

Poverty is the Face of Christ

By Dorothy Day

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Summary:

Describes the struggle in establishing farming communes as Peter Maurin taught. Poverty, toil, and suffering are bore by the young families trying to live on the land. She writes to comfort these fellow workers who live day by day.

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Martin Paul, head of the Holy Family Farm at Rhineland, Missouri, wrote an article a few months ago for **The Living Parish**, in which he deals with Farming Communes. Martie traveled around with Peter Maurin quite a bit, up and down the west coast, and he was head of the House of Hospitality in Minneapolis, and of St. Isadore' Farming Commune at Aitken, Minn., until he went into the army. He was one of the Catholic Workers who was not a conscientious objector.

When he came out of the army and married he was as anxious as ever to work out the "kind of society where it was easy for man to be good," and that meant to him, houses of hospitality to take care of immediate needs, where the works of mercy could be performed at a voluntary sacrifice, by embracing voluntary poverty, and farming communes, where groups of families could begin setting up a life where communal property and private property were in nice balance.

He recognized the fact that houses of hospitality had to be financed by appeals (not demands as Peter used to say) and certainly not by state grants or subsidies. We did this work from a sense of personal responsibility, we lived in poverty, ("I have never asked anything for myself" Peter used to say.) We gave our work, mental and manual labor, and we tried to strip ourselves to put on Christ. A vocation for this work, and it was definitely a vocation, was something else again than a vocation for marriage. When a man got married, then it was up to him to be on his own, support his own wife and children, and go on performing the works of mercy, according to his ability, with a Christ room in the house, the meal set out for the needy guest, the clothes passed on. Julian Pleasants of Notre Dame, who used to be one of the heads of the House of Hospitality in South Bend before he got married and started a community of his own (the community of the family) wrote an article about **The Catholic Worker** for Fr. Leo Ward's book, **The American Apostolate**, which is called Personal Responsibility, and is one of the best articles on the Catholic Worker movement which has been written. Personal responsibility for practice of the works of mercy goes on, whether you are married or single. You just have to list them over to see what you can do.

It was with GI money, contributed by Martie and by John Boylston, and the money saved by Larrie Heaney from some years of work, that the Holy Family

Farm in Rhineland, Missouri, was gotten under way.

Sowing in Tears

This little article does not propose to give a history of that farm, the sowing of tears (let us hope there will be much reaping in joy). The story of Larry Heaney's life and death were given in the June, 1949, issue of **The Catholic Worker**. This article has to do with certain basic principles which need clarifying, discussing and writing about. There is a great deal of study needed in trying to build a new society within the shell of the old. One needs to study the basic quarrel between Karl Marx and Proudhon that went down thru the years in the ranks of the radicals between the communists and communist anarchists, between the ideas of Marx and Kropotkin. There is a great deal of the struggle in **Three Who Made a Revolution**; there is a great deal of history in Martin Buber's **Paths in Utopia**.

Peter Maurin was interested, too, in the history of the collective and communal farms in Palestine and if he had been alive when Claire Bishop's "**All Things Common**" had been published, he would have been enthusiastic about that.

Life for the Family

He was interested in this way of life for the family and for the laity because he was interested in the Benedictine community and the entire tradition of communal living. God knows it has been prosperous enough from the worldly standpoint, this type of religious communism. Men withdrew from the world, and the world followed them, not only to join them in their lives of voluntary poverty and hard work, but also to cast the world at their feet. Huge properties grew up. Vast tracts of land, tremendous monasteries, seats of learning and the arts. It remains so to the present day, except in those countries where the land and buildings have been taken from them.

Why should not such communities but for families grow up throughout the land, not only as emergency measures, but also as a new institution, "a rebuilding of society within the shell of the old, with a philosophy so old that it looks like new," as Peter used to say. There has been a history of such communities (Protestant and Secular) within the United States and there are remnants of them all over the country. I have just been hearing about them in Iowa (they are still a success) and I will pass them in the Dakotas. They are an answer to the problem of the machine and unemployment, an answer to the depression which will come about once we stop this mad race for armaments, once men begin to lay down their arms and refuse to kill, once young men refuse to be inducted, once older men refuse to build up their prosperity on the blood of their brothers.

The history of our own attempts that have been made at Easton, Pa.; at Upton, Mass.; at Newburg, N.Y.; at Pleasant Plains, L.I.; at Cape May, N.J.;

at Avon, Ohio; at South Lyons, Mich.; at Rhineland, Mo.; and at various other parts of the country (and some have folded up and some go on and many have left them to acquire farms of their own), is yet to be written. One thing is common to them all. That is poverty. There is a constant, grim struggle against poverty.

Grim Fight

The criticism which descends upon the luckless heads of those who continue to be faithful to the dream, who are the forerunners, who are ploughing the ground and sowing in tears, who are dunging it with their sufferings, is part of the suffering itself. Their failure is laid to lack of knowledge, lack of hard work. Sometimes indeed these criticisms are just and we would be the last to deny them. But the grim fight of working with insufficient tools and broken down equipment; the interruptions occasioned by sickness and births and deaths; even the interruptions and dislocations caused by many visitors (and the needy); and not least; the prunings and cuttings of human affections, the grating of one human instrument on another, the whittling down, the paring, the chiseling, all these cruel sufferings that go with family and communal life have been part of the picture.

