House of Hospitality

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Chapter Fourteen

Summary: An account of struggling with agencies and suspicious police to find a room for a small child. A reflection of Christ's sufferings, borne for all who suffer now, and the realization that "suffering and death can no longer be victorious." Discusses the problem of dissension and self-criticism in the movement, reproaching herself and her own sinfulness. Notes how hard their work is and that change comes slowly. Asserts that "Love and ever more love is the only solution to every problem that comes up." (DDLW #449).

1

IT WAS nineteen above zero and Herbert Joyce had just hitch-hiked from West Virginia. Herbert is two and a half years old. With him was his father, twenty-five, a glass-blower. His mother had deserted Herbert when he was six months old.

Herbert was looking for a bed for the night. He had a woolen overall suit on, and no sweater underneath, and tiny galoshes on his tired feet. When he arrived at *The Catholic Worker* office at supper time he was very hungry indeed.

Nobody knew what to do about the baby, and I was out at a meeting and didn't get back until after eight. By the time I came home he was fast asleep on his father's shoulder. They were just waiting.

The top floor front at 115 Mott Street was full to the doors. Ten men slept there and there was no room for a father and child. The rear house was full, every bed taken and every room as full as could be. There was the dining room table, of course, but he might roll off that. There were the offices, but one office already had a bed put up in it and there were no other beds to put up in the other offices nor any blankets. And it was nineteen above. Not as cold as it was to get, but still cold enough.

Crowded or not crowded, Mott Street is scarcely a place for a baby two and a half years old. Unheated at night, oil stoves during the day, no hot water, no extra bath, no privacy. The two top floors were occupied by women, some of them nervously incapable of work, physically shattered by hardship and insecurity.

Not fit company for a baby. And one certainly didn't want to put him in with a lot of men, unemployed, of all ages.

So first we tried the McMahon Temporary Shelter for Children. No, that was filled up and besides it was quarantined for scarlet fever. There was the St. Barnabas Shelter over on Mulberry Street, also temporary, so we tried them, and the matron there told us there was a bed. We walked the ten or twelve blocks to get there and found that there had been a mistake. They were quarantined there too, with dysentery. We should try the Foundling, they said.

During this time there had been a policeman who had been assisting us in our search, very friendly and sympathetic, anxious to help us though he assured us that New York wanted no transients, least of all transients with babies.

Once before the Foundling Hospital had helped us when Margaret had gone to the hospital with arthritis. The hospital had taken in her baby and afterwards had boarded it out. So we went with confidence to the Foundling Hospital. There was a subway right at the door of St. Barnabas which let us out practically at the door of the Foundling, so the journey was not so bad. But once there we had to wait and be questioned. By this time it was after nine.

The nurse in charge took our names, the details in regard to the baby, the father, the mother, our interest in the case.

"How long would we wish the baby kept?" she asked. "A few weeks, until we could find a place to board the baby so the father could find work," we told her. *The Catholic Worker* could put up the father, but it was the baby that needed special care.

The nurse left to speak to the sister in charge and came back with word that we were to go around the corner to the police station on Sixty-seventh Street. I don't remember what she said, but my understanding was that this was a formality to be gone through and being quite used to the ways of charity organizations and the efficiency that demanded that the recipient of charity be made to go through as many inquiries and as much red tape as possible, regardless of the immediate need, we remained patient. After all the baby was asleep. The father might be tired of carrying the sleeping young one–all the way from West Virginia where he should have remained, of course, and lived on the ten dollars a month the relief allowed him–but he had to put up with it. Every one was only too happy the baby was not awake and crying.

So we went to the station house, bare, drab and inhospitable. It was some time before the desk sergeant could give us any attention. He had to talk to a landlord who was having trouble with drain pipes or something. A man of property, worthy of attention. He had to talk to another policeman about getting a woman drug addict over to Bellevue. He seemed to be stalling, meditating over our case for a while when he had finished these two cases. Finally he called the Foundling. We heard his end of the conversation, but not the other.

"What do you want me to do about it?" he wanted to know.

"O, you want me to investigate! Well, I don't blame you, they look fishy to me."

This was hard to understand. Mr. Joyce might have looked fishy, and so might I, but after all, it was hard to see what there was fishy about the baby who needed a bed.

