

On Pilgrimage - October 1950

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Summary: Meditation on the myriad forms of community—in her writing, their neighborhood, parish, the saints, guests, and in the many nationalities they encounter. Quotes from Martin Buber and notes the difficulties in all human associations. (DDLW #615).

The reason we write is to communicate ideas, and the reason for getting out the Catholic Worker each month is to communicate with our brothers (there are 63,000 subscribers and there may be many more readers). We must overflow in writing about all the things we have been talking and living during the month. Writing is an act of community. It is a letter, it is comforting, consoling, helping, advising on our part, as well as asking it on yours. It is a part of our human association with each other. It is an expression of our love and concern for each other.

“If you have no will for human association, I tell you that you are exposing civilization to the fate of dying in fearful agony,” said Pierre Leroux in 1848.

Essentially each one of us is alone, and that makes us first realize our helplessness and then our need of each other and responsibility to each other.

We have been living for fourteen years in a community in Mott street. Every night as we said compline, we said “Visit O Lord this community!” And we meant the street, the neighborhood, the two parishes we lived between, the group where we felt ourselves at home, as once we felt ourselves at home in our families, “felt ourselves approved, affirmed, in our functional independence and responsibility.”

It was a community of families, of small businesses, pushcarts, bakeries, cheese factories, a decentralist neighborhood of Italians who have a strong sense of family, of clan, of staying close to home in their work. They worked long hours, but in a leisurely, even idle, way. The shoemaker, the baker, the winestore dealer, the scungilli restaurant family were at work before we went to Mass at eight, and they worked late at night, but they had time to sit out during fiestas, to lunch with their families each day, to live the life of the streets, playing cards on the sidewalks, ball on the streets. They had the natural joys of family and community, if not the joys of nature.

The vice of the city, the frittering away of money and time, the idleness, the gambling, the sloth of the young as compared with the diligence of the older generation – all these were there, of course, but also there was community in a way. (My sister-in-law has lived in an apartment for seven years, and does not know a neighbor.) There was mutual aid on Mott

street. You could borrow money or food from neighbors, you could wake them in the small hours in time of sickness, there was an acceptance of the poor.

Yes, we will miss Mott street. Here on Chrystie street we are definitely one parish, the Nativity, and our pastor, Fr. Doino, has already come to bless the house. He is a man of this neighborhood, he grew up in the parish of Our Lady of Loretto, and he knows the life of the Bowery, has sympathy for the men. He has a big rambling parish here, after fourteen years in the Philippines, and there is a shrine to our Lady of Lipa. Every night there are devotions, and every morning one Mass follows another, eight of them. Father Doino throws open his house to the needs of the neighborhood, taking in the boys from the street, making a playground of the small yard, using one of the parish halls for a crowd of seventy-five unionists who were on strike for six months. They had there a place where they could meet, cook their meals and discuss social principles. And, of course, there are dances and bazaars, one of which is going on right now. We are happy to be in this Jesuit parish, and Father has been warm and friendly in every way, even to sending us over a couple of alarm clocks so that we can get to Mass on time!

Over here at 223 Chrystie, we are closer to the Bowery than ever. There was an interruption of only two days in the serving of the 500 or so who come to get soup and coffee and bread, and that was due to the taking up and reconnecting of stoves. We are nearer the women's lodging house here. The Salvation Army Hotel on Rivington street is a spotless place, and women can get a bed for thirty-five cents a night. We are a few blocks from the men's municipal lodging house on Third street. There are already Puerto Rican families coming in every day for clothes, there are neighbors coming in for books. Some Jewish friends from the tenement next door wanted to know if they could use the quiet of our library last Sunday.

Here, within this great city of nine million people, we must, in this neighborhood, on this street, in this parish, regain a sense of community which is the basis for peace in the world. It is only so we can oppose the State and the present ever-spreading war. We are not represented by our so-called representatives. (The State, according to Martin Buber, is an institution in which a virtually unorganized mass allows its affairs to be conducted by "representation.")

Our representatives are the saints, the thinkers, uniting us in a community of interest, in a human relationship in this world and the next. And we have to work hard **in this world**, to begin our heaven now, to make a heaven for others (it has been called Utopia), because this is the teaching of the saints.

