

On Pilgrimage - December 1956

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Reports on the many religious serving poor Negroes in Mississippi in schools, parishes, and aid associations. Stories of segregation and small victories for equal rights. Keywords: African-American, colored, blacks, civil rights (DDLW #715).

THE FATHERS of the Divine Word, have many priests working in the South. Fr. Max Williams, S.V.D. himself is of that area, his people coming from the gulf region. His background is more French than colored, and when he was first sent on assignments to colored parishes, he greatly confused the whites of the district, who could not tell whether he was Mexican, Italian or Spanish. He is a vigorous young priest, very happy in his work in the south. Previously he had been in Washington parish in Louisiana and led in rural life work and the credit union movement. His Church was the auditorium at the end of St. Gabriel's school which is staffed by Oblate Sisters of Providence whose mother house is in Baltimore. His room and sacristy was an empty school room next to the chapel, and although he was served breakfast by the sisters, he prepared his other meals himself. The sisters were most hospitable and happy to see visitors, busy though they were with their teaching and missionary work.

Fr. Williams himself drove me to Greenwood, my next stop and on the way, we skirted the highway and went back deep into the Delta country to pass through **Money**, that strange name for a spot in Mississippi where there is a cotton gin and a few stores, and has now been made infamous by the murder of the fourteen year old boy Emmet Till who was taken out in the dead of night, beaten, murdered and flung into the meandering Tallahatchie river, which we crossed many times that morning.

The mystery of iniquity! Here on Forsythe street, just down the street from **The Catholic Worker** is the tavern where the murderers met to pay off for the acid throwing which blinded Riesel, the labor columnist; and a thousand miles south, in that beautiful peaceful countryside, rich and bountiful to man in the goods of the earth, murder also blackened the landscape. No one can ever think of that Delta section of Mississippi again without remembering **Money** and the murder committed there.

The story now is that after the trial, the neighboring white families went to the two men concerned, and told them, "you have been acquitted, but we don't want you hereabouts. Go!" And though the law found them innocent, the people found them guilty, and in the next town where they settled, the story went around,—"those storekeepers selling watermelon down the street are the murderers of Emmett Till," and again a delegation visited them, and they were told to go. The mark of Cain is on them now, and God is not mocked.

Settlement

It was a happy atmosphere in Greenwood, Mississippi where a group of southern white women have started St. Francis Information Center which is a school, a meeting place for the Negroes of this large city in northern central Mississippi. Miss Kate started the work in a little store, and others came to join her, including Alma Taylor, whom we had known as one of the group of women at Maryhouse, St. Paul, Minn. In addition to helping us at Maryfarm, Newburgh, they had had earlier gone to Mobile to work with Sister Peter Claver, and one of them remained, to continue to work in the South. They have a rule of life, this group of half a dozen women who give their days and evenings to work in the community, visiting the sick, teaching catechism.—Alma gives music lessons and there are a couple of practice rooms besides a library, a clothes room, meeting room and office—all housed in what was an old frame hospital for the colored, set back off the street and surrounded by trees which shaded the swept earth around the front door. Fr. Nathaniel Machesky, Franciscan, is pastor of the church a mile down the highway, and is also chaplain of the center. His brother works with him, and Fr. Meinrad at Indianola, a nearby town, is pastor of the church there, which is named for St. Benedict the Moor. There too is the St. Benedict Information Center where the neighbors drop in to borrow books and to ask questions, and the work here, started by one lone priest is already prospering and spreading.

I stayed at the center in Greenwood several days and it struck me forcibly how separate and apart one was, in working for the poor. I had heard white people, even priests and sisters, complain that those who worked with the whites, had nothing to do with those who worked with the colored so that a white worker in a settlement lived a life which was thrown in completely with the colored so that in effect there was complete segregation in this field too. But I think that it is an economic thing—this separation. I notice that when I am visiting cities around the United States, I know only the slums, only the poorest sections.

