

On Pilgrimage - September 1947

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Summary: Highlights the successful summer at the Newburgh farm—crops, retreats, hospitality. Reflects on encouragement in the work and the folly of the cross. Derides flippancy. Describes the environs of her annual retreat and says she is always at home among the poor. (DDLW #455).

Last month on my way home from church one day I was enchanted to see little fig trees and potted herbs being sold along the curb, for fifty cents apiece. So now in my window on the fire escape there is a delightfully fragrant bush of basil, two kinds, one the large leaf variety such as you find in cans of tomato paste, and the other the fine. Now every dish, even to the plain whole wheat pancake which we sometimes make for breakfast, can be garnished with a bit of chopped basil. The fig tree is to delight the eye and the imagination. There are even two little figs growing on it. All over the east side in the Italian section, wherever there is a bit of dirt for a backyard, the Italians have their fig trees carefully corseted in straw in the winter, and cherished fondly in the summer. To sit under one's own fig tree! Even the proletariat, the property less, keep dreaming of this heaven. "A land flowing with milk and honey!" "Of the fruit of their corn and wine and oil they are multiplied. In peace in the self same I will sleep and I will rest. For thou, O Lord, singularly has settled me in hope."

This has been a tremendous summer on the farm, our first summer on our new farm at Newburgh, N.Y., ninety-six acres, of very good soil, which is producing cabbages, broccoli, tomatoes, rutabagas, potatoes, corn, in such abundance, that station-wagon loads are brought in every week to help feed the breadline and all of us at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality. And as usual on C.W. farms, hospitality goes on, and constant visitors.

Maryfarm retreat house has been full on many a weekend during the summer. On one occasion, eighty-five were present; there were colored boy scouts camping in the woods; there were colored and white at most of the retreats.

Gerry Griffin and Jack Thornton have been farmers and builders, with John Filliger, Hans Tunnesen, Joe Cotter and William Rocco. Peter Maurin is there, enjoying the conferences and the company and sitting on the lovely stone porch which looks down the road, past the flower garden and shrubs, which are so beautiful around the house. Out in front are three gigantic Norwegian pines, fragrant in the heat.

Quite a number of our friends answered our appeal in the last issue so that the butcher, the baker, the grocer, all had their weekly bills paid at least, and will wait until the fall appeal for the rest. We pray for God to bless our benefactors and all those who have done us good.

From Italy, from the Philippines, from Spain and from friends in other parts came assurances that we should not be discouraged, but rejoice in the Lord always. This in answer to the editorial “What Dream Did They Dream? Utopia or Suffering,” (The title, by the way, was not mine. Marjorie Hughes read the article and entitled it unconsciously in her comment on it.)

We thank all our friends for their encouragement, but we do wish to repeat that we are not discouraged – that one of the reasons we wrote the article was to point out as we have done again and again, that in following the Cross, we are inevitably going to have failure and death, and that these are the means God has given us to work out our Salvation. The sum total of our failures, however, will mean the abundant life, here as well as hereafter, though perhaps not in our generation.

Here are two quotations which make the point. (Peter always told us to back up our “points” with authorities!)

In respect to Peter Maurin’s ideas about farming communes, it is good to ponder these words of Fr. Humbert Clerissac, O.P., spoken to Jacques Maritain, and quoted in his introduction to “The Mystery of the Church.”

“Jacques,” he said, “the fact that a work is quite evidently useful for the good of souls is not sufficient reason for us to rush to carry it out. It is necessary that God should wish it for this precise moment (in that case there must be no delay); and God has His own time. It must first be desired, and be enriched and purified by that desire. It will be divine at this cost. And the man who will be charged with carrying it out will not perhaps be the one who has best understood it. We should beware of a human success that is too complete and too striking; it may conceal a curse. Let us not go faster than God. It is our emptiness and our thirst that He needs, not our plenitude.”

In respect not to discouragement, but a healthy and truthful recognition of our own failures as well as those of others around us (the human aspect of the church) Guardini wrote that we must “have the courage to live in a state of permanent dissatisfaction.”

As I was writing in my room just now, Rose Sclafani brought me up a delightful dish of snails, cooked in tomato sauce, because I had said as I passed her apartment door on the way up,

that I had never eaten them.

I had remembered Sentimental Tommy who said wistfully as he passed his neighbors open kitchen doors "I'm not hungry;" and when they didn't look convinced, "My mother says I'm not hungry." Anyway, Rosie is always bringing me a bit of her Italian cooking, and telling the girls around here how to cook such things as spaghetti, mussels, eels, etc.

