For These Dear Dead

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Summary: Six tender obituaries of Workers who had died the past year, each highlighting the person's special qualities. Comments that since "There is no time with God" our prayers for the dead are as if said before their death. (DDLW #225).

"In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die, but they are in peace."

This is a verse which always brings comfort. We all have a long list of the dead to pray for, relatives and friends. So many of mine are non-Catholics, and I have always remembered the advice of an Augustinian priest years ago. "There is no time with God," he said, "and all the prayers you will say for those souls were as though you said them before their death, and God always answers prayers. Who knows what graces He offered them at the moment of death, or that that instant after when the soul is released from the body." And now, who are our dead of this year, for whom we are praying, and for whom we ask your prayers?

Japanese Friend

There is Kichi Harada, Japanese friend, who came in to us back in 1937 and remained with us all these years. She had been an artist and a lecturer, but the boycott against the Japanese left her jobless and penniless, and she was one of the sad army of the homeless when she came to us. As is often the case, her first reaction to Mott street was one of horror. She had been living on Riverside Drive, in sunny rooms looking out over a glorious river. And now all we had to offer was a miserable room in the slums, where one must make a constant fight against vermin, where one is surrounded by noise and the soot of the many small factories that seep in the windows, where there are endless steps to climb (she always lived on the fifth floor as being more airy), where one's companions are not of one's choosing.

I remember a feast day some years ago–just before Peals Harbor. We like to celebrate name days around the Catholic Worker, and we had given Kichi the name day of St. Francis Xavier. She wanted to give us a feast on that day, so she blithely went around to the Chinese stores and bought vegetables and meats and sauces and brought them back into the house.

There was another woman in the House of Hospitality who hated those whom she called the Japs. The poor are not necessarily kind, as we all know. She came into the kitchen that afternoon and while Kichi was upstairs getting an apron, she threw everything Kichi had bought on the floor, scattering it with a wide drunken sweep to the four corners of the kitchen floor, cursing out the "dirty Jap" and her evident intent to poison us all. It was a moment for me of "righteous rage." But I've learned through long and painful experience that rage does not accomplish righteousness. So I persuaded the militant one to go up to bed and rest, and I gathered up from the floor all the food and laid it out in plates for cooking, so that Kichi never knew how close to disaster her feast had come.

A Delightful Feast

It was a delightful feast and the drunken one herself, recovered to a certain extent by that time, helped serve, singing jovially the while, and passing gravy-laden dishes precariously over our heads so that we held our breath.

Kichi had a great sense of rank, of hierarchy, and it was always painful for her to live as she did. She was insulted many times during the war, even at our own table, and there were those who told her after the atom bomb that the Japs deserved everything they got. It is true, she argued, indefatigably in a high shrill trembling voice, and she could shout anyone down, but there are few amongst us who practice holy silence.

Laid To Rest

When she went to the hospital and was asked her religion, she said, "I am nearer a Catholic than anything else." But she was not to have the consolations of Holy Mother Church, though she died surrounded by Mother Cabrini's sisters, who have always been angels of mercy to us. She died so suddenly of a heart attack that she could not have the Church's burial, and she is laid to rest (I like that phrase) in a little non-sectarian cemetery over in New Jersey where Standard Oil tanks stand out in a distant field like grim reminders of the hell she had left. May God rest her soul.

Isabel Conlon

And there is Isabel Conlon, dear friend of the Catholic Worker, who lived next door to us, in one of the apartments at 115 Mott street. Her husband was a doctor and a holy one who left her holy poverty, and every night when I first knew her she went out to office buildings to clean. She had the dignity and

grace and peace and quiet of what our old fashioned mothers used to term "the perfect lady," and it was easy to think of our Blessed Mother as the model of all Catholic women when with her.

Later she was too ill to work and for the year before her death, in constant pain, for she was dying of cancer, she sat in her little tenement kitchen at the center table and answered letters for us, acknowledged subscriptions and donations after our appeals. Just a year ago she wrote her last notes, and probably many of you have received these impersonal little cards, signed "the editors," and then she went away to St. Rose's cancer home down by the river, within walking distance so that we could visit her and keep her constantly in our thoughts. She died some six months later, suffering for us all, doing the hardest of all work, spiritual work, the work of suffering and pain.

