

# On Pilgrimage - July-August 1949

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*The Catholic Worker*, July-August 1949, 1-2.

*Summary: Complains of the lack of help from the Church to promote unions. Forcefully explains the difference between communism and the C.W. and contends that the greatest threat to the Church is the working man's ignorance of the Church's social teaching not communism, which is "simply a consequence to the ignorance." (DDLW #164).*

It was Clarina Michelson twelve years ago who first organized the department store workers, the little shop girls immortalized in the O'Henry stories. I don't know what their wages are now, but the point O. Henry made, as well as St. Thomas Aquinas, was that it was necessary to have a certain amount of goods in order to lead a good life, and the girls were having a hard time leading a good life. Clarina was a Communist, and she had seen Catholic picketing in the Ohrbach strike, which was probably the first department store picket line. It was one of those times so humiliating, when we were not accounted worthy to suffer for Christ. Before we entered in on the situation, the police wagons had lined up every Saturday afternoon and had carted away load after load of picketers. It was an impressive spectacle and the martyrs rolled away rejoicing. As soon as we started picketing, the arrests stopped. It was the placards with quotations from the Popes that did it, the good Irish policemen would have felt they were arresting Pius XI himself, but we definitely felt let down.

## Ten Cent Store

Not long after that there was a sit-down strike in a ten cent store which lasted over Sunday. Since much of the help was Catholic and could not get out to Mass, Clarina had the Italian girls say the rosary together. This use of a spiritual weapon undoubtedly did much to sanctify the strike and the union in the eyes of the girls, and since their pastor warned them against unions and strikes, they felt that undoubtedly in this case Communism, if there was Communism in the union, was more sympathetic to the workers than the Church, as represented by their pastor.

## Bethlehem Steel

In the Bethlehem steel strike some years later, we found all the workers we came into contact with who were supposed to be Catholic, had already fallen away from the Church. They had drifted away partly because hours and conditions of labor did not leave them much time to think of the things of the spirit. Communism did not have to woo them from the Church. They had already left it. The Pope did not have to excommunicate them. They no longer approached the sacraments. There did not happen to be Communist infiltration in the Steel union in that Bethlehem, Pa., strike. But when we helped run the soup kitchen, we were immediately joined by a young woman representative of the furrier's union in Easton, who was a Comrade and working, through the works of mercy, in the interests of the Party. We were doing the same job in the interests of the Faith. We too had the ulterior motive. And the workers both in this case, and in the case of longshoremen in New York when we distributed literature along the waterfront, let us understand that they did not like to be pulled this way and that, propagandized on the one hand by Communists and on the other hand by Catholics. As Tobin of the Teamsters Union and himself a Catholic stated editorially in his journal, "The Church has kept out of unionism so far, she has given us no help, what is she getting into it for now?"

## Catholic Communist Workers

There was only one case we know of where communists palmed themselves off as Catholics, and that was during the picketing of the Bremen before the war. We, the pacifists, were the first Catholics to resist the evil of Nazism here in this country, by picketing the German consulate at the Battery, sometimes with the Communists also picketing in their own separate line. In the case of the Bremen picketing, since both Catholics and Communists were picketing and giving out literature, and some of the Communist literature was addressed to the Catholics, we felt it necessary to make clear our position, that there was a fundamental opposition between us, that we regarded their dictatorship of the proletariat as a bad means, that we were opposed to all dictatorships in trying to uphold the dignity of man, the son of God, and his liberty in Christ. They made attempts to join us in our picket lines. There were invitations for us of the Catholic Worker to join them, in accordance with their outstretched hand policy of the day. We always pointed out our oppositions, since they were saying in their literature that Catholics and Communists were together when they were not.

There was no difficulty in the picketing that summer night down on the water front. We gave out thousands of leaflets and then most of us went home. Some of us remained and were in on the more dramatic happenings of the evening. A few of the Communists group went on board the Bremen and tore down the Swastika from the mast and one of the group was shot by a ship's policeman. The men

were arrested and taken to the 47th Street station and the crowd was afterwards dispersed by policemen's clubs and fists. Nina Polcyn, Frank O'Donnell and I were in the midst of that, and the violence was all on one side. The next day the men who were arrested announced themselves as Catholic Workers. I wish we *had* pulled down the swastika.

## Joe Curran, Catholic

When Joe Curran was still working with Communist advisers he was running for political office on the west side and some of the leaflets handed out hailed him as a Catholic. I telephoned him on the subject and accused him of falsely calling himself a Catholic to get the Catholic vote. He said he went to Mass, but admitted he could not go to the Sacraments because he married out of the Church.

These above instances are the only occasions that we know of in these last sixteen years that the Communists have tried to confuse the issue. Our differences have been clear. We too, with other innocents are invited to have our names in the mast heads of organizations for peace and democracy, civil rights, Spanish rights, Negro rights, and we have refused mainly because we could do no more than we were doing, and did not want the empty honor on the one hand, or to lend prestige on the other (it is a vicious circle) to groups in whose work we had no part and often no knowledge.

Pope Pius XII said, "The greatest danger to the Church is that the working people know nothing, absolutely nothing, of the social doctrine of the Church.

"The greatest danger is not communism. That is but a consequence. The greater danger is the ignorance of working people who need the truth and who need the apostles of this truth."

