

Why Do the Members of Christ Tear One Another?

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Protesting against a journalist's assertion that they are sentimentalists in their pacifism and afraid of suffering, she challenges her critics to spend time in the city slums where Catholic Workers regularly battle the realities of disease, poverty, filth, cold, foul smells, etc. Quoting Dostoevsky, she assures her readers that Catholic Workers were not sanctimonious but approached their work with true humility and love. Notes with irony that pacifism, while not popular with society as a whole, was the philosophy which society wished to impose on the poor and disenfranchised victims of America's class war. Rejects the suggestion that they should remain silent. (DDLW #390).

Why Do the Members of Christ Tear One Another? Why Do We Rise Up Against Our Own Body in Such Madness? Have We Forgotten That We Are All Members One of Another?—St. Clement.

Fr. Stratman writes: “We think with Cardinal Faulhaber that Catholic moral theology must in fact begin to speak a new language, and that what the last two Popes have already pronounced in the way of **general** sentences of condemnation on modern war should be translated into the systematic terminology of the schools. The simple preacher and pastor can, however, already begin by making his own words of the reigning Holy Father (Pius XI), ‘murder,’ ‘suicide,’ ‘monstrous crime.’”

“But we are at war,” people say. “This is no time to talk of peace. It is demoralizing to the armed forces to protest, not to cheer them on in their fight for Christianity, for democracy, for civilization. Now that it is under way, it is too late to do anything about it.” One reader writes to protest against our “frail” voices “blatantly” crying out against war. (The word blatant comes from bleat, and we are indeed poor sheep crying out to the Good Shepherd to save us from these horrors.) Another Catholic newspaper says it sympathizes with our sentimentality. This is a charge always leveled against pacifists. We are supposed to be afraid of the suffering, of the hardships of war.

But let those who talk of softness, of sentimentality, come to live with us in cold, unheated houses in the slums. Let them come to live with the criminal, the unbalanced, the drunken, the degraded, the pervert. (It is not decent poor, it is not the decent sinner who was the recipient of Christ's love.) Let them live with rats, with vermin, bedbugs, roaches, lice (I could describe the several kinds of body lice).

Let their flesh be mortified by cold, by dirt, by vermin; let their eyes be mortified by the sight of bodily excretions, diseased limbs, eyes, noses, mouths.

Let their noses be mortified by the smells of sewage, decay and rotten flesh. Yes, and the smell of the sweat, blood and tears spoken of so blithely by Mr. Churchill, and so widely and bravely quoted by comfortable people.

Let their ears be mortified by harsh and screaming voices, by the constant coming and going of people living herded together with no privacy. (There is no privacy in tenements just as there is none in concentration camps.)

Let their taste be mortified by the constant eating of insufficient food cooked in huge quantities for hundreds of people, the coarser foods, the cheaper foods, so that there will be enough to go around; and the smell of such cooking is often foul.

Then when they have lived with these comrades, with these sights and sounds, let our critics talk of sentimentality.

“Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.”

Our Catholic Worker groups are perhaps too hardened to the sufferings in the class war, living as they do in refugee camps, the refugees being as they are victims of the class war we live in always. We live in the midst of this war now these many years. It is a war not recognized by the majority of our comfortable people. They are pacifists themselves when it comes to the class war. They even pretend it is not there.

Many friends have counseled us to treat this world war in the same way. “Don’t write about it. Don’t mention it. Don’t jeopardize the great work you are doing among the poor, among the workers. Just write about constructive things like Houses of Hospitality and Farming Communes.” Keep silence with a bleeding heart,” one reader, a man, pro-war and therefore not a sentimentalist, writes us.

But we cannot keep silent. We have not kept silence in the face of the monstrous injustice of the class war, or the race war that goes on side by side with this world war (which the Communist used to call the imperialist war.)

Read the letters in this issue of the paper, the letter from the machine shop worker as to the deadening, degrading hours of labor. Read the quotation from the missionary’s letter from China. Remember the unarmed steel strikers, the coal miners, shot down on picket lines. Read the letter from our correspondent in Seattle who told of the treatment accorded agricultural workers in the North West. Are these workers supposed to revolt? These are Pearl Harbor incidents! Are they supposed to turn to arms in the class conflict to defend their lives, their homes, their wives and children?

