

On Pilgrimage - January 1957

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Meditates on suffering and nonviolence in light of fighting in Hungary. Harshly criticizes clergy who do not prepare the laity to use spiritual weapons. Doubts the criteria of the just war theory can be met. Desires to grow in love so as to understand the mystery of suffering and forgiveness. (DDLW #716).

We are now in the depths of the winter and the wind howls around the house on Peter Maurin farm, and inside it is warm and snug and very quiet. It is good to get down here for one or two days a week and savor the silence of the chapel which looks so beautiful with its two evergreen trees on either side of the altar, the crib still set up because it is not yet the feast of Epiphany when the three kings of the east come to bear gifts and afterwards return to their lands by a hidden route because they might endanger the life of the Christ child.

In the life of the Church the joyful feast of the birth of Christ is followed the very next day by the commemoration of the martyrdom of Stephen who was stoned to death, St. Paul standing by; the martyr and his persecutor, remembered forever in the history of the Church with its feasts and fasts. And when the three kings of the East left the home of the Holy family, that family too had to become a refugee family and go by foot over the terrible desert waste into Egypt. They were not flown out on army planes, nor did they meet the welcome anywhere that the refugees of today are meeting, the love and sympathy the food, clothing and lodging that await the Hungarians as they leave their country and its tragedy. Always there is the strange juxtaposition of the city of this world and the City of God, the terrible contrasts, the light of the Gospel showing what our attitudes should be if we are trying to put on the mind of Christ.

Outside our own children are playing, making their daily visit to our cows, Daisy May and Josephine, to our three geese, Faith, Hope and Charity, and the few score chickens which remain after many a feast this winter. (Next spring we will start a few hundred more chicks.) The woods stand stark and bare, the brook runs black between its banks, the dry witch grass in the fields across the street which have not been cultivated for years, wave like a yellow sea. Our own cover crop of winter rye is still green, a promise, a reminder that though every tree and bush looks dead, life is there. We need to nourish the life of faith and hope in our souls and the happiness which winter beauty brings us helps to do that, in spite of the grimness of the world in its present struggle.

That very struggle shows life. The struggle is our own South, which spreads from Montgomery, to Tallahassee, to Birmingham, to Tuscaloosa, the quiet and steady and non violent resistance of the Negro to the long endured affront to his dignity as a son of God, and our brother.

“Let us be kind and orderly,” one of the Negro leaders said, according to the radio one morning, and those words were infinitely touching. For days there has been provocation, shots fired at busses, bricks thrown through the windows of Negro stores, insults and violence, and the word is “Be kind.” Ruysbroeck wrote “Be kind, be kind and you will soon be saints.” Kindness is the outward expression of the love in the heart, and is anything but a mild virtue. In these cases it is heroic. “A kind person is one who acknowledges his kinship with other men and acts upon it, confesses that he owes to them as of one blood with himself the debt of love,” (Trench, on the Study of Words.)

And then Hungary

Last night, I picked up a Saturday Evening Post and turned to an article on the heroic struggle of Hungary to overcome oppression, and was confronted with a picture of such horror that I gasped. A man suspended by his feet from a tree, being kicked to death by a mob. Others here at Peter Maurin farm said that **Life** magazine has a whole issue in which there were many such pictures. If our **Lives of the Saints** contained illustrations of the tortures which the Christian martyrs endured through the ages, being burnt at the stake, drawn and quartered, flayed alive, thrown into boiling oil, women having their breasts cut off,—the very recitation of such horrors makes the blood run cold—we would be accused of being masochists and having a pathological delight in dwelling on scenes of cruelty. Only those who keep always in view man’s destiny, confident of God’s care, only those who pray daily for increase of faith and hope and charity, can endure.

St. Stephen prayed for his murderers, “lay not this sin to their charge.” And it was to be expected that Jesus Christ, would say—He who came to give His life, to lay it down, for His brothers, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” All through the lives of the saints there is this “laying down of life,” not the taking of it, this forgiveness, with no thought of revenge, this overwhelming love that overcomes fear, this loving to folly, the folly of the Cross.

What are we looking for, what do we expect in this life? “If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Take up your cross and follow me. Fear not for I have conquered death. In the world you shall have distress, but have confidence I have overcome the world. If you will serve me, deny yourself. My yoke is easy and my burden light.”

This is the mystery of the Christian life, the mystery of love. Even if we don’t understand it, we can pray to understand it, we can pray to grow in love.

When the apostles wanted to call down fire from heaven, Jesus said to them, "You know not of what spirit you are."

It is hard to find in this spirit of violence today, the spirit of Christ.

The Encyclical

Perhaps this year more than any other, we have been impressed by the Christmas message of the Holy Father, and more people have called us on the phone to ask us what we think of it. The Pope's messages remind me of the Following of Christ, because in reading them, one sees them as applying to one's self. At Peter Maurin farm, during Lent, Stanley Vishnewsy reads at table and we generally choose the classic Thomas a Kempis' Following of Christ. Stanley likes to tease us by saying, "this is meant for John," or "this is meant for Joe," etc. But he knows, as we all do that we must apply the teaching of the gospels to ourselves first of all. Most of those who were telephoning were applying the Pope's message to **The Catholic Worker**, because of a few paragraphs in which he laid down once again the conditions of a just war and pointed out the traditional teaching of the church that if these were fulfilled, a citizen could not be a conscientious objector. Many of his readers like to take this as a condemnation of conscientious objection, but we continue to take the stand that it is impossible for these conditions to be fulfilled. All other means must have been used. Have we as a country used them, either in Hungary or the Near East or in Egypt? War must be declared by duly constituted authority, elected by the people in free elections? Does this apply to the satellite countries? There must be some probability of success? Is there any probability against the armed might of a Russia? The good to be achieved must outweigh the evil. When the Pope follows up this paragraph with a reiterated call for disarmament, we cannot feel that he is calling for war, or endorsing war, as so many are trying to make it appear he is doing.

