

On Pilgrimage - November 1950

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Summary: Describes the mission of the new Peter Maurin farm on Staten Island, starting and ending with thanks to God and to the readers for making it possible. Expresses hope in the new bakery venture. Speaks of needing to forgo a trip to Rome because she cannot sign the oath of allegiance for the passport. Justifies voluntary poverty and how it makes Houses of Hospitality possible. Notes their work is a vocation and says "all must perform the works of mercy." (DDLW #616).

Not long before I became a Catholic, I read Sigrid Undset's two great historical novels. I was living on the beach in Staten Island then, and there was time to read and think. I was happily anchored to a small baby and there was no place I could go, nothing I could do, but stay close to home and take care of my duties. It made her books intensely interesting to me because they were also about mothers of small children. There was one little scene in *Kristin* where she is out gathering herbs, and she sits there in the hot sun on the top of a little hill and suddenly the words come to her, "It is truly meet and just, right and profitable to salvation that we should at all times and places, give Thee thanks, O Lord."

This has come into my mind many times since. Sigrid Undset made the words come alive for me and they were no longer words in a missal, part of a ceremonial surrounding the offering of bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. May she rest in peace! I am grateful to her too and thank her, as well as our Lord God. This month of the Holy Souls, she will be on our list of dear dead, placed on the altar at Maryfarm, Newburgh, and Father Faley will offer them all up to our Lord each day as he celebrates the Holy Sacrifice. Mrs. Undset came a number of times to see us when she lived in this country during the forties and she used to bring us clothes for the poor. She told us that she was lecturing on my book, **From Union Square to Rome**, the night the Germans invaded Norway. I little thought, when I read her books before I was a Catholic, that we would become friends, and that war would throw us together. Being a Catholic makes us indeed one family, one body.

Thanksgiving

It is truly meet and just to thank God and to thank all our readers too for all the help they have given us this past summer and fall. Peter Maurin used to say that he liked things to come to a crisis and he certainly brought on a crisis for us this summer. Thanks to our readers, we weathered the storm. Thanks to the many helps from many people, we have gotten our shelter, in Chrystie street, and also on Staten Island. We have gotten far more than we ever dreamed of having, for our desires have been very modest. We were delighting in our littleness and our poverty, and taking pride in the outward appearances of it, the show of it, and God knows how hard a time we have stripping off the old man and becoming truly poor. Now we have lost the appearance of poverty. The big double house, red brick, high ceilinged, with its iron grilling over the porch and stairway, its iron fence in front, its large yard, this is room indeed for our dining room, our breadline, and for those who come to stay with us. I had thought we should remove that iron fence, but the windows are flush with the street and I am afraid that our thousands of guests would stagger into them many a time and the cost of replacing panes of glass would be more of an inconvenience than the fence which protects our ash cans and the immediate front of the house. We can well see what that front would be like if it were not protected. The old theater on the corner with its fire escapes which lead down to the ground provide a shelter for many a group with a bottle, and there is never a night when there are not men sleeping against the wall as we turn the corner from the subway. Poverty, destitution, vice, are all around us still. Our work is there cut out for us from morning to night.

Staten Island

And how can we thank our friends for helping us get the Staten Island farm. Of course there is a tremendous mortgage, ten thousand dollars, which must be paid off every six months as much as we can. There is the interest on it, and there are the taxes. But I shall let nothing affright me. When I get uneasy all I need to do is to read St. Teresa of Avila's foundations, and the story of Mother Cabrini. To keep going every minute, every hour, there is no better guide than St. Therese, the Little Flower. We have named the chapel at Peter Maurin farm after her, calling it The Little Way Chapel. Somebody said it sounded Protestant but we do not care. It is very definitely hers, and there is much work for her to do around us. We are surrounded by Jehovah's Witnesses, a radio station, a big communal farm, a cooperative cannery, and many other adherents of the sect have small farms of a few acres around us. Our next door neighbor who has a goat farm with fifty registered goats, is a member, and when we brought over a loaf of whole wheat bread, we had a most agreeable conversation, and the daughter-in-law of the house drove over later with a jeep truck bearing a radio and a bushel of tomatoes. There is a Negro village just down the road

and a Methodist chapel. And our guests so far have included Anglican, Greek Orthodox and Quaker.

Mass Is Offered

When St. Teresa made a foundation she was never happy until Mass had been offered, and she made all haste, in spite of lack of materials and repairs, to have the Holy Sacrifice before anything else. So it rejoices me to report that the Holy Sacrifice was offered up for the first time on the vigil of St. Simon and Jude, and again on the Feast of Christ the King, and also on the day after. Hans Tunneson had come down from Maryfarm, Newburgh, to prepare the barn chapel, and after reinforcing the beams underneath the barn floor he built an altar and a platform, took out the big front doors and put in two others, capped by a storm window to fill the space overhead, replaced still another side door with a door with a window in it.

