

March

% Dorothy Day

1948, 38-51.

Summary: Finally Tamar's son Eric is born. She comments on the child's baptism and the beginning of her own faith. Considers the role of women as nourishers and upbraids herself for being self-indulgent, quoting St. Theresa of Avila at length on penance. As signs of Spring arrive they move to a "new-old" house and she plans to return to New York. (DDLW #478).

March

March 8th

The baby has arrived! A boy was born and now T. says she will never worry again as to what her next will be, now that there is a son! One week a payment was made on a farm, the next week a son was born. Mother and father and grandmother all are content!

The baby was born on February 20th and christened on March 7th which happens to fall this year on Laetare Sunday. It is also the feast of St. Thomas Aquinas. Laetare Sunday, "rejoicing" Sunday, a fine day for a baptism. Alma and Leslie were godparents, and Fr. Ignatius performed the baptism whereby Eric was made a son of God and an heir of heaven. All the day before Tamar and I were busy cooking for the baptismal feast. The farm at Newburgh had sent a fine ham, and we boiled that all afternoon. She made lemon meringue pies and a fine cake and we put candles on it in the shape of a little fish, the symbol of a Christian. I had to finish making the baptismal robe, which was made of a straight piece of white linen which I had bought stamped as though for a table runner, in a Woolworth store. The stampings wash out nicely and I had embroidered it around the edges with little red crosses and on one side a large red cross, and on the other a blue shell and below it flowing water and another little fish. It was very attractive and the priest smiled as he used it, when he said, "Take this white garment which mayest thou bear without stain before the judgment seat of Our Lord Jesus Christ, that thou mayest have life everlasting." We had also a beautiful decorated candle, which the priest handed to the godfather for

the infant, saying, “receive this burning light and keep thy baptism so as to be without blame; keep the commandments of God that when the Lord shall come to the nuptials, thou mayest meet Him together with all the saints of Heaven and mayest have eternal life, and live forever and ever.”

The ceremony of baptism is certainly impressive, with the priest beginning, “What dost thou ask of the Church of God” and the sponsor answering for the child, “Faith.”

It made me think of my days of struggle coming into the Church, how I did not know whether or not I had faith or believed, or just wanted to believe. Things that I questioned I just put out of my mind then, and reconciled myself with the thought, after all, why should I expect to understand everything,—that would be heaven indeed. I knew that if I waited to understand, if I waited to get rid of all my doubts, I would never be ready. So I went in all haste one December day right after Christmas, and was baptized a Catholic. I did not think of it at the time, I understood so little, that when I went to be baptized I asked for faith. But I knew that prayer, “Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief,” and that comforted me. Fr. Roy used to teach us to pray, “Lord, I love you because I want to love you.” And recently, I read in Garrigou LaGrange the quotation, “Thou wouldst not seek Him if Thou hadst not already found Him.” That is Pascal. So much has to be accepted by faith, and faith is so much an act of the will. And though we are informed by our senses, we hear with our ears, we read with our eyes, we understand with the interior senses, still when it comes down to it, we cannot look for sensible consolations from our faith (except very seldom.) People often talk about not going to Church because they do not “feel” like going. They only pray when they “feel” like it, and when they force themselves they seem hypocritical to themselves. I used to get down on my knees with such hesitation, thinking self consciously, “what kind of a gesture is this I am making? What am I doing this for anyway? Am I trying to induce an emotion of religion?” It is true that I was performing an act of religion, and by going through the gestures I would be more likely to “feel” reverent, adoring.

It is strange how self conscious we Americans are about exterior acts of courtesy, how haltingly we perform them. Yet certainly if we act with courtesy and respect toward people, we will feel it more.

Speaking of comfort in religion, I like to think how our Lord loved women and how tender He was of them. Now that I have become a mother-in-law, I like to think of St. Peter’s mother-in-law, and how our Lord healed her (and also how she got up and served them). Women do love to be active, it is natural to them, they are most happy in doing that for which they are made, when they are cooking and serving others. They are the nourishers, starting with the babies at the breast and from then on their work is to nourish and strengthen and console.

