

# On Pilgrimage

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*Summary: Ruminates in mid-winter on happiness and beauty, and “the duty of delight.” Repeats Peter Maurin’s maxim, “We must make the kind of society where it is easier for people to be good.” (DDLW #910).*

Today it is grey and cold, stone cold. There is no color in sky or pavement or buildings round about. We are deep in winter. The pavements are covered with ice so one cannot walk freely and one’s muscles tense with cold already are further stiffened by the difficulty in walking. No chance to swing out freely and so warm up the body by a good walk. Teresita, who used to be a Protestant missionary in Japan, said to us once some years ago that this is the time when all things should be quiet and peaceful, dull and quiet and grey like the weather knowing by faith that the plain trees in the park across the street will in a few months pulse with life and put forth their green.

Down in the country snow barely covers the yellow stubble of the fields and pine trees stand black against the sky. Cherry trees are black too, and pear trees lift up their branches high and narrow to the dull sky. Down at the foot of the fields of the Peter Maurin farm there is a little brook which empties a mile away into Lemon Creek before it pours into Raritan Bay.

One afternoon on a walk I stood there and listened to the crows and starlings and the chatter of the little brook over iced stones and grasses and had my fill of beauty for an hour before I had to go back to the city again.

What a hunger, what a need we have for beauty and happiness that comes with beauty! When I have read about the Little Flower these last years (and I have read all the books I can find about her) I was suddenly struck by the intense happiness of her early life, the beauty and comfort of her home-life, the Sunday picnics and walks, the love of her father and sisters, the harmony and peace which reigned there. It was an oasis of joy in a world building up for conflict, girding itself for the struggle. It was a beautiful life, a joyous and well-ordered life. And yet the mother of Therese died of cancer in her early forties, she worked hard as a lace maker together with her husband even while she managed the cares of the household and many small children. She had the sorrow of seeing two of her little ones die, and one of them grow through a difficult youth. And yet the whole impression was of a happy life for all the children, and from the letters of the mother, a most happy and satisfying life of her own.

Once when I was talking to Peter Maurin about a man who lived with us who was often drunk and disorderly and neglected his family and I was either wondering what to do or looking for consolation in discouragement, Peter said, “We must make the kind of society

where it is easier for people to be good.” It was a general principle which has often come to my mind since and made clear my path. Peter always dealt in principles not in specific issues, much to our irritation at times. When people appealed to him about some situation which had developed, some rivalry or antagonism, Peter used to give a little lecture “on the art of human contacts!”

But to make the kind of society in which it is easier to be good! One needs to be happy in order to be good, and one needs to be good in order to be happy. One needs Christians in order to make a Christian social order, and one needs a Christian social order in order to raise Christians. So it goes. “A vicious circle” is the term one usually hears, but this cannot be called vicious. Inevitable, perhaps, Christianities are so full of the paradoxes. Such as dying in order to live. No one pretends that it is a simple matter. It is all very hard to understand. For instance, St. Thomas said that a certain amount of goods is necessary to lead a good life, and we are always talking about voluntary poverty as necessary to happiness. We are always calling attention to poverty and yet urging people to be poor. The thing is people do not want to understand.

In a recent article in *Manas* I read: “While only a few hundred people are actually being lobotomized, a few million are in effect temporarily lobotomizing themselves with sedatives and alcohol. Tonight 10 million doses of sleeping medicine will be taken; this year 7.7 billion dollars or more will be spent on alcohol, most of which will be used to make the world bearable to the people who take it. All this expenditure for a chemical release from life as it is.”

In addition to all this money being spent, there is money for cosmetics, cigarettes, movies, coffee, tea and many other things which we could do without. In order to send food and clothing and the warmth of brotherly love to sufferers abroad and at home. Certainly these days, when there is famine, pestilence and war raging in the world and one cannot open a paper without seeing pictures of starving and wailing children and homeless families, it is hard to think of happiness. In time one cannot be happy, but in eternity one can. And the Catholic must be living in both time and eternity, and it is the only way of solving the mystery of how to be happy today. It is living with the long view, and yet living most intensely in the moment.

