

On Pilgrimage - February 1947

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Attends the wedding of Catholic Workers in Detroit. Visits the widow of Paul St. Marie and recounts his union organizing at Ford Motor Company. Sees Fr. Pacifique Roy, suffering in the hospital, and recalls all his help to the Catholic Worker. Meets Fr. Lacourtire whose retreats for priests are the basis of their retreat work. (DDLW #451).

The month of January is usually a long, cold month and one feels immersed in the depth of winter and one's sap runs slow. It is a good time to hibernate, to read, reflect, write and stay in one place. But this January has been one of travel and many contacts. Right after the paper went to press at Epiphany, I left for Detroit, for the wedding of Justine L'Esperance and Louis Murphy. It was a beautiful and impressive day, with the wedding at Holy Trinity Church. Father Kern, the pastor of the parish of St. Francis House and Martha House, which are the responsibilities of the groom and the bride respectively, officiated, and Fr. Hessler one of the three priests at the solemn high Mass. It was Fr. Kern who has encouraged and consoled, advised and admonished members of the Catholic Worker group in Detroit, these many years; and it was Fr. Hessler's family who gave the farm which has been part of the works of mercy program of the Detroit group.

Julian Pleasants and Norbert Merdzinski, who formerly ran the House of Hospitality at South Bend, Indiana were there, with many another old friend, so the two receptions and the wedding breakfast (the celebration lasting until late in the evening) were scarcely long enough for the exchange of ideas which goes with every meeting of Catholic Workers.

Martyr's Home

The next day Marie Conte Orestes, head of the Martha House before her marriage and before Justine took over, went with me to see Mrs. Paul St. Marie for Sunday dinner with her and her family. We called attention to the death of Paul St. Marie in our November issue, but we heard much more about it this time from his wife.

"When we were married," his wife said, "he had passed examinations for policeman and fireman, so you see his health was perfect. I prayed he would not go in for either job because it was so dangerous, little realizing how the job he was to get would end. He didn't go into the police or the fire department, he went with Ford, and he went from department to department, from shift to shift, until there was nothing about the work he didn't know. He

was a tool and die maker, and a skilled man. From the first he started the work of organizing the plant, and you know how hard that was at Ford's. He risked his life doing it, and certainly he always risked his job. The children were coming along fast, and many a time we didn't know how we were going to pay the rent or meet the grocery bill. But he ended up first president of the first Ford local, the largest local in the world, with a membership of 80,000.

"His death wasn't a sudden thing. He worked for a time on the midnight shift, going out to the River Rouge plant and standing on cement floors in a cold building that was kept cold in order to keep the worker's awake.

"One time he came home with his legs swollen terribly, and in a high fever. That was the beginning of his rheumatic fever and it was the fever that brought on a heart condition, and he died of it finally. He never stopped working, all the while he was sick. He worked in the hospital, and he worked at home when they brought him home to die. Right up to the last, he was an international representative.

"When he died the workers took up a collection of \$12,000 and we are getting enough to live on every month, the money being held in trust by a group of his friends."

While she talked I thought of John Dos Passo's book, "1919", and its passages about Ford's plant.

"Production was improving all the time; less waste, more spotters, straw-bosses, stool pigeons (fifteen minutes for lunch, three minutes to go to the toilet, the Taylorized speed-up everywhere – reach under, adjust washer, screw down bolt, shove in cotterpin, reachunder, adjustwasher, screwdown bolt, reachunderadjustscrewdownreachunderadjust until every ounce of life was sucked off into production and at night the workmen went home grey shaking husks.)

Ford owned every detail of the process from the ore in the hills until the car rolled off the end of the assembly line under its own power. The plants were rationalized to the last tenthousandth of an inch as measured by the Johansen scale; in 1926 the production cycle was reduced to eighty-one hours from the ore in the mine to the finished salable car proceeding under its own power.

When the stock market bubble burst, Mr. Ford the cracker-barrel philosopher said jubilantly, "I told you so. Serves you right for gambling and getting in debt. The country is sound."

But when the country on cracked shoes, in frayed trousers, belts tightened over hollow bellies, idle hands cracked and chapped with the cold of that coldest March day of 1932, started marching from Detroit to Dearborn, asking for work and the American Plan, all they could think of at Ford's was machine guns. The country was sound but they mowed the marchers down. They shot four of them dead.

To turn to more agreeable subjects, after a good afternoon with Mrs. Paul St. Marie and Marie, the latter went home to spend a delayed Epiphany with her parents who had just returned from Italy, where Mrs. Conti saw her ninety year old father before he died. He had lived through the most severe fighting and bombing, and one of his remarks which Marie's mother told her about, has stayed with me all month. "God loves me" he kept saying with great confidence, "and he will let me see my children before I die."

