Peter Maurin, Personalist

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Summary: Tells a story of Peter Maurin's work at the Easton farm and goes on to summarize his principal teachings. Peter was a deeply religious man, a reader and constant student, who recommended books, especially the lives of the saints. He valued physical labor and wanted farming cooperatives, "clarification of thought", and houses of hospitality. His faith was invincible, he exhorted a philosophy of poverty and the study of man's freedom. (DDLW #914).

We are usually driving back and forth to the farm at Tivoli, but on the few occasions when I have taken the train from Grand Central station, I have enjoyed the view from the river side, and been oppressed by one aspect of the view from the land side. That is, the ugly habit of people to use as dumps the back yards of their houses as well as the swampy places and creek beds of the little streams flowing into the Hudson. In Yonkers, especially, there are some rows of houses that evidently front the street and where the front yards are probably well cared for. But garbage and trash have been thrown down the cliff side that leads to the railroad tracks and Hudson River, so that it hurts each time one sees it.

Suddenly, I thought one day of one of the jobs Peter Maurin had undertaken on the first farm we owned at Easton, Pennsylvania. It was a job which illustrated many of his ideas but also his love of beauty, his sense of the fitness of things. It also illustrated what he used to call his philosophy of work.

There were two farms, actually, at Easton, the upper and lower farm, and it was on the lower farm that most of us were housed and where we had our retreats every summer. There was one old house, two large barns, one of which we used for the animals, and the other of which we converted into chapel, meeting room, dormitories, and at the lower level, a long kitchen and dining room. The entire barn was built on a hillside so that on the road level the entrance was into the chapel and dormitories. It was below that, on a much lower level, that we had converted cowstalls into a long concrete floored room which made up the kitchen in one corner, and long dining room which could seat thirty or more guests. It was only later that we had electricity and running water in that kitchen. For several years we used lamplight and water from the spring house across the road.

At the very end of this large building, connected with it by one stone foundation wall, there was a foundation built up with field stone ceiling-high, which was overgrown with weeds when we first saw it that first summer, which was so hectic that we saw no further than that. We were too busy caring for the dozen children from Harlem and the numerous guests, most of whom were sick in one way or another.

But the winter disclosed the painful fact that this beautiful foundation, overlooking the fields below it and the Delaware River Valley far below that, was

actually filled half way to the top with all the debris of years. The tenants of the farmhouse before us had used the foundation as a convenient dumping ground for garbage, tin cans, old machinery, discarded furniture, refrigerators, washing machines and other eyesores such as I complain of seeing from the windows of the train. (What to do with all this waste, all these old cars and machines, is one of the problems of the day.)

Peter Maurin surveyed this dump and, before we knew anything about his project, he was hard at work at it with wheelbarrow and pick and shovel. He had undertaken, with no assistance, to clean this Augean stable. Actually, we had no plans then, nor did we for several years, for utilizing the foundation and making an additional house on the property.

Fortunately, the ground sloped so steeply down back of the barns that Peter's engineering project was feasible. By dumping the refuse over the back and covering it with fill (another laborious job since he had to wheel loads of this heavy clay earth from the wooded hillside further down the road) he widened the foot path in back of the barn so that it became a narrow road around the back of the barn and, in fact, a little terrace where it was possible to sit and survey the long sloping valley below, a scene of incredible beauty, since we were high on what was called Mammy Morgan's Mountain, overlooking the conjunction of the Lehigh and Delaware Rivers.

I do not know how long this great task took Peter Maurin, the sturdy French peasant with the broad shoulders, the strong hands which were the hands of the scholar, more used to handling books than the shovel. He had taught in the Christian Brothers' schools in France in his youth and though peasant-born, had received a good education.

Philosophy of Work

I write this account of a piece of work, which I remembered only because the sight of the dumps from the train window which had flashed by in one short instant, had brought it suddenly to my mind so that I knew I should write about Peter in connection with it. It started a long train of thought which had to do with many of our problems today and Peter's solutions. I will try in this short space, and no matter how inadequately, to summarize them, although each of the points he used to make could be expanded into a day-long discussion.