Irene pointed out a phrase to me recently of Ruskin’s which appealed to us both. It was “the duty of delight.” To reverence and be thankful for life itself, in a time when the world holds human life so lightly there is again joy. To be grateful is to be full of grace and grace is participation in the divine life, knowing that we are sons of God and heirs of the kingdom.

Happiness too means warmth after cold, peace after pain and satisfaction after hunger. These simple joys are good to remember, too, especially for a woman, the homemaker. The works of mercy deal in such joys. I was reading a story of Dorothy Canfield in which a woman was speaking of her empty arms. A woman’s arms need never be empty. Nor hands idle. There are always sick, the old, the little children to be cared for. And with love. We must express it with sweetness, with tenderness. When I saw the altar boy kiss the cruet of water this morning at Mass, I felt how necessary ritual is to life. To kiss the earth, to lift the arms, to embrace the lonely.

It seems to me I have written these things so many times before, for my own instruction and consolation, too. But it is a good time of year for thinking of these things, the beginning of Lent when we should rejoice to fast and pray and give alms.

## **St. Marcellus**

Here is a lovely story of a Pope from the early Church in the time of persecution, St. Marcellus, who was made keeper of the menagerie by the emperor and “he spent nine months there, fasting and praying and visiting by his letters the churches he could not visit in person. He was rescued by some clergy, harbored at Lucina’s, in whose house he dedicated a church. When Maxentius heard this he ordered the beasts to be brought to the home of Lucina and Marcellus to be their keeper there. Sickened by the foul atmosphere and worn out by many hardships, he fell asleep in the Lord.”

Since we have a friend who once had the job of taking care of all the animals at New York University hospital, we know just how bad a job that could be with the cries of the animals, the stench, the heavy, oppressive caged animal atmosphere.

## **Interruptions**

One starts writing one’s stint in peace and quiet and soon there are crazy people shouting in the hall, drunken people falling up and down stairs, poor people coming for clothes, two comparatively well dressed men asking for lunch, someone else in for carfare (and he gives you a careful list of all the hospitals and institutions he has tried already), telephone calls, students just finished with their examinations, and then the fellow workers who want to discuss Crashaw, Simone Weil, anarchism, and how can we live without the sacraments, come the red revolution, and so we had better oppose it violently. Needless to say all this interrupts one’s train of thought.

One of our readers asked for some definite news in regard to myself and family, so I will report now that I had a beautiful Christmas with my daughter, son-in-law and four grandchildren in Westminster, Maryland, where David is working for the Newman bookshop. The family is living on the outskirts of the town and yet within walking distance of work and Church, but the icy weather prevented us from doing much recreational walking.

The children are angels, of course. They go to bed at seven, and get up at seven. Susie is a bit hilarious and Eric tries to keep up with her, but none of them come downstairs having once been put to bed. Tamar reads them a story before they go to bed and then comes downstairs to read or sew or crochet or knit or weave in those delicious free hours when silence descends upon the house. The dishes may be stacked in the sink, clothes may need to be folded and put away, but there is always another day. Yes, they are angels, they play with each other’s toys peaceably, they help pick up after themselves, and they try to help their mother. Becky, the oldest, who will be six on April 3, occasionally sits down after bringing in the clothes off the lines, and putting away the clothes pins, and feeding the goats and

chickens and collecting the eggs, and sighs deeply and says, “I have worked too hard. I am always helping.”

I would love to be there with them all the time. Then when I got to Maryfarm, Newburgh, for a weekend, I think how wonderful to be there all the time; and then it is the same way about Peter Maurin farm on Staten Island. And somehow or other one enjoys the city too, and the stimulus of people and meetings, and the never-ending work to be done, and the Church around the corner, and the Russian Choir on Sunday mornings. In these moods of physical health and content, one can say with St. Catherine, “All the way to Heaven is Heaven, because He says I am the Way.” There certainly are glimpses of it here and now, but in heaven we will be in eternity and there will be no barriers of space to separate us from our loved ones. We exercise the virtue of Hope in trusting we will get there.

“Eye hath not seen nor ear heard what God hath prepared for them that love Him.”