

On Pilgrimage - September 1959

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Summary: Meandering account of the past month—the beauty of nature, visitors, and conferences. Highlights Ammon Hennacy's fasting in repentance for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Meditates on how the poor are treated by people in bureaucracies and on the core of voluntary poverty. (DDLW #756).

The leaves are turning on the trees in the little square across the street and the grass in the patches of dirt around the few trees is yellow. Out on the farm at our Labor Day retreat when we sat in the grove listening to the beautiful conferences of Fr. Menard from Mt. Saviour, the brown leaves from the beech trees fell gently all around us, because there was no wind. There was still the loud summer sound of cicadas singing their hot sweet song, but in the city there is only the loud noise of traffic, trucks, buses, the shifting of gears, the scream of brakes, and the heavy fumes of exhaust pipes rising in the breathless air.

Besides our St. Joseph's Loft, there are the four apartments and the beds on the Bowery, but we are all in the same neighborhood. There are plane trees planted along the Bowery now, and plane trees in the children's playground across Spring Street, and plane trees and two ginkgo trees in the tiny triangle across the street from the apartment I share with Judith Gregory and Pat Rusk. In addition to the cards with pressed seaweed from the beach houses, I have a few pressed leaves of the ginkgo tree in my missal or in whatever book I am reading. A bit of beauty in the city to look upon and thank God for. There are many of these glimpses of course – the pigeons wheeling in the sky overhead in the sharp summer sunlight, a few stray feathers on the pavement under foot, the grace of children, the gaiety of the "feasts," the biggest of which is beginning in mid-September, San Gennaro.

"He saved the people of Naples from the lava of Vesuvius," my neighbor told me. "It is a Neopolitan feast. The people of Bari have their feast and the people of Sicily have theirs." We are already getting friendly with our neighbors and sit on the stone ledge around the tiny park and talk in the evening while little girls wheel their doll carriages. We meet in church, too, either old St. Patrick's or in Holy Crucifix on Broome Street where there is a noon day mass.

"But there are Spanish priests there now, since the foreigners moved in – the Puerto Ricans. And they took all our statues, hundreds of them and we don't

know what they have done to them. We love our saints and they are gone. It is like a Communist church now,” and our neighbor repeated this phrase many times in the course of the evening – “It was like a Communist Church.”

The Past Month

We went to press on August 5, feast of the Transfiguration, the day Ammon began his 14-day fast, his penance, for our dropping the bomb fourteen years ago today.

(Reading in the book of Acts this month, I was interested to see that the soldiers and sailors with St. Paul fasted for fourteen days when they were in imminent danger of losing their lives in shipwreck. So it was not only the desert Fathers, and Moses and Elias and St. John and our Lord whose fastings are mentioned. Dear God, send us the spirit of penance that we may learn to fast, because we are far from it yet. How can we be termed really devoted to poverty without it?)

The next day Sister Peter Claver came to town and I had dinner with her and spent the night. Cecilia Hugo arrived in town, too, and she also came to dinner at Agnes Fahy’s house, and we all talked late. We heard from many others besides his sister how Fr. Hugo was honored this month by the new bishop, Bishop Wright, who was so welcomed to Pittsburgh that he had to stand all day to greet his new flock after his first Mass at the cathedral. He dedicated Fr. Hugo’s new Church which he built in two years and told of his happiness in finally meeting Fr. Hugo whom he had followed with interest over many years. Perhaps if he does not have to go on building, Fr. Hugo may be able to give retreats again – those famous retreats which “enlightened the mind and inflamed the heart” and “made all things seem new.”

Sister Peter Claver is the same as always – warm and happy, and full of joy. “Woman’s place is to love,” she told me many years ago, when I was troubled about problems – always the same problems, much to do, and how little we **could** do.

Sister and I passed the Women’s House of Detention to go to the bakery after Mass, and we said a decade of the rosary for the women crowded there. I told Sister how many women were there, more than 500 in a place meant for 250, imprisoned for long sentences although the jail was built for a house of **detention** before trial. Sister had passed it many times and never knew it was a jail. We beg everyone to pray for the women shut in here.

