

On Pilgrimage - December 1946

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Describes a visit to Martin de Porres house of hospitality in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Reflects on the seeming futility of the work and how "it is undoubtedly a manifestation of love, of God's love." (DDLW #228).

The cold has got us at last! I know now why clerks in Dickens' stories always sat on high stools. It was to keep far away from the drafty floor.

One room in Maryflat has a fireplace and Elizabeth Ryan and Mrs. Houlihan go out every day and collect wood for it. It makes a cheerful glow. In Bethlehem, the flat downstairs, we light the gas oven. The fresh paint and red curtains Kay put up before Thanksgiving makes that place warm; the good fellowship helps. They were rigging up a primitive loom in there the other night to demonstrate weaving.

Downstairs in the office there is a good old laundry stove with the racks all around the octagonal sides where the irons used to stand. The faithful thing keeps the place warm all night and it's a treat to come in in the morning. The getting up and washing is always a chore in the cold months. We begin to take on that grimy look of pinched red roses and smears of soot from the fireplaces and the stove.

But it's all very invigorating when there is that snap in the air and the low hung gray clouds promising snow.

Harrisburg

Mary Frecon is still going strong in Harrisburg and I spent a night with her last month on my way to the coal fields. Seventh street, in the shadow of the capitol, is still the unspeakable slum, a shanty town with privies owned, a good part of it, by the city itself, and held without repairs because some day the local government intends to tear down the houses and make a broad high way and freight yard along the tracks of the railroad. Meanwhile I have seen it the same for eight years now, and the poor live and marry and give birth and die in surroundings not fit for pigs.

The Martin de Porres house was bright and colorful and filled with children as we drove up at five-thirty last week. Downstairs there is a big room for games and play and behind it a little kitchen with a coal range and a gas stove. For a year or so, Mary did without running water like the rest of her neighbors (sometimes a whole block get water from one spigot) but now she has a good big sink and cold water, a great luxury. Upstairs there are two rooms, a big living room and a bedroom where 80-year old Mrs. Richards sleeps in her big featherbed which she has had since her marriage. She has given birth to and buried many children, has Mrs. Richards, and now she is living with Mary, and helping too. I slept on a cot in the front room that night and Mrs. Frecon slept in the featherbed with Mrs. Richards, and it was so warm we didn't need fires, and I am sure that the featherbed must have been very warm, too warm.

Helpers

There are a few colored women who help Mary Frecon and are her faithful friends in this long fight for the rights of these brothers of ours. There are high school girls who come in and work with the children. But in general it has been a long, slow, and lonely job, this working for the poorest and most neglected of God's children. "We just don't seem to get anywhere," Mary said, matter of factly, not with dejection."It goes on day after day, just the same." And it seems to me that her work there is a perfect example of the seed falling into the ground and seeming to die. It is the unfailing history of any of growth. "Unless the seed falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it brings forth much fruit." Mrs. Frecon has been dying there these last eight years, working alone, seemingly with no results. She does not know how many people remember the story of the dying girl she dragged in out of the alleyway to nurse. She will never know how many people she has influenced throughout the country to undertake and to continue in work for God's littlest ones.

Time to Love

A priest said to me recently, "there is no time left to do much about the social order now. It is not only later than you think. It is too late for anything but love." With my own unfailing optimism I could never agree with him that it was too late, but it is a good thing to think upon when we see nothing being done, nothing being accomplished, seemingly.

What is Mary Frecon doing? She is loving her brothers, fervently, steadily, faithfully, unfailingly. And there is nothing saccharine, soft, or sentimental about it either. It is a love of preference. She prefers to be with them and she lives with them. She prefers to serve them, work for them, help them in any little way she can. There is no glory in it, no visible results in it. There is nothing in it,

in other words, for her, either in money, power or glory. But it is undoubtedly a manifestation of love, of God's love, and that of one human being for others. And so it is something tremendous.

So we thank Mary Frecon for being like MARY in bringing Christ, who is our Love, to us in these ways.