

On Pilgrimage - December 1978

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, December 1978, 2, 6.

Summary: Delights in the bustling neighborhood and relishes the sun gilding nearby buildings and trees. Jottings of the comings and goings, gifts received for her birthday, and memories of her conversion and past friendships. (DDLW #594).

As I begin this column, I am sitting at a sunny window in Maryhouse on Third Street, distracted by the street scene and the doings of our neighbors coming home from work, or sitting on their narrow “stoops,” or going out for evening jobs. Children are playing with skateboards, tricycles and doll carriages. The older ones sometimes brave the one-way traffic west, and play ball. It is a family street, and even Maryhouse does not have an “institution look,” though it is made up of three houses joined into one, red brick, four stories tall counting the basement, where kitchen and diningroom, clothes and storage rooms are. It was a music school when we acquired it, and includes a good-sized auditorium, where we have our usual Friday night meetings. Socials after the meetings enable us to get more acquainted with our speakers and readers of **The Catholic Worker**. Last night, that auditorium was a dormitory, with a group of students on the floor in sleeping bags. We still have our house on First Street. There are now men and women in both houses.

* * * *

Here at the Catholic Worker in New York we have been rejoicing in our new Pope. Holy “Father” to us all. St. Catherine of Siena used to call the Pope of her time her dear sweet “Christ on earth.” Peter Maurin admired St. Catherine very much, and wanted me to emulate her and advise the Bishops and Cardinals, one and all, to start hospices or houses of hospitality in every diocese, or, if necessary, in every parish.

* * * *

My granddaughter Susie, Jack MacMurray, and their three daughters, Tanya, Kachina and Charlotte Rose, dropped in on their way from Hilaire’s wedding in Vermont. They are driving a borrowed car (Jack’s family’s) and are on their way to their permanent home, The Farm, Stephen Gaskin’s community in Summertown, Tenn. Hilaire, my grandson, is named for Hilaire Belloc, who was one of his father David Hennessy’s favorite writers.

* * * *

At exactly 8:05 A.M., the morning sun gilds the upper floors of the buildings across the street, creeping from the grey one to the red brick one. A lovely sight. Pigeons fly from the roofs. Looking up, I see squirrels on the roof edge. The ailanthus tree (maybe it's a sycamore) stirs in the cold, east wind, the sky is a cloudless blue—and now one side of the tree, reaching the third floor of those once-luxury tenements, is all gilded, as the sun spreads rapidly around. Young people are on their way to work, but the children are not yet on their way to school. “My” tree is now radiant with sun!

* * * *

A party at Maryhouse last night, after the baptism of one of the women in the house by Fr. Geoffrey Gneuhs, O.P. Our own pastor of Nativity Church, Fr. Arthur Clark, S.J., was also present. A Franciscan priest visiting here claimed I got my vocation to start the Catholic Worker at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. In a way, yes. But Edna Kenton's book on the Jesuit Martyrs, read the year before, began my interest. A pilgrimage to Auriesville, N.Y., a Jesuit shrine, in September 1932, cold, hungry, prayerful, had its share. I had read in our N.Y. diocesan paper about the pilgrimage of the parishioners of St. Michael's Westside N.Y. Church, and joined it, a lone figure amid families with packet baskets for lunch. One could not receive Communion those days without fasting from midnight, and this parish brought lunches and fasted till after the noonday Mass at Auriesville, which is past Albany, N.Y. I remember one mother smacking her child for breaking his fast. “Now you can't receive!” she cried. I had to fast all day, since I had not the sense to bring a lunch and there were no places at the shrine then to buy one. Peter Maurin came to me the first time in December 1932, three months later, and converted me to his simple, social program of “Cult, Culture and Cultivation.” A synthesis, he called it. Our first step was to start a paper—**The Catholic Worker**—to print his essays.

* * * *

I am steeped in memories, what with the closing of the farm at Tivoli: all our Pax Christi and Peacemaker conferences there; visitors, even from Australia, several summers; Dr. Karl Stern, psychiatrist, vacationed there; visiting priests; Marge Hughes, best of all volunteers who “had the house.” (The young people never want to say “in charge,” but “who has the house,” the Responsible, in other words.) Clare Danielsson held psychotherapy groups; Marty John and Coretta Corbin were born there—Will Waes' first child, too. I am overcome by nostalgia for the past.

* * * *

Received some advance birthday gifts—books by Isaac Bashevis Singer from Anne and Steve Kaune, and Dostoevsky from Mike Harank. Tamar, down from Vermont, brought wonderful, colored pictures of Hilaire and Erin's wedding.

* * * *

November 8th—my birthday—I was born in 1897. Mary Lathrop Pope has just put up two, gigantic sheets of paper on my wall, a painting she did of a pink-robed, guardian angel, with orange hair, carrying an armload of huge lilies—blue sky and green earth. Wildly decorative, (Mary had made her first retreat after her conversion at Mary Reparatrix, on East 29th Street, a church of perpetual adoration, with a retreat house connected. I had made my first retreat at that convent too.)

Tamar embroidered a gorgeous, round pillowcase and stuffed it. Mike DeGregory and Michelle Timmins sent me an unusually beautiful Madonna of Czestochowa. I will pray to her for them, and our Polish Pope. People send us cups and plates of china, Spode, also Limoges—such luxury! There was a party in the dining room after Mass, and many flowers.