His so great confidence was rewarded. “God loves me,” I kept saying to myself very often after that with a warm and reassuring feeling over this heartbreaking truth.

Montreal

Love is cruel too of course, I thought as I left the next day to go to Montreal to visit Fr. Roy who is sick there in the hospital, deprived of all the activity and the traveling and work which he loves. He who had built schools and churches in the far north, in the wilds of Gaspé; he who had built a parish in the Louisiana swamps, constructing sawmills, harnessing oxen to draw logs to the mills, sawing them up for schools and mission churches; who built a feed mill and ground the meal to support his parish; who traveled and organized retreats and talked unceasingly of the love of God, His love for us, and what our love for him ought to be, since we are sons of God; who came to us sick, to rest, and stayed to construct a retreat house at Maryfarm, working night and day to install pipes and sinks and tubs, and wiring for electricity, a new floor in the chapel, a platform for the altar, prie dieus and book cases and shelves over the kitchen sink; who gave retreats to one or to forty, and days of recollection, when he gleefully made us fast, feasting us royally at the end of the day and singing French folk songs; an active man, a hearty man, who loved people and loved to use his hands to work for people; consecrating the Host in those two hands in the early morning, and driving nails and tinkering with the mechanics of an auto in the afternoon; he who prayed much and yet always found it hard to pray, as one could see by his distractions and his sighs over his hour of meditation after breakfast in the morning – this loved friend of ours is now lying sick in the hospital in Montreal, unable to walk about, unable to offer up the Mass.

God has taken everything from him but Himself. It was as though He said, “You love me and I want your whole love; I love you so much, I can share you with none, with nothing.” He is a grain of wheat, fallen into the ground to die.

I stayed from Monday night to Saturday in Montreal, spending three afternoons with Fr. Roy, and also visiting Richard Strachan who is at Valleyfield seminary, and Leo McDonald and Norman Rolandeau at the Grande Seminaire and Fr. Melancon who is in the hospital taking a rest cure for some months. We are hoping that he can continue his rest with us this summer.

Sudbury

Saturday night I took the train and a tourist berth for Sudbury, an overnight journey up into Ontario, to visit Father Lacouture and Father Migneault and to find out more about the nickel mining in that section in connection with my articles about work.

This is the first time that I had met Fr. Lacouture, and it was good to be able to have a visit with him and talk to him about our work and our retreats in which we have tried to follow the basics of retreats which he has given in the past to thousands of priests. Fr. Lacouture is bursar at the Sacred Heart school – a short, broad, hearty person, born in New England and

much more like an American than a French Canadian. He was an army chaplain in the first world war, and in his approach to people and in manner, reminds me more of Fr. Grace, who spent some months with us on Maryfarm after getting out of the army, than of Fr. Roy. In the next issue of the paper, we will write more about our plans for new retreat houses and will give the dates for the retreats in the immediate future.

Valleyfield Strike

While I was in Montreal I went to a meeting of the Catholic Women's league and heard Mrs. Pierre Casgrain tell of last year's strike of the textile workers in Valleyfield not many miles out of Montreal. They were organized by the A.F. of L. and the strike was a long and bitter one. Before it was over charges of sedition and violence were brought against one of the leaders, and of attempting to bribe witnesses against another of them. The cases are being appealed now. The workers put in a ten-hour day, and worked in rooms where the humidity was 75 or 80 degrees and the windows in summer had to be kept closed on account of the work. When the windows were open the thread in the looms broke. The history of the textile mills is a sad one. They were brought to this country by Alexander Hamilton to provide labor for women and children. "The devil finds work for idle hands," he is reported to have quoted piously. It still remains one of the lowest paid industries in the United States, and is as yet poorly organized.

J.O.C.

A group of us had a delightful visit with Fr. Sanschagrin at the Jocist Center where about seventy young men and women make up the staff. There are three or four buildings thrown into one: a hospice for boys, a chapel, halls, dining room and kitchens, and offices for the many newspapers which are printed there. The Young Christian Workers, to translate the term Jocist, has 40,000 circulation weekly. The Young Agricultural Workers have a monthly with 10,000 circulation; The Young Christian Students have a paper with a circulation of 20,000 monthly. Here is the center for all Canada, and seven oblate priests give all their time to the work. In June there will be a large gathering of the French-speaking and also of the English-speaking groups, the latter of which are just organized.

I was glad to hear that my articles on **Work** caused discussion of the subject, and I hope that the clarification of the ideas on the machine, unemployment, the machine and war, man and work, and the family and the land, will continue among the Jocists as it is going on in many seminaries throughout the land.