

On Pilgrimage - July/August 1952

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Summary: On the feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary she appreciates the work of mothers and the practice of the presence of God in the smallest acts. Describes Tamar's family and their house where she is caring for the grandchildren while Tamar and David have a vacation. Describes life with the children and lauds "manual labor as part of a penitential as well as creative life." (DDLW #636).

Today is the feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. On such a feast when I am saying the Joyful Mysteries, I think of my sister or daughter, and of visits to them. It is fitting also to think especially of young mothers who are pregnant, since Mary was with child when she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was also with child. Such distractions make the meditation very much alive.

She went with haste, over the hills, and she was very young, only sixteen tradition tells us, and she must have been very beautiful and quiet and eager. I love to read of her going with haste. The lesson in the missal for this day is from the Canticle of Canticles.

"See where he comes, how he speeds over the mountains, how he spurns the hills. No doe, nor fawn was ever so fleet of foot as my beloved. And now he is standing on the other side of the wall; now he is looking in through each window in turn, peering through every chink. I can hear my beloved calling to me, Rise up, rise up quickly, dear heart, so gentle, so beautiful, rise up and come with me. Winter is over now, the rain has passed by. At home, the flowers have begun to blossom; pruning time has come; we can hear the turtle doves cooing already, there at home. There is green fruit on the fig trees; the vines in flower are all fragrance. Rouse thee and come, so beautiful, so well beloved, still hiding thyself as a dove hides in a cleft rock or crannied wall. Show me but thy face, let me hear thy voice, that voice sweet as thy face is fair."

Tomorrow I am beginning a visit of a week with my grandchildren, while Tamar and David go on a vacation and the rest of this column will not be written on this donated typewriter, a very good rebuilt one, which came in answer to my

appeal last month, the gift of a father of five children and himself a poor man I am sure; but I will be writing by hand under the mulberry trees, in snatches, and I will write to rest myself, and to recollect myself, and it will be a form of meditation, another way of practicing the presence of God. I will write at night when the children go to bed and I will try to be conscientious in keeping this little diary, for the sake of all the other mothers of small children who are trying to lead the spiritual life, a supernatural life, and who feel submerged, exhausted, by the weight of the physical.

Everyone knows the little booklet by Brother Lawrence, **The Practice of the Presence of God**. It is claimed by Quakers, Episcopalians, Lutherans, many others, just as Thomas a Kempis is claimed by all.

The Way of the Pilgrim is another little book written by a Russian Pilgrim who was looking for a spiritual leader who would teach him how to pray without ceasing as we are told to do by St. Paul. One of our readers sent me this last month, and I hear that Harpers is going to bring it out soon. It is included in **A Treasury of Russian Spirituality**, published by Sheed & Ward.

Just last week at Wainwright House, the headquarters for the Layman's Movement where I spoke, a little pamphlet was handed me, **"Letters by a Modern Mystic"** containing some of the writing of Dr. Laubach, on this same subject, practicing the presence of God. In his letters he begs other to write of their experiences along these lines.

I believe too, that this practice of the presence of God, is the Little Way of the Little Flower, the saint of our times who spoke of her way of spiritual childhood, which consisted in doing everything for the love of God, even to the picking up of a thread from the floor. For mothers who bend ceaselessly in their futile attempts to achieve some order in a household of small ones, the sanctification of the smallest action will be of comfort.

"All is grace," St. Therese exclaimed, even, I suppose, to the spooning of oatmeal into tiny mouths, only to see the oatmeal smeared a moment later in the hair. Oh patience, patience! One may laugh but it is a suffering.

Last night I arrived at my daughter's so that Tamar could tell me what Mary should eat, what her schedule is and so on. Mary is eleven months old; Nickie is 2 and a half, Eric is 4 and a half, Sue will be 6 in August and becky is 7 and a half. In addition to his job in New York, David has a little mail order book business, handling distributist books. We must emphasize the fact that it is a "mail order" affair since several times recently people have come all the way from

New York hoping to find a book shop at 201 Winant Ave. and have been very much taken aback to find a shabby unpainted cottage of five rooms and attic and porch, set back from a cinder road where there are only six other houses in the midst of four acres of burnt over wilderness. This section of Staten Island which used to be a fertile place before the days of Jersey industrialism and smog, is sparsely inhabited and is reached by taking an Arthur Kill Road bus which goes from St. George to Tottenville, a ride of an hour and a half. David's place is about 55 minutes from the ferry, and when you get off the bus you climb a gentle hill through fields of second growth and tangled underbrush. In the spring frogs are vibrant in the marshes, and in the summer the song of crickets and katydids and cicadas fill the air and the birds, thank God, are not discouraged by the smog but fill the trees with their warblings.

The house that David and Tamar are now living in had been rented for the past ten years and has not been painted in all that time. It has been ill-treated as all rented houses are and it is in bad need of repair. But when it was ten above zero it was warm and these last dog days of July it has been comfortable too, except in the attic.

It is a shabby house, but solid, and the sun shines in the kitchen and living room in the morning and in the three bedrooms in the afternoon. There is electricity and a big enough bathroom to accommodate the washing machine which Tamar acquired after her fifth child.

