

On Pilgrimage - March 1955

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Summary: Deplores the destitution brought on by the present social order of capitalist industrialism, describing their soup line. In contrast, lauds the self-sufficient life of Hutterite communities. Supports organic gardening. Concludes the solution to physical destitution is through spiritual means: "We are en-route, on pilgrimage, and our job is to trust, to hope and to pray, and also to work 'to make that kind of a social order when it is easier for man to be good.'" (DDLW #683).

Love demands that we do not lose faith or hope in the work which we have to do. It is love of God and our brother which presses us on. Man cannot live under this present social order, of capitalist industrialism, which is only kept alive by preparations for war. The trouble is of our own making, so the remedy must be of our own striving too. It is by no means God's will that things are as they are, and to live in this social order as it is, and settle down to an acceptance of it, and seek to save our souls by prayer and suffering alone, as John Stanley recommended in his recent dirge for Distributism in the *Commonweal*, is a false religiosity. Man's work is as necessary for him as his bread. What if we don't see results? What if the Bomb hangs over us, and even our daily bread is spoiled by our farming and preserving methods, and smog fills the air? Our Lord comes to us daily and renews our bodily as well as our spiritual life, and if we do our share, we can exult in the faith of the young men in the fiery furnace.

It is true that what we have, our destitution, is worse than poverty. It strikes you with an awful impact when you come back to New York after a long trip west. We have destitution, homelessness, sick, badly clothed and ill nourished men, women and children, crowded into tenements which are worse than fifty years ago. Last month the *New York Times* had in its letter columns a report on housing, showing that more buildings were being torn down than were being built. Last week's Saturday evening *Post* had a report on the housing scandal, showing how politicians, builders and banks all in a way shared in fleecing the people of billions of dollars. The State has entered into our problems in gigantic way, and in the most inefficient way. We had the choice, one might say, back in 1929 when the depression started and Wall Street collapsed, to work through parishes, neighborhoods, communities, beginning with our own responsibility for our brother, and every one cried out, "Let George do it," and the problem was

handed over to the State. At a time of disaster the State must step in, everyone said, and churches and schools held firmly to this principle. It was only one half of a truth, since it is necessary before calling on the State, to do everything one can, oneself, individually and cooperatively, along neighborhood and parish lines, starting in the smallest way possible. It is again the principle of subsidiarity, as well as what most people mean by democracy.

Nothing that was done during the depression, nor that is being done now seems to be helping in the problem of destitution, which has extended far beyond pure physical lines. There is a spiritual and mental destitution evident everywhere, with violence as an expression of the frustration of youth in the face of war and work which is preparation for war, or in the production of so much which is useless.

Our "line" at Chrystie Street goes on, day after day. There is one line early in the morning for coffee and the bread that Francesco is now baking at the Peter Maurin farm. (We are also given bread by the House of Divine Providence on 45th st.) There is another line for clothing, which Dick Charpentier gives out at ten each morning; then again at one-thirty there is the soup line, and more bread, together with the good pea or bean soup provided by Larry in the kitchen.

The amount of food that it takes to feed all the people who come to us is colossal. And yet it is always there, God provides. Our kitchen is small and our dining room seats only twenty-five, so people come in and go out, and eat quickly and silently as they do in a monastery.

Right after lunch, which we who are part of the family have at eleven-thirty, and is usually soup and bread too, we have the rosary in the library and about thirty pray together. One of the older men in the house leads it.

Supper is at five-thirty, and in between meals, people sit and read in the library, or just sit and talk quietly, and Molly works on her patch work quilt, and Slim reads mysteries, and the Puerto Ricans who come to get clothes quiet their children, and in general it looks like a waiting room.

People are waiting for spring, they are waiting until they feel better and can go and find a job. They are waiting too for someone who will listen to them and give them some grain of hope, some little explanation of their misery.

