

On Pilgrimage - January 1970

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Summary: The story of a happy Christmas at her daughters house in Vermont anticipating her grandson Eric's return from the war in Vietnam. Remembers a dear friend who died and recommends a book on St. Augustine by Fr. Hugo. Keywords: fasting, mystical body, work. (DDLW #498).

This has been a time of much feasting and great joy, the return of a grandson from Vietnam, a happy holiday in Vermont, snowed in for a week. Two engagements announced in our midst; many good helpers, young men and young women, more than ever before. My daughter's home in Vermont and the CW in New York (I could not get to Tivoli) reminded me, as Tivoli so often has, of Tolstoi's home, of the picture he drew of a joyous home community at Christmastime, in War and Peace.

Fastings

And now the fastings begin. The nine, or was it twelve, turkeys we were given are all gone, eaten here, in soup and in dinner, and given around to neighborhood families, who in turn brought us some corn meal and peanut butter which holy mother the state had given them.

The noon guests are now back to bean soup, pea soup, rice soup and lentil soup and so on, with whatever has been left over from the night before. There are two hundred for lunch and perhaps a hundred for supper. Or it might be only fifty. Sometimes it sounds like a multitude because the night crowd are the immediate members of the family and the immediate neighbors round about us who feel at liberty to fight and argue as families will. Nobody gets hurt but there is good opportunity to practice non-violence. The worst enemies are those of our own household, our Lord once said. It helped me greatly to read once in one of Saroyan's stories of an Armenian household and a family squabble where the father and two sons began knocking each other around and the mother of the house calmly going on serving the dessert. "Food hath charms to soothe the savage beast," I am misquoting of course, and exaggerating, speaking in hyperbole, but the foundation of hospitality is – "They knew Him in the breaking of bread." The very word "companion" means one you break bread with.

Fasting has begun, fasting from warmth and comfort too in some of the tenements around us. We have at least six young women who have been helping us through the summer and who have taken apartments in the neighborhood, the rent of which they pay themselves by part-time work. They in turn take in our overflow women. And in two of those apartments there is at the moment neither heat nor hot water. This is how it is in slums all over the city and it is something which we also endured the five years or more we lived in Kenmare and Spring Streets while our office and dining room was on Chrystie Street. It is a cruel and bitter thing to be without heat in these days when the thermometer is sinking toward zero but the blacks and the Puerto Ricans suffer this every winter.

Fasting too had begun for Mike Cullen, at Casa Maria, the Milwaukee House of Hospitality. He had threatened a death fast because the dining room in the old church building across the street from the Casa Maria and the Montessori school both had to cease operation for a time, due to the closing of the center. The Montessori school was given hospitality by the Holy Cross nuns down the block. They had a large house and only four nuns occupying it. Friends dissuaded Mike and he is now on one meal a day, and thirty of his friends have offered to fast one day a month until the dining room can reopen.

Perkinsville

Between the December snowstorms I set out at ten a.m. for Perkinsville, Vermont, from Tivoli, N.Y. I drove along route nine to the thruway and on to the Massachusetts turnpike. Leaving that at exit four, I proceeded straight north on 91 to Springfield, Vermont and then ten miles north to my daughter's arriving at three thirty in the afternoon, just in time to pick up Katie, Hilaire, Martha and Maggie who were walking the last four miles home because "they were tired of the noisy school bus." Their legs were blue but they were exhilarated by the cold, still day. One more day and the Christmas vacation would begin. It was Nickie's birthday and that night they were having a party at the trailer where he and his wife live with their year-old baby who is just now walking.

I stayed home and read a book about the Vietnamese war with the French and the defeat of the French in 1954. We had already become involved in this war with financial aid. The First World War (for us) began in April, 1917 and lasted until November, 1918. World War II began (for us) in 1941 and lasted until 1945. We are in this Vietnamese war so much longer. I remember reading an article in the **New Yorker** which brought it home vividly in 1962. But long before, in 1954 I had written an article for the **Catholic Worker** entitled "Ho Chi Minh and Theophane Venard, the hero and the saint." I'd like to reprint it, sixteen years later, now that the North Vietnamese leader has so recently died.

