

On Pilgrimage - Pilgrimage to Mexico Part II

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Summary: On a sleepless stormy night, she shares her worry over their coming eviction from Christie Street. Tells the story of Lawrence Blum whom she visited in Mexico, how he found his vocation on a pilgrimage in Mexico, and his work as an example of a family man living a life of sanctity in the world. Keywords: Church (DDLW #735).

It is the last day of February, and it is wild and stormy here at Peter Maurin Farm where I am going to stay for the next month, during Beth Roger's southern trip. All last night the wind howled around the house and whipped the branches of the cherry tree outside my window, which only a few days ago had seemed about to bud forth. The rain drove right in from the ocean and the air was sea washed and should be, one would think, conducive to sleeping. But—no, I could not sleep, contemplating the changes ahead, our imminent removal from Chrystie Street, and where would we go, and what neighborhood was not due to be demolished! We have here no continuing city, I thought restlessly, and began to wonder if Ed Mitchell's proposal of a barge, or house boat would be practical. Or it could be a Liberty Ship, and we could go out to sea when the city fathers got irked with us for our indiscriminating charity and what seemed like a public parade of poverty, destitution, unemployment, when indeed they were doing what they could with relief, and unemployment insurance, and municipal lodging houses and free hospital care, not to speak of the hospitality of the jails on Riker's Island, Hart's Island, Hampton Farms, the Tombs, Youth Houses, hospitals for teen-age addicts on North Brothers' Island, etc., etc. What were our problems compared to theirs?

There are sixty of us at Chrystie street, with an overflow of eight sleeping on the library floor, and more overflow guests going to lodging houses on the Bowery at the cost of sixty-five cents a night per bed. The Peter Maurin Farm is limited to a certain number. I have signed and sealed before a notary public, an affidavit that we would house no more than this certain number. There is not money enough to build, and making plans, hiring architects, getting building permits, certificates of occupancy— all this would take much time. Besides we are not in favor of forcibly moving populations.

Besides there is the breadline. Where will they go? For years, since 1936, to be exact, these men have been coming to us, old and crippled, young and disordered

in mind and body. "Behold, oh God, our Protector, and look upon the face of Thy Christ!" We know that the Lord has no need of our goods, but still He has commanded us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the harborless. Individually one can do this quietly, unobtrusively, letting not the right hand know what the left hand is doing. But when there is a group of us getting out **The Catholic Worker**, and when because of what we have written people come to us for aid we cannot turn them away. When we quote our Lord's words, "All ye are brothers," they believe we believe it.. .

By now it was after twelve and the room was cold and the windows rattling in the wind. There was only one thing to do to stop these thoughts, I got up and put on sweater and scarf and propping myself up in bed began to read what was at hand, Kenedy's new missal with its beautiful new translation of the prayers. I had gone through the Mass for the next day, and turned to the February volume of the Butler's lives of the saints (also Kenedy), and was immediately charmed into a new perspective. "My ways are not your ways, nor are your thoughts my thoughts," the Lord says. (I quote always from memory so please excuse the inaccuracies.)

On February 27 in the lives of the saints there seemed to be an abundance of hermits: Thalaleus who lived in a penitential cage and wept continuously, round about the year 450; St. Baldmerus, a more attractive figure, also a hermit whose one message to the world was, "always give thanks to God." The wild birds used to come and eat from his hands, and he told them too, "Take your refreshment and always bless the Lord of Heaven"; St. Alnoth, another hermit, around 700, began as a poor cowherd, and ended his days as a recluse in the deep woods; Blessed Augustus, born in 1856, of a farmer, one of nine children, was martyred in China after fearful torments; St. Gabriel, 1862, son of a wealthy man, one of thirteen children, began life as a pleasure loving youth, fond of literature and the theater, and ended it in a monastery at the age of 24, walking "the little way" in this time when gigantic discoveries were being made. I went on reading about the martyrs who died in the great plague of Alexandria "always famous for its riots and tumults," "so uncontrolled that it was safer to go from one extremity of the known world to the other than from one street of Alexandria to the next."

"How like our New York," I thought, and before I could start a new train of worry about the delinquent neighborhood children— children of working mothers in the neighborhood (they had tried to start a fire under our back porch and had robbed our priest here of seven packages of cigarets) my eye was caught by the news that those early Christians of Alexandria had also fled persecution by putting out to sea in a ship! And then there were Sts. Romanus and Lupicinus, the former beginning as a hermit, but soon joined, as hermits are, by others. First by his brother Lupicinus, then by his sister, so that monasteries and convents grew up in the forests of the Jura mountains between France and Switzerland. I had read about these mountains before in **The Path To Rome**, of Hilaire Belloc (a wonderful book to read on a pilgrimage) and also in the memoirs of Kropotkin who had learned his anarchism from the watchmakers, villagers of

the Jura mountains. The Little Flower's father also learned watchmaking there. They led a very simple life, these monks of 470 A.D., but the account tells us that after imitating the fathers of the desert, they had been enriched by many gifts and changed their diet, which was only bread made of barley and bran and pulse dressed often without salt or oil and began to bring to table, wheaten bread, fish and other food. But Lupicinus was the most austere of them all. He slept in an old tree trunk and ate only dry bread moistened in cold water.

