

On Pilgrimage - May 1964

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Summary: An anniversary column reaffirming Peter Maurin as the founder and their trial and error approach to meet his ideals. Says they are a community of "wounded ones" and are not complacent about accomplishments. Appreciates a day of recollection. Describes their new farm at Tivoli and plans for retreats that will send forth others "to speak truth to power." (DDLW #815).

May, 1964.

I am writing this column, at the beginning of the thirty second year of the Catholic Worker, at Tivoli, New York, where we are making new beginnings of a farming commune, agronomic university, house of hospitality, all combined in one because that is the way it has worked out over the years. We are running in this issue some of Peter Maurin's essays, which are really just phrased writings many times repeated, so that he could "make his point," as he used to say.

Peter Maurin

Peter Maurin, to inform those who have come lately to a knowledge of **The Catholic Worker** and its program of action, is the founder, the instigator, the teacher of us all. Peter died in 1949, on May 15th, the anniversary of the feast day of St. John Baptist de la Salle, who was born in 1651, and founded a new congregation which he called the Brothers of the Christian Doctrine. Peter and many of his brothers became Christian Brothers in France and he had his training with them, though later he found that his vocation was a unique one of the direct action, emphasizing both the freedom and the responsibility of the ordinary layman. He was a forerunner and he still is a forerunner. We are spending our lives trying to work out his ideas, and we are learning the hard way, by trial and error. There is very little we say or write that we do not have to work out his ideas, and we are learning the hard way, by trial and error. There is very little we say or write that we do not have to give an accounting for, here in this life. "Do you know what you are talking about, do you really mean what you say?" our Lord seems to ask us, as we live with "the people," as distinguished from the Masses so often swayed hither and yon in our day by the demagogue. Living as we do with bread lines, with the people who come to us,

off the streets, of all races, colors, creeds, of all intelligences one might say, we see how we ourselves have to learn, continue to study, to work and pray for the help of the holy Spirit. We sure have to grow in patience. While on the one side we receive acclamations, on the other side, it is denunciations.

People are always thinking we have accomplished what we are holding up as an ideal, and the simple ones who come to us keep wondering why we have not already built that kind of society where it is easier for man to be good, as Peter Maurin expressed it. It is a wonder, with all their expectation and disappointment, they do not go away, but bad as we are, it is worse outside, someone said; or “though I am unhappy here, I am more unhappy elsewhere,” some one else said. And so we are really not a true communal farm, a true agronomic university, but a community of need, a community of “wounded ones” as one girl who came to us from a state hospital, expressed it. I myself have often thought of our communities as concentration camps of displaced people, all of whom want community, but at the same time want privacy, a little log cabin of their own, to grow their own food, cultivate their own gardens and seek for sanctity in their own way. This kind of sanctity of course has for most of us as little validity as the sense of wellbeing of the drug addict. “Man is not made to live alone,” as we are told in the book of Genesis.

But as it is, work is our salvation. There is scarcely one among us who does not want to contribute by his work to the community, and since there is little choice in the work to be done, ordinary hum drum work for the most part, governed by the circumstances which arise each day, we are, willy nilly, being sanctified, by not in the way we wish, not by our own efforts. Jim washed dishes, and nobody likes the way he washes them. Tom cooks, and no one likes the way he cooks. Another is general pot washer, and carries trays to the sick and he is criticized for his mournful disposition. If you say it is a fine day, he tells you there will probably be a freeze-up tomorrow. I remember another in our midst, many years ago who used to say, “It is no use ploughing that field because we probably won’t have the money to put into seed, and if we did we probably would have a drought.” (But each one with his many superficial faults, has also profound virtues). If you laugh at such a whimsy, you are liable to offend as though you were making fun of someone. Oh, community is such a wonderful thing, as all the religious orders in the world know so well. There is not much room for complacency or a sense of accomplishment, looking around after thirty-one full years of work.

Day of Recollection

Father Janer, S.J., who has charge of Nativity Mission across the “park” from us on Forsythe Street, who deals with Puerto Rican gangs in our slum area, gave us a day of recollection during the month, and made it clear to us just what we were accomplishing. “When you have done everything,” he said, “you are still unprofitable servants. You can give all you have to the poor, you can give

your body to be burned, but all this nothing – without charity, the reason for it all. God is love, love is the reason for all we do, the highest reason, on the highest plane. We may talk about freedom and justice, but the reason for them too is love, love of brother, by which we show our love of God. It is when we have done all we can on the natural plane seemingly without result, that we can say, 'Now I have begun,' Because God takes over, and since we believe in the doctrine of the mystical body, all our sufferings lighten the load which is being carried in Africa, in Asia—all over the world. We are lightening the sufferings of the East Side, of Harlem, of Appalachia."

All this is paraphrase, of course. But I can speak from my own experience of its truth. Suffering borne in this way has certainly a depth of joy, a hard core of joy, because we know that "unless the seed falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies it bears much fruit." We must give up our life to save it. So we can look at the little we have done in thirty-one years with peace and joy and leave it in God's hands to make of it what He will.

I have said these things, and written these things many times, not only in regard to our own work, but also to the whole struggle for social justice and racial justice. Every time hand bills are passed out on the street, every time one walks on a picket line, or sits down in factory or before a factory gate, or at the world's fair, or in front of the Waldorf, every time a voice is lifted to call attention to man's joblessness, his homelessness—these acts are expressions of faith, hope and charity. We cannot be silent.

