

# On Conscience

*Dorothy Day*

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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Day often wrote to promote the “arousal of conscience” and the “examination of conscience.” Some pieces explored the nature of conscience, especially as it applied to Catholicism, but Day also wrote to prick readers’ consciences on particular issues. She frequently commented on war, peace, and anti-nuclear themes; on poverty; on race; and on the labor movement. Often touting the primacy of conscience, Day believed that one of the chief objectives of *The Catholic Worker* was to raise Christians’ consciences on these and other matters.

***December, On Pilgrimage (1948) (DDLW#486)*** Linking voluntary poverty to self-sacrifice, Day implies that conscience is crucial to fashioning a Christian attitude and lifestyle aimed at alleviating the suffering of the poor and of victims of injustice. At the beginning of Advent, Day reflects on the importance of examination of conscience. As an example of her own use of conscience, she describes her weaknesses and writes that “the remedy is recollection and silence.” She prays, “enlarge Thou my heart, Lord, that Thou mayest enter in.”

***July-August 1948, “Articles on Distributism – 2” (DDLW#160)*** In making a case for distributism and a “more just distribution of wealth,” Day urges an arousal of conscience in order to raise awareness of the needs of the poor.

***April 1954, “Are the Leaders Insane?” (DDLW#664)*** In this article, Day denounces hydrogen bomb tests and the production of incendiary bombs and chemical weapons. She writes of the tension between obedience to God and to the state. While she acknowledges God’s command to obey secular authority, when that authority conflicts with God’s law, disobedience to the state may be justified. The conscience is the instrument that reminds us of our duty to God for Day. She argues that “people need to be disturbed,” aroused to opposition to the hydrogen bomb and nerve gas. While she explains that individuals should examine their own consciences when it comes to matters of war and peace, including registering for the draft, she clearly sees the role of *The Catholic Worker* as being a supplementary conscience for those individuals.

***July-August 1963, “On Pilgrimage – July/August 1963” (DDLW#805)*** Day’s reflections in this piece focus on civil rights demonstrations in Danville, Virginia. She cites Pope John XXIII’s comments on the rights of conscience in the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, arguing that the non-violent struggle for racial justice is foundational to peace. Both the peace and civil rights movements utilize the rights of conscience to do God’s work.

***December 1965, “On Pilgrimage – December 1965” (DDLW#248)*** The announcement that the second Vatican Council condemned nuclear warfare elicited Day’s approval and sparked her reflections on the nature of conscience. For Day, the decision would lead to a “more enlightened conscience on the part of all men.” She tackles the possibility of following a “wrong or ill-informed conscience” and argues that the consequences of that are mitigated by seeking God’s good as well as by “studying, listening, [and] being ready

to hear . . . opponents' point[s] of view." Day expounds on the primacy of conscience and again examines the struggles that come when one's conscience conflicts with obedience to secular authority.

*May 1970, "On Pilgrimage – Our Spring Appeal" (DDLW#500)* Defining the Catholic Worker Movement in this piece, Day notes the significance of following the conscience. She insists that even though it is necessary to "inform one's conscience," individuals "must follow one's conscience still, even if it is an ill-informed one."

## Chapter 2

# On Pilgrimage

*Catholic Worker Books, New York, 1948*

FOR THE LAST month I have meditated on the use of spiritual weapons. In Father John J. Hugo's pamphlet "Weapons of the Spirit," he advocates as weapons devotion to the Sacred Heart and the Rosary. The love of the humanity of our Lord is the love of our brother. The only way we have to show our love for God is by the love we have for our brother. "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, you have done it unto Me." "You love God as much as the one you love the least."

Love of brother means voluntary poverty, stripping one's self, putting off the old man, denying one's self, etc. It also means nonparticipation in those comforts and luxuries which have been manufactured by the exploitation of others. While our brothers suffer, we must compassionate them, suffer with them. While our brothers suffer from lack of necessities, we will refuse to enjoy comforts. These resolutions, no matter how hard they are to live up to, no matter how often we fail and have to begin over again, are part of the vision and the long-range view which Peter Maurin has been trying to give us these past years. These ideas are expressed in the writings of Eric Gill. And we must keep this vision in mind, recognize the truth of it, the necessity for it, even though we do not, cannot, live up to it. Like perfection. We are ordered to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, and we aim at it, in our intention, though in our execution we may fall short of the mark over and over. St. Paul says, it is by little and by little that we proceed.

If these jobs do not contribute to the common good, we pray God for the grace to give them up. Have they to do with shelter, food, clothing? Have they to do with the works of mercy? Father Tompkins of Nova Scotia says that everyone should be able to place his job in the category of the works of mercy.

This would exclude jobs in advertising, which only increases people's useless desires. In insurance companies and banks, which are known to exploit the poor of this country and of others. Banks and insurance companies have taken over land and built huge collective farms, ranches, plantations, of 30,000, 100,000 acres, and have dispossessed the poor man. Loan and finance companies have further defrauded him. Movies [and] radio have further enslaved him. So that he has no time nor thought to give to his life, either of soul or body. Whatever has contributed to his misery and degradation may be considered a bad job and not to be worked at.

If we examine our conscience in this way, we would soon be driven into manual labor, into humble work, and so would become more like our Lord and our Blessed Mother.