As a young man Ho Chi Minh had traveled from Indo-China to Paris and on one of his first voyages he had stopped in the ports of New York and Boston. One story is that he had worked in Harlem briefly, and perhaps—who knows—he

had stopped in the Chinese and Italian area on Mott Street where the Catholic Worker had its house for fifteen years, from 1936 to 1950. Perhaps he came in for a meal with us just as Chu did or Wong, who is with us now. London, Montreal and New York have seen many exiles and political fugitives. If we *had* had the privilege of giving hospitality to a Ho Chi Minh, with what respect and interest we would have served him, as a man of vision, as a patriot, a rebel against foreign invaders. I pointed out this fantasy of mine to some of the young people around here who work on the soup line each day, young people of vision and imagination too, in regard to our own work. I spoke in order to make the point of the obligation we are under to respect everyone we encounter each day. There is that which is of God in every man, as the Quakers say. We believe that we are all members or potential members of the mystical body of Christ, members of one another as St. Paul said. We are all one body in Christ. St. Peter himself said that St. Paul was hard to understand, but the I.W.W. understood this particular doctrine when they said “an injury to one is an injury to all,” with beautiful simplicity.

I was in Perkinsville to wait with the rest of the family for the return of Eric from Vietnam. Two Christmases he had been drafted and was due to report January 2. He was a few months out of high school and his friends had been drafted and some were already in service. He did not grow up in a pacifist atmosphere. His father was a Belloc and Chesterton man and as in so many American families there were veterans on all sides. So he went. And now he was coming home. He had written that he was due on December 19th or 20th, and we kept listening for the phone.

One of his friends who had served in Vietnam came in that afternoon looking for Eric, and he spoke of the Vietcong burying thousands alive in Hue. “I know,” he said. “I saw those corpses.” He spoke defensively as though I, as a pacifist, was on the side of the Vietcong. It is hard to talk to each other, the words of Christianity mean so little, “All men are brothers, God wills that all men be saved. Love your enemy. Deliver me from the fear of my enemies” so that I can be close enough to them to know and love them.

Certainly I did not then nor later refer to the terrible stories being printed in the daily papers of massacres, rapes, kidnappings, captives being dropped from helicopters who refused to talk, of the torture of prisoners. But these facts are in the minds of all and I am sure that young soldiers on leave, or being discharged from service are going to be on the defensive and will be bending over backwards to defend this country any way. But no soldier I ever met wants to talk about the war itself, about the action, the combat; especially to a woman, to a relative.

But I remember an instructor in philosophy drafted into the infantry (he refused officers’ training) in the Second World War, and how he said at war’s end that in the midst of the horror of destruction and bombardments, he felt a strange and terrible sense of exultation.

The boys, one can only think of them as boys, were drafted just out of high

school. Two or three who kept coming in to inquire if Eric had been heard from talked of going back to work for a while and then going to college in the fall. One was studying business administration already, and the other “programming,” something to do with computers, I suppose.

I could only think as I listened to them talking of work, of the need to emphasize working for the common good, rather than working for increased salaries, and more luxuries. Peter Maurin used to emphasize so much the doctrine of the common good. I must look up that article in **Resurgence** on the Buddhist concept of work. We hope to reprint this later in the CW. The Benedictine philosophy of work as Peter Maurin used to call it, was that work had to engage body and soul. Work was prayer, sometimes monotonous and exhausting involving suffering and strain but always there was that moment of satisfaction, even of exhilaration. Recently I read Joseph Conrad’s novelette, *Youth*, which is the story of grueling work at sea in the effort to survive a storm and later a fire in a leaky tub of a ship bound for Bangkok.

