

# On Pilgrimage - March 1965

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*Summary:*

Writing from Albuquerque she contrasts two types of hospitality—the “grand gesture” that doesn’t last and the “unspectacular” that perseveres. Opposes a top down governmental approach to helping the poor and is critical of excessive spending for airbases and for Church decorations. Witnesses the brutal breakup of the civil rights march in Selma, Alabama and relates several incidents of violence and segregation in Mississippi. Keywords: Negro, Black

(DDLW #823).

It is impossible to write all my impressions on the trip I am making in such a column as **On Pilgrimage**. I must write some longer articles later on various aspects of the problems I have encountered. Fortunately, tapes were made of many of my talks and if it is possible I would like to get copies of these tapes that will serve as notes. Meanwhile all this can be is a diary, and a diary that works backward, at that.

I write today from Tucson, Arizona, and by the time this March issue of the paper reaches our West Coast readers I will be home again, in New York, or perhaps on my way to Puerto Rico where I have been invited to speak to some university students who are nationalists but on the nonviolent side.

I am staying now with the James Allens, who have a family of ten, and eight of the children, all very articulate, are at home. Mealtimes mean discussion on all kinds of topics, from the new morality, the new look in the church, the population explosion, the anarchism of the home and the kind of anarchism Ammon Hennacy talks about, war and peace, man and his destiny. And in the midst of this life, an old man, the grandfather, lies peacefully dying. Today he was anointed. It is hard to write at such a time, but this is my job.

Arriving only last night by Greyhound from Albuquerque, I find it very warm here. When this is written I am going out to sit under a tree and read. Mail follows me, but travelling, speaking and just conversations leave little time to answer mail. I’ll catch up on that later.

## Albuquerque

Here I visited the Resers, in the house that Al has over the years enlarged and which looks down an unpaved country road and across to the far horizon of the mountains through which I had come. It is as though Albuquerque was in a large shallow bowl and we were on one rim of it looking across the city to the mountains opposite. Years ago Al started the house of hospitality in Chicago together with Ed Marciniak. John Cogley lived there while he went to college and at the same time ran the house. All three had known each other from boyhood. Al came to the Southwest for his health. (He would have died had he stayed in Chicago.)

Catherine works part time for Catholic Charities. The oldest son is married, with kids, and he works cleaning out and welding the insides of trailer truck tank cars. Isn't this dangerous work? Certainly all work has its risks, but there are safety devices. They steam out the tanks first before the men go into them. (I just read of a dozen seamen overcome by gas fumes in a tanker. They got out, all but one, and when a fellow worker went in to rescue him both were killed.) Bill has the Great Books, which I dipped into while I was there. Pete, his cousin, works as mailman and takes courses at the university.

"They sure need a house of hospitality around Albuquerque," Al said. "The Salvation Army takes transients in for one night and Brother Matthew for three."

The Catholic Worker may not be able to take in many but those who come become a part of the community and make it such a place as Orwell recommends in the concluding pages of **"Down and Out in Paris and London."** If there were only many more of them! These are means in a war on poverty not much regarded.

## Other Friends

Visited with Erma Suess who has helped us much at sudden times of need. Saw John McKeon, who is still organizing for the municipal workers and trying to write a novel. He might better get his hand back in by writing some more chapters in "Poverty's Progress."

## Oklahoma City

Stayed here with Sister Nativity who lives in an old rectory that has been converted into a Montessori center for the children of the district. Sister was formerly in charge of a hospital but has chosen this work among the poor.

About a mile away there is a slum section separated from the rest of the city by a river on one side and railroad tracks on the other and there is a small house no\*\*\*better than the Negro houses around where two priests live together with Vincent Maevisky who spent some months with us last summer. He is going to

college and also cooks the meals there. There is poverty there but not destitution, so that it looks like something that will continue and not be just a flash in the pan, just a romantic gesture as so many attempts “to live poor” are. Vincent, for instance, lived in an apartment of two rooms on Spring Street last summer – which he and two others called the SaccoVanzetti house and where they took in so many that every bit of available space was taken up and the young extremists took to the comfort and privacy of the roof during the summer months. This sort of thing is a gesture that needs to be made, no doubt, but it never lasts because it is humanly unendurable for donor or recipient of hospitality. I don’t know how many of these splinter offshoots of the CW house have happened in the past, as a result of our own attempts to think of the common good, and to use some measure of common sense and as a protest against our failures in Charity too.

Jacques Travers seems to have some balance. He teaches, earns his living, and shares his apartment with two others, one of whom many might give up as hopeless cases who may walk off with all his possessions as he has done in the past with others. For the other who is a former professor he is providing a home in his old age, who had nothing before but a room on the Bowery (for which by the way, the Catholic Worker has been paying slightly more than a dollar a night for many years).

