

Reflections on Work - November 1946

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Emphasizes learning to work with crafts and trades to counter the evils of industrialism—to acquire a philosophy of work. Complains that clergy are too easily “bribed” by business and lauds the work of the French worker priests. (DDLW #227).

One night, just as we were beginning compline, two young boys came from Mott street, hitch-hiking, to pay a call on us at Maryfarm, Easton, 75 miles from New York. They would not come upstairs to the chapel, so while I fed them bread and milk and tomatoes (that was all that was left of supper), I talked to them. One is half Polish and half Italian, and the other Italian. They are both sixteen, smooth-cheeked, round eyed, young, strong and soft. Both have been in trouble with truant officers and probation officers for years. The reform schools are all crowded, accommodating sometimes twice as many as they have room for, so the boys know that there is no penalty for their minor misdemeanors. They merrily go on their way of petty stealing from their mothers and families, hanging around street corners and social clubs, of which our neighborhood is full, loafing, swearing, smoking, drinking—well on their way to more serious crime. The courts are full of just such young ones. How to reach them? They are cynical, they gamble, they want to get rich quick. They play the numbers, the horses. They don't want a job, because they want big money. They see others making a killing. Everyone wants to get ahead, to be better off. This is what they are taught in the school, public schools and in the Catholic schools. But they are not taught to work—they are not taught a philosophy of work. They are not taught a philosophy of poverty which will make them use their talents rather than seek wages.

Begin at the Beginning

“You’ve got to begin at the beginning,” a priest said to me when I was talking to him about the Carmens and the Pasquales of our acquaintance.

You cannot talk to these boys on religious grounds because they are not convinced there is a God, nor that the Bible is His inspired truth. They don't believe in the ten commandments, nor in the Gospel of love of the New Testament. And they don't believe because they do not see it worked out in the lives of religious any more than they see it worked out in the lives of lay people. We live in a business world just like everyone else, and we live by investments, usury, big business; by our present industrial system which is materialist and as godless as Communism. So how can we talk to them. It is too late to reach them in ordinary ways.

They need a conversion. A shock treatment. They are too old. Only a revolution will change them. That's why people accept Hitlerism, Fascism, Communism. They accept it like a religious conversion.

Jocist Movement

It is this point, of course, which is recognized by the Jocist movement and we must at once give Canon Cardign the credit for the tremendous zeal which was so contagious and which brought the workers by the thousands into his movement in Belgium and all over the world. Mass demonstrations, mass liturgical functions, warm the heart, arouse the spirit, fan the fire and must be used, though at the same time we must recognize the danger of dealing with "masses" as such. Mobs and masses are to be feared, and yet also we must remember the three thousand who were converted on that first Pentecost. Three thousand was no small number. I saw three thousand hunger marchers parading through the streets of Washington, D.C.

I saw them lined up by the roadside living in tents, and they seemed like a mighty crowd, a goodly army to me, and a dangerous menace to the police. We are so used to dealing in millions these days, dealing in conscriptions and mass slaughters that three thousand is nothing. We are prejudiced against mass demonstrations both because of Hitler and Mussolini and Stalin, and because of our own mob reactions. But we must give credit to the brave Canon for his inspiring work with his thousands. It was after we wrote the last article, in September, and after talking to those two boys, that we wished we had some such demonstration as the Canon could put on to show the dignity of work, that we could bring these boys to.

We appreciate what has been done along Jocist, YCW lines, but we wish to go much further, to get at the evil of the industrial system and to make people recognize it.

Catholic Radical

Peter Maurin wanted to call *The Catholic Worker* The Catholic Radical because he believes in getting down to the *roots*. And the root of our evil, he has been crying out like a prophet, like a St. John the Baptist, is the lack of a philosophy of work.

It is significant that it is in reformatories that boys are taught crafts and trades. It is significant that it is in insane hospitals that the patients, some few of them, are taught to use their hands to do creative work.

But the sad part of it is that though they have these schools, teaching skills, and some learn to do things very well, and probably get great joy out of doing them, they do them with the sad sense of futility, of boondoggling, of having been given something to do because they are either criminal or insane—and not that they are doing things which are good and natural to man that they can continue doing when they get out, creating, making, using mind and body to work on beautiful things God has given man, raw materials He has provided, and in so

working on God's good things, getting a sense of the sacramentality of life, the holiness, the symbolism of things.

Maryfarm

Down on Maryfarm at Easton, we have been working with wool from the Angora goat and the sheep the men sheared one evening after supper. Their hands are strong and it didn't take long. My daughter took one bag of wool from her own sheep which had been given to her by Fr. McGee as a wedding present, and washed it while she was doing the babies' washing every morning. It was a full and heavy fleece and took a week to dry. Then during evenings she teased it to get enough light wool to stuff the new baby's mattress for the little cradle. The rest of the same fleece was worked on by two Hungarian women who were making the current retreat. They had raised wool and spun it back in Hungary before they came to this country, they said. They had raised flax, too, and they advised us about ours, when to pull it. Our new spinning wheel arrived from Montreal. It cost thirteen dollars, and in just a few evenings Tamar had carded and spun six hanks of wool. Two bags of wool from the other two sheep we sent away to be spun single-ply so that we can set up the loom. We are working on the angora wool now.

