

# Letter To Our Readers at the Beginning of Our Fifteenth Year

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*Summary: Outlines P. Maurin's program for social action as the instituting of Houses of Hospitality, Clarification of Thought and Farming Communes, and explains where the C.W. has gone with each program. Reveals Maurin's sources of thought and the need to find lay apostolates. Traces personal sacrifices to Jesus' command in the gospels and asserts that the state cannot take over this duty. (DDLW #155).*

“It is better to light a candle than to sit complaining of the dark.” Chinese proverb.

## Dear Fellow Workers in Christ:

This merry month of May, this month of Mary, this most important month which marks the beginning of our fifteenth year I have offered, with great temerity, to write the whole paper, aside from Peter's essays. We have a new farm and retreat house at Newburgh-on-the-Hudson, sixty miles from New York and up there the men are ploughing and planting and building, Gerry Griffin and Jack Thornton, John Fillinger, Joe Cotter, Hans Tunnesen, Rocco and Frank Coyle. In a way I would like to have this issue of THE CATHOLIC WORKER an anniversary issue, and give a resume of our life and work in neat and scholarly style. But being a woman, and a much interrupted woman, I can only write a letter, a discursive letter, which none the less will be packed full of news and events and from which you will gain a picture, form an opinion, even perhaps make a decision. A decision to read a book, make a retreat, visit us on Mott street; a decision perhaps to consider yourself an apostle and search out some school of the apostolate to inform yourself more about God our King, and Heaven our country.

Each and every paragraph of this letter will be interrupted, I know, by visitors, by babies perhaps, by meals, by matters of great importance in that they have to do with human beings. And in the face of these interruptions, I must remember what I read of Cervantes recently—that he wrote his masterpiece, “Don Quixote,”

while he lived in a four-room house with six women, and above a tavern full of roistering drinkers. Not much peace and quiet there.

Peter Maurin's program of action, in the face of the crisis of the day, a crisis that has continued these last fourteen years through a great depression and a great war, remains the same now as it did when first we met back in 1933.

1. To reach the man in the street with the social teachings of the church.
2. To reach the masses through the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, a personal sacrifice, which means voluntary poverty.
3. To build up a lay apostolate through round table discussions for the clarification of thought.
4. To found Houses of Hospitality for the practice of the works of mercy.
5. To found farming communes for the cure of unemployment. To solve the problem of the machine, for the restoration of property and the combating of the servile state: for the building up of the family, the original community, the first unit of society.

To form our minds, Peter brought us things to read, Chesterton and Belloc and Gill and Cobbett and Father Vincent McNabb, the encyclicals of the recent Popes, from Pope Leo XIII down to the present day. "Making the encyclicals click," he used to say with his bright and happy smile, at what he considered a happy phrase, something that would stick in the mind of the hearer. Peter is a Frenchman (for those of you who do not know him) and a peasant, and he has his own way of saying things.

He introduced to us Leon Bloy, the pilgrim of the absolute, and that great and terrible line of his, which converted the Maritains, "There is only one unhappiness, and that is—NOT TO BE ONE OF THE SAINTS." He showed us how Pope Pius XI called our attention in his encyclical on St. Francis de Sales, to the fact that we are all called to be saints, layman and religious, that this is our goal, union with God.

"If you have risen with Christ, seek the things which are above. Mind the things that are above, not the things that are of earth. For you have died and your life is hid with Christ in God." "Unless the seed fall into the ground and die, itself remaineth alone. But if it die it bringeth forth much fruit."

Peter quoted this encyclical on St. Francis de Sales, he quoted the beatitudes, he quoted the Sermon on the Mount. And these Ideas were afterward elaborated in the retreats given at Maryfarm, Easton, and are now being given at Maryfarm, Newburgh; retreats which emphasize man's dignity as the son of God, the supernatural motive, as the little way to God; the correlation of the spiritual and the material, making one's work coincide with one's faith as a Christian. All summer we will have these retreats at Newburgh, and after the retreats there will be discussions and work on the land, to raise the food for the breadline at Mott street.

This letter will be for our prospective readers, as well as for the 58,000 subscribers we now have throughout the world. So I will try to take up Peter's program point by point and tell what we have been doing these last fourteen years.

