

Day After Day - June 1943

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Dorothy meditates on the importance of books to her, Peter Maurin, and to the Catholic Worker tradition. Mentions many titles and relates reading to prayer and joy. (DDLW #392).

“A New Testament and a pair of knees are all one needs in jail,” Fr. Hugo said to Harold Keane when he was sentenced to two and a half years in a federal prison after his application for conscientious objector status had been denied. (Both Fr. Hugo and Fr. Roy were present at his trial in Baltimore.)

I thought as I heard of this remark that there were quite a few things more that I would like to have in prison. Books for instance. As one of the old fathers of the desert said, “Prayer hath the travail of a mighty conflict to one’s last breath.” And to help in that travail, there are always books. Every time I try to detach myself from them I think of that little tale from the early Fathers.

The Abbott Marcus asked the Abbott Arsenius, saying, “Is it good to have no kind of solace in one’s cell? For I saw a brother that had a few green herbs about his cell, and he was rooting them out.” And the Abbott Arsenius said, “It is indeed good; but every man must act according to his own powers; if that brother should not be able to endure that kind of virtue, let him plant them again.”

(That brother ought to have been planted himself! comments Tina.)

I need the books that I am reading now. For instance there is Gerald Vann. For the first time too, I’ve seen Fr. Verner Moore’s little book PRAYER, republished for a dollar fifty by the Westminster Press in Maryland. All Oblates should send for it. What was my delight to find quotations from the fathers in it, one of them the long one we used in the March issue of the CW. I was converted to being an oblate by reading and re-reading *The Fathers of the Desert* (you can get it from Sheed and Ward, 63 Fifth Avenue, for seventy-five cents.)

Sauntering

Yesterday afternoon was one of these breathless and deliciously hot days, and after several days of not moving from my desk in the office, I decided to roam about the city a bit. First I went to Barnes and Nobles, that second-hand book shop on Eighteenth Street and Fifth Avenue. I had decided to replace some of our treasures which had been lost, strayed and stolen, and decided to look for them there. I didn’t find what I was looking for, but I did find some of the Welfare pamphlets by the St. Dominic’s Press, at Ditchling the community founded by Eric Gill, and about which our foreign correspondents, Jack English and Ossie Bondy, in England, have written us. There were a half dozen on the

counter and they were priced at seventy five cents each. I got one of them as a sample of what we could do on our own little press, given the time.

Wandering down to Sheed's at Thirteenth Street, I was just in time to have a visit with Frank Sheed. He gave me another copy of St. Augustine's confessions which he has so brilliantly translated, and it was of the new edition, a library copy indeed. I had just left another copy, of the dollar edition, with Norman Hawkins, who is in the military hospital at Phoenixville, Pa., having been returned from Africa last month. I got other copies of the *Fathers of the Desert* to send to Norman, and to Gerry Griffin, if I can get it over to the African desert to him. Ossie Bondy in England says that if I will label such things "Soldiers Comforts" they will surely get over.

Peter

Mr. Sheed also gave me "This Man Was Ireland," and that will go to Peter Maurin immediately. He has been wandering around showing everyone the advance notice of it, and pointing it out as one of the books to be read—"about when the Irish were Irish, a thousand years ago."

In my book about Peter I am writing two extra chapters, one of them entitled, "Peter's four foot shelf" and containing a list of books he considers indispensable for a Catholic education, and another chapter entitled "There is a book—but I have not read it." He keeps careful track of books old and new to find those that will lend authority to his message and that will give light on the synthesis he is trying to make between "Cult, Culture and Cultivation."

Blackfriar's

There is an article in this month's Blackfriar's, the Dominican monthly which comes to us from England, (you can get it at Brentano's) called Self Sufficiency.

It is the leading article for April. Probably written by Gerald Vann since he begins by emphasizing Community as he generally does. "The humanizing influence that makes us more complete men lies in the society of other men." He possesses goods of the spirit as well as of the body which he must share. The only way he can show his love for God is by his love for his fellows, as St. Teresa says.

This article on Self Sufficiency is a very important article, Peter says. "I am going to get two more copies to carry around with me. Then I will give them to people to comment on and then I will make points.

"Yes, it will answer objections to our emphasis on the land. The land is the first step, not the last end. *Vann*. The call of the land, to the earth, is the necessary first call. We must be born again, we must be born again on the land. *Gill*.

