

On Pilgrimage - April 1956

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, April 1956, 3, 6.

Summary: Tells the story of their travails with the city courts after being fined for operating "a fire trap." Reaffirms personal responsibility as the way to care for the poor, decrying "Holy Mother the State's" taking over such care. (DDLW #702).

What is charity, and what is the love of God?

A few years ago we had the joy of hearing Fr. Damasus, O.S.B. give a conference during Lent and he read us this story from the Old Testament:

"In those days a Sunamite woman came to Eliseus to Mt. Carmel, and when the man of God saw her coming towards him, he said to Giezi his servant: Behold the Sunamitess. Go therefore to meet her and say to her: is all well with thee and with thy husband and with thy son? And she answered: Well. And when she came to the man of God to the mount, she caught hold of his feet and Giezi came to remove her. And the man of God said: Let her alone for her soul is in anguish and the Lord hath hid it from me and hath not told me. And she said to him: Did I ask a son of my lord, and did I not say to thee, Do not deceive me?"

The prophet had been fed by the woman during a famine and had been given shelter so he had foretold that she would have a son. And now that son had died, and she had hastened to the prophet. He responded at once and told his servant to go and lay his staff on the child so that it would recover, but the woman was not content and would not leave him until he himself went with her. The servant had been unsuccessful, so Eliseus himself went into the house, and "behold the son lay dead on his bed; and going in he shut the door upon him, and upon the child: and he put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and he bowed himself upon him, and the child's flesh grew warm." And this, Fr. Damasus explained, was the kind of charity and love we should have for each other. We should become so close to our brother that it is almost as though we had become one flesh. We should be growing toward the realization that "we are all members one of another, one body in Christ."

How far short of this we always fall in our care for others! St. Francis kissed the leper and so came to love him. Aldous Huxley has often in his writings spoken of the extreme gestures of the saints, in their attempts to overcome therewith of their own flesh and to show their love for the sick and the sinful. We here in

this country, in revolt against the poverty and hunger and sickness of the world, have tried to clean up everything, build bigger and better shelters and hospitals, where misery could be cared for in neat orderly rows, with bedspreads that may not be ruffled by the crooked limbs of age and bedside tables that will not hold the clutter of those who try to make a home around them with little possessions and luxuries. We have tried to do so much what with Holy Mother the State taking over to so great an extent the care of the poor. And the civil service lists grow, and the charity is only as warm as those who administer it. There are not many who have ever read and understood the story of Eliseus. And who of them have had the privilege of listening to the story of Eliseus as expounded by a Fr. Damasus?

Thinking of these things we are humbled indeed at all our failures considering our understanding of the subject. And we are humbled and grateful to the great mass of kind people who want to love, who want to care for those who are in need in the Eliseus way. During the past month, they have sent us more than half the money required, to meet the requirements of all the new laws passed in regard to “multiple dwellings”, to keep our work going.

We have been classified as a multiple dwelling, a hotel, and the very fact that those who come to us cannot pay, deserve, the city tell us, all the more protection from the state, because they cannot go elsewhere. All the Puerto Ricans in our neighborhood who are living in unspeakable conditions of poverty, cold, with defective plumbing, lack of heat, several families crowded in one apartment, due to the tearing down of other slum areas, evidently are not considered to be living in fire traps. At any rate they have not met with the terrible urgency that we have, what with the summonses, fines, accusations that we are operating a fire trap!

“We Never Had It So Good”

The fact of the matter is that for the first time in the 23 years of the Catholic Worker existence, we have had central heating, bathrooms and toilets on every floor, plenty of hot water for our washing, large airy, and sunny rooms and so on. Since the tragedy of the fire, three years ago, in which five men were burnt, one of whom died of pneumonia, we have been doing everything possible to make our house secure against such a thing ever happening again. It was not the building that was at fault that time, but the carelessness of a man who smoked in bed, which meant a smoldering cigarette which burst into a flash fire, an open window on the fire escape which created a draught, and then the searing, terrible experience of a fire, which no one ever forgets.

So we put up an additional fire escape, appointed a night watchman with a keen sense of smell and a wide experience, cleared up all materials stored in the basements and tried, each time we were told by inspectors, to take care of each complaint month after month.

