Poverty and Destitution

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The Catholic Worker, April 1966, 5, 8.

Summary: Through graphic stories of guests at the Worker she distinguishes between poverty ("the poor have some hope.) and destitution ("The destitute are ill and lonely, the hopeless ones.") Also distinguishes poverty, voluntary poverty, and holy poverty. Keywords: anarchism, pacifist (DDLW #838).

This article is about New York and its particular brand of poverty and destitution. We see enough of it, surely, around the offices of the **Catholic Worker**, which in the last 28 years have been located successively on East Fifteenth Street, near Avenue A; West Charles Street, near the North River; 115 Mott Street; 223 Chrystie Street; 39 Spring Street, and now our address is 175 Chrystie Street. The last three houses of hospitality have been within two blocks of the Bowery; so the men and women we see have reached what is considered the lowest depths of degradation.

Here are a few stories of some of the people we have encountered in New York who have lived with us for long periods, so that they became part of our community. They were with us some years ago, and I do not feel that I am violating their privacy by writing in this way.

Elizabeth was a big blowzy redheaded woman, with a good-natured face and eyes that squinted at you between long lashes. She was good-looking in her way, but the day she came in to us she was filthy from sleeping out in basements, hallways, even on fire escapes. She was not alone; there was a tall gaunt man with a grey face with her. She was eight months pregnant and the two of them felt that some shelter was needed now. They were both very much afraid. When we became more acquainted with them we learned that they were legally married, and "in the church" too. Elizabeth was feeble-minded, and yet she tried to hang on to religion, and one thing she knew was that she should not be married out of the church. He was the first addict I had ever encountered, and, as far as I knew, what he was taking were what they called on the Bowery "goof balls." That, in combination with the kind of liquor he drank, was powerful enough to make him fall unconscious in his plate of soup when he came to eat with us. We did not have accommodations for married couples, so we took Elizabeth into the rear house at Mott Street and put her husband in the front house into the ten-bed dormitory on the top floor.

John Cort had just come to us from Harvard, hoping to become more acquainted with the field of labor, and found himself instead helping, as he said, to run a "flophouse." John used to get down on his knees at night and pray. He prayed for himself and for those around him, the destitute and the poor, I suppose.

We may as well clarify this notion of the destitute and the poor. The poor have some hope. They have not been so long in this condition that they see no way out. They stay with us for months and years sometimes and then, finally, they get jobs. Or they go back to school, or get married, or rejoin their marriage partners. Anyway, something happens to them, they survive, and there is a certain joy and freedom in their condition. There is involuntary poverty and voluntary poverty, and all of us who try to earn a living by writing experience voluntary poverty. And there is, of course, the holy poverty of those who try daily to strip themselves of all attachments and to approximate to some extent the physical condition of the destitute. The destitute, on the other hand, have nothing–physically, intellectually, or spiritually. You never see them reading a book or a newspaper as they wait on the breadline, or listening to music, or playing with an alley cat as they sit on a curb in the sun, or laughing, or telling stories.

There is life of a sort on the Bowery, a wild boisterous life, and seamen, longshoremen, restaurant and institution help and all kinds and conditions of workers to live there for a time. You can get a cubicle with clean bedding for a dollar a night and a cheap meal and companionship. But the destitute are those who are always drunk or drug-ridden, who are always lying in gutters and in doorways, who are finally picked up by the morgue wagon early in the morning, who are afflicted mentally, who stare stonily around them, or rush about with anguished faces, and who suffer the torments of hell. The destitute are the ill and lonely, the hopeless ones. They may be of any age.

Pattern of Destruction

Elizabeth's husband was one of the destitute. We were never able to reach him–to get inside that hard exterior. When he was conscious he was only anxious to become unconscious again as quickly as possible, and when he could find no other companion on the Bowery, no other means to get money for drugs and liquor, he would come pounding on Elizabeth's door, demanding that she go out and get a job as dishwasher to take care of him. But Elizabeth was too far gone to work. Her baby was born, and died, and she returned from Bellevue Hospital and rested a day or so, and then rejoined him. He would not let her stay longer with us, nor could we let him stay, because he used to fall asleep with lighted cigarettes and set fire to mattresses, and he stole. So they left us, these destitute ones, and began their life again, sleeping out. (It was summer.)

