

On Pilgrimage - September 1949

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Summary: Announces a birth and eulogizes a long-time worker, John Anthony Curran. Tells of starting the farm at Newburgh, NY, and all their unpaid bills hoping someone will send money. Thanks readers for condolences on Peter Maurin's death. (DDLW #473).

Everything happens here," three young Maryknoll students said as they left us after a two weeks visit. Births and deaths, the joys and sorrows that go with the crises of our daily life at Mott street. All our visitors were hoping that Marjorie Hughes' baby would be born before they left, but Lois Schumacher from Chicago departed, and the three seminarians and various other guests, and still no baby. Then one Wednesday night, after a meeting in our courtyard where Bob Ludlow was speaking, after the crowd had dispersed and had wandered around to the "Muni" for coffee, and there was no one around to stay with the children while Joe accompanied Marge to the hospital, her time came. She left the house at eleven-thirty and the baby was born at twelve-thirty, a boy, eight pounds, James Matthew by name. The hospital called it Thursday, but by God's time, not daylight saving, the child was born on the feast of St. Lawrence, always one of my favorite saints. When there was danger of the estates of the Church being confiscated by the State, he sold them all and gave them to the poor! A good example for our time.

Another Death

The birth of a baby is a joyful event so I write of that first. A week later, John Anthony Curran died. Many of our readers and correspondents will remember him as a most ardent disciple of Peter Maurin.

I had been visiting my daughter for a week down in West Virginia and returned home to find John very sick indeed. He had had several serious operations two years before and had been in a very weakened condition ever since. He and Cecilia his wife lived up one flight in the rear house at Mott Street, in a two-room apartment, adjoining our clothes room and laundry. The only running water they had was that in the laundry and the noise and airlessness of the place was oppressive in the extreme heat this summer. John lay there Sunday morning and

talked to me of Peter's sanctity. "I haven't got that sanctity," he said seriously, "I've got the intellectual appreciation for all that Peter taught me, and I certainly appreciate how much God has given me in letting me have the opportunity of knowing and working with such a man. But no, I haven't his sanctity."

And I thought, "what a variety of saints there are," looking around at John's poverty, voluntarily accepted, to be with the poor, to work with the poor, to talk to whoever would listen about the things of God as taught in the liturgy; and the things of the world, the history of things past, what to do now in order to make the future better.

St. Paul's

That Sunday morning John was very weak. But it was the day Jack English was to be "clothed" at St. Paul's Abbey, Newton, New Jersey, and the crowd of us were to go out there. It was a joyful occasion and we had a happy afternoon with Jack. Tom, Bob, Charles, Natalie, Irene and Agnes stayed for supper at the Abbey, but Catherine Odlivak and I hastened back on the bus, a beautiful trip, eating our supper of French fried potatoes, purchased at a roadside stand, by the way. It was a night of the fiesta, the eve of the feast of the Assumption, and street singers, men and women, with loud speakers to increase their already gargantuan voices, were on the band stand which is built for this feast each year, right across the street from us. We got back to find the concert in full blast, and Cecilia, John's wife, in despair because John could no longer move himself, and she could not help him. With the help of Kay Brinkworth, who has had experience at St. Francis home where she had to move patients many times the size of John, we got him moved, his bed and clothes changed, because it was a very hot night.

John did not mind the noise. He was in the rear building so the sound was not so piercing, deflected as it was by a five-story building directly in front of him. "There are other noises that are worse," Cecilia said. "The neighbors are always taking the clean clothes down at midnight and the sound of screeching pulleys is almost more than one can stand. This noise is a happy noise."

John could not eat, so we had to go over to the Hughes' for ice cubes to make lemonade. (They are luxuriating in a second hand gas-ice box this summer, purchased for \$20 and set up by Joe.)

It was fifteen years that John was in the work. He started to come to the meetings back on Charles Street and moved in with us when we came to Mott Street in 1936. He travelled with Peter, he helped Frank O'Donnell and Carl Paulson build on St. Benedict's farm. It was the first stone work they had done, and he learned it from a book. He worked at Easton, at Alcuin, and at Mott Street. He was critic as well as worker, New England perfectionist that he was, and in his forced inactivity the last years of his life, it was hard for him to see mistakes, or what he thought were mistakes, developments, defections, and the

slowness with which things moved, the lack of accomplishment. Women working from day to day, from meal to meal, with the immediate, did not get discouraged as men did, I used to tell him. It was the men who had the vision, Peter used to say, and the women followed the men who had the vision, and helped them accomplish it. It was up to the men to keep the vision clear, but not much would be accomplished without the women, I always added. "Oh, women!" John would snort, because he was noted for his impatience with them. He was always quoting St. Paul at me, and he was still doing it the day he went to the hospital.

On the feast of the Assumption, Monday morning, the priest from Precious Blood Church around the corner, came in his robes through the street, barefooted and in sandals, and brought Viaticum. John confessed, received Holy Communion and was anointed. "And now, if I were to die today," he said happily, "I would go straight to heaven."

I remembered Fr. Reinhold's article on Extreme Unction which appeared in the *Commonweal* some years ago, and wished I had it to read to him. What beautiful emphasis he placed on the power of the Sacrament!

