

Peter Maurin Farm

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Summary: Explains Peter Maurin's ideal of "agronomic universities"—communal farms founded on a philosophy of work, especially manual labor. While an ideal, farm communities often suffered from too little skill and community conflicts. Lauds the new Peter Maurin farm on Staten Island and envisions deepening one's spiritual life in work on the land. (DDLW #923).

Peter Maurin, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, used to dwell lovingly on the thought of what he called an agronomic university, where the scholars could become workers, and workers scholars; where a philosophy of work would be restored to people; where they would regain a sacramental attitude toward life, property, and people in relation to them. For a time we could not understand what he was talking about.

He gave, as illustrations, the Fathers of the Desert, who lived in community and raised so much food that they could not find enough poor to feed their wheat to. He talked of the ideals of St. Benedict, whose schools were for Opus Dei, the work of God, and the worker-scholar idea was fully developed. He loved to dwell on "when the Irish were Irish" and crowds from Europe flocked to their universities and then returned to evangelize Europe during the Dark Ages. He told us of Proudhon, who wrote "A Philosophy of Poverty," to which Marx answered with his "Poverty of Philosophy," and Proudhon's own answer, "Property is Theft." It was Peter's criticism of present day capitalism. He quoted Eric Gill, "Property is proper to man," and, in combating the machine, he spoke of tools as extensions of the hand, and the necessity of people to have the responsibility of ownership of their tools, of their means of producing. He also quoted St. Gertrude, "Property, the more common it becomes, the more holy it becomes."

Peter wanted to restore the communal aspect of Christianity. So he taught us all to live in community as lay people, in order to be rich in our voluntary poverty, and free to devote ourselves to the works of mercy. He wanted farming centers where families could live and work together, communities of families where there could be a certain amount of common life, and work for all, and a school where all could learn to work.

So, we began to term these centers which he had first called agronomic universities, "farming communes."

There are today, throughout the country about a dozen of them where those who have been willed farms, or who have acquired farms by gift or purchase, are willing to share with others the use of the land. So far they are neither a success nor a failure. The main reason they

have not developed more is because people are not yet poor enough or holy enough to live together and work together. They are not poor enough, because they are not willing to do without the plumbing and heating fixtures which most workers in America have come to consider an absolute necessity. They are not humble enough to acknowledge how little they know, and yet they all wish to be scholars, who direct the workers, rather than those who give themselves, their bone and flesh and sinew, to daily hard work. And they are not holy enough to put up with the pinpricks and sword thrusts of common living.

There is a constant struggle between people living together, and the resultant elimination of the weaker. “who cannot take it.” There are many who come to such a movement, of course, to give some time and study to it, who find themselves and their vocation, and, having started on what they want to do, go forth to do it. Individuals and families all over the country came and sat at Peter’s feet for some months, even years, figuratively speaking. For, although he taught and spoke a great deal, scarcely leaving time for reading, he also stimulated one to work, especially manual, although he always approved of the work of discussions, clarification of thought. Many there are who constantly acknowledge their debt to the Catholic Worker for disclosing to them a “Way of Life and Instruction.” It is not self-aggrandizement, self-glorification to say this, because all of us at the Catholic Worker movement will never cease to acknowledge our debt to Peter and to return again and again to the things he taught and did. It is my duty, as reporter, as journalist, as fellow worker with Peter, to write about his ideas, the debt we all owe him, and in writing about him, the man, I make clearer the ideas we are all trying to work out.

Conflicts

Father Paul Hanley Furfey has said many times, “how do you manage to lose so many wonderful people to the work,” and it is not self-justification to say that we do not lose them—they go forth into all walks of life to spread the ideas, to sow the seed and reap the harvest. Another friend has said sadly: “the gold is ejected and the dross remains,” and we often quote this to each other, laughing wryly, because, of course there is some element of truth in every criticism of such kind. Then there are those who think that many of these who remain have driven the others out. “Nobody can live with them, nobody can work with them,” they say. “And what do you think of the common good?”

Oh, that conflict between charity and the common good! How many times to forgive?

Or, do not Mary or Dan (both of whom are now dead) misinterpret the movement in trying to explain it. Or does not this one or that, by malice, drive the others out? Poor Mr. Hergenhan, who is now dead, was one of our best workers, but his criticism of others was constant. This one or that one was “brother fly” and should be eliminated, regardless of bodily or mental health.

We could mediate over and over on the theme, “if you cut off the head of one tyrant, several others will spring out,” or “better that one should die for the others than that the whole nation perish.” It was the high priest who said that, and Jesus was put to death. And when those who thought of the movement and its welfare spoke thus of others, they were seeking to put to death Jesus in others, though they did not know it.

It is these considerations which have kept the idea of an agronomic university from developing more than it has. Because all of us are the lame, the halt and the blind, and we are the offscourings of all. There are wandering monks and brother flies among us, it is true, but the former do go on wandering, "giving the movement a bad name," another friend said, and the flies are goaded by the others to work.

