On Pilgrimage - November 1956

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Summary:

Depicts the plight of black sharecroppers in Mississippi–efforts to drive them off the land, economic injustice, intimidation, and lack of ownership. Tells of efforts to speak out and organize. Before arriving in the deep south she visits Catholic Workers in Memphis. Keywords: segregation

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The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament proclaims the work of His hands... The earth is the Lord's and all its fullness, the world and all that dwell therein. How do you feel these things when you are traveling, as I have been through the bright October weather, down in the state of Mississippi, now at the time of cotton picking. All day long from dawn till dark, the people are in the fields, men, women and children, bending over the cotton, pulling their long sacks behind them, plucking the four tufts of cotton that are in each pod,–how many tufts to make an ounce? How many pounds of cotton, to pay a day's wage. When there is only four months work, counting hoeing and chopping in the spring, and picking in the fall, all the family must work to make cash to pay rent and groceries and back debts. There are tenants, and sharecroppers, and day laborers, but mighty few owners. The majority of the workers throughout the south are Negroes who "make the crop." And though they work hard, they can barely be said to exist. How good God is, and how cruel man is, in what perverse ways he has exercised his free will, and how he has come to deny God in his brother, the Negro. These are the things you think of during such pilgrimages.

When I stopped first in Memphis before coming down into the deep south, I stayed with Helen Caldwell Day Riley (the name is too cumbersome and from now on we'll call her Helen Riley.) She and Jesse, her husband who works in a Quaker Oats plant in Memphis, and her son by a former marriage, Butch, live in the six room house, 218 Rear Turley, in the slums of Memphis. It was the neighborhood where she started her day nursery, and she is paying a monthly rental to the diocese to pay for the house where she and her husband continue to live and work. She will be having a baby next month, and after that she can take in two or three more children again,–those children who are now left alone, or with brothers and sisters little older than themselves, locked in their precarious homes, or roaming the streets. Scarcely a day passes but what one sees a story in the paper about little children being burned alive in some mishap with an oil stove–even in summer.

Fr. Cosmos, Franciscan, has a parish which makes up one half of Memphis. There are over 600 students there. There are 57 in Butch's room and students come from miles around. Meanwhile, white Catholic schools, in parishes which

have become colored, are almost empty or have closed down. The buildings are there, but there is no room for the Negro. There is no room at the inn.

To get to the Blessed Martin house (it is still called that though not now functioning as a house of hospitality in the formal sense) you go down Main street to Beale, famous for its blues, past Handy park till you get to Turley. Beale street is the street of the poor, movies, taverns, stores of every kind. It is not very long and not at all glamorous, not too wide a street and not too even sidewalks. Turley has trees, rickety porches, dirt and not just pavement. You can cut through a vacant lot to get to Helen's and coming from Mass that first morning, we passed the neighbors where Helen out greetings [sic] and sent her love to Bob Steed, who used to work with Helen before he came to New York to be on the staff of the Catholic Worker. In that vacant lot Helen had painfully got buckets of good dirt, and clumps of grass to start a lawn around her own little house for the children. Up to May there were still thirteen children in that little six-room house, and very little support coming in except what Jesse brought in. Originally the house was a double one, two apartments of three rooms each, with rent of $25 for each. Helen put in the bath and toilet and built on another room, and friends in Memphis supported the house until her marriage. How little the married apostolate is accepted in the world even in this day of the lay apostolate. There was not much support after her marriage.

The Riley's were tormented by regulations just as we are; first in regard to the nursery. Pretty soon one will have to have a degree to have a child. Helen was a student nurse and so was more able to cope with the work than most. The other Helen who worked with her went through practical nursing school, leaving her children with Helen and helped as much as she could besides. Now there is no more nursery as such but there is the family, and as a Christian family, Jesse and Helen will be continuing the work.

Butch is eight years old, but with the other children in the neighborhood, he goes out to the Arkansas cotton fields just across the bridge, every Saturday, and picks cotton for the day. The last Saturday he had earned eighty cents, which meant about forty pounds of cotton picked. The package of cotton you buy in the store weight only two ounces.

This Saturday he was driving with Jesse and Helen and me down into Mississippi, down into that black delta country, down to Mound Bayou and Cleveland and near that infamous settlement, Money, when Emmett Till was kidnapped and murdered a year ago. The very name Money, is significant, because it not only in the name of tradition, but in the name of Money, that so many crimes are perpetrated today, for oil, for cotton, for the wealth that comes out of the soil, from deep down in the earth, in which we all have our roots, but the Negro people most of all. They are still close to the soil, they are forced to be, and where roots go deep, the tree rises high. Already their music has reached out all over the world, not only the blues, but the spirituals.

