

Be Kind, Cain

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Summary: An apologia for their work in response to a letter questioning their efficacy. She emphasizes strong faith, withholding judgment of the poor, country living, removing fears and the value of indoctrination. Says, "God is love, and perfect love casts out fear." (DDLW #460).

A letter on our work – and answering the question as to its futility or utility.

Though I am starting out on a trip through south and west, I am still not long enough away from home nor far enough, not to be preoccupied with the affairs of home. They write me that the appeal is coming along slowly. Those grocery bills! As I was leaving, Mr. Davin, David, Shorty, and a few others were peeling onions in the dining room, for the soup which has to go on the stove immediately after breakfast for the afternoon meal. Split peas, beans, cabbage, onions, carrots, potatoes (almost a hundred pounds a day of the latter) all these go into that soup, that good and holy soup to feed our guests, our ambassadors of God, as Peter has always called them. Then the bread, ten dollars worth a day, and coffee and sugar and milk. Thank God the weather is still warm in New York. Weather means a lot to poor people. There is no need to buy coal or oil as yet, nor blankets. For again there is a dearth of blankets, what with the farm at Newburgh and the House of Hospitality at 115 Mott St.

I remember one time when we were starting a woman's house and they were complaining they were cold. We had a steam heated apartment for them then. When I look back on our fifteen years, it seems to me that we get poorer, not more comfortably settled, which is a good thing. Anyway, we prayed for blankets, and during the course of the morning a car drove up, a chauffeur in it, who came into the office with an armload of blankets! And we don't know to this day whom he came from, whose gift it was.

And here is another story about Peter Maurin. One winter when all were complaining of the cold, I asked Peter one morning whether he were warm enough. He said "No." ("Let your answer be yea, yea, or nay, nay.") I went into his room which was on the first floor to save him steps, and there was his bed covered neatly with a cotton bedspread, nothing else. He had been sleeping in his clothes under his overcoat and a bedspread without complaint. When asked, however, he told the truth. He was cold. That's one way, of course, of covering many of our friends, the ambassadors of God, with blankets. By doing without oneself. Bread and coffee for breakfast the year round means that many can be fed.

"Thou knowest, O Lord, that we have need of all these things, bread and soup, blankets and coal." How debts do keep you down, and anxious; and yes, prayerful. Because if you did

not worry over your bills you would not pray about them. As it is, our staff goes around, murmuring, God help us, God help us! At least I know Tom Sullivan does, who has to confront the bill collectors, now that he is in charge of the house. When I was asking Tom for carfare and saw the anxious lines appear on his face, I added to my prayers, “Mary, Our Mother, they have no wine.” It is one of my favorite prayers, this of the Cana feast, reminding her, our Mother, to remind Him that we need to be warmed by the spirit, to be cheered, comforted and reassured. “Mother, we have no wine!”

Yes, I am thinking of those at home. They get to the eight o’clock Mass and then Bob Ludlow goes for the mail. Over bread and coffee one looks at letters. Bob is hard at work before anyone, never stirring from his desk until the stroke of noon. I’m praying as I think of him, that in opening the mail he will be rejoiced by the money to pay the bills, that people will continue to send in what represents their work, their livelihood, something from their own tables and homes, in short, something of their own life. It is the ones who have little who give the most of course, and it is the widow’s mite that God will multiply so that we can get our bills paid.

Our Friends

One of the reasons we keep so poor is the attitude of many of our friends who are dubious as to our program of voluntary poverty and works of mercy. Here is a letter which is typical enough, and perhaps I’ll be answering others by printing it and answering it here.

“I am very interested in your Catholic Worker movement, though I do not completely understand it. I mean about how far each individual must go in his imitation of Christ and how does one know which action is in imitation of Our Lord. I think what I like best about the movement, it is such a challenge. I knew it was something I was searching for and didn’t even know the Church had till I happened to read a copy of your paper.

“I have had very strong arguments about your work and what you do and I am afraid I have not been able to answer them all. How can it help the poor if we live in the same conditions that they do – that is, if I married and my husband and I went down and lived in the slums and our children were born there. What good would it do anybody? I had an argument with Fr. A. He said it wasn’t right to accept anyone in the Hospitality House as sometimes they had diseases like T.B. and endangered the lives of other occupants. Another argument, does it do any good to have soup kitchens, etc.? Does it really help them or do they just stay in the same position coming to get their bread and soup every day. In my heart I feel yours is the right way but so much is said against.

“I would like to start a Catholic Worker House here, but I am only twenty and do not have anything behind me. I would not know how to start. But when I read your paper it surely sets me on fire to do something for Christ’s poor. I think it is a wonderful work and I pray our Lord will show me some way to do something. What is indoctrination? I am afraid I am very ignorant but I do want to learn.