Well, enough of this introduction! Dwight MacDonald in his article about **The Catholic Worker** movement says that it takes us a thousand words to get warmed up to our story, and if it is true, there is also method in our madness. I wanted to remind our readers of our coming eviction in July (the actual document says in thirty days) since Bob Steed in his beautiful editorial last month mentioned it so tranquilly. Perhaps our readers could help us find a new place, perhaps they will worry with us. And I wanted too, to indicate that the tradition of pilgrimage, penance, hermitting, martyrdom, still goes on in Mother Church, that it is part and parcel of her way of life, worldly prelates to the contrary. I received last month not only abusive letters about the church in Mexico, the churchmen and people alike, the latter being accused of worshiping idols and full of superstitious and pagan practices and the former of course of wealth and idleness, but also at meetings there were vigorous attacks. People do not want to know or believe that today, as in every age of the church there is corruption and renewal, greed for money and power, but also utter love and selflessness. This corruption must put on incorruption. The Church is always dying and yet always living. "As dying yet behold we live," St. Paul puts it.

Lawrence Blum

When I told the story of Lawrence Blum and his pilgrimage to Mexico, the attitude of some was indulgent or scornful. "It took him a long time to adapt himself to society," one woman remarked scornfully. But the point of the matter is that he didn't, he never will. Perhaps she was being "mystical" and meant that by marrying and bringing forth children he was lowering his standards and is less holy than as a hermit or pilgrim. (To be holy is to be a whole man.) But one of the many points of my story is that his example could be followed—he is a great layman—his marriage is a sacrament, not a concession, and reading as we do from day to day the stories of the saints, there is great need to be showing always how the ordinary man, the family man and woman, are living lives of sanctity, sometimes heroic sanctity in the world today.

We first met Lawrence perhaps fifteen years ago or maybe more, and he had just come from a seminary where he had been studying for the missionary work. They felt that he did not have a vocation, so he had left and had earned his living as a migrant worker, travelling around the country, west coast and east. He landed at **The Catholic Worker** and spent some little time with us, making a retreat with us too at Oakmount, the scene of the famous Lacouture-Hugo-Farina

retreats. He learned to drive the station wagon in helping us, he did not drive another car until recently—and then he went back to Kentucky which was his home, and decided to build a hermitage on the side of a little hill in Marian county, which is a predominantly Catholic settlement. He wanted to build a shrine on the top of the hill.

He came down from his hermitage to do odd jobs and so earn a simple living, but if a person does not have any wants, he does not have to work very hard to satisfy them. He could give a good deal of his time to those around him who were in need.

Pretty soon, as is usual, others came to join him, a Negro, a college graduate, a Mexican ex-seminarian, etc. I do not know how many there were, but I do know that when they decided to make a pilgrimage to Mexico City to visit the shrine of our Lady of Guadalupe, four of them set out. They hitchhiked to the border and when they had crossed over they decided that they had been too comfortable so far, and gave away all they had so that they could proceed, completely penniless, to Mexico City.

“Hospitality was perfect,” Larry told me. “Wherever we went, when we said we were pilgrims, they gave us food. We had sleeping bags with us and slept by the roadside. Only once were we met with discourtesy. A bartender, who perhaps had been treated the same way in the States, threw a penny at us. It was a pleasant and beautiful trip to the capital and when we got there, we went at once to Tepeyac, to visit the shrine.”

Tepeyac is the little hill on which Juan Diego first met the Blessed Virgin. The busses or street cars marked Villa all go to the shrine, but they walked. It is the custom too to proceed on one's knees from a certain plaza, or from the entrance of the great plaza in front of the basilica. I asked Larry if they had done this and he was evasive in his replies, so I think they did it, one or all of them. We had seen these kneeling figures, sometimes supported on either side by friends, sometimes in anguish, sometimes in profound peace and calm, making this long last lap of the way on their knees. Americans witnessing it were horrified but impressed, inclined to take the Blanchard view that this was exhibitionism or masochism, but nevertheless, uneasily wondering whether or not here was a resolving of this agony of guilt under which we all suffer these days, as Koestler wrote.

