On Pilgrimage - September 1968

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Summary: Journeys through the South–D.C., Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Comments on the civil rights struggle and the work being done. Is saddened at all the violence in the world–Vietnam, Nigeria, and in Chicago at the Democratic Convention. (DDLW #888).

August 19

We started out from Tivoli, New York, fifty miles south of Albany, at 9:30 this morning. Kay Lynch was my companion and driver. We arrived in Washington, D.C. just before dinner. The annual Liturgical conference was holding its opening meeting, and I had accepted an invitation to receive an award. I was to make a three-minute acceptance speech. I had accepted because our old friend Father Robert Hovda had asked me, and because I welcomed the great privilege of being with Rev. Martin Luther King, who was to give the opening address. What a tragedy had occurred since that invitation came! Dr. King had truly laid down his life for his brother. Rev. Andrew Young spoke instead, and his talk on nonviolent revolution, over an hour long, held a crowd of four or five thousand people intent and sympathetic. The close of the evening was a tremendous burst of sound from the magnificent choirs of the Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta and a Baltimore choir, with two soloists of thrilling quality. There was also a symphony orchestra: four poems of Father Thomas Merton had been set to music, a tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King and an inspiring call to action. The music, composed and conducted by Alexander Peloquin, raised us all from our seats. I understand that the concert will be repeated at Lincoln Center later in the year. It was truly music which could bring the walls of Jericho down. The next day I heard the talk of Father Daniel O'Hanlon, S.J., an outstanding young theologian, whom I had met on ship going to Rome during the last session of the Council. As usual he was inspiring. Since I was anxious to get on to the South (in spite of the 97-degree heat) we left without hearing the other talks or attending the workshops.

August 22

We arrived at Conyers, Georgia, at five in the afternoon, in time for vespers. It had been terribly hot on the two-day trip from Washington, and the little guest house of the Trappist Abbey had welcome shade and an air conditioner in

the kitchen, which was closed off from the rest of the house, where, fortunately, there were fans. Kay wanted to swim in the little lake near the house but was warned by one of the brothers against water moccasins. After supper, I was invited to speak to all the brothers (as both priest and brother are now called). Compline was late that night. It was a sympathetic audience and I'm sure we'll have many prayers in our present difficulties (which are many). We visited the bookshop, where Brother Hugh assured me that he was unable to sell any of my books. "People don't read the same stuff down here that they do up north," he said. Knowing how much of a rightist Brother Hugh is, I was sure he never gave a good sales talk, but probably advised people against what I wrote. But he loves us and gave me all the books of Father John McKenzie, the Biblical scholar, that I did not already have. Also a copy of Julian of Norwich and **The Cloud of Unknowing**. He is 76, blind in one eye, and is sure he is going to have a nervous breakdown. Can he really still be keeping that harsh rule? Up at 2 A.M., Matins and Lauds and Mass at four-thirty. And the long fasts, the hard labor and the gruelling heat! It is his vocation, and his happy face shows it.

August 23

We were up at five-thirty, Mass was at six-thirty, concelebrated by the Abbot and Father Peter, with Brother Dan assisting. Brother Dan is a black and a former S.N.C.C. worker. We had breakfast with Father Abbot Augustine, and he guided us to the right road. We went away laden with books, money, lunch and loving kindness. And I must not forget! Was it Br. Paul who said he would send me a cactus garden, which I was not able to carry along with me? "If you give the plants a soaking every six months it is enough," he said. "You can't neglect them enough." What with my frequent trips, it will be an ideal house garden for me.

August 24

We stopped at historic Selma for breakfast at 7 a.m. The more I think of it, the more I admire the tremendous demonstration which took place here. Priests, nuns and laity, the thousands and thousands who gathered for that historic march, that supplicatory procession, will never forget it–will look upon it as a peak experience. Now, a few years later, people are apt to denigrate it, to be a bit ashamed of their own ardor, to feel that little has been accomplished, that things remain the same. But it was a great awakening for thousands of people. They embraced hardship and fatigue, exhaustion and contempt. I blessed them in my heart as we drove on.

We drove on good roads through miles and miles of dense woods, and then rolling grazing lands. Few houses, few people were encountered. And I kept thinking of the COFO youngsters, who came from colleges in the north and east and midwest and lived in shacks, literally in a wilderness, and whose teaching furthered the growth of knowledge among the poorest, so that they could pass literacy tests and register, and go to the polls and vote. A few days later I was to see Fanny Lou Hamer on television at the Democratic convention in

Chicago, addressing literally millions of people. She was one of a delegation half Negro and half white. I could only think of how she had suffered alone, was cruelly beaten in prison, following her inner voice, the voice of the Spirit. What struggles Charles Evers and Julian Bond have had to go through, overcoming the fear and discouragement which is common to us all. I thought too of Marge Baroni, whom I was going to visit in Natchez, her constancy, her daily work in the Poverty Program, fighting discouragement in others, keeping the vision alive of a country where men can live like men, holding their heads high in the knowledge that they are sons of God, and brothers.

In Natchez

When I woke up this morning and began to sort out my impressions of all I had seen and heard yesterday, the tears began and I could only keep on reading the Psalms, with their cries for help to a God who does not seem to hear. Because the suffering certainly goes on, down here and up North, in Vietnam, in Nigeria, in Biafra–and everywhere. It is a sure thing that the freedom God endowed us with is a terrible gift, and He has left us to do the job ourselves: the job of ploughing through the morass of sin and hatred and cruelty and contempt that is all around us, a morass that we ourselves have made.

