

On Pilgrimage - June 1963

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Summary: Reports on John XXIII's last public appearance and words before his death and their earlier audience with him. In her meeting with Vatican officials she says she hopes the Council will discuss the morality of war and peace. (DDLW #804.)

From Rome

Monday, June third, I landed from the Vulcania Italian Line Ship at 45th Street New York, at eight o'clock in the morning to find Nina Polcyn of St. Benet's Book Shop of Chicago waiting for me with Stanley Vishnewskey, Tom Cornell, Terry Becker, Arthur J. Lacey (with dispatch case and letters), Joe Maurer, and Chris, Irish-American playwright and actor, and Cesare a young Argentinian. We had been getting only the most meager reports as to the Pope's health on board ship where the news was given out each day in Italian on a tabloid news sheet. Each morning at Mass the chaplain had asked our prayers for the Holy Father, and each afternoon at Benediction we had repeated those prayers.

Death of the Pope

We were still sitting at our lunch with people coming and going in the little apartment on Kenmare Street, when someone came in with news of the Pope's death at three in the afternoon. It had been a long agony and daily I prayed the Eastern rite prayer for a death without pain for this most beloved Father to all the world. But I am afraid he left us with the suffering which is an inevitable part of love, and he left us with fear, too. If the reports of his last words are correct, fear that his children, as he called all of us in the world, were not listening to his cries for **pacem in terris**. He was offering his sufferings, he had said before his death, for the continuing Council in September, and for peace in the world. But he had said, almost cheerfully, that his bags were packed, and that he was ready to go, and that after all death was the beginning of a new life. "Life is changed, not taken away," as the Preface in the mass for the dead has it. And just as Therese of Lisieux said that she would spend her heaven doing good upon earth, so in his love, John XXIII will be watching over us.

It was on the day before I sailed for New York, May 22, Wednesday, that I had the tremendous privilege of being present at his last public appearance. He stood in his window looking out over the crowd in front of St. Peter's. An audience had been scheduled as usual for that Wednesday at ten-thirty, and the great Basilica was crowded to the doors when the announcement was made that the Pope had been too ill the night before to make an appearance that day but that he would come to the window and bless the crowd, as he was accustomed to do each Sunday noon.

I had had an appointment that morning for ten-thirty at the office of Cardinal Bea, to see his secretary, Fr. Stransky, the Paulist, about a meeting I was to have with the Cardinal that night and was leaving the No. 64 bus at the colonnade to the left of St. Peter's. I noticed that the people leaving the bus were hastening to the square. Word gets around Rome quickly and when I inquired I was told that the Holy Father would be at the window in a moment. I hastened to a good position in the square and was there in time to see the curtains stir and the Pope appear. I had not realized how tremendous that square was until I saw how tiny the Pope's figure seemed, up at that window of the apartment under the roof. Those rooms used to be servant's quarters and had been occupied by the popes since Pius X.

The voice of the Holy Father came through a loud speaker of course, and seemed strong. He said the Angelus (which we say before meals at the Peter Maurin farm), then the prayer to the guardian angels and ended with a requiem prayer for the dead.

It was the last time the public saw his face (many of the crowd had opera glasses, so one can use that expression). Questioning those at the little convent where I had been staying in Rome the last week, I learned the subject of the Pope's last talk, at his last Wednesday audience. He had urged all to read and study his last encyclicals, the call to the Council, **Mater et Magistra** and **Pacem in Terris**. He had said all he had to say, this was the message he left the world.

Last Words

"There is an immense task incumbent on all men of good will, namely the task of restoring the relations of the human family in truth, in justice, in love and in freedom; the relations between individual human beings; between citizens and their respective communities; between political communities themselves; between individuals, families, intermediate associations and political communities on the one hand and the world community on the other. This is a most exalted task, for it is the task of bringing about true peace in the order established by God.

"Admittedly, those who are endeavoring to restore the relations of social life according to the criteria mentioned above, are not many; to them We express Our paternal appreciation, and we earnestly invite them to persevere in this work with greater zeal. And We are comforted by the hope that their number

will increase especially among those who believe. For it is an imperative of duty, it is a requirement of love.”

Applications

Yes, we will meditate on his words to us all, because he said he was addressing all men of good will, and we know too, as we have known in the past, how difficult it is to apply these words to individual situations. We need all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, for our work, we need all the help of our guardian angels, and to make our non-Catholic and non-believing readers know what these words mean, we are printing together with this column of pilgrimage, definitions of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as what the guardian angels mean to us who believe. And not to know these things, for those of us who do believe, means not to know the treasure we have, the resources we have to draw upon.