## **Reach All Nations, Reach All Men**

To reach the man in the street. "The workers of the world have been lost to the Church," Pope Pius XI is reported to have said to Canon Cardijn, international head of the Young Christian Workers. It is here that the apostolate of the WORD comes in, newspapers, leaflets, magazines; THE CATHOLIC WORKER, a monthly, usually of eight pages, but now cut down on account of the paper shortage has been distributed from the very first in public squares, sold on street corners, distributed in front of meeting halls. At times the circulation which started at 2,500 went up to 150,000, at a time when labor was beginning to organize and there was a greater call for the paper for mass distribution.

At those times when such simple issues as the right of workers to organize into unions of their own choosing was at stake, it was very necessary to get out into industrial conflicts, in front of factories and on picket lines, to emphasize what the Popes have said in regard to the worker.

But there were also criticisms to make as to the acceptance by the unions of the industrial set up as it was, private enterprise, competition, industrial capitalism.

Frankly, our position was that we had better work against the whole order, work for decentralization, in some cases even for abolition of the machine and the assembly line where it definitely went against the best interests of man and his needs and his nature. Since the unions were organized more for wages and hours, rather than for mutual aid and indoctrination, very often what we have to offer in the way of a program did not interest them. Our point of view was foreign if not hostile at times. Often it is a matter of criticism that we have not continued work with unions as we did in 1933 through 1938. Frankly, it was because we were not interested in increasing armaments, big business, perpetuating the status quo, and working in many cases perhaps towards state ownership.

We must continue to protest injustice, bad working conditions, poor wages which are general now in face of the high cost of living; but our vision is of another system, another social order, a state of society where, as Marx and Engels put it, *"Each man works according to his ability and receives according to his need,"* Or as St. Paul put it, "Let your abundance, supply their want." Men are beginning to think of the annual wage, in the unions, but not the family wage. Usually it is "equal pay for equal work." But that holy Pope Pius XI, said we should work to deproletarize the worker, to get him out of the wage-earning class and into the propertied class, so that he would own his home, as well as his tools.

## Join the Apostolate

We must continue to get out into the highways and byways to distribute the paper even if it is not the food the man in the street wants. Religion is *morbid* to most people, and indeed it is a matter of dying to self, in order to live for God and one's neighbor. Religion has too long been the opium of the people, the opiate of the people. I forget how the jingle in the first issue of INTEGRITY ran, but the sense of it was this:

John Smith puts on his hat and  
goes to Church on Sunday,  
And John Smith goes to hell for  
what he does on Monday.

Not Saturday night, mind you, when he may be taking surcease from care in some tavern, but for the work he engages in, whether it is the advertising business, or a fat job in the Rubber Company or Copper or Nickel Mines, or a Steamship company. We participate in the sin of others, we are all helping to make the kind of a world that makes for war.

Yes, let us get out into Union Square, along Forty Second street, in front of Madison Square Garden and distribute and sell THE CATHOLIC WORKER. We have been doing that for many years, but we need to do much more of it. As the older ones get tired (and Stanley has become a tired radical in this job of selling the paper), let the younger students and workers take over the job of being fools for Christ. One seminarian sold the paper all one summer for us. One rainy night when we were going into a CIO meeting there he was, standing in the downpour shouting READ THE CATHOLIC WORKER—THE ONLY THING THAT ISN'T ALL WET!

Big Dan used to call out (in opposition to Communist salesmen, who shouted, Read the Daily Worker), "READ THE CATHOLIC WORKER DAILY."

Leaflets, pamphlets, papers as well as more scholarly journals, are needed to reach the man in the street. Here is a letter which came last month: "We have been receiving a hundred CATHOLIC WORKERS a month and selling and distributing them in Columbus Circle. Do publish an appeal for more zeal on the part of Catholics in getting the Catholic message to the worker, to the poor, to the oppressed. There is a colored Catholic couple in Philadelphia and they would like a supply of fifty papers every month to distribute in their neighborhood."

Many an apostle has been found by selling Catholic literature on the street corner; he has been queried as to his positions and beliefs and has had to begin to study "to know the reason for the faith that is in him" in order to answer all the questions that are put to him. And many a time he just can't answer them and it's no use his trying.

