Peter Maurin 1877-1977

By Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, May 1977, 1, 9.

Summary: Recounts her first meeting with Peter Maurin in 1932, his teaching style, his personal example, and his platform for the Catholic Worker: "Roundtable Discussions, Houses of Hospitality and Farming Communes–those were the three planks in Peter Maurin's platform." (DDLW #256).

When I first saw Peter Maurin my impression was of a short, broad-shouldered workingman with a high, broad head covered with graying hair. His face was weatherbeaten, he had warm grey eyes and a wide, pleasant mouth. The collar of his shirt was dirty, but he had tried to dress up by wearing a tie and a suit which looked as though he had slept in it. (As I found out afterward, indeed he had.)

What struck me first about him was that he was one of those people who talked you deaf, dumb and blind, who each time he saw you began his conversation just where he had left off at the previous meeting, and never stopped unless you begged for rest, and that was not for long. He was irrepressible and he was incapable of taking offense.

The night I met Peter I had come from an assignment for **The Commonweal,**covering the Communist-inspired "hunger march" of the unemployed to Washington. I had prayed at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, that I might find something to do in the social order besides reporting conditions. I wanted to change them, not just report them, but I had lost faith in revolution, I wanted to love my enemy, whether capitalist or Communist.

I certainly did not realize at first that I had my answer in Peter Maurin. I was thirty-five years old and I had met plenty of radicals in my time and plenty of crackpots, too; people who had blueprints to change the social order were a dime a dozen around Union Square.

At that time Peter Maurin was fifty-seven, had never married, had been "away from the Church" in his youth, had worked with Sangnier and his social studies group in Paris, and had sold its paper, **Le Sillon.**He believed in going to the people in town and countryside, because first of all he was of the people himself.

He was born in a tiny hamlet in the southern part of France, 200 miles from Barcelona, one of a family of 24 children. His own mother had died after she had borne her fifth child, and his stepmother had had 19 and was still alive, he said.

''I did not like the idea of revolution," he once told me. "I did not like the French revolution, nor the English revolution. I did not wish to work to perpetuate the proletariat. I never became a member of a union, even though here in America I did all kinds of hard labor. I was always interested in the land and man's life

on the land. That is why I went homesteading in Canada, but after two years, after my partner was killed in a hunting accident, I went around Canada with work gangs and entered this country in 1911, where I have been ever since."

When I first knew Peter, I was busy at a research job which kept me at the library until three in the afternoon. When I got home to my little apartment on East Fifteenth Street, I'd find him there waiting for me, ready to indoctrinate, to give me a lesson in history from the Catholic point of view. He had been sent to me, he said, by George Shuster, later president of Hunter College, who at that time was editor of**The Commonweal.**George thought that we were alike in point of view, both interested in changing the social order and in reaching the masses with the social teaching of the Church.

I had been a Catholic only about four years, and Peter, having suggested that I get out a paper to reach the man in the street, started right in on my education; he was a born teacher, and any park bench, coffee shop counter, bus or lodging house was a place to teach. He believed in starting on a program at once, without waiting to acquire classroom or office or meeting hall. To reach the man in the street, you went to the street. Peter was literal.

I had met Peter in December, 1932, and the first issue of **The Catholic Worker**came out in time for the May Day celebration in Union Square, 1933. What Peter Maurin was interested in was the publication of his essays, and my journalistic sense led me to report conditions as they were, to paint a picture of poverty and destitution, homelessness and unemployment, in short, to so arouse the conscience that the reader would be willing and ready to listen to Peter when he talked about things as they should be.

Things as They Should Be

Peter was very much afraid of class war, and after his first essays were published he could not quite understand why I wrote so much about interracial injustice, hard conditions of labor, inadequate housing. He much preferred to write about how things should be–Houses of Hospitality for the needy, charity exercised in every home, voluntary poverty and the works of mercy, farming communes and agronomic universities that would teach people to earn a living by the sweat of their own brows instead of someone else's.

The Catholic Worker was financed like the publications of any radical "splinter group." If we had had a mimeograph machine, it would have been a mimeographed paper. But we had nothing but my typewriter, so we took our writing to a printer, found out it would cost $57 to get out 2,500 copies of a small, eight-page sheet the size of **The Nation,**and boldly had it set up. There were no office, no staff, no mailing list. I had a small pay-check coming in for the research job which was just finishing; two checks were due for articles I had written, but these were needed to pay overdue rent and light bills. Father Joseph McSorley, the Paulist, paid me generously for a small job of bibliography which I did for him;

the late Father Ahearn, pastor of a black church in Newark, gave me ten dollars; Sister Peter Claver gave me one dollar which someone had just given her. Those were our finances. We took that first issue of the paper into Union Square that May Day and sold it for one penny a copy to Communists and trade unionists.

Peter slept in the back of **The Catholic Worker**office, and he soon brought in an Armenian anarchist poet and a German agnostic to share his quarters with him and to provide sparring partners for round-table discussions. He never took part in any of the work of the paper, except to turn in each month half a dozen "easy essays," many of which he insisted that we repeat over and over again. He was the kind of teacher who believed in repetition, restatement, and the continual return to first principles. He loved, however, to see visitors, and, if none came into the office, he went out into the highways and byways and found them.