So Tamar and I had a very good time, that Lenten Saturday cooking for the mid-Lenten feast. We invited the Clarks, our neighbors, but they had to go to Baltimore that day, and since it snowed and they did not go, and yet did not

come; we decided that it was because they were Brethren who did not believe in infant baptism, that they did not wish to come and celebrate with us. We are glad, however, that they believe, and know what they believe, and go to Church to worship every Sunday. They are an earnest crowd. A notice in the local paper of a revival carried on a few weeks ago reports: "Each night we count the chapters read in the Bible from one night to the next. The highest count was five hundred and eighteen chapters. One person read 96 chapters. The revival is a renewed interest in the word of God."

Leon Bloy wrote: "Like the Eucharist, the Words of the Sacred Book feed the soul and even the mind, without its being necessary to understand them."

He also wrote: "The only profitable way to read the psalms or the book of Job, for instance, is to put yourself in the place of the speaker, since he who speaks is always, necessarily, the Christ, whose members we are."

It is early in the morning (I must grab the chance to write while I may) and the pails of water are heating on the stove. Since we have not washed since Saturday, there is a great wash for today. Becky and Susie are both eating peanuts and singing happily. Becky sounds like a Chinese singer, having a peculiar plaintive wail that delights her heart. Yesterday when the sponsors and the priest were reciting the apostle's creed together, both children joined them with a mumbling of their own. Not that the priests or the sponsors mumbled as some I have heard do. They spoke clearly and distinctly. Many a priest does swallow his words in the most peculiar fashion, thinking that he is fulfilling his obligation of praying aloud as long as some sounds come out. But the effect is horrible, scarcely human. No wonder the Protestants at the time of the reformation talked of "hocus-pocus" which is a corruption of the sacred words, "Hoc est corpus meum."

Meditations for woman, these notes should be called, jumping as I do from the profane to the sacred over and over. But then, living in the country, with little children, with growing things, one has the sacramental view of life. All things are His and all are holy.

I used to wish I could get away from my habit of constant, undisciplined reading, but in the family one certainly is cured of it. If you stop to read a paper, pick up a book, the children are into the tubs or the sewing machine drawers. And as for praying with a book,—there has been none of that this Lent for me. Everything is interrupted, even prayers, since by nightfall one is too tired to pray with understanding. So I try to practice the presence of God after the manner of Blessed Lawrence, and pray without ceasing, as St. Paul advised. He might even have had women in mind. But he himself was active enough, weaving goats hair into tents and sail cloth to earn a living, and preaching nights and Sundays. So I am trying to learn to recall my soul like the straying creature it is as it wanders off over and over again during the day, and lift my heart to the Blessed Mother and His saints, since my occupations are the lowly and humble ones as was theirs.

March 10

The baby will be three weeks old tomorrow night, and both baby and mother are fine. Tamar walked the three quarters of a mile over to the new-old house, over the swinging bridge, over the rushing creek, and came back across the meadow following the brook which made the walk longer. She wanted to give Dave directions about putting up shelves; to measure the stairwell to see if the double bed and book cases could go upstairs, because it is one of those old fashioned houses with tiny narrow enclosed stairs, both from the kitchen and living room. How they are going to get their double bed up, they do not know. Dave wanted to put all his books upstairs in the large room which used to be the smoke room over the kitchen, but that looks impossible too.

Tamar has been active since she came home, baking a cake one day, (though she sits at a high stool by her kitchen cabinet while she does so), packing boxes of clothes for Europe on still another, and *now* out for walks! I'm glad she is so strong. She is better after this baby than after the two others, she says Marge said the same thing last year. As a matter of fact, Marge had five days in the hospital only and when she came home, she found me and Peter sick in bed with flu and took care of both of us too as to meals.

