

On Pilgrimage - July/August 1976

Dorothy Day

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Summary: A wandering collection of anecdotes centered around letter writing, spiritual reading, and the summer heat. (DDLW #571).

Though we moved into Maryhouse months ago, my room is still a mess and to get at the typewriter, the desk, the dresser, or even the bed, I must remove piles of paper and correspondence, some of it, indeed, dating back to 1975! There is some excuse for it, what with many visitors, telephone calls and getting acquainted with the forty-five women we have at the house right now. Volunteers have come from far and wide, thanks be to God. We have several Sisters who have had training in the neatness that makes for efficiency. Our Maryhouse is beautiful to behold. It is on E. Third Street. St. Joseph's House is on E. First Street and there is much going back and forth. What is life without the men, we say, as we watch them unload the two freezers and washers, donations to the work. The staff on First Street say the same of the women as they help mail out the paper and cook the meals. Then, too, we have the two little cabins, houses of prayer, on the beach, where our volunteers can flee for fresh air and a dip in Raritan Bay in this hot, humid weather.

A Letter

I am beginning to read **Dear Theo**, van Gogh's letters to his brother. This Signet book, New American Library, was given me last night by one of our guests out of gratitude for the articles on van Gogh in the May '76 issue of the **C.W.** So this column is not only a letter to our readers and my correspondents, whose letters are piled on my desk unanswered, but to my sister who has recently moved to Victoria, British Columbia, to my daughter, in Vermont, to my granddaughter, Susie, who just had her third daughter, on the fourth of July, and to Marge Hughes.

Marge, who headed our farm for so long, and there bore the heat of the day, is now bearing the heat of West Virginia, in one of the five homesteads at West Hamlin. Chuck Smith, editor of the **Mountain Worker**, started this move South for four of our friends and associates. My granddaughter, Maggie, is there,

too, with a strong baby boy, who will be a help to his father, who is a skilled craftsman.

Other family news is that Hilaire Hennessy, named after Hilaire Belloc, of course, graduated from high school at East Hill Farm, RD Andover, Chester, Vermont, 05143. I print the address completely because I remember I had several letters asking the address of this most interesting school and I do not remember whether these are stacked among the unanswered letters. (When 90,000 **Catholic Worker** papers go out nine times a year, and we all write rather personally and informally, as one does in a letter, our readers feel free to write in the same way to us – so no wonder we cannot keep up with the mail. But we do try to answer all, if only with a card, and our cards are beautiful and interesting! We are beginning to print some on Stanley’s press at Tivoli.)

Spiritual Nourishment

Speaking of schools, van Gogh wrote to his brother from a boy’s school at Ramsgate, England, where there were about forty pupils. He got no pay, except his board and room, and when he went up to London to find the ministerial work he would rather have, he walked the entire way.

He was obsessed by God. He saw beauty all around him which gave him great happiness. This is the best spiritual reading I have had for a long time, also a great encouragement. I am very much afraid of pietism and religiosity in writing as I do, and I beg pardon of my readers if I seem to lapse into it at times. The letters of suffering we get so often from our readers, make me constantly want to pass on the comfort which I have so often received throughout my life. That comfort has always come from Scripture.

Horror at man’s cruelty remains with us. Radio, television, newspapers. We confront man’s cruelty daily, but occasionally we confront it starkly. Yesterday, a woman told me of a night she was “sleeping out,” lying on a hard bed, a doorway sheeted with newspapers. While she slept, some passerby set fire to the papers and her legs and skirt were badly burned. She showed me the scars. She is little, fragile, still possessed of a womanly grace and a soft Southern accent.

It is a comfort to sit by my window early mornings and read Scripture or **The Imitation**, that old classic scorned by some eminent theologians today. Pierre turned to it in **War and Peace** after fighting a nearly fatal duel. I started reading it after George Eliot’s Maggie Tulliver, in a teenage religious crisis, was comforted and fortified by it.

In Book IV, Chapter II, a Kempis write, “I need two things. Food and Light.” And he points to the Sacrament of the Eucharist as his Food and the Word of God as the Light. “These also may be called Two Tables containing Holy Bread and the Divine Law.”

It thrilled me to think of it – God everywhere so palpably present – truly there, if not in the sacrament of the Altar then in the Book. All can have the Bible in their homes!

On my last visit to Tivoli my seven-year-old Tanya, the oldest of my grandchildren, brought the Bible to me and read aloud to me from it!

Summer Heat

By the time you get to read this issue of the paper it may be September, and probably just as hot as it is today. When I look back at my school days it was always hot in September, especially in Chicago, where my family lived when we were children. From fourth to seventh grades we lived on the South Side, which, as I remember, was hotter than the North Side, where I lived until graduation from Robert Walker High School. We always lived near Lake Michigan, that great inland sea. On Thirty-Seventh Street we were two blocks from the lake and, after climbing a wall and crossing the Illinois Central tracks, we bathed in deep pools inside the breakwater. It was dangerous crossing all those tracks for both passengers and freight trains. It was dangerous bathing inside the breakwater, which was very deep in some places.