The trouble is we did not realize the need of a lawyer who would know the law and interpret the law to us. We got mixed up on what they meant when they said we had to file plans, and it was all but too late when we hired an architect. I was thanking God that I had Miss Dorothy Tully beside me when I had to answer a summons to appear before Judge John Nichol for violation of the building code, and she having just come into the case (she had been looking into other matters for us) was as astounded as I was when the judge imposed a fine of \$500 for being a slum landlord and operating a fire trap, a fine which he mitigated a few moments later by coming down to \$250, with two days to pay. The housing inspector also announced that there was already a vacate notice issued against us to take effect the following Wednesday morning.

All this came as a most stunning blow, and my first reaction was that on no account would I pay such a fine, but rather go to jail instead. But I knew I could not do that. I realized that such a move would not help the fifty or so people in the house who were dependent on the house for shelter and who would have to find houses within a week. I could see them being herded off to municipal shelters, mental hospitals, old age homes, the farm colony, hospitals on Welfare Island – to all the huge, cold institutions that break the hearts and spirits of so many. Some of our family could be put on the relief roles and given furnished rooms and money for meals – I knew that – but many could only live in a family such as ours. Neither the giant institutions, nor the lonely isolation of the hall bedroom would fit their case. There was of course The Pioneer, a hotel on the Bowery for women, where single women are referred from the family shelter. Here the city pays their hotel bills, and they are given a meal ticket to a neighboring restaurant, but this can scarcely be called the home which our St. Joseph's House of Hospitality undoubtedly is.

And what an expense for the city, and for the taxpayer! Andrei, a Puerto Rican longshoreman who had lived with us for four years, recovering from an accident which resulted in a crushed leg, had just recently been put on relief, and it was costing the city \$8.50 a week for his room alone. Multiply that by fifty and it means \$425 a week rent which we can be said to be saving the city. Not to speak of meals, three a day, and clothes, and carfares and all the little incidentals. Someone said to us yesterday, "You have the most expensive family in the city of New York" but that is certainly untrue. It is the city itself that supports the most expensive family. How many people there are who have salaries of, let us say, thirty thousand a year? And how many people do they support on that sum? Do they think feeding a bread line of two or three hundred twice a day, and seventy-five others three meals family style, and housing fifty more – all on thirty thousand a year – a very expensive proposition? My figures are rough of course. It may be more or less, and yet when one considers the farm at Staten Island where twenty more live, we are over estimating our cost.

Of course the city has not asked us to do such work. We were in fact intruding on what the city fathers had come to think of as their responsibility. They did not want to listen when we spoke of personal responsibility, and family responsibility,

or parish responsibility, or the principle of subsidiarity. Maybe we talked too much about it and confused the poor inspectors. They were only doing their job when they studied the laws, and new ones being put into effect every year, and studied our old building, a hundred years old, and tried to figure out where we were going to get the money, poor as we were, to do all that would be required. Maybe that was why they never would tell us in detail just what had to be done. They talked vaguely of sprinkler systems in the hall, and fire retarding, and we started to save for the sprinkler system, and waited for more definite orders. But they were going on the assumption that we, the stupid citizen, knew the laws, and knew the violations which had been placed on the house in the last few years. We didn't even know how one went ahead to find out. Now, at last, we have learned the painful and hard way, the necessity of having lawyers, to study for you, to speak for you, and to protect you from injustice. I had called Dorothy Tully in so late that she did not even know there had been a fire, let alone what the details of the case were. So we both had been rather defenseless before the judge. It all came to a head, to a crisis, instantly.

It was Wednesday, Feb. 28, when this happened, and in two days the month of St. Joseph would begin. All we could do was to pray to St. Joseph. And for a small town carpenter (although a somewhat travelled man what with exile in Egypt) he certainly set the wheels in motion.

