

On Pilgrimage - October/November 1974

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Announces the births of two great-grandchildren, describes a visit to Tamar's farm in Vermont, and the harvesting of apples and vegetables. Praises Dick Bliss' Green Hill School, and the character of "useful" versus "useless" work, quoting Dostoevsky. (DDLW #545).

This column is being written in a spirit of great thanksgiving, because this month I have had the news of the birth of two great-grandchildren, Justin and Forest, born respectively to Becky and John Houghton and Mary and Jim Hanna within the last two weeks. Both families are living in Perkinsville, Vermont, the former on a two-acre plot in a house built by John, and the latter in a small rented cottage two miles down the road, surrounded on three sides by woods, which might have suggested the name Forest to them. (St. Sergius lived in a forest in Russia in a hermitage. Helene Iswolsky gave me a postal picture of him feeding the bears.)

I had gone for a week's visit to my daughter hoping I would be there for the births. I had waited there before in fear and trembling for a grandson to return from Vietnam, and I had wanted to wait there again for the great event. But babies have a way of taking their time, and neither was born while I was there. Becky was impatient, and so was her three-year-old Lara. We sat one day watching Maggie, who is expecting in January, drive the tractor down to the barn, pulling after it a trailer filled with bagged potatoes just harvested from the hilly field in back of the house. "Why can't I ride behind that tractor too, with the potatoes?" Becky wanted to know.

Most days I was in Vermont, Bill and Maggie, John and Martha left early for the nearby apple orchard to pick all day. Martha, seventeen, boasted that she had picked 75 bushels the day before. Some days, she confessed, she only picked 45. It was her first year of apple picking. She had written me during the summer, "Our gardens are doing very well and keeping under control, as we put a lot of work into weeding, hoeing, etc. The small goat barn is almost completed. I was reading **The Green Revolution**, and there was an article on goats this time. It sounds so great to have a good, self-supporting homestead; it is my dream. Good to have peace and order, hard work also. The book you sent me by Goethe I started and enjoy very much. The man writes just the way I like, observing Nature and talking about the things I'm interested in. What a country, Italy. He writes so good it makes you want to go there immediately. Fruits and vegetables everywhere, lovely evenings when people are out enjoying everyone, shops that are open half into the street with their craftsmen working right there. And the history and art of old, what beautiful studies could be made. This is the first work of Goethe that I've read, it's excellent and just to my taste. Not much culture or art where I live, but plenty of natural beauty."

There are about twelve large rooms in the Hennessy house, on 20 acres of land. The house is most shabbily furnished, what with nine children growing up there and four neighbor friends always in and out, and all of them more ready always to spin and weave, knit and sew, paint or draw or read than to tidy up or wash dishes. This latter work always takes place in a whirlwind rush while dinner is being prepared.

I speak of the untidiness of the house, but Tamar has flowers growing in every window in winter, and in the gardens in summer (even if the ducks, and babies, too, make havoc of them). The room I sleep in when there is filled with plants (and also a gun rack with four rifles!). I was much startled early one morning while I read the psalms most comfortably in bed (the room was very cold) to see Martha rush in and grab a gun from the rack! Prayers forgotten, I rushed after her, wondering what had overtaken the vegetarian-pacifist Martha. No shooting occurred, but she had intended to shoot **over** a couple of stray dogs which were prowling near the barn where there were triplet baby goats. A pack of roaming dogs had killed a flock of goats years before Martha was born at the Easton farm. Martha and Katy (who has to leave for school at seven) care for the chickens, goats and two pigs, and love their work.

Tivoli, The Generous Earth

We have never raised so much food as we have this year. I am writing now at Tivoli. Today at lunch we had squash, turnips and some canned meat which somebody had sent in, enough to feed the meat eaters among us (half the population is vegetarian). Enough vegetables were raised to be sent pretty regularly to First Street for the soup line. But to get back to Tamar's, the barn is piled with hay and the cellar is filled with sacks of onions, cabbages, and twenty one-hundred-pound sacks of potatoes, much winter squash, pumpkins, and brussel sprouts. Canned goods, tomatoes, tomato juice and pasta fill the shelves. I spent evenings shelling beans which had been dried over the wood fires on screens. (They are doing the same thing at Tivoli.) I had a list that Maggie and Bill gave me of all the food they had raised, and when it comes down to **teas**, an infinite variety of herb teas. I have been dosed with yarrow, mint, sage, catnip, borage. The bountiful garden that produced all this crop was only 3/4 of an acre. The woodshed was half-filled with wood chopped for the upstairs and downstairs stoves, but that work goes on when the days of harvest at home and in the orchards is finished.

Schools

Katy does not like the large public high school in the big tool town of Springfield which she must start out for each morning at seven, on the bus. In protest, she took to the woods for two days and two nights to avoid going. I have heard such complaints of the high schools that I was not too much surprised at this

adventure. She had taken a book on “Survival” with her, she said. When she came back, she had thought it all out and decided to go to the high school for her ninth grade. But she would like very much to go to such a school as the Meeting School in New Hampshire.