On Oakwood Boulevard we were further from the lake but we were on a treelined street near a Catholic Church, which I was afraid to enter for fear I would do the wrong things, as a Gentile might on entering a synagogue. We lived on the sunny side of the street, so we had to play in the backyard. When I had to go to the store for my mother I would hasten down the hot street from tree to tree, hugging the shade. When the wind was off the prairies it was hotter still.

Beauty remains in a child's mind, and up to that time it was all beauty – hot vacations, sunny afternoons playing with a cousin and a sister. But **horror** remains, too – the memory of seeing a non-union man being beaten up by two union men, until my mother got him away and took him to our kitchen to wash his bloody face. The memory of the woman next door who said the way to get rid of rats was to catch them in a trap and set the trap over a gas flame, so that the squealing of the rats and their burning flesh would drive the other rats away from the house. Perhaps we moved away from the North Side to get away from that evil woman.

Perhaps I am writing of the heat now because it seems most of my summer so far this year is being spent in the city. When I was living at St. Joseph's House on First Street, I had a rear room on the third floor which looked over a factory roof, where cats stalked pigeons (and never caught them) and curled up cozily in packing cartons, which our fellow-worker Paul put up there to protect them from the sun. He fed them, too, on the roof of that factory, which was one story high, and since I was on the third floor, I had a good view of the tall apartment houses on Second Street. It was a shady room, no sun, and a good breeze on a day like this. Looking to the back windows of the apartments on the next street,

I was fascinated by the clothes lines which stretched from windows to tree-high, leaning poles and were worked by pulleys. The clothes always looked very clean, and so did the mops which hung out the windows.

Now at Maryhouse my windows on the second floor face the street with its teeming life and noise and the hot sun pouring in. If I leave my door open a breeze comes through. I have a rocking chair in front of my window and I never tire of sitting there and looking out at a sycamore tree, that tree Zaccheus made famous by climbing into its branches (he was a short man) so that he could see Jesus better as He passed by. How startled he must have been to have Our Lord look up at him and tell him to come down, that He wanted to have dinner with him that day. And Zaccheus was a tax collector, abhorred by the chosen people! Do we abhor our tax collectors? "We love God as much as the one we love the least!" Fr. Hugo said.

Alderson, W. Va.

Chuck Matthei, Peacemaker, visited recently and told me of his latest visit to Alderson, West Virginia, where there is one of four Federal prisons for women. I have visited there twice and written about it for the **Catholic Worker**. Chuck is interested in starting a house of hospitality nearby so that the visitors to the many prisoners, sentenced from all over the country, can have some place to lodge. There is no hotel, rooming house or lodging of any kind for families of the prisoners. It is cruel and inhuman punishment not to make it more possible for the prisoners to see their children or parents. (See letter, p. 4.)

Lolita Lebrun has been there for twenty years and is a symbol, to many Puerto Rican people, of resistance to the United States' exploitation of her country and her people. A young woman from Holyoke told me last year of the hard life on the Puerto Ricans who work in the tobacco fields of Connecticut and Massachusetts. Cesar Chavez' United Farm Workers Union has signed up Florida Agricultural workers and looks forward to getting benefits for the Eastern workers, too. What a nonviolent war Cesar is waging against the Goliaths who hold the land ("The earth is the Lord's" Scripture says. Proudhon's "Property is theft," is a familiar, though enigmatic, anarchist pronouncement. "How much land does a man need?" Tolstoi wrote in a famous short story about a greedy landowner.)

I recently sent a beautiful, Spanish crucifix to Lolita, asking Chuck to give it to the authorities to give to her. It was from our own Southwest, and was a "museum" piece and very precious to me, as I knew it would be to her. It was carefully wrapped, but Chuck has not been able to let me know if Lolita has received it, because the authorities, perhaps worried about the violence and terrorism of some Puerto Rican patriots, feared a bomb! Chuck, the most nonviolent and long-suffering of pacifists, laughingly told me there was even a thought of putting the package in a pail of water before opening it to check as to whether it was truly the representation of the gentle and agonized Christ!

Excuse! Ten telephone calls, and visitors made this disjointed letter. But letters are always welcome, I know from my own experience.

Postscript

Box A
Alderson, W. Va. 24910

July 8, 1976

Dear Dorothy Day,

Your “most valuable possessions” are with me, as Chuck informed you. Receive my profoundest thanks and gratitude for making me keeper of these treasures. I hope that I will be able to care for them well, and that, with the help of God and our Blessed Mother, I will succeed. Your gesture is profoundly touching and fully understood only to God, Whose understanding surpasses all knowledge. May God be praised!

I know that you keep us in your prayers. For them and for your great directness, I am entirely grateful.

Myself, and the women who met you, and the sisters, remember and deeply appreciate your visit to this prison.

As the century advances, the sign of the times increases with the Power of God to give us strength and forwardness in Jesus!

Love,

Lolita Lebrun, 11909