

On Pilgrimage - January 1949

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Contrasts the attitudes of two religious sisters, one impatient and despairing, the other accepting and happy. Noting the fervent love of the early Christians she asks for more generous servants of the poor and sets it as a new year ideal for herself. Appalled at a news report planning for a man-made space satellite for weapons. (DDLW #492).

There is a new picture uptown called *Monsieur Vincent*. I want to see it soon. There was a quotation from it that moved me so much I must write it down for meditation for the new year.

St. Vincent is supposed to have said to a new sister going out on her first assignment:

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“You will find out that charity is a heavy burden to carry, heavier than the bowl of soup and the full basket. But you will keep your gentleness and your smile. It is not enough to give soup and bread. This the rich can do. You are the servant of the poor, always smiling and always good humored. They are your masters, terribly sensitive and exacting masters, you will see. Then the uglier and dirtier they will be, the more unjust and insulting, the more love you must give them. It is only for your love alone, that the poor will forgive you the bread you give to them.”

Two Sisters

On a recent visit to a midwestern city, I stayed a bit with some sisters who were working in a Negro neighborhood. They had given their lives to God, and to the poor. They lived in the midst of ugliness, and sordid vice surrounded them on every side. They had made their own poor little house a place of beauty as sisters always will. Of course it was perfectly repaired, heated, painted and well equipped. Gifts will do that for a place, the most barren. It might be better to give away all gifts as the Cure of Ars did, so that people would stop giving you that particular form of charity and give to you only for the poor.

There were the two of them, and one settled down comfortably in the place, and surrounded herself with beauty in her spare moments by making altar linens and vestments. There was a clinic and catechism classes, and the sisters visited the homes of the poor. In other words they do what they can. One sister was a comfortable soul, older than the other. She was always happy, in spite of sickness, failure and so on. She did not expect much, not enough, many critics would say. But she left things to God. On the other hand, the other little sister was impatient, sometimes sad, and almost despairing. She wanted so much. She wanted people to reform, to become orderly, to change their lives. She wanted

them to get to Heaven and to be good now. She wanted her reward, in other words. Both sisters did what they could to help physically and best of all when there were retreats in an outlying district they gathered up the lame, the halt and the blind, the old, and young and sick and well, and got them out to the retreat house where they were waited on at table, where all they had to do was sit and rest and listen, and drink in the good news.

But the younger sister was impatient. Nothing seemed to happen. On one occasion she said, she was helping a young Negro girl who was going to have a baby. She had gotten her a layette, a beautiful little layette, and I can see the little sister holding it to her cheek as she pondered it and loved it and thought of the new baby to come. There is that saying in the psalms, "He has made the barren woman a joyful mother of children." Commentators apply these happy words to nuns, but she knew that it was not the same. To have a baby of your own! I can imagine the little sigh, the longing glance at the layette. She gave it to the young girl, and a few weeks after when she visited the shack where the girl lived, she found her in the kitchen, sitting on the lap of a great big Negro man. "She just sat there," the Sister said in despair. "She didn't even act ashamed. She didn't move. She sat there and threw her arms around his neck and laughed at me. I was so mad at her, I felt like telling her to go right upstairs and get me that layette!"

And I thought to myself, not having yet heard the words of M. Vincent, "All you have to give is love. That layette wasn't yours, nothing that you give is really yours. All you have to give is your smile, your encouragement, your love. You must not lose it." I had experienced this impatience so often myself!

To get it back, to renew oneself, to fill up the empty cistern, that is what days of recollection are for. And the life of a sister is so well ordered, with time of rising and time of going to bed, and the rule, and time in the chapel, all these customs to rest the soul.

In the Rain

Going in to supper last night in the dining room which had been filled all afternoon by one table after another full of wet, sodden, dirty men, down at heel, many without socks or overcoats, wet to the bone, what with waiting outside because of lack of room inside, there was the heavy odor of human misery. You could cut it with a knife. There had been three hundred at least to eat our soup and bread.

If every church served the poor in the basements of their Churches and rectories, if the good ones of the parish would serve tables as the deacons did, if there were communion breakfasts for the wayfarers, then there would be true agapes. God would pay the bills. And perhaps the Church would get poorer and poorer, and have less and less, and then perhaps She would have too, less of the enmity of the workers of the world, and what she had they would not try to take from her. "When you give a banquet, do not call in the friends and relatives, but the poor," is what our Lord said. (Luke 14/13)

Oh, for more hospices, for more tables, for more servants, for more love!

In the Acts, it says, the apostles rejoiced to be accounted worthy to suffer for Christ. St. Stephen was the first martyr, the first after celebrating the birth of Christ, which the Church celebrates, who was accounted worthy to suffer. And he was a server at tables, and fed the poor and did a lot of indoctrinating beside. You have to talk of what your heart is full of.

