

On Pilgrimage - February 1964

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Reflects on voluntary poverty against the backdrop of stories of theft and being taken advantage of by guests. Asks if we are ready to be robbed of our goods, relinquish what we have, and share with the poor. "Do we really welcome poverty as liberating?" (DDLW #812).

"He shall bring them down that dwell on high.
The high city shall lay low.
He shall bring it down even to the ground.
He shall put it down even to the dust.
The foot shall tread it down,
The feet of the poor, the steps of the needy."
Isaiah 26

Non-violence, the feet of the poor, not the clenched fist. Anderson's **Marching Men**. That was the name of a book of Sherwood Anderson's that I reviewed many years ago when it first came out. The Freedom Walks, the Quebec to Guantanamo walk this past month have made me think of these things. They walk in poverty, this group; stripped of all comfort; imprisoned and tortured, fearful and yet determined, they have shared the suffering of their brothers in the South.

Tom Cornell has written of them in this issue of the paper.

Looking back on what has happened this month since we went to press January 8. Martin Corbin visited the farm for a few days . . . A still-born child was born to a girl on the farm . . . The local hospital which is so hospitable to our family of the poor sent us a woman recovering from pneumonia. . . One of the women I met at Spode House in England has come to join us, to help us. . . We had a tremendous bill from a plumber in mid-January when our oil burning furnace stopped, pipes froze, and left thirteen men in cold rooms for two night and a day. . . It was five above zero those days. We have other troubles, legal and financial which I will write about later. . . Al Learnard came to join the farm community. . . Jean Walsh is still away but is expected to return in a few weeks. Charles Butterworth is taking a sabbatical, as it were, for prayer and study.

I speak at Trinity forum in downtown Manhattan February 5, probably to Wall street workers on voluntary poverty! On February 8 at a public school in Greenwich Village on the Woman's House of Detention which for Deane and I, was home briefly once a year for five years. Other speakers that day will be Jane Jacobs, City planner, and Fr. Egan, of Graymoor who has done so much for released prisoners who have been addicts. This meeting is sponsored by the Village Independent Democrats.

Thursday and Friday, Feb. 13 and 14, I speak at Winthrop Hall, Harvard, or rather have discussions with the students there. On Saturday, I will speak at New England Mutual Hall, Copley Square in Boston, at a Catholic Book Fair, I believe, together with other authors; and in the evening at Ed Sweny's Holy Spirit Book Shop. Then on Monday, Feb. 17 in Oneonta, New York, at the University. On the 25th I speak at a Fellowship meeting at the Presbyterian church in Princeton, New Jersey.

The month will fly by, and although there are blizzards in March, there is also the first day of spring.

Dear Soul

Arthur J. Lacey, one of the most useful members of the Catholic Worker group, whom some of us call "dear soul" to tease him for the tender solicitude he shows those who come to him – "and what is your problem, dear soul," – spent a week's vacation in Detroit last month as the guest of Dan Shay, former young Christian Worker who is aspiring to start a hostel in downtown Detroit to be called St. Thomas More house. He visited St. Francis House and was much impressed by how well it was kept and run. He visited the Murphys in St. Martha House and the Little Brothers of Charles de Foucauld, attended a Cursilla Mass on Saturday at Fr. Kern's parish, visited the families at the farm at South Lyons, the Meltons, the Johnsons, the Martuses, and the Catholic Worker farm where the Murphys stay in summer and which some of the men from St. Francis House keep going in winter.

Speaking of Poverty

On a number of occasions when I have been speaking at schools where the nuns have been troubled at the idea of living in luxury and deeply desired poverty, I talked of the readiness we ought to have to be despoiled of our goods, to be robbed, taken advantage of by those we trusted. As Fr. Roy used to say, "God takes us at our word." We had an experience last month which shocked us all profoundly. Indeed so much so, that Deane has been quite unable to write her usual column, she has been so saddened by the tragedy of the loss of a friend.

A man who has been staying with us for six months, who was gifted, amiable, generous, helpful, doing all kinds of menial chores, shopping, running errands, taking the fellow workers at Peter Maurin Farm to the hospital – Larry to the asthma clinic, Barbara to maternity, Shorty to that for Parkinson's disease; bringing Albert last week to St. Rose's Hospital in New York; bringing Peggy to the city with one of her cats (the latter stalked and pursued around the bare wisteria, forsythia and privet hedge and then packaged in a carton, tied up and carried), listening to the woes of young and old (he had worked for five years in a home for delinquent boys) – this man suddenly packed his things, all

obtained from the CW clothes room, got into the one good car and took off. With him also went two hundred and eighty-five dollars of our money and four blank checks, already signed, which he could probably cash along the road with some school or rectory where the CW is known.

No one knew he was gone until Sunday morning when John, Jim, Hans, Andy, Larry, George, Slim, John B., Joe D., Joe C., Deane, Clare, Barbara, Alice, Paul, Shorty, etc. etc. were ready for eight o'clock Mass. We make two trips back and forth, and not all listed above go, but I name them to indicate the numbers involved on a Sunday morning who depend on the car to get to confession and Mass, since confessions are heard before Mass in our little country chapel. Those who could walk, who were not too old or too crippled, walked that morning to a later Mass.

