

On Pilgrimage - October 1958

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Summary: Expresses dismay at their difficulty in finding a new house of hospitality and is upset at the process of urban destruction instead of restoration. But says their uncertainty is that of all poor people. Mentions visitors and books to read. (DDLW #744).

We went to press on September ninth. That morning I woke up feeling that something nice was in store for us, and I half looked for exciting mail, or message, or a house of hospitality all ready to move into. But nothing happened except that the paper went off smoothly and afterward we walked through the East Side, Agnes, Bob and I, and looked at houses. Charles McCormack is occasionally working nights and then Agnes comes over to supper and it is always a joy to see her. Charles is engaged in light trucking, with a Volkswagen, working with another old friend and when business is light, he hacks at night, when he can get a cab. Many students do this, working from four in the afternoon through the night, and they have to turn in sixty five per cent of their proceeds to the company. One needs steady nerves and patience in such a city as New York, and Charlie has them. He had ten years of practice around **The Catholic Worker**.

Next day a young seminarian come in, on his way back to Washington, and he is much interested in the Little Brothers of Charles de Foucauld, as am I. He told me of one English speaking brother in the Fraternite El-Abiodh Sidi-Checkh in Sud Oranais, Algeria, and of a priest in Montreal and an intern in a Far Rockaway Hospital, all of whom are members of or prospective members of some part of this new order in the Church, which has secular institutes in formation for women and men, and a Fraternity for priests to associate themselves with them. Fr. Brennan who teaches at the Seminary in Rochester is one of them too, a new friend whom I shall always see when I go to Rochester to visit our **Catholic Worker** group there.

Which reminds me that Fr. Ehman is going to have a day of recollection there on Saturday, November 15 and since I am going to be in the neighborhood, I shall attend. Fr. Ehman has given us retreats at Maryfarm and was associated with the work of the House at Rochester from its beginnings. He and Fr. Vogt have remained faithful friends for the last twenty years though their labors have taken them away from us.

Later in the month Mr. Ryan, the seminarian, sent me a translation of one of the untranslated chapters from Pere Voillaume's book, **Seeds of the Desert** (Fides Press), on Poverty and Love. Another untranslated chapter, on the Hermitages, was sent me in translation by Jack English, now Brother Charles, who has just received his diaconate orders at Conyers, Georgia.

We read this chapter aloud in the office and it gave us more of an idea of what our houses should be like.

I cannot recommend this book too strongly, –this **Seeds of the Desert**. It is the best spiritual reading I know for our time.

Staten Island

One of the joys of Staten Island is that one can get down there after a gruelling day in New York, and for thirty five cents find oneself on a deserted beach. The season is considered July and August and as soon as children go back to school all is quiet and once a week I spent a September afternoon, sitting in front of Maryhouse (which is one of our beach cabins), the air full of the small sound of crickets, and the steady sound of the waves. The grass is high around the house and Andy is coming down to cut it and Hans has some repairs to make. The pokeberries are heavy on their stems and bright red. Tamar uses them for dying wool and it is a beautiful cerise color. The privet, the cherry tree and the rose of Sharon trees all need pruning. The hedge is house high and gives great privacy. We are open only in the front, looking out on the bay.

One weekend the Willocks came, and Ed and Dorothy sat out in the long wicker chairs and feasted their eyes on the water. They are both New Englanders and no New Englander is far from the sea. Both had spent time on the beach as children. They had four of their eleven children with them and the Hughes and the Willocks had a great time together. We ate out of doors and there was on one occasion fried eel as well as everything else in the ice box.

Frances Langford, an old and dear friend was a visitor during the month. We share the same tastes in spiritual reading, so I was glad to be able to share a day of recollection or rather a day of reparation with her, which is a monthly affair of the New York oblates of St. Procopius Abbey, Lisle, Illinois.

She was staying with Gloria Swanson on Fifth avenue and that well-loved movie star got tickets for us to go see **The Music Man** which had delightful choreography and music and was the kind of musical the whole family can enjoy. Earlier in the summer I had seen the Moiseyev dancers from Russia with one of our readers who had just achieved her Ph. D. and wanted to celebrate, and I was enthusiastic about these dancers. It delighted me that our young American dancers showed the same vigor and originality as they. We could be very proud of them indeed if they made one of these cultural interchange trips to Russia. It is Martha Graham and Agnes de Mille who has done so much for the dance in this country.

Contrast

It was a joy indeed to have these treats when we are living in such a state of uncertainty and spending time in such fruitless searches. We saw another house on Elizabeth street, with fifty rooms for \$15,000 dollars, but it would have cost another \$50,000 to fix up and how would we keep a sense of family with so much space, so many floors, so many apartments. Holy Mother the city wisely forbade this to us. Though I do wish Holy Mother the Church would

get such a building and make it into rooms for the poor. It isn't that the Church does not go in for real estate. We certainly have plenty of it. So why not apartment houses for large families where eventually renters can become owners by some cooperative plan. And why not a hotel like that of the Salvation Army on Rivington street where many a time I have had to send extra guests from St. Joseph's House. Here the Salvation Army maintains a hotel for women where one can get a bed in a dormitory for forty cents a night and it is clean and well run and warm and plenty of hot water and washing facilities.

