A Friend of The Family - Mr. O'Connell is Dead

By Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, March 1952, 1, 6.

Summary: A difficult eulogy for Maurice O'Connell who lived at the Easton farm for over 10 years. Notes his helpful side as a worker and his cantankerous nature that tried the patience of nearly everyone in the community. Reflects on the interplay of supernatural love and human freedom. (DDLW #630).

Somewhere in the Psalms it says that we can look forward to three score years and ten, if we are strong, but any more years are toil and trouble. Undoubtedly they are, but I suppose most people want to hang on to this life, life they know, as long as possible. Not that anyone will ever be ready for death in the sense that they feel prepared to face God and the judgment. Old Maurice O'Connell, who lived with us from 1936 to 1947 at Maryfarm, Easton, Pa., lived to be 84. After the Catholic Worker moved to Newburgh, Maurice remained behind. When the priest from St. Bernard's Church came to anoint him a few weeks before his death he announced jauntily that he would drop in to see him the next time he was in Easton. His appearance there was not so casual.

Yesterday, February 26, a requiem Mass was sung at ten o'clock and the body of Mr. O'Connell

was laid in a grave in St. Bernard's cemetery, behind St. Joseph's Church, up on the Palisade over the Lehigh River. It was a clear spring-like day, though the ground was hard under foot.

We knelt on the cold earth around the freshly-dug grave, Eve and Victor Smith, Louis Christopher, Guy and Fifi Tobler, Winifred, Helen Montague, Fr. McGee, the pastor of St. Bernard's, the two men from Curran's funeral parlor and three of the seven Smith children, Margaret, Guy and Victor.

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I thought as the coffin was being lowered into the grave, a cheap grey coffin of proper shape, but God knows what materials, the handles decorative rather than functional, that Mr. O'Connell

had made a coffin for me back in 1940 or so, but that he had not made himself one. I should have brought mine and let Hans Tunneson make me another. The coffin he made for me is of proper size and varnished with the bright yellow varnish that he had used on the altar, the sacristy closet, and the benches which he had made for our chapel at Easton, Pa., when Fr. Palmer and Fr. Woods first came to vacation with us back in 1937.

Mr. O'Connell put in a lot of work on that chapel. The altar, vestment closet and benches are all now in use at Maryfarm, Newburgh, and will be for many a year to come.

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In addition to my coffin, which my daughter now uses to store blankets and other bedding, and the chapel furnishings, Mr. O'Connell took an old tool shed and made himself a comfortable little house in which he lived for all the last years of this life, until this last year, when he went to the Smiths and Christophers and boarded there. He had old age pension and so preserved a strong feeling of independence. He enjoyed being with the children. He helped John Fillinger remodel his chicken house, he constructed the Montague and Buley houses, all of them long rectangular affairs that could be divided into three or four rooms, small, narrow, like the emergency barracks the veterans are forced to live in now.

There was nothing beautiful nor imaginative about Mr. O'Connell's building. It was utilitarian. He would not use second-hand materials, but demanded new pine boards and barrels of nails. Tarpaper covered roof and sides. That was as far as any of the buildings got, not only for lack of materials but from the lack of ability or initiative. There was all kinds of poverty at Maryfarm, Easton.

He also built a little cabin for Tamar, who had saved her Christmas and birthday money for many years and had $85 of her own. This bought enough boards at that time to put up a tiny place with double-decker beds, the coffin chest to store things, a table and chair. I had wished it larger so that it could be heated. It was so small that even the tiniest pot belly stove made it unbearably hot. But Mr. O'Connell was adamant.

"I'm making this small enough so no one but you and Tamar can sleep there."

As it was, others slept there, transients, and sometimes the men of the farm. Later a porch was put up L-shaped, and that was large enough to sleep four more people during retreats. We always had to use every inch of available space not only in the city but on the land.

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We had to remind ourselves very often of how much Mr. O'Connell had done for us in the years that we lived at Easton. Of course, John Fillinger worked with him at first; Jim Montague worked on the Buley house; Gerry Griffin and Austen Hughes had put up Jim's house just before Helen came home from the hospital with her first child. The truth was, no one could work with him long, because of his violent and irascible disposition.

How to write about people–how to understand people, that is the problem. "I write for your comfort," St. Paul said. "I am comforted in order that I might comfort you." And so I too write as things really were, for your, my readers' comfort. For many of you have old, and sick and sinful people with you with whom you have to live, whom you have to love.

Often one is accused of not telling the truth because one tells only part of the truth. Very often

you have to write about the past, because you cannot write the truth about the present. But what has occurred in the past holds good for the present. The principles remain, truth remains the same. How to write truthfully without failing in charity?