## Houses Needed For Hospitality

*To reach the masses through the spiritual and the corporal works of mercy.* Of course getting Catholic literature around is performing quite a few of those tasks. It is *enlightening the ignorant and counseling the doubtful, comforting the afflicted*, and you might even say that walking on a picket line is doing these things too, as well as *rebuking the sinner*. But when we talk of the works of mercy, we usually think of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and sheltering the homeless.

We have had to do them all even to *burying the dead*. One does not necessarily have to establish, run, or live in a House of Hospitality, as Peter named the hospices we have been running around the country, in order to practice the works of mercy. The early Fathers of the Church said that every house should have a Christ's room. But it is generally only the poorest who are hospitable. A young college graduate hitchhiking across the country during the depression (he was trying to make up his mind about his vocation) said that the only place he found hospitality was among the Negroes and the Mexicans. Certainly priests' housekeepers did not extend any. He met so much misery and starvation even, that when he reached Los Angeles he finally started a House of Hospitality there, and in that house he met with so many impossible cases that he turned more and more to the spiritual weapons, and now he is a priest, with the most powerful weapons of all in his hands.

Every house should have a Christ's room. The coat which hangs in your closet belongs to the poor. If your brother comes to you hungry and you say, Go be thou filled, what kind of hospitality is that? It is no use turning people away to an agency, to the city or the state or the Catholic Charities. It is you yourself who must perform the works of mercy. Often you can only give the price of a meal, or a bed on the Bowery. Often you can only hope that it will be spent for that. Often you can literally take off a garment if it only be a scarf and warm some shivering brother. But *personally*, at a *personal sacrifice*, these were the ways Peter used to insist, to combat the growing tendency on the part of the State to take over. The great danger was the State taking over the job which our Lord Himself gave us to do, "Inasmuch as you did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me."

Of course husbands must be considered, and wives must be considered, and children. One must look after one's own family it is true. But Fr Coady said once, "We can all do ten times as much as we think we can do."

Right now we have two Houses of Hospitality in Detroit, the St. Martha House and the St. Francis House. In Cleveland there is the Martin de Porres House. In Pittsburgh, there is the St. Joseph House of Hospitality which was started by our group, (the Bishop gave the use of a huge orphanage) and is now run by Father Rice and Joseph Lenz. In Harrisburg there is the Martin de Porres House. In Philadelphia, the House of Christ the Worker. In Rochester, St. Joseph's House of Hospitality for men and the Martha flat for women.

In the past there have been houses in Seattle, Sacramento, San Francisco, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Milwaukee, St. Paul Minneapolis, Chicago, South Bend, Toledo, Troy, Buffalo, Boston, Washington, Baltimore, New Orleans, etc., but when the depression ended with the war boom, and there were again jobs for all, many of the houses closed. Of course there is always a need for such centers. There are always the lame and the halt and the blind. There are always the poor we will always have with us, as our Lord said. There are always those coming out of hospitals, mental asylums, jails, etc. There is the wayfarer that needs to be sheltered for a night and those who come and stay a lifetime and finally need to be buried. The war took many of our young men into the service, into conscientious objector camps, into the medical corps, into jails, and they were the ones who ran the houses and performed the works of mercy. There were only four houses for women and of those two are still going; the Harrisburg house is a family center, to take care of the Negroes in the Seventh Street district in the shadow of the capital.

## **Unpremeditated**

At one time a thousand a day were fed in New York, probably more. Now there are perhaps four hundred or five hundred. The house is always filled (we have 36 rooms and two stores) but the line is smaller. We started fourteen years ago by inviting whoever came along to dinner. Many of our workers were recruited in that way. By the time three years had passed we were given the use of 115 Mott street and the line began to stretch around the block. We never contemplated starting a BREAD LINE. All Peter had ever talked about were Houses of Hospitality and he had hoped that there could be craft shops, and discussion centers and libraries, and perhaps a chapel, and that these houses would be little cells of Christian living, radiating peace and brotherly love. But the evil of the day, the poverty in our rich country, the unemployment in the age of the machine was so great, and the disability, mental and physical, so appalling, that our houses grew and the lines grew with them.

But Peter never grows discouraged. "Discouragement is a temptation of the devil," he would say "We must make the kind of society where people find it easier to be good," he would add very simply.

