

Charles O'Rourke - The Death of a Beloved Apostle

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Summary: An obituary for a gentle Catholic Worker—Charles O'Rourke. She notes his persistent work habits, generosity, attentiveness to all, non-partisan demeanor, and praises him as a gentleman. (DDLW #613).

This last week Charles O'Rourke died and was buried. He had been in and out of the hospital several times recently and was resting at Mott street before going on a breathing spell to Maryfarm. Tom Sullivan also had been ill, and in the hospital for a week, and the two of them set out together last Thursday to catch the Hudson River Day Line to Newburgh. We had a gala breakfast, what with two members of the staff invalids, and Jack English shopped for English muffins and frozen strawberries (much to Charles' amusement) while I poached some eggs and poured out the coffee. Of course there were no strawberries, but the English muffins were fancy enough. In our newly donated station wagon we drove the invalids to the boat. It was a grey day, rather heavy and warm, but the river is always beautiful. Agnes Bird was meeting them at the boat.

They had a good day, I learned afterward, and Charles visited around the farm and went to bed at ten-thirty. He and Tom were sharing Peter Maurin's room. Charles woke up at three with another heart attack and after a struggle for an hour to breathe, he died. Fr. Faley was with him when he died and had just heard his confession. Tom was telephoning the doctor at the moment.

Charles' family, his nephews and nieces took over then, the body was brought to Arlington, New Jersey, where many of his relatives lived, and he was buried from St. Stephen's Church. The Mass was sung by Fr. Boyton, S.J., his boyhood friend. We went to the cemetery with him and saw him laid to rest in his father's plot.

As one grows older, one wants to hear the details of the last days of old friends. I put a death notice in the **Herald Tribune** and the **Times**, and when I was telephoning it, saying how Charles had devoted the last 15 years of his life to the poor, and that though he was a lover of all beauty, he chose to spend his last years in ugly slums, the girl who took the message exclaimed, "you sound as though you loved him," and I could tell her that indeed we all loved him dearly.

In the notices I listed him as circulation manager of **The Catholic Worker**. I was trying to speak in terms that people would understand. Peter Maurin's indoctrination has affected more people in more ways than they realize so that those who come to give themselves to the **Catholic Worker** try to ask nothing for themselves. Beginning with doing without a salary they do without a title also. He "just came in" some 16 years ago, and began giving up his spare time when we began our work on Fifteenth street. He came in to help.

He took such dry-as-dust jobs as taking care of the changes of address, cancellations, new subscriptions, stencils, carding of contributions, and so on. He worked faithfully, putting in long working days at this desperately dull work. Then when he had caught up on all the loose ends, he'd go back to his own work as construction engineer for a time and we'd hear from him from Ohio, or further west. It was usually just a quiet note and a large contribution from his salary. Just as we began to get swamped again, he'd arrive on the scene and take up the work. He never had his name listed on the mast head, he never put himself forward in any way. He just gave what he had to give, and that was hard service, and delicate companionship and consideration to those who needed it around the office.

He loved poetry and opera and people and walking trips. He had been all over the world, and there was no place you could mention but that Charlie had been there. Only last week when we returned from our pilgrimage to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church on 115th street, and were boasting of our exploit of walking the entire distance from Canal street and then waiting from 1:30 to 4 a.m. for Mass, fasting, Charles mentioned that he had made pilgrimages to every church in New York except one or two recent ones. He had been in Europe, he had been in Asia.

He used to show up at odd times, too, when there was some crisis, and we needed extra help desperately. During the seamen's strike in 1936-7 he served every day, helping the coffee line there, in the headquarters we set up on the west side, serving cheese and peanut butter sandwiches and keeping the coffee on the stove from eight a.m. till midnight. One Saturday afternoon when Charles and I were listening to the Valkyrie and one of the strikers kept pushing the radio dial to the bop music of the day, Charlie invited me to the opera so we could hear Flagstad without interruptions for the news or bop. From then on we took in an opera every winter, standing on the main floor since even then he could not take the stairs on account of his heart. He was a bit younger than Peter, but no one could ever tell his age; he never seemed more than a hefty fifty. Some said he had the glamor [sic] of a Ronald Coleman and one of my Spanish relatives who came around called him the Colonial.

He was always immaculately dressed and even these last years when he stayed at Mott street most of the time he never indicated he minded the absence of bath or hot water, but tubbed as the rest of us did in the sink, and continued to look immaculate.

We used to tease him in the early days of the work, saying he was probably a government agent spying around for traitors. Our pacifism and anarchism made us persecution-conscious. “You always show up to help at the crucial moment,” we told him, but since all times seem to have been crucial times with the **Catholic Worker**, that didn’t mean much. After all there was always a war going on. We were opposing class war, race war, the Ethiopian war, the Spanish war, the Chinese-Japanese war, the World War, and now, as he lay ill, the Korean war. Charlie never called himself a pacifist or an anarchist. “One of these days they’ll round us all up and put us in a concentration camp,” I used to tell Charlie, “and if they ask you to finally commit yourself, to take your stand, you’ll say, ‘I just dropped in to help—some seventeen years ago.’”

When we made a duplicate mailing list and decided to hide it, we gave it to Charlie to leave it with his family in Jersey and it’s tucked away there now somewhere, rather out of date, I’m afraid.

There was something godlike about Charlie, this large interest he showed in everyone, this genial charity. He was kindly and friendly to all, pacifist and militarist and to those who “just went,” drafted in the forces. He was never one to be dogmatic, to press his point on others. He was silent, gentle, and one would be tempted to call him a rather amused spectator of the goings on of the **Catholic Worker**, if he had not worked so hard at the mailing list, to whom after all, our pacifist literature was going out.

There was many a young fellow he befriended around the place and kept in touch with for years after they left the Worker. I am thinking of one in particular, a turbulent lad who had hitch-hiked all over the country and was in a rather beaten state. He came to us from the south, travelling in box cars, and Charlie read his poetry, encouraged him to write, was a sympathetic friend when he fell in love. I can remember going with Charles and Paul (my daughter was along, too) on a hot summer night to sit on the steps of St. Vincent’s hospital while we waited for Paul’s first child to be born. Charlie and Paul sat there and smoked, and every now and then one or the other would go across the street to a candy store to telephone for news. I can remember Tamar hopping around impatient for her walk. She was a child herself then. When Charlie died he had a letter from Paul in his pocket.

Much as Charlie loved people and was torn by that love to partisan positions on occasion, he never let his feelings interfere with the work he did for the movement. People came and went. There were occasional explosions over ideas and positions and personalities, and people left in a huff (always to make up afterward) but Charlie, though he took sides where his affections lay, kept on working, grimly at times. Thank God there were no tempests going on these last years, and that he left the place in a generally peaceful state.

I don’t think any of us underestimates the work that Charles O’Rourke did with us all these years. But he, himself, kept his good humor about it, and his fine perspective. We had been reading **The Gallery** that last week of his life and

commenting on the General in the censorship division. “The whole war rested on the shoulders of that general in the censor’s office,” someone said. “Like the **Catholic Worker** revolves around the stencils,” Charlie added, picking up a pile of defective stencils to replace.

He was in harness yet and he was not relinquishing the work because of age or illness.

He took no dogmatic stands, but he loved the **Catholic Worker** and he loved us as we did him and we are proud to have had such a gentleman associated the last seventeen years of his life with us. As far as we are concerned he has not really left us. For him, “life is changed, not taken away.” He has just gone on another journey.