Poverty means nonparticipation. It means what Peter calls regional living. This means fasting from tea, coffee, cocoa, grapefruit, pineapple, etc., from things not grown in the region in which one lives. One day last winter we bought broccoli which had the label on it of a corporation farm in Arizona or Texas, where we had seen men, women, and children working at two o'clock in the morning with miners' lamps on their foreheads, in order to avoid the terrible heat of the day, which often reached 125 degrees. These were homeless migrants, of which there are some million in the United States. Carey McWilliams' *Factories in the Fields*, which you can get at any library, tells of the conditions of these workers. For these there is "no room at the inn."

We ought not to eat food produced under such conditions. We ought not to smoke, not only because it is a useless habit but also because tobacco impoverishes the soil and pauperizes the farmer, and means women and children working in the fields.

Poverty means having a bare minimum in the way of clothes and seeing to it that these are made under decent working conditions, proper wages and hours, etc. The union label tries to guarantee this. Considering the conditions in woolen mills, it would be better to raise one's own sheep and angora goats and rabbits, and spin and weave and make one's own blankets and stockings and suits. Many groups are trying to do these things throughout the country, both as a remedy for unemployment and for more abundant living.

As for the dislocation in employment if everyone started to give up their jobs? Well, decentralized living would take care of such a situation. And when we look at the dirty streets and lots in our slums, the unpainted buildings, the necessity of a nationwide housing project, the tearing down that needs to be done (if we do not in the future wish to have it done in the hard way and have them bombed down), then we can see that there is plenty of employment for all in the line of providing food, clothing, and shelter for our own country and for the world. We should read Eric Gill, A. J. Penty, and Father Vincent McNabb on the machine.

Poverty means not riding on rubber while horrible working conditions prevail in the rubber industry. Read Vicki Baum's *Weeping Wood* and André Gide's *Congo Journey*. Poverty means not riding on rails while bad conditions exist in the coal mines and steel mills. Poverty means not accepting that courteous bribe from the railroads, the clergy rate. Railroads have been built on robbery and exploitation. There are stagecoaches, of course, and we are only about a century past them. But pilgrims used to walk, and so did the saints. They walked from one end of Europe and Russia to the other. We need saints.

Father Meus, the Belgian who is a Chinese citizen since his missionary life began in China, has walked thousands of miles. He said he would dearly love to walk from one end of the United States to the other. Of course, we are not all given the grace to do such things. But it is good to call to mind the *vision*. It is true, indeed, that until we begin to develop a few apostles along these lines, we will have no mass conversions, no social justice, no peace. We need saints. God, give us saints!

How far we all are from it! We do not even see our infirmities. Common sense tells us, "Why live in a slum? It is actually cheaper to live in a model housing project, have heat and hot water, a mauve or pink bath and toilet, etc. We can manage better; we have more time to pray, to meditate, study. We would have more money to give to the poor." Yes, this is true according to the candlelight of common sense, but not according to the flaming heat of the Sun of justice. Yes, we will have more time with modern conveniences, but we will not have more love. "The natural man does not perceive the things of the spirit." We need to be fools for Christ. What if we do have to buy coal by the bucket instead of by the ton? Let us squander money, be as lavish as God is with His graces, as He is with His fruits of the earth.

Let us rejoice in poverty, because Christ was poor. Let us love to live with the poor, because they are specially loved by Christ. Even the lowest, most depraved – we must see Christ in them and love them to folly. When we suffer from dirt, lack of privacy, heat and cold, coarse food, let us rejoice.

When we are weary of manual labor and think, "What foolishness to shovel out ashes, build fires, when we can have steam heat! Why sew when it can be better done on a machine? Why laboriously bake bread when we can buy so cheaply?" Such thoughts have deprived us of good manual labor in our city slums and have substituted shoddy store-bought goods, clothes, and bread.

Poverty and manual labor – they go together. They are weapons of the spirit, and very practical ones, too. What would one think of a woman who refused to wash her clothes because she had no washing machine, or clean her house because she had no vacuum, or sew because she had no machine? In spite of the usefulness of the machine, and we are not denying it, there is still much to be done by hand. So much, one might say, that it is useless to multiply our tasks, go in for work for work's sake.

But we must believe in it for Christ's sake. We must believe in poverty and manual labor for love of Christ and for love of the poor. It is not true love if we do not know them, and we can only know them by living with them, and if we love with knowledge we will love with faith, hope, and charity.

On the one hand, there is the sadness of the world – and on the other hand, when I went to church today



and the place was flooded with sunshine, and it was a clear, cold day outside, . . . suddenly my heart was so flooded with joy and thankfulness and so overwhelmed at the beauty and the glory and the majesty of our God that I could only think of St. Dionysius, “Concerning the Godhead”:

It is the Cause and Origin and Being and Life of all creation. And It is to them that fall away from It a Voice that doth recall them and a Power by which they rise; and to them that have stumbled into a corruption of the Divine Image within them, It is a Power of Renewal and Reform; and a Sacred Grounding to them that feel the shock of unholy assault, and a Security to them which stand; an upward Guidance to them that are being drawn unto It, and a Principle of Illumination to them that are being enlightened; a Principle of Perfection to them that are being perfected; a Principle of Deity to them that are being deified; and of Simplicity to them that are being brought into simplicity; and of Unity to them that are being brought into unity.

