

## Poverty and Precarity

By Dorothy Day

*The Catholic Worker*, May 1952, 2, 6.

*Summary: An essay on the mystery and complexity of poverty, real and voluntary kinds. Enumerates the many forms of poverty, the irony of “poverty” in “rich” religious orders, and finally poverty as a means of helping the poor. (DDLW #633).*

Poverty is a very mysterious thing. We need to be always writing and thinking about it. It would seem strange that we must strive to be poor, to remain poor. “Just give me a chance” I can hear people say, “Just let me get my debts paid. Just let me get a few of the things I need and then I’ll begin to think of poverty and its pleasures. Meanwhile, I’ve had nothing but.”

This last month I have talked to a man who lives in a four room apartment with a wife and four children and relatives besides. He may have a regular job and enough food to go around, but he is poor in light and air and space. Down at the Peter Maurin farm each of the corners of the woman's dormitory are occupied, and when an extra visitor comes she must live in the middle of the room. During a visit to Georgia and South Carolina I have seen the shacks Negroes are living in, and the trailer camps around Augusta, Georgia, where the Hydrogen Bomb plant is under construction. They may have trailers but they are also poor, physically speaking, in the things that are necessary for a good life. Trailers cost money, so do cars, and food is high and no matter how high wages go, a sudden illness, and accumulation of doctor and hospital bills may mean a sudden plunge into destitution. Everybody talks about security and everybody shudders at the idea of poverty. And in fear and anguish people succumb, mentally and physically, until our hospitals, especially our mental hospitals, are crowded all over the country.

[illegible]

I am convinced that if we had an understanding and a love of poverty we would begin to be as free and joyous as St. Francis, who had a passion for Lady Poverty and lives on with us in joyous poverty through all the centuries since his death.

It is hard to write about poverty. We live in a slum neighborhood that is becoming ever more crowded with Puerto Ricans who are doubling up in unspeakably filthy, dark, crowded tenements on the lower east side and in Harlem, who have the lowest wages in the city, who do the hardest work, who are little and undernourished from generations of privation and exploitation by us. We used to have a hard time getting rid of all the small sized clothes which came in to us. Ladies who could eat steak and salads and keep their slim figures, contributed good clothes, small sized shoes, and I can remember Julia Porcelli saying once, "Why are the poor always fat. We never get enough clothes to fit them." The

It is hard to write about poverty when a visitor tells you of how he and his family all lived in a basement room and did sweat shop work at night to make ends meet, and how the landlord came in and belabored them for not paying his exorbitant rent.

[illegible][illegible]

And maybe no one can be told, maybe they will have to experience it. Or maybe it is a grace which they must pray for. We usually get what we pray for, and maybe we are afraid to pray for it. And yet I am convinced that it is the grace we most need in this age of crisis, at this time when expenditures reach into the billions to defend "our American way of life." Maybe it is this defense which will bring down upon us this poverty which we do not pray for.

[illegible]

2





This story was contained in the last column written by a great Catholic Layman, a worker for social justice, F.P. Kenkel, editor of the Central Verein in St. Louis, and always a friend of Peter Maurin, founder of The Catholic Worker.

Mr. Kenkel's last comment was, that the universal crisis in the world today was because of love of money. "The present Egyptian crisis is but one scene in the great oriental drama that has been unfolding for the past years," he wrote. "The Far East and the Near East" (and he might have said all Africa also), "together constitute a great sack from which blood is oozing. The flow will not stop as long as our interests in those people are dominated largely by financial and economic considerations."

"Voluntary poverty," Peter Maurin would say, "Is the answer. Through voluntary poverty others will be induced to help his brothers. We cannot see our brother in need without stripping ourselves. It is the only way we have of showing our love."