St. Teresa of Avila has a great deal to say of women's ailments. "The first thing we have to do," she writes firmly in *The Way of Perfection*, "and that at once, is to rid ourselves of love for this body of ours—and some of us pamper our natures so much that this will cause us no little labor, while others are so concerned about their health that the trouble these things give us (this is especially so of poor nuns, but it applies to others as well), is amazing. Some of us, however, seem to think that we embraced the religious life for no other reason than to keep ourselves alive and each nun does all she can to that end. In this house, as a matter of fact, there is very little chance for us to act on such a principle, but I should be sorry if we even wanted to. Resolve, sisters, that it is to die for Christ, and not to practice self indulgence for Christ, that you have come here. The devil tells us that self indulgence is necessary if we are to carry out and keep the Rule of our Order, and so many of us, forsooth, try to keep our Rule by looking after our health, that we die without having kept it for as long as a month—perhaps even for a day . . ."

Newman writes that the greatest tragedy is that so few of us have even begun to live, when we die. Not even to make a beginning!

St. Teresa goes on, "No one need be afraid of our committing excesses here, by any chance—for as soon as we do any penances our confessors begin to fear that we shall kill ourselves with them . . ."

Every time I am making what I consider a thorough confession,—that is, telling tendencies that I wish I could overcome, like eating between meals, indulging in the nibbling that women do around a kitchen, and mention it in confession as a venial sin not only in regard to myself but my neighbor who is starving all

over the world, the confessor makes no attempt to understand, but speaks of scruples. One confessor said "I order you to eat between meals!"

These are tendencies to gluttony, and gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins. So little is expected of us lay people, that as Father Joseph, our dear Benedictine friend once said, "the moral theology we are taught is to get us into heaven with scorched behinds."

What kind of an unwilling, ungenerous love of God is this. We do little enough, and when we try to do a little more, we are lectured on Jansenism! I don't even know what it is. I only know that I am self-indulgent.

St. Teresa is sharp enough with nuns who want to go in for their own kind of penance. "It is really amusing, she writes, to see how some people torture themselves; sometimes they get a desire to do penances, as one might say, without rhyme or reason; they go on doing them for a couple of days; and then the devil puts it into their heads that they have been doing themselves harm and so he makes them afraid of penances, after which they dare not even do those that the Order requires—they have tried them once! They do not keep the smallest points in the Rule, such as silence, which is quite incapable of harming us. Hardly have we begun to imagine that our heads are aching, then we stay away from choir, though that would not kill us either. One day we are absent because we had a headache some time ago; another day because our head has just been aching again and on the next three days in case it should ache once more. Then we want to invent penances of our own, with the result that we do neither the one thing nor the other. Sometimes there is very little the matter with us, yet we think that it should dispense us from all our obligations and that if we ask to be excused from them we are doing all we need.

"But why, you will say, does the Prioress excuse us? Perhaps she would not if she knew what were going on inside us. But she sees one of you wailing about a mere nothingness as if your heart were breaking, and you go and ask her to excuse you from keeping the whole of your Rule . . . Sometimes the poor Prioress sees that your request is excessive, but what can

she do? She feels a scruple if she thinks she has been lacking in charity, and she would rather the fault were yours than hers; she thinks too it would be unjust for her to judge you harshly . . .

"Think how many poor people there are who are ill and have no one to complain to, for poverty and self-indulgence make bad company. Think too how many married women have serious complaints and sore trials and yet dare not complain to their husbands about them for fear of annoying them. Sinner that I am! Surely we have not come here to indulge ourselves more than they! How free you are from the great trials of the world! Learn to suffer a little for the love of God without telling everyone about it. When a woman has made an unhappy marriage she does not talk about it or complain of it, lest it should come to her husband's knowledge; she has to endure a great deal of misery and yet has no one to whom she may relieve her mind. Cannot we then keep secret between

God and ourselves some of the ailments He sends us because of our sins? The more so since talking about them does nothing whatever to alleviate them . . . Believe me, my daughters, once we begin to subdue these miserable bodies of ours, they give us much less trouble. Unless we resolve to put up with death and ill health once and for all, we shall never accomplish anything. And believe me, slight as it may seem in comparison with other things, this resolution is much more important than we may think; for if we continually make it, day by day, we shall gain dominion over the body . . . No one will regret having gone through trials in order to gain tranquility and self mastery.”