“All this is greatly against one’s human nature, which likes ease and comfort and we are not taught in school the things you are writing about. Does it mean giving up all pleasure – I

mean nice clothes, smoking, having fun, etc.? I hope I do not sound very childish and I hope you understand me. I would be very glad for some of your pamphlets, and are there any books you would advise me to read, I have read SAINTS IN SOCIAL WORK.

Sincerely in Christ,

“Firm Faith”

In answering this letter, I can say first of all that the epistle this morning, on the eve of All Saints, is from the sermon on the mount. I know a non-Catholic who reads it over every week and never tires of it. Pope Pius XII, who is “our dear sweet Christ on earth” as Catherine of Sienna said, in calling for action and in listing a program of action, says: **“a firm faith is an absolute faith, one that is without reserves or reticence, one that does not falter in the face of the ultimate consequences of truth, that does not retreat before its most rigorous applications. Do not be misled, as so many others have been, and suffered a thousand disastrous experiences, by the empty dream of winning over your adversary by attaching yourself to him and modeling yourself after him.”**

These may all sound like abstract principles, but the fate of the work depends on whether or not we try to put them into effect. That is why we have a retreat house, at Newburgh, to study the things of God, to learn to put first things first, to learn to know God and to love Him, to put off the old man and put on the new, **to learn to love**, and this is the most important of all, **whether or not people deserve it**, “for He maketh His sun to shine upon the just and the unjust.”

New Commandment

How can there be any question about it? Is there ever enough love in the world? “Love is the measure by which we shall be judged.” And we must love even to folly, as our Lord did. “This is the NEW commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you,” which meant for Him the laying down His life. We certainly don’t think it enough to just go on feeding people (two meals a day and it should be three), we have to love them, souls as well as bodies. It is the hardest thing in the world to love, because many of those who come for help look upon us as enemies, as typifying the comfortable, the educated, the great bourgeoisie. No matter how hard we try to be poor, we can never be as poor as those we try to serve, and they know it, and they know our backgrounds and hate us for them. We really have a chance to bless them that curse us, and to love them that spitefully use us, and there is no question of sentimentality in this love. We love with the love of preference, with the love of the will, and there is natural love there too, because of course, some are more friendly and some are better than others, and some like us, and of course, that makes us return that liking. But natural affections are only there to show us how strong our supernatural love should be.

There is no question but that people must be fed, clothed and sheltered. They would not be coming to us, standing in line in rains and cold and wind and snow, unless there were need. There are men and women out of hospitals, there are those who have been evicted from apartments and who end on park benches, and of course, there are the drunks, men

and women, people who try to fill themselves with the spirits, as Peter Maurin used to say, rather than the Spirit.

And who are we to judge what brought them to such a pass? There are three sayings that are very pat on their lips, and they fling them in your face triumphantly and most effectually stop your criticisms. “There but for the grace of God, go I,” one drug addict reminded me as she fell into the room. “Let him that is without sin cast the first stone,” said Jennie as she lurched upstairs one morning after a night on the Bowery. “Seventy times seven, Dorothy, remember seventy times seven,” Bill used to cry after me down the street.

Devil

The devil himself can quote scripture, one may say wryly, but the truth is the truth whether it comes from the devil or not, and these sayings, at least two of them, were uttered by Truth Himself.

Does it do any good? Does love do any good? Does it change people, or do they just keep coming? Well, people must eat, three times a day, there is never an end to it. It takes nine months to bring forth a babe and they are the longest months in a woman’s life. Many years have gone to making a man and woman what they are, and we ourselves can do little about it, except what the Lord Himself told us to do, “Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, love people, do not judge.” He has to do the rest by His grace. And there is no fear that He won’t do His share in His own good time.

To be very practical, by living in the slum yourself you save money and so have something to give. Down on Mott Street rents are ten, fifteen, eighteen dollars a month. Living in a slum involves mortification that we would not choose voluntarily. Mortification means “dying daily,” as St. Paul recommends. “Unless the seed fall into the ground and die, itself remaineth alone. But if it die it bringeth forth much fruit.” So if we die a little to our senses by not being able to take baths, by not being warm enough, or fed enough, or comfortable enough, then strangely enough we become healthier. We give up our life and save it. What we think is hard becomes easy.

Village or Farm

As to your question as to living in the slums with husband and children – if you read *The Catholic Worker* long enough, those sections called “Toeholds on the Land” will give you an idea of what we think young married people ought to do. One can be of good faith, and move to village or farm, live in poverty without modern plumbing or electricity, and have everything husband and children need in the way of space and sunlight. I know of farms as cheap as \$1,200 with outbuildings, farmhouse, woods and acreage, and employment with neighboring farmers and lumber mills available, provided one does not mind isolating oneself a dozen miles from town. This means only Sunday Mass, however, and then walking or hitchhiking, horse and buggy, or old secondhand Ford are necessary. But the green revolution

is part of our program. The Pope in his last address to women “reminded his hearers of the faith of the early Christians by stating that not less heroism is needed to live these days in the streets of great cities without weakening in the faith or staining one’s purity than was needed once in shedding one’s blood.” We wish we had the exact words instead of the paraphrase, but we understand a new encyclical on rural life will soon be out.