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The truth was that like many old men, Mr. O'Connell was a terror. He came from Ireland so many years ago that he remembers, he says, when Canal Street was not a street but a canal. He was one of 21 children, and his father was an athlete and a carpenter. Maurice pictured him as a jaunty lad with his children, excelling in feats of strength, looked upon with admiring indulgence

by his wife, who, according to Maurice, nursed all her children herself, baked all her bread, spun and wove, did all her housekeeping and never failed in anything. It was, indeed, a picture of the valiant woman that Maurice (accent on the last syllable to distinguish it from Morris, a Jewish name) used to draw for us when any of the women were not able to nurse their children (not to speak of other failures).

He was an old soldier, was Maurice, and had worn many a uniform, in South Africa, in India, and in this country. He had no truck with pacifists. And as for community!

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According to St. Benedict, there should be a benevolent old man at the gate to receive the visitors, welcome them as other-Christs, exemplify hospitality.

Maurice's little cabin was on the road at the very entrance of the farm, and he never missed a visitor. If they were shabby he shouted at them, if well dressed, he was more suave. He had many a tale to tell of his fellows in the community. He was not a subtle man. His thought was simple, not involved. "Thieves, drunkards and loafers, the lot of them." he would characterize those who make up what was intended to be a farming commune. And if anyone living on the farm had any skill, it was "what jail did ye learn that in?" One man who became a Catholic after living with us for a year was greeted with taunts and jeers each time he passed the cabin door. "Turncoat! Ye'd change yer faith for a bowl of soup!"

He was ready with his fists too and his age of course protected him. Once when he was infuriated by a woman guest who was trying to argue him into a more cooperative frame of mind, he beat his fist into a tree and broke all his knuckles. A violent and enraged man, if any one differed from him, was Mr. O'Connell.

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The first winter we began the retreat house (the roof of the barn had been repaired with second-hand lumber by Dave Hennessey, Mike Kovolak and Jon Thornton, with whatever tools they could round up among themselves). By this time, the ninth year of Mr. O'Connell's stay with us, he had all the tools of the

farm locked up in his cabin and would guard them with a shotgun. That first winter when Peter and Father Roy and the men had a dormitory in the barn, Mr. O'Connell became ill and was persuaded to be nursed in the dormitory. He was kept warm and comfortable, meals were brought to him on a tray, and he soon recovered his vigor. He decided to stay for the cold months and ensconced himself by the side of the huge pot-bellied stove. One end of the barn was the sanctuary, and was separated with curtains from the center where the stove, benches, chairs and bookshelves were. Peter and Mr. O'Connell sat for hours in silence, the latter with his pipe and a book, Peter motionless, his chin sunk in a great sweater that had all but engulfed him. Mr. O'Connell was a great reader of history, but it was hard to understand him when he was trying to make a dissertation, especially when his teeth were out, as they usually were.

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It was a difficult few months especially in the morning. We sang the Mass every day, thanks to Father Roy, and Mr. O'Connell did not enjoy this at seven in the morning. He had been used to sleeping until ten or eleven. On occasion his audible grumbling was supplemented by a banging on the floor of the dormitory with his shoe. Taking him to task for this he would snarl,

"I was just emptying the sand out of my shoe." It was a winter when we had to dig ourselves out to the outhouses.

When Lent came we were reading Newman's sermons during meals, and whether it was because Maurice did not like Newman as an Englishman, or a convert (he decidedly did not like converts) or whether it was because he thought the reading was directed at him, he used to stomp angrily away from the table and refuse to eat. Stanley had always gotten along well with him (he had never worked with him), but Stanley had a habit when he was reading pointed chapters from the Imitation, or Newman, of saying, "This is meant for Dorothy," or "This is meant for Hans." Mr. O'Connell decided the reading was meant for him, and would put up with it no longer. He moved back to his cabin and his meals were brought to him on a tray. When spring came, he came to the kitchen and fetched them himself.

The cooking was good that winter. Either Hans or Duncan managed the kitchen, and "we never had it so good." Especially since Fr. Roy used to go down to the A. and P. on a Saturday night and beg their leftovers. They were very generous, especially with cold storage fish or turkeys that would not last, even in the ice box, until Monday. Part of our Sunday preparation was cleaning fish and fowl and seeing what we could do to preserve them. I shudder now when I think of the innards, so soft that all parts seemed to merge into one! However, we had good cooks. And most of the time we had simple foods that did not need to be disguised.

