

Letter to the Unemployed

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Summary: Facing the desperation of the Great Depression with hope is difficult. Reminds us of the common laboring life of Christ and the Holy Family. Religion links us in a brotherhood through Christ and is a battle “unto the pulling down of fortifications.” (DDLW #188).

For two and a half months I have been traveling through the country, visiting Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New Orleans, and stopping off at country places in between. And everywhere I have been meeting the unemployed – around the steel mills, the employment agencies, the waterfronts, around the “skid rows” and Boweries of this country, out in the rural districts where the sharecroppers and tenant farmers face lean months of hunger.

Now I am back on Mott Street, and as I get up at six-thirty there you are, a long line of hungry men extending all the way to Canal Street, waiting for the coffee and apple butter sandwiches we have to offer.

I remember how hard it was last Christmas to face you men. How could one say “Merry Christmas” to you who are gaunt and cold and ragged? Even the radio with its recipes and offerings of clothes on the installment plan, interspersed with music, did little to brighten things.

It is hard to preach the Gospel to men with empty stomachs, Abbé Lukan said. We are not a mission. We turn off the melancholy religious offerings on the radio in the morning. Religion is joy in the Holy Spirit. “Religion is a fire; it is like the coming of the Paraclete, ‘a mighty wind rising’; it is a passion, the most powerful passion known to man. For religion is ‘mighty to God unto the pulling down of fortifications.’ Religion is a battle,” writes Father Gillis.

Because it is a battle, and because you are not weaklings, we fight our own inclinations to feed only bodies to the small extent we can and let this editorial go. But it is a battle to hang on to religion when discouragement sets in. It is a battle to remember that we are made in the image and likeness of God when employers, treating you with less consideration than animals, turn you indifferently away. It is a fierce battle to maintain one’s pride and dignity, to remember that we are brothers of Christ, who ennobled our human nature by sharing it.

But that very thought should give courage and should bring hope.

Christ, the Son of Man, lived among us for thirty-three years. For many of those years He lived in obscurity. When He was a baby, His foster father had to flee with Him into Egypt. Joseph was a carpenter, a common laborer, and probably had no more savings than the majority of workers. When he tramped the long weary road, in the heat and dust of the deserts, he, too, and Mary and the Child were doubtless hungry. Do any of those hitchhikers, fleeing from the dust bowl in southern California across mountain and desert, remember, as they suffer, the flight into Egypt?

George Putnam, who has charge of our Los Angeles house, told me of picking up a man in the desert so starved that for the remaining days of the trip he could hold neither food nor water. Occasionally they had to stop the car and let him lie out on the ground to still the convulsive agony of his stomach. While I was in Los Angeles a young couple came to our place carrying a month-old baby and leading another eighteen months old. Some kindly worker had given them a lift on the last lap of their journey and turned his room over to them since he worked nights and could sleep days. That traveler, the father of the two little ones, was also a carpenter. Did anyone see Joseph in this unemployed man? Did they see the Holy Family, epitomized in this little group? Did they see Christ in the worker who helped them?

Christ was a worker and in the three years He roamed through Palestine He had no place to lay His head. But He said, "Take no thought for what ye shall eat and where ye shall sleep, or what ye shall put on. Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you. . . For your Heavenly Father knoweth that you have need of these things."

For one year now, our coffee line has been going on. Right now we are making seventy-five gallons of coffee every morning. There are too many of you for us, who wait on the line, to talk to you. We must think of the other fellow waiting out in the cold, as you remember, for you are very prompt in finishing your breakfast and making way for them. It is a grim and desperate struggle to keep the line going in more ways than one.

It is hard, I repeat, to talk to you of religion. But without faith in each other, we cannot go on. Without hope we cannot go on. Without hope we cannot live. To those who are without hope, I remind you of Christ, your brother. Religion, thought in terms of our brotherhood through Christ, is not the opiate of the people. It is a battle "mighty to God unto the pulling down of fortifications." Do not let either capitalist or Communist kill this noble instinct in you.