

Workers of the World Unite

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Celebrates the 25th anniversary of the C.W. Perceives freedom as the greatest gift to man from God, and advocates a four hour work day, child labor, private property as personal property and manual labor. Personalism works from the bottom up and reminds her readers that Jesus told people, not states, to perform works of mercy. (DDLW #177).

Here is another May Day, our 25th anniversary and I have only today to get my copy ready for the paper which Bob Steed will have to make up alone, with Beth Rogers as general proof reader and editorial advisor. On make up day I must be speaking in Holyoke, the last engagement of a week of speaking at Fordham, Swarthmore, Boston and returning for a communion breakfast here in New York, and a talk at Iona college in New Rochelle. If today is a day like yesterday there will be people sick in the house to visit, letters, phone calls, the Puerto Rican and Negro neighbors for clothes, a priest from the Fiji Islands, and another from Santa Fe, college students and others, and always the letters that don't get answered and the articles that don't get written.

Oh well, if the Lord wanted them done, I comfort myself, He would provide the time and the ability. But there is always the sneaking thought, I am not efficient, I don't organize my time right. I should hide away and get things done. But every one in St. Joseph's House of Hospitality is my family, and those on Peter Maurin farm too. I am "the barren woman that the Lord makes joyful with many children." I am always thanking God that "my lines have fallen in goodly places," – and then falling from this happiness of gratitude into the suffering that is inseparable from love. If we pray to grow in love, burdens are bound to grow heavier on every side, our own burdens and those of all the people in the CW around the country. It is a terrible thing to see some of the suffering of our friends. Oh for the strength of the apostles who came rejoicing from prisons and from beatings, "rejoicing that they were accounted worthy to suffer for Christ."

Our main burden right now of course is that the subway down the street is approaching ever closer and closer. Indeed it is a temptation not to leave everything on a bright sunny day like this with the trees bursting into green in the park, and lean against the fence that surrounds the big open pit at the corner, and watch the work as the huge shovels eat inexorably towards us. We are about to be devoured and we are fascinated by this progress. What is the

sense of it all? Across the way there is an inadequate school for the slum children around us. There is a playground understaffed. There are derelicts sick and maimed on every park bench. There are so many ways to spend money on people instead of on a little connecting link of subway, extending for five or six blocks and which is costing millions of dollars. And here is this Puerto Rican father, minus two fingers on one hand recently lost in an accident at his machine in the factory, and an underfed little boy with him, rooting around in a huge box of contributed shoes. No compensation yet, he says, and the little boy and the little girl with him look as though they had not had a decent meal in their lives. But unemployment brings one blessing with it. The father, or mother, can be at home with their children! Among teenagers throughout the five boroughs, the mad and senseless violence continues. It is a guerilla war against society and each other. Deane Mowrer said that the other night the gangs of children on her block which is between Avenue C and Avenue D, went rioting down the street knocking over every ash can and garbage can and destroying property as they could.

But it is May Day. We cannot sorrow as though we have no hope. How can one help but live in hope and the joy that faith and hope bring on such a spring morning as this? A few weeks ago a deluge of rain and cold and snow made us despair and the trees and shrubs in the park were dead. But we had faith and hope as far as nature was concerned. To all appearances they were dead, and now they are blooming. There is no one without such natural faith and hope in such weather. So let us rejoice, as Fr. Roy was always telling us. Let us rejoice in tribulations. Has there ever been a time when we were without them? We started out twenty-five years ago thinking we were just going to get out a newspaper, small though it might be, which would allow us to exercise our journalistic talents. We were going to discuss the present problems, which began with depression and unemployment (and we have them again) and we would go on with all the problems which came with poverty, injustice, and the ever recurring wars, whether race wars, class wars, civil wars or international wars. We were always pacifists, many opinions to the contrary.

Peter Maurin exalted freedom as God's greatest gift to man, and he pointed to the gospels and Christ's teachings. We were to lead by example, by serving. We were not to seek leadership indeed, but to strive to be the least – to wash one another's feet in other words. "I have left you an example," Jesus said, when He washed the feet of His disciples. "As I have done, so do ye." "My little children, love one another," the beloved disciple kept repeating in his last days. "A new commandment I have given you, that you love one another as I have loved you." Jesus said. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Everything we knew in the Gospel was against the use of force. We were taught in the Gospel to work from the bottom up, not from the top down. Everything was personalist, we were our brothers' keepers, and we were not to pass by our neighbor who has fallen by the wayside and let the State, the all encroaching State, take over, but were to do all we could ourselves. These were the anarchist

and pacifist teachings Peter Maurin, our founder, taught us. And he bolstered them up not only from all the religious sources we were familiar with, but from the writings of Kropotkin, Don Sturzo, Chesterton, Belloc, Eric Gill, Fr. Vincent McNabb, Fr. Tompkins, Fr. Coady.

