

On Pilgrimage - February 1965

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Summary: Travels to North Carolina and Georgia to speak and visit friends. Recapitulates basic Catholic Worker ideas in a question and answer format. Comments on the government's war on poverty, Communism in Cuba, the role of the Church in society, Vatican II, and the gap between haves and havenots. Keywords: war, voluntary poverty, work (DDLW #822).

When I left New York on February first, it was snowing and not so cold. It had been ten below zero the day before. Stanley Vishnewski from Tivoli was going to meet me at the station to bring me some things I had forgotten, but his train was an hour late, so I missed him. Clare Bee, Ed Forand and Waiter Kerell saw me off. My sister had provided me with sandwiches, so I had supper on the train and my fare and berth was paid for by one of our readers, Ditte Shafer, of Tryon, North Carolina, so I travelled in great comfort.

When I woke up I was in North Carolina, with its yellow and red earth and green cover crop on the fields and brilliantly green pine trees (all the other trees were bare). I read the psalms for matins and lauds in Father Frey's little book, Confraternity edition (5300 Ft. Hamilton Parkway, Brooklyn 15, N.Y.). I include the address so that our readers can get them and be comforted as I was, sorry as I was to leave home and family on another trip. I needed the strength and courage that the psalms always give.

As I write I am passing row upon row of Negro shacks like corncribs, and then there are fields of junked cars, and the earth over and over is wounded with erosion. All these things hurt. Of course I am surrounded by squalor on the Bowery, and moral squalor too, but here people are closer to the earth, and so much alone with their poverty and pain.

In Tryon, I visited Ditte for two days, spoke at the beautiful little church there and met Father Kerin, who is principal of the Catholic high school in Atlanta and drives down once a week to offer Mass. It was cold that night, around the zero mark, and Father Kerin had made the extra trip for the meeting, a long drive. The next day there was a morning meeting, after Mass at Brevard, and the mothers of the parish came. Early Thursday morning Father Charles Mulholland, an old friend, came far out of his way from Brevard to Tryon to pick me up, and we drove first to Highland, over the steepest mountain roads,

which were icy at every turn – roads that climbed thousands of feet and wound down around the mountains into Alabama. At one point we were four thousand feet up and stopped at a little church at Highland, where three of us assisted at Mass in the warm living room in back of the church. Water had frozen in the pipes, but one of the parishioners had prepared a good breakfast after Mass, all complete with homemade coffee cake, which warmed us for our trip. Then we set forth to drive to the Trappist Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit, at Conyers, Georgia, east of Atlanta. We got there at three p.m. and Father Mulholland had to start back to Brevard after a brief rest for coffee.

It is strange to write of good conversations at a Trappist monastery, but the season is still the joyful one of Epiphany and I was permitted to speak to Father Charles and Father Peter, both of them long associated with the Catholic Worker. Father Charles was formerly Jack English and Father Peter was Victor Assid. Part of the new look is that from now on Trappists, the new ones at any rate, are going to keep their own names, and the lay brothers now dress the same as choir monks.

The next night I spoke to the community in the crypt and I was happy to speak, begging the prayers of this powerhouse for those in Alabama and Mississippi that I am going to visit, as well as for myself. I spoke and answered questions for an hour and a half, and before I went to sleep in the little guest house on the lake near the entrance to the monastery, we enjoyed visiting with the Sherrys; Gerald and Evelyn, who had come out from Atlanta, and getting first impressions of the work of the Council, which Mr. Sherry had attended for some weeks.

Mr. Sherry is editor of the diocesan paper, and before he and his wife left he gave me a list of questions that he begged me to answer and mail back to him as I proceeded on my way. So now that I am settled before a typewriter at the Holy Name of Jesus Hospital (integrated) in Gadsden, Ala., I can add these pages to what I have written for him and send them on to Martin Corbin to include in my February **On Pilgrimage** column. There is always the need for recapitulation.

INTERVIEW

Q: Can you explain briefly the aims and purposes of the Catholic Workers movement?

A. The aim of The Catholic Worker movement is really to further what Peter Maurin (the founder and leader of the movement in 1933) called the Green Revolution. He wanted to make the kind of society “where it would be easier for men to be good,” he said. That involved us of course in a program of action, which began with 1) clarification of thought through discussions, courses, retreats, work camps, which go on at our Catholic Worker farm at Tivoli, New York throughout the year, and 2) the running of houses of hospitality where there can be the direct action of the works of mercy, running a breadline, clothesroom, hospice where immediate needs can be taken care of those who come to us. That

has meant the building up of a family around the country of people from all walks of life, of different backgrounds, people of every race, color and creed. The leaders of the work are Catholic. There are probably about ten or twelve houses and farms around the country, each autonomous. But the readers themselves throughout the country try to carry on what Ammon Hennacy calls a one-man revolution.

Q: Is there such a thing as Christian Communism?

