

A Baby is Born

By Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, January 1941, 1,7.

Summary: A vivid description of a young woman leaving St. Joseph's house by ambulance to have her baby. Expresses joy at the child's birth even in the midst of poverty and a time of war. "With the woman the suffering brought forth life. In war, death." (DDLW #186).

It is January 9, 1941, and The New York Times this morning is filled with news of total war and total defense. Every day four-column headlines of the costs of war: "1942 Budget \$17,485,528,049. Funds for British to Be Sought Later."

Wonder what that \$49 tacked on at the end of the \$17,485,528,000 is for? Fifty dollars, we know, will pay for a baby, if you are poor, at any hospital in the city. A flat rate of fifty dollars, ward care, the ministrations of any doctor that happens to be on hand, and ten days' hospitalization.

At Bellevue Hospital, if you are poor, if you are a resident of the great City of New York, it doesn't cost a cent.

William, our new baby down here at Mott Street, is hearby headlined on our front page, as the biggest news of the month, the gayest news, the most beautiful news, the most tragic news, and indeed more worthy of a place in a headline than the seventeen billion, four hundred and eighty-five million, five hundred and twenty-eight thousand and forty-nine dollars headlined in The New York Times this morning. William himself is worth more than that sum, more indeed than all the money in the world. He is indeed but dust, the Lord knoweth it, but he is also little less than the angels. He is a creature of body and soul, a son of God and (by his baptism down at Transfiguration Church last Sunday at 2 P.M.) a temple of the Holy Ghost. For his sake our Lord God came down from Heaven, was begotten by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, was made man, lived with us for thirty-three years, and suffered and laid down His life. For William's sake as well as for the sake of each one of us.

And this tiny creature who little realizes his dignity as a member of the Mystical Body of Christ lies upstairs from me now as I write, swaddled in a blanket and reposing in a laundry basket. He is rosy and calm and satisfied, a look of infinite peace and complacency upon that tiny countenance. He little knows what is in the world, what horrors beset us on every side.

We had awaited his arrival, the week before Christmas, breathlessly. Every night before we went to bed we asked the young mother, "How do you feel?" and asked each other (us women on the two top floors of St. Joseph's House on Mott Street), "Is there taxi money?" in case it would be too late to call an ambulance.

And then, one morning at five, I heard rapid footsteps in the room above, the voice of the ambulance interne in the hall, "I'll be waiting downstairs." And I realized that the great moment had arrived.

It was still dark out, but it was indubitably morning. Lights were on in the kitchens of surrounding tenements. Fish peddlers, taxi drivers, truckmen, long-shoremen, were up and on their way to work. The business of life was beginning. And I thought, "How cheerful to begin to have a new baby at this time of the morning!" Not at 2 A.M., for instance, a dreary time of low vitality, when people sink beneath their woes and courage flags. Five o'clock is a cheerful hour.

Down in our little back yard (where we had the Christmas tree this year), down in that cavernous pit with tenements looming five and seven stories up around, we could hear them dragging out the ash cans, bringing in the coffee cans for the line.

Peter Clark and his crew were on hand, cutting pumpernickel (none of this already sliced, pasty, puffy white bread for us), getting out the cups, preparing the coffee for our eight hundred or so breakfast guests.

Out in front the line was forming already and two or three fires in the gutters brought out in sharp relief the haggard faces of the men, the tragedy of their rags. The bright flames, the blue-black sky, the grey buildings all about, everything sharp and clear, and this morning, a white ambulance drawn up in front of the door.

This is not the story of the tragedy of the mother. We are not going into details about that. But I could not help thinking that while I was glad the morning was beginning, it was a miserable shame that the departure of the young woman for her ordeal should be witnessed by a long, silent waiting line of men. They surveyed her, a slight figure, bundled on that cruelly cold morning (and pain and fear make the blood run cold), come running down from the dark, silent house to get into the ambulance.

Not one man, not a dear husband, nor a protector on whom she could lean for comfort and strength. There was no Joseph on this winter morning. But there were hundreds of men, silent, waiting and wondering perhaps as they watched the ambulance, whether it was life or death that had called it out.

"This is worse than war", one woman friend said a few days before, contemplating the situation. And we agreed, wondering if anything indeed could be more desperate and sad than a woman left to have her child alone.

There you have the tragedy of the refugee, there you have the misery of homelessness, the uncertainty as to food and clothing and shelter (and this woman had known hunger). And there, too, you have the pain and agony of the flesh. No soldier with his guts spilled out on the battlefield, lying for hours impaled upon barbed wire, suffers physically more than a woman in childbirth. Physically, I say, because does not the soldier in his horror and pain wonder what has brought him to this pass—what is being accomplished by the gigantic agony of war? With the woman the suffering brought forth life. In war, death. And despite shame and fear and uncertainty, as in this case, still there cannot but be joy over a child born into the world.

So it is with joy that we announce the newcomer to our House of Hospitality on Mott Street, knowing that our readers who have suffered with us in the past will be glad to rejoice with us now.

For us most truly this has been a season of happiness. “For unto us a son is born, unto us a child is given.” Christ Himself came so truly to us this Christmas Day in this baby boy, just as in the persons of the hungry men. “For inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”