We were questioned some more. We were taken upstairs and questioned some more. We sat in a room with a detective who was finger-printing some men, next to a room where some women were being held, and the questions went on. Perhaps we were not technically being held by the police, but in effect we were. We were questioned separately and together.

It was suggested that I had been wandering around the country with Mr. Joyce and the baby. This contribution to the case was made by the detective who alternately sneered at us and at the Catholic Charities, who had not taken care of the case though he donated his money to them. He remarked on this many times.

What had complicated the whole case was that Bernard had come to us in California, to our Los Angeles headquarters, when his wife had deserted him. There after much red tape, which took days, the baby was taken care of for a time and finally Bernard was sent back to West Virginia.

The fact that we had been concerned in his case before made the police confident that we were partners in his delinquency in running away from his ten dollar a month allowance in West Virginia. They distorted the story in their ugly imaginations and insinuations until it looked as though the charges were to be made against us of vagrancy, adultery, kidnapping and a few other sins and crimes. During the long hours we sat in the police station–and we were there until after midnight–the only response the Lieutenant made to the problem was sneers and suspicion. The detective upstairs was even worse.

Finally after hours of pondering on the part of the Lieutenant an ambulance doctor walked in, much to our surprise. He picked up the sleeping child, and, to our alarm and astonishment, examined the baby who refused to wake up and then handed him back to us.

"Nothing wrong with that baby," he said. We knew that before.

The intern was from the Flower Hospital, and being just a plain man he had a simple solution. "I'll say the baby is an undiagnosed case and bring him over to the hospital," he said. "He'll at least have a bed for the night."

"Then I'll have to arrest the father for vagrancy just to see that he doesn't desert him," the police decided. "And tomorrow the case will come up in the courts and they'll both be shipped back to West Virginia. We have enough problems of our own."

But this didn't seem any solution for us, so this idea was abandoned.

And then finally, after these hours of pondering, the great police department of the City of New York gave up. We had to take the baby back to Mott Street

to find a bed for him there. The only contribution to our problem was that we were escorted back in the patrol wagon, and I am not yet decided whether we had this escort out of desire for our comfort or in order that the police might find out whether we really had a House of Hospitality.

In the wagon, our escort policeman was most sympathetic.

"It's a hard, cruel world," he said sadly.

We agreed.

"You've done wrong, young man, but still I can sympathize with your wanting to keep the child with you."

We were glad for his sympathy. He was a kindly man and he gave Bernard a dollar for the baby.

He helped us out carefully, escorted us to the rear tenement which we call home, and even insisted upon going upstairs. By this time I had decided on a solution. It would have saved us lots of time and worry if I had decided on it before.

We put the baby and the young father in my room where there are two single beds, and we woke up Teresa, aged twelve, and she and I went to a neighbor's apartment to sleep on the floor. (Our friend had one blanket on her bed that night and we had two, one under and one over us.) The next day we sent Bernard and Herbert, the baby, down to the farm at Easton to save them from being shipped back to West Virginia.

"I'm not a bum," Bernard had said sadly that evening. "I worked for three years in West Virginia until I got laid off and when I went to California, I went because I had a job there which lasted a year. This last summer I worked six months and I'm looking for work now, but I want to keep my baby."

2

"And they came to a farm called Gethsemene . . . And Jesus said to them, 'My soul is sorrowful even unto death; stay you here and watch.'

"And when He had gone forward a little He fell flat on the ground. And He prayed that if it might be, the hour might pass from Him . . . And being in agony, He prayed the longer. And His sweat became as drops of blood trickling down upon the ground."

Strangely enough there are objections and criticisms made by unbelievers in regard to the sufferings of Christ. There are some who believe that it is pathological and morbid to dwell on the agony of our Lord. There are others who say that there have been other martyrs who have suffered greater torments, and they cite cruel sufferings, sufferings that were prolonged for hours and even days, as in the case of the Jesuit martyrs here in New York state.

They cite the sufferings of little children, beaten, starved, crying in a premature and horrible despair, and they say with Ivan Karamazov that "the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to 'dear kind God,' who does not seem to hear it."

