

On Pilgrimage - January 1954

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Summary: Stories of life at Peter Maurin Farm—children’s talk of God, her reading, a family needing hospitality, the gift of a cow, a visit from the FBI, and the need for activists to pray. (DDLW #235).

When we woke up this morning the mist hung like a lake in the lower fields. A flock of starlings flew into the big pear tree, black against the sky like winter leaves. The dry grass of the fields was yellow in the wet but there were still bits of green grass around the house. The ground which had been hard as stone was springy under foot and stones had sunk into it. It was forty degrees but there was no wind so it seemed warmer.

Our chapel which is heated by a big oil stove was almost too warm on such a morning so that a sweater was enough. The two Christmas trees keep well in such a cool place. They looked fresh and green against the newly painted yellow walls. The creche, donated by Theresa Connors, housed in a thatched stone shed, was lit from above by a little electric light and cast a soft glow on mother and child.

“God is not a little baby,” Nickie says defiantly. Or if he is, “then I am bigger than God,” and he puffs out his chest. He was four on December 19, and was named Nickolas Joseph, and when he is wilful we call him Nickolas Lenin Joseph Stalin Hennessy, but recently he is taking much interest in theology so his father calls him his little theologian. Yesterday he was telling Mary, aged two and a half, “We must like God, but we must not like the devil.” I wondered at that use of the word “like.” Was it because we tell them to be like Jesus? Every night we pray that we may learn to give in to each other and oh the joy of seeing it work—sometimes. For instance, Nickie and Mary are fighting over some toy. It is obvious that Nickie being the stronger and with no courtesy whatever, is going to get it. So we say, gently, “Mary, do give it to your brother like a good child. Give in to him.” And she gives in, and suddenly filled with magnanimity, he gives in too.

But then sometimes, it doesn’t work either. I often say that if you give up your cloak too, you will be called upon to give up your shoes and pants, and even your life. After Christmas, there is the feast of St. Stephen and the Holy Innocents and we are not allowed to forget the closeness of joy and sorrow. When the children refuse to respond, what a good chance to exercise patience, fortitude, long suffering, endurance, silence and love.

After I had written as I did last month, of being ill and of having to rest this winter, I was ashamed at such a bid for attention. I certainly got attention in the way of prayers from friends all over the country, and they have had their effect. I feel great gratitude for such

friends, and beg God to bless them a hundred fold. When I write as I do, of sickness and the ruminations which comes with sickness, I am writing about how we all feel, our fears and pains, and our comforts too. St. Paul said that we are comforted in order to comfort others and I always feel as I write that I am addressing friends who live as we do, who have the same problems, trials, family situations, so that when I talk of family and jobs and sickness, I am talking about this life and the disciplines of this life which are helping to groom us for heaven. One of the books I have been reading this months was given me a few years ago by my friend Mae Bellucci, *The Divine Crucible of Purgatory*, by Mother Mary of St. Austen, published by Kenedy in 1940. When I read a book by an author new to me, I look to see the sources from which he quotes. Here is Newman, St. Catherine of Genoa, St. John of the Cross, St. Frances de Sales and The Cloud of Unknowing. It is an extraordinary book, a comforting book, filled with great light and peace.

Then too I am reading history since we are living in time as well as in eternity. I have read Pares' history of Russia, in the pocket book edition, and Russian Spirituality and part of Green's History of England. There is something very steadying about reading history to counteract the hysteria of the radio.

Hospitality

Just before the holy days we got a telephone call one cold evening. We were sitting around the long dining room table, listening to the wind and a good symphony, sewing, knitting, and Jim making cocoa for us all down in the snug basement kitchen. The call was from a priest friend who had a problem in hospitality. There used to be, he said, a little hotel nearby where he could put people up when they came to him in need, but the hotel was closed and he did not know where to turn. It was a family, young husband and wife and two small children, two and three years old. There was another on the way, and a ten months old one taken in by an already overcrowded relative. Did we have room for four?

Happily Linda and her baby had just gone into New York. Vsaye and little Paul were in Baltimore, and Mary offered to move in with Agnes and Molly for the night. So that left a nice big attic room, with four beds. Hans had insulated it for us and it was bright and cheerful and a big oil stove kept it warm. So the family arrived, young and cheerful in the face of truly cruel circumstances. The father had a job, but they had been evicted from their apartment for which they had been paying eighty-five a month. They needed hospitality for just a short time, they said. The babies were angelic and pretty as pictures, and the mother was a child herself. Each day they were with us, after breakfast they set out house hunting. Rents are sky high and houses for large families are all but impossible to come by. They found, finally, a few housekeeping rooms which they took in order to be near relatives over the holy season. Let us pray they find a good place soon.

For this small gesture of hospitality, our dear friend wanted to reward us by buying us a cow and when he asked Msgr. Corrigan about one, that generous soul insisted on giving us a cow himself. So Fr. Monaghan, who is the hero of this story, is planning on obtaining still another cow for us in the spring. How good God is to send us such friends.

