On Pilgrimage - July/August 1974

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Ill in bed, she tells of the immanent move to a new Maryhouse for women. Describes their farm as a "village", remembers three workers who died, and recalls the pacifist witness of Ammon Hennacy and his gentle personality. (DDLW #542).

Since I am lying in bed writing this, and have cancelled all the engagements which I so witlessly made, On Pilgrimage is a bad title. But I always regard this column as a letter to our friends, so it will travel for me. A strep throat, a three-day dosage of antibiotics, and a tired heart (physically) laid me out, and my speaking voice has failed me. But I have been a compulsive writer ever since I was 8 years old when I wrote a serial story on a little pad of pink paper for my younger sister's entertainment.

I began this column on First Street, St. Joseph's House, in a mood of depression, as a way of writing myself out of it. Writing, keeping a journal, can be a way of praying, too, as we are reminded in **Prayer Is A Hunger**, and excellent little book by Edward Farrell, the head of Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit (Dimension Books, Denville, N.J., $3.95).

A New Community

Looking around our so crowded women's apartment with boxes, suitcases, clothes, blankets, books, shopping bags, piled under beds, around beds, on shelves over beds, I began to see our present situation as a life in a railroad or bus station, always fascinating places, but getting more and more uncomfortable in these latter days. I thought of that incredible journey in Dr. Zhivago, and incredible journeys back and forth across our vast country, due to change of jobs or in search of jobs. In war time, our buses were crowded with mothers and babies (I was always holding an extra child), young families following young husbands in the service around the country. Buses so crowded people sat in the aisles. But to be going somewhere, to be going to something, to someone, made such conditions endurable.

We women of the Catholic Worker are going somewhere indeed–to a new house, an old music settlement a few blocks away. City regulations mean we submit planes to the Building Department to change a school back into a residence. More bathrooms needed, steel self- closing doors on all bedrooms, fire-retarding staircases, etc. Already there are sprinkler systems and fire escapes. The building is paid for–no mortgages, no interest to pay! Our dear Lord, who so reassured us in the "journals" written by Matthew and Luke with all the tenderness of love shining thru in the Sermon on the Mount, will see to our new "shelter."

But–the worry which I try to drive away comes to this–when we take women in, it means for life. They stay until they die and then, too, we find that spot of earth they still need, and bury them. How tiny a plot of earth does a woman need!

We will not be in our new Maryhouse very long before it will be filled up. This is the distressful way the mind sometimes works and we need to remember the chiding of Jesus. "O you of little faith! Doesn't your heavenly Father know your need of these things?" "Take no thought for the morrow." Very well, dear Lord, I will obey. I will mortify–put to death–those interior senses of the soul, the memory, the understanding and the will—forget all past difficulties, the little hells created around us so often, and think instead of the folly of the Cross, and how wasteful God is with His graces, and try to appreciate and rejoice in our folly, modelled after His folly–the folly of the Cross. "Self-justification!" one of our early critical but very efficient fellow workers used to fling at me. "You seem to be aiming at failure."

But in the "Recovery" movement, which is for "mental patients," commending oneself is part of the therapy. Also St. Paul said, "I do not judge myself even." "Judge not," Jesus told us. A terribly important statement for Community.

Later–The Farm

I am writing from the Farm now, surrounded by the jungle greenness, the result of much rain. There is a smell of drying sweet clover in my room. The air is humid, it is hard to breathe. But O, the beauty of the river, the quiet, at this early morning hour.

If I am reminded by the clutter around me of a railroad station in the house in New York, I am suddenly reminded of villages here at the farm. (In N.Y. I have often thought of the city as being made up of villages:–East Village, Greenwich Village, Chinatown, SoHo, which is South of Houston Street and now the home of artists and craft shops and of course the Italian section.)

But I'm thinking here of an Italian village, such as Ignazio Silone describes, and our two big houses are crowded with families, in one room, if a single woman and child, or in several rooms. Our larger houses are like village tenements, some neat apartments, some untidy, and always a struggle for living space in tent, hut, or shack, well built though small. How many are there? I've lost count. But a village we are, I have decided, not a commune. I'm afraid we still are individualistic, not Communitarian. But we get along, a lot of work is done, and hundreds of meals are put on the table daily. Home bread baking – everyone has learned how.

