

# On Pilgrimage - January 1950

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*Summary: Tales from each stop of a long journey from New York through Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis, Tulsa to Amarillo, Texas. Tells of many efforts at the works of mercy, learning to make rosaries, lectures, liturgies, and enduring suffering. (DDLW #606).*

## Amarillo, Texas

The vast sky is above and the vast plain stretches out all around, the sun shines but it is cold. It is quiet too. Here there is no sound of traffic, no roar of trucks from Canal street, no El trains clamoring by. There is silence. Here one could almost be a desert father. It is a good place to stop and write

But even the desert fathers came forth from the desert in times of need. There was St. Ephraim, one of my favorite saints, who left the desert to start houses of hospitality in the city in time of famine and pestilence. Fr. Lux, whose guest I am, does not need to go to the city, because it comes to him. It is here already because of the richness of the soil, the plenitude of water, which is just sixty feet below the surface and cheap land. They raise wheat here, and the land goes for a dollar an acre. It is an easy crop, and the owners, the speculators, sit in the cities and let the sun and earth and God's bounty do their work for them. Fortunes are piled up in wheat and oil, but there is still poverty all around. A man can work six days a week for eight to ten hours a day, and still only earn thirty-five a week and that is not enough to support a family on. Milk is 25 cents a quart. Land is cheap but building materials are high, so the people live in tiny shacks and whole families exist in one room. It is not as though they could live in the warmth of out of door, either. It is cold and will be cold for months. Occasionally there are snow flurries. And the wind blows, and even when the sun is hot, there is a bite to the wind, that whines around these little houses on the plains, a lonely wind that never ceases for months on end.

Fr. Lux came down from Chicago where he was chaplain of the Blessed Martin Center for some years, and now he is in the Blessed Martin Mission, among the Negroes of Amarillo, and his parish extends for miles around and there are fifty Catholics in it. There is a school which can take care of a hundred and fifty, and

there are Dominican Sisters here, and a few lay people who are interested in people. And all day long Father's telephone rings and people are wanting him, to calm a drunken son who is threatening his mother and breaking up furniture or to visit the sick, or to feed the hungry. There is plenty of work to do, so Father Lux, O.P. cannot miss the great city of Chicago nor the work that he was doing there. Here it is a good place for lay apostles to stop and visit. When I am far in the southwest I realize how good it is to have a few wandering apostles who will come now and again and help out and bring news of the activities in other centers.

## **Rochester, N.Y.**

I started on my trip on December 18<sup>th</sup> and spoke at Rochester, New York that night. Tommie Scahill and Bea and their five children, four boys and a girl under four and a half, are living in the House of Hospitality there, at 402 South Avenue, and are doing a tremendous job, a job that I am afraid will cost Tommie his health if he does not give it up. He is driving a truck practically every day when he is not working a few days a week for a bit of cash for his family. The truck picks up papers and magazines, heavy bundles and these in turn are sold to support the house. When I saw how much work there was involved in this picking up, how much driving in a heavy truck which has resulted in an occupational arthritis such as tractor drivers suffer from – I realize how Tommie is supporting the house, not only with plain ordinary hard work but with his life's blood. He is indeed laying down his life for his fellows. The house is in debt, because daily there are about a hundred coming in to eat, and there are a dozen men living in the house. The work of serving table is continuous. Tom and Bea's last child is named Stephen and Tom says that St. Stephen should be the patron saint of the Catholic Workers, because they lay so much stress on feeding the hungry. There are also meetings held at the house, and there is a Saturday morning Mass at which the group who have been helping the house for many years participate. The spiritual and corporal works of mercy cannot be separated. While in Rochester I had lunch with Lawrence and Teresa Weider, and visited the shrine to the Holy Family which they have placed in their garden on the outskirts of the city, in honor of their son Joe who was killed in the war. Mrs. Weider's great work now is visiting young mothers in the hospitals helping them with layettes and other needs, and getting them to dedicate their unborn children to the blessed Mother. Their home has always had a Christ's room in it, for the sick and needy.