Another thing Father Janer said struck me. He looked out of the chapel window at the brown fields, and the forsythia bush in bloom, and the maples with their touch of red, and the willows, pale green down by the brook, and he said, "What if it all should stop! What if spring progressed just so far, and then nothing happened! What a frustration that would be!" He went on to say that if we did not develop spiritually, no matter how much we might accomplish in the material order, we were like a spring which never developed into summer, we were like plants that never matured, like trees that did not bear fruit.

To have such a day of recollection is a good way to begin our thirty-second year.

Our New Venture

I suppose I have been writing the foregoing in fear and trembling because with a new venture, it will seem to our readers that we are accomplishing much in the material order. We have been building up to this move for a long time. We began in 1936 with a small farm on Mammy Morgan's Hill outside of Easton, Pennsylvania. We bought the adjoining farm. Later we sold one, and deeded the other to two of the four families who lived on it. Of the four families, three remained; the other moved to the western part of the state. We bought another farm, much larger and more expensive, at Newburgh, New York, and lived and farmed there until after Peter's death. For a number of reasons we moved, one

of them the constant presence of the jet planes which zoomed off Stuart Field nearby, one of which exploded and landed on a field near the house a year after we vacated it. Our next farm was at Pleasant Plains, Staten Island, where we had over twenty acres of field and woodlot, a large house and barn and outbuildings. The building of the new bridge over the Narrows, thus starting a real estate dealers' field day, has resulted in our moving again.

Knowing that we would receive over a hundred thousand dollars for a property for which we paid sixteen thousand, I began to look for a place where we would have room not only for our farm family but for our courses and retreats in the summer, and which of course be used for the same during the winter.

The Sunday New York Times brought to my attention a real estate ad about a property on the Hudson, twenty-five acres, with three large buildings, one completely furnished and habitable, in the past a resort, school, land army headquarters, boys' camp, orphanage. Originally it had been the mansion of General de Peysler, an old brick building not used for many years. It was after his death that the orphanage and school were built. We are in the village of Tivoli, in the towns up of Red Hook, just north of Bard College and the Christian Brothers at Barrytown, and perhaps an hour's drive or less from Poughkeepsie.

On St. Mark's Day, April 25, the day of the major litanies, Hans Tunnesen, who has been with us since the first farm at Easton, Ed McLoughlin, Tom Hughes, Joe Domensky and Alice Lawrence and I drove up from Staten Island, and joined John Mastrion, former owner, and his partner who were already here, putting in a new boiler. The electricity was turned on, all the pipes tested, the pump started to fill the reservoir at the top of the hill. The bottled gas heater was turned on, and we started our first meal in the apartment which occupies one wing of the building. The men took cold bedrooms upstairs and Alice and I slept in the warmer quarters of the apartment which will be occupied by one of the three families which are coming to us this summer.

With the twenty-five people which make up our community at Staten Island, and with three new families which are arriving, one of them for the summer (a professor from Purdue with his wife and children, to help us get started) and Marie Corbin and Rita and their three from Glen Gardner, and Loraine and her three, our community will about fill the place. We will have a job getting the other two buildings in shape for permanent use. As it is, we can use some of the room for the summer courses which we expect to have.

One course is sure, and that is a retreat to be given by Father Marion Casey from Belle Plaine, Minnesota, beginning Sunday, July 19 and ending the following Saturday. There will be on the weekend of the Fourth of July a discussion led by William Horvath and Ruth Collins, about the rent strike and the possibilities of cooperative ownership and rebuilding of old tenements in Harlem. This will be one of a series we hope, of weekends to discuss this idea.

We are thinking, as we institute these courses, of such other enterprises as the Brookwood Labor School which graduated A.J. Muste and Walter Reuther and

many labor leaders; of the Putney graduate school of Vermont, of the Highlander Folk School. It was a Negro woman coming a course at the Highlander who started the explosion in Montgomery Alabama when she refused to relinquish her seat in the city bus after a long day's work at a sewing machine. She would never have thought of making protest for herself, but the sessions at the Highlander Folk School gave her the courage to think of the common good and the sufferings of her fellows. So, in a way, the action of this one woman led to the rise of Martin Luther King to world prominence so that now there is no part of Asia or Africa which has not heard of him. Who knows what Nyreres will begin to see their vocations at the little school we are beginning at Tivoli, New York.

We hope too, to have one weekend retreat a month all through the year, and several long retreats in the summer, so that we may learn to appreciate the gifts of the Holy Spirit and begin to release some of those spiritual forces which will keep up and control the gigantic strides which man has taken in the physical order.

"Go forth and stand upon the mount before the Lord," the word of the Lord came to Elias as he abode in a cave. "What dost thou here, Elias?" he said to him when he had fled the world in fear. "Go forth and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And behold, the Lord passeth. And a great and strong wind before the Lord, overthrowing the mountains, and breaking the rocks in pieces: the Lord is not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake; the Lord is not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire; the Lord is not in the fire, and after the fire, the whistling of a gentle air."

This is from the Douay version of the Bible of the year 1609 and that in turn was from the Rheims translation, 1582, and it is not so graceful a translation in our ears, but we know what it means.

Elias took courage and went forth and found Eliseus ploughing and cast his mantle upon him, and he was no longer humanly speaking alone.

So too, here at Tivoli, after study and prayer, the manual labor of hospitality and the suffering of community living, we can go forth and send others forth "to speak truth to power," in the gentle air of non-violence.