

Ammon Hennacy: ‘Non-Church’ Christian

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, February 1970, 2,8.

Summary: Recalls Ammon Hennacy’s life and contribution to the Catholic Worker Movement. Admires his courage, hard work, dedication, voluntary poverty, and constant struggle against war. Admits he was sometimes harsh and anticlerical but acknowledges “He was an inspiration and reproach.” –a unique kind of Christian. (DDLW #192).

One of the great things that Ammon did for the Catholic Worker back in the thirties (we began publishing in 1933) was to increase our ecumenical spirit. There was not much talk of ecumenism in those days in the Holy Roman Catholic Church. His association with us began in the city of Milwaukee where he was living at that time and where we had a house of hospitality. Communists, socialists, anarchists, and an assortment of unbelievers and Protestants, of who knew what denomination, used to come to our Friday night meetings. The discussions were lively. It was not long after the Spanish Civil War and some of our friends had served in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. The discussions were mostly on social questions. The group in New York and other centers where we had houses were going in strong for the liturgy then, and lauds and complines were recited in many of our houses. A cardinal once asked me some years later, “What do they think they are, that Catholic Worker crowd – a bunch of nuns and priests?” The separation between the clergy and the laity was pretty distinct. It was considered remarkable that we lay people were living what is called dedicated lives of voluntary poverty, working without salary and serving our brother Christ in the poor, “inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of my brothers, you have done it unto me.”

In New York there were complaints among the staff that they never knew whether I was quoting the Douay version of the scriptures, or the King James version. (Now there are a half dozen English translations.) When we started to publish Ammon Hennacy’s articles, “Life at Hard Labor” in *The Catholic Worker*, and he made slighting remarks about Holy Mother Church, there were adverse comments among the staff and also more severe criticism from some of our readers. It was in vain that we pointed him out as the most ascetic, the most hard-working, the most devoted to the poor and the oppressed of any we had met, and that his life and his articles put us on the spot. He was an inspiration and a reproach.

Before he came to New York to join us on the staff of the Catholic Worker, while he was still working at farm labor, he introduced us to the Molokans, the Doukhobors, the Hutterites, and many another sect which had come to this country to escape war and conscription in their own countries. When he came to live with us he began to attend the meetings of the War Resisters League, meetings at Community Church, at Methodist churches, and with

Jewish, Episcopalian, and other war resisters. He was interested, in fact, in all religious points of view if they resulted in a real effort to conform one's life to one's profession of faith. He still spoke contemptuously of Jesus-shouters and religious demagogues who blessed the state of war, and he stated unequivocally that he did not like St. Paul, and that St. Peter had betrayed Christ again when he said, "Servants, obey your masters." He didn't see the point of St. Paul sending Onesimus back to his master, in the hopes that the master would be converted so that there would be "neither slave nor free."

Obedience, of course, was a bad word. Authority was a bad word. In vain I pointed out to him that when the retired army major for whom he worked in Arizona told him to do a particular job, he did it, and he did it as he was told to. He admired the army officer because he knew farming. And he cooperated with Ammon in paying him by the day and thus evading the federal income tax which the tax man was trying to collect from Ammon.

I pointed out that he accepted the authority of those who were authorities, and knew what they were doing, and how to do it. He admired the courage of the major who subdued a bull which was wild with the pain of a snake bite, and had the courage to handle him with confidence and without fear. But he continued to balk, Ammon did, at the words authority and obedience.

On his coming to New York in the late forties, he attended a "retreat" at Maryfarm at Newburgh on the Hudson which Fr. Marion Casey of Minnesota gave. During the Mass each morning he knelt on the hard floor next to a Greenwich Villager by the name of Kenneth Little. He died some years ago and I always remember him with gratitude (not only for the gardening he did with us but for those retreat days with Ammon). Kenneth knelt next to him and kept pointing out to him the words in the Mass that had to do with peace.

"Mercifully give PEACE in our days. The PEACE of the Lord be always with you. Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, grant us PEACE. Lord Jesus Christ, who said to your apostles: PEACE I leave with you, my PEACE I give to you, be pleased to grant to your Church PEACE and unity according to your will."

