

# Dire Need of Hospitality House For Christ's Poor!

Dorothy Day

*The Catholic Worker*, June 1950, 1, 3.

*Summary: Describes the poor they serve and a nearby dilapidated tenement they could acquire for hospitality but which needs extensive repairs. (DDLW #611).*

Last month I wrote that we had found a house. I am sorry to have to tell our readers that the place we so glowingly described is not available to us.

We are looking again for a House for our poor, who belong to us, who are our family.

I do not know how to love God except by loving the poor. I do not know how to serve God except by serving the poor. Poor people are those people who are standing out in the rain now, today, May 29, standing there with the rain soaking through their thin clothes, running down their faces like tears. They are standing there because they are hungry, and because in our fifteen foot by fifty foot dining room and kitchen there is warmth, and there is Everet Trebtske and his staff, serving soup, a good heavy pea soup, with bread. Poor people are people like that colored man and woman who spent the night riding in the subways because they had been put out of their lodging, after they had lost their jobs and spent what little they had laid by. A priest sent them to us last night. There was no hospice in his parish, no Christrooms. Poor people is that sick man who has epileptic fits and cannot hold a job and who keeps trying because he doesn't want to go on relief. Poor people is that woman in jail who wants to come to us when she gets out, and that alcoholic dim-witted prostitute who plies her trade on the Bowery. It is that drunkard sleeping in a doorway, that old woman going through garbage cans. Sinners are poor people only it is getting so that only the poor are considered sinners these days. We are supposed not only to love sinners, but to have reverence for them, Fr. Faber said, because Christ came especially for them.

This is the way I feel, and this is the way Tom Sullivan and Irene Naughton and Bob Ludlow feel, and John McKeon and those others, Marie Roche, and Tony Aratari and Everet and Joe Cuellar and Dave Mason and all the others feel. That is why they are here, because they have a vocation to do this work at this time, and they want to love God. It is the only way right now that they can see to do it. Two of them are going away to the priesthood from here, and this has been a preparation for that tremendous service of the dispensing of the sacraments.

## No Place to Go

But there certainly are great and insurmountable obstacles in our way to performing this service of tending a soup line and giving shelter. As we said in our last issue, we are being dispossessed from 115 Mott street. The house has been sold and we have been looking and looking for a home. We thought we had found one when we wrote last month, an ideal location, in a street of the poor, in a great parish, centrally located. But it turns out that we cannot have that house which we had set our hearts on. It is evidently the will of God manifested through the will of others. Perhaps we should stay in this neighborhood where the parish, the priests, the neighbors, lament at the thought of our going. We keep looking for a place.

It seems to be easier to find the money to buy a place than to find a habitable place to be bought. Down on the East Side buildings are being torn down faster than others are going up and every habitable building is taken. The only empty ones are loft buildings, business and factory buildings.

Right next door to us there is a seven-story building which used to be an occupied tenement. There are two narrow stores on the first floor, one of them now used by a shoemaker, who edifies us by always being on the job even before we are out to Mass in the morning. The other store is occupied by an old Chinese who has boarded it up since a long illness in Bellevue. Downstairs there used to be a spaghetti and sheeps' head restaurant and the gypsies used to come and partake of that latter delicacy and listen to violins. Now they have gone and there is only the shoemaker. The rest of the house is unoccupied, all up through the long halls, flanked in the front by two four-room apartments, and in the rear hall by two three-room apartments. There are tile floors, slate steps and iron railings to the stairs, up the high wall in the center of the house to the roof. You can scarcely see the floors for the plaster, the rubble, of which we have read so much these last years. People are living in rubble, clearing away rubble, etc. A strange word that, born of war agony. Then when you have reached the top stair, a way of the cross up through the deserted house, there on the roof, one of our Italian neighbors is keeping pigeons—not homing pigeons or racing pigeons, but just domestic ones.

The rear of the roof is surrounded by a high parapet, and the owner of the pigeons has done a rough job of re-roofing that. The front roof is in very bad shape, just mended enough to walk over it safely.

While we were up there in the sky, one sunny day last month, the owner of the pigeons came to feed his flock. To get there, he did not come as we did, through the shoemaker's store, and up through the dark halls, but over the roofs, over our roof next door, stepping over a five-story-deep areaway through an empty window and then up the stairs to the pigeons' yard.

We wish we could move in as he has, and just make habitable the place floor by floor and so take care of our needs and also accommodate the new owners of

115 Mott St. who are restlessly waiting to move in and start rebuilding. The work required on that old building next door before one could get a certificate of occupancy is gigantic. We had two friendly building inspectors go over the place with us. One was an Italian from the next parish. They pointed out that we would have to draw plans, or have an architect draw them, submit them to be passed on, then do the work required—whereupon it would be inspected, the complete job, and a certificate given us. There would have to be a new roof, new fire escapes back and front to the seventh floor, fire retarded halls, which means tearing down all the rest of the old plaster, taking out any wood, using metal sheeting and cement and plaster.