Hutterites

How different this picture from that of the Hutterites, whom I visited in Montana before I returned from my trip. There, in small communities on the land, living in groups of sixty to seventy five people, I found a people devoted to crafts and agriculture, living a life of early Christian communism following the pattern of the life described in the second chapter of Acts. There are large families and fifty per cent of their number are children. They raise sheep and cattle and grain

of all kinds in their colonies as they call them. They spin the wool they do not sell, on small spinning wheels which seem to be easier to use than the larger ones I learned on in Quebec. They are not adverse to modern machinery and attach motors to their wheels. A young couple drove Fr. Kittelson and me to the colony early one morning and as we arrived, one of the women was making feather pillows (they raise geese), the manager was making brooms and the rest of the men were out on the range, feeding stock. We had lunch together in a long dining room where the table on one side was for the men, and on the other for women, and guests sat by ourselves at a sort of head table. It was quite monastic, since the custom was to eat in silence, but there was no reading aloud. The food was all raised on the place, meat stew with plenty of vegetables and bread and honey.

We enjoyed very much talking to the women and young girls, all of whom were friendly, with fresh bright faces, truly beautiful. They were dressed in long skirts of flowered black material, and had long gay aprons. Their warm jackets of the same material as their skirts are interlined. Their kerchiefs are always of polka dots on black. They gave a gypsy effect, nothing somber about them. And when they sang for us, perched around on the beds in one of the rooms we happened to be visiting, there was a charming spontaneity about them and one felt strength and happiness in their voices. When Marie Stahl talked about their work, she said the young folks went out in the spring to gather willow branches, to make the baskets we saw them using in the laundry, and it took three hundred shoots to make a basket. They were easier to peel in the spring. In another colony in South Dakota, they gathered the grasses used for broom making. In still another colony they did cabinet work and they made fine chests, in addition to the spinning wheels. These are the only private property which the Hutterites seem to own. Every child, boy or girl, on reaching the age of fifteen, is given a chest in which to keep his own personal belongings. It is only then too that they assume responsibility for work, though of course they help in chores before then. One of the young girls laughed and said she did not like to work in the kitchen, that she liked best to do embroidery. Marie showed us some samples of the very fine cross stitch samplers she had made when she was younger.

The big house we visited had twenty rooms and could accommodate guests in summer, and we were invited to stay longer next time. The other houses, ranged closely about as in a village, were made up of two or three apartments each, and there were no kitchens in these houses. There is only one common kitchen, dining room, bakery and store house. In addition to these buildings, and the barns and machinery sheds, there is a school which is staffed by a public school teacher who ate with the children and looked strange in her modern clothes, scant, rather short and not at all graceful as compared with the Hutterite women.

The children only attend school through eighth grade. They have found that young people who go out to higher education, lose their taste for the simple life, although during the last world war, when one-third of their men served in conscientious objector camps, 98% of them returned to their own way of life,

after having been subjected to the impact of the outside world for four years. During the last thirty years only 100 have left the community.

There is another building which is used as a meeting house, and there are services which consist of singing, Bible reading and sermons, every afternoon at five. There is a longer service on Sunday morning. One of their number is elected as minister and he serves for life, copying the sermons which have been passed down from earliest times. The Hutterites began in 1528 and have kept their early form of religion and life. They do not believe in infant baptism and it is only after a novitiate of some months after they finish school, that they are baptized Christians. One hundred and one couples came to this country in 1874 and they have 98 communities now, in Montana, South Dakota and Canada. They number almost ten thousand now. The Bruderhoff groups with whom we have been friends since they began their settlement in Paraguay, began after the first world war by studying the way of life of the Hutterites, and afterwards allying themselves with them. There is a new colony of Bruderhoff people near Kingston, New York, and we hope to visit there in a few months.

Mormons

Marie told me that a group of Mormons had come to study their way of life and had begun a common life together outside of Salt Lake City. I had talked to a Mormon Bishop when I visited Georgia Kiernan who is teaching school in Lovell, Wyoming, the week before. I was much impressed by their welfare work, and their system of tithing themselves for the support of the church. A study could well be made of the methods of this church in caring for their own unemployed and poor, although I did not much care for the emphasis on help given the “worthy” poor. I’m afraid the kind of poor who come to us would have short shrift as the saying is.

Of all the groups I have visited, the Hutterites impressed me the most in their simple and beautiful life of work and prayer, and I would wish that we could do more to copy it. Here is a pattern of life like that of the Benedictines, only it is for families, and it is the family which is suffering most today.

