

On Pilgrimage - January 1952

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: In the midst of interruptions she writes of ill guests, how hard it is to only help by listening, gratitude for gifts, and the gently effects of hospitality. (DDLW #627).

January third. Outside the sky is bright blue and all flecked with fleecy clouds. The plane trees across the street look as though they had all been dipped in gold in honor of the festive season. It is colder after the misty warm days we have had. It is clear now and dry under foot and you muffle up and walk fast to keep warm.

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Hereafter when I use asterisks it will indicate interruptions. This first interruption meant an argument in the office over Father Danielou, Emmanuel Mounier and cooperation with Communists in defense of the worker. The argument got heated and reached no solution. Holy silence then ensued, broken only by the rhythmic tearing of wrapping paper by John Pohl in preparation for the wrapping of bundles of the January issue which will come out next Tuesday morning. John Pohl has been laid up in a Bowery hotel for the last month with an injured foot when he fell on the ice. He refused our hospitality and preferred that of the Union Hotel on the Bowery where he and the night clerk have the same taste in symphonies.

Mary Galligan and John Derry are chopping up names and the chop-chop of the names which have been run off on the addressograph (bought for us by Father Lappam of Pittsburgh some years ago) are peaceful sounds. Out in the back yard Mary Lisi is hanging out clothes which promptly freeze. Mary has filled the house with bouquets of ivy which put forth new shoots continually. To lighten up her vases, she tucks in a few artificial flowers. Right now the Blessed Mother has a few tulips in the midst of a magnificent bouquet of ivy leaves.

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Stanley Rinehart just came in from the Y.M.C.A. where he is staying on 34th street. He is badly crippled with arthritis and gets state aid. Holy Mother the State is making a chair especially for him as the first step to training him for some work. I suggested shorthand and typewriting as something which is always useful; good stenographers are rare. Another friend of ours is talking of starting a home for people in need, "but everybody would have to work," she said. "None of this sitting around, drinking and loafing."

Michael Kovalak contributed to the conversation by telling of Quaker friends who believed that people should be helped to help themselves. I could have kept holy silence, but did not since I think there is a point to be made, and

always and forever made, of people being left alone to rest and recover mentally, spiritually, physically, left alone to help themselves. Attempts at “rehabilitation” by one who is not priest or doctor or psychiatrist, any probing and questioning and prodding into the hearts and souls of those who come to us, when just plain kindness, courtesy and acceptance is what they need most of all, is something foreign to the spirit of the Catholic Worker.

There is nothing like sticking to the simple and ordinary jobs of feeding, clothing and sheltering people. Other things come along naturally, as a matter of course. Most people like to cooperate, to work together, to feel themselves needed and a part of the group working together on a common job, like running a hospice, a retreat house or getting out a paper. And so for those who just sit,—well who knows what is in their hearts and minds. Who knows their pain?

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Brendan and Leah O’Grady of St Edward’s Island were in for the last few days, gathering material about Peter Maurin. Brendan is writing his Master’s thesis about Peter Maurin and we are happy indeed to get all the material we can for him. Through Columbia University, he has checked the doctors’ theses written in the United States and has not found one on Peter. Maybe there are papers written for Masters’ degrees. If any of our readers know of any such papers or writings about Peter, we would be very glad to hear from them.

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Some days it is impossible to write, to think. Those are days when you just blindly go ahead, taking each job as it comes along, obedient to each duty of the moment, living from moment to moment blindly. One is without energy, without inspiration, without strength almost to do more than the immediate job on hand. Thought of work to be done is appalling. A drawer full of letters to answer, days full of visitors to meet and talk to, people’s anguish to listen to (and how can one listen without a response, without an intense longing to assuage a grief, lift a burden, do something, something, anything at all.)

It is so hard to sit and do nothing. And yet in many a case that is all one can do. Just listen. And do nothing. There was one woman who came in who told us a terrible story of how, as a nurse, she had been accused wrongfully of burning a patient, and now she was spending all her days trying to sue the hospital, the doctors, in the name of justice to clear her name. She could eat, sleep, think of nothing else. She lived in an agony. She wanted us to find her a lawyer. There was nothing one could do but listen, but serve a cup of hot coffee and a piece of whole wheat bread.

Well, they have shared their suffering those who come to us. They have given a little of it to you to handle for a while. Just as I pass it on in this column to our readers, begging their prayers.

St. Gertrude says that when we ask for prayers from someone, we will obtain the benefit, even if the one asked forgets to pray for us. “Ask, and ye shall receive.”

Christ has said it and His words are true. The very asking is important.

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What overwhelms me is God's merciful kindness to us, shown us through the generosity of our friends. We receive so much even without asking.

During the holiday Charlie McCormack drove the station wagon up to Maryfarm to bring back Joe Davin, who had to be taken to Bellevue for treatment of one eye which was painning him so much that he said he would just as soon they took it out. He has besides glaucoma a broken hip badly healed. Marge Hughes was invited down for a few days to visit Kay Brinkworth and brought Johannah, Tommy and Mary, leaving Jimmy at Maryfarm. The trip took seven and a half hours from the doors of Maryfarm to St. Joseph's House on Chrystie street. Everything happened to the car, the lights went out, the battery went dead, it stalled in the middle of a highway, on a bend, on the side of a hill (going up). Joe Davin said he shook with fright from limb to limb. Charlie is the soul of patience. Children are never afraid when their mothers are with them, and somehow all the guardian angels were on the job and they arrived in New York safe. The next morning the dear friend who had originally given us the car sent us a check for a hundred dollars, which means repairs and maybe a couple of new tires. The old ones are worn thin. May God bless our good benefactor a hundredfold in the way she needs it most.

The second gift we received without asking for it was a load of wood from the department of parks at Newburgh, just as the wood we had on hand ran out. Food and fuel, these bills loom gigantic in the winter. There is an Arab saying "fire is twice bread."

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It's hard to express our gratitude to our friends and readers. People are good, "good as bread," my friend Mary Heaten Vorse always says.

We were having a conversation about that up at Maryfarm New Year's day. There were the eighteen who live at the farm, and five visitors (Marge and her family eat in the carriage house), and the tables were crowded. There had been a holy hour the night before, and the Mass had been sung that morning, and everyone had joined in. There is not one there with what could be called a good voice, but because nobody could sing, everybody was willing to try, and they had had practice together. Father Faley had given us a homily on examination of conscience as a preface to daily resolutions (not yearly), and it suddenly struck me, as it has so often in the past, that an entire group of people, men from the road, men who had lived on waterfronts, who had sailed the seven seas, had been in armies and in prisons, in the four corners of the globe some of them, were in our houses of hospitality all over the country as gentle as lambs, when on other occasions they might well have been ravening wolves. I have seen brutality, and bestiality, and violence and sin, and I know that there are the possibility of these things in us all. Cruelty and ugliness, sadness and want, all can be changed by warmth and light and food prepared and eaten in brotherly love.

Another Trip

This is going to be a winter of traveling. January 13-14, I am speaking in Washington, D.C., at Llewellyn Scott's House of Hospitality and at the St. Peter Claver center. Then I go south to visit the Trappist Monastery outside Atlanta, then on to Augusta, Georgia. Other engagements are in Louisville, Tell City, Indiana, St. Louis and Phoenix, Arizona, and anyone who wishes to get in touch with me can reach me by writing here to New York, 223 Chrystie Street, and the letters will be forwarded to me air mail.