

On Pilgrimage - October/November 1975

Dorothy Day

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Summary:

Fondly recalls Sister Aloysia who guided her preparation for Baptism, mentions tax resistance, and the enthusiasm of a convention of 16,000 charismatic Catholics whom she wishes would embrace peace activities, rejection of war, and income tax resistance. However, she admires their return to Scripture and communitarian spirit. Keyword: Pentecostal (DDLW #557).

Awakening one fall morning, at daybreak, I suddenly wanted to go to New York. I had been at the farm in Tivoli for some weeks. (It is a good place to be and there are visitors, letters to answer, writing to do, and peace and quiet to do it in.) Often when I am there I feel guilty to be escaping the noise and turmoil of the Lower East Side, and the sadly crowded house of hospitality. But it was not guilt which made me take off for New York. Tommy Hughes was driving to the city and impulsively I went along. I arrived in time for the five-thirty mass.

Saint Elizabeth Seton

There I had a sudden overwhelming realization that I had been brought down to the city to participate in the Mass at our Nativity Church on Second Avenue, in honor of the about-to-be-canonized saint, Elizabeth Ann Seton! The next morning, I went to the Mass for the Spanish-speaking, where men, women and children, even the man who passed the collection basket, sang joyously, participating most truly in the Holy Sacrifice. In the afternoon, I sat engrossed before a television set which made us all present in Rome, at St. Peter's where the great ceremony was taking place. When the day was over, I felt that I had truly been at the canonization of someone to whom I felt was close indeed.

There was a special reason for this. There was a humble little sister on Staten Island, retired after years of teaching second grade, who lived down the beach at St. Joseph's by the Sea (now a busy academy, but then a place for old, retired sisters). She used to slip over to see me when she could, to help me study a penny catechism, as it used to be called, to become a member of the Catholic Church. I had met her on the road between our bungalow and the Sister's home.

The year before she had introduced me to a young priest who baptized my infant daughter. So it was Sister Aloysia Mary (or Mary Aloysia?), one of the daughters of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, who kept after me with unflagging perseverance, bringing me all kinds of Catholic “propaganda,” from the Messenger of the Sacred Heart to the lives of the saints.

She was a dear, God rest her soul, and what would I have done without her! She brought me also my first glimpse of the liberty of the children of God, the children of the Church, (which Lenny Bruce said once was the only **THE** Church in America). Nothing daunted her, neither my Communist friends, nor my purely atheist friends, some of whom lived on the beach too, all close friends who observed the progress of my conversion with interest. They were not surprised – “Dorothy had always been too religious in her attitudes,” they said.

Dear Sisters of Charity, dear Sister Aloysia, how grateful I always will be to you! “Superstitious” as I am, I am sure that it was a nudge from the departed friend and counsellor, Sister Aloysia, that impelled me to go to New York that beautiful weekend of celebrations.

We have friends amongst these Sisters now, together with other Orders, who are helping us to get our new women’s house, Maryhouse, started on Third Street. Sisters of Charity have contributed beds, thirty of them. Sisters of Charity come down to help us in their spare time. Sister Margaret Dowling, head of the entire order, has contributed substantially to the repairs called for. God bless them all.

Nonviolence

I’d like to call special attention to a story in this issue of the paper – it is Peggy Scherer’s story, on the front page, of the Peacemaker victory. (It is the completed story of the news box which appeared on page three of the last issue.) It is a story of gentle persistence, the power of Truth – faith in Truth (remembering that Christ is our Truth). He is the Way, the Truth, the Life.

Chuck Matthei had told me the story of his interviews with the head of the Internal Revenue Service, the almost daily dialogue that went on between them, and the frank and “manly” admission, made finally by the IRS chief, that a mistake had been made, that the Peacemakers had Truth on their side. I felt a great sense of joy and thanksgiving, a sense of hope too, that our officials in Washington D.C. **could** be approached in this way – with dignity and perseverance, with courtesy, with the recognition that we are all, each one of us, whether government official or radical (one who gets to the **roots** of things), children of God. We do believe that we are all brothers and sisters. We believe, too, that we can only show our love for God by our love for our brothers and sisters. So we share our joy with you, our readers, and hope we all have a sense of renewed strength and energy to continue our opposition to all violence, to all wars.