The immanence of God in all things! “In Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). “He is not far from every one of us” (Acts 17:27).

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole strength.

And these words which I command thee this day shall be in thy heart. And thou shalt tell them to thy children. And thou shalt meditate upon them sitting in thy house, and walking on thy journey, sleeping and rising. And thou shalt bind them as a sign on thy hand; and they shall be and move [as frontlets] between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them in the entry, and on the doors of thy house. (Deut. 6:4-9)

THE WINTER before Tamar was born, we lived in a little apartment on West Street looking out over the Hudson River docks which was as sun-filled as the chapel in which I meditated. And on the doors of that little apartment, down the street from St. Christopher’s Church, in an apartment over a tavern, there were those holy words enclosed and tacked upon the doorpost inside that house. I was strangely moved when it was explained to me by a Russian Jew, a Communist, what it meant. I understand one can find many an apartment in New York, and doubtless in many of our cities with their large Jewish populations, with such small metal containers, hanging unnoticed by the door frame. I feel like going to one of the Hebrew stores on the East Side and purchasing one so that hereafter, always, it may hang on the door of my house. We need these reminders.

When the world is too much with us, how wonderful to think on these things, to let the mind rest on these things, to rejoice in these words: God is Light, Infinite Beauty, Goodness, “for there is no good save only God.”

One very dreary, dark morning a year ago, when the dark, cold mist hung like a slime over the streets and tenements around Mott Street, I had been at Mass down at Transfiguration Church, where there was a mission going on. The priest gave a very good homily on the commandment “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” Each day he was talking on the commandments, one by one.

In his talk he said that any murmuring against God could be included in the violation of this commandment. He talked of “acceptance” of the will of God in whatever the day brought forth. His talk emphasized the virtue of abandonment to Divine Providence. He even brought in the weather.

And yet as I left the church and stopped to exchange some words with a neighbor, my first words were “Miserable weather, isn’t it?” I was immediately conscious of my lapse and laughed at myself as I went down the street.

But it is true that most of our complaining can be construed as thoughtless complaining against God and His Providence. I remember reading once in Romain Rolland that we Western people have lost the beautiful quality of acceptance. Many writers on the East have talked of the philosophical calm and “acceptance” of the Eastern, the Oriental, in the face of heat and cold, disaster and suffering.

Cynically, our Westerner may say that is why they do nothing about poverty and filth and disease. Many of our soldiers were disgusted rather than pitiful at the poverty they saw everywhere, as though it came of choice and sloth. I have heard them express themselves so in regard to our own South. Certainly we Westerners

have poverty, filth, and disease side by side with our wealth and comfort. I do not think much of that wealth and comfort, that shining civilization of gadgets and electric lights and skyscrapers, radio and movies. There was the ancient city of Ur out of which Abraham came. I like to turn my thoughts back to Memphis, that great city of Egypt, and Babylon, whose walls extended for forty miles in circumference. And there the Jews sat and wept when they remembered Zion, Jerusalem the golden, so many times razed to the ground.

“Praise the Lord, O my soul. Let all that is within me praise His holy name.”

No matter what happens, it is possible to praise, and it is impossible to praise God without that swelling of joy within the breast.

And people! What about people – the evil that men do? I think of Sister Peter Claver and her saying that women’s job is to love.

One summer Sister Peter Claver was rebuilding an old farmhouse over in Jersey which was going to be used as a retreat house for Negroes. The place was a wreck – it had not been used for years – and there was work to do in roofing it, painting it, [and] repairing it, and Sister had no money. She came to the Catholic Worker [house] and asked if anyone wanted to work for God. She had to beg for every scrap of paint, shingle, and lumber she put into it, getting what she needed week by week.

Two of our men volunteered. Both of them were men who drank, one steadily, the other periodically. John, who drank steadily, went out to Jersey for the summer and never touched a drop for the months he was there. Hugh went out and worked hard, but again and again was tempted and fell. In addition to his other work, he carved a huge beam which separated the sanctuary from the pews in the room they made into a chapel, and he made a crucifix. He had learned these crafts at the Catholic Worker house.

Sister never became discouraged in her loving charity. She loved these men and brought out the best in them. I’ve been inclined to attribute that loving warmth of Sister Peter Claver to the fact that she is half-Jewish and half-Irish. It is in her nature to be warm and loving, to see the good in others, I argue to myself. But true it is, she forgives seventy times seven, she sees always the good in the other, she sees a man as made in the image and likeness of God, a temple of the Holy Ghost, the brother of Christ.

Oh, the joy there is in that warmth and love. Bernanos wrote, “Every particle of Christ’s divine charity is today more precious for your security – for your security, I say – than all the specie in the vaults of the American government.”

ADVENT IS a time of waiting, of expectation, of silence. Waiting for our Lord to be born. A pregnant woman is so happy, so content. She lives in such a garment of silence, and it is as though she were listening to hear the stir of life within her. One always hears that stirring compared to the rustling of a bird in the hand. But the intentness with which one awaits such stirring is like nothing so much as a blanket of silence.