* * * *

Woke up this morning, thinking of a bitter saying, which early was used about the Catholic Worker, “The gold is ejected, but the dross remains.” Also, about the flight from Paris in World War II. “There remained only the very poor.” Arnold Bennet, in **Old Wives Tale**, wrote of Paris in the Franco-Prussian war.

Help me, dear Lord, to do my little, daily tasks with “ease and discretion, with love and delight.” I do not know where that quote comes from either. It just popped into my head. “The duty of delight”—is that a phrase from Ruskin? It was Irene Mary Naughton who first used the quotation (she said it was a quote) when she was one of our editors on Chrystie St.

* * * *

Visited Deane Mowrer in her room down the hall from me here at Maryhouse, which looks out on a tall tree. The young women are thorough in their finishing of our hardwood floors—walls and windows bright—most cheerful. I read to Deane the introduction to Chaim Potok’s **Wanderings**, another birthday present, a beautiful edition. I remember my room on Cherry Street in 1917 in a Jewish family’s apartment—their loving kindness to me, leaving me food late at night as I came home from my night work on the **New York Call**, the Socialist paper I worked for then. The safety of the city then! My reading now includes Elie Wiesel’s **A Jew Today** and **The Oath**, and **Wanderings**.

* * * *

Felt low most of the day over the terrible events in Guyana this month. The South American horror reminds one of the Joseph Conrad story, **Heart of Darkness**, which ends with the words—“The horror, the horror.” Oh, the darkness of sin!

And the trouble in Nicaragua. Years before the Catholic Worker began, I worked for the Sandino group, through a Communist affiliate, sending medical supplies to the Sandinistas, who were in the mountains. The long struggle goes on

still. Nevin Sayre, then head of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, went on a trip through Nicaragua on mule-back, working for peace.

Visitors

Nina Polcyn was here for two days from Sauk Centre, Minn. Dorothy Gauchat came for a weekend holiday and brought me a souvenir from our nearby Ukrainian Church. Paul LaChance, O.F.M., visited on his way from Chicago, to Maine for Thanksgiving. Catherine deHueck Doherty and Father Briere from Madonna House, in Combemere, Canada, paid a good visit. They now have outposts in the far west and the West Indies. She is the most efficient, organized person I ever met. An extraordinary life.

And Abbot John Eudes Bamberger from the Trappist Abbey in Piffard, N.Y. visited us on his way to France. He was delighted to see St. Joseph House and Maryhouse, this old, music school, which is large enough for fifty women. There are always mattresses on the floor of the auditorium, the stage and library too, these winter months. There is close cooperation between St. Joseph on First Street and Maryhouse on Third Street, with the young women and men, some of whom live in the houses, and others who earn the money in part-time work to rent little, slum apartments, and not take up room needed for the homeless, and to pay back school loans (the less one has of Caesar's the less one has to render to Caesar). Many of our men work at the Rose Hawthorne cancer home nights, and some of the women at a Quaker school a few blocks away at lunchtime. Rents are high! I think of the times, fifty years ago, when I lived on Cherry Street, between bridges, and paid \$5.00 a month for an unheated, furnished room with a huge, feather comforter. Now average rents are \$150 a month for dingy, so-called "railroad" apartments, or sometimes dumbbell apartments, because front and back rooms are wider than two inner rooms. But, of course, they have heat now.

* * * *

Reading Thomas Merton's **Sign of Jonah**. (Trappists have always been our friends: Trappists in Kentucky, Georgia, Massachusetts, New York, Utah, Virginia.)

I must cultivate holy indifference. I should rejoice that I am "just an old woman," as the little boy said at a Rochester New York House of Hospitality dinner long ago. He said, "All day long they said 'Dorothy Day is coming,' and now she's here and she's just an old woman!" I certainly felt my age, not being able to get downstairs for Fr. Dan Berrigan's lecture on Thomas Merton. The auditorium was packed.

* * * *

"I know not ugliness, it is a mood which has forsaken me." Where does that quote come from? Suddenly, these words had come into my mind this morning, while I enjoyed watching the rays of the sun rising over the East River, touching

up the withered leaves on the little tree across the street. Later on the answer came. It was Max Bodenheimer (long forgotten?) who recited it in that back room of the old saloon (which was the background for Eugene O'Neill's play, **The Iceman Cometh**) which many of us frequented those early days of Gene's career. His one-act plays were being put on at the Provincetown Playhouse, which was the downstairs "Little Theatre" on MacDougal Street (around the corner from Luke O'Connor's Tavern). Upstairs, Christine ran a restaurant. Her husband helped build the sets. The audience sat on benches. Gene's one-act plays were so engrossing that no-one minded the discomfort.

Seeing the O'Neill play **Mourning Becomes Electra** on television last night brought me back to those days when I frequented the Playhouse and felt Gene to be a playwright superior to Strindberg and Ibsen, the Scandinavian authors he much admired. We have also had some of Strindberg recently, too. What a boon television, or rather, our Public Broadcasting Channel 13, is!

* * * *

Thank you, all our readers, for the loving kindness shown us all, for all the cards, gifts and remembrances.