On Pilgrimage - October 1968

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Bemoans the destruction and suffering of war and violence. Recaps the resistance of the Catonsville Nine and Milwaukee Fourteen. Shares neighborhood stories and their poverty. Resumes her account of a trip to Mississippi and civil rights accomplishments. (DDLW #889).

It is mid-October and the weather is still warm. There has been no wind and the leaves are still on the trees. The maples and the oaks and the sumac are brilliant, but in general the trees are still green. There is scarcely a hint of frost in the air; only at night a chill arises, a foretaste of the cold to come.

Aside from the pettiest of annoyances, which are part of life, there is generally calm and quiet in the morning, to do one's work. If only there were not the radio! The news of a North Vietnamese island half obliterated, bombarded by the guns of a reactivated warship. The bloody death and destruction of that land at the other end of the world, in the name of Defense. In the mail comes word from Ndubisi Egemenye, a Biafran student of journalism at Duke University, also a cry of anguish, recounting again the massacres which have occurred, the last one in 1966 of 35,000 East Nigerians, the Biafrans, and telling too of the slow agony of death by starvation of the besieged, the non-combatants, the women and the children. We have already forgotten the mass extermination that went on in Indonesia two years ago, in the name of wiping out Communism.

How to be happy in this world where even nature itself, in sudden hurricane or typhoon or earthquake, suffers and groans? How to sing of the glory of God in this strange land? "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat and wept," living as exiles, as we are.

It is only in the light of this anguish that one can understand the attempt made by the Catonsville Nine and the Milwaukee Fourteen, amongst whom are so many of our friends, to **suffer with** these fellow human beings so devastated by war and famine. These men, priests and laymen, have offered themselves as a living sacrifice, as hostages. Next to life itself, man's freedom is his most precious possession, and they have offered that, as well as the prayer and fasting they have done behind bars, for these others.

In case there are those among our readers who do not know why these men have suffered trial and imprisonment, if radio or television or press has not

reached them – it is because they have destroyed draft records in Maryland and Wisconsin, the 1-A files, which meant the next men to be called in our criminal drafting and enslavement of young men for our immoral wars. Where we have not sent men, we have sent weapons, planes, bombs to do the work in other countries' wars. There are many other actions – of refusal to work in any industry pertaining to war or to pay taxes for war – being undertaken that we cannot include here, that are too numerous to list.

We can only thank God and try to add our prayers and sacrifices.

Because newspaper coverage of the burning of the files has been so meagre, this issue of the **Catholic Worker** has stories by Michael Ketchum, of our New York staff, who went to the trial in Baltimore, which took place in mid-October. We print also the talk Barbara Deming made at one of the rallies which occurred every night from Sunday until Thursday, which drew more than a thousand young people from colleges all around, and many priests and seminarians. During the day the streets were filled with peaceful demonstrators, beginning with a march of almost thirty blocks to the main post office, where the trial was being held. St. Ignatius Church Hall was given over to the demonstrators. Meals were served there and hospitality was given by the Jesuits and the Christian Brothers throughout the city. At the close of the trial and before disbanding, there was a great clean up, not only of the hall and the washrooms, but even of the sidewalks up and down the street. I was present only for the Sunday and Monday night meetings, and sat in on the trial for the first day. It was a remarkably peaceful and intensely interesting week for all who participated.

We are going to press this month on October 25$^{\text{th}}$ and are finally reconciled, as I hope our readers are also, to the fact that, unlike almost every other periodical, we are not publishing on the fifteenth of the preceding month, nor will we ever. This means that we cannot warn our readers at the beginning of October about what is going to happen during the month, but only tell them what has happened. We are not really a newspaper, but a periodical coming out once a month, occasionally skipping an issue when we are broke or short-handed, and there is many a great event which we miss commenting on. We are warmed and heartened by two letters received recently from readers who tell us that ship route to India or Africa will do very well, because the articles in the **CW** are timeless. They add that they cannot bear to miss a copy.

The rest of the month and the beginning of November will find me travelling to Rochester, New York, and Montreal, but otherwise I remain either in St. Joseph's house, 36 E. First St., New York or at the Catholic Worker Farm at Tivoli. How good it would be to be snowed in at Tivoli for a time!

To give a brief resume of the past month: we had two Friday meetings when all who came joined in work, helping mail out the CW and the appeal. Plenty of work to do there still. On the other Friday night meetings we had talks by Father James Megivern, chairman of the Theology Department of St. John's University, Ned O'Gorman, the poet, who told of his days in the Addie Mae Collins Center,

at 2029 Madison Avenue in Harlem, where he and several assistants help all the little children on the block from dawn till dark; and Paulette Curran, who told us about the impromptu classes and the learning which are going on during the New York City teachers' strike, where the children stayed for three hours on one subject if their attention was held, or got up and walked out and found another more interesting teacher to listen to or work with.

