

On Pilgrimage - June 1970

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Summary: Empathizes with young activists who question their pacifism in the face of so much injustice. Admires the work of activists in China, Hong Kong, Central America, and the revolution in Cuba. Contrasts them to the 20% of people who often ignore the 80% who face inhuman conditions in the world. Tells of activists in prison and those getting out. Keywords: Communism, family (DDLW #501).

Last night Michael Scahill spoke at our Friday night meeting, together with Carol Hinchey and John Stanley. John had been to Cuba last year and Mike and Carol have just returned from two months of cutting cane. Mike has written about it for this issue of the paper.

A few weeks ago, David Miller who is out on parole from Lewisburg Penitentiary after serving more than two years spoke to us and in the course of his talk he said that he returned to the “world” neither a pacifist nor a Catholic and wanted to discard labels. Someone in the audience shouted out that he had indeed been “rehabilitated.”

But in both of these two young men I can see only the deepest honesty, and soul searching and recognition of the fact that we are not indeed, any of us, Christian or pacifist, and they are indeed labels which we have taken so much for granted and are quite content to wear them. To be honest we certainly cannot say we are Christians. Being and becoming are two different things. We might better say that unlike the **just** man who falls seven times daily, we are falling seventy times seven times, to follow in the footsteps of Christ. It is all very well for a St. Paul who was struck blind with the grace he received on the way to Damascus to talk about “not judging himself.” But we belong to that 20 percent of the world which possesses or uses, or has at its disposal 80 percent of the world’s goods. And of that 20 percent we are the whites, and we should be able to see around us conditions analogous to those in Latin America. We are the guilty ones and cannot help judging ourselves.

So it is good for us to be confronted with a David and a Michael and recognize that we do not deserve, have not earned the title pacifist or Christian.

Dom Helder Camara says, “The 20 percent who let the 80 percent stagnate in a situation which is often subhuman—what right have they to allege that Communism crushes the human person?”

Yes, Cuba is a Communist country and Dave Dellinger (whose nonviolence is proverbial), and these young ones scarce past their twenty-first birthday, return with enthusiasm, the deepest admiration for the struggle which goes on in Cuba to build up an economy which

will provide for the common good. Of course what has happened there has been achieved by revolution and is one of the most incredible stories in modern times. Eighty five men setting out in a small ship, called the Gramma from their exile in Mexico, all but wiped out in an initial assault on their landing, and then the twelve survivors taking to the mountains and the fields and winning over the peasants, the small farmers, the villagers by the integrity of their personal conduct and finally marching into the capital from which the dictator had fled. And now, after eleven years, still struggling to build up by hard work and their austere life their farming, their commerce, industry and achieve a deeply human life for all. All this sounds impossibly idealistic but I visited Cuba in 1963 and it delights me that Mike and Carol have come back with the same deep enthusiasm.

Peter Maurin used to quote from Chesterton, " It is not that Christianity has failed. It has been tried and found too difficult." Certainly the 20 percent of the world which is nominally Christian is enough to damn Christianity in the sight of the 80 percent, Archbishop Helder Camara tells the World Council of Churches.

The problem for the young is this. Shall they stand by and continue talking of non-violence when they are able to accomplish so little in the kind of program the Catholic Worker envisions, of education, round table discussions, hospitality, farming communes, all to be accomplished by voluntary poverty and manual labor? It means enormous self discipline and we fail so continually that it is no wonder that many of the young men coming out of prisons where they have witnessed massive injustices, or coming back from Cuba where they have seen and participated in hard labor and brotherhood, building for the common good—it is no wonder that they begin to question whether they are truly pacifist, truly non-violent.

Brad Lyttle a year ago questioned his own pacifism. David Miller coming from Lewisburg penitentiary, Michael Scahill coming from Cuba, question theirs. "When people have built up a good life, overthrowing tyranny can they stand by and see it destroyed? Must they not defend it?"

These are hard questions indeed. I feel that these young men have grown in honesty and seriousness. They have begun to see what study lies ahead. We need to learn from others, and from the struggles going on in India, Africa, China, Russia and Cuba.

Decentralization

The Catholic Worker movement certainly has never been able to set up any farming communes—merely houses of hospitality on the land. But we are all interested in them. Decentralization is necessary for survival. The greatest tribute I can pay to my friend Anna Louise Strong, the American journalist who died recently in Peking, is to say that I will study further the rise of the People's Communes which she wrote of in the letters which she sent out these past ten years. It always made me happy to see the postmark **Peking** on the news letters she sent out. The mail service did indeed transcend all national barriers. (She tried to get news for me of Bishop Lane of Maryknoll who has been imprisoned in China for many years, but she did not succeed.) She died at the age of eighty four.