This work was no sooner done when we received word that Fr. John Shritz was arriving home from Rome on Thursday morning. Fr. John is a priest from Minnesota, eighty-five years old, who stayed with us on Maryfarm for almost three months, and who baptized Hans. He did not have such good luck with Miguel, the escapee from Franco's concentration camp. He had uttered words of praise of Franco in Miguel's presence, and so reinforced his conviction that the Church was on the side of oppression. Hans does not let the scandals of the Church stand in the way of his eternal happiness, and he and Fr. John (who is from Luxembourg) had long and amiable conversations together which resulted in Hans' conversion.

And here, out of a clear sky, with none of us expecting, was Fr. John arriving to offer Mass on the altar which Hans had built.

All our Staten Island friends and neighbors came to the blessing of the fields and houses and oratories, except, of course, the immediate neighbors above mentioned, some of whom watched from afar. It was a perfect day with the temperature in the eighties, and we walked through the fields with all our guests, which included priests and sisters from Mt. Loretto and St. Louis academy and brothers from the Marist fathers, and the day was a beautiful success. The group from Maryfarm, Newburgh, drove down in a borrowed car, and Father Faley offered Mass the next morning and took care of the Blessed Sacrament, since we cannot right now have daily Mass at the farm.

How much has already been accomplished in two months on this latest farm venture. There have been Saturday workdays, and groups of children have come on three occasions and had picnics on the beach and in the wood lot. There are sick people being cared for even while the chapel and bakery are being built up and general repairs made.

The Bakery

The bakery is our great dream, which we have had for a number of years to provide bread for the breadline. We made one attempt to start a bakery on Mott street in the basement of a tenement down the street which had formerly housed a bakery with a big stone oven. The rats drove us out of that place. One could not walk into it without seeing the animals scurrying in every direction. Jane O'Donnell bravely tried to keep at it, and brought groups down there to learn bread baking, but the project had to be given up, and Jane took over the care of the retreat house at Maryfarm. Fr. Coffey of the Brooklyn Seminary came and blessed that venture, and he came again on the feast of Christ the King this year, and again blessed our works and gave us a most beautiful sermon on the virtue of hope. Fr. Coffey's talks are the kind that should be taken down on a wire recorder or in shorthand, but we had not made the arrangements, so must trust to our memories to use the material for future meditations. I wish I could drag out my notebook on these occasions without seeming too conspicuous. The sisters and brothers felt that they had had a feast, indeed.

Our neighbors, by the way, insist upon regarding us all as sisters and brothers, because the idea of the lay apostolate is not very well developed these days. Any communal work must be either communist or religious, and any works of mercy also belong to the religious. That the laity should confine themselves to the material order is the general opinion. But even in a few visits one can see this attitude changing, and now groups of women who have helped us furnish our new venture are anxious to help in the works of mercy, one of the most important of which is to clothe the men on the breadline. They are going to collect shoes, sweaters, socks and coats for the coming cold months. Already Mrs. Oechsli, who with her sister-in-law, Mrs. Staudt, holds the mortgage on the farm, have brought us many things not only for the house, but for the men in Mott street. Thank God we have already this close relationship with them. When we first tried to get a mortgage, we were treated like criminals by the mortgage companies because we were not incorporated. "What is your source of income," they wish to know. And when you say, "God is our Father, St. Joseph our almoner, and they work through our readers," they regard you not only as criminal, but mad.

Pilgrimage

So many exciting things always happen around the Catholic Worker that I almost forgot to speak of the great gift offered me by Frances Mazet and Mary Benson this month—a trip to Rome. I immediately accepted with joy, and it was not until I started to fill out the application for passport that I realized that one must take an oath of allegiance, before God and with no mental reservations, to defend the constitution of the United States. I have been publicly stating my position as a pacifist these past seventeen years since the publication of the

Catholic Worker, and I have too much respect for my country and its traditions and institutions to take an oath such as that called for on one's passport, no matter what decisions have been made by the Supreme Court about letting in conscientious objectors. They still have not removed the oath and the obligation to take the oath from the passport forms, and one is required to take it and sign it. I might refuse to sign, send an appended letter explaining my position to the State Department and wait what favors they grant me, the recognition of my position and the permission to go abroad. But, meanwhile, my hosts wish to leave on November 11th.

Having been confronted with this obstacle, I found more. My book requires cutting and rewriting, a major operation. I have entered on the Staten Island adventure, and, although that could be left to the group who are there, still the burden of sick people in addition to conferences and days of recollection and workdays is too much for the small group. Usually for every well person we have many ill. One dear friend who is coming to us for nursing is Cecilia Curran, who has just undergone a major operation at Bellevue. It will be our joy to give her good care at the Peter Maurin farm. Peter had many a meal in Cecilia's kitchen when he and John used to talk over the green revolution. And my own health also is not such that I should go on a three month's pilgrimage at this time. This last excuse is the one most acceptable to my friends, so I must state it, though the less we talk about our health and the more we rest and eat good nourishing food, such as our own whole wheat bread, the better off we would be. Nothing like a day in bed to build up nature and so have a good foundation for the supernatural.