The pilgrims spent days before the shrine, and slept against the sacred walls of the basilica, begging their food from the spare living of the families who set up their little stoves and spread out their housekeeping around them. (If we are evicted in July, perhaps that is what we will have to do,— set up our housekeeping in the public park across the street, with a statue of St. Joseph our own particular patron in our midst!)

What a scandal such young men are, what fools for Christ, taking the beans and tortillas of these poverty stricken Indians! It was not for long. Around the basilica there have been in these last years free of persecution many convents

of nuns who devote themselves to teaching the children and with one of these convents the young men found work. They accepted nothing but meals, since they had sleeping bags and continued to sleep out of doors, and for a while they worked and studied the language. The Mother Superior gave them a list of five hundred words, telling them when they learned those, they would be able to get around.

Call them wandering monks, perhaps they were, but the young men still had not found out what was their vocation, so when they heard of the pilgrimage to Our Lady of St. John of the Lake twenty one days' journey on foot, by mule track through the mountains, they decided to join the eighty or so pilgrims that were going there. They began their journey on January 9th and by the close of the next day, Lawrence had found his vocation, which was marriage to a young woman from Michoacan. She was a catechist and her father was a skilled spinner from a village which was made up of spinners. Other villages had weavers. Due to the little compensation for their work, it was hard for the villagers to make a living from their craft. Blankets and jackets were bought for little and then sold for a great deal in the Mexico City shops and stores in the United States.

Lawrence who had never been able to learn a language in the seminary, learned Spanish in twenty one days. He was married not long after and spent some time in Mexico, working for a firm as a plumber's helper and then going to the States to introduce his bride to Mary Widman and her companions who worked at the Martin de Porres Center in Chicago, and to his friends in Kentucky. (The Martin de Porres center is also closing due to a free way and will have to find other quarters.) She was lonely and unhappy until her father came from Mexico dressed in his serape and big white hat and white trousers which is the Mexican garb familiar to us. Maria's first child, Maria Guadalupe, was born in the States. They returned and Lawrence worked again in Mexico city, earning so little that his way of life was not much different from the Mexicans around him. He rented a large lot, built adobe houses which accommodated his mother and father-in-law, and several of the men that worked with him. There is a wall around the patio, Moorish style, and you ring a bell at the gate, which is often opened by Lupe, or Jose, the second child. Now that some years have passed, Lawrence is in plumbing work for himself, and has eighteen helpers, and he shares with them on an equal basis, living as they do. He drove me around in a Chevrolet truck with broken springs in which he carries his tools and equipment. He has to do the buying of materials and getting commissions, and he always has enough work to do to keep all of them busy.

(Of the other young men of the pilgrimage one has become a Dominican priest, another is working with the Little Sisters of the Poor in Kentucky and the other near Boston is also engaged in some work of the apostolate.)

One afternoon Lawrence took me to see a friend of his, Fr. Theodosio Martinez who had started a little seminary and a new order of priests to go out to the home missions. Their buildings are set in the midst of a regular shack town, in a very poor part of Mexico city, and the church is an adobe structure with a tin

roof, and the seminary is bare and poorly furnished, the dormitories crowded with the eighty students they take care of, all of whom are very poor too. There are fifty boys in the novitiate, and eight priests ordained. The work was begun in the midst of the depression, in the midst of persecution, in 1938. Fr. Martinez himself was a refugee from Chiapas, going first to Guatemala and then returning to start this new work.

He told us some interesting stories about the Indians in the state of Chiapas where there are twelve tribes of Indians who have reverted almost to savagery. Every year a tribe would choose a president or chief and six councilmen and always he rejects the office, which carries with it no salary, and forthwith is put in jail. The term of office is for two or three years and although the position carries with it responsibility and honor, and a special costume and a staff, it is always rejected. The president elect stays in jail until he consents to serve and when he finally does, to test his sincerity he is strung up on a cross for a time, in the presence of his villagers. There has been no priest in this one area for a hundred years, though the church built 400 years ago still stands and the people flock there each Sunday. Fr. Martinez has a permanent priest there now, a native of the state and he is accepted but not obeyed (true of many other places in more civilized areas.) Once when the priest reproved an Indian for drinking in church, the latter said, "Shut up, or I will kill with chile," an expression referring back to a time a hundred years ago when a priest was asphyxiated in the church with burning chile.

We went through the seminary and it is hard to describe the grim austerity due to poverty of this school.

Another friend I visited was Donald Demarest, author of **Fabulous Ancestor**, **The Dark Virgin** and other books, who was working on a Mexican magazine, and living in Coyoacan with his wife and six or seven children. I cannot keep the number straight, when I visit so many families. Did I mention in the last issue that the Demarests also had a Christ room in their house, to take in those who are in need.

A good deal more could be written about the fifteen stops I made on my return through the States, but we will continue that in the next issue.