They lose sight of the fact that in the Agony in the Garden, Christ took upon Himself the sins of the world and the sufferings due to those sins.

He withdrew from His friends and disciples. The three He had with Him slept (for their eyes were heavy). But even if they had been with Him, He would have suffered all the desolation and the loneliness and the utter desertion that anyone has ever suffered in all ages. He suffered not only the despair of one but of countless millions. The accumulated woe of all the world, through all the centuries, He took upon Himself. Every sin that was ever committed, that ever was to be committed, He endured the guilt of it. In His humanity, He was the I.W.W. who was tortured and lynched out in Centralia and Everett, and He likewise bore the guilt of the mob who perpetrated the horror on their victim. There was never a Negro fleeing from a maniacal mob whose fear and agony and suffering Christ did not feel. He Himself, in the person of the least of His children, has been hanged, tortured, afflicted to death itself, and He has at the same time been the one who has borne the guilt of the evil done. "Him, that knew no sin, for us He hath been made sin." He has suffered long years of imprisonment in jail, innocent and guilty; He has suffered the woe of a mother bereft of her child, and of a child bereft of all solace. "Who does not suffer and we do not suffer," St. Paul cried, voicing the dogma of the Mystical Body.

Who can measure the sufferings of Him Who died for our sins, in that hour He spent in Gethsemene, bent to the ground in His agony, His sweat becoming as drops of blood trickling down upon the ground, crying out "Father, if Thou wilt, let this cup pass from me!"

It is Christ in His humanity Who suffered, and since then suffering and death can no longer be victorious.

"For we are saved by hope," and even the natural man without faith can understand and realize hope.

Father McNabb brought out in a recent book on our Lord that Christ's greatest temptation in the Garden of Olives was to hate his neighbor. Bernanos in his *Diary of a Country Priest* writes, "Hell is not to love any more."

I felt when I read this that the blackness of hell must indeed have descended on our Lord in His agony.

The one thing that makes our work easier most certainly is the love we bear for each other and for the people for whom we work. The work becomes difficult only when there is quarreling and dissension and when one's own heart is filled with a spirit of criticism.

In the past, when I have spoken on the necessity of mutual charity, of self-criticism rather than criticism of others, the accusation has been made that I

talk to the men as though they were angels, that I do not see their faults. Which is certainly not true.

The difficulty for me is not in not seeing the other person's faults, but in seeing and developing his virtues. A community of lay people is entirely different from a religious community like the Benedictines. We must imitate them by thinking in terms of work and prayer. But we must always remember that those who come to us are not there voluntarily, many of them, but because of economic circumstances. They have taken refuge with us. There is the choice of being on the streets, taking city care such as it is, or staying with us. Even many of the young "leaders" who give up home and position to come to help in the work are the rebel type and often undisciplined. Their great virtues often mean correspondingly great faults.

Yet those who are interested in the movement fail to see why it does not run as smoothly as a religious movement. They expect our houses and farms to be governed as a religious community is ruled, and in general they take the attitude that I am the one in authority who should rule with an iron hand, the others accepting this willingly. Truly the position of authority is the difficult one.

One of the difficulties of the work is to find those who are willing to assume authority. Leaders are hard to find. The very best in our groups who are members of unions for instance, are steadfast, humble, filled with the love of God and their fellows, and their very virtues make it hard for them to assume leadership. Often then, they leave it to the articulate ones who are often articulate about the wrong doings. They leave the foremost positions to those who like to talk rather than to do, to those who are aggressive and pugnacious and who do the movement harm rather than good. If they are not saying the wrong thing, enunciating the wrong ideas–being politicians in other words—then they are *saying* but not *doing,* and even doing contrary to what they are saying.

There are those leaders in the movement who think they believe in the idea of personalism, of everyone doing as he would have the other fellow do, being what he would have the other fellow be. They think they are doing right because they do not "give orders," or *dictate.* On the other hand, woe to anyone else who goes ahead and does something which he believes should be done. Such a show of initiative means that the offending one has not acknowledged their leadership by asking permission (and very often it would not be given, as not being the proper time for the activity in question). If the others meekly submit to this and stop doing, they are discontented and unhappy at not being able to work for the movement and feel that the idea of personal responsibility has been denied. If they argue the point there is dissension. And if I intervene, even unwittingly, not knowing that there has been a dispute, and say as I think about an activity, "Yes, go ahead, that is a splendid idea," then the immediate leaders claim that I am interfering with their authority and leading others to disregard it. My job is to smooth over differences and to get people to co-operate with each other and not to be surprised that I am always putting my foot in it.