## **Cleveland**

My next visit was to Our Lady of the Wayside Farm at Avon, Ohio, where I had a very lovely day with Dorothy and Bill and the five children, in this case four girls and a boy, all under seven. Dorothy taught me to make a rosary in the long

evening before the bus left, and I have purchased a pair of pliers, and have some materials and am delighted at this new skill. I have always wanted to learn. The Gauchats need very much to build up this home work to supplement his earnings from driving the school bus and working in the feed mill. They are a few years behind on taxes now. So anyone wishing to buy rosaries, beautiful strong ones on silver chains which will not break or tarnish, get in touch with them at the above address. It is a good present for ordination, graduation, confirmation, as well as birthdays and baptismal days.

My bus left at midnight and I got into Chicago in time for eight o'clock Mass at the Paulist Church which is a block from the bus station. It was the feast of St. Thomas, and John Bowers had died early that morning. He had been living and working among the poor for the past fourteen years on West Taylor street, living there in a little store which first housed the Catholic Worker in Chicago. A print of Roualt's St. Veronica which he gave Tom Sullivan hangs in New York and I have a remembrance of him in a work of mercy he did for me years ago when I was taken ill in Chicago and he paid not only for my hospital bill at the Little Company of Mary Hospital where he died, but for the operation on my throat performed there. It probably meant he lived on short rations for some time to come.

He was a man of taste and culture, and he knew good things and the comfortable things of life and he kept just what he needed and put aside the rest to be with the poor. And his idea of his needs was not a worldly one. May God grant him a place of refreshment, light and peace. It makes me happy to think that all you who read this will be saying this prayer for him too.

## Speaking

While in Chicago I spoke at Madonna High School in Aurora and at the Sheil School. I had a happy meeting there with Dr. William O'Meara who is teaching at the University of Chicago. Bill is such an old friend that he knew the Fifteenth street office of the Catholic Worker, our starting place, as well as Charles street and Mott street. When we first knew him we was going to the Institute of Mediaeval studies in Toronto.

The day of the funeral was a crowded one, beginning with the solemn Requiem Mass where many of John's friends met together, followed by a lunch at Fr. Carabine's office where John Cogely, Tom Sullivan, Gerry Griffen, John Mella all met unexpectedly, though the first two were at the funeral. We had a further get-together that evening John Cogely's home, and I met all the children for the first time, Terry, Anne, Christopher and Joan. John and Teddy (Theodora) are moving to New York in a few months, since he is working now on the **Commonweal**.

One of my regrets on this trip is that I cannot hear the series of talks John is giving at **The Catholic Worker** Monday nights on Russian philosophy. I

was present at the first two and realize how much I am missing. Some of the material I got from him. I am using in turn in my own talks. More and more I realize the necessity of study groups, which was always the first plank in Peter Maurin's platform; – Round table discussions for the clarification of thought. John is sharing with us what he got at Freibourg last year.

Later the same evening the O'Meara's took me to the home of Milton Mayer where among other people I met Sol Alinsky, who has done so much to coordinate all the groups "back of the yards." We talked about Kropotkin and his ideas of anarcho-syndicalism which are much like the guilds of the middle ages.