One of our Catholic friends in discussing the Hutterites and their ideal life, said that she would like to join, but she would have to have her radio and her cigarets. That is the trouble. We would give up the necessities in order to keep the luxuries. Or is it that the issue of **freedom** comes in here, freedom to squander our patrimony and go feed on the husks of the swine? Radio, television, movies, tobacco, are not “intrinsically” evil, as the saying is, but then neither is the a-bomb or h-bomb. It is the use of them—how they are used. These theological quibbling are quite beyond the Hutterites. They simply do away with them altogether in their pacifist, communist life.

For Judge

When I returned from my unfinished trip to Chrystie street, I went to visit Fr. Judge at Nanuet, New York, where he is staying at a sanitarium run by Dr. Max Gersen of New York, who is a famous nutritionist and is having extraordinary success in treating cases of cancer by changing the diet of his patients most drastically. He is meeting with much opposition on all sides. We have established certain eating habits for ourselves, and taste is the criterion rather than nourishment. Peter Maurin wanted to serve soup for breakfast to the breadline, and we Americans insisted on coffee. I wonder how big a bread line we would have had if we had served the good vegetables soup that Peter wanted. We have soup and bread every afternoon each day, but we comfort the hearts of our destitute fellow workers with coffee! It is a gesture of love, and so it is not wasted.

But visiting Fr. Judge, we have resolved on putting in a bigger garden of all the root vegetables, carrots, beets, turnips, potatoes, etc. All grown without chemical fertilizer, and cooked properly.

This is seeing the problem of our destitution today on purely physical lines.

We could cure the evil in our spiritual order by the retreat which Fr. Roy began to give us, and which we have tried to keep up over these years, a retreat which gives us the proper orientation, which puts us on the beam, so to speak. We could cure the evil in the economic order by decentralization, by a return to that kind of a social order, a vision of which converted Douglas Hyde from his Communism, a social order which is neither industrial capitalism, nor atheist communism. We could do much to cure the evil of our deteriorated health which drags us down mentally and physically so that we have no strength of mind or body to do the work God put us here to do, by a return to organic farming, and eating the proper foods instead of indulging our appetites.

While we are alive, while there is this measure of peace, this “co-existence” there is hope, and we cannot live in the midst of such poverty as we see in New York without studying to do all we can to alleviate it. Such effort follows from love of God and our brother.

We must see the work we have to do in this one short life and to recognize that there is only “one thing needed.” That if we seek first the Kingdom of Heaven, all else will be added to us, that everything else falls in line.

There is a wonderful chapter in Monsignor Guardini’s last book, **The Lord**, entitled “Belief in Christ, Imitation of Christ.” He says that Jesus came “to bring home the terrible fact that everything, great and small, noble and mean, the whole with all its parts, from the corporal to the spiritual, from the sexual to the highest creative urge of genius – is intrinsically corrupt . . . Human existence in toto has fallen away from God . . . Christ came to open men’s eyes to what the world and human life as an entity really is; to give him a point of departure from which he can begin all over with his scale of values and himself.” Once we

see this, once we are born again, as it were, "We have a confidence which the world cannot give." Death is the fruit of sin, and we each must die and face the judgment. But our judge is also our Saviour. "What happens between birth and death is message, challenge, test, succor, all from His hands. It is not meant to be learned theoretically, but personally experienced and assimilated. Where this is so, aren't all things necessarily transfigured? . . .

"Unless man makes this transposition he will have no peace. He will realize how the years of his life unroll, and ask himself vainly what remains. He will make moral efforts to improve, only to become either hopelessly perplexed or priggish. He will work only to discover that nothing he can do stills his heart. He will study, only to progress little beyond vague probabilities – unless his intellectual watchfulness slackens and he begins to accept possibility for truth and wishes for reality. He will fight, found, form this and that only to discover that millions have done the same before him and millions will continue to after he is gone, without shaping the constantly running sand for more than an instant . . . no single thing helps because the world as a whole has fallen from grace. One quest alone has an absolute sense; that of the Archimedes point and lever which can life the world back to God, and these are what Christ came to give." And he goes on to warn us not to say "I am a Christian" because we are always only on the way to **becoming** one. We are en-route, on pilgrimage, and our job is to trust, to hope and to pray, and also to work "to make that kind of a social order when it is easier for man to be good."