The first thing that happened was a telephone call from Will Lissner of the **New York Times**, a star reporter who always signs his articles, who understands Catholic social principles, and who was telephoning on another matter altogether. I told him of the morning's occurrence, and he hastened down to see us. The fine, he said, seemed an exorbitant one. He visited the house, called the judge and the commissioner of housing, and wrote a story about it for the **New York Times** the next day. His story led the judge to reconsider, so that he called up Miss Tully to come in with me, her client, the next morning. It also reached W. H. Auden, who had just recently been awarded the chair of poetry at Oxford for the next five years and who was soon going back to England, though he has been a United States citizen since before World War II. With all the spontaneity and warmth of love of the true poet Auden hastened to rush over to **The Catholic Worker**, meeting me just as I was leaving the house before nine a.m. on the way to the court at 151st Street. There was already a group of men hanging around near the entrance to await for the ten o'clock distribution of clothes (after the mail comes in) and as he seemed to be stepping out of the group, I had thought he was one of the unemployed men who had come to us, as they often do in snowy weather, to get extra clothing, overshoes, something they need for working at clearing the streets. "I did not look as bad as that, did I," he protested afterward, and I could only assure him that many a man in unpressed tweeds, a bit drawn in the face from cold or from fatigue came to us with other basic needs than expressing loving kindness. Just the same I was embarrassed. I had been so hurried, so worried, that I could scarcely see, let alone identify anyone, and when Mr. Auden pressed a piece of paper into my hand and said, "Here is two fifty," I truly thought it was two dollars and fifty cents towards the

fine. When I opened the paper in the subway and saw two hundred and fifty dollars, signed by Auden, I could have wept for joy, it was so beautiful a gesture. Naturally I told the Associated Press reporter who was at the court to cover the case, so that this story went out over the wires and was printed in many papers throughout the country as an engaging little incident in metropolitan life.

When I appeared before the judge again that morning, he said he had not known we were a charitable institution, and he held the fine suspended for the time being, while he gave us time to get the work done on the house to conform to housing codes. When the building inspector grumbled that it would cost at least \$28,000, the judge wanted to know whether we thought we could manage it. I told him that St. Joseph could. "Who is this St. Joseph?" he wanted to know, and Mr. Brady, the inspector answered that he was the saint to whom he prayed when he had to appear before Judge Nichol. "Does it do you any good?" the judge wanted to know, and the inspector said "No." St. Joseph is not to be involved in politics or spheres of influence. He works much more directly.

The next incident in the drama occurred when we tried to see the Commissioner of Buildings, who would see only our architect, agreeing that the vacate notice also could be suspended if within twenty-four hours we had signed a contract with a sprinkler system man to put pipes in all the rooms, not just in the halls. The work to be showing when the building inspectors called the next week.

Since new legislation has meant that hotels and rooming houses were all deep in the work of remodelling, it was truly a miracle that we found a man at once who could do the job. We investigated a dozen sprinkler system firms and got estimates, and the man we signed on for the job had a most striking resemblance to the statue of St. Joseph which stands on the mantel in the office with flowers surrounding him (and now palms and pussy willows) and the vacate notice hung around his neck. So as not to obscure the statue the notice hangs down his back like a cape.

The Press

With all these visits to court, to municipal offices, lawyers, architects, sprinkler men, Charles McCormick, manager of St. Joseph's house and general treasurer, and I too have been very busy. In the midst of it all, newspaper reporters and photographers came to visit us and took pictures of our library and offices and dormitories so that by now their files are filled with many a view of St. Joseph's House. The ladies in the library all loved having their pictures taken, Mollie, Veronica Kane, and many of the men all presenting a most studious appearance as they sat around appearing to be reading. As a matter of fact there is always a great amount of group therapy going on what with gossips and rumors and tales of adventure, the search for jobs, for homes, for relatives. I'd like to have recordings of all the tales told in our library. Through it all, the men of the press were kind and courteous and sympathetic, and the stories that appeared were

also in the same spirit. With the result that in two weeks fifteen thousand dollars came in, to get our work well under way – the work of installing a complete sprinkler system throughout the house, and the self-closing doors, fire proofing and all the other changes the city is calling for. We were somewhat discouraged by one inspector saying that it would take \$40,000, rather than \$28,000 – but after all, our Father is a millionaire, indeed a billionaire, and St. Joseph is in turn the foster father of His Son, our brother. So what have we to fear? We will get what we need. The state spends far more on one guided missile. We have sent out our usual spring appeal, and have no doubt but that our bills will be covered, and for food, too, which after all is one of the biggest items around here. Through it all, the line goes on, the house continues to eat, and while the plaster falls, the dust settles, Roy and Larry continue to get out the best meals in the city, corned beef and cabbage, steaming potatoes, hot tea or coffee, good food, cooked with good love.

