

On Pilrimage - January 1961

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Sets out by car on a speaking journey on a bitter winter day, stopping along the way to visit families she knows. Admires their varied work, with severely brain-damaged children, teaching and writing, work on the land, and efforts with the elderly. Visits the town in Illinois where the Mormons started and admires their personal responsibility for each other, common work for the common good, and not accepting government aid. (DDLW #777).

We left Staten Island, Wednesday morning, December 28 right after Mass without stopping for breakfast other than a cup of coffee, and crossing the bridge into Perth Amboy, (Outerbridge Crossing) we were soon on the Jersey Turnpike which within a few hours led us directly to the Pennsylvania Turnpike. There was snow on the fields, but none on the road, and it was bitterly cold. But the car, a 1956 Ford, bright blue, which Fr. Kern of Detroit gave me to travel in had not only a heater but a radio, and we proceeded with much comfort, taking an occasional weather report from the radio.

It was a sunny day and we rejoiced. It was good to get started on this long trip, and we both prayed, Mary Lathrop and I, that all would be well at home, that every ones' guardian angels would look after them and that I would not be called back as I have been in the past, by some emergency. We got as far as Greensburgh the first night and next morning awoke to a heavy snow and icy roads. Radio kept repeating ominously "driving hazardous," but we found the turnpike well sanded, though the speeds posted were 35 miles an hour. Starting out at ten thirty we were able to reach Avon, Ohio by 2:30 in the afternoon.

Our Lady of the Wayside Farm

It is no longer a farm, this home of William and Dorothy Gauchat although it started out as one of our Catholic Worker farms. It is now not only the home of the Gauchats and their own six children, but also of five other little ones, spastic, cerebral palsy, mongolian, hydrocephalic, etc., some of them active such as one little six-year-old boy suffering from cerebral palsy who is now going to a school in Lorain, started by a group of volunteers for three mornings each week. When Dorothy took him at two years old he weighed eleven pounds, and was pronounced hopeless by the doctors. But now he is a handsome little fellow, exuberant, laughing, and very happy playing with the other children. So many of these children are so dull at birth that the first job is to see that they take nourishment. They are fearful, timid and very sad. But they respond to the love of this Christian family who

are “on the side of life” and respect this gift of the Lord. It seems to me to be the most holy optimism too, to hope that science and research may find ways to help these little ones.

It was so good to spend a couple of nights with Dorothy and Bill, whom I have not seen for several years. They have always opened their home to so many destitute ones but these seem to me to be the Holy Innocents whose feast we had just celebrated. Victims too, of a cruel Herod, but in another way. Later Julian Pleasants of Notre Dame was to tell me that undoubtedly the testing of atomic weapons was having something to do with the crippling of mind and body of so many newborn babies.

While I visited with the Gauchats, Mary Lathrop went into Cleveland to visit the Hennacy family, Ammon’s mother and sister, Ammon’s mother plays the accordeon, at the age of 85, and she is strong and most active though a tiny creature compared to her strong sons and daughters.

South Bend

The route to South Bend is an easy one, and we got there well before dark and were met near the turnpike by Terry McKiernan who had to guide us to his home, a comfortable roomy old house with five acres around it with orchard and plenty of room for garden. Terry earns his living by running the House of Bread, which his wife Ruth started with a group of Grail women, just as she started our bakery in Staten Island. There are three little ones, Miriam, Margaret and Christine.

We had breakfast next morning with the Pleasants, Mary Jane and Julian, and their fine family, John, eleven, then Peter, Jimmy, Michael, Mary Ann, Martha and Madeleine, who is eight and a half months old, and is in a way, one of these Holy Innocents I was speaking of. It was a breakfast which lasted until noon, and we talked of many things, home and parish and work. The Commonweal has just published one of Julian’s latest articles *Religion and Science*. The parish they live near has a beautiful new church, St. Teresa’s and there is either a dialog or sung Mass each day, with an offertory procession. Children are educated for their first Holy Communion by their parents, and examined by the priest, receiving Communion as a family group.

Julian is the only scholar I know who has built his own home, to shelter his own family, a job which is never finished, so that as he said, his sons can boast that they helped build the house they were born in. He, together with Norrie Merdizinsky as students at Notre Dame ran the John and Paul house of hospitality years ago, and Julian stayed on to teach at Notre Dame. Together with other Young Christian Students, he purchased an eighty acre tract on which half a dozen families or more, have built their homes and raised their families. Being teachers, many of them, there has been some turnover but nevertheless it is a community of a kind.

Eugene Geissler, who is head of the Fides Press which published my THERESE a few months ago, is the builder and has not only built his own house, helped others build theirs, but has supervised the building of part of the headquarters of the Press. They have a family of twelve, and on the afternoon we visited them and the press, one of their girls who was helping out at

Fides, made coffee for us at the offices. Their home is always expanding of course, but they have ample land, and it was a happy thing to see too the groves of trees that Eugene has planted, groves of pines, and other trees too. Eugene like another famous publisher, Frank Sheed, is the author too of a number of many books, on family life and certainly he knows where of he speaks. I felt that my visit short though it was with him and Josephine, was a blessed one, and thinking of my own large family. I asked them to pray for David and Tamar and their nine children too.