All the way to heaven is heaven, because Christ said, I am the Way. St. Catherine of Sienna said this. We are to be Christ to each other, and see Christ in each other, and so we will love one another. "And for these there is no law," in the legal worldly sense, but only "the liberty of Christ." This is what we mean by our philosophical anarchism.

Our representative leaders, thinkers and strugglers are such men as St. Vincent de Paul, St. Francis, Gandhi, Tolstoi, and such writers as Baron von Hugel and Dr. Martin Buber, two thinkers whose books I am reading right now.

Martin Buber

In many ways Dr. Buber, who is professor of sociology at the Hebrew university in Jerusalem, reminds me of Peter Maurin in his interpretation of history and his view of the future.

When there was a dispute in our midst and Peter was called upon to judge or take sides, he used to give us a lecture on the art of human contacts. Here is a paragraph from Buber, page 141 of his **Paths to Utopia**, which is pertinent to our work. He was writing of the early efforts to build up village communes in Palestine and how the new problem of persecution and immigration overwhelmed the early pioneers with a vast tide of new workers, many of whom did not have the same ideals. It reminded me of how Peter, in the years 1933-1939, was always dealing with the problem of unemployment and poverty, and how the coming of world war two meant that we had not the unemployed to build up Houses of Hospitality and farming communes and be weaned away from the wage system by a restoration of the communal principles of Christianity as applied to the laity and to families; but we had the **unemployables**. There was always the problem of scholar-worker relationship to deal with as a result. Martin Buber writes:

“The point where the problem emerges is neither the individual’s relationship to the idea nor his relationship to the community, nor yet to work... The point where the problem emerges, where people are apt to slip is in their relationship with their fellows. By this I do not mean the question, much discussed in its day, of the intimacy that exists in the small and the loss of this intimacy in the big village communes. I mean something which has nothing whatever to do with the size of the commune. It is not a matter of intimacy at all; this appears when it must, and if it is lacking, that’s all there is to it. The question is rather one of openness. A real community need not consist of people who are perpetually together; but it must consist of people who, precisely because they are comrades, have mutual access to one another and are ready for one another. A real community is one which in every point of its being possesses, potentially at least, the whole character of community. The internal questions of a community are thus in reality questions relating to its own genuineness, hence to its inner strength and stability.”

There is this sense of community amongst us all because we are Catholics, for instance and have a common faith. It does not matter that some are pacifists and some not. In one sense we are all pacifists, in the sense that we do not believe in class war, race war, any compulsion and coercion between human beings to compel them to go this way or that. We all recognize the pacifism of the saints, of whom it is said that one sign of perfection is not to see the imperfections of others. And in our Houses of Hospitality and farms throughout the country, and among the families that have lived and been associated with **The Catholic Worker** in the past, there is still and always this sense of community. To know that Katherine Reser is having another baby, that Al is doing well with his trucking business, that Martie Paul on the Holy Family farm is managing to handle things and keep on in the struggle on that front, and to hear that the **Pio Decimo** press has a new center for meetings in Monsignor Hellriegel’s parish, – all these things warm the heart, and in these centers and families, Catholic and non Catholic, every nationality meet together in their common humanity, children of one God whether that God is acknowledged or not. There are many sheep whose shepherds have not feed them these days and who are bitter in their hunger for truth.

Indo-Chinese

At Maryfarm, Newburgh, there were seven Indo-Chinese meeting together at a retreat this past month. They were all exchange students and were getting together before going back to school. They were Viet-Nameese and undoubtedly in their upholding the principles of autonomy, have been accused of communism in their struggle against the imperialism of France.

Down at the Peter Maurin farm we have had a Jew from Israel as a guest and a young Italian discharged from the army for nervous trouble. I mentioned in previous **Catholic Worker's** that we bought our present home from a Korean family. Constantly in our daily lives we are in touch with our brothers from all parts of the world and we feel ever more and more that truth Dr. Buber brings out:

“The point where the problem emerges is neither the individual's relationship to the idea nor his relationship to the community, nor yet to work. The point where the problem emerges, where people are apt to slip, is in their relationship with their fellows.”

St. John on Patmos simplified the whole law –

“My little children, let us love one another.”