Poor Kenneth, he did so want to assure Ammon that the Church, indeed, did desire peace, but I am afraid that neither Ammon nor I could forget how the scrap iron and metal was heaped in the church yards during the Second World War and blessed by the priests, and war stamps sold to the children, and bombers named after the Blessed Mother, and so on. It was still all too much like rival armies in Mexico carrying banners with representations of the Blessed Virgin of different localities to bless their wars.

Ammon knew much labor history but very little about Church history. He could get no encouragement from the fact that in ages past there had been far greater scandals of wealth and warfare than even today. Or, were there? One priest said, of Ammon's anticlericalism, that, perhaps, he saw the sins of the Church as a human institution far more clearly than we did. Another priest said of Ammon that he had received so great a light during that first jail sentence of his in Atlanta Penitentiary, that it had blinded him. He had read through the Bible nine times and all but memorized the Sermon on the Mount. When he came out he had become a Bible Christian, not in the sense of a sect, but of one who accepted the WORD. He read the Tolstoi who wrote *Anna Karenina*, and his faith deepened. In that great

novel Levin struggled and fought for a faith. He went through such agony that he was on the verge of suicide (like the Maritains before their conversion) because he felt he could not believe as his wife Kitty and as the serfs around him did. There is a triumphant note of joy in the end of Levin's struggle which warms the heart. It was not the bitter, later Tolstoi, who derided religion in the novel *Resurrection*, who could not separate the wheat from the chaff.

For a time Ammon was a Catholic. It was before the *aggiornamento*, and though he had been christened a Baptist, a valid baptism, he was conditionally baptized again by Fr. Marion Casey in Minnesota. His instruction had been slight in spite of retreats and conferences which we were in the habit of having at the Newburgh farm. He assented to what he agreed with, had no mind for philosophy or theology, and he no longer read the Scriptures. "I read them nine times in jail," he said on a number of occasions. And once, flippantly, "If I had only a telephone book I would have read that nine times." Just as he said later on, "If Dorothy had been a Methodist, I would have become a Methodist." These were wounding words. I could never understand them.

He was with us – how many years? Long enough to make an impression on that great pagan city of New York.

He had already, while living on the outskirts of Phoenix, Arizona, made an impression on that city with his picketing, as well as on the few local Communists who lived there. I taunted him. "You'll not make the impression on New York that you did in Phoenix. Those Republicans like to show how liberal they are in having a pet anarchist confronting them on their streets every Sunday and legal holiday."

But he did make an impression, and when I traveled on my own pilgrimage around the country I met hundreds (of course, there were thousands), who had encountered him when they, themselves, had visited New York.

Which brings me again to Ammon's life of hard work and voluntary poverty. In those two aspects he outshone everyone. There were a few hall bedrooms in the old Chrystie Street house and Ammon had one of them most of the time, though he never hesitated to give up the room to guests. That was one of the reasons he had it, because he could be trusted to relinquish it immediately. He claimed nothing as his own, nothing but the clothes on his back, and when he gave up his bed, he slept on the floor in the big living room where we had our meetings. He slept side by side with all the Bowery men whom Roger O'Neill brought in on cold winter nights.

He went to Mass early every morning and kept a list of all who had asked his prayers in the front of his missal which he read over after Communion. After Mass he went to the post office for mail, opened it, entered any donations in a big cash book, answered every note or letter in a short and almost illegible script, sent out papers, and by noon was ready to take his stand on the streets to sell the *CW*. He had a regular route. I cannot remember without consulting old papers exactly how it went, but this will give an idea of it. Mondays, Wall Street; Tuesdays, Lexington Avenue and 43rd Street; Wednesdays, Fordham University gates; Thursdays, New York University, and so on.