Canton

My next stop was Canton. It was a conducted tour, this trip of mine. Some of the time I was driven by Negroes who laughed at the other tour which was going on at the same time, of a group of New England editors who were invited by some public relations group, some state sovereignty committee, to travel over the state and visit the ante bellum mansions, ride on the stern wheelers on the Mississippi, see the great plantations and the happy Negroes working in the cotton. The Negroes laughed at the other tour—"You all look on this side the road, not that. See that new school—see all those new schools, equal but separate. Don't look thataway—don't look on other side the road. You're not supposed to see those empty cabins over yonder all falling apart."

Empty cabins, sagging little houses, windowless, mute evidence of the trek north. It is part of the White Citizen's Council plan, this exodus. "By 1956 we'll be rid of 500,000 Negroes from the state of Mississippi." They are counting on the machine to do the work of the fields, and a few subservient "hands."

Canton is a prosperous looking little town, built around a square with some good stores and

wide streets and comfortable homes radiating out in all directions. The Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity have property on the main street but they are not allowed to build there. You have to go in the back way, down an alley before you come out on the four acres which used to be called Frog Hollow and which is now a well kept campus with buildings surrounding it, the gymnasium, convent, school, chapel store rooms. There are trees growing there, and shrubs and a well kept lawn. The entire plant is better than anything the white folks have and there is some jealousy there. "Why don't we have such a gym," they asked Fr. Justin, and he answers with a smile, "No one is keeping you out of **ours**. You are welcome to come." The segregation is not of the Negro's making.

The gym is as yet a shell, 119 by 80 feet, and on the stage the altar is set up for Sunday Masses, and for days of recollection once a month. Week days the small frame chapel is used as Church, and it is there that the Blessed Sacrament is reserved. The gym can be used for games, for roller skating and for meetings too. In 1948 there were three rooms to the school, and in two years three sections more were built. There are now 218 pupils in the grade and high school, and it was here that I had some of the most stimulating discussions. There are eight sisters from LaCrosse, Franciscan sisters who serve the colored in Canton, and they give them the best they have. The pupils are bright, and there was no "talking down to them" as I have seen in other schools. They are treated with the same respect for their abilities, for their status as children of God and our brothers. The time spent there was a great joy. I listened to the glee club singing and I heard the kindergarten children recite the Magnificat.

Camden

Fr. Justin drove me the next day to Camden which has been settled by Catholics as early as 1844 and since 1944 has been cared for by the Missionary Servants. Here at Sacred Heart Mission, which is headed by Fr. Francis Xavier Toner and Fr. Maurice Haiss, and brothers Maurus and Peyton, there is conducted an agricultural school for the colored of the section. Just a year or so ago, the entire high school burned to the ground, and another had to be rebuilt and Fr. Francis told me some of the difficulties he too had with the public authorities which demanded more space for library and books and this and that, before they could be accredited as a high school. A tremendous amount of work has been done by Fr. Francis, and those before him. The mission is away out in the back woods, some miles distant from the nearest town, but it is a community which is working together so there is not the loneliness that the individual missionary suffers. The roads have been repaired in the neighborhood of the school, so that blacktop keeps them from the isolation which they have had to suffer other winters when the rains came and trapped their cars in the mud on many occasion.

That same afternoon Fr. Kieran Morrissey from Carthage Mississippi picked me up and drove me still further into the woods, so beautiful that you would think you were in some vast park. There at a cross roads is St. Joachim's and St. Anne's, one on either side of the street, the latter an old church to serve the white's and the other the colored. The same priest in this case serves both. It is the colored church which has the school, another very good one staffed by the Franciscan Sisters from Allegheny, New York. The Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity live in a Cenacle over at Camden and do catechetical and nursing work in

the vicinity.

They are all so far apart that there is not much chance to visit back and forth, or do anything else but keep to the work at hand. When I visited St. Joachim's school that afternoon half the children were absent picking cotton. I visited with the sisters after school, and just before we started back to Canton where I was staying again for the night, the weekly grocery truck came by for the sisters to do their shopping. This is the nearest they get to a town.

"It takes some getting used to," Fr. Kieran said. He was a city boy and no matter how much they prepared you in the seminary, he said, you never knew what you were going to be up against when you were planted, alone by yourself, in the wilderness, and often a very hostile wilderness, at that.

