

Housing

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Summary: Advocates the small is beautiful, personalist, house of hospitality approach to the homeless, rather than the big impersonal approach of the municipal lodging houses. (DDLW #180).

What did Holy Mother the City do in the Thirties—those grim days of the Depression? Now we are having what broadcasters call a recession and inflation combined, and people are homeless again and breadlines grow longer and there are more of them. Sugar is exorbitant and rents of slum apartments are a hundred dollars a month and more. When people are evicted, landlords close down the apartments and then entire buildings and wait for slum clearance and speculators and developers. People sleep in doorways, empty buildings and, if they are lucky, get tickets for a night's lodging or two in “flop houses.”

As small children, we used to read Horatio Alger and the plight of homeless newsboys. Dickens and Upton Sinclair later gave me pictures of poverty in our American cities.

Housing the Homeless

My generation experienced the Depression and the work of public authorities trying to handle it. The Roosevelts and their Work Projects: Artists, Writers, Theatre projects, civilian conservation corp camps, the latter showing great imagination and handling the problem of jobless teen-agers.

But it is the city homeless I want to write about. Our back files are not available to me as I write, as I am spending Thanksgiving Day on Staten Island, so I will trust to my memory. I wrote a number of articles in the paper about the municipal lodging houses, visiting them over a period of years, and looking back I repent me of the harshness of my judgment of the city's work. Now I realize how much was done in those nonviolent days, before wars brutalized our population. Wars conducted by those same benevolent authorities.

During those years, before W.W. II brought employment to all, we had not only a succession of municipal lodging houses, all in mid and lower Manhattan, but “the longest bedroom in the world,”—a pier at South Ferry, where double-decker beds stretched down the long length over the water, and the heat was piped in by the same system that heated those skyscrapers which made N.Y. famous.

In addition to that, there was another pier stretching out into the East River which, as I remember it, was like a bazaar with many booths stretching the length of it. Here men could get a shave, a haircut, have their clothes cleaned and pressed while they waited, and so on. These were public facilities to take care of the homeless and unemployed.

One of the municipal lodging houses for women (we all called these buildings the “Muni”) was on West Fourteenth St. some old houses adjoining, with all their basements forming a large dining room which was so cozy and attractive that one of my old friends (unemployed) confessed that she went there for her Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners. It was better than the C.W., she said—you could be anonymous and independent on those feastdays and just walk in. (Today, one of our “Ladies” is going around sampling the dinners served by the Volunteers of America and the Salvation Army. It is a beautiful, sunny, mild day of holiday cheer.)

There was another Muni on East Fifth Street in the Fifties, which occupied an entire school house, and there was space for a cafeteria as well as dormitories and entire families were taken in.

Once when we were overcrowded at Mott Street, in the old rear tenement, and we filled an additional apartment in front (we had all this space in two unheated buildings with no baths and shared toilets with another apartment on each floor), I visited the Chancery Office when Cardinal McIntyre was a humble bishop and always available, and asked him why we could not use also the rectory of St. Mary’s Church on Grand St. for additional quarters for the homeless. (With the Puerto Ricans increasing in numbers on the East Side, it is now a big parish and the rectory is used again.) The then Bishop McIntyre assured me we would have nothing but headaches with this broadening of activities. The building inspectors, health and fire inspectors would give us a rough time, he assured us.

We are finding that to be true. Indeed, it started on Mott St. when one of the women we housed and fed complained to the health department about a meal she did not like and we were harassed by building inspectors for some time over the equipment of our kitchen.

We are experiencing the same troubles now with our farm at Tivoli and with Maryhouse, which is bought and paid for and being worked over now.

Small and Homelike

But we still look with longing at the emptying convents and Academies and wish they could be transformed into hospices for the poor. But I can realize from my own long experience all the difficulties of equipment and personnel. If a floor were given over to hospitality there would have to be far more than food, clothing and shelter supplied. There would have to be loving hands to serve. As it is, nuns are leaving their convents priests are leaving their rectories to go into the slums and serve, and the emphasis is too often on just plain social work rather than “preaching the good news to every creature.”

In one of our crises in the late fifties, when we were ousted from our wonderful old double house on Chrystie St. the women in the house (I also) were given shelter at the Joan of Arc residence in midtown, west side. I loved the atmosphere in that house (four bedroom

dormitories with a locker in which one could keep food, a chapel, daily Mass laundry and kitchen in the basement). Why aren't there more of them for the destitute?

And yet—and yet—we come back to the principle of “small is beautiful.” Up and down the West Coast there are now six houses of hospitality, a house in Kansas City and in the quad-city area of Davenport, Iowa; a new house in Chicago, with Karl Meyer one of the group! Visitors from the Niagara house and the Schenectady house were with us at Tivoli this last month. Stanley will be home soon to tell us all that is happening in Milwaukee, Many houses around the country, small and homelike, are better than the impersonality of city “muni’s.”

In New York some years ago, Fr. Wendell, O.P. had in his parish two young women who had a 4-room apartment. The city used to call this type of apartment a dumbbell apartment. That is, the two inner rooms were smaller than the first room and the rear kitchen. The two inner rooms were the bedrooms, and the sisters who rented this apartment had 2 double-decker beds, so that they could share with two others. We used to send up young girls to them and they in turn sent us older women. Those girls who received help never felt themselves to be recipients of charity. They could have been school friends or relatives. The two originators of this delicate charity are both married now with big families. God has blessed them.

New York is big. Our house on First Street, five stories and basement, seems big, and the new house for homeless women will try to keep to the ideas of the personalist and communitarian revolution (emphasis on the personalist). That emphasis and what Peter called his synthesis of Cult, Culture and Cultivation are food for mind and spirit.

Our weekly Mass, our nightly Vespers our Friday night meetings and our farms continue the work of Peter's synthesis. Let us keep to the Little Way of Therese of Lisieux and say with E. F. Schumacher, an eminent economist, a Rhodes scholar, who as a Catholic has Peter's sense of the primacy of the spiritual, let us study his idea and repeat, “Small is beautiful.”