Beautiful and Practical

Living as close to the land as we do, we can see the use of all this and how, as the work comes along, and we gain skills, it is both beautiful and practical. Peter used to remark sadly that the rich made their money out of the machine and then always bought hand-made things, from clothes and shoes, to things of beauty in their home.

What a wealth of meaning the psalms have for us when we are living closer to the earth which feeds us. All the symbolism of the Old and New Testaments, which make us see the sacramentality of life, is made plain to us.

Symbolism

Symbolism is well made use of by the State today. All the military insignia we are by now so accustomed to and look for, is worn with pride, and means a great deal to those who wear them. Both machines and the things of nature are used, and men learn to read and interpret. The Communists with their symbols—hammer and sickle—their factory chimneys, their bridges, their machines, are building up a sense of the sacredness and holiness and the dignity of the machine and of work, in order to content the proletariat with their propertyless state. They do not disdain symbolism.

There is a new symbolism today, the symbolism of the machine, and there is something ugly and devilish in it, and when priests, in their attempt to reach the worker, make use of these weapons of the devil, we must cry out.

Ossie Bondy

Ossie Bondy, the former head of our Windsor House of Hospitality, just sent me a few pages torn from one of the Canadian magazines with this comment: “Since you condemned industrialism, here is one aspect of it that will make you sad.” The two pages contained pictures of girls and men in factories being visited by their chaplains and one caption read, “A new idea in industry and an answer from Scotland to the contention that the Church has lost touch with the worker—is the industrial chaplaincy system instituted by the Church of Scotland.”

I am sure that this idea of industrial chaplaincy is welcomed by big business. I am sure, too, that they are quite ready to pay the salaries of the padres. James J. Hill, the railroad magnate, a magnate and great to the extent of being a great villain and thief, accepted huge grants of land from the government across the country, and imported foreign born workers to be exploited in this country and eventually perverted and ruined by our industrial system—this same James J. Hill contributed a great deal to religion. There is a picture of him on the walls of the seminary at St. Paul, Minnesota, and he is said to have said that religion was most necessary for the workers. To keep them contented with their station in life, no doubt.

Railroads

I have called attention before to the railroad discount of the clergy rates in most parts of the country, and have called it a bribe to the Church so that the railroads can continue their exploiting of workers (the Holy Father has asked for the deproletarization of the workers) with no outcry from the men of God.

It is the custom, too, when railroads import Mexican helpers as they do from coast to coast, to pay the salary of a padre for them, since they are all Catholics. The morality of employing these workers who are more steady than our American “gandy dancers” and “bindle stiffs,” and taking them for long periods, sometimes for years, from their homes and families, and herded together to live in barracks, is not questioned by these clergy.

Mine Owners

Many a priest in the mining district, it is said, is paid by the mine owners who, as individuals or as corporations, have obtained possession of the land and added to their crimes by ruining it. Down in Scranton there is many a home falling into the ground because in their greed they have removed props (natural pillars of coal, or often heavy timbers) in order to get the last vestige of coal from the earth, literally undermining the city.

Priests in Factories

And as I write of these priests accepting benefits from coal operators and railroads, I read of an account of the Liturgical conference in Denver, where a Jean Rogues, delegate of the Center of the Liturgical Apostolate of France, tells of the work of a dozen French priests work in the factories in order to enter into “the mentality, problems and culture of the workers.”

Called Mission Paris, the endeavor owes its origin to Pere Godin, who wrote a book about five years ago stating that France must be considered as a mission, since the workers had been lost to the Church. The story sent out by a priest from the liturgical conference stated that their chief instrument in winning back the workers was the participation in the liturgical life of the Church. I should not say that this was the chief instrument. Their chief instrument is their living and working with the workers, in this way winning their love and their confidence so that they can speak to them, so that they can understand them. We have also heard from priests in Europe that there are many priests in Russia driving cabs, working at hard labor and doing truly apostolic work of the martyrs. These are magnificent beginnings and show a tremendous spirit. To try to bridge that terrible gap between the clergy and the laity, between the man of God and the man of the family—truly this is a great work, and a work which we must comment on, and commend. Not for all, of course, because all these works demand a different vocation. But we should know about them and know about the need for them, and praise them where they are being done.

Housing

And only to show the need, I must tell the story of the Msgr. I recently talked to in Chicago in reference to a big vacant house across the street from his church, which could be remodeled so as to accommodate four families. There was a garage in the back where another family could be put up. There was an ample yard all around where the children of these families could be put out to play. In addition to this setup, we know four families in Chicago, three of them with children, two, three and four children, who are up against it for decent housing. They are friends, they have all worked with the Catholic Worker movement, they are workers and professional men, thus bridging the gap between worker and scholar, as it is so often bridged in America. They are all interested in the family, work, property, responsibility and the discussion and working out of the lay apostolate for the family. In many cases this is how many former Catholic workers who ran our houses, edited our papers, have advanced into another greater work, the work of the family, the healthening and strengthening of the first community.

The Monsignor

One of our fellow workers went with me when I talked to the Monsignor about renting the house for a family center. Al works as a freight handler and was dressed in a cap and leather jacket, ready to go to work.

All the Monsignor had to say to us was that the family was the responsibility of the state, and that the neighborhood had deteriorated so that it was full of truck drivers instead of the doctors and lawyers which it had once boasted, that he had bought the property to protect the church and that he didn't want any shanty towns around him.

"A freight handler is one step lower than a truck driver," Al commented as we left.