When Fr. Dowling called Peter an anarchist, he admitted it, but he also said he would run for office on a proportional representation ticket in order to try to put his ideas across. He firmly believed in “the withering away of the state” which the Communists spoke of, but he did not believe it would happen under a dictatorship even of the Proletariat, and he always said that the only true communism was the voluntary communism of the Church.

He wanted farming communes, communities of families, though many people went to the land when they married, and there have been attempts at farming communes, we cannot point to any successful one. Peter was a personalist and a communitarian and he said that there could be a Christian capitalism and a Christian communism. We keep quoting from Peter, and keep repeating his writings because he was, to use his own words, “the theoretician of the green revolution” we were to promote.

Yes, we thought we were embarking on a career in journalism, the few of us who worked that first year getting out the paper, but like true revolutionary movements, we attracted all the cranks, the reformers, the theorists, the fools for Christ, who wander like wandering monks of St. Benedict’s day, or like the “lumpen proletariat,” or the migrants of our own country.

Some who came to us were holy, some had not even begun to learn to “keep the commandments.” In fact, to this very day, common sense in religion is rare and we are too often trying to be heroic instead of just ordinarily good and kind. Newman wrote how tragic if we come to the end of our lives and find that we have never even begun to do what God wanted of us. But I honestly do not think that can be said of us. I do sincerely think that we keep trying, that we keep beginning again, over and over, each day. And the fact that we were so soon involved, and are now so completely involved in the daily practice of the works of mercy and can’t get out of them, nor ever can for all the rest of our lives, is some proof that we are continuing Peter Maurin’s mission.

“It is good for us to be here.” John Cort in his article in this issue speaks of how I made the Catholic Worker sound like a “good time,” like fun when he heard me speak in Boston. And it is true that there is a good deal of humor involved in **The Catholic Worker** movement. It is not only that we are fools for Christ. He is always making us “put up, or shut up,” as the vulgar saying is.

We wrote about houses of hospitality, and the poor came to the doors of the CW office and forced us to open one. “Why write about it otherwise,” the first articulate homeless woman told us. “Peter Maurin wrote that we should not say, ‘The Church or the State, doesn’t do this or that.’ ‘We is a community; they is a crowd.’ ‘Be what you want the other fellow to be.’ Why don’t **you** have a house of hospitality?”

Maybe Peter Maurin was surprised at being taken at his word too. Anyway it was that woman who came in with a paper shopping bag, who had been sleeping on subways, who forced us to open the first house of hospitality. And there have been thirty or forty since – I cannot count them all, since each one is autonomous, and I am always finding new ones here and there around the country. Just this week we got a donation from D. Farnsworth, from Martin Joseph House, and I recognize the name and know that she was running a house in Stockton, California for some years. The Blanchet House of Hospitality in Portland, Oregon, is feeding almost two thousand men a day now, according to a priest who just visited us from there.

Once I asked Peter what he thought of our Baltimore House (which was finally closed not only because of overcrowding but also because we housed both Negro and white) and he looked rather doubtful, thinking of what he really wanted in a house, craftrooms, seminars, reading rooms, as well as a place to eat and sleep. “It at least arouses the conscience,” he said. He always firmly held that the works of mercy were the means to show our love for God and our love for our brother.

It was the men in the house themselves that started our breadlines, by taking in one after another to share our meals. It seems we never do anything good by ourselves, we just get pushed into it. We are surely unprofitable servants. One time at Maryfarm I saw a man with a suitcase walking down the road towards our farmhouse, and since we were already filled to the door, and with problems too, I sighed deeply and remarked, “I suppose he is coming here.” And a man sitting next to me said sternly, “Then you don’t mean what you write in the paper?” Yes, we believe it. If “your brother is hungry feed him, if he is naked, cover him, if he is without shelter, visit him, if he is sick comfort him, if he is in prison visit him, if he is dead bury him.” The Lord himself said it. And he was talking to each one of us, not to Holy Mother the State.

Of course there are some ideas which we change over the years. Personally I don’t believe women should work out of the home if they can possibly help it. Personally I believe more in child labor than I used to. If the little boys who are running riot could be put to work and the mothers stay home, how much happier it would be. But we do not have a philosophy of work, as Peter Maurin said, and certainly the jobs open to most people in this mechanized age, are anything but attractive. I do believe however in the four hour day. And I do believe in manual labor for every one, everyone bearing their share of the hard work of the world.