## **St. Louis**

Early the next morning, after going to sleep at four, I was on my way to St. Louis in the most rattle trap of busses, the kind put on only on holidays when the traffic is heavy. The doors and windows would not close properly, the heating system would not work, we crawled along, and were hours late. I became so cold, in spite of being wrapped in a heavy coat, I wish I had been prepared with hot bricks, lap robes, and a few other such appurtenances that went with stage coaching in Dickens' day. It was a good vigil, a bit of penance to prepare one for the feast, so it was quite in keeping with Christmas spirit. I groaned within myself, but I didn't notice anyone else complaining except in the mildest terms. It always amazes me, the patience of the general mass of people. What they put up with, without complaining how far they must be pushed before they can be induced to take any action. The patience of the poor. But smoldering beneath it all is a keen sense of injustice, a scholar-worker, rich-poor antagonism. The race war, the class war goes on. It is here. But one of the things which retards the revolution, in America is the dream of wealth, carefully fostered by all advertising, in print, on the air, before ones eyes. The press, the radio, television, all concentrate on increasing man's desires for luxury, for money and for the things money can buy such as the respect of others, place, position and power. Until we begin to want real things, the things of body, mind and soul, we cannot get anywhere. And deep down, buried perhaps beneath the clutter of our days, the desire for God is there in every man. I have faith in my own life. Every man is hungry for Good, for love, for happiness, but they are looking for Him in strange places.

## **St. Louis**

And who has given him the strong meat of the gospel? Well, there is Monsignor Hellriegel for one, who in his parish, dispenses the sacraments in ways befitting their power and glory. It always thrilled me to think that Father Damien of Molokai felt always the importance of the church services, vestments, rituals, to clothe and present in the most beautiful and majestic way possible, the glory of the faith to those poor and hideously ugly parishioners of his, eaten by disease,

no beauty in them. The truths of the faith can reach men most easily presented in this way. They must have had a wealth and a health which we lack in many a prosperous city parish. I arrived in St. Louis in time for midnight Mass and probably because of my vigil on the bus, it was a glorious experience. We all sang the Mass together, there were carols, there was a beautiful sermon and at two I went in the dark clear night to Florence Vollmuth's home and feasted on sausage and rolls and hot coffee before falling into bed for a most welcome sleep. There were other high Masses at seven-thirty and then at eleven and at the end of the eleven o'clock Mass there were the acclamations, *Christus vincent, Christus regnat, Christus imperat!* sung by the entire congregation, a tremendous ovation.

## Tulsa

I left St. Louis after vespers and supper with Bob Isaacson and Herbert Baden, on the nine-forty-five bus and arrived in Tulsa at noon the next day. I stayed over only long enough to visit Monsignor Hillenbrand at St. John's hospital where he has been lying in bed, suffering for the lay apostolate, since last February. On Jan. 6<sup>th</sup>, feast of the Epiphany a year ago he started out with a group of Young Christian Workers for a tour of the seminaries on the west coast, and on the way back, in Oklahoma, there was a head-on collision with another car whose driver had drawn a blank, and the result was the serious injury of Monsignor Hillenbrand. The day I was there he was suffering intensely, and the nurse asked me to stay only five minutes. We made it half-an-hour and I tell about the visit to beg prayers from our readers.

We will always remember a magnificent conference that Monsignor gave us a few years ago in New York on the Mass. He came right after supper, and our meeting was held in the back yard. It was an unscheduled meeting. He started talking, standing on the step of the rear house looking into the courtyard which was sunk like a well between tenements five and six stories high all around, lighted by the brightness of the kitchens where radios were blaring, and children talking and mothers screaming, and husbands washing up at the kitchen sink, and gradually all this hubbub died down, and the radios were turned off, and people leaned out their windows to listen, and he talked on, and could be heard clearly in that curious little amphitheater. It was unutterably beautiful, hearing about our Lord Jesus Christ, about whom we should never tire of hearing, and His presence with us, now and today and forever. It brought about in us a great increase of love, and I began to understand how St. Bernard could preach the crusades (an obstacle to me as a pacifist) but it was because his love for the man Jesus Christ was so flaming that he wanted all to walk the land his feet had trod, and breathe the same air he breathed, and see the same sights, so that never again could they think of him as someone afar off, but one near to them, a man like to them in all things, save sin.

He gave us much that night, and he is giving us much now, lying there enduring.

God must have thought him strong enough to take it, and the rest of us are spared the suffering which we are not ready to bear. He tempers the wind to the shorn lamb.

Monsignor Hillenbrand must be strong enough, I say, but still in our gratitude to him we must pray that this ordeal be shortened. A year is a long time.