

On Pilgrimage - October 1963

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Summary: On a vacation and speaking trip in Italy, she admires the enthusiasm of young students and seminarians. Remarks on the life and conversion of Bill Congdon who acted as an interpreter for one of her talks. Visits Milan, Florence, Assisi, and takes a side trip to see Padre Pio. (DDLW #808).

When I was in Milan last May I spoke to the university students and Bill Congdon translated my talk. The meeting was held after a Sunday morning Mass at the Church of St. Anthony, Abbot, when the transepts, and the body of the church were packed with students who began their worship with Prime. It was thrilling to hear the old Latin hymns. The Mass was in the Ambrosian rite and the students sang the Gelineau psalms. A meeting later was held in the Cardinal Shuster School in the paved and roofed-over cloister. It had been made into a large meeting hall, and the imposing rostrum was presided over by a plaque of Ozanam who also started his apostolate as a student and continued it as a teacher and married man. Our own Bishop Wright of Pittsburgh spoke about Ozanam as a model for young men in a talk he gave before the Newman Clubs of the United States.

Talk To Milan Students

It was easy for me to speak, thanks to that plaque, because it kept me in mind of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, which all Catholic students understand and which are all-embracing in the intellectual or manual labors which are before them. Within the colonnades of this cloister there are great paintings from the lives of the saints, eight or ten feet high and over the plaque of Ozanam a Byzantine crucifix. I was surprised to see how pervasive was the Byzantine influence in the art of Italy, but I should not have been, considering the pre-Christian and post-Christian influence of the Greek civilization.

This meeting went on all morning and I was impressed again at the patience of the Italians, as I had been on the trains especially, which are always overcrowded (though they run on time). The students were intent and disciplined during this long meeting. Don Luigi Guisanni is the inspiration of this work among the youth of Milan. They are given the best in intellectual and spiritual leadership

and Don Guisanni is not afraid of taking their time, asking all, demanding search, research, more meetings, preparation for that moment, that opportunity, that choice which will affect their entire lives. All this emphasizes the need to intensify their prayer life. The meetings stimulate their minds, inflame their hearts. Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaketh. There cannot be too many words of this kind, words that crowd out frivolities. Read, study. “Wisdom is the most active thing.”

Bill Congdon

Meanwhile, as Don Guisanni spoke, Bill was writing out the translation.

Bill Congdon at previous meetings had spoken to them—he is fluent in Italian and they responded to his warmth, to what Jacques Maritain called his “strangely deep *douceur*, his defenseless candor, a vulnerability to any spiritual arrow, either the arrow of distress in this world and of that beauty which wounds the senses, or the arrows of the supramundane shores.”

The fact that I was introduced by him and interpreted by him made my welcome a warm one.

I have before me now as I write, **In My Dise Of Gold – Itinerary to Christ**, with “presentations” by Jacques Maritain, Father M. C. D’Arcy and Thomas Merton, published by Reynal and Company, New York.

It is a book of plates of Congdon’s paintings produced in color and in black and white, beginning with a black and white of Stanton Street, right off the Bowery where he lived for a time right after the war. During the war he had served with the American Field Services, as a few of our editors had also and for a time afterward he returned to Europe to do relief work. When he lived on Staton Street he wrote in his own account of his conversions which is printed in this remarkable book: “At that time I could no longer face the comfort, security, the thinking and living by tradition to which I was born and had been accustomed. I went to live in a one room, cold water flat for seventeen dollars a month just off the Bowery.”

Staton Street is just around the corner from the Catholic Worker. “I did not paint as I had studied, reproducing the object through an art of illusion; I painted the image of the object that rose up within me as emotion, that impelled me to paint, in its own time, not mine. This was my first conversion in 1948. The tenement facades began to bloom within me, to grow into an image that palpitated with multiple suffering within them; and within me no doubt as well. Blocks of identical tenements, identical miseries repeated street after street as I had seen them repeated in dressing stations in the war, in hospital corridors, and in the numbered huts of concentration camps. The Bowery, Staton Street, Mulberry Street, Spring Street.”

