

On Pilgrimage - December 1973

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Summary: Describes a pilgrimage to England and Ireland to visit the Simon Communities on their ten-year anniversary of serving the destitute. Discusses the Student Christian Movement in England. Attends a fundraiser, which leaves her uncomfortable with the wealth of the celebration's sponsors. Visits the shelter housed in the Crypt of the Cathedral in Liverpool. (DDLW #536).

Crowthorne, Berkshire, England

When I travel, it is always with mixed motives, and my trip to England came about like this.

Back in N.Y. about the end of September, the CW was having a farewell party, arranged by Tom Cornell, for Mike Cullen, Nettie and the children. Everyone loves this CW family, and so it was a good party – held in our Nativity Parish hall. The U.S. government naturally pays the fare of those whom they are deporting. Mike, not a citizen, had served a prison sentence for draft-card-burning in Milwaukee, the only head of a CW house who participated in these widespread actions. (We, as a group, didn't want to "do unto others what we didn't want them to do to us," concluding words of the Sermon on the Mount).

But we all at the CW love Mike and his family, and hated to lose him to Ireland. Mike had won all hearts by his joyful spirit and his beautiful singing, though I understood he did plenty of keening, too, in jail. There was such love in his heart for Nettie and family – and never a hate for the world or his enemy. He approached God with joy as the Hasidic masters, and St. Francis did. There were no hostilities in him. The fare for the family was raised by all their friends, and it was a grand party. But I could not go because Professor Wm. Miller, who wrote "**A Harsh and Dreadful Love** (Liveright), chose this particular day to come to N.Y. and go over Peter Maurin's papers with me. They were already gathered together and arranged by Ed Turner, Marge Hughes' son-in-law, a few years ago.

We were only waiting for the trained historian (Ed was unwilling to undertake it), and Bill Miller was **it**. So the afternoon of Mike Cullen's party was spent with

Dr. Miller (and with Peter Maurin!). It was a joy to see Dr. Miller growing more and more interested in the work ahead. So I put aside the party for Mike, who had restarted CW activities in Milwaukee this last decade at Casa Maria. There had been great activities in the 30's and 40's, but the old guard was married off and raising communities of their own.

At the airport next day, I kissed Nettie goodbye (she is expecting again) and said, "See you soon, I hope." And the next day at First St., St. Joseph's House, I got a call from London to come over Nov. 7th to celebrate a tenth anniversary of the Simon Community, which runs hostels for the homeless, and whose members live in voluntary poverty and manual labor. I had visited one such hostel years before, and found them living in much harder conditions than any of the CW people have had to endure. So I accepted the invitation, tentatively at first, until Mother Teresa, whom Eileen Egan and I put on a plane a week later, told me decidedly to go.

So today, sitting in front of a gas radiator with a blanket over my knees, I am writing on On Pilgrimage, sketchy as usual, suggestive, instead of thorough, discursive rather than complete. Life is like that. It's a stew of an article with a lot of things touched on and thrown together. (There's so much to talk about and think about in this short life.) Speaking of my mixed motives again, I wanted to come to England and Ireland to see Mike and Nettie, to pay homage to the Simon Communities (named for the Cyrenian, pressed into service of the Lord by the military, who helped carry Jesus' Cross), to visit the various communities if possible, and to see my only sister's only daughter, whose father, Franklin Spier, had died last month. (See Oct.-Nov. issue of **CW**.)

Martin of Tours Hospice

Jane Sammon, who has worked with the CW this last year, accompanied me on my flight, a 22 to 45-day excursion rate. We were met at the airport by officers of the Simon Trust and driven to Islington where there was a large hostel, an abandoned church, and three houses adjoining, with a garden in the center. Here the place is more a St. Vincent de Paul shelter with over 70 residents, many of whom are from Simon houses which are like half-way houses. There were plenty of blankets, but the bedrooms were **cold**. Winter had set in. The kitchen and basement of the church were warm and always fully occupied. In their large living room, television was enjoyed, breakfast and dinners were served. Men who worked took a sandwich off to the job. It was orderly and friendly, and as informal as the CW in N.Y.

Those first few days of my stay in London were hectic – every hour seemed to be crammed with contacts, interviews with the B.B.C., the **Guardian** (formerly the **Manchester Guardian**), **Catholic Herald**, **The Universe**, and last and best with Viv Broughton, Student Christian Movement. The S.C.M. Press, Ltd., 56 Bloomsbury St., London has recently published **Seeds of Liberation** –

Spiritual Dimensions to Political Struggle, edited by Alistair Kee. The Preface is by Viv Broughton, telling of what he calls an extraordinary four-day meeting at Huddersfield of 350 people, mostly young, but ranging from “4 mos. To 60 yrs.”

The articles in this pamphlet – excellent ones by Fr. Dan Berrigan who was quoted and commented on – are most stimulating, and it must have been an inspired meeting of all the young radical groups in the British Isles. They would be the ones we would most relate to, I’m sure.

A leading article in **The Movement** (10th issue) by Tom McGrath, president of the Student Christian Movement, about another conference held in Libya (rather like Abie Nathan’s attempt to reach Israelis and Arabs thru broadcasting from his Peace ship), reflects the way I feel about my own presence at the Simon Trust’s 10th Anniversary celebration.

It has been like an Alice in Wonderland encounter, and has done much for me in the “clarification of thought,” Peter Maurin’s favorite phrase.

