

On Pilgrimage - May 1975

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, May 1975, 1, 2, 12.

Summary: Traces the role of Mary has had in her prayer life—prayers learned before her conversion, her prayer at the national shrine to work for the worker and the poor, the little office of Mary, and the Memorare. Mentions the construction work on Maryhouse. (DDLW #550).

When we were growing up, we were taught that it was in bad taste to talk about money, and yet one finds Anthony Trollope's and Jane Austen's characters constantly talking about income. "Aunt Greenow has a fortune of 40,000 pounds" and "poor Kate's fortune is less than 100 pounds a year!"

I have some of these books in my little hermitage, and recreation here also means a walk on the beach, collecting driftwood, stones and shells, and what I read, what I put in my mind germinates, and a column results. The two weeks after Easter, I visited my sister upstate who is also somewhat of a hermitess (if there is such a word) and also the farm at Tivoli. Both visits were refreshing indeed.

Stopping on the way up and back at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality on First St. only for a day and a night, and visiting also our new house, Maryhouse, a few blocks away, I can report progress there.

All this long year, the City has held us up, though progress has been made—page after page of plans, intricate architectural blue prints, foretelling all the changes that had to be made, fire-retarding stairs, steel self-closing doors, new bathrooms on each floor, etc., etc. Plans were submitted for approval to holy mother the City. Architects, contractors, plumbers, professional men all worked and studied and finally those great long sheets of blueprints, so intricately marked, were approved. Enormous sums of money, \$110,000 up to \$200,000, would be required to make a fit habitation for women who had been sleeping in doorways, empty stores, and buildings in our neighborhood, the lower East Side, for God only knows how long. There are so many of them in a great city like New York, that one can say with truth, "It has always been this way." Many will not want to stay with us—will prefer their hideouts. Many will refuse to get rid of their vermin-ridden shopping bags and shopping carts.

Hospitality Houses

The best house of hospitality we ever had was St. Joseph's House on Chrystie St., also an old settlement house. It was always full, but we were always saving a bed for Anne who fled from us each night when we were closing up at ten or eleven, dragging her carton, fleeing from us who wanted to take her in. Eventually she consented to stay, provided we let her sleep on the floor in the hall, near the door. One night, I foolishly ventured to put a blanket over her and she was up and gone in a flash. But she kept coming back, until a car ran her down and she was taken to the hospital, and the Daughters of Israel took care of her from then on. She spent her last years in a good nursing home.

We were able to move into that house with no changes, but lost the house after some years when the City, by the right of eminent domain, took it over (and all the rest of the block). Some planning for an extension of the Second Ave. subway was one reason given. (The building is still held up, and the route changed besides.) All that remains of St. Joseph's at 223 Chrystie is a parking lot littered with beer cans and other trash. An ailanthus tree (the tree of heaven), transplanted from that lot, graces our tiny back yard at First Street now. Beauty is found in the most unlikely places.

It rejoices my heart to see the work going on new at Maryhouse on Third Street. As the demolition squad moves out and the carpenters and the plumbers come in, it looks as though the end of June will see their work finished.

On First Street

We still will be using St. Joseph's House on First St. for the men and the daily soup line and, undoubtedly, it will always be full. I think of one little man, short, bearded, very old, who, when we close up, goes over to the Municipal Lodging House to sit up or perhaps lie on the floor all night. There is shelter there—it is called the men's shelter, and one floor is a clinic, another a place where men can have "shelter," but there are no beds. Tickets are given out for "flops." We know from experience of many of our friends among the men that these Bowery hotels, these so-called flophouses, are preferred by many of the men to our crowded hospitality, though they come to our "line" for food and clothes, and just hanging around "for human warmth."

The mailing of the paper also goes on at St. Joseph's House—our little industry which is looked forward to every month and **lingered** over lovingly, a job dragged out, because of human warmth and a sense of belonging, which is so important to us all.

That is the reason it takes you, our readers, so long to get the paper! You will get this 12-page May Day issue so late that it will last you until we start mailing out the June issue.

This, our May Day issue, we consider of great importance, so once again I associate it with Mary, the Mother of Jesus. May is traditionally her month.

Mary's Role

I'd like to recount now, at this time, my own personal knowledge of her—the part she has played in my life. I don't want to be controversial—I'm just going back to that memorable occasion when I covered the Hunger March to Washington in 1932 and prayed in the Cathedral of the Immaculate conception there for her help to work for the worker, the unemployed, the homeless. I have written about that before and how she answered me by sending me, on my return to N.Y., Peter Maurin, who proposed to me a program which has occupied our lives ever since, and is a yeast leavening the lives of so many of our readers.