He went back to Italy which he loved, and went to Assisi for the first time in 1951. The Byzantine crucifix which spoke to St. Francis spoke to him too in another way. He began to read **The Little Flowers** of St. Francis. One of my favorite stories in **The Fioretti** is “This then is perfect joy.” For the eight years which preceded his conversion he was never separated from this book.

And then “a stranger” drew him from his solitude and introduced him to the **Pro-Civitate Christiana** “where he was given a greeting of such affection that he could not forget it.” Don Giovanni Rossi, founder of the association, and friend of Pope John XXIII, asked him in all simplicity if he was thinking of becoming a Catholic. He ran away at this point. “I travelled rapidly and constantly, seeking in the redemptive symbols of others substitutes for my own salvation.” He went to India, to Greece, to Egypt. To the island of Santorin in the Aegean sea and to the desert of the Sahara. Eight years later he returned to Assisi, to Don Giovanni, and in August 1959 he became a Catholic.

He took a small house in Assisi, 600 years old in an olive and fig orchard, and I visited him there. Sally Douglass and I were his guests at the **Pro Civitate Christiana**, and it was from there that we went to the students at Milan.

There is much more to William Congdon’s story than these short paragraphs. His book tells much more, besides giving reproductions of his paintings. His paintings are found in the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, the Duncan Phillips Gallery and the Betty Parsons Gallery.

In the Sept. 6 issue of Time Magazine I read of Monsignor Loris Capovilla’s speaking of Pope John at the **Pro Civitate Christiana**, in Assisi last month telling of the Pope’s meeting with Aleksei Adzhubel.

It was a good audience to whom to tell this incident. “You are a journalist,” the late beloved Pope told Krushchev’s son in law. “So you know the Bible and the progression of the work of creation. You know that the Lord took six days for the work of creation before coming to man. As you know the days of the Bible are not days but epochs, and the epochs of the Bible are very long. We are now at the first day. We are looking each other in the eyes and we see that there is light there. This is the first day, the day of **fiat lux**, let there be light. The light is in your eyes and mine. The Lord, if he wishes, will make known the road to follow. But it needs time, it needs time. For now we can only hope and pray.”

It was a good story to tell this eager and passionate band of young people, who have offered into the hands of their bishop their entire lives to make Jesus Christ known and loved in the contemporary world. The purpose in the words of the papal brief of John XXIII is to lead society back to the principles of the Gospel, and the Association was raised in perpetuity to the dignity of primary Congregation. All its members have degrees at a State University and have completed a regular course of theological studies, and have consecrated themselves totally to their apostolate, renouncing all family and professional ties. They strive to christianize the soul of our times with the Word, through

missions, courses and conferences; with the Press, publishing reviews and books; with Study, organizing a school of theology for lay people; with Art, offering competitions for musical composition theatre, cinema, painting, sculpture.

When I was there I visited their library of 30,000 volumes, a gallery of art with over 600 works of the most prominent living artists, an iconographical documentary with 40,000 photographs, a record library of 3,500 records and cinema library of films of Christian inspiration gathered from all people, all centuries.

The Little Sisters

One of the things that made me happiest in visiting Assisi, was that after I had walked in the footsteps of St. Francis and St. Clare, I met the Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld and walked a mile down a sunny narrow lane to visit their little house, with a sitting room, guest room, dining room on the first floor of the small stone house in a sunny valley, and upstairs a delightful small chapel, bare and simple. No one visiting the Little Brothers and Sisters can fail to be impressed by the poverty of their lives. Here they are truly walking in the steps of St. Francis, living today, in this day of luxury, the life of the poor, the life of contemplatives in the world, and earning their living, often at manual labor. They are cramped for space, (and that is one of the things I noticed about the Franciscan quarters) an hour's walk above the city, up the mountain to the Hermitage. We drove in order to be on time for Mass in the tiny oratory where the friars first said Mass when they lived in grottoes around. It is a narrow valley where they retired for solitude. The Little Sisters are on a sunny plain and walk up to San Damiano's to Mass each day.

