

Sanctuary

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Responds to Karl Meyer's proposal for universal sanctuary for sleeping using empty structures, especially churches. She recalls, in her response, the large municipal lodging houses during the depression. Reiterates the need to build a new society in the shell of the old, using "neither capitalist, nor communist, nor totalitarian means, but accomplished through non-violence. (DDLW #895).

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Dear Dorothy and Marty:

I am sending you an outline of a hospitality scheme which I wrote up three years ago, but never sent for publication. The great advantage which this scheme has over the forms of hospitality we have offered in the past is that we would not ever have to turn any person away cold or hungry or lonely at any time. We would not have to think that there was any person anywhere in the city cold or hungry that we could not help, if they would come to us. Churches have been used recently as sanctuaries for draft resisters – why not for the desperate and destitute? The power of this idea of universal sanctuary grows on me with each passing year and I have not abandoned the dream, which I set down three years ago, though I seem at the moment to be further from the possibility of carrying it out. Nevertheless, I am still seeking the proper opportunity. If it can be published, others may be caught up by the idea.

Love,

KARL MEYER

[Editor's note: the next section is by Karl Meyer.]

If a man has the money to own an automobile, he gains the right, all over Chicago, to as much as a hundred square feet of public street, wherever he can find it, to park his car. On the other hand, if a man does not have the price of a room for the night, he does not even have the right to lie down on the concrete pavement and claim six square feet of parking space. To do so would be to commit the crime of loitering or vagrancy. The foxes have their holes, the birds have their nests, the autos have their parking spaces, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.

We live in a society in which every inch of ground is claimed and every tool and means of livelihood is owned as private property. A man, by his birth and growing up, does not gain a proportionate share of the land or means of livelihood sufficient to sustain his life. He gains it only by the sufferance of those who have preceded him.

I contend that man, by his birth, has at least an unqualified right to the use of enough of the public space to lay his body full length upon the ground and sleep, since, manifestly, he can not sleep on his feet while in constant motion, nor can he long survive without some form of rest. While I am realistic about the prospects for securing the fuller economic rights of man, I think we might take upon ourselves the obligation of securing to every man in Chicago the minimum right of which I speak. As always at this time of year, when I pass men on the street hunched into hooded cotton shirts, I feel an acute renewal of outrage that such men haven't the right to enough ground on which to lie down and freeze.

In times past, and even to the present day, I have maintained various houses of hospitality for the destitute, but never for all of them. In January 1960 I had my largest storefront, on Division Street, where a pretentious animal hospital now stands, and for a month we took in eighty men a night to eat and to sleep on the floor in rows. They used to lay down newspapers on which to sleep, because the floor was dirty from their feet. Every morning I had each man fold up his bed and walk in order not to fill our own trash barrel with all the old newspapers. Detectives soon paid us a visit: a neighbor, devoted to "Operation Crimestop," had called PO-5-1313 to report a storefront where men came out early each morning carrying suspicious looking packages wrapped in old newspapers. The cops forced us out, because if you are going to provide a residence for human beings, you must have a certain amount of space for each one and conditions befitting the dignity and needs of the human person, or nothing at all. That is why we have always had to close the door and turn men away, because we have never had space for all who would come.

But I have scheme for a sanctuary where every person and every class of people would be welcome – except for a single group of men; police officers in uniform – where people could come in or out at any time of day or night, to be warm, to rest, to eat, and to find human company. It could not be a residence with rooms and beds, because no one could bear the cost or survive the weight of regulations on such a basis. It would be more like a railroad station than a residence. In fact, a railroad station would be the most appropriate kind of building. People would walk in and out through revolving doors, without restriction. There would be broad, highbacked benches where men would sit and rest. If a man lay down to sleep between trains to nowhere, no one would disturb him, as long as there was room for others to sit. There would be a snack bar where a perpetual pot of soup or cereal would boil beside a perpetual urn of coffee and a perpetual loaf of bread. There would be washrooms and shower stalls, with slugs to open the doors, and slug-operated lockers where people could keep their belongings in safety.

It could be a large, unused church building (most churches are unused 99% of the time, but it would be too much to hope that a church that was used 1% of the time would open its doors to the destitute for the rest of the time.) In the basement kitchen there would be a perpetual casserole of baked macaroni beside a perpetual urn of coffee and a perpetual one-layer chocolate cake, or even bread and wine in the sanctuary.

An automobile showroom or any other large open building would also serve the purpose.

If a place can be found, I stand ready to do the job, but I could not support it alone, as I have houses of hospitality since 1958. It would need more substantial support from more substantial people. Probably, it would require a donation of the use of a suitable building. Other expenses might be met by a Sunday evening club that would meet at the same place to hear the most eloquent spokesmen of true revolution. That is my scheme on cold nights when men carry the banner on the streets. I am serious, and I would like you to keep your eyes open and let me know what you think.

[End of Karl Meyer's article.]