Heavy Rains

Leaving the office crowd to mail out the paper, I went to the farm for the weekend and there were heavy rains which forced Pat Maloney and his nine street boys who were camping in the woods to come into the house where they slept in rows

on the floor. They are not all Puerto Rican, but also colored and Italian, and the average age of this group was fourteen. He works with them beautifully.

Don Sturzo Dies

The newspaper account of Don Sturzo's death on August 8th told of his great accomplishments – he was our greatest Christian sociologist. How I wish I had been more faithful in keeping a diary to write more fully about such a man. Someone said he reminded them of the noble priest in Silone's **Bread and Wine**, but Don Sturzo never retired from active work. Even when he was in exile in England, he formed the **People and Freedom** group and issued a publication which kept alive his ideas about the corporative **order** (not the corporative state), and when he came to this country in the middle of the war during the bombings of London, he was so ill he had to be carried off the boat. He got in touch with us right away, and we visited him in the home of his former Sicilian housekeeper, who was then living in the Bay Ridge district of Brooklyn. He wrote articles for our paper, and sent us help, too, out of his most meager resources. He met each duty as it came, fearless, outspoken, understanding, trying to give guidance in the world of men. He was not one who thought in terms of how many souls there were in his parish. He thought of them as body, mind and soul, and realized their needs, the kind of society suited to man and his freedom. I hope there will be a shrine to him in the little village in Sicily where he started working for the poor, and that biographies will be written. To read of such men arouses courage in other.

Ammon's Shadow

All during Ammon's picketing, Hugh Madden, the California rancher, seaman, ex-Trappist, walked, too, barefoot, bearded, shabby, pants drooping around his hips and giving the appearance of either being too small for him, or else that hips were non-existent or incapable of keeping them up. He wears a heavy flannel shirt and sometimes an extra one over that in the hottest weather. He fasted, he wore a rope about his neck, and he picketed. Three times a day he knelt down on the pavement and said the Angelus, on his hands and knees, only instead of ringing a little bell as is done during the Angelus in monasteries he pounded with his bare knuckles on the cement pavement.

He reminded me of the Moslems who pray openly, regardless of human respect, three times each day. Once we were viewing television, a program showing life on the desert and the search for oil, and when our CW family who were watching the travelogue saw the Moslems prostrating themselves in prayer, they laughed, so unused are they to public worship. One could not help but remember how Charles de Foucauld's conversion began because of this public worship.

Later in the month, when Ammon and Hugh had finished their fast and picketing, Hugh disappeared for five days. Some time after he returned he wrote me a note and put it on my desk.

Hugh Writes

“In Tokyo they rope off streets for the people to sleep in. In New York they chase you out of the parks (if you call them such) and into the jailhouse. Twenty-one men in a paddy wagon built for twelve and then jammed in a cell 8 by 8 for three hours. Five days in the hoosegow and got lousy in the deal for passing through one corner of the park at three a.m. and the cops hijacked our knife and carpenter’s rule.”

He had been working steadily the rest of the month, taking out all the windows, replacing the window sash cord and broken panes, and puttying the loose glass. He is poor and he is devoted to manual labor. And if he goes around the Loft or the farm, waking people up at five thirty every morning – we can put up with it for the help he is giving us.