Retreat

As we go to press, we are preparing for a little retreat of thanksgiving and rejoicing over the New Year holiday. Fr. O'Loughlin, Selesian, is giving it and it will be two days of silence and prayer. We meet together here at Peter Maurin Farm, Thursday evening at five, and after the Sunday Mass, we break silence. There is another conference Sunday morning, and Benediction will close the retreat at noon.

We shall have another short retreat at the beginning of the Lenten season, the week end after Ash Wednesday. Let us know if you can come.

A project on hand in our rich life down here is the copying of Cassian's conferences on Prayer from a volume of the anti-Nicene fathers, which belongs to an Anglican priest friend of ours. He is kindly loaning it to us long enough to do this piece of work. According to St. Benedict, Cassian's conferences should be read in every Benedictine monastery, but it is hard to find a copy of Cassian nowadays. I have tried to trace a copy for our library and Frater Charles wants a copy for the Trappists in Conyers, Georgia, but they are scarce. If anyone has one they are not using, we wish they would loan it for a few years.

Reading over the title, **The Divine Crucible of Purgatory**, I can't help but think, what in the world does that title mean to a migrant worker, a longshoreman, even to a teacher. (This noon for dinner we had a visitor, a member of the ILA from Mulberry street and tonight for supper a teacher of mathematics from Phoenix, Arizona.) I think, too, of that fascinating book, *Wuthering Heights*, and the fantastic titles which were part of the nightmare of the dreamer in the beginning of the book.

FBI

Some FBI man by the name of Daly came down to query me about one of our friends who is a conscientious objector. He asked the usual questions as to how long I had known him, how he stated his position as c.o. or pacifist, whether or not he believed in defending himself. Evidently one of my answers offended him because he pulled back his jacket and displayed the holster of a gun under his arm pit which he patted bravely as he said, "I believe in defending myself!" I could not but think, "how brave a man defending himself with his gun against us unarmed women and children hereabouts." The FBI should train their men to be a little more impersonal.

Mike Gunn, our old friend, brushmaker and founder of a labor guild, writer of many columns in the old days in the *Catholic Worker*, has bought himself a prefabricated house, made in Finland and shipped over here, five rooms and bath, for \$2,000, which he wishes to put up on the Peter Maurin farm. Now he is faced with many complications, getting an architect, a building permit, a contractor to dig a cellar and foundation, and to raise a mortgage to do all these things with. When one sees the trouble involved in trying to work out ideas, one comes to favor the shiftless life. Things are made unutterably hard for the family always. Even when one tries to do things in community, the fact remains that one man, the **econom**, has to deal with money, debts, materials and men. It is desperately hard, but if we bring

enough of the power of prayer to it, things will fall in line, work will get done, the rough ways will be made plain, mountains will be leveled. I used to think scornfully of praying over such humdrum details. Now I can see how often the activists don't do enough praying, and the ones who pray don't "make intentions" enough, firmly enough, vehemently enough. Body and soul are so close. The family needs the material of a home.

Christmas

We had a most peaceful and beautiful Christmas and we wish to thank all our friends who helped make it so. We walked home from Church, some of us and breakfasted on Betty's strudel, and soft boiled eggs. Our butcher gave us a beautiful twenty pound turkey and there were plenty to eat it. Hans cooked the dinner, in spite of the pains of his arthritis and the whole day went smoothly. Three of our friends sent picture albums, El Greco, and the other two of icons and western religious pictures. Their bright color and warmth, contrasted with the grey of skies and woods around us. Then during the octave, Hans Furth, friend of Karl Stern came bearing gifts. One was his thesis for us to read, on the psychology of Cassian, which he is offering for a degree at the University of Ottawa, and the other, a concert, which he played for us on Tamar's piano with an audience of five. We sneaked away from Peter Maurin farm, leaving all the children there but Margaret, the babe in arms, and drove over to Tamar's who has the only piano in the community and that sticky with children's fingers. But the music was magnificent and we had Schubert, Mozart, Brahms and the explanations of an enthusiastic teacher. It completed, that concert, our feeling of well being and peace.

A Cow Arrives

This morning just after Mass, our greatest Christmas present arrived, a Holstein cow from Msgr. Corrigan at Mt. Loretto. Up to this time we have been spending six dollars for fresh milk and six dollars for canned milk each week. Even if we had to buy all the feed for the cow it would be a saving. But Father Duffy has already reclaimed two big fields, one full of clover and the other of oats, and he has a goodly hay stack covered with a tarpaulin given us by an out of work neighbor with a raft of children.

Orthodox Recession

Yesterday's paper headlines on the front page news of an "orthodox" recession, which 300 economists meeting in Washington, announce to the nation. All those out of work, and it is estimated as a million and a quarter, and all those whose jobs are threatened, numbering some million more, are doubtless well aware of this already. They have felt the pinch. Better the recession than more preparedness for war, but that is bitter comfort for the unemployed. Blessed that man who has a bit of soil, a taste for that soil from which all comes, including us. There is no unemployment on the land, Peter Maurin always said, and that slogan which he loved needed quite a bit of expansion and explanation. We know well the problem of skills,

strength, mortgages, taxes and other pains associated with the pleasures of the land, and we promise during the coming year much discussion of these problems. A happy new year to all our readers and if they want to send us a New Year's gift, an Epiphany gift, let them send in a new subscription.