Hilaire Hennessy is going to Richard Bliss’ excellent Green Hill School at Andover, Vermont, and loves it. Tamar and I drove over to have lunch there one sunny day, and it was delightful to hear the singing of grace before the meal. All the school is a choral group, singing their **Jubilate Deo** so perfectly. They went on to practice another song of praise and thanksgiving.

The students not only raise the food but do the cooking. They build their bunkhouses and beds and care for the animals. The set up reminded me of Ade Bethune’s studio and group of apprentices of many years ago, who stayed with her a year, my daughter among them. Julia Porcelli Moran, the Finnegan sisters of the Rochester group (now married and living in Minnesota), and Dorothy Gauchat (now running Our Lady of the Wayside, that beautiful little home for damaged, disabled and crippled children in Avon, Ohio) all attended the school. (I beg our readers’ prayers for Julia Moran and Bill Gauchat, both suffering grievously of cancer of the spine. Friends of both can write to Julia at Phelps Memorial Hospital in North Tarrytown, New York and to Bill at Avon, Ohio. They are two of the best Catholic Workers we ever had, with a keen sense of the primacy of the spiritual. To me they are both Christ figures in our tragic world, doing the hardest work, offering their pain for suffering humanity. They “have been accounted worthy to suffer,” as the phrase is used in the book of Acts. Julia knows the school problems today because she also has taught not only her own children but also the children who came to the Catholic Worker so many years ago, the children of the very poor, on Fifteenth Street in ’33 and ’34, and on the Easton and Newburgh farms later.)

I have never seen more beautiful order than that of Dick Bliss’ school where Hilaire is. The woods around it are cleared of underbrush, the fields are tidy, the houses are beautiful, and there is a great air of sunny cheerfulness. Academic work in the morning and field work in the afternoon, and two tours each year, one on sea off the Maine coast to catch fish for their winter supply, and one to the South. Dick Bliss is interested in Eric Gill’s ideas and is a friend of Graham Carey who brought our attention to the ideas of Gill years ago.

The Character of Work

I’d like to write a little more of “Work,” that important aspect of man’s life. To be earning one’s living, to be raising one’s food, building one’s shelter, is a satisfaction, and in my own family, John’s inventiveness, his tool making varied by apple picking, Eric’s electrical work, Jim’s snow ploughing in winter and road mending in summer, and the girls with their gardens, herb gathering, sewing and weaving (Maggie wove 25 yards of cotton material for diapers for her expected one in January), have a good life of work.

Our Maggie, when she was saving money towards settling in West Virginia, had a job in a neighboring village from eleven at night until seven in the morning, on an assembly line where a few motions glued a Timex watch box together, which box is discarded of course as soon as the watch is taken out. Small factory work in the country would not be so bad if something useful were being turned out. But what a torture to do such useless work! I am reminded of the words of Dostoevsky, in **The House of the Dead** (his Siberian prison experience):

“The idea has occurred to me that if one wanted to crush, to annihilate a man utterly, to inflict on him the most terrible of punishments so that the most ferocious murderer would shudder at it and dread it beforehand, one need only give him work of absolutely, completely useless and irrational character. Though the hard labor now enforced is uninteresting and wearisome for the prisoner, yet in itself as work it is rational; the convict makes bricks, digs, does plastering, building; there is sense and meaning in such work. The convict worker sometimes grows keen over it, tries to work more skillfully, faster, better. But if he had to pour water from one vessel into another and back, over and over again, to pound sand, to move a heap of earth from one place to another and back again—I believe the convict would hang himself in a few days or would commit a thousand crimes, preferring rather to die than to endure such humiliation, shame and torture. Of course such punishment would become a torture, a form of vengeance, and would be senseless, as it would achieve no rational object. But such torture, senselessness, humiliation and shame is an inevitable element in all forced labor; penal labor is incomparably more painful than any free labor—just because it is forced.”

These words have always haunted me, and we quoted them in the **Catholic Worker** during the depression, years ago. Douglas Steere quoted them in his book on **Work and Contemplation**. And it has occurred to me recently that much of the reason for the violence—the muggings, rapes and murders—of the present day is man’s revolt against the kind of education he received. A thesis could be written on the subject.

Ember Days

While I was visiting my daughter and her children, she brought me one of the girl’s old missals (with a morning cup of coffee) when she saw by my light that I was awake. “Be not sad, for the joy of the Lord is our strength,” the second lesson reads. The first lesson, from the prophet Amos, is very fitting to read up there in Vermont where the young people are harvesting the great abundance of fruits and vegetables: “The mountains shall drop sweetness and every field shall be tilled. . . My people shall plant vineyards and drink the wine of them and shall make gardens and eat the fruit of them. And I will plant them in their own land.”