Bronnie Warsaskas

Another visitor during the summer whom we would like to keep forever is Bronnie, Lithuanian, born in Boston, former G.I., who earns his living by furniture repair. He loves his work and he loves his materials. He read Peter Maurin and Eric Gill, and this brought him to the Catholic Worker movement and resulted in his spending his vacation with us. Besides being a worker, he can discuss ideas, and we wish he would get a store or a shop in Boston which could be a CW headquarters for that area where people could meet and by mutual aid perform the works of mercy, which include enlightening the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, comforting the afflicted and so on. What a center it could be, with a person with Bronnie’s background. He is a musician, too, and in himself there is certainly a good balance of cult, culture and cultivation. Difficulties in the way of this headquarters would be the city’s rules and regulations again. If you are in business, a woodworking shop is a fire hazard and there are many rules to be observed, some most sensible and others impossible to keep. Like our own laws which keep piling up on the books which penalize people like us (I am a convicted slum landlord with a suspended sentence, \$250 fine) and allow corporations to postpone any repairs while they pay their little fifty dollar fines, and permit rooming house keepers to pile ten in a room, the refugees of the Moses demolition era.

Conferences

It was a month of conferences for me, which took me to the Catholic Art Association meeting at St. Elizabeth's, New Jersey, to the Peacemakers school at Manumet, outside of Philadelphia, and to the Liturgical week (only three days) at Notre Dame. I had never attended these conferences before and found them very stimulating. I went to the Liturgical conference on the invitation of Terry McKiernan and Ruth, who earn their living at the House of Bread, in South Bend. Terry is an anarchist-pacifist and his wife was with the Grail and worked with us a few months to get our bakery started, when we baked the bread for the "line." They have three beautiful children and it is a joy to visit them.

Ever Present Trouble

As I write, Pat Maloney telephones to say that three of the boys he had brought to the farm during the summer had been arrested for robbery and were now in Youth House which is filled to overflowing. I wonder how many people know that there are prisons like the women's house of Detention for **children**. Pat has gone to court for them but he must go back to the seminary in late September so there is not much he can do now.

When I read Harrison Salisbury's book "THE SHOOK-UP GENERATION" which won the Pulitzer prize this year for reporting, I had just come to his conclusion which spoke of simple remedies like more common sense and getting away from the "let-George-do-it" attitude, when a knock came at our door. We were presented with two young fellows who needed attention. It was a priest who brought them to us, and within a week they too had been arrested and they are now out on bail. One bail bond cost a hundred dollars and the other seventy-five. I spoke to Fr. Luce, an Anglican priest during a meeting later in the month and he said he too had made a practice of bailing out as many young offenders as he could, regardless of how little it seemed; if we only disregarded money, thought less of it, and more of **people**, we would begin to be poor in spirit.

More and more when students and seminarians write to us or speak to us about voluntary poverty and what does it mean and how they can achieve it when they live in fine buildings and all their wants are so cared for, I can only say we should not be looking to the romantic, outer aspects of poverty, the sack cloth, the bare feet, the unshaven look, but give ourselves generously, at each moment of our time, our listening, whatever we possess of talents, or books or understanding, with patience and with love, and we would begin to be truly self-sacrificing and poor.

An incident

An incident which happened during the month:

An old friend, Helen Wing, came in seeking advice and help. We had known her some five years ago when she was in the hospital, put there by the relief headquarters because she was disturbed, troublesome, uncooperative. It is one of the practices of the relief people to put away clients who make too much trouble, and who have no friends to intercede for them. Tom Sullivan and I went to see her on a number of occasions and after she came out, we did not see her again until last week.

She had been put off relief again, this time because she and her eighty-year-old husband, a Chinese, were uncooperative and would not answer questions and so on. They had been living for sixteen years in a little walk-up apartment, a cold-water flat, and now the rent had not been paid and the gas meter had been taken out and they had had neither gas nor electricity for some months. The bill was around sixty dollars, she said. She and her husband had been living on cold foods which was all right in hot weather, but they would like hot tea once in a while, and they had to go to restaurants. If they only had a little one-burner oil stove to cook on.