The Pilgrimage

To report further about the trip to Rome which came about because a group of women, mostly of other faiths, and including those who did not believe, had called for this attempt to reach the Holy Father with a plea for a condemnation of nuclear war, and a development of the ideas of non-violent resistance. This very attempt brought out clearly how difficult are these attempts at unity and co-existence.

It is no easier to receive a hearing with princes of the Church that it is to receive one from the princes of this world. There is protocol, there is hierarchy and blocs of one kind or another, there is diplomacy in what we generally consider to be the realm of the spirit. There is maneuvering for credit and recognition from groups and nationalities among the women themselves. This latter began as soon as the plane load of women arrived from the States and found that Hildegard Goss Mayr, Marguerite Harris and I had drawn up a preliminary paper, a one page message to be sent to the Holy Father. Because of the Pontiff's precarious state of health, the message had to be in the hands of his secretaries by eleven the next morning, Monday, in order that we be recognized at the coming Wednesday audience. There seemed to be no chance of a smaller audience, or any special recognition. But to be assured that our message reached him, it had to be short, complete and accompanied by individual letters from the women, and a summary of the make up of the pilgrimage. For this latter, Marguerite had worked valiantly every afternoon and evening on board the ship in our cabin on the way over from New York. She had typed up many copies of concise biographies of the American women concerned and had them ready for that first meeting.

But the acceptance of that one page message caused the most trouble. It meant a meeting that lasted from the time the women assembled until two o'clock in

the morning and though it was finally accepted as revised, there was renewed discussion the next morning, another meeting right after breakfast and then the hasty departure to meet the Cardinal who was going to bring it to the attention of the Holy Father.

This was only the first of continual meetings, meetings about the letters to be presented, about other people to see, influences to be exerted, meetings as to whether one sector or another of the group of sixty or seventy were being properly understood or treated. The language barrier made everything harder. We were from so many countries, so many faiths, so many backgrounds. Some of the women had so little money, that they actually did not have enough to pay the extra costs of lunches and the one sightseeing trip that we all took together which came to only about seventy five cents a piece. Certainly there was too little time for us to get acquainted with each other. But I think most of us have lists of the women who were there, and most of us hope to see each other again and perhaps get acquainted better through correspondence of one kind or another. There is so much peace literature being gotten out and one thing it does is to draw us together. Most of us thought we knew Virginia Naeve, for instance, just through all her short notes by which she kept us together before the pilgrimage began.

The Audience

The day of the audience arrived and the big busses came to the door, and it did not seem that we were being treated as of any more importance than the bus loads of school children who were coming from all over Europe during their Easter holiday to see Rome and attend the large general audience which took place each Wednesday at St. Peter's.

We waited as everyone else waited outside in the square, two of our members in wheel chairs. We passed though the showing our unprivileged tickets, and back past the bureau of excavations and through one of the side doors and around into a section already packed with people. Klare Fassbinder, the leader of the German group had managed four special tickets; the Japanese representative, dressed in her lovely costume and bearing gifts for the Holy Father, and the two women in wheel chairs were put near the front. But the large body of Pilgrims of the group were far to the rear and unable to see over the heads of the multitude. It was only by searching around individually that we were able to get a better view. Two other women and I were pulled by a young, gay Italian girl up into one of the tribunes where there was a tremendous view of the crowd and where we would be able to see the Pope come in and ascend the throne, but that space was only cleared a little because a huge pillar was in the way of seeing the Holy Father, himself when he was seated before the altar, ready to speak.

It was long to wait. Probably people were standing two hours and it was not until twelve-twenty that finally there was a surge in that vast mob and a sudden

silence followed by almost a roar of greeting. Borne aloft on his chair, (and how could any have seen him if he were not conducted in this way,) the procession proceeded around the columns and then the Pope, blessing all, was conducted up to his throne where he sat while a list of all the groups and pilgrims was read aloud. As the names of the villages of Italy, and the schools of the Continent, and of England and the United States was read out, applause came from various parts of this vast group. And our pilgrimage was not mentioned!

But then the Pope began to speak and the words that fell from his lips seemed to be directed to us, to our group, speaking as he did about the “Pilgrims for Peace” who came to him, and his gratitude for their gratitude and encouragement. The young woman who had helped us find our places was translating his words as fast as he spoke them, and writing them down while two of us read over her shoulder. She kept beaming at us, and all those around us, seeing our buttons, large almost as saucers, bright blue bearing the legend “Mothers for Peace” in Italian, also smiled and indicating the Holy Father and us in turn, seemed to be letting us know that he was speaking to us especially.

