

Community of Brothers

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Summary: An appreciation of community life in a Bruderhof of 175 people. Describes the division of labor, the “rich poverty” with artists, musicians, and worship. Recalling Peter Maurin’s vision of farming communes she wishes for more such Catholic communities. (DDLW #695).

The community of families living at Woodcrest, Rifton, New York, this year and last year and a half, numbering by now perhaps 175 people, including many children is still called a Bruderhof, though there seems to be some attempt to drop the German name. It is one of a group of communities, which we have been acquainted with since 1938 or thereabouts, when we met two of the Brothers who were on their way from visiting a like community (one of the Hutterite colonies in North Dakota) to Paraguay where they were seeking a settlement for the overflow of their community in England, at Wheathill in Shropshire. We have kept in touch with the community in Paraguay and many of our friends have visited there and participated in some of the incredible hardships of pioneer life in a new country. Grace Rhoads, a Philadelphia friend, went to join them in Paraguay, and Hector Black, who spent a summer with us at Chrystie St., and at Peter Maurin farm has also joined them.

These are non-Catholic communities of course, but there is the saying that the nearer men approach to God, the nearer they are to each other, and in our studies and desires to grow in love of brother and so in love of God, we have always felt that The Catholic Worker community (which is made up of our friends and readers all over the country) and the Bruderhof communities, were very close to each other in love.

Peter Maurin in his peasant love of the land, in his dealing with the problems of unemployment, family life, mental health and physical health, always taught “farming communes.” He called attention to the attempts at community of goods in our time in the cooperatives in Nova Scotia, in the Kibbutzim of Palestine, early attempts at community of families throughout the United States. He urged study of religious community, especially of Benedictine monasteries as models of community life, and urged that families come together to live in this way, making a living by a diversity of talents, as well as by farming. This of course pointed to the development of crafts as a means of earning a living. He never

actually made blue prints of the kind of community that would suit our day and age, but he looked for leaders and skilled workers to lead the way.

At Rifton, New York, a toymaking shop is busy from morning until night turning out sturdy toys, rockers, whirligigs, wheelbarrows, carts, blocks, trains,—everything made with wood and so beautifully and expertly finished, so strong that a multitude of children could use them without destroying them (Catalogues will be sent on request, from Woodcrest, Rifton, New York.)

Last summer when we moved from Maryfarm, Newburgh, to Peter Maurin Farm, Staten Island, our work was made much easier by the truly brotherly cooperation of this group. They made three or four trips with their truck, and assisted Pete Asaro with all the work he did. They visit us periodically with gifts of clothes for the families and the homeless men and women who stay at the Municipal shelters in our neighborhood.

Last summer Paulina Sturm drove a group from The Catholic Worker in her station wagon, and Hans came back enthusiastic over the kitchen and dining room. He has worked in cramped quarters for so long.

A few weeks ago, Julie Lien and I took an eight-thirty Trailways bus at the Dixie Terminal and sped up the new thoroughway for a two hour trip through glorious countryside and got off at the Wallkill River Bridge, not far out of New Paltz. There we were met by Bruce Sumner and Hector (Duffy) Black, and a short drive down the road along the river brought us to a mountain road on the right, winding up a mile to Woodcrest. There a group of buildings surround a mansion which is now a school on the first floor, and homes for families on the next two floors. It was a morning recess from school and children were playing all around the broad lawns. Older children walk down the road each morning to catch the bus a mile away for the junior and senior high schools in the district.

Two things impressed me a once. One was that all the children were warmly and shabbily dressed,—no attempts at slick haircuts or Hollywood glamour such as you find even in the slums in the cities. Right there is a great economy and saving not only of money but of time and wear to tear to the spirit. There was no keeping up with the Joneses here. The second thing was, that like The Catholic Worker hospices, every inch of space is utilized. The basement of the big house is a laundry and there are several battered old washing machines which will be used daily until they break down and some proper equipment for laundering for 175 people can be worked out. We too have a large family sized washer at Chrystie street that is always breaking down and costs a fortune to keep going. Not to speak of the hot water used.

The school rooms are high-ceilinged with enormous windows and one wonders how costly it will be to heat the place. “The extravagance of the poor,” as Louis Murphy says. But with the numbers of men, the talents of the workers, the discipline of the group, all these needs can be worked out and it is worthwhile spending money to keep the basic needs for food, shelter, warmth attended to. There are trained teachers among the women, including a trained nurse. The

women who are busy in the laundry and school room, have their children cared for in turn by nursery teachers. The children eat separately except for three or four times a week when there are family meals. We went around during the evening meal and peeked in on the babies, all earnestly eating big bowls of applesauce and cereal.

Where there are enough people, that means many more than we have ever had on any of our Catholic Worker Farms, there is a real division of labor. There are the men who take care of the vegetable gardens, the incipient orchards, the heating, the wood chopping, the toy plant, a real factory, the driving, marketing, speaking, writing (even the advertising of toys) and so on. The discipline of accepting the work apportioned out and doing an honest day's work is something expected of those who make application to join the community. (People live together in community for some years before being formally accepted as part of the Society of Brothers.) Also, the community of goods is a fixed principle. Before families come, they literally sell what they have and come and lay it at the feet of those members in the group who are in charge. If they have a hundred dollars or a thousand dollars, or their bare hands, they offer it honestly. There are no reservations. It is truly a Christian communism such as that of monasteries, convents, such as that of families in the Hutterite Colonies which I wrote of last February in *The Catholic Worker*.

Such Poverty as the members of the community accept does not mean the suffering of destitution. As a matter of fact, it is a "rich poverty" which means that talents of artists, musicians and so on are at the disposal of all. There is folk dancing and singing and those recreations which freshen and recreate in the true sense of the word are enjoyed and participated in by all. They are not just watchers, hearers, but participators. There are walks for the children and they are treated as children who need to be taught on their level. There is hymn singing and prayer, and meetings for worship and Sundays the whole group come together for service. If this were a Catholic community of families, there would be a daily mass, (participated in by the congregation, which would mean a sung Mass) and probably rosary and compline as we have it on our farms. And of course our Sundays, beginning with Mass and continuing through the day with conferences and Benediction. There is one such a community of Catholic families in England, made up of a small group of oblates of St. Benedict who with wives and children and some single people are living this community life near Prinknash Abbey. We have had an article on this in a back issue of *The Catholic Worker*. Would that there were so many such Catholic Communities.

(Continued in January issue)