A: Peter Maurin wrote an essay, to the effect that there was a Christian communism and a Christian capitalism, in which he made his point very clear. The quotation "Property, the more common it becomes, the more holy it becomes," is from the writings of St. Gertrude. It was Eric Gill who said, "Property is proper to man." And St. Thomas said that a certain amount of property is necessary to lead a good life. It would take a book to answer such a question.

Q: How do you think the Church can best assist the War on Poverty?

A: By teaching Holy Poverty – a philosophy of poverty and a philosophy of work. If children took the lives of the saints seriously, they would realize their capacity for spiritual and material action and the importance of their contribution to the Green Revolution. The plight of the migrant and agricultural worker would be alleviated by farming communes such as the kibbutzim of Israel or the collectives and communes of China and Russia and Cuba. Joan Robinson, British economist teaching at Cambridge, has written favorably about Cuban and Chinese communes. In his book *Paths in Utopia*, Martin Buber says that only a community of communities deserves the name of commonwealth. A great deal of study of cooperatives and small-scale enterprises, as well as a sense of personal responsibility, is necessary in this war on poverty. You find the workers in the interracial movement in the South, determined to begin a war on poverty right where they are, through mutual aid, the use of talents and physical resources, study groups, adult education and so on, before they call in the government for aid. They are starting from the bottom up.

Q: What do you think is wrong with the present approach in this regard?

A: Everyone is saying the problem is too vast for any but public agencies and large-scale government help. People are waiting for Church or Government, or in general for George to do it. We begin with ourselves and give what we have, and the movement spreads. This is the dynamic, organic approach.

Q: What do you think is the minimum that Catholics can do in view of the needs of the times?

A: We should not think in terms of minimum. Aim at perfection. Aim high, and we will get somewhere. God can take the loaves and fishes, if that is all we have, and multiply it. But the thing is to want to give all. A new commandment Jesus gave us, to lay down our lives for our brothers. If we are ready and willing, God can show us what we can do. We are living in a time of crisis. In war the

State asks men for everything, to lay down their lives, to endure hardship, loss of family, “blood, sweat and tears.”

Q: People have accused you of supporting the Communist takeover in Cuba; would you clarify your views on this?

A: With John XXIII, our beloved late Holy Father, I think that where the social aims of Communists are Christian aims they should be supported. Our own bishops have also said this in one of their annual messages. Interracial justice, education for all, medical care, housing for the poor, twelve months’ work a year instead of four months – these are good aims. And I can only report what I saw in Cuba, the churches open, retreats and days of recollection being given, catechisms printed, instruction going on. The Catholic schools have been confiscated, yes, but if we listen to our Lord, Who said, “If they take your coat, give them your cloak too,” we could meet such things with holy indifference. These things have happened many times before. All the land taken from the papacy has meant no diminution of her influence in the world. At no time in history have people listened so warmly to the Popes in their encyclicals.

Q: Do you think that the work of the Vatican Council has in any way justified your pioneer work in the dialogue with the community?

A: We are tremendously interested and encouraged by the work of Vatican Council II and are looking forward to the work of the last session, hoping that Article 25 in Schema XIII will be made even stronger, so that they will condemn not only nuclear weapons, but all weapons of modern war, napalm, blockbusters, chemical and biological war, as well as nuclear war. And we hope that the teaching on the meaning of conscience will be made clear. Of course we rejoice in the liturgical reform, and thank God for such prelates as Archbishop Paul Hallinan, for their pastoral letters, informing their people as to what is going on.

Q: What is in your opinion the root cause of the tremendous gap between haves and have-nots?

A: One cannot answer this question without taking into consideration the entire history of the United States, man’s nature, his fall, and his redemption. To put it simply, the root cause of the gap is man’s greed, avarice, acquisitiveness, his fear of insecurity, and the lack of attention to the teachings of Jesus and the saints throughout the ages.

Q: What must the lay apostolate do in the light of Vatican II to keep it abreast of the call to aggiornamento?

A: Read and study, listen and learn. We have to know God in order to love and serve Him. We have to know our neighbor likewise. As I travel through the country, I am trying to learn what is going on – all the exciting things that are happening – the strength, the courage, the vigor of the struggle going on in the South. They are teaching the rest of the country,

Q: What is the future for the church in America?

A: I'm hoping that young Catholics will become more and more involved in a cause that increases their love of brother (and they will be growing in the love of God). Here is Gadsden, my first stop after Conyers, Georgia, I find a young Negro Catholic, born in New Orleans, Bennee Luchion, who is involving the whole community, not just in a fight for justice but in the building up of a center where arts and crafts, puppet shows, clothes center for mutual aid, education classes to fight illiteracy to help men get jobs, and many other activities, are going on. He has been jailed six times for taking part in demonstrations. I saw him for the first time in church this Sunday morning, going to the communion rail and getting his throat blessed after Mass. Some one said afterwards that he came here without a cent, lives in one place after another, is fed by the community and is involving everyone. And thank God the Catholic community is involved!