

Day After Day

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Summary: Discusses the two major subjects of her speaking engagements, Peter Maurin, whom she describes as founder and mind of the C.W., and personalism, which she describes as communitarian, and the philosophy of both P. Maurin and the C.W.. Describes some of the difficulties in living the CW vocation and running farming communes. Recommends reading the Desert Fathers and Aldous Huxley's Grey Eminence to understand personalism and communitarianism. (DDLW #148).

Received a letter this month, which I can not only answer personally, but also by means of this column, since it takes up such fundamental issues.

We are printing Gerry's letter in this issue of the paper, but I want to take up one paragraph especially. He said: "Quite by chance I gave a very, very informal talk on the Catholic Worker several nights ago. My talents are limited. I am positive they were bored to death or couldn't understand my middle western accent. I did my best but it makes one seem so much like a fool when people just don't grasp what you are driving at."

Joe and Gerry

How well we all know that feeling, those of us who are called upon to speak at meetings, communion breakfasts, conventions, etc. We are assailed by sudden feelings of futility, of false humility and only desperate praying drags us out of the sudden slough into which we have fallen. Gerry Griffin and Joe Zarrella were five and a half years with the CATHOLIC WORKER and neither of them made more than half a dozen speeches, and then only when they were caught in a trap and forced into it. Joe made a trip with Peter Maurin once and found himself on the platform and on the spot, but after he got home he never made another speech and all my pleadings, cajoling and even outright commands served to no purpose. He would not, could not speak. Nor would Gerry. Gerry was just dour. We knew he had been forced to express himself a few times in Chicago and Detroit, when he was visiting there. So far, only Peter and Arthur Sheehan and I have done the talking around the country. Right now in my file of unanswered letters there are half a dozen invitations to speak, of which I can accept only a few and those on my way home from the south. And why are we speaking and what are we speaking about.

Peter Maurin

First of all, it was Peter who came into our lives and called us to work in the vineyard. He convinced us by his own talking that there was work to be done, that we each had vocations, callings. We were called upon, as St. Peter said, to give reason for the faith that was in us.

When people ask me how the Catholic Worker movement started and what it is, I tell them about Peter, and the way he lives, and the ideas he expresses. I talk about his personalist and communitarian philosophy. Personalism and communitarianism! There are two more “isms” for us to think about in this day of Communism, Fascism, Nazism, totalitarianism.

And since we started talking about these things ten years ago, there is scarcely a mail comes in that we don't have to go on talking and writing about them to answer the questions. That's because our readers are trying to live these ideas, not just talk about them. And the living of them leads to endless discussions, which as Peter says, leads to the clarification of thought, but it also leads to endless misunderstandings. I am at present engaged in trying to write a book, and it will be a long book, about Peter and his ideas and the work that came of them. So it is hard to try even to suggest what it is all about in a few short columns.

Personalism

Peter's little essays on personalism can be summed up in “What makes man human?,” and “To be what you want the other fellow to be.” Ade Bethune has a magnificent article on Personalism in the Spring 1940, *Christian Social Art Quarterly*. Printed at St. Mary of the Woods, Indiana.

And the catechism sums it all up. What are we here for? We are here to know God, to love Him and to serve Him. We must study read and ponder. Peter is always giving us lists of books which enlighten us, develop our faculties so that we know more about God and man. We are here to know God, to love Him and to serve Him, and how can we love and serve Him unless we love our brother and serve him. So it follows, that each of us, instead of being self-centered, must try more and more to be God centered. To obey the first commandment by loving God above all things, with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. Without thinking of what the other fellow is doing we must do what we are called upon to do.

Vocations

We are called, we have a vocation, we have a talent. It is up to us to develop that. Mine for instance, is journalism writing, and it is only because of the paper, the CATHOLIC WORKER, that houses of hospitality and farming communes, or even the suggestion of them came into being. That's how the communitarian end of the movement started. People read about our way of thinking and our way of life and want to join us. They come to visit and remain.

Things just happen. Jesus said if your neighbor is hungry, or if your enemy is hungry, feed him. So we took to feeding those who came. We didn't intend breadlines. They just happened. The same with sheltering people. The same with starting farms. We write about these things and they sound wonderful in writing. The kingdom of Heaven sounds wonderful, too, but it must be taken by violence. One gives up his life in order to save it. And "love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams"

A Movement

People come to join us in "our wonderful work." It all sounds very wonderful, but life itself is a haphazard, untidy messy affair. Unless we can live simply, unquestioningly and solitarily, one might say, in the midst of a mob, then we cease to be a personalist. The more we live with people in a community the more we must look to ourselves and regard the beam in our own eye. The more we live with a babbling crowd, the more we must practice silence. "For every idle word we speak we will be judged."

Peter is one of those who speaks to the point and not idly. He speaks in season and out of season, of course. Sometimes as the night grows late it is necessary to call a halt. But since we are not having regular meetings, he must take his chances to indoctrinate as he gets them, which may be in the midst of mailing out the paper, answering letters, etc. Remember St. Paul and how he talked all through the night and how one of his listeners sitting on a window sill in the close room, hot with the lamp light, fell out of the window and had to be restored to life by the speaker, who then went back to his indoctrinating regardless!

Idle Talk

The idle talk, the judging of others, the lack of charity, this certainly is not the kind of talk to be indulging in. . . . Peter's vocation is most certainly to think and talk and write. He has done every kind of manual labor so he is indeed a worker as well as a scholar. But he is an indoctrinator, not a manager of a house of hospitality, nor yet of a farming commune. Joe and Gerry did the former job of running a house of hospitality as well as they could considering we were also a newspaper office, but we have not yet found good farm managers, with knowledge, ability and perseverance. Whether our farms will ever be more than groups of people living together, more than villages on the land, it is hard to tell. We simply have not the people with skills to work, or to follow or to lead. We have many rugged individualists, each one doing the best he can. But we have lost our knowledge of crafts, we have not yet achieved the unjudging self-discipline, the asceticism, the voluntary poverty necessary for even the beginnings of a farming commune. We are still little more than refugee camps on the soil, and we are still no more than refugees from the industrial revolution the class war, a race war and international war that is engulfing us. This past month while I have been away from the work I have been reading the Fathers of the Desert. You can get a paper-covered dollar edition from Sheed and Ward, 63 Fifth Avenue. I had read that and am now reading two complete volumes, edited by Ernest A. Wallis Budge, keeper of the Assyrian and Egyptian antiquities of the British Museum and published 1907.

Books to Read

It's a good time to be reading about the desert fathers. It is familiar ground that I am covering what with the campaign in Africa, and letters from Gerry from Syria. A lot of those desert fathers, according to Dr. Budge, fled from the cities to the wilderness to escape military service. Thousands of monasteries began then, for people began to live together as well as to seek solitary places. By reading about the desert fathers I have learned more about personalism and communitarianism.

Another book which is profoundly interesting is Aldous Huxley's *Grey Eminence*. Both these readings have helped clarify my own ideas in regard to our work and the part each one of us must play in it. We hope our readers can get hold of both and enjoy them as I have.