Be still. Did I hear something?

Be still and see that I am God.

Zundel, in *Our Lady of Wisdom*, has some beautiful passages on silence:

Do we understand at last that action must be born in silence, and abide in silence, and issue in silence, and that its power must be an emanation and the radiation of silence, since its sole aim is to make men capable of hearing the Word that silently reverberates in their souls?

All speech and reasoning, all eloquence and science, all methods and all psychologies, all slogans and suggestions are not worth a minute of silence in which the soul, completely open, yields itself to the embrace of the Spirit.

In solitude Christ speaks to the heart, as a modest lover who embraces not His beloved before all the world.

In silence we hear so much that is beautiful. The other day I saw a young mother who said, “The happiest hour of the day is that early morning hour when I lie and listen to the baby practicing sounds and words. She has such a gentle little voice.”

St. James says, “If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man.” And how much more women need this gift of silence. It is something to be prayed for. Our Lady certainly had it. How little of her there is in the Gospel, and yet all generations have called her blessed.

Behold, how small a fire, how great a forest it kindles. And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity. The tongue is placed among our members, defiling the whole body, and setting on fire the course of our life, being itself set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird and serpent and the rest is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But the tongue no man can tame – it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

With it we bless God the Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made after the likeness of God.  
[ James 3:5-9]

To love with understanding and without understanding. To love blindly, and to folly. To see only what is lovable. To think only on these things. To see the best in everyone around, their virtues rather than their faults. To see Christ in them.

Many people think an examination of conscience is a morbid affair. Péguy has some verses which Donald Gallagher read to me once in the St. Louis House of Hospitality. (He and Cy Echele opened the house there.) They were about examination of conscience. There is a place for it, he said, at the beginning of the Mass. “I have sinned in thought, word, and deed, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.” But after you get done with it, don’t go on brooding about it; don’t keep thinking of it. You wipe your feet at the door of the church as you go in, and you do not keep contemplating your dirty feet.

Here is my examination at the beginning of Advent, at the beginning of a new year. Lack of charity, criticism of superiors, of neighbors, of friends and enemies. Idle talk, impatience, lack of self-control and mortification towards self, and of love towards others. Pride and presumption. (It is good to have visitors – one’s faults stand out in the company of others.) Self-will, desire not to be corrected, to have one’s own way. The desire in turn to correct others, impatience in thought and speech.

The remedy is recollection and silence. Meanness about giving time to others and wasting it myself. Constant desire for comfort. First impulse is always to make myself comfortable. If cold, to put on warmth; if hot, to become cool; if hungry, to eat; and what one likes – always the first thought is of one’s own comfort. It is hard for a woman to be indifferent about little material things. She is a homemaker, a cook; she likes to do material things. So let her do them *for others*, always. Woman’s job is to love. Enlarge Thou my heart, Lord, that Thou mayest enter in.

And now, with all this talk of silence, I finish this long account of the year. I send the book out with diffidence. It is the work of a journalist who writes because it is her talent; it has been her means of livelihood. And it is sent out with the hopes that it will *sell* so that the printing bill will be paid, and enough [will be] left over to bring out another book next year – perhaps the book about Peter Maurin as well as a book by another of the Catholic Worker editors. We write also to help support the work which we are doing, because we have a very big family, ranging in age from the infant twins at 115 Mott Street to an eighty-four-year-old woman who wandered in from the streets. It is written most personally because I am a woman who can write no other way. If it is preaching and didactic in parts, it is because I am preaching and teaching and encouraging myself on this narrow road we are treading.

“Life,” said St. Teresa, “is but a night spent in an uncomfortable inn, crowded together with other wayfarers.”

There are bills to pay at an inn, of course, and they are one of the reasons which led me to send this manuscript forth in the care of St. Joseph, patron of all families. May God bless it, and you who read it.



## Chapter 3

# Articles on Distributionism

We have a farm at Newburgh of nearly six acres. We are raising hay, corn, vegetables, pigs, chickens, a cow. Every few days the dog, King, has brought in woodchucks and some of them weigh eight pounds. He must have caught fifty this year. Down at the docks the Negroes fish without a license for eels. It is woodchuck season and you can eat the woodchucks now. You skin them as you do rabbits, and roasted with sage dressing they make a good meal, and they are cleaner than chicken or hog. Right now Carmela and Florence are sitting out under the crabapple tree stringing beans. There are peas and broccoli and swiss chard besides lettuce for salads. It is getting easier to feed the forty or so retreatants who come every few weeks to the farm and the twenty who are here all summer.

I tell these things to make the mouth water. In the fall we are going to put in a field of wheat and next summer, God willing, we will have our own flour for the good whole wheat loaves that come out of the oven every day.

For the average worker it is more and more difficult to get food. Butter, oleo and fat are sky high. Meat costs a fortune. Food prices have gone up 133% and milk 85%. We saw these figures in a magazine recently to advertise milk as a food. How to live, how to feed a family! Most of all, how to find shelter!