Bayard Rustin had had lunch with us the day before, and had told us about

some of his friends in the section whom we were going to visit, and the Rileys had a friend in the Negro community of sisters, Handmaids of Divine Providence, whose mother house is in Baltimore. Sister Marsha had been one of the beginners in the Memphis apostolate with Helen and now she had finished her training as a sister, and was teaching school in Mound Bayou, the all Negro town of 1,300 population.

We talked with the sisters and the priest, Fr. Williams, S.V.D. from Bay St. Louis seminary, and that night Jesse and Helen had the long drive back to Memphis. I stayed with a Negro family in the parish that night.

The next morning a mocking bird woke me and it was still dark. Cocks began to crow far off and near at hand a chorus of them. Then it began to get light and I looked out the window over the vast flatness, the great distances. How impressed one is by the beauty of the land and its people. The white man likes to think of the Negro as lazy, slow and relaxed, and indeed you often sense a stillness when you are in their presence, a silence, a reserve, and the white man in the south likes to emphasize that the northerner does not understand the Negro; but how can it be said that he does either?

At Mound Bayou and at other centers, I met Negroes who by grueling work had gone through college, had graduated from Fiske, and Hampton and Harvard and who had returned to work with their people. Thank God they had returned and not left their own at the mercy of exploiters. Although Mound Bayou was nothing to boast about, being after all a segregated town itself, at least there they had their own mayor, post office, school and many owned their own homes. Benjamin Green, now ill in a Memphis hospital is the town's mayor, and he is a son of the founder, a former slave and valet to Jefferson Davis. At the close of the Civil war he had been given property to distribute among the Negroes and the town has enlisted as an all-Negro town ever since, Richard Jones, town clerk, worked in the cotton gin, and he was also a graduate of Fiske. His wife was secretary to the Mayor and it was at her house I stayed. Her sister ran the hotel of the town, and her daughter living next door taught school in Cleveland, Mississippi some miles away. Her husband was trying to finish his schooling and there were three children to care for. Working, teaching, studying–what hours these people put in! What a driving ambition to better their own condition and that of their people.Sunday I talked to the congregation in one of the school rooms of the very fine parish school which was set in the midst of cotton plantations, and I told them about The Catholic Worker, and how God and St. Joseph had come to our rescue not only six years ago to buy a house, but this last spring to preserve it, and that when people worked for justice and truth, and for love of brother, God would not allow them to be defeated by the "economic squeeze" that is being put upon them now in this most recent war in the south. It was probably that from the Negro leadership in the future would come, just as leadership for the world had come from Ghandi and Bhave in India.

Later that day Fr. Williams and I drove with Wm. O'Neal, associate county

agent to visit with Amzie Moore, local president of the N.A.A.C.P. who said there were 700 underground members of the association in the county.In the 1950 census, there were 1,188,429 whites in Mississippi and 984,707 Negroes. The third congressional district consists of 11 counties, has the largest plantations in the United States. In Cleveland, Mississippi, the R.M. Dokins plantation of 20,000 acres, 240 Negro families will have to move in 1957, and they have no place to go but to Chicago or Detroit. Scores of other plantations in Tallahatchie, Sunflower, Bolivar and other counties are getting thousands of Negroes off their plantations. According to a report by the Associated Press, some 50,000 Negroes leave Mississippi yearly in search of better pay, more "rights." But how many more are being forced out. The account compared this exodus to the migration of the Okies from the dust bowl areas and the mass migrations into cities during the war. It is not only oppression that is doing this but also the machine. Automation is a problem now just as unemployment was during the depression. It seems that this most prosperous country in the world is beset continually by problems. As they sand during the depression, "the rich get richer and the poor get children." And although the Popes cry out against this exodus from the land, and call for the deproletarizing of the masses, fewer and fewer own anything but debts or luxuries. Instead of bread they are offered cake in the way of cars and television sets and these are cited as indications of prosperity.During those days that I was visiting around in Mississippi there were also twenty editors from New England who had been invited by the State Sovereignty Commission and were being taken on a conducted tour. This commission is set up to fight any move toward racial integration in schools or elsewhere. He who pays the piper, plays the tune, and we ponder what impression these editors were able to take away after their week of wining and dining, boat rides on the Mississippi, fishing in the Gulf, tours of plantations. It would be ungentlemanly to repay one's hosts with criticism. One cannot be outdone by southern white gentlemen!But there were a few who were speaking out and complaining that they were not seeing all. When they broke away to visit a slum which the southern papers referred to as Catfish Alley, some Southern commentators scornfully called the New Englanders, not slummers, but social climbers.