The great body of the document is directed against man of the "second technical revolution" and that is the man of the west as well as of the east. He emphasizes man's dignity as well as his limitations. He deplores trends in education, and the laicism which separates the state from religion.

There remains much in the message which needs to be studied. I read it first in an unheated Church on a bitter cold day and it took me almost two hours, and I have studied it again. It has warmed my heart to hear the constant discussion of the words of the Holy Father. "I would you were hot or cold. The luke warm I will spew out of my mouth."

On the one hand the Pope seems to justify the fighting in Hungary. Certainly he cannot be justifying such hatred and bestiality as is evidenced in the newspaper photographs of mob murders. He feels undoubtedly that it is better to fight than to remain in the indifference and cowardice that accepts the exploiter and the oppressor who teaches atheism to little children and confiscates all means

of performing the works of mercy, closes and profanes churches and imprisons priests and nuns, submitting them to torture of mind and body.

But on the other hand, we don't not have a trained laity, exercised in the use of the spiritual weapons, one of which is voluntary poverty which must be endured in the exercise of such economic and political weapons as the general strike; if we do not have the kind of courage as was evidenced in Mexico when a long policy of non-violent resistance to persecution was practiced, if we do not have a faith strong enough to move mountains, and a love which will cry out, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do!"—then we must point to the clergy and say with Ezechiel, "you are shepherds who have not fed your sheep. You have underestimated their spiritual capacities, you have ignored the call, 'be ye therefore perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.' You have gone along with the State. You have countenanced racial discrimination, not only among Negro but Mexican and Puerto Rican, you have sought to avoid trouble with the State and community and lo, trouble is upon you. Persecution is deserved and undeserved. God is not mocked.

American generals imprisoned by the Communists in Korea pointed out that we Americans had not indoctrinated our soldiers in the values of our American way of life, our spiritual and material values. Another report said that the Communists in China did not so much try to indoctrinate the captured soldiers with communism as break down their faith in their own country.

The army on the one hand demands everything of its men, the hardship of homelessness, cold and heat, hunger and thirst, forced marches, flights over land and sea, terrible voyages packed in ships like sardines in a can. To endure fasting, sleeplessness, and bare ground, the expectation of bodily suffering and even death—all for our country. And on the other hand pampers them by condoning lower moral standards. Love of country, love of duty are noble virtues. But the emphasis unfortunately has been on hatred of enemy, fear of enemy, which flares in wild passion and then dies down in shame and revulsion and the questioning of men who wonder why we are fighting our brothers.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love than this no one has, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do the things I command you. No longer do I call you servants because the servant does not know what his master does. But I have called you friends, because all things that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and have appointed that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain; that whatever you ask the Father in my name, He may give you. These things I command you, that you love one another. If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before you. If you were of the world the world would love what is its own. But because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I have spoken to you: no servant is greater than his master. If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you also. All these things they will do to you for my name's sake,

because they do not know Him who sent me.”

It is hard to write these things, and I do it with fear and trembling. It is hard to say, but if persecution abounds today, then grace is more abounding. It is hard to rejoice in persecution. And yet in the light of the gospel, this is what we should do. If the Church is being persecuted, it must be growing in the world. If we do not accept that persecution in the spirit of a Stephen who perhaps converted St. Paul by his words, “Lay not this sin to their charge!” we are not corresponding to the grace poured out upon us.

One reason we hesitate to write or even think these things, is because we feel guilty, as a people, for our part in the world’s suffering, and because we are not homeless, we are not hungry, we are not cold and sick and wounded. And it is contrary to human nature for us to make ourselves so in order to share in the suffering of others. But certainly we can endure our own particular cross, in home or school, or work, we can make use of our spiritual weapons of prayer and fasting, and gain the strength for both by daily communion which is available for all of us who live in cities where there is Mass every hour in the morning. We can flock into the churches for holy hours, in the evening. We can do work which does not contribute to war, we can refuse to pay taxes for war.

One priest said last month, “Cardinal Stritch begged for a holy hour in all the churches to pray for the Hungarians, but there were very few holy hours. The pastors knew that the people would not come.” This is the attitude that leads me to write as I do about the shepherds who do not feed their sheep, who in fact despise their sheep. But “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them” Jesus said. What if only two came, what if only one came? The priests themselves would be there praying, and in a city like Chicago, that would mean no small number of prayers rising to Heaven.

So, to meet the crisis in the world today, we can only beg of our priests, “Feed us, teach us, prepare us to take up our cross and follow our brothers in their suffering, and follow Jesus in his. We are the rich man of the world, and the poor man is at the gate, and we are afraid the day is coming when God will say, “Depart from me, accursed ones, into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you polluted the earth with your mines and your bombs and wars which starved the poor; I was thirsty, and you contaminated even the ocean and the waters of the earth with your hydrogen bombs; I was a stranger, and you made agreements with former allies who now are enemies, to keep me in displaced persons’ camps to this day, and daily you make more homeless; naked, and you make weapons and profits for the rich and the poor have not the clothes to cover them; I was sick and in prison, and my numbers ever increased.”

Yes, this is our spiritual insecurity and we long to love, we want to be taught to love, we want to learn what love is so as to grow in love, and begin to understand that mystery of suffering and cease to fear, and then victory will be assured.