

On Pilgrimage - July/August 1965

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Summary: Quotes from Pope John XXIII about his foul experience in the military. Hopes the Vatican Council will make a clear anti-war statement in line with Jesus' word: "Put up thy sword." Reaffirms a kind of pacifist manifesto: use the weapons of the spirit and take up you cross and follow Jesus. (DDLW #828).

One wakes early in the city on hot summer mornings, and this morning I began my day by going on with my reading of Pope John XXIII's **Journal of a Soul** (McGraw-Hill). I had reached page 84, "Notes made during the spiritual exercises after the Babylonian Captivity" (which is what he termed his time in the Army). He wrote of knowing what hell was like, now that he had lived in barracks. "What blasphemies there were in that place, and what filth. Would hell be any better? What if I were to end there, while my fellow soldiers, the poor wretches, who grew up surrounded by evil were sent to Paradise—no wonder I tremble at the thought. . . . O the world is so ugly, filthy and loathsome! In my year of military service I have learned all about it. The army is a running fountain of pollution, enough to submerge whole cities. Who can hope to escape from this flood of slime, unless God comes to his aid. . . . I did not think any reasonable man could fall so low. Yet it is a fact. Today, after my brief experience, I think it is true to say that more than half of mankind, at some time in their lives, become animals, without shame. And the priests? O God, I tremble when I think that not a few among these betray their sacred calling. Now nothing surprises me any more; certain stories make no impression on me. Everything is explained. What cannot be explained is how it is that You, O most pure Jesus, of whom it is said 'He pastures his flock among the lilies,' can put up with such infamous conduct, even from your own ministers, and yet deign to come down into their hands and dwell in their hearts, without inflicting on them instant punishment. Lord Jesus, I tremble for myself too. If 'stars of the sky fell to the earth,' what hope have I who am made out of dust? From now on I intend to be even more scrupulous about this matter even if I become the laughing stock of the whole world. In order not to touch upon impure subjects, I think it is better to say very little, or hardly anything at all, about purity. We have this treasure in earthen vessels. I have reason to tremble. 'Is my flesh bronze?'"

A Hard School

In his letters to the rector of the seminary at Rome, young Roncalli is far more moderate in his expressions; the editorial note which introduces the two letters explains that at that time there were no military chaplains to give spiritual assistance in the barracks and that his letters, while commending the courtesy of the officer in command and the good nature of the Italian soldier, bear out what he wrote in his notes “with all the frankness of an innocent soul brought face to face with the reality of the moral crisis in which most young men, especially those who live the communal life of the barracks, find themselves involved. In such circumstances the weaker and less noble, one might say the most melancholy characteristics of youth come to the fore.”

“Nevertheless,” young Angelo Roncalli wrote, “every day I am more convinced of the great benefit I shall draw from this year’s experience, for the glory of God and to the advantage of the Church.”

Now, half a century later, the Vatican Council at Rome is taking up this issue of war and peace, and the rights of conscience, as well as the formation of conscience in regard to the means used in modern war.

There was still time this morning to read a chapter in the Gospel, and I opened to the 22nd chapter of Luke, which begins with the story of the Last Supper, Jesus’ taking bread and wine and saying: “This is My Body, this is My Blood,” and then crying out: “Behold the hand of him who betrays Me is with Me on the table.” . . . “And they began to question one another which of them it was that would do this. A dispute also arose among them which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.

“And He said to them, the kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and they that have power over them, are called beneficent.” (The newest version says ‘Benefactors’.) “But you, not so: but he that is the greater among you, let him become as the younger; and he that is the leader, as he that serveth. For which is greater, he that sitteth at table or he that serveth. Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves. And you are those who have continued with me in my trials. And I dispose to you, as my Father hath disposed to me, a kingdom. . . . And turning to Simon He rebuked him saying, ‘Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not. And thou being once converted, confirm thy brethren’.”

Simon Peter protested that he was ready to follow him to the death, but Jesus sadly told him that before the cock crowed Peter would deny him three times. He reminded them of His sending them forth without purse or scrip and asked them did they want for anything? They said, “Nothing.” And He went on; “But now he that hath a purse let him take it, and likewise a scrip, and he that hath not, let him sell his coat, and buy a sword.

" For I say to you, that this that is written must yet be fulfilled in Me: **‘And with the wicked was he reckoned.’**

The apostles said, “Behold here are two swords. And he said to them: it is enough.”

Mystery of Iniquity

I thought about these very mysterious passages in the half hour I stayed in church after my communion. Often I have thought of how the apostles were afraid and hid themselves behind locked doors. And I thought too of how even after Jesus’ death and resurrection they were still hankering after a kingdom, a worldly kingdom and the subjugation of their enemies. It is all there in the pages of the New Testament, in the Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles. It is not easy reading, the New Testament, any more than the Old is.

I am thinking of it now, in connection with the Council, this last session on which so many hopes are placed. This entire issue of the **Catholic Worker** is addressed especially, by scholars and workers, by the laity, men and women, by the little ones of the Church, to the three thousand bishops, to the Holy Father Pope Paul VI, as well as to our own readers.