Those were the last words I had with John. In the afternoon the ambulance came and took him to the Veteran's hospital up on Kingsbridge Road, and there he died, Wednesday night, August 17. Cecilia, Irene, Charlie, Julia and I took turns reading him the psalms. He was brought to Precious Blood Church for a requiem Mass which we all sang, and then his body was brought to Lewiston, Maine, where his mother and sister still live. As a young man he had gone to Annapolis but did not finish because of illness. He has served in the Coast Guard in the first World War, but since he had been with **The Catholic Worker**, he had been a pacifist. He was fifty-five years old when he died.

Retreats

I am writing now at the farm where we have been more crowded this summer than ever before. The youngest member of the community is Teddy Cizek, who is here with his four-year old brother while his mother has an operation in New York. This little family have been the guests of a couple of members of the YCW in New York who have an apartment above the headquarters. Now that we are taking care of some of their guests, they are taking care of one of ours. It delights us to see this practice of hospitality. Oh, for a Christ-room in every home! Women and children, separated from husband and father, hundreds of them, at the Municipal Lodging house in New York, and on the other hand, empty buildings, boarded up buildings, buildings that could be made into apartments for these homeless people! Little interest is evinced in them. The Lodging house has become the Marshalsea of the present day, but we have not a Dickens to bring the plight of these families before the people.

Just this last month an apartment fell vacant across the street from us on Mott Street. The janitor had lived in it, alone, and he suddenly died. We had the

chance to rent it, buy the furniture for fifty dollars, and move in a family from the lodging house, a widow and four children. They are already considered to be on relief, so when they were moved into the newly painted clean apartment, with sufficient but meager furniture, they were automatically cared for by the city which is trying to do its share in this emergency. Holy Mother the City, Holy Mother the State,—both are tender and merciful to the poor. But the members of Holy Mother the Church are remiss. We are not doing our share.

Blue Prints

We have the land at Newburgh, and we have several men who would help build. Fr. Buckley, of the Brooklyn Catholic Charities office, says that he has a building group also who would come out and give a hand week ends, which means one day's work. We have the land and the labor. But we have no funds for building materials. As a matter of fact, we still have a bill for building materials not paid yet with a local dealer who is most patient. Pope Pius said in a talk to a group of nuns who were engaged in caring for the poor, "Never be afraid to run up bills for the Lord's work." An encouraging thought. But our bills are so high now, and there are so many long unpaid, that we wonder how we can get through the summer until our Fall appeal goes out. Only yesterday, the undertaker, Mr. Walsh, came around to remind me that the bill for Peter Maurin's funeral, \$650, was still unpaid. The humiliations of poverty! Tom, who has charge of the funds, has been hard pressed to pay butcher, baker, and grocer through the summer, feeding the living, caring for the line that increases at our door in Mott street, and for a family of thirty or so who are here at Maryfarm all the time. One cannot raise enough for all.

Bills

On various feasts I have rather timidly asked St. Anthony, St. Joseph, the Blessed Mother, and today St. Rose, to please move someone's heart to send us a sizable gift, that would get rid of some of our bills, so that we could breathe easier, take courage, gird our loins for the ever increasing struggle. Just a little reminder that the saints are with us. Maybe they want us to groan in our poverty. Maybe they want us to feel the same heavy, almost hopeless burden that the family does these days as bills pile up, doctor's bills, hospital bills, grocery bills, so that you never get out from under, you never draw a free breath but are always scheming and planning and wondering how to make ends meet.

Still, we keep on asking, "show me a token for good." St. Joseph sent us five-hundred dollars on his feast day through the will of one of our readers, once many years ago. But it seems to us we have had drops in the bucket for a long time now.

“Sow, and you will reap,” Fr. Roy used to say. “If you are saving to pay a mortgage on the Church or school, and had only five hundred or five thousand in the bank, get rid of it all, sow it all, and you will be rewarded a hundred fold. God has promised it. It sounds foolish, but if you need money, sow money. It will come back to you. Cast your bread on the waters.”

So we sow all the time, whatever we have, and we beg our readers to do the same. Perhaps some reader will look at our broad fields here at Maryfarm and decide to sow a few houses on it, to take care of the few families, and what mansions in heaven they will receive in exchange!

Postscript

In the September issue of Blackfriar’s there is an article about Peter Maurin which I wrote at the request of Fr. Conrad Peplar the editor. Since I took part of a chapter I had written on the life of Peter and used that, it contains, I find, many more facts about Peter’s life than I had given in the article which I wrote about him for our own paper. On my desk there are requests from several other magazines for articles about Peter Maurin and the Catholic Worker. There must be a great deal of repetition in writing articles such as these, but I like to remember how much Peter had to repeat over and over again to visitors, the basic ideas of the work, about voluntary poverty, manual labor, “being what you want the other fellow to be.” We must repeat too, and remembering how many times St. Paul told his story, remembering the four gospels, will help in writing about Peter, the lay apostle of our times.

Thank You

While we were mailing out the July-August issue of the paper, I began to remember all the things we had not put in the paper. I had neglected to thank all our friends for their letters and condolences on the death of Peter, the Masses offered for him, the prayers of his friends. There were beautiful comments made in **America**, in **Orate Fratres** (his death was coupled with that of Cardinal Suhard of Paris), in the **Commonweal**, in **Osservatore Romano**, and other papers and magazines. Agnes Bird is making up a scrap book of all the clippings and letters received and it will be precious to us and interesting to all the visitors who come in to Mott street. We hope our readers will understand the pressure of work this summer which has made much letter writing impossible and excuse us for not being prompt in answering them. I always think of this column as a letter to our readers and hope that they too feel it as such.