Frank O'Donnell, Bob Stewart,

Emily Coleman

Sometimes one can look on this "farm with a view" as the "poor house" of Dutchess County. Friendly highway police, seeing old men journeying on foot, give them rides to our place.

Our cemetery plot, which Msgr. Kane gave us ten years ago, is now full, what with Emily's recent death and Bob Stewart's a few weeks before. Both were in their 70's. John has made little white birch crosses with the name of each for those buried there. Dominic who cares for the graves recently decorated each with little American flags–commemorating Memorial Day and Fourth of July!!!

There are three deaths to be commemorated in our evening vespers this summer. Frank O'Donnell, one of our first volunteers on Fifteenth Street, a conscientious keeper of the files in our first years, making cards for new subscribers. He was a resident for a time near the first farm at Eaton, and later at St. Benedict's Farm at Upton, Massachusetts.

Then Bob Stewart died early one morning of emphysema, very peacefully and painlessly. He was anointed, and buried in the little Tivoli graveyard. Then Emily Coleman, my very dear friend whom I had known since the Forties, at Maryfarm, Newburgh, where she came to make retreats, and at Peter Maurin Farm, Staten Island, where she wrote the farm column. I visited here at Stanbrook Abbey guest house, where she lived for twelve years. She was a convert, the godchild of Jacques Maritain, and had been secretary to Emma Goldman in Paris years ago. Emma gave here credit for here help in the foreword of her fascinating book **Living My Life**.

Emily's life had been for the last ten years one of suffering, yet of joy, too–her mind and heart were so rich in wisdom and love. Her suffering must have been intense, but she never complained. She had a tumor on the brain and lived for ten years or more after an operation and later several hospitalizations. Joe Geraci has written more about her in this issue.

Ammon Each August

I had wanted in this issue to write about those mysterious words of Jesus, "Resist not evil," and about the violence which so often creeps into the Resistance movements today. But it will take some more prayer and meditation, in our little chapel here at Tivoli where a summer storm today lashed against the windows, shaded by the heavy foliage which is so lush this wet summer.

Instead I'll end this column with a commemoration of Ammon Hennacy who every August commemorated the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and did his part expiating our national crime by a fast which grew longer every year since that fatal August.

He was not one of these non-cooperators, or resisters when he went to jail for civil disobedience–I cannot count the number of times. He treated all men as brothers, even those who arrested him or sneered at him for his lifetime opposition to war.

He was always ready to help or serve anyone, friend or foe, police or jailor. I went to greet him once when he was being released from the Federal Prison at Sandstone, Minnesota. The warden came out with him, as he was being released, to shake his hand, and mine too, telling me he had never met a finer man.

He asked nothing for himself (like Peter Maurin) but took the jobs assigned him, indoors or out. He rejoiced in helping build up a library at Sandstone. He liked to share the meat and fish served (he was vegetarian), and the men sitting next to him benefited by his portions.

He was as friendly as a puppy, I used to say, never abashed or resentful at any brushoff. He respected courage and honest conviction–even when it meant acceptance of war. I should admit that he was at times highly critical of the clergy for their luxury, their drinking (an expensive habit) and conformities to patriotism. He had a strong faith that men could change, and a fearlessness, a courage, unmatched by anyone I have ever met. He literally talked himself out of bodily danger on numerous occasions–a crazed welfare recipient with a knife, a brutal cellmate intent on rape, a mob in Arizona coming to his isolated cabin to "get him." Moral jiujutsu, he called it.

Dear Ammon, pray for us that we too grow in courage, "Love casts out fear," and we are living in fearful times.

Joan Thomas, Ammon's wife, has written a biography of him which she will publish herself when she raises the money by the sale of his two books **The Book of Ammon** and **The One Man Revolution in America**. She will be glad to receive orders. Write her: Joan Thomas, Box 25, Phoenix, Arizona 85001.

I may not agree at all with her interpretation of Ammon, but I'll certainly be interested in reading her book.