How had it all started? Well, she thought it was that newspaper account of an old woman who had been living on old-age relief and had three thousand dollars hidden in her mattress. Ever since that came out in the paper, the investigator had been making the rounds, searching the rooms of their clients, opening closet doors, poking under beds, even going so far as to feel in the pockets of her old husband to see what he had there. They accused him of selling things on the street, and perhaps he had sold little magical ladders during the Parade of the Dragon. Another time they accosted him on the street corner where he was sitting on a box with papers by his side which he had retrieved from litter baskets on the street. (We have several men who do this for us, at the Catholic Worker, and in this way we are able to get all the English language papers published in New York. Even on occasion, I pick up a copy of the Wall Street Journal on the ferry.) The relief investigator accused old Mr. Wing of selling papers, and made a scene on the street corner in front of his neighbors so that he went away into a coffee house and sat down and cried. He had been so humiliated.

What They Live on

The rent for their apartment is \$25.50. There is an allowance of six dollars a week each for food. Then there is the gas and electric. There are supposed to be extra checks for clothes and I thought of the difficulties of mothers getting that extra money for shoes for school when I read in Mrs. Roosevelt's book how she spent \$6,000 or was it \$8,000 a year for clothes.

How does one get behind on rent or Edison bills?

I heard of one young mother trying to get an extra bed so that the baby would no longer have to sleep with the adults, and how many requisitions in triplicate had to be gone through, and how many bureaucrats placated, until finally the mother took part of the rent money and bought a second-hand bed. And when we were in jail this April, a poor Spanish widow had cheated the relief people for a number of relief checks after she had got work, in order to catch up on back rent and grocery bills, and since she was one of the first offenders caught, they had to make an example of her and they gave her three years. (The Daily News asked its readers to **inform** on their neighbors if they knew of any cheating.)

The destitute are notoriously bad managers. They smoke, they drink, they are even known to buy television on the instalment plan. Yes, we sat in jail and watched television in the recreation room (we are pampered in jail) and over and over again, it was, “pay nothing down, just telephone and this handsome bedroom suite, this frigidaire, this television set will be delivered to your home Monday morning, and nothing need be paid down.” Oh, the advertising men, the radio, television itself, are the robbers of the poor, the real culprits!

It is hard to write about summer conferences when these things happen daily on one's return. Other magazines, **Worship** and **The Catholic Art Quarterly** are among the best, will publish some of the talks and an account of the proceedings. The address of **Worship** is Collegeville, Minnesota, and **The Catholic Art Quarterly**, 53 Ridgewood Rd., Buffalo 20, New York. Subscription for the first is four and for the latter five dollars a year.

Mea Culpa

I speak disparagingly of television and last week I went to the studio of Mike Wallace and went through the fearful ordeal of being televised, if that is what you call it, a program to be used on one of his ten o'clock interviews some time soon. They made the recording twice and I should not wonder if they did not use it at all, so hard he worked to bring out ideas which were to say the least unfamiliar to him (such as pacifism) and so fumbling were my replies. I go where I am invited, to give reason for the faith that is in me, as St. Peter said. And each day there are invitations from end to end of the United States to come for “clarification of thought.” Both Peter Maurin and Ammon Hennacy have always felt the importance of that as a first step, and now that Ammon is in jail for six months, I must set out on the road in mid-October and visit him at Sandstone, Minnesota, and Karl Meyer at Springfield, Missouri, and then on to the coast where I have engagements in Portland, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

I hope I do not sound bitter when I talk about the treatment of people on relief. It all comes down to the attitude and the behaviour of each individual employed by the city. Courtesy and respect for the poor, just because they are poor, seeing Christ in each one, “inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto me,” may sound easy, but of course it is not. We each one offend by

impatience seven times daily. We have to be forgiven seventy times seven, each one of us, at the Catholic Worker family as well as in each individual family. The beginnings of peace are at home, in one's own heart.

So excuse my faults in presenting the case for the poor, who are always expected to be courteous, respectful, honest, thrifty, self sacrificing, hard working and sensible people. And unfortunately destitution brings with it greed and grasping, and lying and cheating and every man for himself! One does not work for 26 years in the Catholic Worker family and not realize this. But we also know, as St. John of the Cross told us, that where there is no love, put love, and you will find love; and where love is, God is, and true joy.