Later, when Bob Steed and Kieran Dugan and other members of the Catholic Worker staff were looking for a house to which we could move, after notice had

been served on us by the city because they wanted to put a subway under our house and were demolishing the entire block around us, we found many evidences of such families as Elizabeth and John. In all the empty, boarded-up houses on the Lower East Side there were heaps of rags in corners, old mattresses dragged in, evidences of humans living like animals, like rats, in these old tenements. Water had been shut off, of course. There were no lights. Candles were used and empty rooms served as toilets. It must have been unbearably cold in winter. But they were out of the wind and the rain, the snow and sleep, these destitute ones.

Before our Chrystie Street house was torn down we could look into the windows of the tenement which was to one side of us and see a Puerto Rican family which shared its home with another family, bedding down on the floor in each of the three rooms. There was often screaming and fighting and sobbing and crying in these rooms. What wonder people turn to drink and dope and the dope of television to stupefy themselves and the children, so that they will not suffer so much.

When I was in jail for refusing to take shelter in the April 1959 Civil Defense Drill, there was a young Negro girl in the bed opposite me who claimed that the only place she could be alone was in the toilet. She had taken drugs, and later, in order to provide the money for drugs, she turned to prostitution.

If such desperate measures to escape from destitution (only, of course, one does not escape) seem fantastic, one can only say: go live in such circumstances for a while and see.

We were talking about Celia the other night and how enormously she ate at the table, and how she used to take away some crusts of bread and put them, wrapped up, under her pillow at night. With rats around, this is a dangerous habit. Just yesterday, Italian Mike told me that rats were jumping on his shoulders at night as he slept. He had brought in some alley cats but he wanted rat cages. Not traps. Traps get blood on them and the rats smell the blood and get wise and stay away. "I wash them off, of course," another neighbor said. "No, I want a cage," Mike insisted. "I'll catch them and drown them every day and after a while they'll stay away." Another man said that the best way was to sit quietly by the rat holes, and as they came out hit them over the head with a club. He had killed thirteen one night. Big ones. Put them in a gunny sack and they filled an ash can.

It was a bright day in May, and across the street, in the little Spring Street playground, old men sat at chessboards painted on the tables and the children ran screaming around at their games, which always involved jumping, dancing and whirling. Little ginkgo trees, with their fan-shaped leaves and upstanding branches, were bright green and shimmering. Mike was happy, standing over his garbage cans, waiting for the trash collector, surveying his clean-swept sidewalk. Mike fetches the bread each day from Poppilardo's bakery, ten dollars' worth, and on Friday gets the free swordfish tails which a big wholesale house at the

Fulton Fish Market saves for us. They make good chowder. Every Friday he calls out to Larry the cook, "What kind of fish?" and Larry makes the stock answer, "Dead fish!" which never fails to get a burst of laughter.

Mike is public relations man as well. "One hand washes the other," he explains as he sweeps off the neighbor's sidewalk. Once, when he was staying with us at the Peter Maurin Farm on Staten Island, he refused to come in to dinner and said, "I won't eat." John, the farmer, had taken away his hoe that morning and done the cultivating himself.

I have interpolated this little sketch of Mike, one of the poor, possessing nothing, with no salary, just the clothes on his back, a bed in a rat-ridden tenement, yet one of our best workers and in general a happy man, because he loves his work, he loves to be part of a community, serving others and working for the common good.

Celia, on the other hand, was one of the destitute. She came to us years ago because she could not live with her father, who was on welfare, because when he got his check he would drink and try to attack her. The welfare people had no remedy for this. He was an inventor, a man of brains, talked intelligently to the welfare people–he was cooperative, in other words. Celia, on the other hand, was obviously defective and when she told tales of her father's having tried to rape her, she was not taken seriously. The welfare worker would not put her on separate relief, so she came to us. She was a greasy, black-haired girl, short and stout, and wore several suits or dresses and two coats. She was afraid that someone would steal her clothes, so she wore them all the time. She did not trust our community any more than she did her father. She never missed meals, wandered in and out with a huge purse clutched under one arm (she probably slept with it that way) and an armload of school books. She went to night school and got good grades. She was forty before she finally left us and she was still going to school.

It was the Second World War and its dearth of manpower that finally parted us. There was a job open at a little movie house on the Bowery for an honest cashier, and Celia got the job, which she held for five years. At our persuading, she got into a girls' shelter, where she paid weekly rent, made her own meals in the basement, and washed her own clothes. She also had a locker with a key, so she stopped wearing all her clothes at once. This simple solution had not occurred to us. Or perhaps we did not have the money for lockers then; we do not now. You buy for one and you have to buy for all. Her father had meanwhile died, and she was saving her money, she said, to buy him a tombstone. We urged her to put her money in the bank but she would not, and sure enough, one night a purse snatcher ran off with her savings, which by then amounted to several hundred dollars. Her screams brought the police, who caught the thief. From then on they cared for the purse, honestly, until she spent the money for the tombstone.