But they did take their guests to Mound Bayou where Negroes spoke out, one of the them saying, "life is dear, but so are other things," intimating that they were risking not only their security but life itself by speaking out. The Negro feels that there is truly a reign of terror being instigated throughout the south. Not only since the Emmett Till case, not only since the Supreme Court decision. White leaders say that the south is going through a second reconstruction and that integration will never come. White Citizens Councils are being formed in every area and threats are in the air.

The simple fact is that the Negro outnumbers the white in these rich areas by five to one. Here are some figures. Bolivar county, white 19,000, colored 42,000 round figures; Sunflower (Till's country) whites 17,000 colored 38,000; Tunica, whites 3,000, colored 17,000. No wonder the White Citizens Councils, the successor to the Klan, plans to drive out 500,000 Negroes in the next ten

years, and drive out the Negro leaders first of all. No wonder they are afraid, as the exploiter has always been afraid, as the guilty has always been afraid, afraid of those whom he has starved and ill treated. I heard it when I was in the south during the war, "our white men have all gone to war, and we are outnumbered by the Negro five to one." The Negro of course also went to war, but still he outnumbered the white.

And now they are more afraid because the Negro has come back, integrated in the armed forces, with his G.I. bill of rights, going to school, traveled, experienced. And in the armories of these small white, rich communities, the Negro and white are not segregated. They aim to have an armory in every town for a reserve. The Negro who was taking us around that day was a veteran of Korea and he had been in Europe as well as the Far East.

There are other organizations the Negro can depend on, such as the Urban League, the Delta Youth Counsels, the Farmers and Businessmen's Association. But attempts are made to drive the leaders out. Those who remain are being tried as if by fire. And one of the reasons for this article is to try to gain moral and financial support through some of our northern organizations so that they can continue their work, so that they cannot be driven out by the economic squeeze. Although there have been other murders since the Till case, and men are afraid, still the white Mississipian knows that the eyes of the world are on Mississippi, that state of 986,000 Negroes by the 1950 census, where there are only 8000 registered voters, and where they too are disqualified at every election, in one way or another.

Even though the editors of THE CATHOLIC WORKER do not believe in the vote, in elections as conducted today, we do agree that man wants a part to play, a voice to speak in his community, and this is usually exemplified by the vote. The law (though they are fighting it) is mighty in the south. The courthouse is the center of every town and the most imposing edifice in the county. Pick up any paper and read the legal notices, the rolling periods, the dignified phraseology, the respect for the forms of law. If they did not have this feeling about it, there would be no such outcry against the Supreme Court decision.

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Perhaps the Negro will lead the way, in establishing the new order, in showing by little beginnings how a new order can come peaceably about. No man can do it

alone. No one family can do it alone. The South itself cannot do it alone, It would take the cooperation of North and South, to set up such islands, such leaven, such communities of families, holding all in common, working cooperatively, the true farming commune that Peter Maurin envisioned.

We talked about these things to Orsie Malone, to Amzie Moore, a business man and leader of that district. With men of experience, and the good business sense, who know how to plan, who can be architects of this new edifice, there is also needed those who can give the money, the land or the equipment. These are the kind of investments that are needed today, and they are the kind of investments that the Holy Father called for in one of his pastoral letters. But it is the story of David and Goliath over again. The great insurance companies are getting the land,–and where is the ownership and responsibility? Unless there are some of these Davids raised up in the land of cotton to fight the Goliath. The time of war and pestilence will come. Revolution is inevitable, and no White Citizens Councils or State Sovereignty Committees are going to stop it. The movement is world wide, China, India, Africa,–all are seething. How much could be done here peaceably?

What comes first, a better social order, or the education of the people? It is like the dilemma of the chicken and the egg. Leaders like Anzie Moore would say justice in food, clothing and shelter come first. A certain amount of goods is necessary in order to lead a good life, St. Thomas Aquinas said. People have to have the minimum of clothing, food and shelter before they can begin to learn."There are sixty or seventy landowners who are willing to mortgage their land," he said, "to get a project started, a piece of land bought, a cooperative store going. But more is needed."

