

On Pilgrimage - May 1976

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Summary: An anniversary recollection in honor of Peter Maurin. Notes writers who influenced Peter and highlights some of his key ideas. Also reflects on adversity, beauty, martyrs, and joy. (DDLW #569).

Another May Day issue. There have been so many, since that first one in 1933. And Peter Maurin, French peasant, founder, indoctrinator, truly our inspiration, must be honored on this day.

As I write, I'm sitting in our chapel at the farm at Tivoli. The four front windows look out on the Hudson river. The last few days have been sunny and warm and the roads dusty, tracking up our nice clean rooms, being readied for the great feast of Easter. But in the night there was a great storm of rain with thunder and lightning. "We needed it," says John the farmer, who has been with us since 1936.

There are many storms and tumults in our communities, and sometimes the burdens are heavy which are forced upon us, left on our doorstep, one might say. Stanley loves to say that community life is a matter of the martyrs trying to live with the saints.

"We are the offscouring of all," we can say with St. Paul but, living as we do, I can also say we are "the salt of the earth" and we must guard continually against losing our "savor."

Yes, our life is full of savor, a pleasant flavor, and a good taste left in our mouths as crises pass and what seemed insuperable obstacles have been overcome. (It has been a hard winter, here at the farm!)

But there are 80-acres of beauty around us. There is the Blessed Lord Himself in our chapel.

Even St. Teresa of Avila sought material, even worldly remedies in times of crisis. "If the nuns are melancholy, feed them a steak!" And when she danced and played her castanets at recreation time, and was reproached for frivolity, she said "We must do something to make life bearable."

So we seek our consolations on the material and mental and spiritual level. There are two great novels I often turn to in time of stress, **David Copperfield**

and **Kristin Lavransdatter**. I love the way McCawber found consolation in a sudden feast in the debtor's prison. And I remember Kristin sitting on a high hill, where she had been gathering herbs, and suddenly remembering the words from the Mass (I am paraphrasing) – “It is right and proper at all times and in all places to praise and to glorify God” – and she lifted up her heart.

“Lift up your hearts!”

“We have lifted them up to the Lord.”

The book also gives a glowing and beautiful account of the beautiful and passionate young Kristin in her old age, after she had raised her large family and survived much sorrow.

It enlightens the mind and enlarges the heart to read of age and the works one must continue to do – works which bring both sorrow and joy.

“Unto old age and gray hairs, O Lord, forsake me not.”

Our work has been accounted often as folly, yet it has been the “folly of the Cross!” Peter Maurin, founder of the Catholic Worker, derived his inspiration, not from the education he received from the Christian Brothers, but from his contact with French radical thinking. He never ceased to emphasize the voluntary poverty of St. Francis of Assisi; the philosophy (and the theology) of work from St. Benedict; the practise of the works of mercy of St. Vincent de Paul; the intellectual studies of St. Dominic.

Peter also kept in touch with such thinkers as Jacques Maritain who visited us in our storefront at 15th Street and who gave us his book **Freedom in the Modern World**, calling attention especially to the chapter on the “Use of Pure Means,” such as Gandhi's.

Maritain said that our first store front headquarters reminded him of Charles Peguy's shop in Paris where students and workers gathered. Peguy was the great influence in the life of Emmanuel Mounier, young student at the Sorbonne who started the magazine **Esprit**, which began publication around the same time as ours, and which led Peter Maruun to translate for us Mounier's “Personalist Manifesto” which was followed by other articles about revolution, a necessary but nonviolent revolution which Mounier called “The Personalist and Communitarian Revolution.”

Peter is dead now. He died in May 1949. But his work bears fruit still. Here in the U.S., Chuck Smith in West Virginia amplifies his teachings on decentralism, land use, dedication to the poor – truly what Peter called a new synthesis of Cult, Culture, and Cultivation.

Many little houses of hospitality have sprung up to serve the poor, to find Christ in the poor, workers themselves trying to “put on Christ,” “putting off this old man.”

(Peter Maurin was as simple and profound as the Gospels, in the way he taught us.)

Sometimes life is so hard, we foolishly look upon ourselves as martyrs, because it is almost as though we were literally sharing in the sufferings of those we serve.

It is good to remember – to clutch to our aching hearts those sayings of Fr. Zossima – “Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.” (in **The Brothers Karamazov**).

And that other saying in one of the tales in the **Little Flowers** of St. Francis – “This then is perfect joy.”

How often that has been used around the Catholic Worker, making us laugh for the joy at the sudden light and perspective given to our problems.

“We have not yet suffered unto blood.” As St Paul said.

The **Nation** has sent me a marked copy of an article (March 6) about the martyrdom of young mission priests in Honduras, telling how they (with peasant leaders) were preaching the Personalist and Communitarian Revolution of Emmanuel Mounier. “Priests have been assassinated, jailed and exiled,” the editorial read. The dynamite inherent in Peter Maurin’s teaching is being set off, as he predicted in the first issue of the Catholic Worker.

So we beg our readers (91,000 circulation now) to pray for these men in Central America who have shed their blood. And since we believe in the Communion of Saints (We are **all** “called to be saints,” St. Paul wrote), let us pray to our fellow workers who have suffered martyrdom, asking their prayers.

P.S. John Cogley, head of the first Chicago house of hospitality and editor of the Chicago **Catholic Worker** (which was considered by many to be a better paper than our own), died last month.

Dr. Karl Stern, a most dear and intimate friend of all of us at the Catholic Worker, died also some months ago. I will try to write more of them later.

My article for this May issue fell into shape this April morning. By this time, our readers should know that the **Catholic Worker** editors have no sense of “time.”