Fr. Oesterreicher has a most interesting pamphlet on the Jews, "Salvation is from the Jews," as St. John writes, and Fr. Oesterreicher quotes Msgr. Charles Journet saying of the infant church: *"Never again on earth will the Church be so fervent, so loving, so pure, as when she was wholly Jewish. Never again in the course of the ages will she find sanctity like that of the apostles."* St. Augustine wrote in wonder that *"it has not been recorded that any Church of pagan nations did this, (sell all that they had and distribute to all) because those who had as their gods idols made by hands were not found so near the truth."*

"So inspired was St. Augustine by the first Church at Jerusalem and its spirit of sacrifice that he spoke again and again of them who 'mortifying the desires of the old man, burned with the newness of spiritual life, as the Lord had enjoined in the Gospels.' Under the tutorship of the Law, they had learned to worship the One Eternal God, and were very close to spiritual things. For this reason they were so receptive to the power of the Holy Ghost that they sold all they had . . . and dedicated themselves entirely to God as a new temple of which the old Temple they had honored, was an earthly figure?"

It is a great ideal for the coming year to give oneself more fully, more completely and generously.

I was thinking while I was in the hospital how hard the doctors worked, looking after the bodies of all the patients who came in. Dr. Pressley, a young doctor who operated on me, was on hand at seven every morning to do dressings; he operated afternoons, and visited wards again in the evening. Often he was still around at ten at night. The nurses were just as zealous. There are not enough priests to visit the sick. They are called, of course, for the dying, to anoint, to bring viaticum, often when people are unconscious. Fr. Wendell came in to see me, and gave me his blessing, and the sight was so extraordinary and unusual that everyone was remarking on it. Ours is more or less a well patients ward. What a tremendous amount priests can do at these serious times in our lives. Just to be there, to bless, to remind the patients of God. His very presence lifts their hearts to God so that because of him so many prayers rise to heaven. The Little Flower said that her mission was to make God more loved. In a ward of twelve there were two of us who had a missal or prayer book with them. Several other women had rosaries. A Christian Scientist prayed aloud and with tears. An old colored woman read a Fr. Frey's Psalm book. And there were four of us praying, out of twelve, and I have no doubt the others did too.

Fr. Oesterreicher's most interesting booklet emphasized the zeal of the Jews in praying and praising God, in putting first things first. (You can get it thru

American Press, 70 East 45th St., New York 17, or Propagation of the Faith, 109 East 38th St., N. Y. 16. Fifty cents or \$1.00. Get two!

The other night I listened to Defense Secretary Forrestal's report. Every hour on the hour, that evening, I listened to the news. There were some very good concerts on the air, and I had been ill during the day, so I was luxuriating in the present of the radio which Natalie D' Arcy gave me for Christmas. Every hour that night that report was repeated, and yet only on one hour was the recommendation repeated, for building a "satellite platform, nine-tenths of the distance to the moon!"

I was so stunned by such a recommendation, coming in the midst of what was a most serious report, that I could scarcely think. It was as though I were living in the midst of a fantastic dream. It was not repeated during the course of the evening, and the next day I kept thinking I had dreamed this fantastic utterance. I told it to the others, and it is only Joe Hughes who brought forth a newspaper, containing the AP report that finally convinced me that I was not dreaming but had really heard what I heard. When I first heard it I thought first of all, "who will man such an outpost? What poor conscripts will be sentenced to such unheard of existence? God help us in such a world where men dream such dreams."

Here is a bit of the news story, dated Dec. 29 by the AP.

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Washington, DC. The United States, leading in the world weapon race, is now studying the possibility of creating a military outpost hanging like a tiny "moon" far up in the skies.

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Disclosures of a fantastic "earth satellite vehicle program" was tucked away cryptically tonight in an annual report by realistic Secretary of Defense Forrestal.

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One theory, completely unofficial, is that a man-made satellite platform might be established about nine-tenths of the distance to the moon, beyond the earth's gravity pull. The moon is about 240,000 miles away.

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Aside from the name of the project, there was no further clue, thus leaving speculation that the program may be related to studies made by the German rocket experts during the war.

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Those studies were directed at the idea of directing a missile or aircraft which, upon reaching the outer edge of the world's gravitational pull, would become a man-created satellite. For military purposes the satellite would be a platform from which to launch or guide rocket attack on any part of the world. . . .

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A man-made satellite hanging near the moon would need not be manned at first, but merely equipped with automatic instruments . . .

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From an altitude of 200,000 miles, the satellite would have the whole earth in its bomb site.

I should like to get the whole text of the encyclicals of Pope Benedict XV, *Pacem Dei* and *At Beatissimi*. He condemned the proposition that the Sermon on the Mount applied only to individuals and not to nations.

In *AdPacem*, he writes:

“There is nothing that Christ recommended more frequently and more insistently to his disciples than the precept of mutual charity, and that because it embraces all others; Christ called it the new precept, His commandment, and He wished to make it a characteristic mark of Christians, by which they would be distinguished from the rest of mankind. . . . The Gospel does not contain one law of charity for individuals and another law different from the first, for cities and peoples.”
Pacem, May 23, 1920.