## **Clarification Thru Discussion**

Round Table discussions go on everywhere, when two or three gather together. Perhaps there is too much of it in an informal way, and not enough of it in a formal way. We have regular Friday night meetings, when speakers come and present a point of view lead in a discussion, or give a spiritual conference. There are discussions when visitors gather together, and whole groups, classes from seminaries, colleges and schools come together to ask questions and to enter into controversy. There are the retreats at Maryfarm, which in the past have been

glimpses of heaven to a great many, an enlightenment, a conversion, a time of peace and study and rest.

Peter used to enter upon discussions on street corners, over restaurant tables, in public squares, as well as in the office, at all times of the day and night. He believed in catching people as they came, and often the discussions would go on all night. One is reminded of St. Paul who talked so long that the young man fell off the window seat out of the open window, and was picked up for dead; St. Paul had to revive him. And St. Catherine of Sienna, it is said, talked until she put people to sleep and then woke them up to listen some more. But Peter can talk and discuss no longer. He is over seventy, and his mind is tired and his memory bad. He has been a great leader, and his writings still inspire. And now significantly enough, many young people all over the country are trying to put into effect his ideas, both in publishing, in running centers of training, in establishing themselves on the land and here these discussions are being continued. If you cannot find enough people around Mott street to talk to about these ideas, and books that Peter has recommended, one can go to John Straub or Walter Marx in Washington or the Center for Christ the King at Herman, Pennsylvania, or to Loveland, Ohio where there are a number of families, as well as the great school of the apostolate for women, THE GRAIL. Or there is a center at Brookfield, Conn., where there are four families on the land. Everywhere, the discussions started by Peter, are going on. The candle he has lit has been lighting many another candle and the light is becoming brighter.

## **Farm Centers Are Small Beginnings**

There are these centers and other farms too around the country which are centers of the lay apostolate, though not the communal farm that Peter envisaged at a time when unemployment was the tragedy of the day, and man had neither work nor bread. There is a Catholic Worker farm at Lyons, Michigan where Louis and Justine Murphy live, and another Catholic Worker farm at Upton, Mass., where the O'Donnell and the Paulson family live. Frank manages the St. Leo shop there and Carl Paulson and Mary make stained glass and do wood carving etc. Both farms are called St. Benedict's Farm. There are nine children at the Massachusetts farm. There is Our Lady of the Wayside Farm at Avon, Ohio, where Bill and Dorothy Gauchat live with their three children and are taking care of a little crippled baby (who cannot live) whose parents cannot care for it. This farm helps provide food for the House of Hospitality Bill manages in Cleveland.

Now there is Maryfarm, Newburgh, which is connected with 115 Mott street, and which we hope will soon be self sustaining, and not only self sustaining, but helping to feed the breadline at Mott street. We will be having retreats there during the summer, and it will be delightful to go by way of boat up the Hudson, a slow trip, but a fitting approach to a week of prayer and study. You can get there quickly by New York Central to Beacon in an hour and a half, then take

the ferry to Newburgh and a bus to Coldenham for ten minutes or so. You ask to be let off on Route 17K at the Catholic Worker Farm which is opposite the Sunnybrook Fruit Farms. We have had our first retreat already, Easter week, dedicated to rejoicing.

This is a brief summary of the Catholic Worker and its aims and purposes in the lay apostolate. Often people ask us what is the keynote of Peter's message, and one could say at once, without hesitation, POVERTY. It is what sets him apart, it is what distinguishes him from the great mass of the teachers of the day. In a time when we are living in an acquisitive society, Peter Maurin is THE POOR MAN.

Last month there was a sensational story in all the New York papers, and probably reprinted all over the country, about two brothers, Langley and Homer Collyer, who were misers and accumulators and who met with a horrible end. On receipt of a telephone call, police broke into a house on upper Fifth Avenue in the Harlem section, a four story house which in this housing shortage could have been converted into homes for four families. They found Homer, who had been blind and helpless, dead from starvation. His brother had disappeared. The house was so filled with junk that Langley had had to tunnel his way through to go in and out of the house to make their few purchases. In fear of intrusion, he had made booby traps with hundreds of pounds of old iron ready to fall on whoever threatened their privacy. One of these booby traps caught Langley who smothered to death within a few feet of his blind brother, who on account of the junk, could not reach either his brother or the window to call for help.

