

Fall Appeal - October/November 1966

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, October-November 1966, 2.

Summary: She asks for help—"It is hard to be a beggar." Admires the voluntary poverty of St. Francis, Gandhi, and Peter Maurin. In contrast, the "destitute and dissolute" are often despised as "bums" in the city and we fail to see "the sacred element in every human being." (Simone Weil) (DDLW #844).

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Dear Beloved Ones,

Here it is October again and time to write our semiannual appeal to you our readers to help us keep going another few months. It is a beautiful day, the sun coming up right over the Williamsburg Bridge, the air clear, and here I am groaning within myself at having to ask for money. It is hard to be a beggar. Even St. Francis, the mendicant, whose feat comes at the beginning of this month, found it easier to help himself to his rich father's goods to restore His Church, but not by another building operation. He learned the hard way as we all do. He had to give back what he had taken, and when his first disciple came to him, he showed how he felt about money by making Bernard, his first follower, give away all he had before he let him join him in his new way of life, the life of poverty.

In the little foreword to the Mass of the feast of St. Francis, he is referred to as a serviceman, and he certainly took part in the inter-city wars of his day, and for a year was imprisoned in Perugia. "This affliction he suffered a whole year with great alacrity, and comforted his companions." He always loved to sing and give feasts and walk the streets of Assisi in his all night long revelry, but the Lord kept calling him till he gave away his fine clothes and his uniform too. He began his spiritual warfare with loathing and fear but overcame himself by kissing the leper, and it was that hard act which transfigured him and turned him to the works of mercy. He visited the hospitals and served the lepers and he finally, at twenty-five, separated himself from his father, he put on the dress of a poor shepherd and the multitudes followed him as they did a Gandhi in our own day. Both were poor, both were ascetics. Both loved peace and worked for it and faced, unarmed, the sultans and rulers of their day.

Thanks to Peter Maurin, French peasant and founder of the Catholic Worker movement in 1933, we too, working in houses of hospitality such as that at Chrystie Street, feel that we have been called to a life of voluntary poverty. We know that there can be a natural attraction to poverty and the irresponsibility which goes with it. Artists, writers, musicians and scientists have embraced poverty rather than the rewards of the world to follow their own vocation. But surely it is a strange vocation to love the destitute and dissolute, those men sleeping in doorways, foul with the filth of the gutter, dying of drunkenness and malnutrition and fever and cold. We have known many such deaths and have witnessed the depths of misery around us. Only last month a group of school children, in their early teens, poured kerosene on three such men, lying in doorways sleeping in the still warm nights, and set fire to them! This act of horror gives witness to the all too prevalent attitude to these men—"They are only bums" one child said, and the mother of another, "Someone ought to do something about these bums"—who are found in every corner of the city, in vacant buildings, in the shadow of warehouses in neighborhoods deserted at night.

Looking up something in a book of notes taken in 1952 I find these sentences from an article called "Beyond Personalism" by Simone Weil in **Cross Currents**, Spring '52 issue, "From earliest childhood to the grave there is something in the depths of every human heart, which in spite of all the experience of crimes that have been committed, endured, observed—invincibly expects people to do good and not evil. More than any other thing, this is the sacred element in every human being." This applies to these children, to these derelicts, and to us and to you, to rich and to poor. So we ask your help and your prayers.

Gratefully in Christ,

Dorothy Day