

On Pilgrimage - December 1951

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Summary: She goes to Canada for the funeral of Fr. Lacoutre then visits shrines, and numerous craft schools. Praises the “many beginnings” of the personalist and communitarian revolution. (DDLW #911).

Father Lacoutre died November 16 and I took the bus Sunday night at six forty-five, arriving in Montreal at nine o'clock the next morning. It was very cold all night. The door of the bus did not shut tight and the heater worked only on one side. Nobody complained. Opportunities for penance, vigil, prayer! I am constantly reminded of how good people are, how patient and long suffering. Madeleine Sheridan is an ever hospitable friend. Since her mother's death, her little apartment has been a house of hospitality. She exemplified personal responsibility. After lunch Fr. Leandre Plante, Fr. Roy's nephew who is stationed at Gesu Church, borrowed his brother's car and picked up Karl Stern at the Allen Memorial hospital and me at Madeleine's, and drove us out to the other end of Montreal to view Fr. Lacoutre's body. There I met his sister, brothers and nieces and nephews, most of whom had come up from Massachusetts and Rhode Island to attend the funeral. They loved him very much and were all weeping. “He paid us visits often, and never stopped talking about God. He was always so happy.”

Funeral

The funeral of a Jesuit is very austere. One nocturn of the office of the dead is recited before the low requiem Mass. They live, as St. Paul said, in a family as though there were no family, among brothers as though they were not brothers.

Right after the funeral Mass I took the bus to Quebec to see Fr. Pacifique Roy, our old friend who helped us to start the retreat house at Easton, Pennsylvania, and who lived with us there for a year or more, before he was taken ill and had to return to Canada where he lived for a long time at the hospital and later with his sister in Quebec. His lapses of memory do not permit him to say Mass. Like Peter Maurin, his mind is tired. He cannot say his office, but he sits with his beads. His condition in many ways resembles that of Peter Maurin's last years. Friends of Fr. Roy will be glad to know that he is comfortable with his

sister and her husband, a bridge builder, their three daughters, and at present a little grand nephew three years old, Pierre. There were nine children, all of whom are married save the three sisters at home. Family feeling is very close in French Canada. It is truly a village economy there. They are like people living in an occupied country and still speak of the Conquest. Mr. Riendeau told me something of the economic conditions which prevailed in the mining districts and which led to the asbestos strike of a few years ago.

St. Anne Shrine

I was surprised to find that the famous shrine of St. Anne, which I thought was in Quebec city, was 25 miles further up the St. Lawrence. We drove out there one cold afternoon, but it in no way felt like a pilgrimage, making so brief a visit and driving out in the short winter afternoon. The next day I spoke at the school of social work at Laval, at the invitation of Fr. Gonzale Poulain and had lunch at the university club later. I remembered at the last minute that at home it was Thanksgiving.

In the afternoon I visited an exhibit of handicrafts with Anne Marie Riendeau who had worked for the department of agriculture, going to all the family circles in Quebec giving two weeks' courses of one kind or another to the farmers' wives.

Even though many a housewife knows how to spin and weave the government finds it necessary to encourage them to continue in these crafts, so subtly are American ways creeping into the Province. I remember how in Mexico the friends I met relegated their wonderful Indian crockery to the kitchen and brought out Woolworth stuff as superior.

Jim Shaw

In the evening I took the bus for Three Rivers which is half way between Quebec and Montreal. Adjacent to it is Cap de La Madeleine, another famous shrine in Canada dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary. Pilgrims come in the summer by the thousands every day, and even in winter the shrine church is full each day at the Masses offered continually by the Oblate Fathers. One feels the devotion as soon as one arrives at this city of 15,000 which sprawls along the St. Lawrence. I got off the bus on a cold, clear night and was met by Jim Shaw who is the editor of the English edition of the Shrine Annals. As we walked to his headquarters which he shares with his mother, who comes from an Irish village, as devout as any in French Canada, we watched the children skating on the little lakes in the park surrounding the shrine. Jim lives all but in the shrine grounds. Cap de la Madeleine is famous not only for the shrine but for the paper mills on every side. The Charles River coming down from the north floats the logs to the mills and as we walked to Church in the morning we faced literally a mountain of logs waiting to be devoured by the pulp mill. The smell of paper mills was in the air.

School

In the midst of this industrial atmosphere, there is also a famous “family school” or school of the household arts for which Canada is becoming famous. Several of our friends from the states have taken a course for a year at one of these schools and have learned spinning, weaving, dress making, the French language. The schools are really high schools, but anyone can take a course. The tuition is thirty dollars a month at the Institute Familial at Val Marie, Cap de la Madeleine, but it is still less at some of the rural schools. Here the girls are prepared for home making in the town and city, rather than on a farm. There are now over 64 of these intermediate schools, 36 superiors schools, 3 schools of family education for young people and for adults there are 34 institutions which offer courses. For information one can write to Mgr. Albert Tessier, 1420 Boul Mont Royal, Outremont, Canada. Outremont is part of Montreal.

As I write I am stopping at the school in Val Marie for the week, writing in the morning, spinning, or learning to in the afternoon, with time for chapel and spiritual reading. It is a retreat eminently suited to woman’s nature. The silence is pretty complete since only French is spoken.

Worker Homes

Before I came for my retreat, I visited Le Miracle du Cure Chamberland, as it is called, which has provided homes for 400 factory workers in the last seven years. The last forty houses were begun in June 1950, and finished in February, 1951. The financing was done through parish credit unions and much of the work was done by the workers in their evenings and on Saturdays. Twenty skilled union workers worked during the day and prepared the work for the men to do in the evening. Truly, this is part of the personalist and communitarian revolution. We visited one of the homes on a Saturday night. It had that meticulous order of the French home. Opening off of it are four bedrooms, a bathroom, and just inside the front door a parloir, which is the smallest room in the house. It is literally, only “to speak” in, parler. The kitchen is living room, dining room, work room, the heart of the family. Such work is not possible except through the parish unit, and with the leadership of such a priest as Canon Chamberland.

“The real job,” he said, “was to give the people courage to venture the undertaking.” Here is one instance where the child of light was as wise in his generation as the children of this world. Here is the coordination of the material and spiritual order. Canon Chamberland does not just regard his people as souls. They are body and soul and he has been a good shepherd.

Other Ventures

There are other ventures of which I have heard, but not seen, and which I intend to visit before I return. There is the English speaking group of girls like those of Abbey Saey who go out to nurse the sick and clean their homes, who live in poverty in the old Irish, and now the French quarter. Their chaplain is also the chaplain of the Young Christian Workers. There is also the Foyer de Charite, headed by an old friend of ours, Fr. Ovila Belanger who is the chaplain of this home which is being built for destitute families. It is also an outgrowth of the work of the laity who began to live with the poorest and serve them.

“The aim of the work is to assuage and solace the abandoned ones of society, and that absolutely by private charity. The temptation often presents itself under the form of political organization of so called social agencies which would very much like to put their hands on our work,” writes Fr. Ovila Belanger. We wish to count only on Divine Providence and the Holy Family.

Bishop Leger

Bishop Leger, of Montreal, in speaking of the work, said (and this is a rough translation), “In this field, symbolically apart from all bureaucracies imagined, one will bend his mind quite simply without question, towards the lot of those who are so poor that they cannot any longer be categorized in a society too perfect for them.”

To encounter such works, such beginnings, with all the ardor of beginnings, is to be filled with hope. The Church is indeed alive. We are living in a time of many beginnings.