

On Pilgrimage - September 1950

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Summary: Notes they have differences of opinion about pacifism and the use of force. Observes that Gandhi said "anger is violence." Speaks fondly of their Mott Street neighbors just before their move to new quarters. Struggles with the decision to acquire a farm on Staten Island and shares a meditation on "the everlasting arms which sustain us" while riding the ferry back to the city. (DDLW #614).

There is a great deal of laughing at each other around the Catholic Worker. And we don't agree with each other either. There is no party line, Peter Maurin used to say. We are all Catholics, here at our New York headquarters, and while there is true unity at the altar rail, and also in our acceptance in principle of voluntary poverty and the works of mercy as part and parcel of our Christian life, (some put into practice this principle better than others) there is always difference of opinion about war and peace and the use of force to defend one's country and change the world. Officially we are a Catholic pacifist paper and generally accepted as such. Actually, there are not many pacifists among us. Bob and Irene and I are pacifists and call ourselves such. Tom does not. And yet Tom may be more pacifist in his behavior than Bob. Fr. O'Connor of Dunwoodie Seminary, theologian of the diocese, is supposed to have said, "It is as much as your life is worth to argue about pacifism at the CW."

I personally stand in back of everything Bob Ludlow writes, though his way of expressing himself is at times peculiar, to say the least. I don't think the majority of our readers know what he is talking about when he says, "The compulsion to revolt is explained as a manifestation of the libido."

As I read it over this morning before sending copy to the printer, I thought of something Irene said yesterday on her way home from Mass.

"Human nature is passionate and demands violence," she said. "Those who espouse the celibate life are very likely to find themselves constantly tempted toward anger. Hence they must struggle for sweetness of soul and cheerfulness of temperament. Otherwise they will make themselves and everybody around them miserable, and bitterness and misanthropy will characterize their vocation. The violence and energy of our natures should not be repressed but transformed into a very active and joyous love of God and neighbor."

I have been reading Gandhi this last week, the new autobiography by Louis Fischer and it is a wonderful study for all who are seeking peace in the world. Gandhi said that anger is violence. So we see more than ever the temptations of the pacifist who may become inclined to anger at those who do not agree with him. When Gandhi began his celibate life he began to grow also in love for all those around him. The desire for sex, Gerald Heard said, is a desire for tenderness since tenderness also characterizes the sex relations of man and woman, and we are afraid to show tenderness for each other in this hard-boiled world for fear of being misunderstood, or deemed sentimental.

I suppose it is about these things that Bob is thinking when he writes as he does, and I often feel that I must explain what he means. "As long as you do not explain me away," he comments.

Chrystie St.

It is said that when men have served long jail sentences and the time of their release is at hand, they suffer more than ever before. These last months for us at Mott street seem interminable. Everybody's nerves are tight, things grate on one, and one wonders at having been able to stand so much in the way of dirt and noise and confusion for so long, in these crowded quarters.

This morning as I climbed up to the fifth floor of the old tenement at 115 Mott street where we have lived for the past fourteen years, I groaned anew. "You're moving soon," the traffic policeman called out to me as I came from Mass. "I hear you have a fine place now. You deserve it after all these years."

It has been pretty bad at times. The old walk up, cold water tenement, vermin ridden, cold, damp and drafty in winter and dirty and noisy all summer, with cries of children, gossiping women, quarrelling neighbors, juke boxes, blocked traffic, grinding garbage trucks, factory machinery. All the senses are affronted at these surroundings, they are mortified as the religious term has it, slowly put to death, dulled, irritated, worn down and even in some way sharpened and made keen to suffer more.

I can write this and speak this way these last days of our sojourn here, because the end is in sight. We are going to move next week. Some of our friends have said, "They cannot realize how bad it is." Or "they must in some way be depraved to choose to live in so hideous an environment. They must be dirty and slovenly people. The poor can at least keep clean."

One can understand their criticisms. Next door to us there are Italian families who are forever scrubbing, painting, cleaning and repairing their four room apartments. At the most they have four children, but usually there are two. They don't mind the heaped up garbage in the streets, the overflowing ash cans, the dirty halls. But their homes, their children, are spotless. Every cent they have goes to keeping their children dressed like Hollywood youngsters (themselves too) and their homes like advertisements in woman's magazines.

They are gregarious, Peter Maurin would say, “not communitarian.” But every night when we have said compline, we have said, “visit, we beseech thee O Lord, this community.” We love our friends and neighbors and they have come to love us too. We could never have lived so long without trouble in any but an Italian neighborhood, while our bread line was building up, filling their halls on rainy days, blocking the sidewalks.

As I write it seems impossible that our Korean friends have truly found a place and expect to be out by the first of September from 221-223 Chrystie Street.

Peter’s Influence

Other astounding things have happened this month of August, our Lady’s month, the month of her great and joyful feast.

