

On Pilgrimage - July/August 1973

Dorothy Day

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Summary: "I must write about prayer because it is as necessary to life as breathing." Enumerates several forms of prayer: reading as prayer, the psalms, scriptural prayers of faith, hope and charity, and praying for and to those who have died. (DDLW #532).

There are so many things I want to write about that the eight pages of the **CW** could not contain them, so I keep notebooks and write down my morning meditations which come to me, as distractions perhaps, during the morning hour of prayer.

This morning it is cool after a week of grueling heat and humidity. I have been in the city all summer, with usually a weekend on Staten Island where there is still country and beach to refresh one.

My rear window looks out over a factory roof which occupies what used to be two long back yards between Second and First Streets. It is a black tarpapered roof, but miracle of miracles, about ten feet of green grass, a foot high, has sprung up in some earth which somehow lodged in the crack between this roof and the 12-story house which shuts off the western sky. There is an ailanthus tree, a few years old, in our ten-foot back yard, and another older one in another minuscule yard in the rear of a Second St. house. The trees stay green all summer, but the grass flourishes a few weeks, then turns yellow and dies. There is no nourishment in the sparse dust and dirt between brick and cement.

There are three or four cats who stalk the few pigeons who clean up the crumbs left from the food Paul puts out for them. He climbs a ladder to the roof to do so. This is my glimpse of wildlife in the city.

St. Benedict's Day

I want to write about one day especially, the feast of St. Benedict, July 11. I have to keep going back to my old St. Andrew's daily missal, after using the revised missalette provided by our parish. I am tempted to complain at the many changes taking place in the Church's daily routine, but, after all, one can keep one's old missal as an encyclopedia, and look up those short, precious

accounts of the saints and the history of their times which the old St. Andrew's missal contained. After all, the poor could not afford missals. Peter Maurin told us to study the past, in order to live in the present so as to make the future different. This type of reading is a form of prayer. The Little St. Therese used to read the Scriptures constantly (in those days she was permitted to read only part of the Old Testament, so we Catholics can rejoice in the freedom we have now, even though we recognize that freedom is dangerous, imposing terrible responsibilities on us to try to live as we believe and profess). Often this reading the Scriptures is like plodding through a desert, we get so little from it. And then chapters, verses, shine out with a great light and our way is made clear for us.

Yes, reading is prayer—it is searching for light on the terrible problems of the day, at home and abroad, personal problems and national problems, that bring us suffering of soul and mind and body.

And relief **always** comes. A way is always opened, “Seek and you shall find.”

There is nothing too small to pray about. “Oh God come to my assistance; O Lord make haste to help me.” Sometimes one is so tired, so dull, so hopeless, that it is a great effort of the will to remember to pray even so short a prayer. “Oh Lord hear my prayer. Let my cry come unto Thee.” I remember seeing a black man on a train in Oregon reading from a pamphlet edition of the Psalms which he took out of his pocket. My heart warmed to him as to a blood brother.

I must write about prayer because it is as necessary to life as breathing. It is food and drink. And I must write about it because we here at the Catholic Worker are surrounded by the lame, the halt and the blind, the utterly destitute, and it is a seemingly hopeless situation. And we can do so little. Yet young people, who come to us to give us a few months or years of their lives, learn here what it is to love, to hope, to rejoice.

And now we have a great call to rejoice.

On the feast of St. Benedict, whose motto was *Ora et Labora*, Pray and Work, we received such an answer to our prayers, that renewed strength has poured into us all. And such gratitude! Which is a grace, as the root of the word reveals.

Not only have we found a house for the destitute women Anne Marie Fraser and I have been writing about, but we have received assurances from the sons of St. Benedict, at a not-too-distant monastery, that they will sell some of their unused property and provide the money to pay for it! I have been “calling on the Name of the Lord” in praise and joy and love ever since.

There are always delays, of course. The house we hope will be ours will have to go through extensive repairs to make it suitable. St. Joseph's House on First Street taught us that eight years ago. There is little chance of a “certificate of occupancy” from the city building department until next year. Meanwhile, we can continue our “little way” and do what we can. There is always food to

comfort soul and body, and clothes, and the few beds we can provide now for these most neglected poor. God bless these monks.

Another Gift

But there was still another gift—another “happening” on St. Benedict’s day—in the way of a visit from two cloistered nuns of a famous order. One old, one young (and the older looked stronger physically than the younger). They are looking for a little apartment on the lower East Side, in St. Bridget’s parish near us, where they can live as cloistered nuns in silence and prayer and poverty. They have been inspired by the work of the Little Sisters of Jesus, who, with the Little Brothers, are followers of Charles de Foucauld, the hermit of the Sahara. There are two Little Sisters in New York now, living in a Puerto Rican slum in uptown Manhattan, and two Little Brothers a few blocks from us, just off the Bowery.

This little Cloister will, God willing, be nearby, and soon, I hope.

When I went to 5:30 Mass that day, my heart full of gratitude to the Holy Spirit, I told a young Jesuit scholastic about the nuns and begged his help in finding a little apartment for them.

“It is a dangerous neighborhood” he said gravely. Yes, it is true. But thank God, these women continue to wear their habits as the Little Sisters of Jesus do, as Mother Teresa’s Sisters do. To me, a “habit” is a sacramental, “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace,” a prayer in itself, a reminder of prayer.

Prayer

There has been a constant mention of prayer in this column this month because prayer is an **exercise**, sometimes dull, sometimes boring, but it brings health to the soul, which needs exercise just as the body does.

May I suggest these three acts of faith, hope and charity, quotations from Scripture which should strengthen us? “Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief.” “In Thee have I hoped, let me never be confounded.” " Dear Lord, take away my heart of stone and give a heart of flesh," so I may learn to love, to grow in love.

I pray not only for those who have died, but **to** them also. In our November issue, I hope to write about our own dear departed, and about the lowliest and the highest among them. Right now, I am praying to Jacques and Raissa Maritain, whose obituaries I will write belatedly, though Stanley has already written one. I will pray to them to watch over this new venture of a cloister in the East Village, as our Bowery district is called. Since these nuns were inspired by Charles de Foucauld and his Little Sisters and Brothers, and since Jacques

himself had joined their company some time before he died, they should be powerful friends in Heaven.