

On Pilgrimage - September 1952

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Summary: Shares her notes from the annual retreat at Maryfarm and the importance of developing the spiritual life, which is as important as the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. (DDLW #637).

One can take a bus at the Port Terminal Bldg. for Newburgh every few hours during the day but there is only one bus which continues on through Newburgh, out route 17K, and passes the door of Mary farm which is our resthouse and retreat house and house of hospitality on the land, – a house by the road where the wayfarers come in for free meals and lodging. (One must always keep on defining, restating, telling what we are doing and why, for the sake of the new readers whose subscription keep coming in such numbers. “This has got to stop!” groans Bob Ludlow who has much of the clerical work of the place.)

On August 18 th a retreat was starting at Maryfarm so after a hectic day at Chrystie street, I set out. At the last minute the office was packed with company but with Betty Lou and Rita and Pat, they were being taken care of and I was able to set forth. That six-thirty bus is always crowded and hot but when we got going, when we had sailed through the tunnel and out across the Jersey meadows it was already getting cooler. When we reached the hills, mist was flung like scarves around the tops of the mountains.

At the farm every bed was taken and nine of the men had to go to sleep in the Blessed Martin Farm dormitory each night. They would not have had to do this if there had been time to finish preparations for the retreat which were interrupted by the moving of the Hughes family to Waverly, New York, on the feast of the Assumption.

As usual there were a number of familiar faces—Frank McGinty and some friends from Philadelphia, Ammon Hennacy from Phoenix, Emma Greiner, Anabelle Lund, from New York, Dorothy Willock and children, Caroline Gordon of Princeton.

The kitchen stove was not working, there were holes in the pipes and they had not been cleaned out besides. The first day of a retreat you see all the things that are wrong, the broken screens, the missing screens, the missing bread pans, the lack of pot holders in the kitchen and many flies. But after the first day with Prime and sung Mass, the conferences, the reading at table, the delicious waves of interior silence begin to roll over one, and then

the tall pines, oaks and maples stand out, the fields of golden rod, the thriving garden with its good vegetables for the table.

Joe Cotter has already started to can tomatoes and the shelves in the pantry where I spent a few hours yesterday making bread, were filling up with tomatoes and string beans.

During the afternoon I took a walk down through the fields to visit the shrines which Joe had made. As I passed the swamp I remembered Joe's story of the captive crane which he had released from the grip of a snapping turtle. "Things are always happening on the farm," Joe said. "Fr. Faley reads his office down in that meadow and one day he came up to tell me that a big bird had been caught in the bog. I went down and waded in up to my shins and put my hands down and he wasn't stuck in the mud or caught by a log, but held by a big snapping turtle around the leg. In snapping at me, he released the crane."

Joe is joyful when he talks to you about Nature, and his walks with King, and his shrines, but he is a suffering soul, crippled with rheumatism, tortured by "nerves," and he uses this suffering of his for the work, which he loves. "I'm hoping though," he said, "to be joining Peter one of these days. It will be easier to work up there, than down here."

The Retreat

Oh the joy of such retreats which deal with the principles of the supernatural life, the glory of God, the folly of the Cross and the Supreme Dominion. What he was trying to do, the retreat master said, was to give us a view and a deepening of the supernatural life, and to instill in us a desire to be perfect, as we had been commanded by Christ, "as perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect."

Every conference started with references to the Blessed Mother and Father Casey reminded us of that great poem of Hopkins. "'Mary compared to the air we breathe.'" "No man can look on God and live," he pointed out, "but through her we may see Him." His light is sifted to suit our sight." She does not dim God's glory but sweetens it. "I am Who Am." There is no simpler statement possible. God is existence. He does not have it, but is it. We have it in part, given us by grace. "I am what I am," St. Paul said. Not grace alone but employment of grace bring men to heaven. "His grace in me has not been made void," St. Paul continued . . .

We have never forgotten paradise and this aspiration for the supernatural life is in us all.

Father recalled to us the story of Pinnocchio, and Pygmalion. "The breath of life was given to Galatea and to Pinnocchio," he said, "and how ungrateful if they had still acted like the marble statue or the wooden doll. The love of God demands an equality. He does not wish to love us like a shepherd his sheep, a master his servant, but like a son. There is a quasi-equality between ourselves and God. Love demands it. He could never love us as sons, if we had not been elevated by supernatural grace. How awful to continue to act like good

human beings. It is true that to act reasonably is to act worthy of a human being. Reason is the headlight which brings us to human fulfillment. At his human best, men are guided by reason, not by their appetites, their passions, cravings, instincts. But man cannot maintain his purely natural powers without the help of grace.”