I visited Ned O'Gorman's place during the month and saw the two cheerful store fronts in the appalling slum area of Harlem, where the vice and crime portrayed in Malcolm X's **Autobiography** flourishes. It was so beautiful a fall day that many of the children had been taken to the parks and museums and only the littlest remained. The place is painted and papered with pictures of all kinds, and the walls are lined with books. Visitors came and went, and on the wide sidewalks in front people met together to talk. Down on the East Side, in the Italian and Jewish neighborhoods, old people and mothers and babies are always hauling out chairs and sitting in the sun and I wished that Ned had benches or more chairs to decentralize the crowd and make, as it were, another room, an outdoor one. We always used to bring out chairs on Mott Street. Our neighbors would take advantage of them, and if they liked a chair they took it upstairs to their own apartment. But then they were always giving us furniture too.

There is a big church on the corner of Ned's street which is kept locked up all day so that there is no chance to "make a visit." I myself like a nice big parish church, where one can get a wonderful sense of space and privacy and quiet. Nativity Church, on Second Avenue and Second Street, is our present parish and was when we lived at 223 Chrystie Street. Many a man from the Muni (the Municipal Lodging House, on Third Street) went to morning Mass and dropped in during the day to sit in the sun of the Blessed Sacrament.

If I wrote to Archbishop Cooke and asked that Nativity church be kept open during the day, I wonder if the pastor and curates would agree. Of course, things would get stolen. If there are curtains, heavy rich red plush ones, in front of the confessionals, they might be taken home to be used as covers in the cold tenements, where too often the furnace breaks down. Or the candlesticks might disappear from the altar, to supply the light when the welfare check was used for food and the gas and electric was shut off.

We ourselves were threatened that way at Tivoli by the Central Hudson Gas and Electric last month because we had missed paying our monthly bill. No leeway given, "Pay, or we come on Monday to shut off the electricity," which means that heat goes off and the pump that fills the reservoir stops functioning for the thirty-five people around the house at Tivoli, who now include two newly born infants and people who have passed three score and ten. Of course the bill was large, $128, but we got it paid by collecting it here and there from everyone we encountered. Some of our young residents who have been picking grapes chipped in a ten here and there, and one girl gave twenty dollars. We really have never been quite so broke as we are right now, but the appeal is going out and little by little the bills will get paid.

The only other time we bought a house in the city, back in 1950, it was the same, but the butcher, the baker and grocer all waited for months and months. None of these cooperators are chain stores, needless to say.

But to return to how the church in Harlem could be used by the entire neighborhood: There is always a basement and a hall, and what does it matter if only a handful of people get to daily Mass? There could be a good literature rack, and perhaps an organ recital a few times a week, and a choir to practice and to put on some concerts. But of course what pastors worry about is desecration of the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. As though the dear Lord could not take care of Himself.

The Pursuit

But I promised to tell more about my three weeks' trip through Mississippi in August. It is not so far a cry from Harlem to Mississippi after all. What with declining farm equipment and the lack of educational and health facilities, more and more Negroes are moving north to the big cities.

According to **Fortune** magazine, 77 per cent of all Negroes lived in the South in 1940. Now just over half do. "Because migrating Negroes are subjected to less study than migrating birds, nobody knows how many have moved out of the south since 1960, when the last census was taken. But there is fragmentary evidence to suggest the migration is changing in direction." But they are returning not to the rural South, but to the cities. One half of the entire Negro population are in the cities compared to one third in 1940.

There is more employment offered to the Negro now in Southern cities and when a Negro woman was elected Chancery Clerk in Port Gibson, Mississippi, a town half way between Natchez and Jackson, she found little cooperation in the county to help her begin her new job. So the local priest, a Missionary Servant of the Most Holy Trinity, went to Berry Morgan, a convert to the faith, asking her to help out with what aid she could give and her moral support. Berry promptly found herself being boycotted by her neighbors, but she was of such established position, and was so completely happy as a convert and a writer, that it did not bother her much.

Hearing about our visit to Natchez from her friend Marge Baroni, Berry drove down one day and took Kay Lynch and me home with her to spend the night. She lives on Albena Plantation, a six-hundred-acre tract in the northern, Delta section of the state. The house and lawn are surrounded by a picket fence and then there is what I can only describe as rain forest shutting them in. Trees, trees everywhere, and when I asked her if there was no garden near the house she indicated that there was a clearing away in the back, where there was a clear field for a garden. Other such fields dotted the woods, connected by direct roads so numerous that Berry herself has not explored all of them. Some fields comprise a few acres, others fifteen or twenty-five, and there are cattle grazing,

and horses. It is a strange land there along the Mississippi, a country of loess soil that is like powder, or silt, and all but impossible to cultivate, and I guess it is the trees and the shrubbery that hold it down. But the roads have been worn down so that they are between steep high banks. There is a section of Mississippi near there, fifteen by twenty-five miles, which is inhabited. I felt trapped in these woods and am sure I would never dare to set foot in this dense jungle because of the rattlesnakes.