Another Pearl Harbor

Last month a Negro in Missouri was shot and dragged by a mob through the streets behind a car. His wounded body was then soaked in kerosene. The mob of white Americans then set fire to it, and when the poor anguished victim had died, the body was left lying in the street until a city garbage cart trucked it away. Are the Negroes supposed to “Remember Pearl Harbor” and take to arms to avenge this cruel wrong? No, the Negroes, the workers in general, are expected to be “pacifist” in the face of this aggression.

Love Is the Measure

Perhaps we are called sentimental because we speak of love. We say we love our president, our country. We say that we love our enemies, too. “Hell,” Bernanos said, “is not to love any more.”

“Greater love hath no man than this,” Christ said, “that he should lay down his life for his friend.”

“Love is the measure by which we shall be judged,” St. John of the Cross said.

“Love is the fulfilling of the law,” St. John, the beloved disciple said.

Read the last discourse of Jesus to his disciples. Read the letters of St. John in the New Testament. And how can we express this love—by bombers, by blockades?

Here is a clipping from the Herald Tribune, a statement of a soldier describing the use of the bayonet against the Japanese:

“He (his father) should have been with us and seen how good it was. We got into them good and proper, and I can’t say I remember much about it, except that it made me feel pretty good. I reckon that was the way with the rest of the company, by the way my pals were yelling all the time.”

Is this a Christian speaking?

“Love is an exchange of gifts,” St. Ignatius said.

Love is a breaking of bread.

Remember the story of Christ meeting His disciples at Emmaus? All along the road He had discoursed to them, had expounded the scriptures. And then they went into the inn at Emmaus, and sat down to the table together. And He took bread and blessed it and broke it and handed it to them, and they knew Him in the breaking of bread! (St. Luke, 24, 13-35.)

Love is not the starving of whole populations. Love is not the bombardment of open cities. Love is not killing, it is the laying down of one’s life for one’s friend.

Worse Than Others

Hear Fr. Zossima, in the brothers Karamazev:

“Love one another, Fathers,” he said, speaking to his monks. “Love God’s people. Because we have come here and shut ourselves within these walls, we are no holier than those that are outside, but on the contrary, from the very fact of coming here, each of us has confessed to himself that he is worse than others, than all men on earth. . . And the longer the monk lives in his seclusion, the more keenly he must recognize that. Else he would have no reason to come here.

Responsible for All Sins

“When he realizes that he is not only worse than others, but that he is responsible to all men for all and everything, for all human sins, national and individual, only then the aim of our seclusion is attained. For know, dear ones, that every one of us is undoubtedly responsible for all men and everything on earth, not merely through the general sinfulness of creation, but each one personally for all mankind and every individual man. For monks are not a special sort of man, but only what all men ought to be. Only through that knowledge, our heart grows soft with infinite, universal, inexhaustible love. Then every one of you will have the power to win over the whole world by love and to wash away the sins of the world with your tears. . . Each of you keep watch over your heart and confess your sins to yourself unceasingly. . . Hate not the atheists, the teachers of evil, the materialists, and I mean not only the good ones—for there are many good ones among them, especially in our day—hate not even the wickedness. Remember them in your prayers thus: Save, O Lord, all those who have none to pray for them, save too all those who will not pray. And add, it is not in pride that I make this prayer, O Lord, for I am lower than all men. . .”

“Holier Than Thou”

I quote this because that accusation “holier than thou” is also made against us. And we must all admit our guilt, our participation in the social order which has resulted in this monstrous crime of war.

We used to have a poor demented friend who came into the office to see us very often, beating his breast, quoting the penitential psalms in Hebrew, and saying that everything was his fault. Through all he had done and left undone, he had brought about the war, the revolution.

That should be our cry, with every mouthful we eat, “We are starving Europe!” When we look to our comfort in a warm bed, a warm home, we must cry, “My brother, my mother, my child is dying of cold.

“I am lower than all men, because I do not love enough. O God take away my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh.”