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Every month I shall have to explain the title to this series. We are not expecting utopia here on this earth. But God meant things to be much easier than we have made them. A man has a natural right to food, clothing, and shelter. A certain amount of goods is necessary to lead a good life. A family needs work as well as bread. Properly is proper to man. We must keep repeating these things. Eternal life begins now. "All the way to heaven is heaven, because He said, 'I am the Way.'" The Cross is there of course, but "in the cross is joy of spirit." And love makes all things easy. If we are putting off the old man and putting on Christ, then we are walking in love, and love is what we all want. But it is hard to love, from the human standpoint and from the divine standpoint, in a two room apartment. We are eminently practical, realistic.

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Irene has charge of the clothes at Mott street (besides having charge of the women's house and writing for the paper, and seeing visitors) and the other day a mother of eleven children, nine of them living, came in to get clothes. They are all living at the Municipal lodging house on Third street. The other afternoon when the rain had stopped Irene and I walked down Mott street to Bleecker where Mott street ends, then over to the Bowery and up one block to third, and there, just to the east of the Bowery, is the big building that used to be the Bowery Y.M.C.A. and which is now a municipal shelter.

I was familiar with the place because it used to have a "clean up system" before the blessed days of D.D.T. which you can use like a talcum powder, and there once in a while I used to bring my old friend Mr. Breen. He was a very dignified old man, with a beautiful beard and he walked with a cane. He looked like Chief Justice Hughes. He had worked as Sunday editor of the Washington Post, and he had worked for the N.Y.

World, written reviews for the Commonweal, poetry for us, and had assisted us, during his last years, in answering our large correspondence. His wife and children had died, he had fallen into bad times and during the depression we became his family. For a time he had slept in the world's largest bedroom, on a dock down at South Ferry, where the Municipality put up about 1,200 men every night. He used to tell us a story of one old man who evidently thought he was in a cathedral, so vast was the long dim dock at night, and in his night shirt, with his long sticks of legs making him look like a strange bird, he used to "make the stations" down the inner aisle between the double-decker beds, pausing at every seventh bed to pray.

Mr. Breen had many such stories of the poor. We had to take him, as I said before, to the Bowery Y, for a clean-up every now and then. One could bathe at leisure, have one's clothes cleaned and pressed, and have a shave and a hair cut all for seventy-five cents. We used to go in state in a taxi cab. It was very hard to get Mr. Breen to go, and he would only go with me. As we went up to the desk and the very courteous young man behind it, Mr. Breen would look at him haughtily and say in lordly fashion, "I have come to be deloused." Then he would turn to me with a sweeping bow, thank me for my escort, and I would leave him there for the night.

Now this building is part of the municipal lodging house. On either side of the entrance hall there are beautiful rural scenes painted on the walls, a road through the woods, a country field, and around the tiled halls, children play, from one-year old and up, slipping in and out between the hordes of young and old, black and white, drunk and sober men who are also served, who also are "clients" getting their lodging for the night and several meals a day. The men were registering at the desk as we came in. They all could write their names on the ledger, they were all literate. After they registered they were all taken upstairs to the dormitories to bed. It was five-thirty. No one was taken in after nine.

Downstairs meals were still being served. They had soup or stew, as we could see from the windows outside, two slices of bread and huge mugs of cocoa.

I don't know how many thousands of men are served every day, are lodged every day. What was occupying our minds was the fact that forty-five families were lodged there too, with six, eight, nine children. The mothers sat around, the fathers came in to report the result of their day's search for rooms, (and who wants families of four children even, let alone nine?) The children restlessly ran from end to end of the hall, and we tried to talk.

"Isn't there a play room?" Yes, but the colored, the Puerto Rican the Italian and the "American" children fought. It was nerve-racking. There were separate bed rooms for different members of the family, it was not overcrowded, there is a doctor for the women and children. The city was doing what it could. Up at 26th street, another branch of the Municipal lodging house, there were other families and more men. What they were trying to do was bring all the men down here to Third street, and get the women and children away from the Bowery and up to 26th where there was a playground, a dead end street, the river, and more light and air.

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Yesterday two Irish Christian brothers came to call and told us of Harlem where their order had a school in what was the largest parish in the world. There were thirty thousand people in it, it was estimated. Families fleeing the hunger of Porto Rico were living three families to an apartment. It was the most congested, most neglected section of the city. With all these thousands, the church on Sunday was only half full. It is not a leakage from the Church, it is a landslide.

We have been working on these problems at the Catholic Worker for the past fifteen years, and we can say with all sincerity, that things have never been so bad as they are now, even in the worst of depression. Now men may have work, but they lack homes. There may be odd jobs, poorly-paid jobs, something coming in the way of work, but the housing situation gets worse and worse. Everywhere it is the same. In every city and town the story is the same. There are no apartments, there are no houses.

Mr. O'Daniel, father of the eleven we were visiting, had had a job as janitor. In order to make their profits and avoid the penalties of rent gouging, the owners of the building he was in had transformed a twelve-apartment house into a twenty-four-apartment house of two and a half rooms each. The board of health got after the

owner for having a large family of children in the basement, and he had let them go. No one wants to employ families, none want to rent to families.

And of course we can understand the home owners' point of view. Once we saw a cartoon in the Saturday Evening Post of a mother rebuking her child. "Don't deface the wall, William, we own this house." In other words, what you own is taken care of. Property means responsibility. Property is proper to man.

