

Pensacola Fishermen

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Summary: Reports on the hard life of Gulf fishermen in Pensacola, Florida. Underscores the need for study clubs and the need for the men to become owners through the cooperative movement as a way to change their lives. (DDLW #353).

It is good to see how others are working in the Lord's vineyard. Today, Sister Peter Claver, Teresa, two high school boys who are driving us around and I went over to Pensacola to see the Trinitarian Brothers and the work they are doing for the fishermen there.

It was a very cold day; the paper said the temperature was going down to twenty-six. So we didn't feel so badly when we thought of the temperatures up in New York, where our fellow workers are toiling. Houses down here, not equipped for cold weather, are just as cold as Mott street. And the Brothers' houses were even colder. Our teeth chattered as the damp cold of the Gulf penetrated to our bones.

Down on a slip right off the harbor they have three little houses, each one of three rooms, frame houses such as the fishermen live in, and for which the rent is usually twelve dollars a month. At that the rent is high. Our place in Cleveland, where we pay only fifteen, is palatial compared to these houses.

Dollar a Day

The first house contains a chapel and two dormitories, each with four beds built double decker style. The second house has a little office and bedroom in back for transient boys. The third has the dining room, kitchen and dormitory for the fishermen. Those fishermen who have no families in the neighborhood and are employed usually can sleep on the smacks, so there are not often more than half a dozen men staying at the place. What they do need is food, and this the brothers provide for about sixty, two meals a day. The brother who was doing the cooking had to go home because of serious illness in his family, so one of the boys is cooking now.

The fishing trips, which take the men all the way to the coast of Mexico, are for twenty-eight days and, as one of the men said, if they get eight dollars for their share of the proceeds they are doing well. One of the men who had just come back the day after Christmas said that his share was \$29 for this trip, around a dollar a day for work which is from dawn to dark, seven days a week. They have three or four days ashore and then they are out again.

During the summer the fishing is poor and not many trips are made. The captain will take the boats out provided he can get the men to go. They are given only five dollars, out of which they must pay a dollar for food, two for oil, and one for insurance, so they have a dollar as a reward for their work. They fish with lines, and we saw the notches along the rill of the boat where the men stand to fish.

Cooperation

Fishing is supposed to be on shares, which means that the men pay for the fuel, food, etc., and then from what they get, the company gets about eighty percent, and captain ten percent, the cook and engineer one and a half, the crew one each. There are only two fish companies, the Warren and the Saunders. Saunders scoffs at the work which the brothers are doing for the men, but Warren cooperates to the extent of giving the three little shacks rent free. Otherwise the men would be sleeping “in the weeds” as they call it, or getting advance of food, liquor and tobacco from the numerous brothels down the street, who exact a stiff return when the men come in from their trips. At that, they probably both lose out.

We climbed down into one of the smacks from off the dock and then went down a perpendicular ladder into the fo’castle, which was also the dining room and kitchen.

If you remember the scene in the fo’castle in Captains Courageous, you get a general idea of the set-up, bunks along the side, table in the middle, wood stove down near the center, a pump which draws water up from the hold below, cupboards for supplies and for the wood box. In the movie all this looked bright and colorful and enlivened by the men themselves. In this case it was narrow, cramped and terribly dirty. Fifteen minutes later up on the deck, when we were taking pitches, I was brushing cockroaches off my ankles. They crawled all over the floor, ceiling, around the water hold, through the cupboards, and of course in the bunks. On the floor under the table one man was sleeping, and in two bunks others were breathing heavily. They were ashore for a few days and they were spending their few hours in pursuit of the only joy they knew, an escape from the harsh reality of their hard lives. Out at sea the men do not drink, but ashore they seek release from the tension and monotony of work in liquor.

No Union

One of the men, Larsen, crawled out of his bunk and asked us if we would like a tub of salt fish sent up to us. We told him we sure would welcome a diet of red snapper for Lent. A young Spaniard, a Catholic, showed us around the boat. He didn’t drink, he said; he had a wife and children and that kept him straightened out.

The men are of all nationalities and of all ages. They are a good crowd of men and the brothers enjoy working with them. Two of the brothers, Brother Aden and Brother Bernardine, went out on trips with the fishermen and know from first-hand the rigors of the life. Ashore, the brothers live no better than the fishermen, sharing with them their quarters and their food.

They give them bundles of magazines to take with them to sea, and all the men are familiar with *The Catholic Worker*.

There is no union, of course.

It is hard to see how the lot of the men could be changed. The employer cannot be induced to give them a greater share of the profits, and if he did, that in itself would not be a solution. Many a time, when there has been an extra good catch of fish and the market price is high, the men get a good deal more money, but it goes the same as the rest. A few days and they are broke again.

Difficulties

On the other hand, if the work of deproletarianizing the men were done as the Holy Father recommends in his encyclical, and the cooperative movement built up so that the men could become owners—then their sense of ownership and responsibility would do much toward changing them and their lives. But there are gigantic difficulties in the way. If a dozen men cooperated to buy a boat and ran it on shares equally, then there would be the difficulty of marketing. None would give them credit, ice, or buy their produce. A number of these smacks would have to work together. One solution would be for the men to find their own markets—to sell to all the Catholic institutions, for instance. But that would mean that men and institutions would have to cooperate. So it gets down to the fundamentals again—the necessity of education (the education of the institutions as well as the men) to rebuild the social order. A start must be made sometime unless we wish to let things go from bad to worse, let men degenerate until they are an unthinking mob to be worked upon by demagogues, to be used eventually in a revolution. It may be a few generations hence, but it is inevitable, leaving out of account Divine Providence. Charitable work is not enough. We have to get at the roots. It may seem like a hopeless job, but if the Communists feel confident enough in their economic solutions to attempt to indoctrination of the masses, why should others have less faith in their brother? We would most certainly recommend that study clubs be started there at the Apostolate of the Sea, and that the literature from the Nova Scotia groups be used. The address is Extension Service, Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Both in Philadelphia and New York we have encountered seamen interested in running a boat cooperatively, and if in those big cities, why not a small place like Pensacola, where there are only two hundred fishermen.