One funny thing about the publicity, the papers kept emphasizing work done for the men of the Bowery, emphasizing the men to such an extent, and always speaking of me doing the work, when they might better have spoken of the other members of the staff; so that a detective calling up about a friend said that it seemed rather funny, me working with all these men. I told him that one of the things that made our work human was that two floors were devoted to women who had a great deal to do with the upkeep of the house, making it a cheerful and bright place to live.

Help came in from all over, from the police department's pension fund, from parole officers, from doctors and nurses, and lawyers, from the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Joint Board, from the president of the State Senate, from priests, from Bishops, from Monsignori. We were heartened by visits from one of the priests from Catholic Charities, by a contribution from the pastor of our parish.

We All Are Guilty

In writing about all these our vicissitudes, I do not want to give the impression that we feel ourselves persecuted. Such laws as we have been in conflict with are for public safety, and we have been trying to comply. It is just that laws become very complicated. The inspectors have been trying to do their duty, and the judge his. As I have sat in courts, all of them overheated and stifling, and seen the crowded dockets, the masses of documents relating to a million minor offenses from traffic violations to leaving garbage can lids off, the few judges there are to take care of the work (the city claims it cannot afford more) I do not wonder that one is never given a chance to speak, to defend one self, but that automatically all are guilty if they have reached the pass that they have to go into court. That is the way it seems. It is the system. It is all too big, too ponderous, too unwieldy. Everything needs to be decentralized, into many smaller churches, many smaller institutions, many smaller courts, hospitals, and

so on and so on. And I wonder that there is ever any unemployment with all the work there is to be done in the world. Everyone works too hard, too long hours. Reading the diary of John Woolman the early Quaker, on the subway, I find he came to the same conclusion. Everyone works too hard, too long hours, and that is why the workman takes to drink as a relief from tension he said. He himself took up the trade of tailoring and only worked enough hours to earn himself a modest living.

Of course one could move away from New York, but even Staten Island with all its wide open spaces is a part of New York City. They say one can buy a one hundred acre farm in Nova Scotia by the seashore for five hundred dollars, but the problem is transporting our little island of people to another country. I have also, with my own eyes, seen farms in West Virginia for two and three thousand dollars, thirty five miles from the nearest town where employment can be found. If we could all get back to pioneer principles and practices, and desert fathers' asceticism, we might try that.

Seriously we feel our vocation to be in the world, loving the world, because God so loved it that he gave his only begotten Son for it. And the simplest witness that we make is that witness of love of our brother, because we can only show our love for God which is the first great commandment by our love for our brothers. "Love is the measure by which we shall be judged." Where there is no love, put love, and we will find love, St. John of the Cross wrote.

"Love or Perish," is the name of a popular book today. T. S. Eliot's play "The Cocktail Party" is about people who fail because they cannot love. Our lack of that kind of love which desires to give, to give up, to strip oneself in order to give, is what leads to wars, "each one seeking his own." The failure of every acquisitive human being leads to an acquisitive society, which leads in turn to the welfare state or the welfare city, where our form of charity seems out of place, outmoded, ineffectual, extravagant. And yet it is the charity which our Holy Father has called for. We must read his words again in this current issue of **The Catholic Worker**, in the reprint of portions of his 1952 Christmas message. And it is the charity which would empty huge and ever growing mental hospitals throughout the land. Because we seriously state that this charity of the city and the state is the kind that tries to care for the body, without caring for the mind and the soul. And it all goes together. In leaving everything to the state, we are going Marxist without realizing it, with a materialism, with a "temptation to do good" at home and abroad which is coercive and overriding. Such are the implications of so simple a passage in the program of Peter Maurin, "to reach the man in the street and his problems by practicing the works of mercy, at a personal sacrifice".