And so I do not go on this particular pilgrimage. God willing, I will make the next Holy Year, and this I write, exercising the virtue of hope.

Self-Justification

Although it is never good to defend oneself, it is good to defend others, and it is for the sake of those who are working at the Catholic Worker without salary these many years, that I think it might not be out of place here to defend once again our position of voluntary poverty. Often, sometimes several times a month, and from one's good friends, the remark is made, "Why do you not get a job, support yourself first of all, and then with the surplus support others, and then you would not have to beg from your readers to support the breadline, the house of hospitality."

This has been done, in connection with other Houses, but it ends in failure. As a matter of fact, it is one reason why the House of Hospitality movement has not grown more than it has. There have been too many single people without family obligations who refused to go the whole way, who preferred their eight-hour-a-day jobs and good salaries and who tried after hours to give themselves to the work. But it has not worked out. Every worker knows that what is called an eight-hour

day means much more. One has to eat and sleep, get one's clothes in order either by oneself or pay to have it done by shoemaker, tailor, laundry, go to Mass, attend services in the evening, take care of social obligations of one kind or another, and lo and behold, there is never any time left to take care of a House of Hospitality, which is a full-time job from early morning until late at night. There are sicknesses, accidents, emergency calls. The breadline means getting up at five-thirty, and Tony Aratari or Jack English or Joe Monroe are on that. If Jack did not give himself to the kitchen, it would not be so easy to get men like Fred or Leo, also to give their time cooking. Cooking for a household, no matter how much help you get in preparing vegetables, is a long and arduous responsibility. Three meals a day, seven days a week, over and over, days without end. St. Benedict suggested that the cook be changed weekly. If we had enough cooks we could do that.

In spite of common-sense recognition of the work that goes into a house of hospitality, and getting out a paper with 63,000 circulation, and the answering of mail, telephone, the letters of thanks for packages of clothes, the answering of inquiries, the ceaseless calls for help in person and on the phone, many still regard the workers at Chrystie street as a group of idlers who could not get jobs if they wanted to. They are there because they cannot adjust themselves to the system, it is said.

Be it said again, there are plenty of honorable jobs, in hospitals, in business, in teaching, that members of the Catholic Worker group could get and could get paid for. They could lead a life far more leisurely, far more meditative and far more healthy. And they still could perform some of the works of mercy on the side. And we are convinced that that is the normal life, the kind of life the great majority are called upon to lead. They all must perform the works of mercy. If they are not, their salvation is in danger, our Lord Himself said. The life of family requires that the majority lead this life. It is the good life for body and soul.

The modern mind is so preoccupied with efficiency that if we paid ourselves salaries, kept books, were incorporated, spent most of the money on overhead, we would be considered honorable men instead of crackpots. We would be paying taxes to the Federal government, the State, supporting war, and Mayor O'Dwyer's pension, spending much time on paper work instead of with dear flesh and blood, and we would also be commended by our friends.

No, I am afraid we must continue to be taken for fools, "fools for Christ," the "offscouring of all." We cannot get complacent, because criticism is pretty continual, and if not deserved on one count, it surely is on another.

If we do not want to render to [2] Caesar, we must be careful not to take much from Caesar. St. Hilary wrote in commentary on that famous text. It is the same with taking from our friends. We are working for them, and we ourselves earn our keep by it, our board and lodging, our clothes and such needs. We must be careful to be generous as they are, and not take much, and to give in

turn what we have—our time, our talents, our strength.

This running of Houses of Hospitality and retreat farms and agronomic universities and farming communes is, of course, a definite vocation, and we are only scattering the seeds for them now. Since Peter Maurin appeared upon the scene with his gesticulating finger and his habit of making points, “making the encyclics click,” as he used to say, we have been “put in good works,” as St. Paul said. It is no doing of ours. We said yes when we were called, but we were called. God has chosen us most definitely to do this, or we would not be here. We need to pray more for many more vocations to this work. If we had more people to help on the line and in the office, Tony could do more teaching in the craft shop. If we had more Everet Trebtsoskes who could come and cook for a while, Jack could write and study more. If we had more to be responsible in relation to the whole house, as Tom is, he might get time to visit the newest venture, which he hasn’t done yet. We are happy in our work here, and that is one proof of a vocation. Another proof is that the Chancery office gives us so great a privilege of having the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel at Maryfarm, Newburgh, and the privilege of having the Holy Sacrifice offered also at the Peter Maurin farm on Staten Island. We are so grateful for this “calling” that we can only say again and again,

“It is truly meet and just, right and profitable for salvation that we should at all times and in all places, offer thanks to God,” and to all of our readers.