

On Pilgrimage - May 1974

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Summary: Meandering comments on anarchism, "worthy or unworthy" poor, usury, the Church, holy fools, the writer Solzhenitsyn, Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers, and the Berrigan brothers. (DDLW #540).

Why do I go around speaking where I am invited when there is so much to do at home? This question was very much in my mind as I woke at 4 a.m. this morning (not quite as early as the Trappist monks). I often awake thus troubled, but my bedside books are at hand—a missal, a Julian of Norwich, and this particular Sunday morning, St. Francis de Sales, a paperback given me yesterday by a young girl at the annual Anarchist conference at Hunter College here in N.Y.!

My missal opened at yesterday's epistle, which begins, "the priests and elders were amazed as they observed the self-assurance of Peter and John and realized the speakers were uneducated men of no standing." This immediately gave me comfort. "Go where you are invited," Father McSorley, my first spiritual adviser, once told me. He was a man who listened, who never criticized. He knew instinctively that as a woman, as a convert, I was filled with uncertainties, always coming away from speaking engagements with the feeling that I was inadequate, had said

what I had not intended to say, had talked too long about irrelevancies, had not "made my point" as Peter Maurin put it. (I do keep telling stories to illustrate my "point," but the Gospels are full of such stories.)

Today I must go up to a convent, an Academy of the Sacred Heart, and, at the Liturgy of their annual reunion, give a ten-minute homily. What an impossible assignment! How could I in those few minutes deliver the message—give what was in my heart? "Thy will be done," was the topic assigned me. And "God's will is that all men be saved." St. Paul said that somewhere. All men. All the unworthy poor, the drunks, the drug-ridden, the poor mentally-afflicted creatures who are in and out of our CW houses all day. And yet Jesus told us what we were to do—feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, "worthy or unworthy." Oh, how much could be done if there were a house of hospitality in every neighborhood, in every parish! Lowering the tone of the neighborhood/ we have heard this everywhere. In some cities we have been driven from pillar to post by it, forced to move many times. A long history could be written—Detroit, Rochester, etc., etc. Yet the news is full of murder, mugging, rape and all manner of violence taking place in every neighborhood from Park Ave. to the Bowery or the South Bronx.

“Those who have the substance of this world”—“and close their hearts to the poor.” Am I going to make this kind of a judgment today on Fifth Ave., I, who have so much of the substance—books, radio, heat and hot water, food and clothing? (I could complain of crowding, of too much of the substance of this world all around me in shopping bags, clothes, suitcases, under the bed, over the bed on shelves, sometimes hardly a passage thru a dormitory to my own cluttered room which is office, library and guest room, too, when I am away.)

Can I talk about people living on usury, on the interest accruing from stocks and bonds, living on the interest, “never touch the principle,” not knowing in what ways the infertile money had bred more money by wise investment in God knows what devilish nerve gases, drugs, napalms, missiles, or vanities, when housing and employment, honest employment for the poor were needed, and money could have been invested there? What houses the employed have been able to buy double in cost, what with interest and insurance added on.

A Hard Job

To talk economics to the rich and Jesus to the anarchists gathered in convention these two days (and have to write this column) is a job. Besides, I did not “talk Jesus” to the anarchists. There was no time to answer the one great disagreement which was in their minds—how can you

reconcile your Faith in the monolithic, authoritarian Church which seems so far from Jesus who “had no place to lay his head,” and who said “sell what you have and give to the poor,”—with your anarchism?

Because I have been behind bars in police stations, houses of detention, jails and prison farms, whatsoever they are called, eleven times, and have refused to pay Federal income taxes and have never voted, they accept me as an anarchist. And I in turn, can see Christ in them even though they deny Him, because they are giving themselves to working for a better social order for the wretched of the earth.

“God the Father had two sons,” Jesus told his disciples this story. “The one said ‘I will’ and did not follow his command, and the other refused his command and yet went out and did what the Father commanded. Which one do you think the father cherished?” Jesus concluded. But Jesus also said “Judge not.” And as He hung in torture from a Cross, “Father, forgive them,” the jeerers, the mockers, the soldiers, the priests, the scribes and Pharisees. “They know not what they do.” Stephen, not long after, said the same thing when he was being stoned to death. “Lay not this sin to their charge.”

