

On Pilgrimage - March 1951

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Summary: Describes the bucolic scene at Peter Maurin Farm as she begins to write her column. Relishes their joy and reminds us of the sorrowful aspects of life, for example, drunkenness. Talks of how hard it is to serve the poor and keep at the mundane drudgery—"the mystery of sin and suffering." (DDLW #619).

On Pilgrimage

February 26 — Although I spend more than half my time at Chrystie street, I like to write my **On Pilgrimage** column from the country in order to bring a breath of the soil to our readers. Today, Monday morning, I am sitting in my room at the Peter Maurin Farm, on Bloomingdale Road, Pleasant Plains, Staten Island, and looking out the window as I write. The east window looks over fields, sloping down to the woods and the little brook which rises in a swamp a mile away and flows through our land, marking the eastern boundary, down to Lemon creek and into Raritan bay. The woods are brown and the fields are golden in the sun, and the trees in the woodlot, stand out black and beautiful against the rising yellow field beyond. There is a blacksmith shop and a shed there, both very much in need of repair but I can foresee that they are going to become hermitages before the summer begins.

I wish Joe Cueller, who is living in a hermitage beside a brook out in New Mexico, would come back and take over one of ours. He could live in silence and manual labor, and he could relieve his solitude by going into the city for the apostolate of the streets, selling the paper. He was always a good example to us, was Joe. When he writes me he calls me Melania after the friend of St. Jerome.

Beauty

The window to my right (I have my back to the sunny window) looks north, and there is more subtle gradations of color in the scene because the sun is not in my eyes. There is a pearly haze in the air, cherry trees are black and beech trees are pearly grey, and there is a pinkness about the ends of all the branches. The buds are swelling on some of the bushes, and the branches we bring in the house burst into leaf. Starlings cluster in the branches like leaves. There is no green yet, but only blue, lavender, pearl grey, yellow and brown, a delicate combination. There is a promise of warmth later in the day when the sun is stronger.

It is early morning. Irene and Isidore have gone for a two mile walk to the organic farm of Mr. Gericke to ask questions about pruning and to buy some black molasses for bread.

Hans is making a flight of steps into the attic over the men's side of the house, which will free the attic on the woman's side for a dormitory. I can see Marge and her four children rampaging around up there come a warmer week-end. The house is solid, and if Marge feels like teaching Johannah the polka – she used to dance it down the hills at Easton with Leonard Austin – I am sure the house can stand it.

Work

Down stairs the baby is crying while Rita gets her breakfast ready, mashed prunes, baby cereal and milk, all mixed together deliciously. Little Rachel is three months old now and eats with avidity. The finishing job on the bakery, the second coat of paint, is to be done today and soon the first batch of bread for the ambassadors of Christ (the breadline) will be turned out and brought into the city. Albert, who is going to help Ruth bake, is down at the beach in search of clams and mussels to eat and seaweed for compost. He walks the two miles to the beach and returns with a heavy sack on his back.

These days when we go down the road through the woods for Mass at St. Louis Academy, the moon is still bright, but day is not far off. The sun is well up at seven a.m. and at six in the evening it is not really dark yet, but twilight. The days are getting longer. It is warmer by the sea than it is inland, so we expect to be planting salads and peas shortly. Our readers, suburban and country are going to rush for their seed catalogues, if they are not already at them.

To talk about these things, to write about them, to think about them, and then to do them – this is to be “on the side of life,” as my son-in-law, Dave Hennessy would say.

It is a joyful thing we have a baby on Staten Island. “We must always have a baby with us,” Rita says. “When this one goes, we must find another mother and child.” It makes us live pretty much in the joyful mysteries, to be around children.

Oh yes, I well know we must go through the sorrowful to get to the glorious – that fact is dinned into our ears quite enough, and we have the realization of that on every side of us too. There are always the sick and suffering ones with us, and some times it seems as though half the household is sick in body or mind, possessed, or just plain drunk. To keep one's charity and peace of mind under these conditions which are pretty constantly with us, is to be living the entire rosary at once. With much work from morning to night, even though it is only letters and seeing visitors, there begins to be a timeless quality about our lives. We go through a gamut of rejoicing and grieving every day.

