

Our Fall Appeal

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, November 1955, 2.

Summary: An appeal for financial help and a restatement of the Catholic Worker belief in personal responsibility for the poor over State responsibility. (DDLW #242).

Dear Friends of the Catholic Worker:

In the light of our present difficulties it is necessary to restate our position and tell our readers again just what it is we are trying to do—what it means to us to perform the works of mercy, spiritual and corporal. The most important thing in the world to us is to grow in the love of God, to try to do His will. Our Lord Jesus told us that what we do to the least, we do to Him. St. Paul told us we are “members one of another, and that when the health of one member suffers, the health of the whole body is lowered.”

We believe not only in St. Thomas’ doctrine of the common good, but feel it can be affected only if each one of us alone realizes his personal responsibility to his brother, that his love for God must be shown in his love for his brother, and that love must be expressed in the works of mercy, practiced personally, at a personal sacrifice. So we live together, here at the Catholic Worker, pool resources of money and abilities, and so are able to take care of far more than just ourselves.

People have so far lost that sense of personal responsibility that our country is becoming a country of institutions and a gigantic part of our income goes to support them. State responsibility has come to take the place of personal responsibility. Doctors at mental hospitals and veterans hospitals have said that a tremendous number of patients could be cared for at home if their families would take the responsibility. On the other hand, houses and apartments become smaller and smaller so that there is “no room at the inn.” We are able to have fifty people in our own home here at Chrystie Street because it is two old houses thrown into one, built at a time when people wanted space. When people come to us we cannot say, “Go, be thou filled,” and refer them to an agency. So we have come to be feeding and clothing a vast number of people who come in to us day after day, the lame, the halt, and the blind.

But we are not organized as an institution of any kind and the city does not know how to classify us. We are not a multiple dwelling, a rest home, a convalescent home, a shelter or an asylum or a convent. We are a group of people living

together under one roof with one head, which is Charlie McCormack, now that Tom Sullivan has gone to the Trappists. Often I am considered to be the head, being older and the publisher of the paper. I get the summonses, the complaints. We are not registered as a charitable agency, it has been pointed out. But we hope our dear Lord recognizes us as charitable people. We try to keep the laws and regulations about housing, health, fire prevention, and take as good care of our family as we can. But we find we are always coming up against some ordinance, some infraction. We will always be in trouble with the city and the state because though we also consider ourselves good citizens and lovers of our country as well as children of God and try to bear our share of the responsibility of brother for brother, the city and the state have come to feel that this is their field (since it has been left to them). A western Bishop said to me once that he did not believe in state ownership of the indigent. God wants man's free service, his freely bestowed love. So we protest and cry out against every infringement of that great gift of God, freedom, our greatest gift, after the gift of life.

That love of brother, that care for his freedom is what causes us to go into such controversial subjects as man and the state, war and peace. The implications of the gospel teaching of the works of mercy, lead us into conflict with the powers of this world. Our love of God is a consuming fire. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. It is a living God and a living faith that we are trying to express. We are called to be holy, that is, whole men, in this life of ours. We are trying to follow this call. It has led many of our workers into the priesthood, into Trappist monasteries, into convents. But we as a group, not having *this vocation*, are not classified as a *religious* group, not even as a *Catholic* group, and so do not have the protection of that classification. We are individual Catholics, not Catholic Action.

Many have left us to marry and raise a little community of their own, and endure all the sufferings of trying to lead this life in the factory, on the farm, enduring the frustrations of seeing their talents unused, their best energies of all their work days put into meaningless work in the cities, and not having the help we have of our community life and the assistance of our friends in our houses and farms.

We never intended to have breadlines, to care for so many, but it is always so hard to turn people away. Men out of hospitals, with no place but the public shelter housing other thousands, turned loose on the streets by day. We have had people come in to us from the streets who have died a few weeks after, from their long endured miseries. We still have people coming who sleep in doorways and spend their days with us and share our meals. It is so hard to limit oneself, and then too our Holy Father, Pius XII, told some Sisters once never to be afraid to run up bills for the poor. Of course it always comes back to the fact that we are not an accredited agency. We are not a charitable institution. And we are never going to turn into that because we are trying to make the point, by our lives, by our work, that personal responsibility comes first. We are born alone, we die alone, we must, each one of us, do what we can for God and our brother,

not God and country, but God and our Brother, as Christ stated it. We are in difficulties now, not only with our bills, but with the State, with the City. We cannot print our usual Fall appeal, without pointing this out. But we are begging you to help us to continue to keep going with these ideas of ours about mutual aid, voluntary poverty, and the works of mercy. If we were forced to cease, how great a burden which we are bearing now, would fall upon the state or city—mental hospitals and convalescent homes, relief rolls and the bread lines of the Municipal Lodging house. And how many would be just wandering the streets, crouching in doorways. Oh God, look upon the face of Thy Christ in these poor, and help us to keep going.

So we are asking you, as our Lord himself told us to ask, for your help once more. And may God and His Blessed Mother whose month this most specially is, bless you a hundred fold, heaped up and running over.

In His Love,

Dorothy Day