

On Pilgrimage - December 1972

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: An open letter to Fr. Dan Berrigan. Expresses her love and gratitude for his and his brother's (Fr. Phil Berrigan) work for peace and their influence on the young. Speaks of abortion and birth control as genocide. Singles out sayings of Jesus on forgiveness and the continuous need to confess one's sins. (DDLW #526).

Dear Father Dan Berrigan:

I woke up thinking of you this morning with love and regret at not having been at the First Street Friday meeting—nor on the picket line with you Saturday at Mother Cabrini's hospital on 19th Street. With love, and gratitude too, for all you are doing—for the way you are spending yourself. Thank God, how the young love you. You must be utterly exhausted too, yet you keep going. I feel this keenly because I've been really down and out since August, what the doctor calls a chronic cough and a mild "heart failure," and I chafe at my enforced absence because of a nervous exhaustion which I realize you must often feel, though you are a generation or more younger than I.

But thank God, you are truly bearing the Cross, giving your life for others, as Fr. Phil is in cramped cell and enforced idleness, away from all he must crave day and night to do, surrounded by suffering, enduring the clamor of hell itself—he too is giving his life for others.

I cannot tell you how I love you both, and see more clearly how God is using you, reaching the prisoners and reaching the young. Now that I have five great grandchildren and another on the way, I stress the young. They all call you "Dan" and "Phil," but I call you Fr. Dan and Fr. Phil because always you are to me priests and prophets. Remember how you said once to me that you and Phil would never leave the priesthood or your Orders as you had told your mother that Christmas?

Non-Resistance

Humanly speaking, your "violence" appeals to me—naturally speaking—since we are creatures of body and soul, flesh and blood. (I just heard a tape of your talk at the Catholic Worker house and it was gentle!) But I feel Fr. McKenzie in his emphasis on non-resistance is more right, naturally and supernaturally, than anyone in the peace movement today. Yet he too is an angry man, a violent man and knows it. I read his commentaries, **The Two Edged Sword** and **The Power and the Wisdom** constantly. And now we have his recent tape recording to listen to which is put out by the Thomas More Mediatapes, 180

North Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Ill., 60601. I believe that later it will be included in a volume of essays.

I feel that, as in the time of the Desert Fathers, the young are fleeing the cities—wandering over the face of the land, living after a fashion in voluntary poverty and manual labor, seeming to be inactive in the “peace movement.” I know they are still a part of it—just as Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers’ Movement is also part of it, committed to non-violence, even while they resist, fighting for their lives and their families’ lives. (They, together with the blacks, feel and have stated this, that birth control and abortion are genocide.)

I agree with them and say—make room for children, don’t do away with them. Up and down and on both sides of the Hudson River religious orders own thousands of acres of land, cultivated, landscaped, but not growing food for the hungry or founding villages for the families or schools for the children.

How well I understand that Biblical phrase “in peace is my bitterness most bitter.” How to reconcile this with Jesus’ new commandment of non-resistance, of loving others, forgiving others seventy times seven—forgiving and loving the enemies of our own household?

Once a monsignor, a generous donor to the CW, on hearing of one of our dear and poverty stricken friends about to have her sixth child said, “Not much self-control there!”

Another time I went with one of our CW mothers of eight children to the large rectory of the parish to ask that the parish St. Vincent de Paul Society help out with the rent and prevent the eviction of this family of ten. The young mother weeping said, “There is not much food in the house, either.” The old pastor grunted, “You don’t look as tho you’ve been going hungry!” She had lost her figure with much child bearing, and from finishing up the scraps the children left, as poor mothers do. But no steaks, salads, fruits and cheese—not to speak of wines and liqueurs—on the tables of the poor.

Yes, “in peace is my bitterness most bitter.” Yet the bitterness subsides and the peace in my heart grows, and even a love and some understanding grows of these “enemies of our own household.”

Parables

I must tell little stories, as Jesus taught us to do in trying to teach. They call it “reminiscing,” when you are old. I do not undervalue my wisdom, which my age (I begin my 76th year) and experience have taught me.