"The Benedictines exemplify *cult*, *culture* and *cultivation*. In order to preserve their religion, their literature, their books, their art, they took to the land, lived in communities and so grew.

"Today we have lost all that and must begin again, and begin with *cultivation* in order that *culture* may grow so that we may have *cult*, that is to say, religion.

"We must do it together, helping each other, bringing light to each other. We cannot do it alone.

"St. Thomas speaks in terms of the City, yes. But the Civitas is the perfect community, not our present city. Which 'errs violently in excess where the isolated unsocial landsman errs in defect.'"

Status of Book

As for the status of the book on Peter, I am rewriting the entire thing. It is a hard book to write, trying to do it objectively, and I am afraid of trying to interpret him, explain him. No one can do that to another. It is not right. And when I have written it, we are going to try to publish it ourselves, if the funds are forthcoming. It would be good for us to have a little publishing fund for cheap paper-covered books, the kind our readers can afford to buy. If the Lord wants us to do it, He will send the money. Meanwhile the book is being rewritten and will be out in the fall.

Moses

When Moses was leading his people out of the land of bondage—as Peter is trying to lead the workers—he had, as we all remember, quite a time with Pharaoh. At the first concession Pharaoh made—that the Jews could leave, provided they leave their gold and silver vessels for the temple behind—Moses said, "These things are necessary for the service of the Lord our God."

That, it seems to me, is the attitude we should take towards our material possessions. And certainly we feel that books are necessary for the service of the Lord our God. For instance there is that Readers Bible arranged by Fr. Ronald Knox, which gives the story of Moses' continuity—I had never before realized the drama of it, nor what a wonderful heroic character Moses was. Leaders of movements should read him for their encouragement.

Longmans

Thinking these thoughts about books I naturally betook myself further down Fifth Avenue to Longmans Green where our friend Julie Kernan is, and replaced two of our most precious books, the most reread, the most passed on—**St. Paul**,

as arranged by Maritain, with comments, and **The Christian Looks at the Jewish Question**, by Maritain. Not to have them around means a blank on one's shelves. They are the kind of books you pick up to read aloud from, and in conversations with visitors in the office. They are books which need to be referred to again and again.

Leon Bloy

While there we talked about Leon Bloy, and the impossibility of translating his work, and the difficulty I had of understanding him until Madame Raissa Maritain came out with her book, "**We Were Friends Together.**" And that reminded me that for a picture of Catholic Paris, and of the Personalist Communitarian movement in France, it was necessary to have not only Raissa Maritain's book but also Helence Isvolsky's **Darkness Before Dusk**.

Such an afternoon is a happy one. St. Benedict's idea of reading was prayerful, meditative reading, and these books I was searching for were the kind that stimulated thought. Thought becomes prayer, and prayer always returns to joy.

Not a Book Column

I am writing this column this month almost as a book column. At times one's heart is too sore at the impact of such blows as the bombing of the Ruhr dams (and hundreds of thousands of civilians, helpless ones, little children, fleeing screaming with agony and fear from this sure death of flood). Around us on Mott Street, the little children play. Everyone who comes to the office comments on the hordes of children playing in such workers' districts as these. Hard by are little factories on all these family streets, where flame throwers, amongst other death dealing instruments, are made. You look at them, these children, playing with joy, chasing each other, imitating grown-ups serious and peaceful, and you envisage such terror as the children of Europe and of Asia and of England know. Norman Hawkins, former head of our Seattle House of Hospitality when it began three years ago, has just been sent back from Africa (with epilepsy) and is at present at Valley Forge Hospital at Phoenixville, Pa. When I went to see him last month (with books) he told me how next to the hospital in England where he was, was a home for children crippled by air raids, and he used to watch them playing from his window. In the sadness of his heart, he decided that when he got better and peace came, he would devote himself to work among the children back here at home. Maybe he can help start an agricultural school where crafts are taught, on one of our farming communes, with Negro and white youths.

Peace in Prayer

We may cry “Peace, peace,” but there is violation of peace everywhere these days, in homes, in families, among the races of this country, between colored and white, between the workers and the employers, between the rich and the poor, between countries. There is only peace in prayer.

“The fruit of the spirit is charity, joy, peace, patience, benignity, goodness, longanimity, mildness, faith, modesty, continency, chastity. Against such there is no law.”