Steve Hergenhan, God rest his soul, used to call me a pencil pusher when I did my writing and he dearly loved to see me in the kitchen working. There is always a war between worker and scholar and too often the scholar has it coming to him.

I’m afraid I believe in private property too, though St. Gertrude says that “property, the more common it is, the more holy it is.” But when I speak of

private property it is mostly personal property I am thinking of. A typewriter, for instance—a fountain pen, one's books, one's own bed. Of course if one is deprived of these things, one should thank the one who deprives, since they are lightening one's load on the journey to heaven. Once a policeman called up and said he had picked up a man who was bringing one of our typewriters to a Bowery hock shop. The man explained that all property was held in common around the Catholic Worker, so it was his as well as any one else's. The policeman restored our "property." We didn't press charges of course, and we thanked the policeman. Ammon would have refused the services of the police perhaps and gone to pick up the typewriter himself. He hangs on to his own pencil, book, clothes, so carefully indeed that we sometimes call him "private-property-Hennacy." But it is really just Yankee thrift.

Once a passerby dropped into our store at Mott street when Slim was being night watchman, and someone had brought us a turkey that night since it was the eve of Thanksgiving. Slim wanted to take a little walk, so he left the stranger in charge and went out. When he came back stranger and turkey were gone. There was a great furor around the house, but we took the opportunity to explain that in the upside-down world of Christianity, Slim should have run after the thief and brought him the cranberries and celery and other fixings so that he could have a really good meal. "If anyone takes your coat, give him your cloak too." Most of the family didn't see it that way. I have told this story before, but I did not tell the sequel. Only a year or so ago, but ten years after the incident, a man came in and handed us five dollars. "I was the one who stole your turkey," he said.

Sometimes perhaps we arouse a little fear in the hearts of our friends. For instance there had been a demonstration in England just after the war, when the needy moved into some of the uninhabited homes of the rich and just took over. We expressed ourselves in the CW as pleased with this expropriation, and went on to say that the Benedictine oblates amongst us would like to go to some of the Benedictine monasteries and become squatters on their vast tracts, and so induce them to start again the guest houses which are part of the rule of the order. They don't need all the land they have, and we have plenty of landless folk. Not long after that, (but we had forgotten our comments, thinking of them as casual illustrations of our point rather than plans for action) we went to visit a Benedictine monastery, Peter, Dwight Larrowe and I. (Dwight is now Brother Peter in the Trappist Monastery of Our Lady of the Snows in Colorado.) We were fed a very good dinner rather hastily, and then the good monks pulled out bus schedules and rather hastily found a way of getting us off their premises. I thought the visit very short, there had been no time for any conversation, nor any dear-to-his-heart round table discussions for Peter, but it was only on the way home that it occurred to me that our dear friends the monks had read the paper and had been afraid that in the parlance of the gangster, we were "casing the joint." In other words, that we were sizing up the place with the end in view of moving in some of our unemployed families.

Well, if they suffered from this misconception, we were made to suffer too. That month we had had a letter from one of our friends who was married and had two children and was dissatisfied with the farm his father had given for his use. He wanted to join one of our farm communities. We wrote and told him that he already had a home and that we were forced to say no. But he disregarded us and very soon after car and trailer arrived and little family with another baby imminent, to move into our barn. We did not want them, but they were there; it was as though God were teaching us a lesson, was having a little joke on us, making us eat our words.

Peter Maurin rejoiced in these situations. They made us think, he always said. There was nothing like a crisis for on-the-spot discussions. For clarification of thought. Everyone was an asset in a way. No need ever to eliminate anyone. They would eliminate themselves. It took a robust soul to live in community. It was, in fact, a martyrdom.

There are so many stories that could be told about our communities, our houses of hospitality, and some of them grim and some of them so funny and so good that one could laugh for joy.