The Nuttings

Willis Nutting and his wife have long been our friends, and Peter Maurin never failed to visit there. We talked of Melbourne University, which is in the process of being built up near Melbourne Village in Florida and which was started by Ralph Borsodi and continued by Nutting. It is at present a seminar to discuss philosophical problems of the day and Nutting is enthusiastic about the interest shown by the older, retired people of the town. Young people, scientists, working at Cape Canaveral, deeply troubled by the problems of the time, discuss fundamental truths, and as Peter Maurin said always, clarification of thought was basic to action. "There can be no revolution without a theory of revolution," Peter used to quote Lenin as saying, and it is on this fundamental level that Willis Nutting works. All year he teaches at Notre Dame, and in the summer, he goes to Florida to continue his teaching. I have heard many young men speak of how profound an influence in their lives their contact with Nutting has been.

The Hamels

I had met the Geisslers, the McKiernans, the Pleasants and the Nuttings before, but a new family, the Hammels, (and I am not even sure of the spelling of their name) came to breakfast at the McKiernan's New Year's morning, just before we set out for Peoria, Illinois. The husband teaches in Notre Dame. It was due to an "exceptional child" in the family that Angela, the wife, was able to get a school started for retarded children, another one of the many small schools which are so necessary. It is a great illustration of the Bishops' call for "personal responsibility" which they made in their message this year.

Knox College

We set out right after breakfast and reached Peoria that evening, where we were the guests of Janet Burwash's family. It was good to be able to stop for a day and catch up on some mail. Then Janet had to return to New York, and we went on to Galesburg, where I spoke that morning at eleven o'clock before eight hundred students. That afternoon and evening there were other meetings, not to speak of lunch and dinner meetings, but the next day we were free until noon and after lunch there was a four o'clock meeting again. After a good night's sleep we left again the next morning for Macomb, Illinois' where Father Haddigan

had invited us to meet his curate, Father Kelly, who was chaplain of the Newman Club of Western Illinois University. Father Kelly's brother is one of the chaplains at the University of Illinois at Champaign and Urbana. The western Illinois branch of the university has only two thousand students and so the Newman Club is not very large.

While we were at lunch Father Haddigan began telling us about the Mormons, knowing Ammon's interest in the group, and it was interesting to learn that they had had their big Illinois settlement of twenty five thousand people not more than fifty miles away at Nauvoo, Illinois. It was hard to believe that Nauvoo then was a larger town than Chicago, which at the time had a population of only five thousand.

Nauvoo

"You should visit the Benedictine Sisters at Nauvoo," he said, "They own some of the old property of the Mormons, and the old arsenal is part of their buildings." Father Edmund, O.S.B. who is chaplain of the sisters is the greatest expert on the Mormons in the country, and has been studying their history for a long time. He knows their theology as well as their economic set-up."

When we found out that we could make the trip to Nauvoo and back in time for the evening meeting, we set out at once and passed the little town of Carthage and saw the old jail where Joseph Smith met his death by mob violence. "The community did not collapse, and Joseph Smith was not lynched because of polygamy," Father Edmond said later, but because the Mormons felt themselves to be the chosen people, had a militia of their own of five thousand men and raided the surrounding country. They were, in fact, cattle thieves, but they believed, of course that God was with them and that they had right to take their neighbors' property.

It is astounding the growth of this large community in Illinois in so few years. They were strong believers in education and they were the first community to have a municipal charter for a municipal university. They had their own court and none could try a Mormon but themselves. After the murder of Smith, when their charter was withdrawn, they began their move to the west, leaving everything behind them. They tried to sell their land and buildings and then their whole town for two hundred thousand dollars. The temple alone, which they had build, cost a million dollars at that time. Finally, the place was sold to the Icarians who were atheists and *communists* for a thousand dollars They had a common nursery where the children were taken care of and a common dining room where twelve hundred people could be fed. Later the temple burned down, at least the wooden parts of it, and a tornado destroyed the rest of it. The stones which made it up became a quarry and the parochial school, situated down the road now, was made from these very stones.

The Icarian community did not last long and now in addition to the small Mormon community there is one of the finest Benedictine high schools that I have ever visited, an academy which serves not only the surrounding country, but also has students from other countries. The nuns sing the office in English and their chapel is one of the most beautiful I have ever seen. We would have liked to have spent a few days in this delightful section of Illinois, which is right on the Mississippi River, St. Mary's Priory is a most hospitable place.

Personal Responsibility

One reason we are so much interested in the Mormons is they have the most perfect set-up for mutual aid, and accept no handouts from the government, or any other outside aid such as that offered by the Red Cross in time of disaster. They tithe themselves, they set aside some of their land for God, there is common work contributed by the parishioners for the common good, and where there is a surplus in one section of the country it goes to supply the need of another section. Their storehouses are always full, and there are no needy amongst the Mormons. Also, when Mormon students finish their formal education they give two years to missionary work, supporting themselves and going to different parts of the world. This is an example of building a new society within the shell of the old. Both Father Edmund and Father Haddigan see the virtues of these former neighbors and are interested in Ammon's plans to work among them in the future. My visit with Father Haddigan and Father Kelly was a most unexpected pleasure as Father Haddigan wrote me at the last minute inviting me to stop by on my way from Galesburg to St. Louis.

St. Louis

We are now in St. Louis and staying at Rogers Hall which is a women's residence connected with St. Louis University. I have already spoken at The Centre where Evelyn Gilson and others of the old *Catholic Worker* group have built up a bookshop, art center and meeting place. It would have delighted Peter's heart because he was always talking of the need for such a center near every big university in the country.

We went to Mass this morning at Monsignor Helriegel's Holy Cross Church and were welcomed, as usual with the kiss of peace. One comes from such a church feeling that God has been praised and honored intensely by pastor and flock. It made me happy to see Father with two enthusiastic young curates and to feel the fullness of joy in the Holy Family Mass of the day. We had breakfast with Monsignor and then went on to meet with a group of families.

To be continued.