

On Pilgrimage - January 1947

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The Catholic Worker, January 1947, 1, 2, 4.

Summary: The story of a poor family—a pregnant wife and her drug addicted husband—that elicits the prayer “Dear God, help us to increase in holy hope.” Reports that Peter Maurin will spend the winter well cared for by friends in Rochester, NY. (DDLW #432).

This is the month of the Holy Family, and January 12 is the feast day of the Holy Family, instituted quite recently by Benedict fifteenth. And here is a story of a family, not a holy one, that we have with us now. We no longer have a Mary house but we have here at 115 Mott Street two apartments called Maryflat and Marthafat respectively. They are what the city calls dumbbell apartments because of their shape: two slightly larger rooms back and front, and in between two small rooms with no windows.

There are seven of us women living in these flats, and sometimes more in the way of transients and visitors. One can always put a few mattresses out on the floor, and we also have an elegant army sleeping bag. There is no hot water and one is heated by an open fireplace and the other by a tiny stove which is always going out. One must have a gift with fires, a red thumb, one might say, as one must have a green thumb to be a good gardener. (Julia has a green thumb. We have some of her plants growing in our windows, one of them a grapefruit tree, three feet tall, grown from a seed. Happy miracle!)

Margaret likes to stir the open fire from the top and when anyone corrects her she murmurs, “Always complaining! People are always complaining.” She was a weaver in Lancashire, and then in New England until “President Roosevelt closed all the mills in New England back in 1933,” she says. Her history is original. She is almost seventy.

FAMILY

Elizabeth is our mother-to-be. She is thirty; large, strong and patient. As I write, she is due in a couple of days. Her husband is a drug addict, fifty years old. When they first came to us six months ago they had been sleeping in cellars and empty buildings, in doorways and once, as I went to Mass, I saw them asleep on a fire escape of a Chinese hall down the street.

First we offered them separate beds in St. Joseph's house and in Maryflat, but he would not accept this hospitality. They ate with us, he usually falling asleep with his head in his soup, and she patiently lifting up his face and feeding him like a child. Later we got them an apartment across the street, three rooms with hot water for ten dollars a month. But the usually forbearing Italian neighbors, fearful of fires and worse evils, padlocked the door on them after a couple of months and would not allow them in. Somewhat fearful of the cold weather by then, the man consented to stay in St. Joseph's house and let his wife stay in Maryflat. But he kept coming in at four in the morning, falling asleep on the floor before he reached his bed. When he was found one morning sleeping on a burning mattress, we were forced for the common good to put him out, but for her sake we put him in a thirty-cent room on the Bowery. Because he was a fire hazard, he was put out of half a dozen hotels so he took again to walking the streets. Meanwhile, we were able to keep his wife with us, nights, but day after day he called for her and dragged her about with him on the streets, begging and dozing and floundering about the parks and Bowery restaurants.

Last night, New Year's Eve, as he sat at supper, asleep and yet being fed by his wife, we called the ambulance. He was conscious enough when they got here to answer the questions they put to him, and to refuse to go to the hospital. He was obviously drugged, his eyes dazed and half-opened, his voice halting, monotonous and bitter in his refusal to accept hospital aid. The policeman who always accompanies the ambulance and the doctor both said that he could not be taken against his will, so after making him sign a paper stating that he had refused hospital aid, they went away. "She is my legal wife," the man kept muttering. "She has to stick to me. She can't leave me. She has to take care of me."

Oh, the distortion of the idea of the Holy Family. She has to take care of him and she about to bear his child!

Later that night she told me of horrible experiences she had had, of fighting off drunken men, of repelling advances of janitors, who had in a supposedly charitable spirit, allowed them to sleep in a warm basement, and who bothered her after he had fallen unconscious. "He accuses me of having someone else's child," she said. She talked of the unutterable fatigue and suffering she had gone through, the craving for sleep, for rest, "But I am strong, I am never sick."