St. Teresa points out that she is talking of ailments to which women particularly are subject, and knowing that some nuns would say “What will people think if you write thus and so,” she adds, that she is writing for them, that the matter is important, and that all convents are the same.

And all women are the same, I might add, and such advice goes for us all. And I add too, that I am writing this for women, so I do not mind being considered indelicate, if these notes bring solace or comfort or help to some women.

I remember an old Irish woman who had raised eleven children saying that she had suffered at one time or another, and sometimes all at once, varicose veins, piles and fallen womb, and with the passage of years all these ailments had disappeared. Mostly from being able to take more rest, keep off her feet, as the children got older.

I do know that the fetish for order, for making one’s house look like something from *Better Homes and Gardens*, is partly responsible for the ills of the world, for ill health, jagged nerves, nagged husbands, broken homes, etc.

One has to learn to look on outward disorder with a humble serenity, not minding what the neighbors will say.

March 11

David and Tamar are getting enough eggs now to sell some, and since eggs are good for forty eight cents a dozen at the cross road’s store a mile away, that means that four dozen eggs will buy a few staples. Coffee is fifty four cents a pound now, bread sixteen cents a loaf, oleo forty five a pound. We make our own bread however, from good whole wheat flour and I am very proud of mine, made according to an English recipe with only one rising; so short in time and easy to make. You just knead your ingredients together, flour, salt, lard, sugar, yeast and water, and make it stiff enough so that you can pat it into loaves with well floured hands, put it in the pans, let rise for half an hour and then bake for an hour. It can be done of an evening, or before breakfast. It certainly is good to eat with a bit of onion,—a poor man’s feast.

Spring is coming though it is still only twenty above zero when we get up in the morning. The frogs are croaking, and have been this week past, in the runs along the road, and green things are pushing up on the hillsides and the barley and wheat fields are green. The sun is warm in the middle of the day, but oh dear, how sharp the wind is, so that the children come wailing in off the porch after too short a respite for us who are working in the house. Right now they are in again. I write at the kitchen table, and Becky is going around singing, "The baby is all baptized," putting it to various tunes. They have brought their cart in from the porch and are riding each other around in it with great noise. Their favorite toy right now is all the canned goods in the house, which they play with like blocks, soups, tomato paste, deviled meat and small cans of baby food which my sister sent for the babies, to help out in an emergency. What with moving, Tamar did not do much preserving last fall.

Becky is always asking for a washboard so she can help with the washing. She has a little mop and a little carpet sweeper which are a great delight to her to help clean the floor. Already, though she is not three, she helps with the dishes after every meal. How I hope she continues this love of work.

St. Benedict, after St. Joseph, is my patron, and his motto was "Work and Pray." A Benedictine monk, Fr. Rembert Sorg writes,

"We are of the opinion with Cassian, St. Benedict and St Thomas, that the true, positive ascetical exercise of the body to mortify concupiscence of the flesh is honest manual labor. It is apostolic, wholesome and as far as positive violence to be inflicted on the body is concerned, sufficient. But it has to be noted with reference to the sufficiency that the true ascetic, like St. Paul, has the readiness to undergo any hardship of body rather than be separated from the charity of Christ. The spirit of this, however, does not so much involve a case of seeking these things out, as of taking whatever comes in a full love of Christ."

The bill came from the doctor today and with all our visiting at his office and his delivery of the baby, it came to thirty-seven dollars. The hospital bill was forty nine, four dollars a day for the mother in a three-bed ward, and a dollar a day for the baby. Tamar stayed for seven days. The remainder of the cost was for medicine, delivery room and circumcision. All reasonable enough and to fit the purse of people hereabouts. For her other two babies, Tamar paid a flat rate of fifty dollars at the Easton Hospital and that is the rate at most of the hospitals in New York, provided you take any doctor or intern on duty. If there is anything extraordinary about the birth, specialists are always called in. It is only the poor and the rich that have such care; the middle class, mainly because they insist upon it, pay far higher. Quite a few young women whom I know have had to pay two hundred dollars to the doctor just because they were ashamed to say their husbands were getting so little salary. The doctor judged by their pretensions to prosperity rather than the actual wage of the father.