The more I make this retreat which we try to have at Maryfarm every summer, the more convinced I am that it provides the answer. It is an Ignatian retreat, but only part of it, one third of it. When we spend five or six days on this part, I begin to long for the other two parts. Not all at once of course. St. Ignatius took a month to give his exercises. Many religious have the opportunity, but layfolk need it too.

The men on the breadlines, those who live with us at St. Joseph’s House on Chrystie Street, students, teachers, workers, all need it. Men are starving today for spiritual teaching. What is man? What is life? Where are we going, how can we help ourselves? Just the other night Betty Lou and Rita and I walked down Mott Street to our old neighborhood for the fiesta of the Assumption which was going on. The streets were lined with lights and garlands, balloons, pushcarts and ferris wheels, open cauldrons to cook Italian pastries in deep fat; sizzling sausages, an infinite varieties of cakes. There was music from the singers and orchestra on a platform right across from 115 Mott Street.

We paid our homage before the gaudy statue of the Mother of God (carrying a purse which evidently overflowed so that dollar bills had to be pinned on her gold and satin gown). During the day there had been a procession, and the old mothers walked in black, veiled, and in bare feet, carrying lighted candles; and the girls wore backless dresses, without shoulder straps, with opulent chest and back exposed. The old walked to show gratitude and to do penance, and the young, the queen of the feast and her attendants, walked to show their gowns and to triumph. It was all very puzzling, the rejoicing and the sorrow, the flesh and the spirit, so lavishly intertwined.

We went down Hester street to see Catherine Odlivak in her new one-flight-up apartment in a rear house, greeting on the way the shoe maker who had just lost his wife, and Rosie Sclafani who had been our neighbor for eighteen years. Catherine wasn’t home but we ran into another old friend, a young fellow who used to visit us often to listen to records and to talk about music.

But we did not talk about music, or the feast, that night. We got to talking about God. He had showed us a religious drawing he was copying for his mother, together with some other paintings on his walls. “But I am not religious,” he assured us. He was interested in music, in pictures, – but certainly not in work, he said, although the decorating and pannelling of the room he was in showed him a good craftsman. “I am a gambler,” he said, “and that is

my life, my excitement. It is a vice, it leads to dishonesty and lying, and yet there it is, I am a gambler. I like excitement. What else is there?"

As for God. No he did not believe in him. "God is all powerful, so why doesn't He prevent evil? Why is there suffering? Why was I an invalid as a kid so that I suffered and suffered. I prayed. I was always praying that God make me well. But he never answered me. But then, when I gave Him up, then I got better."

Oh, yes, Man wants to be happy, he is made that way, and the more he reaches out for happiness, for joy, the more it turns to dust. "Our hearts are made for Thee, oh God, and find no rest until they rest in Thee."

But how strange it is that when we know and experience that nothing can satisfy us except the best, the All, that we do not take those steps to go in that direction, not even the first step, to say, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." "Take away my heart of stone." If we could study how to pray, for it is not easy, then all would be well. A desire to love God is a sign—that you do, Dom Chapman said. "You would not seek me if you had not already found me," Pascal wrote.

It is foolish to say that the spiritual life is easy, and that the knowledge of the spiritual life comes easy. In the material order a man has to study to build bridges, to split the atom. A man needs to study, to ponder in his heart about God and himself. This study might not have been necessary in the age of faith. But we are not living in an age of faith.

What is human nature? A principle by which we act as man. And human action means we do things rationally, purposefully, and we enoble what we have in common with animals. We are one step above the brute, and one step below the angels. And when we consider that most of us are not acting even like good human beings, in the way we live and work, then we begin to see the need too, to study the supernatural life, to learn what grace is, and how it gets into motion superior actions. "Faith is a species of knowledge" St. Thomas says, and the supernatural life is now, not pie in the sky. Beatitude is a certain beginning of supernatural happiness. "Taste and see that the Lord is sweet."

And we learn about love, that much abused word, in these retreats. I am sure that boy that was talking to us wants love. We all do. If he loved God, he would have all else beside. He would learn to love, and to love is far more important than being loved. But in aiming only for human love, we fall short of that.

Even in the natural order the vine is pruned to bear fruit, and if the vine had feeling, cutting would hurt the vine. The seed must fall into the ground and die before it can bear a hundred fold. And if the seed had feeling, it would hurt that seed. And man has to be pruned, to fall into the ground and die. There is nothing surer, this inevitability of suffering and its glorious and fruitful results for ourselves and others whom we love and work for.

It is a joy to use the body to work, to use the mind to think and the heart (and the body) to love and these are the things we study in our retreats at Maryfarm. And to prepare and build up these retreats is just as much a part of our work as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner. All the corporal and spiritual works of mercy are inseparably bound up together.

If we ourselves can only grow in knowledge, and speech and love,—then there is just so much more of it in the world to wipe out its opposite.