Membership in Christ

Certainly Jesus knew that since He **was reputed among the wicked**, He was always going to be entangled with the things of this world. Christ is our head and we are His members. We are other Christs by our incorporation into the body of Christ. We involve Him even in our sin. “He became sin for us,” according to St. Paul. He knew we were going to go after material things. (A certain amount of goods is necessary to lead a good life, St. Thomas Aquinas said.) When the Jews fled Egypt they took with them (as restitution for unpaid wages?) the belongings, the gold and silver of the Egyptians. To this day we have an increase of wealth in the Church until persecution takes it from us, or until we voluntarily do penance, deprive ourselves, deny ourselves and follow Him in serving our brothers. To this day we have the sword and the spectacle of brother fighting against brother, German and Italian Catholic against French and English and American–Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, fighting each other. “The time will come when you will think you are serving God in putting one another to death.”

It is as though He said, “Very well, take your scrip, your purse, your sword. Each one of you must have a personal encounter with Me, your risen Lord, your Jesus, your Master before you understand.” Just as Mary Magdalene, Thomas, Peter, James and John did. “I have loved you with an everlasting love even when you are denying me. You will each one of you, loved uniquely by the Father, have to be visited by the Holy Spirit before you will understand. You have your

freedom to make your choices. It is a matter of your individual conscience, your individual conversion. Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find.”

My comfort is that a thousand years are one day in the sight of God, and so Christianity is two days old, we have scarcely begun, we are still defending God and Country (putting them on an equality) by our wealth and our weapons.

Come Holy Spirit!

Our prayer and our hope is that from the chair of Peter, from the College of Cardinals will come during this last session of the Council, a clear statement, “Put up thy sword,” with the healing touch of Jesus in such a statement to the ears of those who, hearing, do not understand.

The apostles didn’t take the sword, they cowered in fear instead and could scarcely believe that they saw Him again. They were still asking Him about when the earthly kingdom would come despite His clear statement that His kingdom was not of this world which is a testing ground, a place of trial, a school of Christ, as St. Benedict had it.

But after the Holy Spirit enlightened the apostles they went to martyrdom, embraced the cross, laid down their own lives for their neighbors, in whom they were beginning to see Christ.

“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren you have done it unto me.”

We long with all our hearts for such a statement from the Bishops, clear, uncompromising, courageous. We know that men in their weakness, like the apostles, will still take the sword, will still be denying Christ in their brother the Negro, the Vietnamese.

But the teaching of Jesus has indeed been answered again and again over the ages, from the apostles to the present day and again and again these called by the Holy Spirit and touched by grace have laid down their lives for the Faith that God is our Father and all men are our brothers.

Love

“A new commandment I give unto you, that you love others as I have loved you,” that is to the **laying down** of one’s life. The commandment of love, which is binding on us all, in Old Testament and New, was finally heard by Peter, once the denier, and by Franz Jagerstatter in the second World War. And by how many others through the ages whose histories have never been written? Our God is a hidden God, and such stories are hidden too in the lives of the saints.

We read in the life of Theophane Venard in Vietnam of how he considerably shed his clothes before his head was chopped off so that the executioner who was

paid for his deed with them would not be receiving blood-stained garments. Such was his love for his enemies, remembering Jesus' words, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." We think of the martyrs of Uganda, Protestant and Catholic, when we read the history of Africa and her exploitation.

Christ is being martyred today in Vietnam, in Santo Domingo and in all places where men are taking to the sword in this world crisis. He will be crucified to the end of time. He is with us in His humanity until the end of time.

Weapons of Peace

One of our Catholic pacifists asked me to write a clear, theoretical, logical, pacifist manifesto, and he added so far, in these thirty-three year of **The Catholic Worker**, none had appeared from my pen.

I can write no other than this: Unless we use the weapons of the spirit, denying ourselves and taking up our cross and following Jesus, dying with Him and rising with Him, men will go on fighting, and often from the highest motives, believing that they are fighting defensive wars for justice for others and in self-defense against present or future aggression.

To try to stop war by placing before men's eyes the terrible suffering involved will never succeed, because men are willing (in their thoughts and imaginations at least) to face any kind of suffering when motivated by noble aims like the vague and tremendous concept of freedom, God's greatest gift to man, which they may not articulate by merely sense. Or, in their humility (or sloth, – who knows?) men are quite willing to leave decisions to others "who know more about it than we do." Without religious conversion there will be few Franz Jagerstatters to stand alone and leave wife and children and farm for conscience sake. But as Jagerstatter said, it was God's grace that moved him, more powerful than any hydrogen bomb.

Freedom

This month I saw the film **China!** and two years ago I visited Cuba and saw the changes the Marxist-Leninists were making there. Living so close to misery and vice, destitution and homelessness, hard and cruel labor, sickness of mind and soul and body at the Catholic Worker as we do, – seeing all this aspect of life each day in city and country, one is tempted by such a vision of a **forcible** working towards the common good.

If the Chinese and the Cubans are working for justice, and a better life for the masses, are they not also working for Christ, though they do not know him? But as Harold Robbins, the distributist, wrote in **The Sun of Justice**:

"Freedom is the primary and supreme reason for the existence of mankind. That He should be freely loved and served seems, as far as our thought can penetrate,

to have been God's chief reason for calling us into being. At the cost of this freedom God could have established and maintained a world full of **order**, but not of justice, for free will is of the essence of human justice."

It is on these grounds that we stand opposed to war. Upholding this freedom for Communist and Capitalist, the East and the West.