

Day After Day - June 1937

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Describes parish life in a South Side Chicago slum, the beautiful liturgy in a St. Louis, Missouri, convent. Speaks to workers, white and colored, and lauds the teaching and hospital work of a 75 year old priest, Fr. John Lyons. (DDLW #322).

I must keep a more careful record of places and persons even if it means sitting up in bed writing after an 18-hour day.

For instance, there is in this place so many details of which I do not want to forget but will unless I write them down.

It is the first rectory I've ever stayed at and it is a great privilege to be here. The door bell rings day and night, its parlors are cluttered up with people, everyone works from dawn till way after dark, and everyone is very happy.

We are on the South Side in an uneven neighborhood which has good and bad houses, but mostly slums. Around on Michigan Avenue the houses are beautiful, but across the street are some little houses so awful that it is hard to believe temples of the Holy Ghost are housed there.

Fr. Drescher, the pastor here, pointed out one house which some children had pushed over on themselves, and he had waited hours while the fire department extricated them, to baptize them. Neither child was hurt badly, strangely enough.

Father and I were walking around the neighborhood looking for a little house for another branch of the Catholic Worker for his side of town.

"I cried when I got home that day," he said. "I don't know what was the matter with me. I never do that."

It is a joy to be with such priests as Father Drescher. He and Father Luis, Father Jansen and Father Boerding are all so gay. Father Drescher is the pastor but he is like an older brother. They are free and happy with one another.

He used to be a missionary in the Philippines and as we sit over a good breakfast of liver sausage and toast and fruit and coffee he tells us of living conditions there.

"At first we were allowed three dollars a month to live on. All we had were rice and leaves most of the time.

"Later, when I had three sisters come out for teaching we were allowed ten dollars. You couldn't buy anything. Money wasn't much good. When some of our kind friends sent us clothes, we could exchange them for food, fish and chickens. Sometimes we had grasshoppers, locusts they were, cooked, first in salt and water, and then served with a little vinegar and lard. They were delicious.

We liked it. They eat dogs there, too, and say they are very good but I never ate any. We never had any bread until I began to bake some. We just had rice, and to keep our teeth in chewing habit, we had water buffalo meat. Fresh it was tough, but dried it was worse. And sugar cane to chew on, too. Between the meat and the grasshoppers, I preferred the grasshoppers.

Making Bread

"My bread was very good. We used a five gallon can as the oven, putting the coals and charcoal in the bottom and making an oven on top. We put the bread in an empty sardine tin. I sent some to the sisters and they said it was better than theirs. But I didn't have much time for gardening or baking. I had to go on horseback and on rafts, in all directions, to reach my people.

"During the war about 28 of us Germans were arrested and shipped back to the United States—I don't know what for. All of us were confined to a fo'castle (there were six priests among us) and it was terribly hot. When they shut off the ventilating system to rest the machinery some of them fainted. There we were for weeks. We had beans 78 times. Everybody got thin but the priests and they got fat. Yes, it was a hard life."

The house here is big and the pastor gave me his room because it is the only one with a private bath. The windows look out on a gnarled ailanthus tree, which grows so well in city back yards. There are some shrubs in the tiny back yard but the grass is trampled down by the police dog and the puppy, a mongrel called Valentine, whom Father says Martin de Porres sent him for a pet. The police dog is a watch dog, not a pet, but the little cur wags his whole hind end and is a friend of all. I can see why Father never ate dog meat.

The rooms are large, but the furniture is very poor and the rugs worn down to the nap. When they need any "new" furniture they go buy it at the Catholic Salvage Bureau around the corner. Fortunately for them there are no ill advised though loving parishioners to smother them in gifts such as oriental rugs.

May Day

The cooking is good and we like to go out to the kitchen where Mrs. Lorenz holds sway. She comes from Louisiana and has two daughters who are nuns. On Sunday nights, or when we come in late, we meet down there because we love kitchens, priests and all of us.

The procession for May Day was a happy occasion in the church across the street. The church was filled with flowers, and all the little girls and boys who had made their first Communion that morning and all the school children filled the

church. And before the statue of the Sorrowful Mother there was a big pot of roses, bought for her by a Negro girl who had been homeless one time last winter but now had a job and could afford to pay for roses out of her eight dollars a week salary! May Our Lord and the Blessed Mother bless her!

Blooms in the City

Two members of the Catholic Worker who are leaders of the South Side branch are working here with Father Drescher in the parish, two Elizabeths, and we have enjoyed being together these few weeks.

While we were looking for a place this afternoon we passed little ramshackle frame houses all bent and reeling, and the front yards were planted with lettuce, radishes, golden glow and iris, and even some rows of corn. On one street, here in the heart of the slums there was an apple tree in bloom and a parrot out in a bush in the front yard. Wish we could find a place on that street, but there is great difficulty in finding any place around here, it is so congested with several families and sometimes dozens of families living in one house. Many of the worst places have been torn down and there is no new housing to take their place.

St. Louis

Three of us from St. Louis started out before five one morning (it was the octave of the Ascension) to go to the Convent of the Precious Blood at O'Fallon, Missouri, for High Mass at six. We had time to recite Lauds as we sped along at sixty miles an hour, and the nuns, novices, postulants and aspirants were just starting Prime when we arrived.