But the worst task of all is to try to correct people's wrongdoing in the way of direction and co-operation, by the positive method rather than the negative one of merely fault-finding; to uphold the ideal, to keep working toward that, rather than to discourage by pointing out all the things that are wrong.

It is human to dislike being found fault with. If you point out faults, rather than point out the better way of doing things, then the sting is there, and resentments and inactivity are the results. "What's the use of doing anything, it's all wrong!" Such childishness! But human beings are like that, and we must recognize their faults and try in every possible way to bring out their virtues.

On a visit to a group, there are always a half dozen who are filled with complaints (usually these are steady workers who have been with us for years and feel that they are a part of the whole movement). If you try to turn their criticisms so as to change their attitude of mind, you are refusing to listen to them. You don't give them a chance to show you how wrong everything is. You don't know what is going on. It is in vain that you assure them you do know what is going on, just how faulty different ones have been. No, that is not enough, if you treat all with equal patience, then you are not paying any attention to the complaints. Positive work to overcome obstacles such as people's temperaments is not enough for the fault-finders. They want recriminations and reprimands. "You are going to let him get away with that?" is the cry, when you try by courtesy and sympathy and respect to draw people together and induce co-operation.

It is very trying to receive so many complaints and not to be able to do anything about them. Those who do not complain and who try to work along the positive method are accused of being yes-men, and those who tell on each other and who always have some tale of woe, are informers. So in either case there is trouble.

If I were in a position of responsibility in charge of only one place, perhaps different methods could be used. I could be more definite, because I would be seeing all sides of the question and could speak from my own knowledge rather than from hearsay. There could be definite reproof and co-operation to bring about a change. But as I must visit so many headquarters and farms, I am never at the same House of Hospitality or farm long enough actually to take charge.

Oh yes, my dear comrades and fellow-workers, I see only too clearly how bad things are with us all, how bad you all are, and how bad a leader I am. I see it only too often and only too clearly. It is because I see it so clearly that I must lift up my head and keep in sight the aims we must always hold before us. I must see the large and generous picture of the new social order wherein justice dwelleth. I must hold always in mind the new earth where God's Will will be done as it is in Heaven. I must hold it in mind for my own courage and for yours.

The new social order as it could be and would be if all men loved God and loved their brothers because they are all sons of God! A land of peace and tranquility and joy in work and activity. It is Heaven indeed that we are contemplating. Do you expect that we are going to be able to accomplish it here? We can accomplish much, of that I am certain. We can do much to change the face of

the earth, in that I have hope and faith. But these pains and sufferings are the price we have to pay. Can we change men in a night or a day? Can we give them as much as three months or even a year? A child is forming in the mother's womb for nine long months, and it seems so long. But to make a man in the time of our present disorder with all the world convulsed with hatred and strife and selfishness, that is a lifetime's work and then too often it is not accomplished.

Even the best of human love is filled with self seeking. To work to increase our love for God and our fellow man (and the two must go hand in hand), this is a life-time job. We are never going to be finished.

Love and ever more love is the only solution to every problem that comes up. If we love each other enough, we will bear with each other's faults and burdens. If we love enough, we are going to light that fire in the hearts of others. And it is love that will burn out the sins and hatreds that sadden us. It is love that will make us want to do great things for each other. No sacrifice and no suffering will then seem too much.

Yes, I see only too clearly how bad people are. I wish I did not see it so. It is my own sins that give me such clarity. If I did not bear the scars of so many sins to dim my sight and dull my capacity for love and joy, then I would see Christ more clearly in you all.

I cannot worry much about your sins and miseries when I have so many of my own. I can only love you all, poor fellow travelers, fellow sufferers. I do not want to add one least straw to the burden you already carry. My prayer from day to day is that God will so enlarge my heart, that I will see you all, and live with you all, in His love.