It seemed too good to be true and if all those around us had not kept assuring us he was speaking to us, I would have considered it but a coincidence. Our messages had reached him we felt, impossible though it had seemed they would. I wrote these things in my post-script to my account in the last month’s issue of the **CW**, but I am calling attention in more detail this month to our difficulties.

Communist Infiltration

We were truly an ecumenical group made up as we were of all faiths, of believers and unbelievers, and I had no doubt but that a few of the women, perhaps one or two, were working with the communist peace group too. This did not disturb me, though I would prefer that those of that political point of view were more open about it so that there were more chance of frank discussion about our positions and points of concordance. One can understand however the economical disadvantage, the loss of jobs that such openness would lead to.

This infiltration, (the very word infiltrate has a connotation of hostility and fear so that I do not like to use it, but it is the only one which conveys the idea of secretiveness) is bound to go on in a movement which is reaching such proportions as the peace movement. In the past such groups with whom the CW has always cooperated, the War Resisters League, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the American Friends Service Committee, the Peacemakers, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, have been free from Communist membership. But undoubtedly with the thousands now participating in mass demonstrations around the country, this is no longer true.

It was because of this “certainty,” an American priest stationed in the Vatican told me, that the pilgrimage of women was not officially received. I could only reply that if we understood the Holy Father’s last plea, he wished a closer association,

a seeking for concordances, and the opportunity to discuss oppositions. How could we know our brother, keeping so aloof? I would like to go through the encyclical on peace and count the number of times the word trust was used, how many times we were urged to work together for the common good. We were to go into the world as sheep among wolves, Jesus himself said, and St. John Chrysostom commented on that by writing that if we ceased to be sheep we no longer had the Good Shepherd with us. What have we to fear?

“That such trust would be used for political purposes by the Communists,” was the only reply that I got.

Cardinal Bea

However I was assured by “Vatican sources” (I am using the customary newspaper terminology but I mean Fr. Stransky,) that **The Catholic Worker** was not under suspicion, though some of the women of the pilgrimage had been told that we were a Communist group in Geneva!

The last evening I had my interview with Cardinal Bea and the opportunity to tell him more about the peace pilgrimage and about the women of the many churches who made it up. After all, he was the Cardinal who according to all accounts is one of the most important and influential men in Rome after the Pope and I was grateful indeed for the opportunity I had for an hour’s conversation with him in his apartment in the Brazilian college out on the Aurelian Way. He asked after **The Catholic Worker** in particular and details as to our work and told in turn of his very happy visit to America and the many engagements he could look forward to on a return visit.

I think it was seventy engagements to which he had been invited, and if he came again, perhaps, his secretary said, he could also visit **The Catholic Worker**.

I asked about the coming council and the probabilities of there being a more exhaustive discussion of the morality, of the theology of war and peace today, but I am afraid I got no definite answers save the assurance that these things would be part of the schema on the Church and the world.

Unfortunately I lost my notebook, the diary of my trip, so my report may not be as exact as I would like it to be. I remember the Cardinal’s speaking of the **Focolari**, and how impressed he was with their movement which has grown from its beginnings in the bomb shelters during the Forties as that now it has spread all over the world.

My general impression was, all during my stay in Italy, that the clergy did not know too much about any lay movements in the world that questioned either the injustices of the social order by direct action, or that tried to educate the people in the ways of peace, which would include refusal of conscription or the payment of taxes for war, and in the racial struggles the confronting of the enemy with

non-violence and a sharing of poverty which would be the beginning of true courage, the readiness to face suffering and death.

Conclusions

I came away from Rome more convinced than ever that the particular vocation of **The Catholic Worker** is to reach the man in the street, to write about the glorious truths of Christianity, the great adventure of the spirit, which can effect so great a transformation in the lives of men if they would consent to the promptings of the Spirit. We must write about men like Mayor Giorgio La Pira, a Sicilian whom I met in Florence, who is a third order Franciscan, who lives in poverty and simplicity in a small hospital room, who took (by right of eminent domain perhaps) the unused homes of the rich and gave them to the poor, who preaches and teaches the poor as St. Francis did, and who is so beloved in his city of Florence that he has been voted into office time and again, and also by the Communists of his city.