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But such unspectacular hospitality is not for the very young ones who like to make the grand but not lasting gesture. However, if they had a true vocation for this work of love, sharing what they had very simply, they would have persevered through hell and high water, as the saying is. Meanwhile it is a school for them, an exercise and they can only learn by doing. They have yet to find their true vocation. Even so, as an act of love, it is of incalculable value.

It was good to see Vincent and to learn that he will be with us again this summer, to give out clothes, mind the door, ladle out soup, in addition to other more exciting adventures like picket lines and sit-ins. We visited also with Fr. McDole, who was one of a group of priests who went to Mississippi last summer.

I came to Oklahoma City from San Antonio, a long trip which took from seven a.m. until eleven p.m. and then we sat up, Sister Nativity, Vincent, Fr. Vrana and I, until two-thirty talking and enjoying sister’s fresh coffee cake and coffee. Jean Walsh had been with them at Christmas time and it was her enthusiasm for their work that led me to go so out of my way to be\*\*\*\*with them. We had a good meeting the night after I arrived and the seminarians who had just come from a Shrove Tuesday day of recollection were able to attend. I also had time to visit St. Patrick’s church, which is of great beauty, and built by the parishioners themselves, with the guidance, of course, of contractors and other experts.

## San Antonio

Back in San Antonio I had had a meeting that was crowded to the doors and even outside, and thanks to microphones, I could reach them all. In fact the meetings in Austin and in San Antonio were marked by so great an interest in the poverty program of the government on the one hand and the Vietnam situation on the other. Thanks to John Howard Griffin who has also been giving a series of talks to capacity audiences, they were also keyed up about the civil rights issue and the problems of jobs for Negro and white.

Undoubtedly they were worried, some of them, about their own future work. I heard one student say to another, "Do you realize how easy it is to lose your security clearance – what would happen to you then?" In the way of job opportunity, I suppose he meant.

One of the young men who had stayed with us one summer and who taught afterward in the Aleutians lost his "security clearance" after two years of teaching and has not to this day the slightest idea why, and now can get no more work as a teacher. He loved his work too, and loved the Aleutians and had only admiration for the fearlessness of the young men who flew under the most hazardous conditions (in their work of surveillance, I suppose.) We were talking about war and the challenge war presented to the young when everything was asked of them in the way of sacrifice. It is a time when we need to read again that conversation of the young airman in Bernanos' famous story, **The Diary of a Country Priest**. We printed it once in the CW during the Second World War.

In San Antonio, the sick young man who was president of the Young Republican Club distributed leaflets containing an attack on my moral reputation but it was an audience who did not heckle though there was a good hour of questions afterward. Undoubtedly in most audiences there were many who represented most conservative and unimaginative thinking, but they were serious and courteous and undoubtedly could be reached in discussion. We are too often belligerent pacifists who talk only to ourselves and to each other. "God will that **all** men be saved."

## Here are the Poor

Thanks to my hostess, Encarnation Armas, I was able to have a close look at the truly destitute sections that surround San Antonio. On the one hand there are the air bases, five of them, not to speak of an army camp within a hundred miles, of from 45,000 to 60,000 very young draftees or enlisted men, and the knowledge and sight of all the money spent on war, and on the very small amount spent on the poor in comparison, and that to be spread over five years, makes for bitterness of heart. "In peace is my bitterness most bitter," one of the prophets said.

“The poor are the first children of the church,” Bossuet said, but to look at the unequal distribution of the Church wealth one would never know it. The amount spent on wall to wall carpeting and expensive furnishings in the offices which have to deal with the fact of destitution is a scandal in the church, which cries out to heaven. As I see it I think with refreshment of the barracks used as a convent by the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity in Gadsden, Alabama, and of the two slum priests in Oklahoma City, and of the Benedictine Monastery at Weston, Vermont, and of the Little Brothers in Detroit, and the Little Sisters in Boston, Chicago Washington and Montreal, and all the others working among the poor and not trying to get hunks of government money with which to begin from top down to alleviate poverty. One worthy voluntary project for some publisher to do would be to reprint Conrad Pepler’s book – Rich and Poor in Christian Tradition.

Before San Antonio there was Austin, where I spoke at St. Edward’s University to a very large audience and where I met Fr. Trebtske again, who used to work with us in New York before he went to the seminary. He is in a Mexican parish where they have a fine center for the children, bright and gaily painted, spacious, light and airy, better than anything that I saw In San Antonio where the Bishops’ committee for the Spanish speaking is located. The Montessori method is used to teach the children and the children come after school every day.