God wills that all men be saved. A hard saying for us to take and believe and hold to our heart to ease its bitterness. St. John of the Cross wrote, “Where there is no love, put love, and you will find love.” He was in jail too, put there by his own brethren. “Our worst enemies are of our own household,” Jesus said. I will write about my pitifully brief jail experiences one day, God willing. Such brief episodes compared to the time spent by c.o.’s, the Martin Sostre’s. Even the Berrigans’ imprisonment seems light compared to Sostre’s, Feliciano’s and so many blacks who are serving long terms. So many of us are holy fools in the eyes of our friends and readers because we share their sufferings or try to.

Holy Fools

But the term has a special meaning in Russian literature and is used to describe Myshkin in *The Idiot*, a truly Christ-like figure, and I was glad to see it used again in relation to Solzhenitsyn in an article in *Newsweek* last month. Every day the *Daily World* is filled with vituperation for Solzhenitsyn, which just goes to show how important he has become in the eyes of the Soviet bureaucracy, and how much he must have meant to other writers and scientists who were being harassed or imprisoned.

The *Daily World* is a good paper—you find news there you search for in vain in the prestigious press—but their contempt for Solzhenitsyn is unworthy of them. I too have been bothered by his own obvious contempt for his persecutors. Now a professed Christian, honored by the world,

and obviously a passionate lover of his country, he cries out against the monolithic Union of Socialist Soviet Republics and wastes his good energies showing his contempt, in one essay, for the youth who jeer at Easter churchgoers. Thank God church-going is not prohibited, even though it is granted because the Soviets are so sure they have eradicated the sense of the supernatural from the minds of the people, and exalted Science, Technology, as God.

Teilhard de Chardin writes: “Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for the second time in the history of the world, man will discover fire.”

I hated too, to hear Harry Bridges in a Bill Moyer interview on public television dismiss Solzhenitsyn with a wave of his hand. “What do I care for such people as that,” he said. And he repeated, as he had before when questioned about his trials during the McCarthy era, “All the

accusations on which I was brought to trial were true, except that I was a member of the Communist Party. That I was not. All I can say now as I did then, is that in the Soviet Union every one has a job, has work to do, has education for that work, and health care.” (these may not be his exact words. I should have sent for a transcript of the interview.) “They had work.” Man had work to do. There were no men living on the sweat of some one else’s brow and being considered gentlemen. Work was all-important.

“To make the kind of society where it is easier to be good,” as Peter always said so simply, is our own task. These are the things Bridges cared about, though perhaps he has never read Kropotkin or Marx, or Ferrer on education, or Malatesta, or any other of the theoreticians of anarchism. Peter used to quote Lenin as saying, “There can be no revolution without a theory of revolution.” The most important thing to Peter was first of all, clarification of thought, and he would have been a great talker at the Anarchist conference yesterday, had he been alive, finding many a concordance with them there.

But Bridges, though he disappointed me by not sharing my literary enthusiasm, is certainly in my mind one of the great labor leaders of this country, one of the greatest in its history. I had an entire evening’s talk with him once in the home of John Brophy who was one of the vice-presidents of the newly formed CIO, a miner and a great labor leader himself who had the courage to go to the Soviet Union back in the thirties and suffered persecution in his day from most of the other labor leaders in this country, just as Bridges did.

I sympathized with Bridges as I listened on the Moyer hour because he recognized the importance of work and workers and saw to it that they had hiring halls instead of shapeup as they still have on many of our waterfronts today.

In other words, he had respect for work and workers, for the poor and unemployed, and his union became one of the great ones of the country. Let him rail at Solzhenitsyn all he wants. He still remains in my mind one of the greats in the history of labor in our country.

Now We Have Cesar Chavez —

To me, the great work which is being done by Cesar Chavez and his valiant band of boycotters and pamphleteers, demonstrators and jail frequenters, is a subject I must never neglect in any column I write now. His union, his philosophy of work which envisages a society much like that which the philosophical anarchists envisage, his theory of revolution which is a pacifist one following Gandhi, envisions not only unions but credit unions and a decentralized system of clinics, land held in common and in trust, land which can mean vast acreage for some crops which would mean cooperative farms, and settlements like those of the moshavim in Israel. I wish he (and I wish I too), could go on a pilgrimage such as that being led by Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum to Israel, a tour being coordinated by Ms. Inge L. Gibel. Six black educators, clergymen and administrators (specialists in the development of low-income rural cooperatives in the southern states), are making this pilgrimage, and I will take great interest in their report. If anarchist and pacifist groups only had the backing which this tour has, it would make an interesting study occasion for such a union man as Cesar Chavez.