Housing Conditions

Then there is Maria, a beautiful young Puerto Rican. At the age of thirteen she was seduced and had a baby in Bellevue Hospital. She was allowed to bring it home with her but her mother put her out–the house was already too crowded. She was taken in by a neighbor, who used her for prostitution purposes. She jumped out of the window of the rooming house and was brought to the hospital with broken legs, which kept her there for a long while. I have seen the scars of her injuries. Her child was taken from her and put into a foster home, since she would not give it up or put it out for adoption. When we met her she was eighteen, married again to an amiable young fellow who was always losing his job. She had a child by him and another coming. He had lost his job through a very bad accident to his hand. He never got compensation or his job back. His mother took him and his one child in and Maria was sleeping in the hallway, pregnant as she was, because their house too was overcrowded. So she came to live with us for the time. After the baby was born her husband found a job and an apartment. The rent charged these babes in the woods was fantastic.

"How I got this place," she began, "it was this way. This house has Italians and Jews, and the place is all run down anyway, and nobody cares as long as the rent is paid. So they had just as soon rent to Puerto Ricans. Each apartment is supposed to be for $28 a month, and there are four apartments on a floor and seven floors walk-up. I'm lucky I'm on the third floor with the kids. There was an Italian woman living in the building and she told me about this place when I was over at Eldridge Street in a two-room place and we were desperate, the water frozen in the pipes and the toilet stopped up and the gas and electric turned off. So we just had to move. So she said, 'There's an empty place in the house where some friends of mine moved out, and it is my furniture and if you will buy the furniture you can get the apartment. It will be $23 a week.' My husband was getting thirty-five, and here we were going to have to pay $23. So we signed a paper, that was last June, and moved in, and then from June to December we paid her $23 a week and she paid the rent for us."

Maria got up from the chair by the good kitchen table and fetched a box from the kitchen shelf full of papers and odds and ends, and began sorting through them. "Here are the receipts for the statue of the Blessed Mother. You pay every week until you pay the thirteen dollars and thirty-four cents, and it takes twenty-five weeks to pay. Landan Brothers, down on Chambers Street. And here are the receipts for the rent."

True enough, there were the evidences of man's inhumanity to man, the exploitation of the poor by the poor. One set of immigrants exploiting the newest set of immigrants.

"My husband got sick in December and had to stay home from work, so then the neighbor told us we could pay ten dollars a week to her and the rent $28 to the 'super,' so that it what we have been doing."

In the front room, which had two windows looking out on the street, there were a dresser and two over-stuffed chairs; there had been plastic curtains and a davenport which had since fallen apart and been replaced by a smaller one which a neighbor had given her. There was a crib which Maria herself had bought at a second-hand store and in the kitchen an old-fashioned icebox. There are still coal and ice men in cellars all over the East Side, carrying heavy loads of ice and coal up steep tenement-house steps. Our Mike had done just such work and supported his father and sisters until his father died and his sisters married.

The stove in the kitchen was a combination coal and gas stove, but the gas had been turned off and the coal stove had holes in it and the pipe which led into the chimney had rusted apart. I didn't look into the two bedrooms, but I knew that the older boy slept in one and another family had the other. Another evictee, jobless, the destitute being helped by the poor. Or perhaps the poor being taken in by the poor, as between the two of them they were able to raise some food to feed the hungry mouths. The toilets were in the hall, which smelled of cats and rats and toilets, a most familiar tenement-house odor. Windows in the kitchen and bedrooms looked out on an airshaft and other windows, and only by peering out and straining one's neck to look up four more flights was it possible to see the sky.

The back bedroom was just the kind of place I had lived in when I went to work for the New York Call during World War I. I paid five dollars a month, and I had a phonograph on which I had paid a dollar down and a dollar a month, and the bed was warm, with a sheet-covered featherbed, and there was a good smell of cooking from the kitchen. The tailor and his wife and three children lived in the other rooms and there was always work and the gas had never been turned off. But here there was no fire to cook by, and according to the Arabs, "fire is twice bread."

The poor can live in such places and have some measure of comfort, but the destitute are dogged on every side by ill health, unemployment, accident and hunger.

