

House of Hospitality

By Dorothy Day

New York: Sheed and Ward, 1939. (out of print)

Summary: An account of the first five years of the Catholic Worker (C.W.). Describes the C.W. not simply as a newspaper but as a movement. Explicates its position on labor and unions through Peter Maurin's ideas on personalism. Much of the book, however, is taken up with the day to day experiences of the C.W., describing the soup lines, publication of the paper, picketing, farm communes, and the finances of the C.W. (DDLW #3).

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Foreword

An overview of the beginnings of the Catholic Worker. As a journalist covering the Communist led march on Washington in December 1932, Dorothy yearns and prays to find a way to work for the poor and oppressed. She meets Peter Maurin who “indoctrinates” her in Catholic social teaching and his program to change the social order: starting a newspaper, houses of hospitality, roundtable discussions and farming communes. Includes several of Peter’s essays and details about starting the newspaper and their first houses of hospitality.

Chapter One

Engaging vignettes about the daily work of the early depression era movement: helping the evicted, street corner speaking, the impersonal shelters run by the city, and the delightful conversation of children around the office.

Chapter Two

Vignettes about a mentally ill woman disturbing the neighborhood and the good luck and hard work life of a friend. Describes their struggles with food, lack of money, heated discussions, children’s play, “little miracles,” selling the paper at a nearby church, and the constant interruptions. Notes two kinds of materialism.

Chapter Three

Tales of hospitality, distributing the paper, and propaganda meetings. Affirms the primacy of performing the works of mercy over “talking and writing about the work.” Quotes from Frederick Ozanam on putting faith into action. Describes homey scenes at the beach house with Theresa and their beachcomber friend Smiddy. Tells of their poverty and their joy amid their city neighbors, a busy parish Church nearby, and Peter’s efforts in Harlem.

Chapter Four

A mixture of colorful stories of guests’ travails, daily tasks, and small pleasures. Includes a Peter Maurin presentation on Socialism’s faults and the need for

action based on a supernatural foundation. Reflects on St. Therese's Little Way as a way to overcome discouragement.

Chapter Five

Describes the seemingly endless stream of donations, visitors, and people in need that fill the long winter days and make writing difficult. Points to bits of humor and scenes of natural beauty that refresh the soul. Notes their bittersweet good fortune in moving to a larger but less expensive house.

Chapter Six

Struggles with discouragement and turns to prayer and spiritual reading for courage. Includes quotes from various spiritual writers. Tales from the farm and trips to the Home Relief Office, swims to escape the oppressive heat, and sweet smells. Rejects the notion that all are not called to perfection and sees true security in giving ones talents in the service of the poor. Details their debt and asserts their insecurity is good.

Chapter Seven

Fighting melancholy and overwork she wavers between justifying and blaming herself. Includes a mock dialogue with a "Critical Inquirer," examples of their arguments and conflicts, and sustaining quotes from spiritual writers. Sets a rule of life for herself and affirms that "those circumstances which surround us are the very ones God wills for us."

Chapter Eight

After describing their search for a farm and the move to Mott Street, most of the chapter is a clarification of why they support organizing and striking workers. Contrasts their peaceful methods with the communist calls for violence in a class war. Asserts a spiritual foundation based on the dignity of man, a philosophy of labor, and the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ. Wants workers to become owners and lauds the cooperative and back-to-the-land movements.

Chapter Nine

A summer full of trips between the Easton farm and the city, she vividly chronicles the flurry of activity that seemingly accomplishes a great deal. Struggles with issues of freedom, personal responsibility, and her role in the movement. Feels "utterly lacking, ineffective."

Chapter Ten

Expresses deep gratitude to God for the goodness of their first summer at the Easton farm. Explains why they distribute *The Catholic Worker* and Catholic literature at Communist rallies. Meditates on the phrase "Our Father" as the basis for understanding that all men are brothers. A long description of their efforts to help the striking seamen in New York.

Chapter Eleven

Bucolic description of the antics of Bessie the calf. Much of the chapter describes her visit to the sit-down strike in Flint, Michigan, against General Motors and their tactics. Says labor in the U.S. needs a long range program of education about cooperatives, credit unions, and a philosophy of labor. Quotes from a leaflet distributed to the men on the breadline inviting them to attend a parish mission. After a talk to a women's club in Florida she observes that the rich who deny Christ in His poor "are atheists indeed."

Chapter Twelve

Contrasts the violence against strikers in Chicago at the Republic Steel Mills, egged on by the media, with the peaceful methods of dealing with strikers by law enforcement officials in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Comments on the joyful antics of the many children at the farm in the Summer, and enumerates their many unmet needs at the farm. Describes the noisy rebuilding going on at Mott Street. On the road, she reports on housing efforts in Chicago and a beautiful liturgy in St. Louis, explaining why they say Compline in New York.

Chapter Thirteen

On speaking trips to California, Florida, and Alabama, she notes the many places she spoke to labor groups, the projects of many lay people, priests, and sisters, and a visit with the anti-union president of a steel mill. Describes the death and funeral of a seaman who lived at the Catholic Worker. Reiterates the principles of their work: smallness, giving shelter to the homeless, indoctrination, personal responsibility, teaching cooperation and mutual aid, and relying on God—"Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it. Recommends several books.

Chapter Fourteen

An account of struggling with agencies and suspicious police to find a room for a small child. A reflection of Christ's sufferings, borne for all who suffer now, and the realization that "suffering and death can no longer be victorious." Discusses the problem of dissension and self-criticism in the movement, reproaching herself and her own sinfulness. Notes how hard their work is and that change comes slowly. Asserts that "Love and ever more love is the only solution to every problem that comes up."

Conclusion

Reflecting on the themes cover in the book, she acknowledges all that has been accomplished and distinguishes the role of the State and personal responsibility. Enumerates the many strikes they supported. Calls for a greater use of prayer and the desire to be saints. Speaks about what individual workers are doing in New York and is encouraged by houses around the country. Concludes by recalling Peter Maurin's fundamental ideas—voluntary poverty and the works of mercy. Prays that they continue on "the downward path which leads to salvation."