The only time Peter got excited was when he found others agreeing with him approving his ideas. Then his voice would rise, his eyes would shine and he would shout out exultingly. He always expected so much in the way of results that I often felt called upon to put a damper on him, to tone down his optimistic enthusiasms. But I soon noticed that he was never depressed or discouraged by disappointments or failures.

A failure such as that of the first round-table discussion was an example. Peter had hoped for great results from a series of Sunday afternoon discussions he had planned. Optimistically, for the first one he rented the ballroom of the Manhattan Lyceum, where trade union conventions as well as balls were often held. Only twenty people showed up; they gathered around the speaker's table and had an uproarious discussion on political action **versus**Catholic Action. After that, Peter rented a small meeting room. The waste of money, laboriously collected, did not bother him. There was plenty of money in the world, he believed. What was needed was men and women absorbed by the right ideas. Given the people, the money would follow. All one needed to do was to pray. When bills piled up and creditors came, we used to go to church and pray, all of us taking turns, and we called this "the picketing of St. Joseph." Once when I asked an unemployed chambermaid if she would take a half-hour of "picketing Saint Joseph" over at Precious Blood Church, she asked me if she was to carry a sign. Once the printer sent us his bill with the notation, "Pray and pay!"

I asked Peter several times if he were not disappointed at the lack of success in indoctrinating the man on the street. I pointed to various examples of those who came to stay with us and whose condition seemed to get worse instead of better.

Getting Down to the Roots

"People are just beginning to realize how deep-seated the evil is," he said soberly. "That is why we must be Catholic Radicals, we must get down to the roots. That is what radicalism is–the word means getting down to the roots."

Peter, even in his practicality, tried to deal with problems in the spirit of "the Prophets of Israel and the Fathers of the Church." He saw what the Industrial Revolution had done to human beings and he did not think that unions and organizations, strikes for higher wages and shorter hours, were going to be the solution. "Strikes don't strike me," he used to say when we went out to a picket line to distribute literature during a strike. But he came with us to hand out the literature–leaflets which dealt with men and women's dignity and their need and right to associate themselves with their fellows in trade unions, in credit unions, cooperatives, maternity guilds, etc.

He was interested in far more fundamental approaches. He liked the name "radical" and he had wanted the paper to be called **The Catholic Radical.**To him, **Worker**smacked of class war. What he wanted was to instill in all, worker or scholar, a philosophy of poverty and a philosophy of work.

He was the layman always. I mean that he never preached; he taught. While decrying secularism, the separation of the material from the spiritual, his emphasis as a layman, was on our material needs, our need for work, food, clothing and shelter. Though Peter went weekly to confession and daily to Communion and spent an hour a day in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, his study was of the material order around him. Though he lived in the city, he urged a return to the village economy, the study of the crafts and of agriculture. He was dealing with this world, in which God has placed us to work for a new heaven and a new earth wherein justice dwelleth.

He constantly urged individuals to practice the corporal and spiritual works of mercy; he urged Bishops to establish Houses of Hospitality. Somehow the two planks of the program got mixed up. I can remember well enough how it happened. He had written a series of essays addressed to the Bishops, pointing out to them that canon law called for the establishment of hospices in every bishopric. When a reader who had been sleeping in the subway came into**The Catholic Worker**office one day and disclosed her need (the apartment and the office were already full), Peter's literal acceptance of "If thy brother needs food or drink, feed him, and if he needs shelter, shelter him" meant that we rented a large apartment a block away which became the first House of Hospitality for women. Now we have two houses, on First St. and Third St. Here the works of mercy are still being practiced by the group who get out **The Catholic Worker,**living without salaries, in voluntary poverty. "Feeding thy brother" started with feeding a few poor men. It became a daily breadline in 1936, and the line still forms every day outside the door.

Round-table Discussions, Houses of Hospitality and Farming Communes–those were the three planks in Peter Maurin's platform. There are still Houses of Hospitality, each autonomous but inspired by Peter, each trying to follow Peter's principles. And there are farms, all different but all starting with the idea of the personalist and communitarian revolution–to use Emmanuel Mounier's phrase. Peter was not disappointed in his life's work. He had given everything he had and he asked for nothing, least of all for success. He gave himself, and–at the

end–God took from him the power to think.

He was anointed at Easton for a bad heart condition, and a few years later, on May 15, 1949, he died at Maryfarm in Newburgh, New York. Garbed in a donated suit of clothes, he was buried in a donated grave in St. John's Cemetery, Brooklyn.

Obituaries were found not only in **The Industrial Worker,**a Chicago I.W.W. paper which was on the subversive list, but also in **Osservatore Romano**in Vatican City, which carried its notice on the front page.

God has taken him into Paradise, with Lazarus who once was poor. May He bring us, too, to a place of refreshment, light and peace.

(This article is slightly revised from the preface to the 1961 edition of THE GREEN REVOLUTION. Eds. note.)