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It was about that time, spring and summer, when many retreatants came that Mr. O'Connell took to tell them all that we never gave him anything to eat, never

anything to wear. The fact was that we respected his distaste for complicated dishes, and he had a regular order in at the grocer for eggs, cheese, milk, bread and margerine and canned soups. Not to speak of the supplies on our kitchen shelves which Maurice (or anyone else) felt free to come and help himself to. Our cooks had good training in "if anyone asks for your coat, let him have your cloak too. To him that asks give and do not turn him away, and do not ask for a return of what is borrowed."

All our friends coming for retreats, came with generous hearts of course, anxious to give to the poor, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Maurice had many an alms given him, and many were the packages of clothes that were addressed to him. It is wonderful that people had so charitable a spirit, I often thought, but what must they think of us, accused so constantly of this neglect. Surely they were not thinking the best of us! That is to put it positively. To put it crudely, everyone seemed quite ready to think the worst of us, to believe the worst. Or maybe they just said, "They are injudicious in that they take on more than they can handle." One can always escape from being uncharitable by being injudicious. It is a nicer word.

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I find little paragraphs in my notebook at that time. "What to do about M.'s having six pairs of shoes, a dozen suits of underwear when others go without, Peter for instance. Is it right to let him get away with taking all the tools and probably selling them for drink? Where does the folly of the cross begin or end? I know that love is a matter of the *will,* but what about common sense?

Fr. Roy is all for non-sense."

And Fr. Roy was right, of course. "A community of Christians is known by the love they have for one another. 'See how they love one another'."

"Nobody can say that about us," I would groan.

"If you wish to grow in love, in supernatural love, then all natural love must be pruned as the vine is pruned. It may not look as though love were there, but have faith."

We were being pruned, all right. Not only through Mr. O'Connell, but on all sides. Putting it on the most natural plane, I used to think "How sure people are of us that we believe in what we say, that all men are brothers, that we are a family, that we believe in love, not in a use of force; that we would never put them out no matter how hard we are tried. If they act 'naturally' with no servility even to an extreme of showing bitterness and hatred, then one can only count that as a great victory. We believe in a *voluntary* cooperation. Our faith in these ideas must be tried as though by fire."

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And then I would look upon Maurice with gratitude and with pity, that God should choose him to teach us such lessons. It was even as though he were a

scapegoat, bearing the sins of ingratitude, hatred, venom, suspicion for all the rest of us, all of it gathered together in one hardy old man.

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And, on the other hand, to go on with these subtleties, what about this business of letting the other fellow get away with it? Isn't there something awfully smug about such piety–building up your own sanctification at the expense of an increased guilt of someone else? This turning the other cheek, this inviting someone else to be a potential murderer, or thief, in order that we may grow in grace–how obnoxious! In that case I'd rather be the striker than the meek one struck. One would all rather be a sinner than a saint at the expense of the sinner. In other words, we must be saved together.

It was Fr. Louis Farina who finally answered that question for me. And Fr. Yves de Montcheuil, who died a martyr at the hands of the Gestapo because he believed principles were worth dying for.

Fr. Farina says that the only true influence we have on people is through supernatural love. This sanctity (not an obnoxious piety) so affects others that they are saved by it. Even though we seem to increase the delinquency of others, and we have been many a time charged with it, we can do for others, through God's grace, what no law enforcement can do.

Fr. Farina extols love in all his conferences, and points out the agonies which one must pass through to attain to it. Fr. Montcheuil has a magnificent passage on freedom, that tremendous gift of God Who desires that we love Him freely and desires this love so intensely that He gave His only begotten Son for us.

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Love and Freedom, they are great and noble words, but we learn about them, they grow in us in the little ways I am writing about, through community, through the heart rending and soul searing experiences we have in living together.

It is not by any form of constraint, not by "the prestige of an eloquence which tries to snatch man out of himself," not by fine writing, "not by the charms of great and enveloping friendship,"

that we are going to win our brother to Christ. It is only by becoming saints ourselves. That should be easy to understand. And if we are saints, we certainly won't judge others.

According to Chestov, quoted by Fr. Danielou, "Faith is a new dimension of thought" introduced at the time of Abraham, the father of faith, "which the world did not yet know, which had no place in ordinary knowledge." Faith is part of the everlasting newness of Christianity and is something which we must be constantly exercised in.

And so I firmly believe, I have faith, that Maurice O'Connell, in addition to being a kind friend who built the furniture of our chapel and some barracks for

our families, who sat and fed the birds and talked ever so kindly to the children on the sunny steps before his little house, was an instrument chosen by God to make us grow in wisdom and faith and love.

God rewarded him at the end. He received consciously the great sacrament of the Church, extreme unction, he was surrounded by little children to the end, and even at his grave, he had the prayers of kind friends, he had all any Pope or King could receive at the hands of the Church, a Christian burial, in consecrated ground. May he rest in peace.