In the country there is room for hospitality and a Christ’s room in the house. One lives more cheaply and can contribute to the nearest house of hospitality by sending in grain, potatoes, apples and other foodstuffs.

As for yourself, there is always work to be done for the poor, either in one’s own parish, collecting clothes and food, visiting the sick, helping mothers who are in need of a strong hand, and since these things are hard to do alone, one can always find a group, such as Abbe Saey’s in Montreal, or Fr. Meenan’s in Pittsburgh, or Fr. Yunkers in Derry, or the nearest House of Hospitality. Come visit us if you can and make a retreat and start working on the basic part of our program. We have too few girls with us to do this work. For instance, in New York, Irene Mary Naughton is alone in the woman’s House of Hospitality and needs a helper. In Detroit they need help in the woman’s house, in Harrisburgh too.

All Things

Do you fear that “lest loving Him, you must have naught beside?” as Francis Thomson said in the Hound of Heaven. But in Him we have received all things. All life and joy. Yes, to answer your questions, clothes are a joy, and we are not called to put on sackcloth, but we can wear cast off hand me downs, and still look all right. This saves money too. Women are notorious in their extravagance in clothes, whether it is the \$6.98 dress in Klein’s or \$698 dress described in the New Yorker. It is all the same vanity, greed, desire for attention. Whereas we should try to be the least, the most disregarded, the servant who washes the feet. It would do away with a lot of mental torment if we practiced feeling this way. The reward comes even in this life, and our Lord reminded us of it, so we would not be discouraged.

And as for our health. If someone came to us with T.B. we would find a hospital for him of course. We know cases that have been cured, whose lives have been prolonged. If anyone had infections that we knew of, we would call in the doctor. Our Dr. Koiransky, a friend for the past fifteen years, always generously gives his services and we take advantage of them. But worrying about germs is not going to keep us from loving our brothers. Did you ever see a baby whose every bottle was sterilized, scrub a piece of bread around his play pen, and eat it with great enjoyment? I wonder how clean it was in the Holy Land in the days of our Lord? Instead of the saying, “Cleanliness is next to godliness” (I think John Wesley said it) and “order is heaven’s first law,” we should meditate on the disorder and the tattletale grey of the home filled with children. It is Love that is heaven’s first law.

Indoctrination

What is indoctrination? All of this is indoctrination. A retreat is indoctrination. A sermon on Sunday, the epistle and Gospel, the collects for the day, all are indoctrination, teaching us to put first things first. And the taste for things spiritual when once you begin to taste them! They are sweeter than honey and the honeycomb. One of the boys around the office used to go around groaning, “Heaven had better be good!” and I saw a girl beat her head with her hand as she contemplated her retreat notes this summer, but there was a gleam in her eye and an aroused look that made one think she was out to “overcome the world.” Thank God for “the strong conflict.”

And as for things to read – if you get discouraged with the poor, read **The Jungle** by Upton Sinclair. Read **The Honest Thief**, a short story by Dostoevsky. I recommend fiction because it has helped me so much. We love to read about the poor in Dickens and Dostoevsky, but when we start to live it, then there are the bitter looks. “You have deceived us. It is not romantic, it is not glamorous.” There are two famous sayings of Chesterton, in his **What’s Wrong with the World** –

The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.

Men have not gotten tired of Christianity; they have never found enough of Christianity to get tired of.

God is love, and perfect love casts out fear. Once during the war years, when we were emphasizing our pacifist position over and over, I had a dreadful dream. I heard a harsh, discordant voice, and loud jeering laughter, and when I could distinguish the words, this is what they were. **BE KIND, CAIN! BE KIND, CAIN! BE KIND, CAIN!** And then more jeering scornful laughter.

Russia

I was thinking of Russia the other day, and the denial of God, and the doctrine of force, and thinking that the denial of God in His poor, and that the doctrine of force were here with us too in the western world. I had been reading Juliana of Norwich, the old English mystic and she had reminded me that the worst that could have happened has already happened, and I do not mean the atom bomb.

**“I stood beholding generally, troublously and mourning, saying thus to our Lord, with full great dread; Ah, good Lord, how might all be well, for the great hurt that is come by sin to thy creatures? And to this our blessed Lord answered full meekly and with full lovely cheer, and showed that Adam’s sin was the most harm that was ever done, or ever shall be, to the world’s end; and also he shewed that sin is openly known in all Holy Church on earth. Furthermore he taught that I should behold the glorious satisfaction; for this amends making is more pleasing to God and more worshipful, without comparison, than ever was the sin of Adam harmful. Then meaneth our blessed Lord thus in teaching, that we should heed to

this;”For since I have made well the most harm, then it is my will that thou know thereby that I shall make well all that is less.“**

So in considering these things, there are these words to clutch to us, the words of our Lord to Juliana, the promise that “that all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”