Dear Karl:

Please excuse me for answering your letter so late; everyone has been ill this winter with flu and I recently fell down, tearing the ligaments in one sholder, and was in misery for a week. But I have been thinking of you. Have you seen the **CW** anthology **A Penny A Copy**, which contains two of your best articles? I was reading over the one on the House of Hospitality last night and it seems to me the best piece of writing in the book. I was terribly impressed by it. I'd like to publish it again in the paper, but will hold it for some May Day edition perhaps.

You emphasize the idea of large-scale shelter, like that at Graymoor in Garrison, New York and the Municipal Lodging House in New York City. To make it human, young men would have to share with the others or take turns sharing the hospitality of the shelter. Maybe, for months at a time, draft themselves to do this, as the Little Sisters of Jesus did in Belgium and in Sao Paulo, Brazil, going to jail to be with the others for six months at a time.

During the depression (which you do not remember) the city did just the things you proposed, turning piers on the East River into day shelters or places with many little shops, where unemployed tailors' and shoemakers could repair clothes and shoes, where there was a reading room, game room, etc. And there were huge dormitories on the piers, with double-decker beds, all run by Holy Mother the City, and run very well. No churches opened their doors or turned their lower churches or auditoriums into shelters. At least, none that I know of. The late Father Dempsey ran a shelter in St. Louis for many years, and, as far as I know, it is still in existence.

Our own Municipal Lodging House has become much more human of late. Do you remember Gorki's **The Lower Depths**, and **Creatures Who Once Were Men**? They described places like the city lodging houses, where men were afraid to go because they were in danger of being robbed and beaten. But St. Vincent's hospital has sponsored a project there, supplying doctors and psychiatrists, and the Lodging House has given over a floor to the care of alcoholics. They are given a three-day treatment "to dry them out" and supply the vitamins and nourishment they need. From three to five days' complete bed rest does much for them. Camp LaGuardia is another first-rate city project in which men can stay in the country for a long period.

As to the shelters you propose, yes. in time of transition, in time of crisis. But hasn't the Church in the past, as well as the State, always done a great deal of this? I remember reading of how St. Ephraim came out of his monastery in the desert to feed the hungry during a famine. The monks raised enough wheat on the irrigated land to feed the hungry. And there were not enough poor to feast on their abundance, this beautiful tale continues.

Since the growth of the modern state, the welfare state, which numbers and cares for man from womb to tomb, the Church has done less and has been paid by the State for what she has done. I have quoted a number of times in the past that statement of St. Hilary, "The less you have of Caesar's the less you have to render to him." (I had thought I read it in one of the second nocturns of the old Breviary but have been unable to find it. If anyone can tell me the source of that quotation. I'd be grateful.) A bishop out west once said to me, "I do not believe in State ownership of the indigent."

But, and I cannot stress this enough, we must never forget our objective, which is to build that kind of society "where it is easier for people to be good." That is what Peter Maurin taught us. To follow the gospel teaching of the works of mercy. If your brother is hungry, feed him, shelter him. How can you show your love for God except by love for your brother? He who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, how can he love God, whom he has not seen?

This is a beginning. We are also trying to bring about that kind of society where such wholesale practice of the works of mercy is not needed. We want a society where men will have work as well as bread and can chose their vocations, where every child will have a chance to develop his talents and capacities. In Cuba I saw billboards saying, "Children are born to be happy."

We have to work on many fronts in our attempts to build here and now a decentralized society in which men will have a voice. There is much preparation necessary in the fields of education, unionism, cooperatives. We must keep in mind the fact that we are active pacifists and anarchists. Or peacemaker personalists. Or libertarians, pluralists, decentralists – whatever you want to call it. It certainly needs to be presented in many lights, this teaching of revolution, non-violent social change. We begin now within the shell of the old to rebuild society.

Students need to read and study the works of Gandhi, and can get a taste of his ideas by buying the War Resisters League 1969 Peace Calendar (available for \$1.75 from the W.R.L., 5 Beekman St., New York, N.Y. 10038). Which commemorates the hundredth year of Gandhi's birth, and read the quotations, the introduction, and the bibliography. They need to study Martin Luther King's writings, (I am now reading **Where Do We Go From Here?**) They need to keep in touch with the work or organizing in the union field, especially among agricultural workers, and to study farming communes as they are developing in Russia, China, Cuba, and even here in the United States, where the hippies have started farms, unfortunately with little theory of revolution. Peter Maurin used to quote Lenin as saying, "There can be no revolution without a theory of revolution." He said this in order to emphasize the need for study and discussion so that we would know where we were going. We need to make more of a heaven here – at least a few oases in these recurrent crises at present and a long range view of a new social order wherein justice dwelleth, which is neither capitalist nor communist nor

totalitarian in any way. How to accomplish this goal by non-violence and not by warfare?

It is good to read the life of Ho Chi Minh or Che Guevara and be warmed and inspired by their fierce dedication to the common good. But how much we need to study, how much we must learn to endure. We need to practice the same kind of dedication and self-sacrifice in our non-violent, revolution.

Love,

Dorothy