I sat there for a while with Maria at her kitchen table, pondering over the slips before me, wondering how we could help her out of this slough. For seven months she had paid $93 a month, rent and furniture payment. Since then she had paid $40 a month to the avaricious widow and $28 to the landlord, $68 in all, instead of $93. That had been a generous reduction indeed. I frowned over the arithmetic before me. "The furniture looked quite good when we moved in," Maria tried to apologize for having been taken in. "It looked wonderful. You can't imagine how good it looked."

And there was still a year and three months to pay on it. Over a thousand dollars for junk, and nothing left of it by the time it was paid for. The gas and electric bill was $38.64 and had to be paid before the utilities could be turned on again. "It is very expensive to be poor," a friend says.

When we finally got this mess straightened out for them, Maria's husband's job

sufficed to keep them.

Maria never comes to us except when she is in real need and then a few dollars helps her out. There is always someone in the office who chips in to help if we are short. There are always clothes coming in for children. Her household furnishings are certainly not of the best and they sleep on mattresses on the floor because the wages of Francisco are not enough for furniture. Like most hospital workers, he has no more than thirty dollars a week take-home pay, and that has to support Maria and four children. Here is poverty but not unhappiness. There are schools for the children, and free medical care for the family, and all the little comforts and luxuries which spill over in a big city. (One of our staff furnished her first home after marriage with the bits of furniture which are put out, even in the slum areas, to be carted away by the garbage-disposal men.)

Tragic Ending

But another story of utter horror and tragedy gives some indication of the destitution of a new people like the Puerto Ricans coming into the city and living on starvation wages in noisy slums. It happened about a mile away from us. Pilar could speak no English. She was a violently emotional young woman, not too attractive, and was always getting into fights and arguments. One day she went to a tavern to make a telephone call to find out if her two older children had arrived at the agency which was to take them to camp for a few weeks. The telephone was defective, she lost her dime, had no other, and began to make a scene with the bartender, which included screams and kickings and led to police action. The officers' arrival meant terror for Pilar, who was dragged hysterical into a police car and taken away to the psychiatric ward at Bellevue, where her behavior was such that she was given heavy sedation. Evidently, no one on the ward spoke Spanish and she could not make herself understood. The next few days were an utter horror for her, leading only to more hysteria. It was only when a relief worker who had Pilar on her caseload came and pushed in the unlocked door of the little one-room apartment, that two infants were found dead in their cribs of starvation and thirst. If the children ever wailed, their voices were feeble and could not have been heard above the din of traffic and radio and television.

Ah, the pain, the anguish, the sin and despair, the remorse, at not living as one knows one should live, as a human being should live, fully and abundantly! The poor feel guilty too. It has been dinned into them so often that here we have a land of opportunity, of equality, of abundance. What is wrong with them that they cannot get out of the morass, they wonder. One of the saddest things about the poor and the destitute is that they are blamed for it too. Everything is expected of them. "If you would only do this . . ." "This is what I would do if I were in your place . . ."

Yes, we know the poor and the destitute, from twenty-eight years of close association, and if we did not have so many social theories, if we had not

constantly proclaimed our philosophical anarchism, and the nonviolent pacifist means by which we sought to attain it, we might have come a little closer to the ideals expressed in **Fields, Factories and Workshops** and **The Conquest of Bread**. These are two books of Kropotkin which Peter Maurin, the French peasant founder of the Catholic Worker movement, very often quoted as texts. He also talked constantly about "the art of human contacts," and man's freedom, which must impel him, rather than the use of force. And because Peter Maurin was a saint as well as a social thinker, we keep to his program, which we feel is fundamentally sound and holy, and so we have not, in these short twenty-eight years, been able to found any true cooperative farms, though there are a goodly number of houses. Perhaps if we had stopped talking about our principles of personal responsibility, which do not allow us to take state aid or endowments from foundations, which we consider money stolen from the worker and the poor, we might have been able to accomplish more.

"To make the rich poor and the poor holy" (that is, whole men), that is what the late Eric Gill, artist-philosopher, said should be our aim. It is a lifetime work. Meanwhile we are free, and freedom is an inestimable treasure.

Ed. note: "Poverty and Destitution" was first published in a special (Summer 1961) issue of **Dissent** devoted to New York City. This important socialist and anti-war magazine is now appearing bi-monthly and we commend it to the attention of CW readers. Frequent contributors include Irving Howe, Michael Harrington, Nat Hentoff and Paul Goodman. **Dissent** is published at 509 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, NY. A subscription is four dollars and fifty cents a year.