Ray Michael just came by and wanted someone to come and help cut pulpwood. He has some kind of power tool and he holds one end, (he needed a man for the

other) and they walk through the woods, the trees going down before them like grass before the mower. Pulpwood must not be less than four inches in diameter and it grows very fast, practically replacing itself, they all say around here. I suppose it goes to the paper mills and the Dupont people. Ten dollars a cord if they come and get it and thirteen if they haul it in. Normally by hand a man can cut a cord a day, according to the size of the tree, of course. Larger trees, less work.

There are always casual jobs showing up like that. The wage here would be sixty cents an hour. And a day's work would suffice to get in a supply of staples, and a week's work would pay the taxes. But the farmers in the springtime have so many things they want to do, that the only time such labor is done is when they are driven to it. With the young boys it's another matter.

One can get by if one's wants are modest. One can withdraw from the factory, refuse to make munitions, airplanes, atom bombs. In sections like this rent is ten a month, sometimes even five dollars, and there are empty houses. But city people are afraid, afraid of the country, afraid of the dark, afraid to be alone, afraid of the silence. They confess to it. And I remember myself, once, as a little girl, wandering out along the beach down at Fort Hamilton, sitting at the edge of a swamp and listening to the cicadas on a hot summer day, and suddenly being overcome by fear. Even as a little child of six I often awakened in the dark and felt the blackness and terror of nonbeing. I do not know whether I knew anything of death, but these were two terrors I experienced as a child, a terror of silence and loneliness and a sense of Presence, awful and mysterious.

March 22

Spring is here. The frogs are clamorous, the birds awaken us at 6 or before, the crocus is in bloom; one can actually see things grow from hour to hour. Lilies of all kinds bursting up out of the ground, buds coming out on the pear tree and appletrees and hedges.

Today it rains, a sudden downpour. The roads are ridges of mud running with water. There is the monotonous pattering of rain on the tin roof (all the roofs are tin hereabouts), and on the grass outside. But it is good to be out in it too going to and from the barn, the chicken house, the sheds. There is much activity, for we have moved, just in time before the spring rains began and the creek rose again. We moved St. Patrick's Day, bright and sunny, and by the next night were installed in the new-old house, as we call it. When I shopped for cold meat and beer at the tavern, down on the highway, the woman there said, "We've been married 17 years and moved 19 times and thank God we've got our own place now."

The Yosts down the road moved from one farm to another, share-cropping, always tenants and working desperately hard until finally a little legacy enabled

him to buy his own place for fifteen hundred dollars. There is a five room house, many out buildings and fifty acres, and “I wouldn’t take 5,000 for it if I was offered” he said proudly.

Mrs. Yost said she certainly was tired of fixing up other people’s houses. Eve Yost, one of her daughters, had gone out to work at twelve for two dollars a week, and she really worked, scrubbing clothes on a washboard, cooking, baking bread, cleaning. She was home from Washington where she works at the comparatively easy job of waitress now, married to a filling station attendant and sending money home to her mother to raise her 12-year-old son, her only child. They drive up every month or so in a fine big car making the hundred miles in two hours fiat.

Moving—what a job it is! In the book of Job hell is described as a place where “no order is,” and our disorder certainly with its attendant restlessness, is a vision, a sample of hell.

Never to be at home, never to be settled, never to have one’s own belongings at hand!

Eric Gill said “Property is proper to man” and certainly one’s tools, implements, clothing, utensils—no matter how one tries to simplify one’s life—are important.

One time David was helping move a friend of ours from farm to town, from a two-room cabin to a five-room house. There were six children in the family and there were boxes upon boxes of clothes, rags mostly, that another helper, a kindly friend, wanted to throw out.

It impressed me very much to see the understanding care my son-in-law took of all these possessions. “To the poor,” he said, “everything has its value.” What looked like rags and junk were part of the everyday living of that poor home.