(This little account of the physical aspects of her existence is owing to our readers who have read **On Pilgrimage**, the collected columns published a few years ago which contained an account of Hennessy life before Eric was born, on a West Virginia farm where there was neither running water nor electricity. The farm had cost \$1200 and was a dream of a place scenically but it was twelve miles from town and church and school and doctor or any kind of a job and one cannot earn a living for a growing family under those circumstances, if one has been brought up in the city and has not the skills or strength required for country work. And there was the loneliness too, of living for three years in a community where there were no Catholics for ten miles. No neighbors called, only one old woman and her two young foster children.) When David acquired a job which took him away from West Virginia, they sold the place to a Washington family who drive out weekends and spend their holidays there.

The Staten Island house with its four acres cost \$6000. I know it is not fashionable to talk about money and the cost of things, but these days when no one can rent a house and young families are thinking of down payments, it is practical to talk

about prices. The last issue of Integrity was all about Housing, but there was no mention of costs, or land values, except in the most general terms. In these days it is considered to be just as indelicate to talk about money as it is about God.

But we like to call attention to the fact that in New York City, if one has to work there, there is a possibility to live on “the wrong side of the tracks” and have space for garden and goat, chickens and geese, and if there are no neighbors to complain, pigs and a cow. On Winant Avenue there are Norwegians, Italians, Irish, colored and white. Truly an American street, and some children go to public school and some to St. Louis Academy or the Tottenville parochial school.

David commutes four hours a day, however, two coming and two going, and that means bus and ferry and again a bus; but there is rest for the eyes and refreshment for the nostril on these trips. Thank God for the five day week, however, for the proletariat who sees no way out of his proletariat condition.

The children all woke up bright and early this morning, afraid their mother would leave before they got up. But she had a full day before her. She had not slept, she said, for two nights, she was so excited at the idea of a trip, but young mothers are used to broken sleep. She was vigorous enough to mop the living room, kitchen, bathroom and bedroom floors which the children had previously swept out.

She kept remembering things in the course of the morning: “The clorox is under the sink in the bathroom, and the mouse poison and poison ivy powder is under the back stairs.” Then she went out to water the geese who were waddling around the front door. “They are a grazing creature and have to run loose, but ah me, what is going to happen to my garden.”

Becky will be a goose girl, we decided, like the maidens in the fairy tale and keep shooin' them when they stray in the wrong places.

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It has been very hot these last weeks and there has been no rain. The leaves of the sassafras tree are turning and dropping already and the children had been making collections of them. Tamar went to water the garden, tie up the tomato vines and bury the garbage. Finally she was finished.

As the time approached for her to leave, I too began to anticipate homesickness for her, as well as the children, so we planned a little expedition ourselves. As Tamar stood at the road looking pretty and fresh in her pink nylon, her little suit case in her hand, I piled Nickie and Mary in the carriage and with the other three hopping with excitement, we set off in different directions, we to Peter Maurin Farm, and Tamar down the road to catch the three-fifteen bus. We were all going places, so it was all right. At the farm the Smith children and the Hennessy children fell into each others' arms and we stayed for supper, and a happy time was had. By the time we walked home a little breeze had sprung up, baths were in order, and at eight o'clock the great silence had descended on the house.

In the morning we sit out under the mulberry trees to say our morning prayers. Which means that I read Matins from the layfolk's breviary and the three oldest children join in the **Our Father** and the **Glory be to the Father**. Nickie sat entranced for a time and then he began making a tower out of beer cans, screaming whenever they fell down. When we had finished Matins and sang the Salve Regina (the children much prefer English hymns) everyone scattered.

The days are busy. The children awake at seven and the sun is already high. There was only one shade in the living room facing east, so I put up a dark blanket at the upper part of the other window to keep out the glare. There are so many needs around the house. Screening, shades, linoleum, paint—all things that cost money. It is no use saying hard work is enough. Materials are needed to work with. It is a part of poverty to do without these things, to have insufficient strength to take care of five children, wash, cook, clean, garden and can. (It is a part of destitution to have no philosophy of work as well as no philosophy of poverty and not to accept manual labor as part of a penitential as well as creative life.)

And all the futilities, the obstructions, the interruptions of any kind of work. The geese have gotten into the garden and stripped the kale, cabbages and broccoli plants. There has been no rain. "All nature itself travailleth and groaneth."

The children are always ravenous. Mary Elizabeth is like a little bird with her mouth always open. She has three good meals a day and milk in between. And in spite of garden, how much work and money it takes.

The days fly by. It is a good life, a life removed from the world and yet close to life, to reality. One does not have to listen to the news repeated twenty-four times a day, every hour on the hour, over and over again. It is one thing to turn to God seven times daily, at Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers (and Compline thrown in for good measure). It is better to practice the presence of God and pray without ceasing as Fr. Wm. Doyle did.

The great temptation for the mother is to stay up late and savor the silence and peace, to read a little, to sew a little. Physical fatigue is great and it is a joy to relax. The children all sleep through the night and don't stir after they touch the pillow. So my nights were refreshing.

Tamar left Thursday; the family wedding in Washington was on Friday. Saturday they drove on to West Virginia and spent the night with Mrs. Fearnow. "The new family in our old house are also poor," Tamar said happily, "and so they appreciate everything we had and did. They used all the old furniture we left, and have taken care of the perennials and fruit trees we planted. The land is cultivated and they've drained the lower meadow."

After Mass at Berkeley Springs, they had driven on to Hamburg to see Dick Ahern and his successful farm, and from there to Easton where they saw Helen Montague and the Franklins who have our old lower farm.

Monday night they were home (and I had not expected them till Tuesday.)

That, one might say, was my vacation. We have been busy enough the rest of the summer, with the ordinary life of Chrystie Street, and Sunday to Wednesday of one week at Pendle Hill, Philadelphia to speak to the Quakers.