In the chapel, surrounded by noble trees and lawns, were the robed women, and the beauty within completed the beauty without. I have never heard Mass sung so, with such clear, pure and hearty singing, not the thin, attenuated singing one is accustomed to associate with women's voices and Gregorian.

Liturgy

Purity was a positive virtue there in that chapel. There was strength, joy and love strong as death there.

And I thought as I listened that if Mass were offered up in only one place in the world, as Thomas a Kempis suggested, so that all the workers would flock to assist, it would be offered with just such beauty and glory.

I thought too, how there at this liturgical center of America they had made most truly the Mass the crown of the day. The morning took its rightful place, its emphasis. Matins, Lauds, Prime, led up to Mass followed by Terce and Sext, and then the great work of the day was done,—surely as perfectly as it is ever done in this imperfect world. The rest of the day is relatively unimportant and declines to nightfall when God’s creatures sleep.

I thought of the city, of the world, and how life begins at dusk, and I realized as never before that the life of the Mystical Body is a glorious day.

Breakfast

Fr. Hellriegel was our host at breakfast and it was a hearty meal as it should be after such hearty singing. We sat long at the table.

Fr. Hellriegel, the chaplain of the Convent, is a mountain of strength and of energy and has that happiness of one who does well what God wants him to do.

After being up since four thirty, we ate heartily of bacon and eggs, homemade bread and butter, and there were sausages, cheese and green topped onions on the table, of which Father ate ten before I could get the plate and take half a dozen myself.

Speaking to the nuns was a great pleasure and they are all going to pray for the Catholic Worker. Their powerhouse there supplies us with the energy we need for our work.

The students at the high school were farmers’ sons and daughters and it was good to talk to them too. We will have there one more C.W. group I hope.

Speaking

So many places covered this trip and so many different audiences. In St. Louis I spoke before our own group twice, before several High Schools; before one group of workers in an enameling plant and before 600 steel workers.

The last crowd were just organized by the C.I.O. in Granite City, Illinois, and, though the town allows no negroes after dark, white and colored were in the same hall, in the same union; this is something the C.I.O. has achieved which the A. F. of L. failed in.

(We stopped at a coffee shop in St. Louis with a colored member of our group and the A. F. of L. waitress said it was a clause in the contract that she couldn’t serve colored. Don Gallagher, one of our own, waited on us instead.)

Father Lyons

We picked up Father John Lyons at the rectory of St. Louis one afternoon and went with him to General Hospital number 2 where the colored of St. Louis are taken care of. Twenty-five thousand patients a year pass through the hospital and Father Lyons is there every day to visit the sick and console the afflicted. He instructs, baptizes, gives the last sacraments of the Church to the dying.

He is seventy-five now and this has been his life. For a long time he was stationed in Chicago where he did the same thing at the county hospital day after day. And now he is down in St. Louis; there are three priests in charge there, doing eight hours duty each, doing the work which he started.

“R” Schools

Father Lyons is stationed at the colored Church in St. Louis and his special interest is in starting what he calls “R” schools among the colored. “R” stands for Religion and knowing how diffident people are about coming to rectories and to churches for instruction he has started many of his little schools in the homes of the colored themselves. It may be classes for children in the basement of some home on Saturday or weekday afternoons; it may mean evening meetings in the home of some Catholic colored woman or of one of his converts. We visited one of these homes one evening, and the gathering reminded one of primitive Christianity—instruction going on in the bosom of the family and becoming very close and homelike. Father Lyons thinks far more important his work in starting these “R” schools than the weary hours of visiting that he does daily and nightly in the hospital. He wishes other priests to follow this technique which is so simple and effective, and he has issued many pamphlets on the subject, begging the money to get them printed.

Visiting the Sick

It was good to go with him on this afternoon to the hospital. It was an experience one never forgets. The saintly old man of seventy-five, still so vigorous and full of energy and zeal, going from bed to bed and approaching his friends with childlike faith that God would give the desire when he was so ready to satisfy the need.

“Did you ever think of becoming a Catholic?” he would say again and again with great and generous directness. “Do you know any thing about the faith? Can’t I tell you something about it?”

Day by day he visits and finds out the faith of each patient who comes in.

“You see Father here at the strangest hours,” one old Negro said. “At any time of the night I just open my eyes and there he is.”

The hospital itself is a terrible place, not only for its human woe. They have built another hospital for the colored into which they are soon going to move, but for a long time they have been housed in an ancient medical school with huge loft-like rooms, crowded together with little air or sunlight. Children are in the wards with the adults, but these at least have beds near the windows. The black heads stand out stark and hauntingly beautiful in their gaunt suffering against the white of the sheets and the dingy white of the wards. The Negro has learned the “art of acceptance” as Romain Rolland calls it.

Greatest Gift

It is too late now to think in terms of social justice for these dying ones. One can work for their race and for better conditions for all. But for these men, lying there dying, what can one offer?

Father Lyons knows that he has that which means beauty and joy and peace to them. He realizes that he alone in his role of priest can give them the greatest gift this world has to offer. He can bring to them Christ Himself. And he so wants to give them what he has been empowered to give, that he is tireless in his efforts.

Love, St. Ignatius says, is an exchange of gifts. This son of Ignatius, Father Lyons, has indeed a heart full of love.