Berry's three children were not afraid but most at home in that countryside, and hated to go back to school in New Orleans the following week. The house was furnished with massive beds with canopies, and wardrobes, and great dressers, and there was an air conditioner in the room with the bed canopy and a television set in an alcove off the hall. The Convention was going on, but we did not stay up to watch it. Our hostess announced that she always rose at four to write, so she was ready for bed at seven-thirty.

"I am really a plagiarist," she said, "listening to Bach while I work and translating it into prose." She gave me a copy of her **Pursuit**, the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award Novel, which was highly praised by Walker Percy, a novelist whom I esteem. She is planning a book of her short stories, which appeared in the **New Yorker**, about the people of the South; the collection will be called **The Mystic Adventures of Roxie Stoner**. I'm looking forward to it.

So we went to bed early, and she passed on to me her copy of **One Dimensional Man** by Herbert Marcuse, which I in turn was to pass on to her sixteen-year-old son, who would be sitting up waiting for it. I had been hearing a lot about Marcuse recently, first at a conference in New England, and then from Brother Hugh, who asked me during my talk to the Trappist priests and brothers at Conyers, Georgia: "Isn't all the ferment among youth due to one M-a-r-c-u-s-e (he spelled it out) who is infecting them with Marxism?" And now here in this Southern plantation in the midst of the woods.

Greenville and Greenwood

When we arrived at Greenville we were met by Father Messina, a native Mississippian, who took us to the five-thirty Mass which Father Thomas Reed was offering. (Eddie Reed, his brother, had been in charge of the tutorial program in Natchez for the summer, and left for Louvain last month.)

Greenville is in the very heart of the Delta region, where Cotton is King, as they say, where the land stretches out for miles, flat as a pancake. Next to Texas, Mississippi is the greatest cotton-producing state in the country and this in spite of the fact that seventy per cent of the state is forest, according to the latest **World Almanac.** The school run by the Sisters of Mercy in Greenville is extremely well integrated. Some of the sisters had us to supper, and afterwards we drove around to see the largest housing project in the South, which was going up building by building, with lots of space around the eighty buildings of four

units each. Sister Ann from Chicago was living with one of the Negro families and was going to join some other Sisters in working with the inhabitants of the project.

It was the opinion of the blacks we met with that the best work in Mississippi, the most militant work, was being done by the Delta Ministry, which has a paid staff of 35 and annual budget of three hundred thousand dollars, so that they can afford to hire full-time workers in eight counties. They also have ties with individual and local groups in eleven other counties. Those who want to keep up with what is happening in this state ought to subscribe to this **News Letter**, Box 120 Tougaloo, Miss., 39174, which reports on the cooperatives in this and neighboring states.

The next morning, we travelled on to Greenwood to be in time for the Mass at the Franciscan Center, where our old friends Stanley Borowski and Larry Evers once worked for some months with Father Nathaniel. This was years ago, before the violence erupted over the Freedom Schools and voter registration. Father Nathaniel is responsible for starting a boycott, similar to the one in Natchez a year ago which I read about in a copy of the **Wall Street Journal** picked up on the subway. There was a front page, right hand column story of the boycott and its successful outcome in opening up more jobs to the Negro. (It is a shame we have to get our news from the subway because our fellow workers in Natchez are too busy working of the cause there to write us about it!)

Many of the Pax Christi women who come to work with Kate Jordan, who has been working with Fr. Nathaniel for many years, are getting degrees to teach in the Negro and white colleges in the south. I met tour old friend Ima Taylor and a new friend, Shirley Foley, who is going to Boston University. There are many volunteers in this movement who come for the summer and stay for training for work in the south.

My only criticism of the work in Greenwood is in regard to **the dogs**. There were a couple of fiercely barking police dogs which the women had to lock up on a porch every time we passed from one building to another of the large group which makes up the Center in Greenwood. When I suggested that I stay at the rectory, the priest assistant to Father Nathaniel said that I would not like the Doberman Pinschers which they had there either. Why the dogs? "They are dog lovers around here," one of the girls said. "To keep out those who steal" was another explanation.

But when you remember the police dogs used against children in Birmingham, and have seen the dogs which accompanied the police in Baltimore, on their short leashes as the officers patrolled the streets; and saw them being taken out of vans and hoisted up and over a fence around the little park opposite the post office where the trial of the Catonsville Nine was going on, you cannot help but think that the presence of dogs showed fear and distrust of the very folk one lived amongst. "If anyone takes your cloak, offer him your coat too," Jesus said.

I reproach myself, too, for my fear of dogs. St. Francis said, "Be subject to every

living creature" quoting the words of St Paul, and he added, "Even to the dog who is about to bite you." How far we are from living what we believe.

Aside from this reproach, I have nothing by admiration for the tremendous amount of work done by this group of dedicated women, and I'd recommend too their paper, **The Center**, so send for a copy, (708 Avenue I, Greenwood, Mississippi.)