Mary Sheehan

Then there was Mary Sheehan, who died this last year, a rather sour, bitter sort of woman who had seen much poverty and unemployment and who never quite knew what we were trying to bring out in the Catholic Worker. She came to us in 1933, and together with Stanley Vishnewski And Dan Orr she made up a team to sell papers on the streets. They both brought out the best in her, by teasing her and laughing at her, and by their comradeship they eased a great deal of the tension between the workers and the scholars which is just one of the many wars we are engaged in. She had a wit of her own, too, and I think I told the story in my book, House of Hospitality, how one of the Comrades on Union Square jeered one day at her. "I know your Cardinal," he said derisively. "He gets drunk every night with his housekeeper." And she answered, the only possible answer, "And doesn't that just show how democratic he is."

Mary died a few months ago, and Charles O'Rourke and Stanley and I, who had known her for so many years, went to see her laid out, and we recalled with love and gratitude all she had done for spreading the ideas of the Catholic Worker. She was a sharp-tempered soul, and St. Jerome they say was another. Of course she was unappreciated. I think it was Fr. Faber in one of his spiritual conferences who tells how we all feel unused, unappreciated, undeveloped, just beginning, when the time comes for us to die. She probably felt that way, too. But God will make it all up to her.

Will Never Know

She will never know how many souls she reached, to whom she brought the word of God. One result of the street apostolate we saw this summer. A member of the diplomatic corps came in to visit us, who bought a paper eight years ago on

the street, he said, and was led to look into the claims of the Church as a result of it, and now he is a Catholic. Who knows but God, how many Mary reached.

Paul St. Marie

I wish we had more writers in the Catholic Worker movement. There are so many things of interest to report, and the workers are so busy, on all fronts, that we don't have the written reports we should. We should have had an obituary on Paul St. Marie, Detroit friend of the Catholic Worker, whose name is high on my list as a lay apostle to the workers, who recited some of the Office every day, who was gay and happy and persistent, who worked at Ford's and married and raised a large family, and organized and was fired for organizing, who was an official of the auto workers union, secretary of the Ford local, the largest in the world, and suffered all the maligning and smearing that one can suffer when one works actively in the labor movement. Joe Zarrella, who has been working with the Furniture Workers union down in Tell City, Indiana, and his work of organizing and combating enemies within and without the labor movement, should place Paul's name high on this list, and not only pray for him, but to aid in the difficult work of being an apostle in the labor moment who is not sanctifying the machine, but trying painfully to work out of this social order, step by step, trying to clamber out of this social order which means degradation and proletarianism and final slavery to the worker and the decay of the home to the family.

A Gay and Happy Soul

I used to go to see Paul St. Marie on my occasional visits to Detroit, and although he was a skilled tool and die worker, he had to live in one of those ugly Detroit houses, grey and unpainted, ugly and badly built, far from the fields and woods of Michigan, surrounded by mile after mile of slum and factory. He was a gay and happy soul, Paul was, and he found his beauty in his wife and children, and he was always taking our pictures to show to Bishops and priests at the Catholic social conferences he attended so hopefully. A great soul was Paul, and all who knew him recognized it, and it was a great tragedy, his early death. He should have had top place at these conferences, he should have been sitting at the right side of Bishops, he should have been loved and acclaimed and exalted, worker and apostle that he was.