I do not mind speaking openly of this drunkenness, since it is a problem which afflicts many a family. Last week we had four women who were drinking (not together, each was going her own way). One would get straightened out and then relapse again. One of the men, who helps much when he is sober, was also drinking. When we said the rosary at noon, as we do each day for peace, he said it louder than any one, and emphasized his consciousness of

himself - “pray for us sinners, NOW and at the hour of our death.” Or it was, “pray for us SINNERS, now and at the hour of our death.”

Community

Saturday afternoon I left the place and with this parting meditation to a few of the others. “Here we are supposed to be servants of the poor, of each other. We take pride in such terms, long used by religious orders. We don’t want to be called social workers. Although we have an unjust and prideful scorn of them too often, just because Peter Maurin criticized them as trying to make people adapt themselves to their surroundings instead of trying to change the social order – ‘to make the kind of society where it is easier for people to be good.’ If we are truly servants then we will keep at the job in humility, putting our ‘mistress’ to bed, giving them black coffee, aspirin, cold compresses on the head, and urging them gently and respectfully to get back to bed to sleep it off.

“What a wonderful thought!” said Jack English enthusiastically as he wandered through the room where I was talking. “How tremendous are the implications of Christianity, of the sermon on the mount. It stuns you!”

“But I wouldn’t work for such masters and mistresses,” said another with plain commonsense. “I’d get another job.”

“But suppose you had a family to support, and could get no other job.”

The Little Way

At any rate, it seems to be our job, very often, and not at all the kind of job, we picked out for ourselves. We all wanted to do important revolutionary work in the lay apostolate and here we find ourselves washing clothes, spreading compost, taking care of babies, putting drunks to bed, making coffee and mopping floors. And still we’d rather do that than listen interminably to the stories of the poor, the complaints, the tragedies, the truth and the lies, the recriminations, the self complacencies of the streams of people coming in and out all day and every day, those who come to get help, and those who come because they want to be “in the apostolate” because they want to give it. It has gotten so that one is ashamed to be on the “giving side,” to be in the position of dispensing. One needs to constantly remind oneself that we are truly on the receiving side and have received from others what they wish us to dispense with love. We are not only the servants of the poor but servants of those more comfortably off.

Yes, there are picket lines, literature to be distributed and I wish we had more to do it and more who realized the importance of doing it. There are meetings to address, and articles to write, and a book to finish and it is easy to lose oneself in the small demands of others, and not do one’s proper work which one is obliged to.

Oh these masters and mistresses of ours know full well the implication of the Gospel. Bill Evans, God rest his soul, used to follow me down the street calling, “Remember, Dorothy,

seventy times seven.” And Nellie will quote, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone,” and as for being importunate – we are always being put into the position of being the unjust judge or reluctant friend! Tom Sullivan is in the worst position because he sleeps on the street floor and some erring brethren are always knocking on his window to be let in.

Lent

It may seem that I am speaking lightly of these things, but these are sorrowful mysteries indeed, the mystery of sin and suffering, and how we are all members one of another, and drag each other down, or pull each other up.

It is still Lent and will be until we start getting our April issue ready for press. We are using the Lenten missal which Ade Bethune illustrated some years ago. Never are there more inspiring lessons than we read every day in the Old Testament and the New, the story of the widow’s cruse, the story of the Naaman the leper, the healings of the New Testament. All these stories are as good for today as there were then, and these things are still happening on every side, and we can expect them to happen.

“Hope,” writes St. Thomas, “is that elevation of the soul, by which it confidently pursues a sublime and arduous good, despising and overcoming all the obstacles encountered.” The sublime and arduous good we are pursuing is to grow in the love of God and of our brothers. “Do this and ye shall live,” said the Lord.