“No, I am not afraid of the Communists,” he told me. “I went twice to Russia, the second time purely on a pilgrimage to visit some monasteries. I met this extraordinary public official while I was in Florence on the invitation of Jean Goss of the European Fellowship of Reconciliation to speak to a small group of Protestants first, than later at the Major Seminary where George Lorimer was my interpreter. Jean Goss himself was speaking those nights to large audiences and he too had to have an interpreter because he spoke only French. He is a warm and ardent speaker and I had heard him (with interpreters) and was much impressed.

A man who seems to me truly a prophet was Lanza Del Vasto who had come to meet the pilgrimage women in Rome and who talked to us all one morning. His wife was there, a most beautiful woman and a great singer who trains the community in France which Del Vasto founded to sing, and whose voice I brought back with me on a record.

I brought back also some writings of Lanza del Vasto which I hope to get translated into English to bring out in **The Catholic Worker**, perhaps in a series and which made a great impression of many of our readers. At least we can publish enough of del Vasto’s material to acquaint people with his thought so that they can go on from there and get his books themselves. Among his writings, **theReturn to the Sources**, has had a circulation of a hundred thousand copies. **From Gandhi to Vinobha** however, is the only book which as been translated into English and was printed only in England. I do not know whether it is still in print.

But I must conclude this installment of **On Pilgrimage**. I traveled thousands of miles, visited Naples, Rome, Assisi, Florence, Siena, Milan; spoke to American seminarians at the Goldoni Theater and to the Holy Cross seminarians at their college out near the hospice Domus Pacis, and to university students in Milan;

was the guest of the great religious artist William Congden who lives in Assisi. I crossed the mountains to the Adriatic, to the little village in the mountain, San Giovanni Rotondo, to see Padre Pio, all in six weeks, and I cannot possibly get it down on paper in time for the June issue of **The Catholic Worker** which goes to press late as it is, on June 12. There is much more I could write, and much more I will write in the July-August issue, to try to give some idea of the work of the lay apostolate, by groups and individuals in that heart of the Church, Italy, which is now by plane only six hours away from us here in the United States. I went by boat and so spent more than two weeks on the sea during the most holy seasons of the Church, Easter and Pentecost. During both periods there was daily Mass attended by 400 tourist passengers and members of the crew, and in the afternoon Benediction and the rosary, not to speak of sermons and conferences by the ever present chaplains which are part of the crew of every Italian ship. I lived for the last eleven days with immigrants, from Egypt, Croatia, Italy and Sicily, most of whom were getting off at Halifax, Nova Scotia to try to find work in Canada.

I am happy to be home in the midst of a busy community again, planning our summer season of vacations at the beach houses for the Puerto Rican families in our neighborhood, and conferences for Sundays and some week-ends at Peter Maurin Farm. I am still a bit dazed, I have not begun to look through the suit cases of letters awaiting me, though thanks to Marge Hughes, they have been acknowledged.

Fr. Urban, Trappist, stationed at the House of Studies at Tre Fontana in Rome, offered the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass on the anniversary of Peter Maurin's death in a chapel to our Lady in the crypt close to the tomb of St. Peter. Mae Bellucci, old friend of the **Catholic Worker** whom I encountered in Rome most unexpectedly, was with me. I had spent the night at the convent of our Lady Reparatrix and we were up at the crack of dawn hastening through the deserted streets to get to St. Peter's in time for the seven o'clock Mass which Fr. Urban, at the request of Alice Kathryn Caspar of Louisville, Kentucky, was saying for Peter. Peter died in 1949, and May 15th was his anniversary feast of St. John Baptist de la Salle, founder of the Christian Brothers with whom Peter had taught in Paris for a few years. For a time he was a member of that great teaching order.

Fr. Urban

After the Mass, I prayed at the tombs of Pius XII, Pius XI, and Benedict XV, the pacifist pope as he has been called, and of St. Pius X. Thanks to Fr. Urban who gave us generously of his time, we also had a trip down into the most recent excavations, with an archeologist as a guide and saw not only the old pagan tombs but the earliest Christian ones, and we came as near as anyone could to the site of the burial of St. Peter himself.

I could not help thinking as I saw these tombs of those who preceded the Christian era, what great veneration there was for the dead. What wealth and art was expended on the deceased. There were carvings of exquisite beauty and I remember thinking at one tomb that the carved marble looked as warm and glowing as old ivory.