First of all, it must be emphasized that Peter Maurin was a deeply religious man. He never missed daily Mass, and many a time I saw him sitting quietly in the church before or after Mass. When he lived on Fifteenth Street he walked to St. Francis of Assisi noon-day Mass. When we moved to Mott Street, where he lived for fifteen years, he walked to St. Andrew's near City Hall to go to the noon-day Mass there. He never rushed, but walked in most leisurely fashion, his hands clasped behind his back, ruminating no doubt, paying little attention to shops (except for bookshops) or to passersby or even to traffic.

He read and studied a great deal, delighting to find new authors who could contribute to what he called the new synthesis of Cult, Culture and Cultivation. Cult came first, emphasizing the primacy of the spiritual. (Poor proof reading overlooked the error, "**privacy** of the spiritual," in last month's issue.) He never talked personally of his own spiritual life, but recommended to us such writings as Karl Adams's **Spirit of Catholicism**; Pius XI's 1927 Encyclical on St. Francis of Assisi and the Rule of St. Benedict.

He recommended the writings of the saints, as they had to do with their practical lives, what their faith led them to be and do. When Ade Bethune came to us as a high-school girl with drawings of the saints, Peter urged her to picture the saints as workers, and she drew pictures of Our Lady feeding the chickens, sweeping a room, caring for a host of children; not someone to be worshipped, but to be followed. Ade and others who followed her in this tradition (Carl Paulson in his stained glass) pictured St. Benedict planting a field, St. Peter pulling in his nets, St. Martin de Porres feeding a sick man.

Work, according to Peter was as necessary to man as bread, and he placed great importance on physical work. I can remember a discussion he had with the great scholar Dom Virgil Michel, who was the pioneer of the liturgical movement in this country.

"St. Benedict emphasized manual labor, as well as intellectual," Peter said. "Man needs to work with his hands. He needs to work by the sweat of his brow, for bodily health's sake. We would have far less nervous breakdowns if men worked with their hands more, instead of just their heads."

As a result of Peter's emphasis we were called romantic agrarians and, without paying attention to Peter's more profound vision, national leaders in the field of social justice and civil rights insisted on misunderstanding our whole message, which was one emphasizing the necessity of farming communes, rather than individual family farms, cooperative effort rather than the isolated and hopeless struggling with the problem of the land and earning a living from it. He cited the cooperative effort of Fr. Jimmy Tompkins and Father Coady of Nova Scotia, and the cooperative teaching of the Extension department of St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, where there is still active leadership in the cooperative movement. He was deeply interested in the **kibbutzim** of Israel.

Work, Not Wages

A philosophy of work meant an abolition of the wage system. An explanation of that phrase would mean another long article. It would mean, "Work, not wages," a slogan which Peter delighted in, as he did all slogans which made man think. (There is a new slogan now, "Wages, not work.")

It is to be remembered that the first plank in Peter Maurin's program for the world was "clarification of thought." I remember John Cogley's comment one

time that all slogans, all such phrases, became clichés in time, and Peter, the Frenchman, tried to keep up with the slang phrases of the day and to probe to the root of them as to what they meant, what they signified at the time. I remember one of his essays ending in a long list of such slang phrases, the last of which was, "So's your old man!" capped by the sardonic, "So what!"

Once, when I looked around our crowded house of hospitality and asked Peter if this is what he meant when he talked about houses of hospitality where the works of mercy could be performed at a personal sacrifice, by practicing voluntary poverty, which meant in turn stripping one's self of the "old man" and putting on the "new," which meant Christ, so that we could be other Christs to our brothers, in whom we were also to see Christ, Peter sighed and said, "It arouses the conscience."

Yes, it has aroused the conscience to the extent that some of our readers, (now we are printing 80,000 copies of the Catholic Worker each month), have supported us in this work to which we in turn have given our labor for the past thirty-two years, but it indeed is a precarious existence and it demands a great exercise of our faith to remain cheerful and confident in it.