This is to be her second child. The first died soon after birth. What kind of a child this will be, of a simple-minded mother and a drug-ridden father, it is hard to see. But we have a little bed ready for the baby, and a box of pretty garments, and she is happy as she looks at them, and there is even gaiety in our midst as we sit around the fire and have a cup of tea in the holiday spirit.

There is no place else for her to go but here. All hospitals have charitable accommodations for mothers and when they cannot pay, the city does. But the mother cannot go to the hospital until her time is come. The Foundling hospital takes care of unmarried mothers and the girl can go there months before her

time. But it is always crowded and besides, Elizabeth is married, a legal wife.

It is hard to see Christ here, yet see Him we must, or rate such men as this only fit for the lethal chamber of a Hitler, or a forced labor camp of a Stalin. The forced labor camp would not be such a bad idea, but we are a Christian nation, in name, and yes, in deed very often too.

HEROISM

It is a far happier thing to contemplate the heroism and the nobility of such men as Archbishop McIntyre, whom we read of in today's paper as trying to reach entrapped firemen in a burning building last night on lower Broadway. It is far easier to see Christ in Dr. Harry Archer, seventy-eight years old, who crawled into the collapsing building to reach the entombed men. The lives of hard work and the noble courage of such men as these makes it easy to praise God in His creatures.

We love God as much as the one we love the least, a priest once said to us, and I think of that as I see Mr. Hagner, tall, gaunt, an ascetic looking sensualist, dragging his poor wife through the Bowery in search of his barbiturates, defying God in his slow and awful suicide.

"Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams."

"Our faith must be tried as though by fire."

Dear God, help us to increase in holy hope.

HAPPIER NEWS

As usual Fr. Betowsky served our breadline on Christmas day, and generous friends heaped up the feast for us with turkeys and hams enough to serve three hundred people. We thank them one and all, and thank God for such good friends who keep us, their stewards, busy.

We got a tremendous number of beautiful Christmas cards which Peter Carey will take, with his weekly supply of literature, to Bellevue hospital for the children. We thank our friends who remembered us all.

Louis Murphy and Justine L'Esperance, leaders in the Detroit Catholic Worker activities (they have three Houses of Hospitality and a farm) are exchanging vows at a nuptial Mass, January eleventh, the eve of the feast of the Holy Family. I am going to the wedding and from Detroit go to Montreal to see Fr. Pacifique Roy, our dear friend and helper, former chaplain of Maryfarm, who is in a Montreal hospital with a tumor on the brain. We beg prayers and Masses for him.

This Christmas was one of the first Christmases Peter Maurin spent away from home, so I went to Rochester, N.Y., Christmas eve to enjoy the feast with him. Peter is spending the winter with Mrs. Lawrence Weider, whom we call Mother Weider because she automatically becomes a mother to all with whom she comes in contact. She is our oldest friend in Rochester, where we have a very good House of Hospitality, with Joe Ciernicke (if that isn't the way to spell it, excuse me please), in charge. There is a fine young group in Rochester who have been faithful to the work these many years, now. Mother Weider herself has always made her home into a hospitality and many a guest she has nursed back to health and hope. Peter not being too well, she and her husband are making him at home for the winter months, and I am sure he has never spent the winter in such comfort, in a warm big house on the outskirts of Rochester, looking out in every direction on snow covered fields, pine trees and country roads. Visitors come, and Peter goes visiting, and he is sojourning in a modest comfort he has never, in all his seventy hard years of voluntary poverty enjoyed. Living at Maryfarm in a barn on days like this (it is twenty above here and ten above there right now) is for the most active young ones of the movement. It is not as though he could go out and warm up with the wood and an axe. Peter's heart trouble which kept him out of military training as a young man in France, has finally caught up with him and he has had to order his life accordingly. Or rather, let us so order it for him, for he is the meekest and most submissive of men. I am working again on his life, and beg the prayers of our readers that I can make something of it that will inspire others, as he has inspired us.