I also had the joy of visiting a seminary in Florence where my talk was translated by George Lorimer who lives with his wife and large family (and many visitors) in a large villa outside the city. George had visited us at Chrystie Street before his marriage and was familiar enough with the work to make the job of interpreter easy for him. The students asked so many questions and he translated my answers so swiftly and so gayly that I did not notice the barriers of language at all. There is such youthful zeal among the seminarians that they are always easy to talk to, and these seemed much like our own. They live in a huge old former Trappist monastery and the rector told me that he had to have heat put in, which made me happy to hear.

Padre Pio

An ideal way to spend a vacation in Italy is to go as near as one can get to the Capuchin monastery of San Giovanni Rotondo near the shores of the Aegean in southern Italy. I had gone up and down the central valley from Naples to Rome and from Rome to Assisi, Florence, Milan, and back to Siena, over the

Appenines and into Rome again when I was meeting Patrick O'Reilly Persichetti and his beautiful mother, Frances, to go to see **Black Nativity**, the combination ballet and songfest by American Negroes, I ran into Mae Bellucci, our old friend since Mott street days. She also was going to see the ballet.

I had read and heard a lot about Padre Pio and when she told me she wished to go see him, I asked to go too, so a week later we took a train from the immense station in Rome, and crammed in as one always does in Roman second class trains, we set out for Foggia, via Naples. I don't remember whether we were standing in the aisles on this trip, or sitting on luggage in the vestibule where men, women and children were always stepping over people to get to the one and only toilet. The place was clean however, and the people unfailingly patient and courteous. The train goes towards Naples but bypasses it and proceeds on to Foggia where we arrived too late to get the bus for San Giovanni Rotondo which is the little town where the monastery is situated. The word rotondo does not refer to the girth of San Giovanni, I was glad to learn, but to a circular temple on a pagan spot where the ancients used to worship.

Perhaps not quite so far distant was this worship however, according to Gunnar Kumlein, Swedish journalist in Rome, with whom I had dinner one night not long before. He is correspondent also for the **Commonwealth**, and had visited us a number of times at Chrystie street, some years before. He told me he had spent vacations nearby and recorded on tape old legends which were a mixture of mythology and stories of the apostles. One was a story of one of the apostles who because he tilled his field on Sunday was condemned to be burned by Christ(!) and his heart remaining intact and preserved by a pious innkeeper with a young and beautiful daughter, was inadvertently consumed by the latter when it fell from its place of veneration, and the result was the pregnancy of the daughter. The child turned out to be a reincarnation of the condemned apostle himself!

The place is still pretty pagan, Gunnar Kumlein said, and so I was able to understand better the kind of furor which is going on right now about Padre Pio, due to the veneration he arouses. I had seen headlines and feature stories in the Italian papers a few days before we went to San Giovanni, giving interviews with people, one of them a prominent lawyer who claimed that the Vatican had taken over the money which pours into the monastery, to administer it themselves instead of allowing the authorities of the immense hospital which has been built and which is in the process of expansion to do it.

In order to control this money, much of what is handed or sent to Padre Pio, these excited people claimed that Padre Pio was being held prisoner by the Capuchins themselves. A few weeks before a demonstration had been staged in front of the monastery which started off the scandal.

I saw no evidence of all this disturbance while I was visiting there, nor did I hear any of it from the young Americans who go to San Giovanni on their vacations in order to help pilgrims and tourists on their excursions to get the full value of their trip. One such young man was Joe Peterson, a former mailman of the

Bronx, who gave me much help and information while I was there. He has been coming to San Giovanni ever since his service days in the second World War. The story got around then among all the soldiers that Padre Pio was a confessor who could read men's souls and could understand any language spoken to him.

Pilgrimages began then, from all parts of Italy and Europe to such an extent that people began to talk of him as another Cure of Ars. Certainly the emphasis in the case of Padre Pio is not on the works of charity which are being practiced, what with the generous donations of gratitude which have been showered upon him, but on the sacraments of penance and the Holy Eucharist. One can say that literally these pilgrimages are of penance.