I want to go back much further—to Chicago in the early 20's. I worked for a brief time as Bob Minor's secretary when he was secretary of the newly formed Communist Party. He was editing the **Liberator**, which became the **New Masses**. I had worked before the period on the City News bureau covering the Domestic Relations courts. The city editor of the **Post** was Lionel Moise, but it was his assistant, Sam Putnam, whose library fascinated me and is the real hero of this anecdote. Sam Putnam later became a Communist himself, but I doubt if any Marxist remembers him. His fame stems from a translation of Don Quixote, which is accepted by scholarly critics as being the best ever made. Sam loaned me Boris Huysmans' **The Return, The Cathedral, and The Oblate**, which told of Huysmans' return to the Church. (Huysmans' had been of the decadent school, and one of his earlier books, **La Bas**, dealt with the demonology which has again crept into some of our youth movements today. Once I caught Peter Maurin destroying a book and burning it in our Mott St. House of Hospitality, which was heated by open fireplaces, and found it was one of these early books. I had read it, or glanced through it after encountering the other books and was glad to see it go up in flames.) But it was **The Return** which taught me the **Memorare**, that beautiful prayer to Mary, which so impressed me that I have said it since every day of my life. Pope John also had this practice. All I think I ever asked of her was that she should take care of me. The prayer is brief and easily remembered.

The next great influence was a little prayer book given to me by Sister Aloysius, a retired old nun, or Sister of Charity, living at St. Joseph's by the Sea, whom I had stopped on the road next to the convent grounds and asked "How does one go about having a baby baptized a Catholic?" Old fashioned Catholics seem to accept these startling questions and encounters quite naturally. She began to try to feed my own supernatural life with pious, current magazines. There was also a Life of St. Alphonsus Ligouri which was appalling, in that it contained a story of the Blessed Mother who set fire to a barn containing a group of roistering peasants, who were perhaps celebrating some pagan festival! Being brought up on fairy tales from a very early age, I was not bothered by this fable, especially

since a little black book called **The Mercy Manual** fell into my hands, which contained the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin, which I have said so frequently since that I almost know it by heart. The old **Mercy Manual** edition contained the Office of the Dead and many other prayers and novenas and is no longer in print. It seems such devotions have gone out of style. The best edition is one brought out by the Dominicans, Frs. Charles Callan and John McHugh. “Accompanied by thorough explanations” it informs us that the first authentic editions came out around 960 A.D. and it was part of the daily prayers not only of monks but also the secular clergy of France and Italy.

Two of the earliest copies of manuscripts are now in the British Museum. In England, these same little “manuals of devotion” were called Primers because they were the first reading books of children in school. The Little Office was the first Liturgical book printed in England by Caxton in 1477. It is made up of psalms, excerpts from the Bible, especially Ecclesiasticus, the Song of Songs, with hymns and antiphons, many of them composed by Venantius Fortunatus, who lived from 530-609. St. Ambrose, St. Gregory and St. Bernard composed others.

“St. Basil says that the psalms constitute a complete theology; for in them God and His attributes, the marvels of creation and the relations of man and creatures to God are described with a surpassing sublimity and power. He therefore, who meditates on the meaning of the psalms is sure to make progress in contemplation and the spiritual life.”

Surrounded as I am by the “earth and sea and sky,” God’s creation, how can I help but exult in this daily recitation of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin, which warms my heart, enlightens mind and fills me full of the deepest gratitude.

Old as I am, 78 in November, I can well recall too the melancholy of youth, the times even of despair when I could quote Swinburne—“No life lives forever / and dead men rise up never, / and even the weariest river / winds somewhere safe to sea.”—though not really believing it.

Perhaps this written morning meditation, which I write to the sound of waves, or an occasional gull, and the salty and fishy smell of the bay, the feel of early sun in a rather chill kitchen, is in fact a prayer of thanks for the Catholic Worker movement, especially here in New York State where both at the farm and at St. Joseph’s House in New York City (and later it will also be at Maryhouse) there is a sense that in the Church we are one body, part of the Mystical Body of Christ, made many members. neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, praying each day, a group of us, reading Scripture and the Vesper psalms, and commemorating occasionally the life of some saint.

Somewhere I read—“The flesh of Jesus is the flesh of Mary.”—a statement attributed to St. Augustine. So those who love Jesus in His humanity must also love Mary, His Mother, who hears our prayers.

“Remember, O most blessed Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who sought thy help, implored thine aid and asked thy intercession, was left

unaided. Relying on this confidence, we fly unto thee, O Virgin of virgins, our Mother. To thee we come. Before thee we stand, sinful and sorrowing. O mother of the Incarnate Word, despise not our petitions but in thy mercy, hear and answer us.”