

Month of the Dead

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, November 1959, 1, 6.

Summary: Decries the religious attitude that neglects the needs of this world in anticipation of “a fuller life” hereafter. Views this life as a “practice ground,” an opportunity to use our talents to bring about justice and peace. Cites Ammon Hennacy and Peter Maurin as men who showed personal responsibility in this life. Everyone has the choice to bring about a better world aware that we are members of one family. We will be satisfied at death in God’s rich mercy. (DDLW #193).

It is so hard to find a balance.

We have the knowledge that this life is a passageway to another fuller life which is to come, that we are heirs to a richness and a joy beyond all telling, and that we are working toward a new heaven and a new earth, where all is love and peace, where justice dwells. We also know that what we do now will count, that we are exercising our faculties to this end, and that, although sometimes our work seems futile and without result in these fields of justice and peace and love, (Ammon’s work for peace, Charlie’s work with teenagers, Pat’s with the Ninth Street kids, and all of ours at Spring Street and at the farm) we know that is all preparation, like that of a farmer, and God will give the results, the increase, the crop. If we do not do this work, we are dead souls, no matter how vital our bodies, and there is no health in us.

We also know that religion, as the Marxists have always insisted, has, too often, like an opiate, tended to put people to sleep to the reality and the need for the present struggle for peace and justice.

“The future is so glorious in the world that is to come, why worry about the present? If we are heirs to the Kingdom, why worry about the destitution and squalor and destruction around us. To the devil with this world!” But, this world is God’s world and we have no right to consign it to the devil. We should be fighting like mad against the perverse will of men, and this fight is for love of God and for love of men, the very least of them, the most unworthy of them, even to the greatest sinners among them, remembering how Jesus said from the Cross, from His torture and death, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do!” Forgive these murderers! It costs a lot to forgive murderers, every drop of our blood, every ounce of our energy.

One World

We are all members one of another, we are all heirs, we are all brothers, no matter how far apart we have strayed. We live on one world and that seems to be a pretty small one now that there is all this talk of space ships and satellites and trips to the moon.

St. Paul, when he talks of God's power, talks of the "mighty exercise of God's power when He raised Jesus from the dead and, in Him, gave us a promise of the same resurrection for ourselves."

Man, in his pride, is always trying to create life out of nothing and to raise men from the dead, but we don't hear so much about that now that he is thinking of interplanetary exploration.

Men of science are just as much distracted from the things of this earth as those they have charged with putting too much emphasis on religion and the next life. While billions of dollars are being spent on missiles, we still have our poverty, the hungry and homeless in our midst, the needs of our families for bread, for shoes, for shelter. We explore outer space, and families of ten are crowded in one room in New York. Are they crowded in slums? Let them practice birth control! It is now legal in New York, which has a Catholic mayor and Catholic borough president, to give out birth control information to all who ask, in city hospitals and clinics. In Japan, under our complacent acceptance, they have abortion clinics. Remedies are on the side of death. And what deathly remedies are offered! Let them stay in Puerto Rico. Send them back to their shacks where they can starve more comfortably in tropical surroundings, while the rich steal their land for sugar and missile bases.

Missile bases. We always seem to get back to missile bases which are now ringing the world, and that brings us back to Ammon Hennacy who is serving his six months in Sandstone for trespassing and distributing **The Catholic Worker** paper to the workers there. He was bringing them the good news of the one-man revolution. He is one of those who see our life as a grand opportunity to fight a battle for truth and justice, for life and peace. "Greater love no man hath, than that he lay down his life for his friends," and Ammon is giving his liberty, which to Americans is equal to life, or so they say, for his brothers. He is giving up his life and having it. It is a paradox of Christianity, what you give up you retain, and, in Sandstone Federal Correctional Institution, Ammon is working out his sentence helping set up a school for the prisoners, many of whom are his beloved Indians. Art Harvey, his companion, has charge of the library which has been transferred from another prison. They are both living fully. They are exercising their faculties for this life and the life of the world to come.

