

Tribute to the Nelsons

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Praises the dedicated work of Wally and Juanita Nelson for peace, conscientious objection, and tax resistance. Notes their willingness to be jailed and to fast for their convictions. Calls the undeclared Vietnam war “this hideous struggle.” (DDLW #861).

Every summer for the past three years a Peacemakers training program has been held at our Tivoli farm for the last two or three weeks of August. The old mansion and the Peter Maurin house are filled with guests, and campers come and set up their tents on the lawn facing the river. The organizer of the Peacemakers’ school is Wally Nelson, who has been in the workhouse in Cincinnati for the past two weeks, fasting. He and several others were arrested during a vigil for DeCourcy Squire, an 18 yr. old Antioch student who had been hospitalized after fasting since her arrest Dec. 7 and subsequent sentence of 9 mo. for participating in a peace demonstration. (DeCourcy has since been released.)

A psychiatric examination was ordered for Wally when he refused to co-operate with his arrest and trial. Found by court psychiatrists to be “sane,” he was sentenced for “loitering” to ten days in the workhouse, \$25 and costs. Again refusing to co-operate with legalized injustice, he was dragged from the police van by his legs, an action that caused his wife Juanita to follow him, cradling his head in her hands. When they arrived at Wally’s cell, Nita bent over to kiss him, was arrested for “disorderly conduct” and fined \$25 and costs. This she refused to pay, and was ordered to the workhouse.

Detailed stories of these arrests are given in the February 10th issue of the **Peacemaker**, (10208 Sylvan Avenue, (Gano) Cincinnati, Ohio 45241). I hope that many of our readers will subscribe to the **Peacemaker**, since news of the conscientious objectors who are in prison and much other war-resistance news can be obtained there. Peacemakers have led in direct action for many years.

Wally and Juanita have both refused to pay income tax for many years, and it is of them particularly I wish to write, with the most heartfelt sympathy for their suffering and the greatest admiration for their dedication. It is their vocation to realize and to lead others to realize the horror of the times through which we are passing. Wally has explained that his fasting during the jail sentences he has undergone was the result not of wilful refusal but of a total inability to swallow food while imprisoned. Simone Weil, the French woman whose brilliant writings on man and the state, work and war, were widely published after her death, suffered during the second world war in the same way. She was literally unable to swallow enough food to keep her alive, in the face of world starvation.

In the stories of the saints, one reads of such sensitivity, such penances undergone,

such fastings endured and they are little understood by the secular world. I am convinced that this vocation, this calling, to give oneself to one's brother, in loving communion, in loving understanding of the heinous crimes that are being committed today was at the root of Roger La Porte's immolation in front of the United Nations two years ago. It is as though such men said, "We will suffer with you, since we have no way of stopping the bombing, the burning, the napalm, the defoliation, the destruction of homes and an entire countryside. There is no act of ours extreme enough, no protest strong enough, to deal with this horror."

Wally Nelson was in prison for thirty-three months during World War Two and fasted for a hundred and eight days (with forced feeding by tube) as a protest against racial segregation of prisoners. He had had time to think out his position while in Civilian Public Service camp, as forced labor camps which were set up for conscientious objectors were called. These very camps were a concession to pacifists, who had been imprisoned and brutally treated during World War One. But Wally decided to walk out and did so and was arrested and jailed. His example and that of other absolutists led to further concessions. In this present undeclared war in Vietnam, to which ten thousand more men were shipped off yesterday, the conscientious objector position is recognized, and paid employment is offered in home hospitals as "alternative service." To accept this is still to submit to the draft,—hence the continued protests against war, and the drafting of youth to wage this hideous struggle.