This is a long preamble. But what a need there is to arouse the conscience! To call attention to the poor! "Are there any more poor?" This fatuous question has been asked me so often by well meaning listeners at meetings that one must answer it. "What about the bricklayer and his huge wages? Never have wages been so high." And what do high wages mean when there is no just price? Anyway, with all the talk of high wages, most of the people around here that I know are working for thirty and thirty five dollars a week. Also the great white collar class of young men and young women are getting along by living at home, profiting by the industry and thrift and better housing opportunity of their parents.

People sooner or later will have to admit that things are rapidly getting worse, not better. People said during the war that Hitler had the theory that the bigger the lie, the easier it was to get people to believe it. It seems to me we have quite a number of these big lies.

There is the lie of high wages.

There is the lie of widespread ownership.

There is the plentiful production lie.

There is the everyone consuming more lie.

In the little pamphlet DISTRIBUTISM by S. Sagar, a reprint of six articles from the Weekly Review of London, says that the great danger of today is not a revolt of the proletariat but the lethargy of the proletariat. He also says that the "preliminary to any step taken towards Distributism was the creation of the will to take them."

Here is one quotation from Pope Pius XII which ought to be considered a mandate along these lines.

"We confirm what only recently we had occasion to expound. For Catholics, the only path to be followed in solving the social problem is clearly outlined in the doctrine of the Church. The blessing of God will descend on your work if you do not swerve in the slightest degree from this path. You have no need to think up specious solutions or to work with facile and empty formulas for results that prove only a delusion. What you can and ought to strive for **is a more just distribution of wealth**. This is and this remains a central point in Catholic social doctrine.

Joseph T. Nolan writes in *Orationes Fratres*: Too long has idle talk made out of Distributism as something medieval and myopic, as if four modern popes were somehow talking nonsense when they said: the law should favor widespread ownership (Leo XIII); land is the most natural form of property (Leo XIII and Pius XII); wages should enable a man to purchase land (Leo XIII and Pius XI); the family is most perfect when rooted in its own holding (Pius XII); agriculture is the first and most important of all the arts (Pius VII); and the tiller of the soil still represents the natural order of things willed by God (Pius XII).

"But in general there is so little facing of the problem of the land, or of machinery, which the Franciscan Belliot called "one of the gravest and most disquieting elements in the social problem." How many Catholics, especially liturgists, share the anxiety of the present pope at "the agglomeration of huge populations in the cities and the diminution of modern man by the domination of the machine? Neither the nihilists nor the optimists who still dream of abundant production can fill our present need; a lot closer are the realists who are willing to rebuild an organic Christian society from the ground up, from the soil, who might escape the very real prospects of unemployment, hunger and despair."

There are numerous steps that can be taken, outlined in *THE RESTORATION OF PROPERTY* by Hilaire Belloc. But how to create in men a desire to take them, a hope that they will be able to take them?

Things have gotten so desperate, Mr. Sagar says, goods have gotten so scarce, the effort to find housing has become so heart breaking, that now at last today, after these many years, DISTRIBUTISM IS GOING TO

BE DISCUSSED.

The alternatives are not capitalism or socialism. Nor are they the corporatism that Fr. Massey seems to be indicating in AMERICA. We must take into consideration the nature of man and his needs, not just cash—commodities, food and clothing, but a home, a bit of land, and the tools with which to work, part ownership in workshops and stores and factories.

*Distributism does not mean that everyone must be a farmer.* The Distributist thinks in terms of the village economy, and as for the size of the CITY (the city of God) which Cardinal Suhard talks of our building, that is a matter of situation. It may be five hundred, it may be five thousand, it may be fifty thousand. The main thing to do is to distribute the cities before the atom bomb does it. We are not suggesting that it be done by force but by education. If that seems too slow a method, probably depression, war, hunger and homelessness will play their part. We only know it is not human to live in a city of ten million. It is not only not human, it is not possible. “Cities are the occasion of sin,” Fr. Vincent McNabb said, and of course any theologian will say that we should flee the occasions of sin. Pope Pius XII pointed out that it was difficult for modern youth to live in the cities without heroic virtue. (And it was never intended that the good life should demand heroic virtue.)

Distributism does not mean that we throw out the machine. The machine, Peter Maurin used to say, should be the extension of the hand of man. If we could do away with the assembly line, the slavery of the machine, and the useless and harmful and destructive machines, we would be doing well.

In the psalms it says, “Lord, make me desire to walk in the way of thy commandments.” Daniel was called a man of desires, and because he was a man of desires, the Lord heard him.

But how, are we going to get people to desire, and to hope, when men like Fr. Becker writing in America; Fr. Higgins, of the N.C.W.C. and Fr. FitzSimmons of Notre Dame, accept the status quo, endorse social security instead of pointing to the enormous dangers that go with it and in effect combat the desire of the people for land and for bread, and feed them on husks that the acceptance of the city and the factory result in.

Cardinal Suhard of Paris and Fr. De Lubac, S.J., both cry out against the refusal of some traditionalists to be co-creators with God and use the tools which science has put in man’s hands. But Fr. De Lubac also writes (in the Dublin Review) “Does not the discovery of new values involve the depreciation of other, perhaps more fundamental ones? And does it not breed, even while the discovery is still modest and tentative, a kind of intoxication, so that the passionate interest it arouses tends to make men oblivious of everything else, even of essentials? And so ambiguous situations pile up, leading inevitably to crises whose outcome no one can safely prophecy.”