John Ferguson

There is John Ferguson, "Fergie" we called him, who helped us on our breadline for many years, He had been seaman, dock worker, night watchman, barge worker, and it was a murky evening along the water front that led to his disaster which led him in turn to the door of the Catholic Worker. He had a drop too much as the saying goes, and fell into the east River. And when he came to, he found himself in the Bellevue psychiatric ward, and from there he was quickly shipped to one of the giant hospitals for mental cases on Long Island. We have told his story before, how he was held there for three years. He was a good worker, and they need good reliable help, and Fergie could not get away. Finally he was able to get some clothes, and with the connivance of one of the visitors, sneaked out on a Sunday afternoon and made his way back to New York. He came to the breadline in the midst of the depression, and began to be part of the work by his very willingness to serve. He ran many an errand. We get the leftover bread from Macy's bakery very often, and it was usually Fergie who put gunny sacks on his shoulders and went up town by the subway, sometimes making two trips to bring back loads of rolls and sometimes some cake. And then he plucked up enough courage to try to get his old-age pension–the poor know how hard it is. You must be getting no other help, but meantime, you may starve while you are waiting. You have to lie, cajole, entreat, implore, and one of our kitchen workers tells bitterly of a friend who committed suicide finally while he waited for help. Usually one must have letters, friends, pull of some kind. And Fergie's case was further complicated by the fact that he could not account for the three years of his life that he was at Islip, or Brentwood, or wherever it was, from which he had not been properly discharged, but had run away. But I had a friend, who had a friend, in the proper bureau, and Fergie finally got his pension, out of which he helped many as he himself was helped. He lived across the street, in a little steam-heated apartment with Arthur Sheehan, where Arthur takes refuge on account of his own bronchial trouble. One day Arthur was in bed and Fergie had been taking care of him, and when he had warmed the soup and fed his patient he went to sit down in a rocking chair to rest, and fell from the chair to the floor–dead. Arthur had been giving him instruction in catechism for some months, so he was able to get out of bed, baptize Fergie himself, and then call the priest, from Transfiguration Church down the street. So Fergie had the last rites and a Christian burial, and we all went to his funeral, which was a happy affair indeed.

John Ryder

And we could say the same for John Ryder's. He used to help us in the kitchen too, and then when employment picked up, he took a job over in Secaucus, New Jersey. All of you who ride the Pennsylvania or the Lehigh pass by those pig farms set in the swamps, ugly as sin, evil-smelling holes, where thousands of

pigs are raised and fattened on garbage from New York hotels. I always think of the "meadows" which separate Newark and New York with horror. I remember reading of children stung to death by mosquitoes as they went berry picking in the swamps. And just as I left on this trip there was a horrible story in the paper of a two-year-old child of one of the pig farmers being sucked down into a quagmire right in back of his home.

John Ryder worked in this setting, cleaning out pig sties, caring for the hogs, together with several other hired men. On pay days he would come over to New York and too often spend his holidays on the Bowery. He told us the pay was good and the meals too, but it was another case of needing heroic virtue to live under such surroundings. Too often the men sought surcease and rest and dreams in drink. They could perhaps have saved and released themselves from their proletarian status. But it is difficult to clamber out of the trough of the destitute. No matter what wages are they have a way of evaporating. There is always sickness, accident, friend in need. Generally the men themselves are blamed for improvidence by those very ones who are finding it hard to live these days on an income of a hundred a week. I've heard many such complaints.

Came Home

John, like the prodigal son, came home to us after feeding off the husks of the swine. And he could not be feasted because he was dying. Instead, he had that real feast, the bread of the strong, and he died and was laid out in the chapel at Maryfarm, and each night before his burial we said the office of the dead as though he were one of the mightiest of the sons of god, and no Bishop or Abbott could have had a finer burial. Now he rests in a little cemetery down the road where I hope all of us at the farm will be buried, and John Daly and some of the others have put flowers on his grave, and Tamar wheels my little grandchildren down there for visits. Whenever there is a funeral there is a bell tolled, and we on the farm can hear and bow our heads in prayer. May his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

Others

And there was Stanley's grandmother, who died this year, and Jim Mulgrew, and Jim Ericson and Joe Lynch and Bill Evans, and my own Aunt Cassie and my daughter's father-in-law, William Hennessy. And there was a nameless one on the breadline, and down on the farm a homeless wayfarer who was being sent to us by an Easton priest, who died on the road, in front of the Brewery before he could reach shelter.

For all these, and for my own mother and father, and all relatives, benefactors, friends, priests and laymen, I beg of God that they will have now a place of

refreshment, light and peace.

And may they all pray for us, who are still here “in this dubious battle.”