

On Pilgrimage - September 1970

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Summary: Describes in detail the communal life at St. Benedict's farming commune in Australia and their emphasis on the primacy of the spiritual. Notes similarities and differences to the CW farms. (DDLW #503).

Australia

Dearest Deane,

You would love it here, where I am staying in "the bush," as they call it, though on every side there are tall eucalyptus, and the hills are very steep indeed, with gardens in every level place which has had to be cleared. Doesn't that remind you of our little gardens at Tivoli, those close to the houses?

It is truly a farming commune, St. Benedict's, where the initial group, but not all the families, are Benedictine Oblates, and I will give you the rule of life they follow. There is a priest who was a hermit for two or more years, then was joined by two women who had received their training at the Grail and know how to live anywhere, in cellars or huts, in plenty, or in want. Literally they lived in a hut here when they began, not as big as my room at the farm, room enough for two beds at either side of the room. A kitchen stove warmed it. Fr. John Heffey, the priest-founder, ate with them and he had already started gardens, chickens and a cow, and so could provide the food. There is a chapel, just as big as ours, and a community house was built, which now houses three women and a child, and guests, and there is a proper bath and shower and toilet inside. I am on the upper floor where there is a kitchen, community room, and one bedroom, uninsulated, with two windows in it. I have been warm under four blankets of Australian wool, and wearing a heavy bathrobe and bed socks to bed. After our heat wave in the States, doesn't this sound refreshing? And does it not remind you of Maryfarm at Newburgh, though not the poverty of Easton, or the comparative comfort of Staten Island?

This is like Northern California weather. Plenty of green around, and plenty of flowers, and plenty of rain. Also frost and occasional snow flurries. This is two hours out of Melbourne, and truly in "the bush" with no school available so that the children, of four families living here, study by correspondence courses. Two other families are preparing to come. There are three hundred acres and each family can stake out five acres and come weekends to build up their homes. There are single men and women, willing or unwilling celibates, I do not know.

One might say “intentional celibates.” Each family supports itself by labor in the community or outside, teaching, carpentry work, odd jobs. They each have cows, pigs, and when they kill a pig or a sheep they share with each other. The only electricity on the farm is here in the community house; the others have Tilley lamps strong and bright, which are carried to chapel or to the barns.

They have made their own roads. There are about fifty living here. This is an inaccessible place, up in the hills, and yet there are many visitors on weekends. They have the same problems we do and are very much at home with each other discussing them.

The great difference is in the emphasis on the spiritual life, the primacy of the spiritual, Peter Maurin would call it. The priest here is an old hand at this work. His two years (or more) of being a hermit taught him much. He reminds me in a way of Fr. Roy. He leads in all the manual

labor and teaches others. He reminds me too of Peter Maurin and the way he made schedules for himself, though he was always flexible.

The day begins at six. As many as can, get to the chapel to participate in the Mass but first they say Matins and Lauds. Breakfast later and this morning it was oatmeal with brown sugar and heavy cream, bread and cheese, both made here, and fruit. The oranges and apples of Australia are delicious. Then work building, farming, gardening, care of the animals. There is a print shop and the posters which were made to advertise the talks of Eileen Egan and me were both beautifully done. They looked like Eric Gill’s work. Father John quoted to me the early

title of Fr. Vincent McNabb which Peter Maurin had brought to me, Nazareth or Social Chaos.

I told him that the hippies who were taking to the communes in the United States seemed to recognize that, even if they had not heard of Fr. Vincent McNabb, the English Dominican. I meant the farming communes or settlements, not the city communes.

As for the primacy of the spiritual (which Peter used to emphasize) among those communes in the United States, there is an emphasis on study and meditation and there may be some knowledge of St. Francis, but certainly none of St. Benedict, St. Vincent de Paul, St. Martin de Porres. Certainly if you talk of the saints, they are interested as they would be in the legends of the aborigines that I am hearing about here in Australia. Stories of the Fathers of the Desert, the tales of the Hasidim and the sayings of the Zen Buddhists are strangely alike also. Thomas Merton, who brought the Desert Fathers closer, Martin Buber the tales of the Hasidim, and was it Suzuki the sayings of the Zen Masters?—they have all done us a service.

Yes, there is great emphasis on the spiritual hereabouts—Mass, the entire office, lives of the saints, a chapter from the rules of St. Benedict, yes, and the rosary. There is also a Gregorian Mass in Latin once a week which will certainly add a festive element to the feast of the Assumption tomorrow.

One of the girls here has a horse and a pig. The families have cars. (Little Mark has brought us a lizard to admire which was running across the living room floor.) Adele tells us of the

brave Spanish Benedictine who came to live with the aborigines and ate their food which included snakes, lizards and grubs. He, too, for love of them had to live off the land.

I have visited the Matt Talbot Hostels in Sidney, which are clean and smell good. They are homelike even though they house six hundred men a night and serve a thousand meals a day.

How Orwell, who wrote **Down and Out in Paris and London**, would have rejoiced at such hostels. He stressed them as Peter Maurin did.

There is something which is more like a commune in Melbourne, made up of a few families and others they take in, and which is also termed a house of hospitality. Certainly St. Benedict's farm is more like the Moshavim than the Kibbutzim as described by Martin Buber in **Paths in Utopia**. But it is far more of a model than any of our farms are, thanks to the leadership of Fr. John Heffey, who as a seminarian visited us at the Easton farming commune in 1940. I'll continue this as I have time. We leave Australia Aug. 28. Calcutta next.