Well we had plenty of what to others would look like junk and rags. But Tamar can make hooked rugs, or braided rugs. And any number of old wool skirts her sisters-in-law have sent her have been made into little jumper dresses for the two little girls. We like to look at the ads in the Sunday papers to see the prices of the dresses that T. so handily turns out on her machine. Eight dollars for a tiny skirt; five dollars for a little blouse.

My mother used to make all our clothes when we were children but her great lament was that they did not look *bought*. “Home-made” was her sad comment, after hours over the machine.

What strange standards we Americans have! We judge so much by the cost—we must keep up with the Jones’s—I see it in myself and in my desire not to appear different, I look longingly at the new styles in coats and dresses.

There is some excuse for it now for the styles may in a way be termed Christian styles with their decent long skirts, full and graceful. As a grandmother, especially, I need long skirts with children clambering all over me, climbing in my lap, hiking my dress over my knees. I have concocted one long housedress by adding

a foot length of goods around the bottom and Becky insists on calling this a “nightgown!”

2 P.M.

The rain continues. Tamar is busy making Easter candies with fondant (made a few days ago) chopped candied lemon peel and orange peel and black walnuts. The whole to be dipped in bitter chocolate and made to resemble an egg. She also experimented with hot cross buns this morning tho it is only Tuesday. To be more liturgical she neglected to put the cross on them until Friday. We were surprised that Alma had never heard of them in the south. I suppose the custom is a New England one.

Yesterday was a busy and glowing day. The sun shone, Ray came over to help rake up dead grass, broken glass, high weeds, wall paper, tin cans, stones from around the house. All day Becky helped him, raking valiantly. She sat on her high stool after meals, washing “disses,” she helped get the milk, she all but witnessed the delivery of 3 baby goats, one of which was born dead. The two little survivors were brought in behind the kitchen stove and that evening she helped feed one, pushing its head down into a coffee can where it learned immediately to lap up the milk. Tamar used to feed them with a bottle and nipple but with the last few kids, she found they learned immediately to suck the milk up out of a pail.

The kitchen is a busy place, filled with babies, baby goats, two kittens, 3 adults. Around supper time it is Bedlam. It reminds me of the riotous picture presented in that Christmas carol—of milkmaids milking, lads a-leaping, drummers drumming, pipers piping, etc.

“On the first day of Christmas
My true love gave to me
A partridge in a pear tree.” (is the way the song begins.)

March 28

“Now is the time. . . that we must say Goodbye!”

Every day during Holy Week we had Mass at St. Vincent’s Church in Berkeley Springs, and I drove down. Afterwards I stopped for a cup of coffee before the twelve mile drive home. There was a juke box of course in the coffee shop (one cannot get away from them) and every morning that same slow, sad, sentimental and haunting song blared forth.

“Now is the time. . . that we must say Goodbye!” sung with incredible slowness, almost with a wail.

It irritated me and yet moved me because I had to leave the following Sunday. After all, I am still at work, I am still in harness, and I had to return to New York, to the house of hospitality; to the farm at Newburgh where the retreats are beginning again for the spring and summer.

Tamar has had her baby, the moving is done, spring is here. Much as I would love to stay, I have no excuse to stay. It has been two and a half months that I have been away, and though I have been able to keep up with letters and some little bit of writing, my mind and heart have been absorbed in the work at hand, "the family."

So now tomorrow I start off again "on pilgrimage" for we have here no abiding city. Much as we may want to strike our roots in, we are doomed to disappointment and unhappiness unless we preserve our detachment. It is the paradox of the Christian life, to hate father and mother, sister and brother and children on the one hand, if they stand between us and God, and on the other to follow the teaching of St. Paul, "if any man have not care of his own, and especially those of his own house, he hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel"; not to be solicitous for the things of the world, and yet to do everything with love, for the love of God. Moreover, much as I appreciate St. Peter's mother-in-law and how "she rose and ministered to them," and much as I love St. Paul's talk of grandmothers, I know that mother-in-law and grandmother should not be too much in evidence or trying to live the lives of the younger people. If we are there to serve, it is one thing. But usually we are not nearly so much needed as we think we are. There are such things as guardian angels, and our dear Lord watches over all.