"Our God is a consuming fire . . . It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God." These words come to mind when I think of the situation of my friends Louis and Marge Baroni. That fire has consumed the dross of any social life for them. They no longer have any. For the last three years they have been shunned by the other white people of Natchez, the city they both grew up in. At Sunday Mass people go up to the altar rail with them and then avert their heads. "With the host in their mouths, the Bread," Marge says, "they keep their bitter looks."

It is of course because of the integration work that they have been doing. It is hard for me to write about it. Their two boys, aged eight and ten, "don't know about the shot fired a few weeks ago," Marge said. "They don't know about the threat to blow Louis up." The F.B.I. came to Louis and told him that men had been observed tinkering with his car. This was after a Negro at the tire factory where he works had met a violent death from a bomb planted in his car. Since then Marge has driven Louis to work every day. He works six full days a week. Efficiency experts and "industrial engineers" always find ways to increase the work of each man in the plant. There is a union, however, and his job is safe.

I went on to weep over all the things I had seen the day before. I forgot about those things I had been thankful for; that we had been able to drive around with Fred Greene, Jr. a senior at Tuskegee Institute, without being shot at, that we could sit in a restaurant on the highway and have sandwiches and milk and pecan pie together. And that I had visited the clean and well-equipped offices of the Adams-Jefferson Improvement Association, which has an integrated office staff.

No, I forgot about these things. I could only feel the impact of the problem itself, which struck me with full force all that day. Of course, some gains have been made in this war which is going on at home. We had first gone to Duncan Park, a former plantation which had been left to the city for recreational purposes, and in which no blacks had set foot until recently. Now they are there.

The Mansion

On the day I visited there was a picnic going for a hundred or so Negro children, accompanied by their mothers, older sisters and babes in arms. They were all having their lunch as we came, hot dogs, cokes, pastries and pies, and they sat on benches, on the grass in a pavilion, on the swings, and even on the porch of the mansion itself. However, when the white caretaker began to hose down the porch, the counsellor called the children away, fearing that they would make a mess with their lunches. After lunch, many of the children went over to the softball field and began to play. I was glad to see that they could go beyond the picnic grounds; at first, they had seemed to be hovering on the edge of the park. But no, they had the big field for softball, and later we saw some blacks playing tennis at one of the courts. It had taken demonstrations on the part of the Negroes to integrate this park, demonstration which the police had met with a show of force: clubs, chains, baseball bats and dogs. (The clubs and bats had been used on the demonstrators but not the dogs.)

Fred Greene was in charge of the recreation program for the summer and had opened up ten centers so that groups from all around could take turns using the facilities of Duncan Park. (Except for the swimming pool, which has been closed to both blacks and whites for the past two summers.) Later we visited another recreation center (was it the poorest?), merely a large dirt back yard fenced in, with a few bits of playground equipment, crowded with little ones and teenagers. But it was at least a place where the children could get together without being tormented by the police or dispersed for loitering.

Before we left the neighborhood we visited the house of a Negro woman who had spent time in Parchman penitentiary for taking part in attempts to integrate the city auditorium. She was a large, stout woman who had made her living cooking in the homes of white people. She is a good cook and had always found work until she began demonstrating, and then she had to find another way to earn her bread. She started a little home industry by skinning and roasting peanuts and was harassed by the authorities until she was finally granted a permit. You got the feeling that she would persist in whatever she did.

I stayed one week with the Baronis, and on the last night I went to the Josephite church, where Father William Morrissey, S.S.J. has been working for years. There was a program given by the twenty-two teachers and their pupils in the tutorial program which all of them had enjoyed so much; and what a pure joy that love of learning is! There was singing and dancing and recitations. The hall was full

and the windows all open and it was not too hot. But I could not help thinking as we came away that the Church, meaning in this case the white church, is not keeping step with the efforts of the state. They are not giving what they have, they are not supplementing the efforts of the young people.

And as for the state, "They expect us to make bricks without straw," Marge said, "cutting down on the whole poverty program as they have." Another friend told of how the food program in the school was limited–only one lunch to a family, the other children to do without. Only ten per cent of the poor are to be fed. The Church is leaving too much to the state.

During the depression, when we had a house of hospitality in St. Louis, parochial school children brought an extra sandwich, to be packed in cartons and brought to the house of hospitality to feed our breadlines. And in the churches in Washington, Parishioners brought canned goods and staples to put in large offertory boxes in the back of the church for those who needed it. It is not only that these fundamental works of mercy are not being practiced enough, but there is not enough sharing of equipment. Movies, screens, tape recorders, projectors, and other machinery.

August 31

We left Natchez today, driving north to Greenville. We were sad to part with the Baronis and with Eddie Reed, a seminarian on his way now to Louvain, who had headed the tutorial program.

Next month I will continue the story of my travels, and tell of a most interesting visit to Port Gibson, where Berry Morgan lives on an old plantation with her three children; and of our visit to Greenville, and Greenwood, and the boycott which is going on there, under the leadership of Father Nathanial, Franciscan, and of the schools we visited, and the day we spent with Sister Peter Claver, Missionary Servant of the Most Holy Trinity, at Gadsden, Alabama, and of our visit to the Trappist monastery of the Holy Cross at Berryville, Virginia, our last stop before returning to Tivoli.

How strange it seems that I have had this peaceful trip through our usually violent south, while in Chicago 26,000 police and troops were mobilized to combat some thousands of young people, mostly students in ugly violence not only against an unarmed multitude of young crusaders, but within the convention hall itself.

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