We are sure that these priests aforementioned have the interests of the worker at heart, and that in their social ideas and studies they are trying to remedy situations which have become well nigh intolerable. But the essentials are food, clothing and shelter. The essential is ownership which brings with it responsibility, and what is more essential than the earth on which we all spring, and from which comes our food, our clothes, our furniture, our homes.

It is as a woman, a mother, speaking for the family and the home, that I protest the work of “priest-sociologists,” who in their desire to help the worker, are going along with him in his errors, and are accepting the easy way of capitalist industrialism which leads to collectivism and the totalitarian state.

To conclude this particular installment of our series of articles on Distributism, the warning is there, Isaiah 26, 5.

“He shall bring down them that dwell on high; the high city he shall lay low. He shall bring it down even unto the ground; he shall pull it down even to the dust. The foot shall tread it down; the feet of the poor, the steps of the needy.”

So, “strengthen ye the feeble hands, and confirm the weak knees. Say to the faint hearted, take courage and fear not. Behold, your God will bring the bread of recompense. God Himself will come and save YOU.”



## Chapter 4

# Are The Leaders Insane?

When the Lord washed the feet of his apostles on Holy Thursday, St. Peter, head of the Church, questioned Him, “Lord, is it for Thee to wash my feet?” That question is always being asked. He knew how hard it was for us to understand it. “Do you understand what it is I have done to you? You hail me as master and indeed I am. . . if I have washed your feet, I who am the Master and the Lord, you in your turn ought to wash each other’s feet.”

## City of God

St. Augustine in his **City of God** says that God never intended man to dominate his fellows. He was to dominate the beasts of the field, the fowls of the air, what crawled upon the earth, but men were not to dominate each other. He preferred shepherds to kings. It was man himself who insisted on having a worldly king though he was warned what would happen to him. God allowed the prophets to anoint the kings and once men had accepted their kings they were supposed to show them respect, to obey the authority they had set up. To obey, that is, in all that did not go against their conscience. St. Peter was ordered by lawful authority not to preach in the name of Jesus, and he said he had to obey God rather than man, and he left prison to go out again to the market place and preach the Gospel. Over and over again, men had to disobey lawful authority to follow the voice of their conscience.

This obedience to God and disobedience to the State has over and over again happened through history.

It is time again to cry out against our “leaders,” to question whether or not, since it is not for us to say that they are evil men, they are sane men.

On Laetare Sunday, a day of rejoicing in the midst of a season of penance, three stories in The New York Times caught my eye. On the first page of the news of the week in review, there is an account of the “new alarm” throughout the world over the setting off of another hydrogen bomb in the Pacific. The President said of this latest test:

## Quite Clear

“It was quite clear that this time something must have happened that we had never experienced before, and must have surprised and astonished the scientists.”

It is decided that we must learn more about it, so a film will be released on April 7<sup>th</sup> which will show the tests being made. Russia, too, is releasing data about her hydrogen bombs. She has given detailed reports and compared the force of the explosion to the million ton meteor that blasted more than a hundred square miles of forest in Siberia in 1908.

Both Russia and America warn that the use of these weapons will wipe out civilization. Those who are caught in the middle, all those lands on which we have placed our air bases, including England, look upon this arms race with horror. Russia's foothold in Guatemala is one base of a sort, compared to the innumerable bases we have around the world.

Television, radio and press have given accounts of the poor fishermen who were showered with dust from the last atomic explosion and are now suffering the consequences.

There is "an ebbing of hopes for the long standing problem of the Suez," there is "furore over Scorpion Pass," there is the terrible war in Indo-China for which we are paying from 60 to 80 per cent of the costs. There is bitterness in France towards us for paying with money, while they pay with human lives for their last outpost of empire.

On the last page of the first section of the Times, there is a column-long story of Denver's place in our war preparations, with the heading, Denver Calmed on War Gas Fear.

## Deadly Gas

The description of the manufacture of this deadly gas and how it kills in four minutes of frightful agony is told in detail. "The arsenal produces this weapon 24 hours a day, seven days a week." I wonder how many are working in this plant, and have been working in it in the last fourteen years. Until this GB, as it is called, was declassified by the army last week, most workers did not know what they were making. Will we be forgiven for our ignorance?

## Increase Production

Some projects include the filling of mustard gas shells, an assembly line for incendiary bombs that make World War II napalm obsolete. The army plans to increase the arsenal production from sixty million to ninety million beginning June first. The arsenal was built in 1942 and produced the jellied gasoline incendiary bombs that "burned out the heart of the Japanese industrial area long before the atomic bomb explosion." On March 10, 1945, Guam-based B 29's dropped 1,500 tons of Denver made incendiary bombs on Tokyo. About 83,000 persons were killed and an estimated 41,000 injured. More than half of Tokyo was destroyed in that raid with more than a million made homeless." Besides Tokyo 69 other enemy cities were attacked with these bombs.