The story is this. We had a mean pastor once long ago who was always blasting women in his sermons for sitting around gossiping, not cleaning their houses, and spending their husband-soldiers’ pay on beer and movies. It was during the Second World War. And there was a man in our house of hospitality arrested

for indecent exposure. The parish neighbor who told me this called it “insulting a child,” and I had thought she said “assaulting” and nearly fainted with fear and trembling. With no one else to turn to, I went to the pastor, the rigid and cranky one, and asked him to go to the jail, visiting the prisoner being one of the seven corporal works of mercy. With no comment at all but with the utmost kindness and the delicacy of few words, he did as I requested and interceded for this man off the road and got him a lighter sentence of sixty days. When this happened once again some years later, another priest, a saintly well-spoken one, was appealed to. He is reported to have responded, “Too bad they don’t give him a life sentence!”

You never can tell! But there are still, thank God, plenty of priests. One can shop around, though it was not encouraged by those once known as our “spiritual advisers.” Perhaps they were right. Priests and laymen educate one another over the years. Besides, in the country one is stuck with one or two.

Besides—I believe. I believe in reading Scripture, studying it. And in this case, taking to heart the story of the importunate widow and the unjust judge, and the friend who made a tumult at the home of his friend, demanding help. Keep asking for help.

I later learned from a famous psychiatrist, that these men (and what child has not seen them) who expose themselves, seldom are dangerous, and are often cured; and this man was, and died later in “a state of grace”—as our comforting Catholic phrase puts it.

I hope we do not lose many subscribers because of my writing so frankly about usually unmentioned portions of our anatomy. But nowadays when there are no longer lines at the confessionals in our churches except at the business district’s noonday Masses, there surely is an overflowing of public confessions. In our newspapers, reviews, advertisements and novels “nothing is hidden it seems, that has not been revealed.” It is as tho the fear of death, and judgment day has made people rush to tell all, to confess to each other, before the Dread judge shall tell all to the universe. Poor, fearful creatures that we are, is it that in this strange perverse way of confessing we are seeking Christ, even those who deny Him? Jesus Christ is our truth. By telling the truth, or one aspect of the truth, perhaps we are clinging to the hem of His garment, seeking to touch it like the woman with the “issue of blood,” so that we may be healed.

Christ Is Truth

I am not wandering, in writing this way. I am meditating. I am thinking of what I have come to think of as fundamental to our search for peace, for non-violence. A flood of water (and Christ is living water) washes out sins—all manner of filth, degradation, fear, horror. He is also the Word. And studying the New Testament, and its commentators, have come in this my 76’ year, to think of a few holy words of Jesus as the greatest comfort of my life.

“Judge not.”

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

“Forgive seventy times seven times.”

All words of our Lord and Saviour. “I have knowledge of salvation thru forgiveness of my sins,” Zacharias sang in his canticle.

And so, when it comes to divorce, birth control, abortion, I must write in this way. The teaching of Christ, the Word, must be upheld. Held up though one would think that it is completely beyond us—out of our reach, impossible to follow. I believe Christ is our Truth and is with us always. We may stretch towards it, falling short, failing seventy times seven, but forgiveness is always there. He is a kind and loving judge. And so are 99% of the priests in the confessional. The verdict there is always “not guilty” even though our “firm resolve with the help of His grace to confess our sins, do penance and amend our lives” may seem a hopeless proposition. It always contains, that act of contrition, the phrase “to confess our sins,” even though we have just finished confessing them, which indicates that the priest knows, and we know, and we want to be honest about it, that we will be back in that confessional, again and again.

I believe in the Sacraments. I believe grace is conferred thru the Sacraments. I believe the priest is empowered to forgive sins. Grace is defined as “participation in the divine life,” so little by little we are putting off the old man and putting on the new.

Actually, “putting on Christ.”

P.S.—(To our readers). The day after I finished this letter I received a letter from Father

Phil—a good and loving letter. He is not discouraged, but strong in courage. He will be

released on parole on December 20, so let us all pray daily, and every time we hear and

see a reference to “The Berrigans” let us pray even if it is only the briefest “God, be with

them”—those words so familiar in our liturgy, to which the answer is, “And with you” and

us too.

And dear Dan, Fr. Dan, please excuse my wandering like this.