Evenings it was the same: Cooper Union on the nights they had lectures, the New School, and any radical meetings which were taking place around the city. He was there rain or snow,

with anyone who would accompany him, selling the paper. Often conversations would last into the night at some coffee shop. He sold the papers and so always had a pocket-full of pennies or silver to buy extra food or an occasional book, to feed others, or go to some movie with social significance. He used to say that Wall Street clientele gave pennies, and charitable ladies in the shopping centers gave dimes and quarters.

Peter Maurin quoted Cardinal Newman: “If you wish to reach the man in the street, go to the man in the street.” The War Resisters have a motto, “Wars will cease when men refuse to fight.” Ammon went directly to people and persevered in friendship with them though he soon realized that they were not going to go very far in building up a new society. In spite of his critical attitude he had a great warmth and loved to be with people and made them feel his closeness to them. I would not say he ever despaired or felt hopeless. He could not have gone on if he did. Part of his love for people came from his great inner loneliness – there were so few to work for the nonviolent revolution, so few ready to sacrifice all for it.

Of course, Ammon was a romantic Irishman, basically, and never lost that sense of drama, that love of life, tragic though its outcome so often was. He literally would have liked to give his life for the obliteration of wars and all injustice from the face of the earth. He would have welcomed being shot as Joe Hill was, that labor martyr after whom he named his House of Hospitality in Salt Lake City. But Ammon’s death was a triumph just the same. His first heart attack came to him on the picket line on his way to the Federal Court building in Salt Lake City. He died suddenly a week later, when his friends thought he was on the way to recovery.

He died in protesting the execution of two of the least of God’s children who had been justly sentenced, as the Mormons thought (believing as they did in the shedding of blood to atone for the shedding of blood).

I have said that Ammon was a romantic and once he said to me, “I do not remember the time that I was not in love with some woman.” Believing as I do that being “in love” is a reflection of the love God has for each and every one of us, I am glad that this kind of love illumined the last seven years of Ammon’s life.

Ammon had long ceased attending Mass, though on his travels, as his wife states, he went to Mass with her and even received Communion. But, “in peace was his bitterness most bitter.” He rejected the “institutional church,” even while he received the Sacrament. The monks at the Holy Trinity monastery with whom he was friends never questioned him, nor would I. Who can understand another, who can read another’s heart?

I do not think that Ammon expected to die, since all felt he was on the way to recovery, so there was no question of his preparing for death in the way of confession or asking for the last rites, or the sacrament of the sick, as this sacrament is now called. In fact, I am not sure if Ammon knew what the sacraments were, or what they were all about, that they were channels of grace. If they had been explained I am sure he would have considered that grace had already been poured out upon him abundantly in the sufferings he had endured in jail. God’s ways are not our ways.

One of Ammon’s favorite quotations from Scripture was, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.” And he used it in relation to judges who sat as Judge Julius Hoffman has

been sitting all these long months in the Chicago 7 trial.

But I must admit that Ammon was a great one to judge when it came to priests and bishops, and his words were coarse on many an occasion, so that it was hurtful to me to hear him, loving the Church as I do. But there's that love-hate business in all of us, and Ammon wanted so much to see priests and bishops and popes stand out strong and courageous against the sin and the horrors and the cruelty of the powers of this world. But we cannot judge him, knowing so well his own strong and courageous will to fight the corruption of the world around him.

This article was reprinted in *The Catholic Worker* of January 1978 with the following as an introduction.

(Ammon Hennacy was one of the most disciplined individuals ever to come to the Worker. A tireless propagandist, and ardent peace worker, Ammon inspired the Worker in those years to a new level of public witness. Between his street speaking, picketing, his fasts and frequent jailings, he somehow found himself able to respond to any request, including one time, that of a woman who called to find a babysitter for her child while she ran errands. Ammon called himself a Christian Anarchist. An anarchist by his definition, is "someone who doesn't need a cop to tell him what to do." For many years he was an associate editor of "The Catholic Worker." When he grew tired of the city, he moved out west to Salt Lake City, where he died eight years ago this month. Dorothy wrote this article at that time, for the February 1970 issue and she decided that we ought to reprint it this month in Ammon's memory. Eds. note.)