Easy Essays

But what Peter would have loved in Rome was the work of Patrick O'Reilly-Persichetti who had translated his essays into Italian and who sang them with great and joyful enthusiasm to improvised tunes on his guitar. The phrased writing, with its repetitions which we are still printing in the **CW** lends itself to song, and indeed Peter seemed like a troubador to us, going about in public squares declaiming his ideas in what most of his hearers considered to be blank verse, or free verse form.

Patrick is probably about 22 and has great talent as an actor and producer and with his mother manages the old Goldoni Theater, the oldest in Rome. It is a delightful place, down a very narrow street filled with the shops of small artisans and near the Tiber. They both live there in impoverished rooms built into the wings, and when they are not putting on shows themselves they rent out the theater to others for concerts and recitals. It was here on Saturday afternoon that I spoke to a large group of seminarians who lingered long after to ask questions about voluntary poverty and personal responsibility.

Little Sisters

Fr. Urban took me one afternoon to see the motherhouse of the little Sisters of Jesus, whose fraternity was founded in 1939 in the Sahara and which now comprises 200 fraternities numbering about 650 professed sisters, who now work in Asia and Africa, in Canada, the States, and South America as well as in Europe. The sisters earn their living by manual work in factories, in hospitals, on the land, in some cases they are consecrated to prayer in the fraternities of adoration, to manual work in worker, rural or artisan fraternities, and to more direct tasks of charity in fraternities of manual help or service. "Specialized" fraternities of various types are consecrated to the sick, to nomadic peoples, to prisoners, etc., or to certain specialized work, such as handicrafts, for example.

So reads some leaflets given me by one of the Little Sisters who showed us the new barracks which were being put up to accommodate all the little sisters who were going to make the headquarters in Rome their "Maison Generale." Some of the Little Sisters were doing heavy work, carrying stones and earth and helping in the building, and others as we talked came up the hill with laden shopping bags which were their luggage. They were Italian sisters who had to go to their birthplace to vote in the recent elections.

The tiny sitting room scarcely accommodated the four of us who sat there, but the chapel was much larger, beautiful in its simplicity and taste. And then we were taken to another chapel, down long, long flights of steps carved out of the tufa down the side of the mountain and which, with the help of some German seminarians, they had enlarged to form a most impressive and beautiful place of worship.

The Little Sisters are settled in Rome too, in one of the poorest districts, but I did not have time to search them out there. But I did visit them in Assisi on a lovely sunny day, encountering them in the Church of San Damiano, five of us with William Congden walked down a long sunny road past little farms and vineyards to the small stone house, a room to a floor, in which they live, three of them. After visiting the Hermitage and the convent where St. Clare dwelt with her nuns, I could only say that the Little Sisters were again living the life of poverty in the world, that St. Francis and St. Clare had brought into the life of the Church. How beautiful these renewals are.

Next month we will print a digest of Lanza del Vasto's work.

An Appeal

I repeat an appeal to help cover the legal costs of the appeal on the conviction of William Worthy, our good friend, long a correspondent for the Baltimore African-American, Harvard graduate, writer and speaker. His troubles started when he went to China together with other newspapermen without the permission of the State Department. And on his return a number of years back their passports were taken from them. The other men on the promise that they would not repeat the offense had their passports returned, but Bill Worthy refused to make such a promise. His vocation is to find and report the news and his next offense was to go into Cuba for six weeks. It was some time after his return that he was arrested and tried and sentenced to three months.

The case will come up again on appeal either in Jacksonville Florida or in New Orleans and money is needed for court costs. We had an appeal in the paper a year ago and some money was received and we hope more will be forthcoming. Bill Worthy is fighting an issue for all of us, for freedom of travel, freedom of the press and freedom of speech.

I was much impressed on my recent trip to Europe that no visa was needed to get into Italy or Spain or any other country in Europe (this side of the Iron Curtain), just as we need no visa for Canada or Mexico or for a number of the Latin American countries. How can we ease the terrible tensions between our country and Cuba unless there is some freedom of movement back and forth? Without Bill Worthy I would not have found the friends I did in Cuba, Catholic and non-Catholic. Thanks to him my visit there was most pleasant and fruitful, and so I am begging my friends and readers, those who appreciated my articles from Cuba, to remember him and send some help. If you wish to send it directly

to the **Catholic Worker** you may, and we will forward it, or you can send it to
"The Committee for the Freedom of William Worthy, Suite 301 217 W. 125th
St. New York 27, N.Y. Checks may be made payable to Bishop O. Ward Nichols.