I have often said that Peter Maurin had so compelling a way with him, had so great a moral force, that if he had asked me to get up in the middle of Madison Square Garden to speak, I would have obeyed, regardless of weak knees, or a consciousness of personal inadequacy. Peter got one used to appearing a fool for Christ.

I feel that my behaviour this past month, this compulsion that was on me to go on with the purchase of the Staten Island farm regardless of the fact that we had just finished purchasing a thirty thousand dollar headquarters on Chrystie Street, was due to Peter.

For months after his death I felt so keenly that sense of loss, of not being able to go to him and say “Shall I do this or this?” Often he insisted on one’s following one’s own judgement, but still he gave his opinion, and he never was one to limit you in our desire. He too used to think in terms of fifty thousand dollars for this or that, and I was the one who was shocked at him, keeping expenses down, doing without, doing little indeed in the name of poverty. Peter had great ideas of what should be done. And he has been busy this last year, keeping after us to bestir ourselves. It was only a day after his death that we received the first intimations that we would have to move, intimations which we ignored, not thinking it could be true that we would have to leave our beloved neighborhood.

He has goaded us and bestirred us and the net result is that now we have not only the new St. Joseph’s House of Hospitality and headquarters of the Catholic Worker at 221 Chrystie Street, which is still in the neighborhood and even nearer to the Bowery but we also have the Peter Maurin Farm, at 469 Bloomingdale Rd., Pleasant Plains, Staten Island, New York. It is a farm of 22 acres, within the confines of New York City. There is a farmhouse, a barn which we will convert into a chapel, a beautiful woodlot where we can have outdoor conferences and plenty of room to put into practice Peter’s fundamental ideas of an agronomic university. People can come down every Sunday and holy day of obligation for conferences and meetings, and there will be room for family picnics like St. Philip Neri used to organize.

Here are directions as to how to get there. Go to South Ferry, take the ferry to St. George, Staten Island, then the train to Pleasant Plains (Tottenville branch) costing 32c. one way. Buses are cheaper, but further from the farm to walk. One can walk up Bloomingdale Road to the farm in twenty minutes or take a cab for fifty cents. One cannot get a cab from Hyland Blvd. or from Arthur Kill Road the two highways on which the buses travel and it is a mile or a mile and a half to walk.

We have made a down payment on this farm and we will have a mortgage to pay off (the Swiss Catholic family which owned it for 60 years previous took the ten year mortgage at five per cent interest, much to our delight.) There are also taxes! We will have more to write about taxes later. We believe in paying our local taxes but not federal. Maybe this is quibbling, but the benefits of hospitals, fire department, street cleaning and health department, etc. make us firm in our decision to always pay our local taxes though we will not pay income tax.

It was last October that we started to think of selling the Newburgh farm and buying another nearer to New York, away from the bad highway we are on in Newburgh. We found the place, and since I had a thousand dollars advance on my book for Harper and Brothers, I joyfully went ahead and signed a contract. Then things began to happen. A mistake in the deed (we used the word trustee in a Christian sense, but it was not legal) preventing a clear title; added to our dispossession from Mott Street and the necessity of bending all our efforts to buying the new house on Chrystie St., the seeming inability to raise additional funds or get a mortgage, the nature of our “business” being what it is. All this seemed to veto the S.I. project. I kept reading St. Theresa and Mother Cabrini to encourage myself. I consulted with priests who did much to encourage me. It was especially when we had all decided we must keep the Newburgh farm – Peter had died there, and then Charlie O’Rourke, that I felt most uncertain, not knowing what to do. Then one morning like the importunate widow, I asked for a sign of the Lord. It was at Mass, and I kept saying to myself, “If I don’t hear something by eleven o’clock this morning, I am going to drop the whole idea and put it out of my mind altogether.” It was a promise to the Lord. Before eleven o’clock a friend had called and offered to loan us several thousand dollars, the old owners had come down in their initial payment and offered to take the mortgage themselves, and I had my sign. Within another two weeks, I was able to obtain two thousand dollars more from friends, and the papers are now all signed.

Our Lord, who is nearer to us than our own hearts, and who is a personal God who loves each one of us individually as He made us each individually, had heard my prayer, and I feel the joy of this conviction as well as the joy of our new farm.

Last night coming home on the ferry there was a heavy swell and a steady east wind. The taste of the salt spray was on my lips, and the sense of being upheld on the water reminded me of “the everlasting arms” which sustain us. Gulls wheeled overhead, grey and blue against the dark sea. On the Brooklyn shore the setting sun shone red in the windows of the warehouses and piers. It was after

rush hour and there were not many on the boat. It was a half hour interlude of peace and silence and refreshment. May the many who come to us on the island feel this calm and strength and healing power of the sea, and may it lift them to God as it has so often lifted me.