I was glad it was not tomorrow as I am scheduled to go on bread and water for the day for a special intention. It would have sorely tempted me because we are all as curious as Eve, and as I had told Rose, I had never tasted a snail.

It has been a pleasant day for mail and visitors. There were good letters from my daughter, my brother, as well as letters from dear friends in the work, bearing encouragement. Later when Sister Bernice, Sister Patrice and I sat in the office talking of failure and the Cross, the telephone rang and a priest from Maine called long distance to tell me that we should never think that we had failed, because conditions were the same in the rural districts and the city districts, and our efforts greatly encouraged others. He himself was interested in settling families on the land, a group of families together.

A lovely package of bookmarks and cards came in from Harry Berliner, Nevada City, California, and we are using them for correspondence.

Many of our friends and readers spoke this last month about the flippancy with which LIFE magazine treated the Marian Congress in Ottawa this summer. In C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, the devil writes to his agent, "Flippancy is the best (weapon) of all. In the first place it is very economical. Only a clever human can make a real joke about virtue, or indeed about anything else; any of them can be trained to talk *as if virtue* were funny. Among flippant people the joke is always assumed to have been made. No one actually makes it; but every serious subject is discussed in a manner which implies that they have already found a ridiculous side to it. If prolonged, the habit of flippancy builds up around a man the finest armour plating against God that I know, and it is quite free from the dangers inherent in the other sources of laughter. It is a thousand miles away from joy; it deadens instead of sharpening, the intellect; and it excites no affection between those who practice it."

During the month of July I went out to New Kensington, Pa., to make my yearly retreat. Most of the retreats this summer have been for men at our Newburgh Maryfarm, though Fr. Fiorentino and Fr. Yunker have given retreats for women. At New Kensington, there is one more of the many little retreat houses we ought to be having all over the country. Fr. Fusco begged me not to advertise it as it is filled up now for all four retreats and it hurts him to turn people away. As usual our readers hear about it and come from Kentucky, New York, Boston,

to make this delightful retreat which is in complete silence and which emphasizes nature and the supernatural; the teaching of the sample; abandonment to Divine providence, and The Folly of the Cross. As usual the retreatants came from all classes; factory workers, teachers, colored women from the Hill district of Pittsburgh, shepherded there by Sister Angelica.

The retreat house is a big ten-room house with all conveniences situated up on the top of the hill, one of a row of similar homes, surrounded by pleasant gardens and trees. There are only a few hundred feet of garden to refresh oneself in, so I took walks every evening and the further down the hill I got the poorer the homes were. I always feel at home and at ease when I get in the neighborhood of the poor with the vacant lots, some all weeds and some with little gardens of corn and salads. People sitting on their porches, little girls wheeling baby carriages, the clatter of dishes in the kitchen, clothes hanging in back yards. These are homes of the poor, but not destitute. In most other cities there are these back yards and porches, not like Mott Street, which is a canyon between tall buildings. Thanks to the playground across the street we get some glimpse of sky.

In the evenings, those retreat days, it was beautifully hot and still and there was an odor of pine and sweet clover in the air. Birds made their evening song, overhead planes soared. Just down the hill from the Apostolate of May retreat house was Fr. Fusco's church, Mt. St. Peter, which he and his parishioners built of the remains of an old Mellon mansion. It was just finished in 1944 and there are windows in it dedicated to Savonarola, Christopher Columbus, St. Joseph Cottalengo, Mother Cabrini, besides the fathers of the Church. The Chapel of the Seven Sacraments is especially beautiful.

What delighted me was the ramshackle old rectory nestled up under the shadow of the church, poor, unpainted, and yet somehow comfortable and homelike. Those good fathers should cherish and treasure that old house, especially these days when so many poor people are being evicted from their homes in all big cities; and so many others poorly housed in rat-ridden tenements, with no sun nor green about them. There is a sunny field around the house, filled with clover and Queen Anne's lace, milkweed in blossom – all fragrant and graceful in the hot July sun. As I rested outside the Church, after making the stations, a little rabbit came out and crouched in the grass, a lump of fur with its ears laid back, contemplating a fat robin in front of it.

Right below there is a factory with a clamor and a stench coming up from it. Up the hill, up from the little houses nestled below, women were coming for the evening devotions.

Yes, I hoped as I rested outside the Church, which was magnificent as was befitting the adoration of God, that the old rectory would be kept, a symbol of the poverty of Christ, who had no place to lay His head, who so identified himself with the poor.