Come to think of it, if people ask me again what can they do with their stocks and bonds (or some of them), I could point out two very profitable investments, speaking both spiritually and materially. There are the works of the United Farm Workers Service Committee (tax exempt, P.O. Box 62, Keene, Calif. 93531) and Danilo Dolci's great labor of love in Sicily among the destitute. (he was called by Aldous Huxley the Gandhi of Sicily.) Dolci came into world fame when he gathered together an unemployed crowd of men in one of the workless villages of Sicily and took them out on a reverse work strike. Without pay, without any one's orders, without food in their stomachs except perhaps some good Italian bread and wine (how significant an idea this is), the crowd of them went to a washed-out but necessary road and began to repair it. They were promptly (all of them) arrested for their pains. They wanted to work. They wanted a chance to earn their daily bread. And by this gesture initiated by Danilo Dolci, they dramatized it to the world. Since then a movement has begun. Volunteers, many of them skilled, came from different parts of Europe and began to help too. By now there is quite an accomplishment in the way of dams built to irrigate the barren soil and grow more vineyards and other crops which provide more work for man.

Property is proper for man, as Eric Gill said, and he meant the ownership of one's tools and one's home; and St. Gertrude said on the other hand that "property, the more common it becomes, the more holy it becomes." Perhaps she was thinking of the land, the good earth, from

which we all come and to which we all return. There was a man, not too well in mind and body who lived with us a while, who each year on the feast of the Incarnation, went out and knelt down and kissed the earth because Christ had taken on our humanity. We Catholics celebrate March 25th as a feast day for this reason. Our food, our drink, our furniture, the

houses we inhabit, the coffin which we are buried in (once a tree), all come from the good earth, made holy by Christ putting on our human flesh. Likewise, thinking of Dolci's dams, Sigrid Undset, the Nobel prize winner for her great historical novels, stated that since Christ was baptized in the Jordan, all water had become holy. And now Dolci is trying to raise funds to build a school for the children of Sicily and he made his recent speaking trip to this country hoping to find investors in this school which so needs to be built. So I mention Danilo Dolci as a foreign investment to be made by any of our readers who wish to make a beginning of walking in this way of "the folly of the cross." (Aid for Dolci's work can be sent to the Friends of Danilo Dolci, c/o Robert Fontana, 9255 Shore Road, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11209.)

More Travels, More Talk

When schools stop asking me to come, I will stay home. But meanwhile this next month, beginning two days before we go to press, I will go to South Dakota, a state where there are 38 Hutterite communities, and I do not know how many Indian reservations, and on to Kansas where I will speak to and learn from a Mennonite group at their Bethel College. Travel sometimes is vacation, a period of solitude and silence for long, often prayerful hours, meeting new friends, learning much from them. Last month an attack of flu, which we all had in turn around our New York house, made me cancel three engagements. Several of us lost our voices completely. Frank Donovan could not even answer the phone. I am sorry I had to miss my friends, the Berrigan family in Syracuse, and Fr. McVey who is carrying on a magnificent work there which I certainly want to write about. (I also want to write more about the two Berrigan brothers who are certainly holy fools in the sense I spoke of before. Martin Sostre who has suffered long years of solitary confinement, and has been in the West St. Federal Prison testifying in behalf of a fellow prisoner, recently called me. He and all prisoners think of the Berrigans with respect and love for their very act of going to prison, and will never forget it. Also I consider them victim souls whom God is using for his purpose to bring about changes in his Church which has been far worse, far more corrupt in the past.)

I missed also an engagement at New York University Catholic Center, and another in Cleveland with the Farm Workers. There is fatigue always in speaking, as there is at sitting at the typewriter doing this column, already too long. But there is also so much work around St. Joseph's House of Hospitality on First Street and getting ready for another new House for women, that I'll enjoy my traveling and rest in it, and know that many vacationers among the students will come to scrub and clean, cook and serve food and help keep the houses going.