He slowly starved to death, while listening to the rats feeding on the corpse of Langley a few feet away.

This story seems to me a vision of hell, a very literal and appalling sample of the hell that awaits the acquisitive, the greedy, the accumulators, the seekers after markets, wealth, power, prestige, exclusiveness, empire, dominion, of everything opposed to the common good. Here were two old men who epitomized to the nth degree suspicion and hatred of their fellows and a desire to gather together to themselves, everything they could lay their hands on. "They were worth \$100,000" the newspapers reported. What a strange use of words! They spent little. Among the things they collected were six grand pianos, dismantled cars, babies' cribs.

Peter, on the other hand has accumulated nothing in this life. He has nothing but the suit on his back, the shoes on his feet. He has lived on Boverys and Skid Roads all his life, not believing that his dignity needed to be maintained by residence at a decent address, or by stopping at a good hotel. To reach one's fellows by the practice of the works of mercy, AT A PERSONAL SACRIFICE,—this meant embracing voluntary poverty. Voluntary poverty as a means to an end, to publish a paper, to put out leaflets, to live on the land, to serve one's fellows. He has lived these ideas.

And so when people ask us how we get the funds to run Houses of Hospitality,



to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, care for the sick and bury the dead we can only reply that our own wages are a penny a day and that by living in common we have enough to care for our brothers. The paper costs a cent a copy, or twenty-five cents a year. Many people send more. When our bills pile high, we send out an appeal, and usually this must be done twice a year, spring and fall, on St. Joseph's day in March and St. Francis Day in October. Always we get just enough to carry on. When there is some extraordinary project in view like the new farm at Newburgh, we made an especial appeal for that. Ask and you shall receive. That is, if the Lord wants you to have it. "I have no need of your goods," He has said, through the psalmist, and one of the ways we may know if it is God's will that we carry on this work, is by the response to our appeals. If He wants the work done, He will send the means to do it.

## **Light and Warmth Means Love**

All this is set forth to show the validity, the vitality of Peter Maurin's ideas, of his vision. They said of the early Christians, – "SEE HOW THEY LOVE ONE ANOTHER" and we have seen in Peter's poverty how this love could be expressed, to live with the poor, to work with the poor, and to love the poor. And how great and wonderful thing is this love which makes all work joyful and all burdens light. "Love is the fulfilling of the law." And HELL Bernanos says, is not to love any more.

That love is not a matter of emotion, but a matter of the will, a matter of preference, one soon learns in work like this. To love your neighbor, to love your enemy, who only yesterday was your neighbor your ally, and now has become an enemy. Or so they say.

And what does this love mean in regard to Russia for instance?

## **What Is Our Stand on Russia?**

We are fighting principalities and powers, not flesh and blood, and the Russians are our neighbors, our brothers in Christ, and not just a world power seeking empire. We are inclined to look upon the small nations as having much more to say, these days, and much clearer judgment than the mighty powers in the UNO. We are for disarmament and the outlawing of the atomic bomb, even if we die for it, even if we are deceived in the integrity of our brothers. We must lay down our lives as Christ did. "A New Commandment I give you, that you love your brother as I have loved you."

But what about the concentration camps, forced labor, domination of small countries? "The worst enemy of a man will be those of his own household." "Regard not the mote that is in thy brother's eye while disregarding the beam in thine own eye." What about our own problem of minorities, Negroes who are

one tenth of our population, Chinese, Philippino, Japanese concentration camps, the recent deportation of Indonesians. Have we forgotten about these?

If your enemy hunger, give him to eat. There is always a solution in the practice of the works of mercy, *at a personal sacrifice*.

The old Testament speaking of our Lord, foretelling Him is full of the same thought. The epistle on Monday in Holy Week was from Isaiah, "I have given my body to the strikers, and my cheeks to them that plucked them. I have not turned away my face from them that rebuked me and spit upon me. The Lord God is my helper."

To those who call us isolationist, we must remind them that the Good Samaritan did not leave the poor traveler by the road and run after the robbers. He ministered to the wounded, and fed and sheltered him, and did not seem in the least concerned for justice to be done to the thieves, or revenge being taken. Love, it is a beautiful word, but as Father Zossima said, LOVE IN PRACTICE IS A HARSH AND DREADFUL THING COMPARED TO LOVE IN DREAMS.