

This Then is Perfect Joy

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Summary: A loving tribute to Peter Maurin—"another St. Francis of modern times." Praises his vision, his poverty, his holiness, and his teachings. Recalls the trial of Peter's last five years when his mind failed him. (DDLW #924).

(This article, here abridged, originally appeared in the June, 1949 issue. Peter Maurin died on May 15, 1949. Eds. note.)

Plato said: "Other people are not likely to be aware that those who pursue philosophy aright study nothing but dying and being dead. But if this be true, it would be absurd to be eager for nothing but this all their lives, and then be troubled when that came for which they had all along been eagerly practicing."

So it will be understood that it is with a spirit of joy that we write this month, because Peter is no longer suffering, no longer groaning within himself and saying with St. Paul, "Who will deliver me from the body of this death?"

I am writing this in New York, up in my room on the third floor, and all winter before last, that hard winter, he waited up here for the weather to clear so that he could go to the country. He had to lie in bed much of the time, and the plaster is all picked off the wall by the side of my bed where he slept while I was down in West Virginia with my daughter. He must have been very weary of lying in bed, he who had traveled north and south, east and west in this vast country. Up on the farm he had become worse these last two years. Everybody was always so reassuring, exclaiming how well he looked, how bright he was, but we, who had known him these past seventeen years, felt only the tragedy of the death in life he was living. Truly he practiced for death a very long time.

A Poor Man

We have written this before, and we repeat it again. Peter was the poor man of his day. He was another St. Francis of modern times. He was used to poverty as a peasant is used to rough living, poor food, hard bed, or no bed at all, dirt, fatigue, and hard and unrespected work. He was a man with a mission, a vision, an apostolate, but he had put off from him honors, prestige, recognition. He was truly humble of heart, and loving. . . He was impersonal in his love in that he loved all, saw all others around him as God saw them. In other words, he saw Christ in them.

He never spoke idle words, though he was a great teacher who talked for hours on end, till late in the night and early morning. He roamed the streets and the countryside and talked to all who would listen. But when his great brain failed, he became silent. If he had been a babbler, he would have been a babbler to the end. But when he could no longer think, as he himself expressed it, he remained silent.

For the last five years of his life he was this way, suffering, silent, dragging himself around, watched by us all for fear he would get lost, as he did once for three days; he was shouted at loudly by visitors, as though he were deaf, talked to with condescension as one talks to a child, to whom language must be simplified even to the point of absurdity. That was one of the hardest things we had to bear, we who loved him and worked with him for so long- to see others treat him as though he were simple-minded.

The fact was, he had been stripped of all—he had stripped himself throughout life. He had put off the old man, to put on the new. He had done all that he could to denude himself of **the world**, and I mean the world in the evil sense, not in the sense that “God looked at it and found it good.” He loved people, he saw in them what God meant them to be. He saw the world as God meant it to be, and he loved it.

He had stripped himself, but there remained work for God to do. We are to be pruned as the vine is pruned so that it can bear fruit, and this we cannot do ourselves. God did it for him. He took from him his mind, the one thing he had left, the one thing perhaps he took delight in. He could no longer think. He could no longer discuss with others, give others, in a brilliant overflow of talk, his keen analysis of what was going on in the world; he could no longer make what he called his synthesis of **cult, culture, and cultivation**. . . it was as though he had a stroke in his sleep. He dragged one leg after him, his face was slightly distorted, and he found it hard to speak. And he repeated, “I can no longer think.”

“This Then Is Perfect Joy”

He had never had a bed of his own, really, until it came to his last illness. He just took what was available in the House of Hospitality. He had always been a meager eater, getting along on two meals a day, never eating between meals. He used to say when he was offered anything, “I don’t need it.” But toward the close of his life, he was inclined to stuff down his food hastily, like a child, and he had to be cautioned to eat slowly. Perhaps there was a hangover from the hunger of a childhood in a large family where there was never enough to eat. There were twenty-four children in all, over the years.

Other habits clung to him. When I’d go in to see if he were warm enough, I’d find him lying in bed with his pants folded neatly and under his head, and his coat wrapped around his feet, a habit I suppose, which he got from living in flophouses, where clothes are often stolen. And once I found him sleeping in the dead of winter with only a spread over him, in a dead cold room. Someone had taken his blankets.

One thing we can be happy about too, is that he felt he had finished his work before his mind failed. He used to say, “I have written all I have to say, I have done all I can, let the younger people take over.”

For the past two months I had been at the farm, and then, while returning from the funeral of Larry Heaney I received a telephone call about his death. Just before I had left, I had told him of Larry's sudden death, and he said yes, to my question as to whether he remembered Larry. He had loved him much, had sent him his quotations listed as cult, culture and cultivation over the years, and when I said to him, "Now you will have someone waiting for you in heaven," his face lit up in a radiant smile. He had not smiled for months; there had only been a look of endurance, even of pain on his face.

That was our goodbye.

Peter was buried in St. John's Cemetary, Queens, in a grave given us by Fr. Pierre Conway. Peter was another St. John, a voice crying in the wilderness, and a voice too, saying, "My little children, love one another."

"We need to make the kind of society," he said simply, "where it is easier of people to be good." And because his love of God made him love his neighbor lay down his life indeed for his brother, he wanted to cry out against the evils of the day—the State, war, usury, the degradation of man, the loss of a philosophy of work. He sang the delights of poverty (he was not talking of destitution) as a means to making a step to the land, of getting back to the dear, natural things of earth and sky, of home and children. He cried out against the machine because of Pius XI had said, "raw materials went into the factory and came out ennobled and man went in and came out degraded;" and because it deprived a man of what was as important as bread, his work, his work with his hands, his ability to use all of himself, which made him a whole man and a holy man.

Peter had been insulted and misunderstood in his life, as well as loved. He had been taken for the plumber and left to sit in the basement when he had been invited for dinner and an evening of conversation. "This then is perfect joy," Peter could say, quoting the words of St. Francis.

He was a man of sincerity and peace, and yet one letter came to us recently, accusing him of having a holier-than-thou attitude. Yes, Peter pointed out that it was a precept, that we should love God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength, and not just a counsel, and he taught us all what it meant to be children of God, and restored us our sense of responsibility as lay apostles in a chaotic world. Yes, he was "holier than thou," holier than anyone we ever knew.

"Do not forget," Mary Frecon, head of the Harrisburg house, said before she left, "Do not forget to tell of the roots of the little tree that they cut through in digging his grave. I kept looking at those roots and thinking how wonderful it is that Peter is going to nourish that tree—that thing of beauty." The undertaker had tried to sell us artificial grass to cover up "the unsightly grave," as he called it, but we loved the sight of that earth that was to cover Peter. He had come from the earth, as we all had, and to the earth he was returning.