Right now, Ed Forand, who pays the bills for farm and city House of Hospitality, and Walter Kerell, who gets the mail and opens it hopefully each morning, are talking of the summer ahead and the bills piling up, and reproaching me for being late in sending out what was supposed to be an appeal. "And you did not really make an appeal," they said.

I find they are right. This morning's mail brings me a letter which begins, "Your form letter of a month or so back did not come right our and ask for money; so I sent none. Today I got around to reading the April Catholic Worker with its **On Pilgrimage**... Here is $5 from my $60 a month social security." Our correspondent was an itinerant linotype operator and is a member of the United Church of Christ and the rest of his letter, his statement of his beliefs, is most interesting and we will print part of it later.

It is good we live still today, sixteen years after Peter's death, in such precarity that sudden large bills frighten us – such as a tremendous plumbing bill for the dingy old loft building which is part of St. Joseph's House of Hospitality on Chrystie Street; and an electric bill at Tivoli where we need new poles to convey electricity to our house of hospitality on the land, which is pretty much what our farm amounts to.

But Peter's faith was invincible. God would supply our needs, provided we were generous with our **work** and sacrifice. He had never failed any of the saints, and we were all called to be saints, as St. Paul said. Again he would call our attention to those who should be our leaders and teachers, the saints.

Also, such a crisis, he would point out hopefully, could lead us to a truer practice of poverty so that we would set a better example to the destitute. "Eat what you raise, and raise what you eat," was another slogan. Which meant, of course,

that you would eat apples and tomatoes in this New York region, instead of oranges and grapefruit. You would have wine, but not tobacco! You would have honey, but not cane sugar. All to which means work, and the knowledge of how to work in the fields.

And as for electricity! The old mansion on the Tivoli farm has cisterns all around it (which we cleaned out last summer during the drought) and newly painted metal roofs, and if it rained (the drought is three years old now and farmers are talking of seeding the clouds, if there were any clouds to seed, to produce rain) we would have water in the cisterns and a hand pump would give us water even if the electric pump of the artesian well failed us. And we could build an ice house and cut ice from the river to conserve our food and find other ways to preserve it also, though raising roots would be better – I can hear him now with all the solutions to a problem of survival.

In addition to a philosophy of work, and a philosophy of poverty which would intensify the need to work, and provide work for others who are without work in time of crisis, not to speak of the health attendant upon such efforts – there was also the study of man's freedom and this seemed to be the foundation of all Peter's thought in that time of dictatorships, when a Hitler, a Stalin, a Mussolini dominated men's minds and bodies. Man was created with freedom to choose to love God or not to love him, to serve or not to serve, according to divinely inspired Scriptures. Even this statement presupposes faith. He is made in the image and likeness of God and his most precious prerogative is his freedom. It is essentially a religious concept. It is in that he most resembles God.

Man, knowing his own personal responsibility, should not say, "**They** don't do this or **they** don't do that." Whether it was Church or State that was being criticized and judged. Instead, Peter Maurin went back, as Cardinal Newman did before him, and studied the teachings of the Fathers of the Church. "Except," said the Abbot Allois, **"a man shall say in his heart, I alone and God are in this world, he shall not find peace."**

These are extreme times when man feels helpless against the forces of the State in the problems of poverty and the problems of war, the weapons for which are being forged to a great extent by the fearful genius of our own country. **"With our neighbor,"** St. Anthony of the desert said, **"is life and death,"** and we feel a fearful sense of our helplessness as an individual.

Peter Maurin's teaching was that just as each one of us is responsible for the ills of the world, so too each one of us has freedom to choose to work in "the little way" for our brother. It may seem to take heroic sanctity to do so go against the world, but God's grace is sufficient, He will provide the means, will show the way if we ask Him. And the Way, of course, is Christ Himself. To follow Him.