We point out that one way not to have to pay income tax, so much of which goes to the military, into stockpiling, into sales of weapons to other countries, is to seek more ways of living a life of voluntary poverty, to follow our Lord Jesus and his loveable servant St. Francis.

Pentecostal Meeting

Last month, I drove to Atlantic City with Alice and Joan from the Catholic Worker farm at Tivoli, to attend the regional meeting of the Charismatics, as everybody now terms the Pentecostal movement. I love the word Pentecost because Pentecost is my favorite feast in the Church. I was confirmed on that day with a large group of adults and felt it to be the happiest moment in my life. Even more than on the day of my conditional baptism into the Catholic Church I felt **sure**, settled, and convinced in the Way which stretched ahead of me. That was a few years before I met Peter Maurin, the founder of the CW movement. My confirmation prepared me for that meeting.

The meeting was an amazing coming together of 16,500 people at Atlantic City. Always I had distrusted crowds, mass enthusiasm. Peter Maurin once gave us a book to read called **The Devil's Share**, by de Rougement which told of mass movements and people's desire to be swayed, influenced, "beside themselves," swept by a common joy as in a football game or a baseball game. Mobs, lynching mobs, too, feel this singleness of purpose. Something takes possession of them at such times, de Rougement points out. Fr. Ronald Knox wrote a book called **Enthusiasm** years ago, about mass movements in the church, and many Catholics thought the Catholic Worker movement was tarred with that brush, it might be said.

I had been to two charismatic meetings and had found only a profound joy and sense of prayer, and a deep concern for our brothers and sisters. One meeting was at Ann Arbor at the Newman club of the University of Michigan, and the communal prayer and the beauty of the singing impressed me and Lou Murphy of the Detroit House of Hospitality. The other meeting was in a small Mexican settlement situated on top of a mountainous dump, across the river from El Paso, Texas. A group of us drove across the border one Saturday morning. (I was travelling home to New York by bus, with stop overs, after my ten days in a California prison camp during the United Farm Workers struggle against an injunction against picketing.)

There I encountered Mexicans across our border in a most miserable condition of destitution, living in rags on these dumps managed by a contractor, who paid the Mexicans to scavenge for old iron, metals, bottles and other trash. The average family, with all members working, could earn barely enough to feed themselves. It was on the top of this hill of junk that a small, cement block shed with no windows, only open spaces, was their little chapel. Benches were built from bits of lumber. A confessional had been set up, perhaps constructed from

the wreck of an old car, and there men and women went to confession, while those left in the chapel sang their joyous hymns and awaited the Mass.

After the Eucharist there was a sharing of clothes brought by the group from El Paso, and a small grocery cooperative was set up where hundred-pound sacks of beans and rice made up the produce. It was a long and beautiful morning. It was not just social work. It was a sharing, a visit, a day of festival. Children were often taken to picnics and Passion Plays and festivals, I heard. There was a close contact between these two disparate groups. Of Course medical needs were cared for too. Much work was being done by this dedicated group of young people. But it was also an example of their sense of the **primacy of the spiritual**. The El Paso group was giving the best they had and they paid their Mexican brothers and sisters the compliment of recognizing that they too rejoiced in the primacy of the spiritual.

I spoke of these experiences to about a thousand hearers in “my workshop” at Atlantic City, and it was a most responsive audience. Already we have received a generous supply of blankets for our new house and for Tivoli. I could tell of other works these groups have done, but there is no space here. I only wish that the cause of peace, the rejection of war and service in the armed forces, and refusal to pay income tax could be part of their way of life. Jesus told us to love our enemies and St. Francis’ followers made a rejection of feudal service to the war lords of the time part of their religious commitment.