Tribulation Ammon

And speaking of tribulations, - one of them is Ammon. I used to say the same of Peter, of course, thinking of my quiet writing life before I met him in 1932 and became embroiled in what became a movement. But Ammon is such a fighting Irishman, such a belligerent pacifist! Take this last article of his on page two of the CW. Here he is carrying on a battle with the ushers of a church and a policeman rather than with the personnel of the guided missile base. He was all but tarred and feathered of course, and I am sure he inspired them with respect for his courage. But they needed more time to get acquainted. These guerrilla warfare tactics - descending on a town with pickets and leaflets and poster walks and radio talks and so on, may cause surprise and some thought but I liked the way things worked out in Phoenix, Arizona, where little by little Ammon got acquainted with all the priests and sisters in the town, and won their friendship and won, too, a very wide circulation for the idea of the Catholic Worker. And now here he is threatening to fast for forty days. I wonder if this is truly a Gandhian technique - to fast at the government, if one can put it that way. Stop atomic tests, or else! What it practically amounts to is a fast to the death. Because I am sure the government out of plain stubbornness, even if they intended to stop would not give in to such pressure. It somehow does not seem the way. It is Ammon's recognition of course, that we are living in fearsome times and that only the most drastic, heroic remedies, much suffering, and self-inflicted sufferings, are going to serve as penance for our sins as a country. We do indeed need to fast and pray. And Ammon goes into these struggles with a joyous spirit, with a great courage, with the generosity of one who wishes to give all, even life itself, for Peace.

They use to say of Peter that he held up to us such lofty aims that we could only reach half way. And that if his aims were lower, we would still only be reaching half way, human nature being inclined to sloth. Certainly the State, love of country, demands and exacts and inspires and arouses the willingness, even the desire to die, to give up one's life for the ideal. Ammon is one of those people who have kept his ideal, and it is just as strong in him now as it was in his early youth. It has grown indeed with his daily communions since his baptism five years ago. He has been "putting on Christ" as St. Paul calls it, though for some people it is as hard to see Christ in Ammon Hennacy as it is to see Him in the derelict. Certainly he is not articulate about his faith, and philosophy and theology are not his forte. His actions are always better than his words, when it comes to living his faith, putting in hours serving others, getting mail, answering it, giving up his bed, listening to the sick, the poor and afflicted. Yes, we will stand by him. He is what God sent us as an apostle, an editor, and he is certainly an agitator par excellence.

Picketing

And how he delights to call attention to the fact that we once picketed the Cardinal during the cemetery strike. It has gotten now so that some of the people at the CW deny that we ever did. The facts are that Michael Kovalak, Irene Mary Naughton and Helen Adler took signs and when all others were fearful of criticism, proceeded to the chancery office and after announcing their intentions to one of the priests at the cathedral, who told them they of course had to follow their conscience, thereupon picketed for an hour and then went into the cathedral and prayed, to make their picketing more effective.

It was so effective that Ammon Hennacy, not yet a Catholic, in far away Arizona, went into the Catholic Church for the first time and prayed joyfully for us all, and thanked God for companions of courage. Some time later, on another visit to the Church he said he began to be conscious that those praying, kneeling Catholics, no matter what their political opinions, "had something." And not to be outdone, now he has it too.

They are somewhat alike, Ammon and Peter, both close to the soil, both close to the people, both inspiring others to awake. On my last trip when I passed out some Catholic Worker papers in the bus which came from Mexico City to El Paso (fare eleven dollars) the insurance saleswoman who was reading the paper began to read Peter's essays out loud to her companion, a Canadian, and to laugh with startled amazement at his ideas. When people know Ammon they laugh at him and with him, and because of him, and some of this laughter is that joyful laughter that the Christian ideal is so flaming, so alive, so burning still. "I have come to cast fire on the earth," Jesus said. And His fire is quite a different fire from that of the nuclear weapon, which is of hell.

The Role of Woman

I speak and write this way of Peter and Ammon (and how often did I not have to speak so of Bob Ludlow!) because I feel that though they themselves do not feel they need to be interpreted, translated, explained, or justified - I am doing it to declare my own position. Sometimes some of our readers like to hold that I, Dorothy Day, editor of the Catholic Workers, do not go along with these ideas, - that others have seized control of the paper, that these ideas are somehow not in line with the works of mercy. **They are all part and parcel of it. It all goes together!** It is all for clarification of thought. Peter used to say that it was men who had the mission and that it was woman's place to follow the men who follow their mission. I believe that this is true. In the main, the Catholic Worker movement has been one of men throughout the country. There have been many great and generous men who have worked with it, Joe Zarrella, Gerry Griffin, Tom Sullivan, Bob Ludlow, Dwight Larowe and Jack English (the last two now with the Trappists); Roger O'Neill and Charles McCormack, and now the present staff. And there are others still with us, too numerous to mention, Hank and John and Keith, and Larry and Roy and Joe, and Red and John and Jim, and Pop and Tom and Mike, and then the men on the farm!

God be thanked for the work He has given us to do. And may we continue it another twenty-five years!