The Bishops of the Phillipines said: "There can be no effective defense against Communism unless we remove that on which Communism feeds and grows: widespread grievous injustice, injustice of the high against the low, of the strong against the weak, of the landlord against the tenants, and the employer against his employees.

"The appeal of that (communist) propaganda is to men's consciousness of injustices done to them, and the use of force without repairing the injustices done can only be felt by them as a new and more flagrant injustice. We know well that men and women who make an outward show of piety while they refuse justice and charity to the worker bring discredit upon the religion they profess. But this discredit is undeserved. When Catholics fail to fulfill what the Church plainly declares to be their grave duty, it is not their religion that is to be blamed, but the gross neglect of their religion."

In Western Europe due to slowness of social reform, bitterness has increased and Catholics while trying to hold on to their faith have felt that only the

Communists were with them. In the eastern sections they have been forced to work with the communists. This has been taken into consideration by the Pope in his recent notice of the excommunication of Communists and there is no excommunication involved for them. It is at any rate a matter of the conscience, as one Vatican official pointed out.

It would seem to have been unnecessary that so much attention should have been paid to this issue in the American press and from the American pulpit. No attention was paid to the indictment of Capitalism in the Vatican press which we print on the first page.

It would have been good to hear a sermon such as that of St. Gregory printed also on the front page of the CW. Or to be more up to date, a sermon on the mob violence against a Negro home owner in Chicago last week. Or the hundreds of homeless women and children living in the Municipal Lodging House in New York this last year. Or the one million unemployed here.

## In this Issue

John Cogley, former editor of the Chicago Catholic Worker and at present studying philosophy and theology at Friebourg (returning to Chicago this September to take up his position as editor of TODAY) sent us the article **Christian Progressive and the Communist** some months ago. The article of Robert Ludlow was also written some months ago, before the issue of Communism and Catholicism made the headlines.

## We Are Accused

In the past we have been accused of Communism on the strangest grounds: because there was a Negro on the mast head of the paper; because we defended the right of property for the worker (workers should be owners); because we were pacifists (at times that is the party line). The brotherhood of man is indeed a dangerous doctrine and the implications of our Christianity are seldom realized. "It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of a living God," St. Peter said. To love one's brother will mean suffering and love only grows through suffering. "All suffering strengthens love." "God only enters in by way of suffering." These are from my retreat notes and I need to remind myself of these things often.

It is hard to love those who thus accuse us. It is hard to love those who speak scornfully of "progressive Christianity, the so-called idealistic left, religious centaurs, collaborators, equivocators, appeasers, temporizers, straddlers, deluded professional liberals, philosophical carpetbaggers."

It is hardest, I suppose, to love and live in peace with those of one's own family. On the one hand there is the Holy Family, and on the other there is that saying of our Lord's, "the worst enemy will be those of one's own household."

On the one hand there are the Communists who are now considered our enemies though during the war they were our allies, our brothers, to be worked with on all fronts; whom we were told to love. And on the other hand there are those of our own household who do not seem to “understand concerning the needy and the poor.”

On the one hand Churches are being rebuilt, and on the other the poor are still living in rubble in America as well as in Europe. The other day I had occasion to visit Borkland State Hospital to see a man recently committed there and the bus went through Shankstown, which is at Orangeburg and was formerly an army camp. Now it is a dismal rural slum where countless families live in wooden barracks for lack of better homes, where the rooms are small and the congestion is as bad as in the city apartments.

The slums we live in and the struggles of the family, and the bitterness of heart there is at the injustice done it, the lack of understanding shown it is one of the reasons “workers are lost to the Church.” The other day I heard a priest say, when told of an increase expected in the family of one of his parishioners, “Not much self control there!” I have heard this so often that I wish to comment on it. I had heard it so often from the Jansenist Catholic that I could control myself to a certain extent, but for a priest to say such a thing! Oh, the cleavage between priest and people! “Do you know the facts of life?”, I wanted to ask. But instead I remarked meekly, “Once a year may produce such a result.” St. Paul said, “Defraud not one another, except perhaps by consent, for a time, that you may give yourselves to prayer; and return together again, lest Satan tempt you for your incontinency.” “Let husband render the debt to his wife, and the wife also in like manner to the husband.”

When we were taking care of Helen’s five children while she had her sixth, Michael said, “What strong curbs God has put on man’s passions by family life. How it moderates them, tones them down.” By the time a woman is having her sixth child, the call of the flesh is far less acute. One of the troubles with love is that it gets buried on the debris of life, the hardships of child bearing. The drain and drag of children on the mother is such that she is apt to neglect her husband and lose that love of body and soul, so that she has to explore and search in her depths and seek it and pray for it, wooing it and caressing it again into life, seeking it in the body of her husband, bone of her bone, flesh of her flesh, breathing life into what seems dead, as Elias did to the widow’s son.

The Church is the Bride of Christ, and our Lord perhaps thought of these things when he said, “Think you when I return, will I find faith on the earth?” Fr. Romano Guardini said that the Church was the Cross and Christ could not be separated from his Cross.

So the worker must remember when in his poverty and insecurity, his unemployment, homelessness, in the midst of his children crying for bread, he thinks with bitterness that it is the Communist who has espoused his cause. It is the great temptation, the great test of the present day, as heartbreaking, as cruel, as the

test of Abraham and Isaac.

But our faith, more precious than gold, must be tried as though by fire.