Fr. Kieran also serves St. Mary's church which is some miles away and because they have a late Mass and it is convenient to the white people, they come here regularly, and it is an interracial church. The same thing has happened in Jackson, Mississippi, and in Montgomery, Alabama.

One of the ugliest situations I saw in the South was the exploitation by a doctor of his Negro patients in one small town. Fr. Kieran pointed out to me a half dozen cars in this doctors' garage, and told me how he had brought a little colored boy to him who had broken his arm. The doctor sent Father a bill for forty dollars for the setting of it. Another flagrant example of this doctors gouging the poor was the case of a young mother not acceptable to the local hospital who went to the doctor's office to have her baby, was taken home immediately after the delivery, and was forced to pay a bill of two hundred dollars! If that Negro family was able to make a bale of cotton on a small holding, the bill would have taken all they earned for the year and left them destitute. Many families are held in servitude by debts which are impossible for them to pay.

Other Missions

There was no time to visit Fr. Joachim Benson at St. Theresa's Mission at Kosciusko, Mississippi, or Fr. Lynch at the Holy Rosary Indian Mission at Philadelphia, Miss. Fr. Benson was editor of the Missionary Servants' magazine which published my book, **From Union Square to Rome** back in 1938, and he had given retreats and days of recollection to many of our groups, in Chicago, Rochester, as well as New York and Easton. He has been working in the south some years now and they say his spirit as a lively as ever—he has the resistant and resourceful temperament which has made him as valuable to the missions as he was as an editor of a magazine for the society.

My bus next day took me to Jackson, where I transferred to go to Montgomery, a visit which I reported in the last issue of **The Catholic Worker**. There has been an injunction against the Montgomery Improvement Association since then, to prevent them from using their station wagons and cars to transport the colored people of the city to their places of employment. Having stopped using the busses because of unfair treatment of the Negro, they are now forced to walk again, to and from work, or be transported by their employers. But they have won another victory, with all this hardship, now that the Supreme Court of the

State of Alabama has also ruled that the segregation of the Negro is unconstitutional. The legal victory is being won, and little by little, the community victory will be won.

Gadsden, Alabama

My next visit was at the Holy Name Hospital which is staffed by the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity and where my dear friend Sister Peter Claver is stationed right now. She is not a nurse, but is teaching school in the town and boards at the hospital. I had visited there before, twenty years ago, when my daughter was ten years old, and the sisters gave her a birthday party there. In general, the work of these Sisters is neither nursing nor teaching, but when demands have been placed on them they have tried to meet them. Usually their work is visiting and catechetical work, and stems from the work of a group of lay women who accompanied Fr. Judge, the founder of the two orders, the one for men and the other for women, when he was sent as a Vincentian to the South. He was another great retreat priest, and not only inspired the laity to work, but gave them work to do, and directed them in it. In addition to the two groups, priests and Sisters, there are many “outer cenacles” made up of groups of lay people who assist the missions.

I had met Sister Peter Claver, who is from Rome, Georgia, 25 years ago, in the offices of Fr. Harold Purcell, who founded the City of St. Jude, in Montgomery, Alabama, a tremendous hospital for the Negro which immediately became an interracial hospital. Fr. Harold had printed an article I wrote, about my first meeting with Peter Maurin and had encouraged me, journalist that he was, with the starting of **The Catholic Worker** in 1933. Sister Peter Claver, being a poor missionary sister, had only a dollar in her pocket which had just been given to her, and she handed it to me as a first alms for the work.

I talked to her class of children last month—or rather, I let them interview me, and I enjoyed it very much. Sister had been studying at Catholic University summers, and her course in education, on how to teach, has resulted in a very lively and vigorous class of children.

From Gadsden, Alabama, I took the bus which went east to Atlanta and then down state to **Americus** where the community called **Koinonia** is situated. In the next issue of the Catholic Worker, I will try to give a picture of this community of families which is in a way a farming commune as envisaged by Peter Maurin.

To be continued.