Fr. Donald Hessler

A recent letter from Fr. Donald Hessler, Maryknoll priest, whom we have known since he was a seminarian is most interesting and provocative of thought. He is a “non-violent” priest. During the second world war he was imprisoned in a concentration camp in Hong Kong for the duration and when at the close of the war, the Japanese were imprisoned in the same camp, he elected to stay with them. He has worked in the Orient and in Latin America and while he was in Yucatan, some of the Catholic Workers went to join him. For some time he has been in Mexico City and when I visited there in the early sixties, he took me to a retreat being given at one of the girls’ academies which was most unusual in that he had brought a number of young girls who came from a prison to share that retreat. He has always felt that his work was to bring rich and poor together, to break down those terrible barriers which exist between the haves and the have nots. He has been interested for a long time in the Christian Family movement because he feels that marital love can be a purifying and liberating force that can break down barriers and enmities. The extended family, the clan, the village, the commune, and finally a community of communes to supplant the modern state—Martin Buber has some such vision of community overturning the state in his book—Paths in Utopia.

But let me quote Fr. Hessler. He has been traveling from Chile back to Mexico and has stopped in nine cities: Vina del Mar, Quito, Guayaquil, Medellin, Panama, Eraguas, Guatemala, Huchuctenango, staying one night in the home of the middle class or rich family, and the next night in the home of the destitute.

“The contrast between my first night and the others in each place was between black and white, between sleeping peacefully alone and with new brothers, between using a bathroom with a light, hot water, deodorant and bath facilities to using a corner of the back yard without light, water or even a seat. My wealthier friends kept in touch with me those days and promised to keep in closer touch, got more deeply involved with their worker brothers.

The Melvilles

“Finally 8 days in 4 dioceses of Guatemala left no doubt in my mind about the much publicized case of the Frs. Melville, Bonpane, Sister Miriam Peter and the students expelled from Guatemala and from Maryknoll. No one can deny that they did nobly in going to the destitute to fight at their side against rampant injustice, to give them voice and power.

“Some Christian Family Movement couples, looking back, see that the big mistake was their own. They, some of them parents of the involved students—were blinded by their bourgeois mentality. They did not thirst for justice like their sons and daughters, they did not join them in their struggle to liberate the oppressed.

“Without them (middle class, educated nationals, including mature married couples), the effort almost had to fail. Students, religious and priests, alone cannot give a complete ecclesial witness—even less so when the leadership is foreign. The national coordinating team of the Christian Family Movement is re-examining the whole tragic-fortunate case. Now with over a year to cool off, a serious effort is being made to extract the gold—and there is plenty—hidden under the unhappy circumstances so shouted about.

“Of course they know that if they don’t, they can expect more and worse happenings, because God is not pleased. Their state of ‘sin’ has not changed: 3 percent of the population still control 80 percent of the country’s wealth. How is this possible? Because their military dictatorship is backed up by millions of U.S. dollars, in guns and munitions, used to silence the poor—in the name of law and order and anti-communism.”

Out of Prison

David Miller, Dan Kelly are both out of prison now but Jack Cook has been refused parole. David Keubrick, just out of Springfield prison, Missouri, is visiting us. He and Chuck Matthei plan to visit friends in Vermont in the coming weeks. They plan to take the Appalachian Trail. In prison, Woman’s Federal Prison at Alderson, West Virginia, is Lolita le Brun, the young Puerto Rican who was sentenced in the fifties to fifty years, or perhaps it was more, for her part in the shooting into the House of Representatives in a terroristic attempt to work for Puerto Rican liberation. We have been corresponding for some years and I’m hoping to get permission to visit her, though I was refused such permission to visit prisoners at Lewisburg.

Lolita is a poet, the mother of two, one of whom, a boy, was drowned. The daughter is now married, and I believe is living in Puerto Rico. Lolita’s faith has come to be the most important thing in her life.

Sister Rose Marie of Mt. De Chantal Academy of Wheeling, West Virginia, wrote me recently:

“Three weeks ago we took a group of our Latin American girls to the prison at Alderson. They had prepared a little program of Spanish songs and dances for the Spanish speaking women who are there. Then altogether we attended the Holy Sacrifice and sang the hymns in Spanish. It was beautiful. I think we brought a little joy to these women and certainly it did a world of good for our girls. I met Marjorie Melville. She is such a fine person. It is consoling to know that Christ understands what she was trying to do both in Guatemala and in the U.S. Women prisoners have a special place in my prayers since I read about them in one of your books.”

Also in prison are Fr. Phil Berrigan and Tom Lewis, Dave Eberhart, Tom Hogan, Tom Melville.

Parole has been granted to seven of the Milwaukee fourteen and they are being released from prison in June. Mike Cullen, the head of Casa Maria, the House of Hospitality in Milwaukee has just been sentenced to a year and a day. Today one of our readers sent us fifty dollars to send to his wife to buy books for him.

Fr. Dan Berrigan’s account of the Catonsville Nine which is published by the Beacon Press, Boston, Mass. 123 pages, \$1.95, is a moving and dramatic account, and helps us understand their witness, though it is not ours.

All of us here at The Catholic Worker have known the Berrigans for years and many of their articles have appeared in The Catholic Worker. I am hoping that they will get the CW while in prison so that they will know of our love and our prayers.