

Flight From the City

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Summary: Admits that it is a struggle to reconcile personal goals and life in community, especially on the land. Says there are many ways to get away from the city. Keywords: farming communes (DDLW #650).

We are beginning to collect letters from families who have gone to the land and we will print as many of them as we can, trying to choose those which are most helpful in clarifying the problem. One problem which stands out immediately is this. Each one wishes to be on his own. Each one wishes his own farm, his own land, and too often has gone too far from town and job and neighbor to cooperate with others. Some wish others to join them, but are unwilling to join anyone else. Peter Maurin used to speak of a village economy, of agronomic universities, of farming communes. Most of the families reading the *Catholic Worker* have dashed off to distant parts where land is cheap, getting away, not only from the city but also from friends and other families who have worried them with constant discussions and criticisms. Community is the hardest problem of all. "Sharing" is too often interpreted to mean that what is yours is mine and what is mine is mine.

What is the gospel answer to this problem? "Give to him who asks of you, and from him who would borrow of thee, do not turn away." "If anyone would go to law with thee and take thy tunic, let him take thy cloak as well; and whoever forces thee to go for one mile, go with him two." "You therefore are to be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Usually when we quote the sermon on the mount and speak in terms of the gospels, we are attacked on the ground that we do not distinguish between counsel and precept. But our Lord said, "A new PRECEPT I give unto you, that you love others as I have loved you," and that meant he gave his life for others.

One of these days we will collect all the articles we have in THE CATHOLIC WORKER on the land movement and on community and print them in book form. (When we have the money.) Then it will be seen that for 20 years we have consistently written and talked these same ideas, that we have admitted that the works of mercy, commanded in the 25th chapter of St. Matthew as a condition of our salvation, do indeed interfere in the land movement, but that if we did not mind being dependent like little children we would somehow get by, we would somehow survive and many others with us. Multitudes have passed through our farms and received refreshment and consolation and spiritual light too. And that is not to say that we have not suffered with it all. Criticism, ingratitude, faithlessness, have too often been the reward. Each one seeketh his own. No one can endure on asceticism or on work. There is

usually a group who work hard holding things together, doing the palpable visible things; and there is a group too of critics, of talkers; indoctrinators, tearing the Catholic Worker movement apart, but still acknowledging it to be their greatest happiness and joy in life.

God has brought us all together to be instruments of each other's salvation and if ever the old man is to be put to death and the New Man, Jesus Christ, put on ("Put ye on therefore the Lord Jesus Christ") it will be done through community. How we should treasure these sufferings, these criticisms, these wounds to vanity and self-esteem! The way we take them is certainly a measure of our pride and selfishness! We can begin to know ourselves, and so to know Thee, O Lord. (That was a prayer of St. Augustine's)

What can those who are held in the city do? I heard recently of a group of young communist families going to one of our great universities, who decided communal living should be tried here and now. They pooled their resources, bought a big old house, divided it up into apartments and community rooms and a day nursery, and all set up housekeeping together, to their mutual aid and growth in understanding of the problems of communal living. The Party decided they were guilty of Utopian, infantile deviationism or some such charge, and ordered them to liquidate their resources and go back to living like everyone else. The thing is now, in the party as in the Church—not to appear to be different from anyone else—wear the cosmetics, the styles, the amusements of the masses—and bore from within. Sanctify the corner where you are. Take the world as you find it. Be realistic. Come out of your ivory tower. Balance the books. Stand on your own two feet. Don't be a visionary.

But if one stops to listen, the cry of the prophet is heard. Figures stand out—(though lone figures, unfortunately) like that of Ammon Hennacy, who do not compromise, who work and pray, who live in poverty, share what they have. And there are those many members of groups such as Carl Paulson, the stained glass window maker of St. Benedict's farm, Upton Massachusetts, who reads because he is the servant of all, who knows how to live in poverty and hard work, and yet whose life, with beautiful wife and seven children, (one adopted) is one of beauty and richness and order. And Hans Tunnesen, and Ed Foerster, single men living in community and giving their word for the good of the whole. There are inspiring figures through the Catholic Worker Movement, and there are inspiring families too. This month we print a few letters from some of them. The best letters always remain unwritten of course.

It would take a book to write of the attempts made in these last twenty years to establish farming communes at Easton, Pa., at Upton, Mass., at Cape May, New Jersey, at Rochester, New York, at Rutland, VA., at Avon Ohio, at South Lyons, Mich., at Atkin Minn. At Aptos, California, and at places outside of Pittsburgh and St. Louis and other cities whose very names are forgotten. As Chesterton said, because a thing has failed does not mean that the idea is not right. "It is not that Christianity has failed," he said, "It has been tried and found difficult."

Many of the letters, which we are not printing, are trying to prove that it can't be done." We want more who are bravely trying to do it—that is, establish communities on the land, who recognize the principle as right. For the few who write discouraging letters we know scores of families with many children, who may be forced to go on holding down jobs to earn a living, but who are learning, little by little, to keep going on the land. "Flee to the fields" really

means “flight from the city” for the sake of the home, the original community, for the sake of the children, the young and the old. One can be a teacher, a painter, a shoemaker, a druggist, or follow many another trade, or merely work in “service” in some institution, and live on the land. Peter’s advocacy of a land movement did not mean that everyone should go out and operate a successful family-sized farm, or join a community on the land. There is an infinite variety of ways to get out of the cities, the occasions of sin, as Fr. Vincent McNabb called them, and marrying and having a family, almost obligates a man to seek these ways. Pere Lamy, famed parish priest of Paris, who lived in intimate converse with the Blessed Mother, made one prophecy and only one, and that was that people were going to be forced to turn to the land, and to recover a sense of the value of the soil. Either peace and its resultant unemployment will do it, “There is no unemployment on the land,” Peter said, or war and the blasting of cities will do it. Perhaps India and Gandhi’s plan for a village economy will help to show us the way.