Padre Pio's Mass is at five in the morning and there are crowds around the doors of the church long before. All confessionals are busy, not only Padre Pio's, and every day, all morning there are pilgrims in the church. At eleven in the morning Padre Pio comes into the church again for the rosary and the Angelus and gives his blessing to the waiting people, and in the early evening there is Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. For healing, there is the hospital, a great one and the only one on that bare east coast of Italy. But there have been a few miracles of healing spoken of. For spiritual healing, there is the confessional and the Mass. Joe Peterson and his little group reminded me very much of St. Catherine of Siena's Little Company in their devotion to Padre Pio and their helping him. Mary Pyle one might say is the center of this little company, and I enjoyed visiting her down the mountain-side in the big old house which was like a house of hospitality to all the guests who came. She told me that there had been many exaggerated stories about Padre Pio, but she still recommended the book, **The True Face Of Padre Pio**, which I must get hold and read, since it was written right on the spot, and which will bring back to me that atmosphere. (I continue to enjoy all my travelling in retrospect, with maps and travel books, going over the places I have visited.)

Mary Pyle was reading the office after Mass when I met her, and later in the afternoon I walked with her to her home and visited with her. She had been a companion of Maria Montessori for ten years and had travelled with her all over Europe, but when the two of them came to San Giovanni Rotondo, Mary Pyle felt she had found her particular vocation.

She was born and educated in Philadelphia and was taught in the Sacred Heart School college. A vocation, a call, is a strange thing; I thought of Mira, the English admiral's daughter who read Romain Rolland's book about Gandhi and proceeded to train herself for a life in India and after a year joined him and worked while he lived for India, helping build villages, introducing healthy strains in their cattle, developing the milk output of the cows by importing other breeds from England, and in general giving all her strength and talents to assisting Gandhi. And here in San Giovanni I found another example of what a vocation is. Mary Pyle heard the "call," and settled in what was then a tiny mountainside village on the eastern coast of Italy. Visit her too, those of you who go to visit Padre Pio!

Odds and Ends

When I had dinner with Gunnar Kumlein in Rome, he told me of the great effect Abbe Pierre of France, had had on the hearts and imaginations of his countrymen. "He has turned many from their comfortable bourgeois attitudes," he told me. He has built a movement there of young companions of Emmaus interested in helping those in poverty-stricken countries. One never thinks of poverty in relation to the Scandinavian countries.

Florence Again

It was a joy to spend the night with the Lorimer family and have an evening of good talk with them and their friends, one of whom was one of Anne Fremantle's sons who works with George. It was interesting to hear the latter telling of his travels in Africa where one of his jobs takes him.

We stayed in Florence for a night in a pension which had been the first Servite monastery, and went to Mass in the Servite church across the plaza.

Giorgia La Pira

We visited Mayor Giorgio La Pira, a saint in politics perhaps though that sounds paradoxical. Jean Goss, a French member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, who formerly assisted the worker priests in France, is a dear friend of La Pira and he took us to the little hospital where the mayor has a small room packed with books, a bed and a desk. There was just room for the four of us visitors, the interpreter, a young Italian pacifist by the name of Franco, Jean, Sally Douglass and I. The mayor entertained us from his bed where he was recovering from the flu. His two greatest problems were unemployment and housing, he said. It is indeed true, as I had heard, that he took the unused homes of the rich to make homes for the poor, and later I heard criticism of his direct action. "He should have asked the rich to give to the poor, and I am sure they would have been willing to," one critic said. I doubted it. One does not willingly give up the unused house, the surplus possession.

La Pira preached too, in poor churches. He is a third order Franciscan and tries to live voluntary poverty. By the side of his bed was his missal and a few other religious books. Other books piled in heaps on desk and even on the floor, were on international relations, economics, and so on. The mayor is a handsome Sicilian and looked very young lying there in bed, and he was young enough and well enough to enjoy his visitors, especially the red headed Sally, mother of two little ones, who was having a little vacation with me before the arrival of her third.

The mayor told us of his two pilgrimages to Russia. Many of the communists in Florence vote for him, devout Catholic though he is. His second pilgrimage was

truly a religious one, as he wished to spend some of Lent in one of the famous monasteries of Russia.

Siena Another Month

It is impossible to cover such a trip as I had on my own pilgrimage last spring, so I will leave until later my visit to Siena and our stay in the palace, now a pension, of two of our Catholic Worker readers. One cannot write of Siena without writing of Catherine who made it famous, so that will have to do for another time.

By the time this issue of the **CW** is with you, I shall be in England and certainly there will be much to write of from there.