Maybe if we had Vinobo Bhave walking the roads of Mississippi asking for land, there would be a beginning made. But perhaps he would find only the offices of insurance companies and their paid managers and employees, and no owners to appeal to.

I met Mrs. Bessie who worked for Mr. Will, ten miles south of Cleveland, who was working on one of the plantations, taking eleven acres to work on halves. Mr. Will provided the seed and fertilizer and I suppose the hoe. The family, Mrs. Bessie and her seven children, or those of them who could work, made the crop. The oldest child was twelve and the baby was seven months. The husband worked as a day laborer, driving tractor for the big plantation, hoping by his days' wages there would be enough money to buy the food and pay the bills. He was supposed to get seven dollars a day. But he got only $3.40 or $3.80. The owner said he was taking out ahead of time what was owed him for rent and furniture and seed and fertilizer.

There was no money for food. The boss would give him ten or fifteen dollars a week, taking the rest of his money as his share. They had no money to live on and they were going hungry. No man, no child can work that way. So they just moved away. Now they were living in the town, renting a three bedroom build

"within the shell of the old" the new society which Peter Maurin loved to talk about. There is no unemployment on the land, he always said. There is room for the family on the land. There is room for ownership of the real goods of this world and room for a life where it would be easier to be good.

Perhaps the Negro will lead the way, in establishing the new order, in showing by little beginnings how a new order can come peaceably about. No man can do it alone. No one family can do it alone. The South it, just took it out of their wages. They kept paying for over a year. There was never enough to eat on when they got through work. Finally the husband just ran away, leaving her with two children.

Their stories reminded me of a joke I heard a few weeks later, from a lawyer friend. One old Negro used to boast that he always broke even. At the end of the year when it came time to settle, the owner used to say–"I don't owe you nothin' and you don't owe me nothin'–we just break even." If there was a drought, they broke even, if there was a bumper crop, they broke even. So a friend of the old Negro said to him, "Jim, you just drop by a couple of bales of cotton at my house as you come from the gin, before you go settle up accounts, and see how it works." So the cotton was delivered, the accounting worked over–(it always took a long time) and there was a great show of figuring, and long and many items to add and subtract, and while the page was filling up with figures the boss said, "Well, boy, I guess we just about broke even, you don't owe me nothin' and I don't owe you nothin'."

"Well, what about them two bales I left off at lawyer Clayton's?"The boss never batted an eye. He just said reproachfully, "Now what a shame, boy, I'll just have to do all that figuring all over again."

Jim Perry will say I'm stealing one of his stories, but it illustrates the point, and he added sadly, "there's more truth than fiction in it."

It isn't just that the Negro can't read or write. He often can't figure. And seeing the school houses that have been allotted the Negro, one doesn't wonder. It is good to feel the strength of such men as Amzie Moore, who pledges himself to stick it out, to keep on working for the Negro until he attains more beginning of justice. And I hope he is able to hold the younger leaders there, who are tempted to go north by the intimidations of those around them.I mention in my appeal how in one of the cars in which I drove around there was a crater-like hole made perhaps by a bullet, shot from some ambush to frighten or to kill the man that sat behind the wheel. His crime was being an educated Negro, and a spirited one, with a French background, from the coastal region, and he had written a ballad about Emmett Till. He sang me a chorus of it as we drove along the back roads, and his great voice boomed out startlingly in the stillness of the countryside.

There are many groups of singers, and they go around to all the little churches and sing of the woes of their race. I don't know how many white mean ever hear

these songs. But the comfort the heart and strengthen the spirit to endure, to plan, to persevere in their vision of a better life for their own.

Next month I will write of Fr. Williams, a Negro Father of the Society of the Divine Word, and of the work of the lay apostolate at Greenwood, Mississippi, and of the Franciscan sisters from Lacrosse at Canton, and of Fr. Justin, Fr. Kieran, Fr. Francis and other priests of the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity, who are working in fields that have never been tilled before, back in the hinterlands, in the woods, or in small towns, and building a truly tremendous and impressive record, both in the buildings they have erected (much of the labor with their hands) and reaching the poorest and most neglected of God's children.

It will take quite a few articles to tell the story of these missions and their work, and there will be another story too of the communities of Koinonia in Americus and Macedonia, Georgia. The first, a thousand miles south of New York, and down in the rolling country of South Georgia, and the other north, near the North Carolina state line, in the mountains, where fields have to be scratched out on the hillsides and where brooks ripple under plank bridges , living water and as refreshing as the people themselves are in their lives, holding out hope of another way of life, community for lay people, for the family.