Saturday, Sunday and Monday. We were still waiting. Three of Eric’s friends kept calling for him. Monday there were heavy storm warnings but in Vermont they pay little attention to these. Snow means business for the ski resorts. Snow started to fall in the afternoon and from ten on it did not stop until long after Christmas, until forty-eight inches had fallen. In between layers of snow there were layers of ice because every now and then the snow turned into an ice storm. It was funny to see the two outdoor dogs which look like huskies, sitting on top of the ice very comfortably. Even the children were walking on it until one of them fell in up to his neck and could only get out with great effort. There was sliding down the hills on some kind of contraption and a great running in and out for dry clothes, and soon all the registers were steaming with socks, mittens, caps and scarves. All of them wear three pair of socks. Tamar’s house is large, four bedrooms upstairs, poorly heated except for the two just above the living rooms, and three down stairs, and a big living room and kitchen. Before I left I think there were seventeen young people coming and going, rushing in and out, filling up on peanut butter and honey sandwiches. Occasionally themselves quiet, listening to the record player which one of the other of them would occasionally turn up to its loudest. I guess I had a complete course in rock this vacation, but I began to wonder, my bedroom being right off the living room, about brain damage. Besides the seventeen, there were three dogs, house dogs, one a tiny puppy who was always trying to drag a big cat around by the scruff of the neck; another strange little terrier full of jealousy and growls; and Rex who is eleven years old as dogs go but sixty-two as men go. He comes to me and puts his head on my knee and looks at me sympathetically. We are near of an age. There are also four cats, a squirrel, two mice in a cage and a bird, not to speak of a tank of fish and other living things like plants. When you open the kitchen door you come into what looks like a green house, and the room I sleep in is the same. It also contains one large loom, two small, a spinning wheel, a home-made Indian loom, a bookcase of books and a bookcase of materials to make rugs.

The snow continued. Our waiting continued. The Christmas tree was put up, presents were wrapped (Maggie is the most communitarian member of the family), Christmas day came and went, and still no Eric. Children practically fell down the stairs to get to the phone from their rooms. How they heard it downstairs over the record player, no one knows.

“I don’t believe he ever left Vietnam,” Larry Green said. “If you’ll re-enlist for another six months, they will guarantee to get you home for Christmas, so those guys who did, get the first chance at the planes.”

Next morning, day after Christmas, the phone rang at nine o’clock and Hilaire got to the phone first. It was he, Eric Dominic Hennessy, Staff Sergeant, Ranger, home from the wars. It took him as long to get from Kennedy airport to Vermont as it did to fly from Vietnam to Seattle. His was the last flight to Kennedy airport in that particular storm, but the buses still ran and got him to Charleston, New Hampshire. It took two hours for his friends to get him from Charleston to Perkinsville what with skidding into snow drifts several times. But at two a.m. on the morning of December 27th, Eric was home again. God be thanked.

There are so many things I wished to write about and so far I have given my column to the story of a happy Christmas, a picture of family life, of a house overrun with children and young people, cats and dogs, celebrating a midwinter festival in the midst of ice and snow. (In the midst too, of continuing war and desolation.)

A family where, as in all families, there are grave differences of opinion, or points of view, and yet united and happy. There is always an unspoken agreement, just as there was in my family of three brothers and a sister, parents and in-laws, not to dispute, not to argue, but to find points of agreement and concordance, if possible, rather than the painful differences, religious and political. What a mystery each one is to another. I remember reading about Hugh of St. Victor who complained to God that he did not value His love because as God He loved each creature He had made, and God replied to him, “Yes, but just as each creature is unique, I love them with a unique love.” We can only try to share each others’ joys and sufferings and to grow in love and understanding. Not to judge, but to pray to understand.