In the early days of St. Francis, his following the teachings of Christ did indeed mean voluntary poverty and rejection of war. However there is, as we all know, an individual, a personal struggle going on today among priests and nuns who are seeking “lifestyles” closer to the poor. These struggles also are found in the charismatic movement.

There were four good sermons, down to earth and solid in doctrine, preached by Fr. Francis McNutt, O. P., which were listened to with most impressive attention by those 16,500 people. That same group sang the Alleluias with a beauty and a might joy which almost rocked the dingy, vast convention hall. It was a weekend which was a retreat for me and those who were with me, and I was reminded often of Father John Hugo of Pittsburgh, whose retreats aroused the same joy in our hearts years ago.

Catholic Worker Retreats

Those were retreats a week long and in silence, in the beautiful surroundings of Oakwood, Pa., and Catholic Workers came from all over the country to attend them. Fr. Hugo wrote also, for the pages of the **Catholic Worker**, those magnificent articles **The Crime of Conscription**, and **Catholics Can be Conscientious Objectors**, and **Weapons of The Spirit**. He saw the importance of “alternative life styles” while we were being labeled “romantic agrarians” by opponents in Washington at the Catholic University.

Father Hugo I would certainly term an intellectual and he appealed to and also affronted higher-ups in Catholic intellectual circles, so he suffered, bright sun in our lives that he was, an eclipse.

But one final point in his retreat always was, “unless the grain of wheat fall into the ground and die it remains alone. But if it dies it bears much fruit.” Another was “Christ was obedient unto death.”

And to me this “charismatic movement” (I prefer the term “Pentecostal”) is the fruit, the result of such teachings as that of Fr. J. Hugo, the priest who has influenced my thinking, my understanding of the spiritual life more than any other.

I did not intend to write this encomium, but it has just poured forth from my pen as I sit here at Maryfarm, Tivoli, back home from this joyful spiritual weekend. To praise God is to rejoice. Those final Psalms in the Bible have that same gladness and indicate the singing of a multitude.

The Pentecostal movement is also a return to scripture (everyone had the New Testament and Psalms with them). It is Personalism and Communitarianism too. Communities have been set up all over the country. No longer will families fight a solitary struggle to survive.

How far the Pentecostals with their family communities follow the teaching of the Popes on birth control, in these days of unemployment, lack of housing etc., it is hard to say. But there is, together with the hard teachings of the Church, an emphasis on faith and prayer, and the seventy-times-seven teachings of Jesus about forgiveness which to me marks the power of the Confessional.

(But where **is** the Confessional these days? We want a place where we can hide our heads as we confess our mean and paltry sins.)

Back at St. Joseph's

We are going through a busy time at the CW – Always the Line, what Johannah Hughes, who grew up with us, used to call the “bread-lions”, when she was a little girl.

The Line means trips to Hunts Point Market for vegetables reach week. It means the converted United Parcel truck coming down from Tivoli farm with more vegetables. It means cleaning vegetables at night and early morning rising to make a soup filled also with protein – lentils, split peas or beans. (navy beans rose from 20 to 41 dollars a hundred pounds this last week.) It means the whole staff taking turns cleaning, mopping daily at St. Joseph's house and now scraping plaster and old wax off the linoleum or tiles at Maryhouse and scrubbing there, (on their knees) room by room. Always visitors, actually from all over the world. I have talked with visitors from Africa, South America, Australia, England. Long talks mean an exchange of knowledge of all the great, and thank God, also the

good changes which are taking place in this time of travail. It is a busy time for me because I have two articles to write, – one for Helene Iswolsky's **Third Hour** and one for **America**. Also two trips ahead – one to Alderson, West Va. with Sister Margaret Traxler for a meeting with the women prisoners at the Federal prison there, and on to Minnesota to visit friends and to rest. Those friends have paid for my fare three times by now, so sooner or later I must go. I will love being there!

By these last paragraphs our readers will know I am in good health (the Pentecostals believe in Healings, you know) and they will also excuse me for being remiss about answering mail. Please forgive us our omissions and pray for us.