Of course one sees the results of the cursillo everywhere, this course in Christianity which results in a sense of community, a sense that we are all one, and responsible for each other.

In Houston I visited Rose Badami, member of the Legion of Mary who started a house of hospitality for girls in difficulties of one kind or another. There needs to be more delicacy exercised in this kind of work, such as was done once by two young Christian Workers in New York, directed by Fr. Wendell, O.P. where they took in girls who were friends of theirs as well as girls out of prison and none visiting them knew which was which. The house in Texas is the first work of this kind I have seen undertaken and I hope it grows, but one must have a sturdy endurance and a lively faith that God will repair our own failures to remember that we are but unprofitable servants and these guests are His guests, and not our own. We are there to wash their feet, as it were, and preferably in silence, which St. Brendan said is two thirds of piety.

Fr. John Sheehan, Basilian, had me speak at St. Thomas University before I left. He was formerly in Rochester and taught the sons of our Catholic Workers there. He reminded me of the work in Toronto where the state university is combined with the Institute of Medieval Studies run by the Basilians. We could learn much from them as to how Church and State work together in the field of education. We learned much in the early days of our work from Fr. Carr and Fr. Phelan, both of the Institute.

## Mississippi

And now to get back to Mississippi about which I must write later an entire article, and with care lest I endanger our friends there by some indiscretion. When you visit friends who have been threatened, whose homes have been watched and in one case bombed, you are anxious not to add to the burden they bear of danger and suffering. Each time they speak out they are in danger and their children are in danger.

You come from Mass in the morning and see bright shiny pick-up trucks with rifle racks in the window behind the seat, with two or three rifles, and no license plates on the car. This I witnessed too, morning, noon and evening when this violation in regard to plates was clearly visible. Then you hear of a young man whose car was being refueled arrested on charges of speeding, assaulting an officer and disorderly conduct because he tried to use the men's toilet, and he a Negro.

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Ave Maria, the weekly magazine published at Notre Dame, Indiana carried a series of articles written by the editor, who was accompanied by an Episcopalian priest in which he told of the terror he experienced there. John Howard Griffin is lecturing on his experiences in Mississippi. Father Hesburgh, president of\*\*\*\*Notre Dame, was a member of the United States Commission on Civil Rights which was conducting hearings on whether the Negro was receiving police protection in his attempt to register to vote, or whether his rights were being interfered with. I spent one day at the hearings overcome with horror and shame at the tale of brutality that unfolded. Kidnappings and beatings eyes gouged out, dismembered corpses found in bayous, two full pages of the names of Negroes murdered in Mississippi, these things came out under the questioning of lawyers and educators which made up the commission.

Even as the hearings went on, the COFO house in Laurel, Miss., was burned to the ground. Men who testified at the hearings had to be given a guard to escort them home, and how safe they would be there was a question. Many who testified were born and raised in the same place. And many had worked and raised their children to go north to college.

During the hearings I met Clarie Harvey of Jackson, Mississippi, who had been one of the women with whom I made a peace pilgrimage that last month of Pope John XXIII's life on this earth. We had lunch together, a group of us in an integrated restaurant in Jackson. In Natchez, though there was token integration of one day, the only counter is in the Kress chain where Negroes can be served. The great struggle is the fight for voter registration now. There are no Negroes in the parochial schools yet in Mississippi.

Incident: We had dinner with Fr. Mahoney, S.S.J. who gives shelter to a COFO worker who was escaping a few cars full of masked men. The next day the filling station attendant across the street from his house stood out in front cracking a bullwhip, practicing with it, as it were. He seemed highly skilled.

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Incident: Fr. Thompson, a Negro, across the river in Ferriday, La., visited his friends the Foleys in a white neighborhood. Bob Foley teaches in a white parochial school, not yet integrated. From then on no white neighbor speaks to him or his Louisiana-born wife and children. He is from the north – didn't know better. Cars come, filled with grim white men, and park in front of the house, with glaring headlights. Telephone calls in the dead of the night. Then near midnight a bomb exploding in the middle of their front lawn. Though there was a police station down the street, no officer came out. No evidence of interest by white neighbors.

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Incident: We went to lunch with Fr. Thompson. He told us of a Negro shoe repairman who lived down the street who had been set on fire after being soaked with gasoline. He lived five days.

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Incident: Powell Hall, Methodist minister with a wife and five children, demoted from one post for preaching integration, now in Kingston, Mississippi, went to town in Natchez and leaving his children in the library to browse, went to a gas station to refuel. He was picked up by the police for vagrancy.

This sketchy account has been written with many interruptions, one of which was to view the brutal breaking up of the Selma, Alabama march. Lord Jesus, son of the living God, have mercy on us.