No need to build from the ground up. There are old buildings which are sound in construction which could be remodeled. I could show a sample of one on Mott street which was offered to us for \$16,000 eight years ago but which was unspeakably filthy and in bad repair. Yet that same building now has been remodeled into apartments and the Chinese have taken it over and it has heat and hot water, and baths and is as good a place as one can find anywhere. There is too much of this razing to the ground and starting all over again. The Church has been taken for a ride too often by contractors who put up expensive buildings with all kinds of unnecessary fixtures and pile up the expense. After all, they are Catholics too, and they put money in the plate. This is away of getting some of it back, they reason. People have gone mad on building. It may be a form of pump-priming, but the housing being put up is not for the poor. And the poor are not being reached.

Too much tearing down and starting all over again. It reminds me of the Russian Revolution. Once during the seaman's strike one of the men who was talking to me about the encyclical "The Reconstruction of the Social Order" scoffed at the idea of reconstruction. Better to tear everything down and start again, he said. That seems to be the thought also of our city fathers, who are making over the city. "One can't make an omelet without breaking eggs," the young man said to me smugly.

But the eggs in this case are the families who are being pushed down farther and farther into destitution. We know plenty of what the world would call shiftless families, who just can't make the grade with the projects—too many children, too disorderly and they just can't answer all the questions. Oh, for those days when you could go and rent an apartment and did not have to pass an examination or investigation!

The Irrepressibles

We will go down fighting, I was about to say. But actually we are not going down, we are going up. We are progressing. In the long run, we win though we may have to go through the agony in the garden, the cross itself, to get to the ascension, to receive the Holy Spirit.

We are not at all cheerless and can see quite a few ways out. For one thing we don't want to borrow money from the city at six per cent interest (our own money, remember, remember!) We know that it is going to take some time to collect from the city the cost of our house and the money we put in for repairs. There is not going to be enough money to buy a house and repair it, as far as we can see, unless St. Joseph wants it that way and sends us the money through the Appeal which also has to take care of all our current bills for our household of over a hundred people.

So what are the alternatives? We can rent a loft for our office, and for a sitting-around place for everyone. WE can feed them there. We can rent a floor of a hotel for our men and find an apartment for our women nearby. We can still give out clothes, we can still feed the hungry. And all this without any too great outlay of money all at once. We can stall along this way for a year until we find a place suitable and one which the city will accept as suitable and give us a certificate of occupancy for.

We Are The Poor

It is good that we have to experience all this—that we have to mull things over in our minds this way, and hunt and figure and worry, and look at our children and family and fellow workers, of whom we are responsible and wonder how it will all work out. It is good that it is this way for us. We are more truly poor in these uncertainties, in this insecurity. And we can give an example too of cheerful acceptance and most confident hope and trust. We know that our Father cares for us. He knows we have need of these things.

Future Engagements

With all this uncertainty and work ahead, I have a week of speaking in November. I am speaking November 6th at Brandeis in Boston and at the St. Thomas More Book Shop on seventh or eighth. In Rochester on the fourteenth and then in Indianapolis on the Nov. 16 and 17. If any school or group wants me between those two dates, I can probably fit it in though it means doing without a visit with Tamar in Vermont, or taking it before hand. I have not seen David and Tamar since July first though I had five of the children with me for a three weeks visit. Write me at 223 Chrystie Street, because the mail will be forwarded wherever we are.

Education

Al Lingus who has spent some weeks with us for quite a few summers, has an avid desire for knowledge, and spends also most of the summer working for wages in order to have money for his education. He has a B.A. from Loyola, and a B. Th. From St. Mary's seminary and now his is going to Louvain for his second year in philosophy there. He sailed last week on a Greek boat, fare \$160, and his tuition is \$96 a year. It was \$700 at Loyola, in Chicago. He also gets a good room for \$9 a month and thirty a month covers both meals and room. Louvain is a town of 40,000, 12,500 of whom are students from all over the world. There are many Arabs too he said. All classes are in French or Flemish. It is one of the most famous schools in the world, and it makes me think of how students used to flock to Paris in the middle ages. We were talking about the government which is Socialist. Although Belgium is 95 percent Catholic, the working classes are devoted to the Socialist regime. Although there are state owned railroads and mines, there are no chain stores in Belgium and there is room for many little businesses. As usual it is the school question which is the problem. The state

wishes to dominate the schools and there is the usual tension between Church and State, with the latter threatening to withdraw support. The U.S. is probably the only place in the world where Catholics support their own schools, and pay double taxes. When I visited in St. Paul during Don Humphries' illness, I spent a night at the Ehrlers where the man of the house is confronted by his children who go to parochial schools and is asked by them "Daddy, why do you teach in public schools when the Bishop says it is a mortal sin for us to go to public schools when we have Catholic schools to go to." Mr. Ehrler could well reply that he had to earn enough money to pay the double taxes and only in the public school system could he earn enough as a teacher to afford to send his children to Catholic schools. The New York parochial school system pays its lay teachers about forty-five a week which is not a family living wage. Nevertheless Tom Sullivan, Bob Ludlow, Ed Turner, Kieran Dugan, all of whom were associated with The Catholic Worker, are so devoted to teaching that they accept the poverty.