

Day After Day - July-August 1934

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Describes the church and community life of a nearby parish in the midst of a heat wave. Reports on her first meeting with the Interracial Committee and describes the hard realities of Peter Maurin's work in the new office in Harlem. (DDLW #280).

A heavy heat continues to hang over the city. When I hurry out at seven o'clock there is a haze over the river a few blocks down, sparkling in the sun, but no sign of the thundershowers that have been promised for the last five days.

It is pleasant before Mass to sit and meditate in the little Italian church down on Twelfth street early in the morning. On the left-hand side the open windows look out on fire escapes and roofs, green-edged with plants. Close to the church window there is corn growing in a tub, tomato plants, basilica, and other pots of herbs which are fragrant if you crush them between your fingers. People are leaning out of their windows already, trying to get a breath of air.

Inside the Church of Our Lady Help of Christians, the two Italian girls sing the Mass with joyous natural voices, trilling through the Kyrie Eleison. The priest, weighed down with his heavy robes, moves with intent stillness through the sacrifice of the Mass.

I love this church of the Salesian fathers. It is indeed what a church should be, the center of the community. Every morning at the seven and eight o'clock masses which are sung there is a goodly gathering of people, not just devout old ladies and men, but many young ones, too.

Before and after mass there is always a priest hearing confessions.

Every evening from five o'clock on to past nine, people are dropping in, before supper, on their way home from market, from work, from play on the streets—everyone is living on the streets these hot days. There is a crowd at the recitation of the rosary and Benediction. The whole congregation sings the hymns and litanies. And even those priests who are not on duty are there, somewhere in evidence. The church is their dearest home, and they evidently love to be contemplating the humanity of Christ, present there in the tabernacle.

Every afternoon the pastor has arranged that a shower be rigged up to the fire hydrant out in front of the church from three to six, so that the kids of the neighborhood can bathe these hot summer days. When I dropped in to Benediction the other night the shower was still going, and a little baby of two was wandering up and down the gutter which had miraculously become a speeding brook, wetting her shoes and socks, and occasionally all the rest of her as she sat now and again.

Action of this kind taken in the neighborhood makes the pastor beloved. He's a zealous man, and yesterday at the ten o'clock mass he was passing out mass books for the young men and women—those not-too-devout ones who think that religion is something out-of-date and un-American.

In addition to a parish school, the church co-operates with the Keating Day Nursery across the street, where the various associations have their communion breakfasts and many meetings. There is a regular settlement there and activities are always going on, winter and summer. There is also a camp, where the children are sent for a few weeks in the summer.

There is the right feeling about this parish, with everyone working together for the Lord.

Last week I attended a meeting of the Interracial Committee, to which I had been appointed at the mass meeting held last month at Town Hall. There were a dozen there, and everyone seemed to be in the humor for hard work and definite action. I've never served on a committee before, but I am glad I am on this one. We are going to do a good deal of investigating of complaints as to churches, schools and institutions where there is said to be discrimination against the Negro and take up specific examples and try to rectify them.

Father La Farge was at the meeting as its spiritual adviser, and he told me he had paid a call on Peter Maurin at the new branch headquarters up in Harlem. There had been no money to turn on the electricity, nor yet money for candles, so Peter receives callers who come in the evening in the dark, or, rather, with just the light of the street outside. Father La Farge said that all he could see in the encircling gloom was Peter's forefinger, motioning in the air as he was making points.

The work in Harlem continues apace. There are street meetings three times a week on different corners up and down Lenox avenue, which go on until well into the night and small hours of the morning.

Mr. Hergenhen is the commissar, and he and Peter live on soup a good deal of the time. They have to beg for their food, or for money to buy it. I picked up Peter's prayer book the other day, a little red pamphlet printed at the Monastery of the Precious Blood out in Brooklyn, and on one of the fly leaves was listed some of his needs. "Food, stencils, paper, pamphlets, etc." He didn't need to jot them down to remember them. Maybe it was a little reminder for our Lord.

Vegetable soup—that's Peter's old standby. So yesterday, Sunday, when he came down to spend the day at the office on Fifteenth street we made a huge kettle of a soup the like of which he had never seen before. It was a cold beet borscht (can it be that we are being influenced by Moscow, or is it just the East Side?), made from a can of beets, a chopped-up cucumber, green-topped onions, hard-boiled egg, potatoes and sour cream. All mixed together, a little dill chopped up on top, and made good and cold in the icebox (no cooking at all needed)—it was a delicious feed for a hot day. We had enough to have it for breakfast, dinner and supper.