Charles Butterworth was on retreat at the Trappists in Winchester. I was in New York at the time, attending a Third Hour meeting at Claire Bishop's.

The consternation over our misfortune was immense. No one ever did such a thing before! But only a few nights before the car was missing one of the kids in the neighborhood was caught siphoning all the gasoline out of the tank and when detected fled, leaving his five-gallon can and tube. And what about a few weeks ago when fifteen pounds of pork roast, all the Sunday meat for our large community and Sunday company, disappeared out of a clear sky, and we were forced to eat scrambled powdered eggs instead. And what about the man from Sing Sing sent to us by a Prisoner's Society who left with the best clothes in the dormitory and everyone's pockets carefully picked. And that young fellow, so handsome and so disturbed, sent to us by a priest, who took a visitor's purse. Martie Corbin, one of our editors, lost his overcoat last week. One should not leave it on a bench in the hall, because that is where our charitable visitors leave clothes for the poor. He should have put it in his room.

I try to think of other cases in the past. There was the wayfarer for instance who stole the Thanksgiving turkey out of the refrigerator at Mott street years ago and was there a hullabaloo over that! I think it was then that I thought of St. John Cantius who ran after the thief who was making off with his wallet to tell him that there was still a gold piece tied up in his cloak, whereupon the thief fell on his knees in repentance and gave back what he had taken.

I did not have too much faith in this story, however. I remembered how Peter Maurin had been robbed in Morningside Park one summer evening and returned home with a black eye and when we indignantly asked him how anyone had dared to strike him, he replied that he only had been trying to tell the thief that he had money in the other pocket! Just the same I told the story of St. John Cantius to the household and told Slim, who had been sort of night clerk at that time of our hospice on Mott street, that he should have run after the thief with the celery and cranberries too! My remedy was treated scornfully by the house, whose mouth had been watering for that turkey.

Just the same the story had a happy ending. Ten years later, when we had

moved to Chrystie street, that same thief came in one day and gave whoever sat at the desk a ten dollar bill, saying it was restitution for a turkey he had walked off with years before.

I remember too the story James Brazel told about how he first came to the Catholic Worker. He had run into a man on the Bowery, an old crony, who noticed that Jim had no coat.

“Go over to the Catholic Worker,” he told him. “I got three coats there this winter,” meaning no doubt that he had sold them when the weather warmed up and got another when the thermometer went down. So Jimmy came to get a coat.

“I got five coats here that winter,” he boasted. It may or may not have been true. All I know was that Jimmy stayed with us for seven years and served the poor faithfully. He was an all around handy man and could take care of crises in the plumbing and electric works around the place, besides carpentry and other work. He is working now as a stationary engineer on a job he obtained during the war and at which he was so dependable that he has been kept on ever since.

Undoubtedly there are many more such little incidents I could tell, and all our houses around the country could tell similar stories. Sometimes the guilty ones were strangers, and sometimes they were very much part of the family folks we had grown to love and to consider as “beloveds,” as St. Paul called them.

And how are we able to react after the instinctive motions of righteous wrath are under control? Our only guide is first of all our common sense, which tells us to put a lock on our gas tank for instance, and to keep the check book locked away safely, and not to put occasions of sin in the path of the weak. And then we are to go by the light of faith and the Old as well as the New Testament is our guide.

In the book of Osee, the forgiveness of God is shown for a faithless people, in the action of the prophet who forgave his erring wife over and over, even supported her and her lovers! In the New Testament in the words of Jesus who told us to forgive seventy times seven when our brother offended against us. And if anyone took our coat we were to give our cloak also, and if any one forced us to walk a mile with him we were to walk two miles, and if he struck us we were to run the other cheek. There is also the commentary on the story of the prodigal son Peguy tells again in “God Speaks.”

Over and over again we are given the chance to re-examine our position – are we ready to relinquish what we have, not just to the poor to share with them what we have but to the poor who rise in revolution to take what they have been deprived of for so long? Are we ready too, to have the drunken poor, the insane poor and what more horrible deprivation than this, to have one’s interior senses, the memory, the understanding and the will, impoverished to the extent that one is no longer rational – are we ready to be robbed in this way? Do we really welcome poverty as liberating?

“Let nothing disturb thee, nothing affright thee,” St. Teresa said, “all things are passing. God alone never changes.”

Every day we have evidence of His warm loving care for us. Since He has given us His Son – will He not give us also every good thing? All else that we need? We are rich indeed.

And even if we did not struggle to attain a supernatural point of view about these crises, peace and calm, and yes, even the sureness that all will work out to the good, comes with the fact that we are too busy to think, to remember. Work is there to be done, city and country, crowds press in upon us from every side.

Our only grief is the suffering we must feel for the absconding one, fleeing, hiding, friendless, tormented. We ask your prayers for him.