There are farms in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Ohio, Michigan, Missouri, California, and now two in New York. One is at Newburgh, sixty miles up the Hudson from New York, and is used as a retreat house and a rest house. Families have been invited to build on it, provided they have the materials and the skills and can support themselves. The land is there, and the chapel where Mass is said daily and the group has common prayer together, Prime and Compline, and the rosary and spiritual reading at meals. The barns, carriage house, chicken coops all have been converted into living quarters and families have vacationed there and the sick have recovered there. We have had study weeks, as well as retreats, but there has not been enough emphasis on the agronomic university ideal of Peter. There have been one or two or three men who have farmed, taken care of animals, and gardened, and the animal care has meant enormous feed bills since we could not raise our own sufficient even for two horses, cow and two calves, and half dozen pigs we had. It seems the animals were used to plough fields, to plant food for themselves and still there was a feed bill to pay. Any milks, eggs, or pork that we obtained were more expensive than that we could obtain at markets. One cannot make a farm self-sustaining when so many visitors are given hospitality. The farm was a community of twenty-five or thirty most of the time and their needs were more than the farm could supply. If they had been monks or ascetics one might have kept down the bills, but they were invalids and working men, who needed the food they were used to for psychological reasons as well as for health. Meat, potatoes and gravy were the rule and with whole wheat bread and cabbage salad a daily part of the menu, a healthful diet.

Now we have started, only this last month of September, 1950, the Peter Maurin Farm on Staten Island, on which we are again trying to emphasize the idea of an agronomic university. We were fortunate in immediately making the acquaintance of a young farmer down the road a mile, a university graduate and follower of the ideas of Lord Howard, who has written about organic farming for years. This young man, Mr. Gerecke, has already, in five years, so improved the twenty acres of sandy scrub land he bought, that his work is a standing witness to his ideas. It is a garden in the wilderness. He has composted, mulched and cultivated, using no sprays or commercial fertilizer and has his mother and father working with him. There are thirty or so, and a few bantam chickens. He is perfectly willing to come and instruct our group, and after three visits with him, we feel that he is one of the professors of the agronomic university that Peter talked of. Peter's round table discussions took place in Union Square and at hot dog stands and on street corners, so why cannot we consider a few of our farms neighbors our instructors in this informal way? Immediately next door to us are some Jehovah's Witnesses, who are good farmers, and, surrounding their radio station, which is a few miles away, there is a very fine organic farm and a cooperative cannery. In getting together to talk with them about farming and canning, we have established a "concordance," a basis of friendship which is the first move in building peace. "It takes two to make a quarrel," my mother used to say to her children, and I have often profited by remembering it.

Our farm is better than our neighbors, Mr. Gerecke's. It is 22 acres and was owned for the past sixty years by a Swiss family, and well cared for and loved. There is a beautiful little barn, right now being converted into a chapel and conference hall, and the house has eleven room, spacious hall and two attics, besides porches, front and back. There is an outer kitchen which we are transforming into a bake shop, where we will bake bread for our New York breadline; there are carpenter shops, toolsheds, chicken coops, pig pens, corncribs, a feed house, carriage shed, blacksmith shop and so on in the way of outbuildings. There is an attractive woodlot and tiny pool grown over with rushes and water lilies, which can be dug out. There are three acres of asparagus, which provide a work project for all who come, for weeding, hoeing and mulching, and roundtable discussions go on meanwhile. There are pear trees, grapevines, work to do at once, even without tools and materials to do them with.

Every Saturday is to be a work day. As I write this now, three young Quakers just arrived to help. A group of boy scouts, half a dozen of them with their priest advisor, are coming in the afternoon. When they tire of weeding, they can go to the beach two miles away and gather seaweed, if any is washed up, for composting. Sometimes in the fall there is seaweed galore, and certain kind of bony fish, called menhaden, which are good for composting. The story is told that the Indians buried a fish head at each hill of corn and so had fine crops.

Members of another community, three of them, are also coming to compare notes and to see how we can cooperate. An agnostic Black lawyer, and good orthodox artist, also have just arrived. It will be a good day.

Sundays are days of rest and rejoicing. We shall have conferences and after discussion, there will be Vespers and supper.

The farm is in the city of New York, fantastic though it may seem. Anyone can take the ferry for five cents, and spend a dime for a bust to the other end of the island for a day's work or meditation.

And all this idea of an agronomic university is in order that one's spiritual life may be continually deepened, and to show how life in Christ can be achieved by realizing the faith in response to the needs and opportunities of our everyday occupations. The idea of **work**, the **land**, people's needs. The study of what others are doing, the lives of great Christians—a sharing, in other words, with each other, in love and work, thought and worship; all this will be part of the life here on our beginnings of an agronomic university.