Every room would have to be replastered, or perhaps we could have these beautiful metal ceilings put in that are so common in tenement houses. They are a violation of the sacramental principle in that they are tin, pressed to look like wood carving. A common American failing, making wood look like marble and sheepskin like sable. There is a safe feeling about those tin ceilings. When your neighbors let their washtubs run over there is less chance of the plaster falling on your head. When the rats start scampering overhead between the floors, they make enough din to make conversation difficult (even Peter Maurin used to find their competition wearing) but you feel that they are safely sequestered. Every now and then in addition to the scamperings there is a loud and frantic squealing as though the father of the family were belaboring all the children and the wife besides.

Yes, there would have to be metal ceilings and probably they would be cheaper than plaster. Plasterers charge twenty dollars a day, and there would have to be a mountain of plaster used.

Then there is the re-wiring to be done and the plumbing. Tubs and sinks have been torn out and carted away. There are two toilets in the hall, to accommodate the four families which used to occupy each floor. Or if we considered the two four-room apartments, one eight-room, and the two three-room apartments, one apartment, then the two toilets could remain but their entrances would have to be into the apartments instead of into the halls. Since there is a dumb-waiter shaft between one toilet and the rear apartment, that would have to be blocked off by floor and ceiling and so have a long closet.

It can well be seen that the work and materials required on such a job would come to many times the cost of the house. We have enough money now to pay for the house, but every adviser we have warns us against tackling such a job. We would be involving ourselves in tremendous debts even if we were given the credit, the chance to contract such debts, being without resources as we are.

The only word we can say in favor of the house next door is that there are windows into every room (with no frames or panes), that there is enough space for craft shops and laundry and library, that it is next door. But the money involved! The work! And the size of the place! We have 36 rooms now, and several apartments across the street, and two stores. In the house next door

there are eighty-four rooms not counting two stores and rooms on the first floor. I can see those two stores being made into one large one and making an ideal dining room. But it is big. Maybe we are not intended to be big.

While Tom and Bob and others roam the streets looking for places (and we have all done a lot of searching) I now sit and read **The Foundations** of St. Teresa of Avila and think how different the times are in which we live.

We live in a city of eight-million where there is fear of epidemics and fires and A bombs and H bombs. We are hemmed in by regulations which are made to protect the poor from grasping landlords, as well as from disaster. In Europe today people are living as best they can and rebuilding as best they can. We would like to tackle that building next door in the same spirit, doing it floor by floor, moving in apartment by apartment, but it cannot be done. We would not be permitted and we cannot even contemplate trying it, because there is the business of water, gas and electric. There is no chance of our sneaking in, in the dead of the night as St. Teresa did with her nuns, and taking possession. It would be a matter of fifty thousand dollars worth of repairs. That is why the building has stood empty these twenty years. It is a sounder building than the one we are in—more spacious, airier, better halls what with tiles floors. There is many a building like it all through the city where the poor walk up with their children, their shopping bags. The dumb-waiter is supposed to be used for bundles, garbage and ashes. I lived in one such old tenement once on East Thirteenth street and the dumb-waiters were broken so tenants threw their garbage and trash down the shaft for the janitor to shovel out in the basement. I lived next to the janitor's family and he used to complain of the rats jumping out at him as he tackled the mountain of trash each day. That was the building where we had to cover our baby cribs with wire netting to keep the rats from gnawing at the babies' faces.

We can fight the rats, the vermin, the poverty of the tenements, but we cannot fight the city's regulations which become stricter year by year. We must find a place which is for sale, empty, with no violations recorded against it at City Hall which would require expensive remodeling. And any such places which are for sale, are filled with tenants whom we would not wish to move, and indeed whom we would find it impossible to move. Here in our own building the new tenants are a cooperative and can swear they wish to remodel for their own occupancy, and so they can give three months' notice to us to move. That three months is up on July first.

We must keep on begging our readers' prayers, their assistance to raise an adequate building fund. We have \$20,000 now and the loan of \$3,000 besides with no interest. If we could raise \$25,000 more we would go ahead on the house next door. Of course we keep on looking. It is hard to know what is God's will.

We are tremendously grateful to our readers who have been coming to our aid so wonderfully. We know they want to help us in every way they can. If any of them know of any buildings, empty and ready for occupancy they must call us

up and tell us. If they can help with funds, we beg them to help in that way. We are most literally blocked on every side. Oh, Lord, make haste to help us!