## Are we frightening ourselves to death?

Lewis Mumford in a column long letter on the editorial page of the Times strongly condemns the leaders of the country for their secrecy in regard to these horrible weapons, with the faith that once known, the people themselves will revolt against this madness. He is afraid that at a given moment our self-induced fears will pull the trigger that will start the destruction of civilization around the world.

Are there not enough Americans still possessed of sanity, he asks, who will call a stop to the irrational decisions which are automatically bringing us close to total catastrophe? And he points out: "There are many alternative courses to the policy to which we have committed ourselves practically without debate. The worst of all these alternatives, submission to Communist totalitarianism, would still be far wiser than the final destruction of civilization.

"As for the best of these alternatives, a policy of working firmly for justice and cooperation, and free intercourse with all other peoples, in the faith that love begets love as surely as hatred begets hatred, would in all probability, be the one instrument capable of piercing the strong political armor of our present enemies.

## Mass Suicide

“Once the facts of our policy of total extermination are publicly canvassed, and the final outcome, mass suicide is faced, I believe that the American people are still sane enough to come to a wiser decision than our government has yet made. They will realize that retaliation is no protection; that total extermination of both sides is not victory; that a constant state of morbid fear, suspicion and hatred is not security; that in short what seems like unlimited power has become impotence.”

Let us deal with our own massive sins, he cries out and he concludes that if as a nation we have become mad, it is time for the world to take note of that madness, and he asks that the voice of the sane be heard again in the land.

## Prosperity

And yet how can that voice be heard when the Denver story listing all the defense plants which are bringing prosperity to Colorado, says “the uneasiness of some in the Denver area about the nerve gas does not affect Colorado’s enthusiasm for the part it can play in what President Eisenhower has called”the new look.”

## How Rejoice?

And yet in the face of these accounts we are told by St. Paul to rejoice and to rejoice always. Fr. Henri de Lubac, the great French Jesuit, wrote in his **Drama of Atheist Humanism**, “So long as we talk and argue and busy ourselves on the plane of this world, evil seems to be stronger. More than that, whether evil distresses us or whether we exalt it, it alone seems real. The thing to do is to enter upon another plane, to find that fourth dimension which represents the kingdom of the spirit. Then freedom is queen, then God triumphs and man with him.”

## Worst Happened

My favorite quotation from Juliana of Norwich is her reassurance that the worst has already happened and has been remedied—that is the Fall of man, and his redemption by Christ. Looked at in the light of eternity we have nothing to fear.

But it is not so easy to separate the city of God and the city of this world. It is not so easy for a mother and father of a young and growing family to face them around the supper table and contemplate only fear and suffering for them in the time to come. It is all very well to say we must go to the source of all strength, to drink at the living fountain of Christ, but can we go from that fount of Love to a factory where nerve gas and incendiary bombs are manufactured?

When we have talked of a general strike it is of such work and of such evil that we are thinking; when we talk of non-payment of taxes it is of the money which is going to Indo-China in the form of these incendiary bombs and the planes to drop them that we are thinking. It is not thus that we can love God and our brother; it is not in this way that we can love our enemy.

## People Need Disturbing

When it is said that we disturb people too much by the words pacifism and anarchism, I can only think that people need to be disturbed, that their consciences need to be aroused, that they do indeed need to look into their work, and study new techniques of love and poverty and suffering for each other. Of course the

remedies are drastic, but then too the evil is a terrible one and we are all involved, we are all guilty, and most certainly we are all going to suffer. The fact that we have “the faith,” that we go to the sacraments, is not enough. “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” with napalm, nerve gas, our hydrogen bomb, our “new look.”

Each one of us must make our decisions as to what he should do, each one must examine his conscience and beg God for strength. Should one register for the draft? Should one accept conscientious objector status in the army or out of it, taking advantage of the exceptions allowed, but accepting the fact of the draft? Should one pay tax which supports this gigantic program?

I realize how difficult this is to decide. If one is unmarried and strong physically, it is easier to make a decision to do only day labor or work without pay. But there are many whose mental and physical strength is not equal to this decision and there is a withholding tax taken from even the smallest salary. Sometimes one can only make a gesture of protest. It is not for any one to judge his fellow man on how far he can go in resisting participation in preparation for war. In the very works of mercy which we are performing, we at the Catholic Worker are being aided by those who earn what they do only because they pay income tax for war. Oh yes, the editors of **The Catholic Worker** know only too well how far we too are involved in the city of this world. Perhaps Bob Ludlow, who left us much against our will, felt that he was being more honest in permitting a withholding tax to be taken from his meager wage as hospital attendant than working for nothing for the Catholic Worker. Who knows the heart of another? The temptation is always there to go out on one's own, to walk the lone path of a St. Francis rather than the community way of a St. Benedict.

## All Involved

I write thus frankly to let our readers know that we realize that we are all involved, that we are not trying to place on the shoulders of others the heavy burdens of knowledge and responsibility and are not bearing them ourselves. This is the greatest of problems today, this problem of war and peace, and involves every man, woman and child in the country. It is a bigger problem by far than Senator McCarthy, than Guatemala, than Puerto Rico and the recession. We are one world and all men are brothers. We must pray to learn to love, to have faith in love.

Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief; take away my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh; in thee have I hoped, let me never be confounded.