

Fall Appeal - 1974

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Records the trials and financial costs of meeting city building codes on a new house for homeless women, and asks for prayers and continued financial support. (DDLW #544).

October 1974—month of great saints, St. Therese, St. Francis and St. Teresa of Avila.

Dear fellow workers in Christ, whom I dearly love, because you enter with us into all our “trials and tribulations” (as John, the farmer calls them).

Time to write another appeal, the first since last October, which you always answer, with prayers and loving kindness and the wherewithal to go on buying the peas, beans and lentils for the wonderful soup with all the vegetables our farm has grown this summer to make it a full meal.

Tomorrow is the feast of St. Francis, who put aside all human learning, all ownership of property and ecclesiastical status, and became a fool for Christ. A year or so ago a handful of us read the “Little Flowers of St. Francis” after Compline in our chapel at the farm, and as I listened I heard again the story “This then is perfect joy.” I think to myself it is time to read it again because our troubles are multiplied. The farm at Tivoli is overcrowded—someone must appear next week in the Tivoli Court, in the firehouse, to answer for violations on the property. A letter today from Chris Montesano tells of a court appearance for violations in the San Francisco house, and danger of closing. Joyce just came upstairs to tell of one of our brothers of the Bowery breaking several of our windows in our “soup kitchen.” Never in the 40 years of the C.W. has there been such violence in the air. What to do? It is a time to practice “Resist not evil.”

Our life certainly is a quest, and it has been for many years a quest for some shelter. Food, for us here in America, is easier to come by than places for the homeless to lay their heads. They are like our Lord in that. He had no place to lay His head. To remedy this, a dear Abbot sold some property belonging to his order and gave us the money to buy an old settlement house which was marvelously fitted to our needs for a center and a home for women. Since it had been a music school, I feel that the very walls have been soaked up with happy sounds; and since it had been a day school, there is already a sprinkler system and fire escapes. There are a great number of rooms, large and small.

Little practice rooms and larger practice rooms. There is heat and hot water, and a few baths in addition to the usual toilets on several of the three floors and street-level basement.

And now, holy mother the city has sent her officials to tell us all the things that have to be done, which means more baths, fire-retarding halls and stairs, and steel self-closing doors on every room. Already there have been extensive repairs made over the entire roof, much of it entirely replaced at a cost of \$4,000, which have depleted what money we had been hoarding for these changes. They are also talking of cubic feet of air for each inhabitant in each room! What next?

When we started years ago and had to make moves, we just moved in and did the repairs as we went along, finding many skilled craftsmen, Hans and Mike and Earl; but now everything has to be done with many inspections before we get what is called a certificate of occupancy.

There is no certificate of occupancy necessary for the homeless women sleeping in doorways, in empty buildings falling into decay in the slums. Enormous building projects for business, but only the streets for the poor.

All our houses of hospitality around the country are going through trials like this, and where they rent and scrape the money together month by month, there is constant danger of eviction. What a perilous life, what an adventurous life! Our wealth lies in the numbers of young people who are coming to us and spending months and years in serving others in voluntary poverty. And where they are able to have gardens to raise food for the poor, they are learning a philosophy of work which Peter Maurin so often stressed.

It is 4:30 and time for an hour in our parish church around the corner. The Mass is at 5:30 p.m., and strength and courage to endure will come with the Mass. News came last night of my oldest granddaughter Becky bearing her second child, a boy. I wish one of my grand-children would name a child either Fidel (!) or Constance, since those names indicate the virtues I most admire—Fidelity and Constancy.

We beg you, dear friends, amici (literally those who love us), to be faithful too in your generosity to us, and respond to this appeal for help in our work for the most neglected of the city's poor. We beg your prayers, and help, and promise you our loving gratitude.