Mary Johnson

Mary Johnson would not want a first page headline such as we gave to David Mason, another old fellow worker who died recently. I think she would have liked to be included in this Christmas account, especially since she died on Christmas day and in a way is still part of the family of Tamar whom she loved and cared for as a child. It did not matter that they had not seen each other for years. There is neither time nor space in God’s kingdom. Mary Johnson died on Christmas day, following her husband Steve by a few years. It was thanks to the

Johnsons that I was able to have my daughter with me through the early years of the CW.

It came about in this way. Steve was a leading figure in the Irish movement in this country, who after an exhausting career as a public speaker and leader had to have an operation which resulted in the loss of his speech and consequent loss of his speech and consequent loss of livelihood. Mary went to work for the National Biscuit company on West Fourteenth street and in the depression during a bitter strike did not hesitate to come to us for aid. Neither of the Johnsons thought of our work as charity, in its bad sense, but as a work of justice. In other words we were a revolutionary headquarters rather than a Bowery mission, as most newspapers like to picture us. We needed them both badly at that moment because we were opening a house in Staten Island, right on the Bay and needed them to run it. Steve and Mary ran this country place and later the farm at Easton, Pennsylvania. They took care, not only of Tamar, but of a dozen other children from longshoremen's families on the lower west side, and from Harlem families. In all these places my little daughter from the ages of eight to fourteen, had a joyous and carefree time. Later Steve got a job as Editor of Catholic Missions which was under Bishop Fulton Sheen at the time, who not only paid him generously but pensioned him when he became too old to work any longer.

So all this week, in addition to the psalms of lauds and vespers, I have been saying for them both the Office of the Dead, from an obsolete old Mercy Manual which has all three nocturns and the nine lessons from Job and the most reassuring and promising of antiphons and scripture paragraphs. "I know that my Redeemer liveth, that I shall rise again from the earth on the last day, that I shall be clothed again with my skin, that in my own flesh I shall see God; whom I myself in my own person shall see, and with my own eyes shall contemplate. This is my confident heart." Of course there are many translations in our day of Job XIX, v 25-27. When I get through with this writing I will check them in the various Bibles we have around the house. But I will not be shaken in my confidence either.

The Very Much Alive

Which reminds me to write this introductory note to the very good book review in this issue of Fr. Hugo's book on St. Augustine.

Fr. Hugo is a very old and precious friend of ours who used to give us the famous retreat which aroused so much controversy all over the country from Bishops down to the simplest fellow-workers among us. I'm supposed to be writing a book about this retreat for Harper and am under contract to do it. The title is ALL IS GRACE. I mention it, hoping for your prayers that soon it will begin to pour out from under my pen as the writings of a St. Teresa of Avila flowed freely in spite of her work of foundations and her traveling all over Spain. I first began reading her when I encountered William James' Varieties of Religious Experience.

I say I am reminded of Fr. Hugo when I write those last words about death because he used to end his delightful, stimulating and provocative retreats with a little dissertation about death. “When your friend comes to you to tempt you to waste your time, —‘come and let us drink at the neighboring tavern,’ tell him, Go away, I am dead and my life is hid with Christ in God.” (famous words of St. Paul.)

As he preached his retreats it was often with enjoyment and humor, but with a deep sense, you felt of the strong conflict in which we were engaged in our attempts to lead a spiritual life. All that we did, work or play, eating or drinking, should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus. Work was co-creative, expiatory, redemptive, and certainly a sharing in the suffering of the world.

But to be brief, Fr. Hugo gave us retreats and was the first priest in this country to come out with teachings about peace which were basic and constructive. He had never studied this subject intensively in the seminary, but he began a study and wrote a series of articles for us. **Weapons of the Spirit**, and two long, double-page articles, **The Crime of Conscription** and **Catholics can be Conscientious Objectors**. We can never be grateful enough for the pioneering work he has done along these lines. The book reviewed in this issue will be challenged just as his other writings have been. Let us hope that reading it, our readers will be drawn again to the writings of St. Augustine, **The City of God**, and, of course, the Confessions.