

Day After Day - October 1941

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Summary: A letter to a bed-ridden Catholic Worker telling of their new women's house of hospitality—Mary's House. Describes bits of beauty in the city, many visitors and conversations, and the condition of miners in Chile. (DDLW #375).

Dear Francis:

This is a letter to make you think of us and of all our doings and to pray for us while you lie there on the bed by the window all day long. I'm hoping your mother is home and that your drafted brother gets time off to see you often. I think of you as Ade and I saw you a few weeks ago, down near the shore in Winthrop, just out of Boston. Since you have to be in bed, I'm glad anyway that you get the sound of the sea in your ears and the smell of salt water.

There is lots of news this month. The days pass swiftly and so many things happen it is hard to remember them all. I have to look into my small date book which I carry around in my pocketbook to recall events.

Moving

The greatest news of the month for the women in St. Joseph's House, at 115 Mott street, was that we moved to a woman's house, which we call Mary's House, at 104 Bayard street, which is the north side of Columbus Park, just two blocks away from the CATHOLIC WORKER office. Mary's House is another rear house just like St. Joseph's House. There are quite a few differences, however. For one thing it faces south, instead of east. For another, we have not the whole house, but just twelve rooms of it. Most important of all, we have to pay forty-eight dollars a month rent.

But we were becoming so crowded at Mott street, and the fact that we had some young mothers and babies who needed to use the kitchen for formulas just when dinner or lunch was being prepared for two hundred and fifty, made it more and more imperative that we move.

Marie Conti's Martha House in Detroit had inspired us also to this move. There was such a quiet, homelike atmosphere that it was a pleasure to drop by there on a trip and rest a bit. One cannot be very quiet and homelike with fifteen hundred people coming in for breakfast, lunch and dinner every night. And the paper being published and mailed from the same place. Certainly the Mott street house is not a sample of what a hospice could be. Mary's House

will give people an idea of what a small house of hospitality would be like and perhaps be another step in the movement to establish them in all poor parishes throughout the country. The house at Mott street shows the gigantic need.

We're hoping that some group of women will undertake to help us pay the rent. It is pretty easy to get food; shelter has always been the difficulty.

Under a tree

One of the joys of the new house is the park across the street. I wrote a short story once about a young mother living in a dingy basement of a tenement and the joy she had in her first baby. It was entitled: "She Could Sit Under a Tree," and I wrote it because I myself had always enjoyed sitting down on a bench in a tiny park and breathing a bit in restful contemplation of the beauty of a tree in the midst of the city slums.

On three sides of the park are tenements and the Chinese and Italian children from these tenements play in the park. The fourth side of the square is a grim one, made up of huge blocks of buildings, the Tombs and the Criminal Court buildings. They are new, and there is, of course, beauty in these buildings if you can just forget whom they house. They do not loom over you threateningly, but rise rather airily like clouds into the blue sky.

Festoons

Down in the back yard, which is between our Mary's house and the front building, there are three cats, mother, father and baby, black as coals, with an occasionally white dash about the face. Teresa goes down to sprinkle the baby one with flea powder every now and then as she says the pests are stunting the poor kitten's growth. In the back of the house there is still another yard, to the rear of a Baxter street house, and there is a turtle and a "pale faced cat with grouchy eyes," as Teresa describes it, who live under some privet hedges which grow rather meagerly along one side.

These are gloomy yards, after the brightness of the open park, but right now our yard is festooned with chains and chains of bright red and green peppers, which made me cry, "Glory be to God" when I first saw them, they were so gay. Praise God indeed, who made peppers and kittens and turtles and not that tall block of concrete and steel which houses thousands of men who are on the one hand but dust, and on the other "little less than the angels." We are to see Christ in them all, but down here we see Him in His most degraded guise.

September 18, Feast of St. Januarius, is a great feast day around here, with colored lights strung across the streets, flags and festoons of branches and flowers, a bandstand around the corner on Mulberry street, and processions in the streets. All of Mulberry, from Columbus park straight up to Grand street, and from Baxter over to Mott, the streets are decorated and thronged with people. One goes out walking in the evening and the crowd takes up the entire street. There is little possibility of a car getting through.

But we have seen little of the fiesta for two reasons, our moving the woman's house and for the visitors that have been coming in. Clarification of thought, round table discussions, and just plain conversations are the beginnings of Peter's whole program of peaceful change.

He would rather talk than write, and he is a born teacher. Sometimes he has days when no visitors appear for conversation, and then other days there are scores of them, coming and going, none of them staying long enough for a real visit.

Last Sunday a conscientious objector came up to New York from Philadelphia to talk to Arthur or Dwight about the camp in New Hampshire, but Arthur being on leave of absence and Dwight not there either, he stayed to talk to Peter from one until eight in the evening. That was a real conversation, but I was not there.

When the young fellow left, he had clutched a number of books under his arm. He had had a real synthesis, an outline of history, and a fresh beginning of study and an impetus for further study for the pursuit of wisdom.

Yesterday was a good day but tiring, just because there had been too many visitors and all of them at once. Each time the door opened, and another friend came in, and introductions had to be gone through with, and interruptions in thought, in conversation—I longed for a regular class room, where Peter could sit at a desk, and start with one, and go on and on, and people would just come softly in as though they had been late for class, and there would be no interruptions.

That would probably be Peter's idea of Heaven.

We talked of the Anaconda Copper company, and of Chile and what was happening in Chile. (One of our guests was a seminarian from Chile).

The Anaconda Copper company is owned by Catholics and there are Catholics in its management. The largest copper mine in the world is in northern Chile and employs fifteen thousand Chileans who are paid ten pesos a day, the equivalent to a third of a dollar in our money. Englishmen and Americans have the office jobs and receive very high salaries paid in American money, and they regard the natives, a mixture of Spanish and Indian and also the pure Spanish that have been there a long time, as animals, and call them yellow bellies. They have easy work but the natives toil out there in the desert, at the heaviest and most grueling work and there are many accidents and deaths in the mine and every so often there are explosions and then forty or sixty are killed at once.

It is a city of miners, and they do not earn enough for vacations, or to educate their children or to leave the life they are living. It is a short life, however, because they die of tuberculosis after a few years and their places are taken by others.

Remember to pray for these dead workers, Francis.

Moving and visitors, and then traveling too, made the month pass quickly. Father Joseph of Portsmouth Priory, who comes to us each summer at the farm at Easton, had a day of recollection for the New England Catholic Workers on September 26. Father Hugo had five conferences a day, one hour each, for six days, at our annual retreat. Father Joseph had one conference which lasted practically three hours! It is true that he returned to the sacristy a few times to give us a breathing space for prayer and meditation (five minutes) and it is

also true that we didn't even notice the passage of time, Father Joseph was so interesting. He preached on St. Paul. Next time we have a day of recollection at the Priory you must certainly be there.

You say you are not much use as a Catholic Worker, lying there on your bed through the long years. But when it comes to work, physical work is hard, but mental work is harder, and spiritual work is hardest of all. You cannot use your hands to write, nor your eyes to read, but there are all the faculties of the soul you can be using, and as you lie there you can move mountains. You may not see them move, it may be a mountain on the other side of the world or in Chile.

We need a lot of upholding down here on Mott street, too. We are like the general who said as he went into battle, "I'll be very busy today, O Lord, and I'm apt to forget You. But do not Thou forget me." So please pray for us and for all Catholic Workers, and for our breadlines and for our readers, and for all the struggling millions in the world today. And God bless you and give you peace in Christ.