Blood of the Poor

“Money is the blood of the poor,” Leon Bloy said. And he went on to write that poverty is a heaven for those who chose her, a cross for those who do not desire her, but absolute poverty is hell. Destitution isolates men. “Poverty is the face of Christ, the Face that was spat upon, that put to flight the Prince of this world.” He spoke bitterly of that type of poverty, “that scandalous, revolting type of poverty that had to be helped, that was connected with no hope of glory and which has nothing to give in return.”

And this is the type of poverty which we have on a Catholic Worker farm. It is not self-sustaining, it has to be helped. And this is the bitterness which eats into the souls of those Catholic Workers who are married, who are raising families, who are trying to live, either on a wage or on the land.

In their suffering they reject the idea of almsgiving. And to protest this, is the point of this entire article.

Leon Bloy said, in a letter to Barbey D’Aurevilly, “I have become convinced that suffering is the only supernatural element here below, all else is human.”

Safety of the Rich

This does not mean that those who have are absolved from almsgiving because suffering and poverty are meritorious. “We must not deprive them of it,” say the rich. The safety of the rich lies in almsgiving. The story in the 25th Chapter of St. Matthew is that we will be judged by our works of mercy. We will not achieve beatitude without it. We must give until we become the blessed. Blessed, happy, are the poor, those that mourn, those who are maligned as fools. Christ came to make the rich poor, and poor holy, Eric Gill wrote. When St. John the Baptist began to preach, that voice of one crying in the wilderness, and the Sadducees and Pharisees asked him, “What must we do?” he said.

“Let him who has two coats give to him who has none, and with food likewise.” Unquestioning sharing, unquestioning love.

We Must Beg

I write this article for our comforting, to console the hearts, to strengthen the weak knees of those who are undertaking the tremendous job of cleansing the Augean stables, of rebuilding the world. We must have almsgiving, we must receive. We must be humble and ask, and then we shall receive. We must be like little children, and expect to receive, and not see the affronts, the scorn, the contempt. (On the one hand we must see it as sharing in the scorn meted out to Christ, and on the other hand we must so see Christ in others that we do not recognize an affront. Peter Maurin used to act this way, and it was a great lesson to us all.)

Rendering to Caesar

Our young men do not mind receiving from the government, although they are warned by our Lord that what they receive from Caesar they must render to Caesar. They would account a Guggenheim fellowship honorable. They would be delighted and honored to receive prizes and subsidies and honors. That would not be charity. But we are here to restore love, charity to the world, to overcome hatred with love, and “love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.” It reaches down and like the sword of the spirit it reaches to the very marrow of our bones. But to receive charity and to give it is to practice loving. We are accounted worthy to suffer for Christ, in this dread struggle to learn love.

People Say

People say: Why do they marry then, those young people, and attempt to continue in this work? Why don't they get a job and support their families? Do

you think any job will support a family these days without help, without a foot on the land?

People say: Why do they have so many children then. Catholic people: Why aren't they content? If a man "knows" his wife once a year she may still have one child a year.

We must change the social order so that a man may raise his family. And it is necessary that there be among us in the Catholic Worker movement those suffering families, to exemplify, to share in the poverty of the family today. There are 2 million migrants traveling the country, harvesting the crops. Only 6% of our Catholic people are on the land. The city is the home of the proletariat, the propertyless. Man must own his home, his work, to be responsible, to be a co-creator, to function as a human being, made in the image and likeness of God, his creator. "A man needs a certain amount of goods to lead a good life," St. Thomas wrote.

So our Catholic Worker families are living in poverty and suffering, in the practice of their faith, not in a dream or an illusion.

I write to comfort our fellow workers whose lot is indeed harder than those who are in houses of hospitality throughout the country. There single people are on the job of dispensing the charity which our generous brothers put into our hands to give. For ourselves we take as little as we can, and we are constantly, most visibly passing on, to the breadline, those who come for clothes, and shelter and loving kindness. Our work has its own suffering. It has its own poverty and deprivation. This last month the furnace was out of order and the house was cold, and all suffered. The bills are still high, and we still need to fret over grocery bills. We are on the giving end, as well as on the receiving. There is a sense of mutual aid, of exchange, of cooperation. And yet here too, how we try to escape, even by the use of these words, from our poverty. "Deliver us from our necessities, O Lord."

Rebellion

**** I write to comfort these our fellow workers, because that is all the help they are going to have. They will not be subsidized, their necessities will not be relieved, although they should be. People consider it honorable to give to the monasteries, and appeals are made for guest houses and other buildings to the tune of a quarter of a million dollars. There is little of poverty and precarity in the life of the religious, and for that reason the poor of the world are rising up in rebellion against religion.

We take comfort in the monasteries like that of Dom Crenier in Martinique, in the hermitage of the two Benedictines in India who have stated a monastery in a mud hut by a river; in the Pius 10th monastery at Grey Summit, Mo, in their log cabins (God keep them in their poverty); in the others which have sprung

up in our time in China, in Mexico, and where emphasis is laid, as it is among the worker priests in France, on sharing the sufferings of the poor. . . .

**** The houses of hospitality cannot support the work on the land except in New York where a retreat house and a resthouse are maintained. The houses of hospitality have long known the companionship of the wolf, who is not at the door, but in our midst. We are stripped bare. There is nothing in the bank to give. We live from day to day, and by the little miracles God performs in his bounty. "If we ask our father for bread, will he give us a stone?"

But ours is happiness, ours is joy, for Christ comes to us each day, not only at Christmas, but each time we look into the face of our brother who is poor.