So my visit has been a puzzle and a mish-mash in many ways. On one day I was overworked with interviews, on another signed up for visits and conferences to which I could not go if I wished to be with **my** family, which Sue, my niece, represents to me over here. I quoted to them: “St. Paul says, he who neglects his family is anathema,” and this visit of mine, after the three-day conference, was my reason for coming. The conference was actually from Friday night till Sunday noon. It was at a new, very fancy hotel, on the edge of one of the many forest remnants around London. It was expensive. There was a dinner dance and cocktail party. (The Simon **workers** had to find their own bed and board.) In actuality, it was to arouse the conscience of the affluent, to reassure them that their generosity would not be misplaced, and to publicize this most needed movement (a movement which was to reach the poorest, usually termed the undesirables).

Fund raising would never do the job of keeping “Simon” going. Already it was divided into those who called themselves Cyrenians, not Simons.

I met Austin Williams, who seems to be connected with many goodly enterprises, including his St. Vincent de Paul hostel in Islington, London, where we stayed, and Trustee with John Jennings and Anton Wallich-Clifford and his wife, of the Simon Community Trust (not the kind of Trust that the Land Trusts are trying to set up in the States). I enjoyed my meeting with Mary Therese, Anton’s wife.

The very masthead of their anniversary stationary, filled with names of royalties, bishops and other clergy was frightening to me. I did not realize that they were merely **sponsors** for the celebration and a recognition of 10 years of hard work. I muddled my way through, as they say the English do, but I’m afraid I did not help them much, and confused them.

Sometimes I think a dollar from a thousand common people is better than 1,000 from one because it shows we have reached 1,000 of our brothers. Cathedrals in

the States are said to be built by the pennies of Irish working girls, maid-servants, etc. What better proof of our faith, hope, and trust and love of God than to leave it to Him to make right our mistakes and failures.

Liverpool

Forty years or more ago, Peter Maurin wrote about hospitality, about how the obligation to practice it was recognized by the bishops and abbots, and how the Bishop of Liverpool was going to open up a hospice for the homeless when he built his new Cathedral. But now the Cathedral had been built, and the former Bishop had died, and forty years or more have passed, but no hospice had been built.

Now I am in Liverpool for this tenth anniversary of the Simon communities (lay people, mostly non-Catholic). The first thing the Simon people greeted me with was, "You must see the shelter there is in the crypt of the Cathedral." A hospice in the crypt of the immense Cathedral had been opened a month before. I visited it last night and thought, "Peter should celebrate this in Heaven."

I am staying at a Simon House in Liverpool, sleeping in a dormitory for women with four very comfortable beds, with plenty of covers, and an electric radiator. Houses here are strictly forced to comply with health and building codes, which say little about heating, so the house itself is not heated, but only a room or two. But it is a beautiful, old mansion of a house, with a spiral stairwell reaching three stories up, brilliantly lit on the night I arrived from London. The house is as sound as our old mansion at Tivoli. The small fireplace is in use in the kitchen, and always there are folk huddled around it. There is a long yard in the back, and vegetables can be grown in the heart of the city.

The St. Vincent de Paul house has an even larger garden still, full of greens, carrots, beets, and other vegetables. There is a young couple with a boy of four running the house there, and, old mansion that is also was, like Petrus House on Shaw Street where I am staying, it has been remodeled so that one large room can be cut up into three. A wing has been added so that steady residents can have private rooms. Crypt, St. Vincent de Paul, both are supported by the diocese, but the Simon Trust supports and is a control agency which helps all the other Simon hospices which are run by young people and attract many co-workers. In other words, they consider themselves autonomous, and yet connected with the Simon trust with its impressive list of sponsors.

But certainly it is the youth and enthusiasm of the young people that keep this hospitality, this care for the poor, alive and spreading in what is called the United Kingdom, in spite of conflict in Belfast, controversies in Wales and Scotland, always frankly expressed in press and on the air. Somehow one feels that Simon, or Cyrenian, or Petrus (whatever they call themselves), is direct action, non-violent action by a group of adventurous people, students and teachers.

In famous Rochdale, in another Petrus house, youth also presides, and the old and crippled, homeless and destitute are served. The place delights me because it was, at one time, the police station of the town, and it is a labyrinth of rooms.

Christ the King

This morning I went to Mass at the beautiful Cathedral which is on high ground so it is above the city, rather like the San Francisco Cathedral. But here, as I wrote, they have a crypt where homeless men are fed and have a good warm bed and bath.

The Archbishop presided. There was a great choir and an organ that at times had a great triumphal sound of trumpets and clarinets. And at the end the great and solemn **Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat**. There were hymns, a **Credo** and **Pater Noster** in Gregorian and Latin, sung by the entire congregation, the **Credo** antiphonally. As the congregation was leaving, the organ voluntary was a Toccata and Fugue in D minor (J.S. Bach). A glorious celebration of Christ the King.

At a tearoom downstairs, Archbishop and clergy join any of the congregation in refreshments. There is also a very good book shop and a Catholic Center across a little Square. We talked with the bishop about the Simon communities and praised the Crypt hostel, well heated and most comfortable, most heartily. The diocese supports it. I've been freezing in some of the hostels of the Simons, poor as they are. Yesterday I was in the square where seven of the young folk (volunteers and co-workers) were freezing and fasting for two days and a night to beg to keep their work going. Then I had a tour of the city for an hour.

To Conclude

Tomorrow I go to Belfast to visit two hospices there, run by the valiant Simons (now each city's houses are becoming independent, autonomous, as our houses are). But they are all concerned with the most neglected poor, and have sprung from a common root.

Let me say frankly that there is no emphasis on religion, though they are serving Christ in His poor, with love and enthusiasm and a joyous, youthful spirit. It is good to be with them! (P.S. They seem, in Rochdale, to know nothing of the Co-op movement, which poor weavers started and which has spread all over the world.)

As usual, I can only give glimpses of such "pilgrimages" as this. So much more could be written.