The Womb of This Life

I am writing this column about death and life, because it is the month of November, which, in the Church, is the month we commemorate the dead. All Saints Day is on November first. (Halloween is the holy eve of the day which commemorates all those great ones who have gone before, who most nearly resembled Jesus Christ in their lives.) All Souls Day is for the rank and file who have gone before us, the “dear departed” as the Irish say. Yes, this is all very true and real to the “faithful,” to those who grow in faith by the constant exercise of it. Greater than faith is charity, *caritas*, love. Without this wedding garment of love we cannot enter into the next world. Hope goes together with faith and charity.

Fr. Guerin of the Marists on Staten Island gave us a series of conferences one winter, and in one of them, dealing with death, he said that this life is like life in the womb. If the child in the womb was asked if it wished to be born, it would say “No I am quite comfortable where I am.” And, if it had control, it would not bother to grow those organs which fit it for life in the world—lungs to breathe with, legs to walk with, the life of the exterior senses.

Holding Fast

And, it is the same in this world. We are all holding fast to this life, no matter how bad it is. It is the only life we know and we keep deluding ourselves that, if we had this or that, if we had the love we craved, the material means to develop our talents, we would be happy. I called my last book, **The Long Loneliness**, recently published in the Image edition for 65 cents, because I tried to point out with St. Augustine, that, no matter how crowded life was with activity and joy, family and work, the human heart was never satisfied until it rested in God, the absolute Good, absolute Beauty, absolute Love.

Those conferences were very stimulating, and I thought of C. S. Lewis’s statement that, unless the egg develops, unless it hatches and grows wings and flies, it becomes a rotten egg. A homely and startling thought

I thought too, of those sad lines of Francis Thompson, “Life is a coquetry of death/ which wearies me/too sure of the amour. A tiring room where I/death’s divers garments try/till fit some fashion sit./It seemeth me too much/I do rehearse for such/A mean and single scene.” I quote from memory, and am not sure even of my divisions of the lines.

Yes, death confronts us all. And life is precious, this practice ground where we are given such opportunity to use what talents we have, what resources of mind and body, to so order the present that the future will be different and try to make this world, as Peter Maurin said, a place where it is easier to be good.

Ammon is doing it, in prison, and calling attention to these truths where he is, that a man is responsible, that there can be a successful one-man-revolution,

that, regardless of what “they” are doing or neglecting, each one of us can work now.

This month, a friend talked of my joining with Abbe Pierre and Fidel Castro in the beginnings of a mighty league to fight hunger in the world. In spite of the respect in which I hold these men, I had to decline, since I could not look upon the state as an aid, as in the case of Abbe Pierre, nor could I look upon armed revolution as an aid, as in the case of Fidel Castro. The message of **The Catholic Worker** is that simple one for all the rank and file, for the masses, that we have free will, we can make our choice, that our personal responsibility which we exercise is what matters. Ammon, in his non-payment of taxes for war, and his civil disobedience, is bringing that message to countless thousands of people. Judith Gregory is, at present, in Tennessee, working for a while with Highland Folk School, which is fighting injustice and malice and evil on the interracial front. Our friend Bill Horvath, of Hungarian descent, a worker and a bricklayer, is working on the problem of poverty and homelessness in Harlem and using the cooperative approach. The rest of us here at St. Joseph’s Loft and in our apartments, are using the works of mercy approach to the problems of our brother. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the harborless, visit the sick, visit the prisoner, bury the dead. And, in that we do this for those who are least regarded by the world as worthy, we are doing it for Jesus Himself, our Brother, our Friend and our Lover.

Life, Grace, Love. Beautiful words to dwell on these fall days.

I have written this after reading St. Paul’s **Epistle to the Ephesians**, which is all about the Body of Christ, of which we are all members or potential members. We are one flesh, one family, one brotherhood. And God is our Father, giving us what we ask, bread, not a stone, life, not death, freely, with love, not because we deserve it. He will save us, in spite of ourselves! Because Christ has, once and for all, overcome Death, the enemy.

“How rich God is in mercy! With what an excess of love He loves us!”