

On Pilgrimage - March 1973

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Summary: An obituary for Catholic Worker Mike Sullivan. Comments on letter writing, new books, and the vocation of writing. (DDLW #257).

A few days ago, early in the morning, Alice Lawrence, one of the hardest working members of our house of hospitality on the land, called me to come to see Mike Sullivan. His face was pale and strained. She had brought him his morning coffee and found him almost unconscious, struggling for breath. Most of us in these upstairs rooms are the older ones with various disabilities. Mike had been in and out of the hospital all winter, and it would take persuading to make him go again. Alice, with all her other duties, looked after him, as she had so many others.

His oxygen machine was on the table, and while I held his hand, Alice put it to his lips, helping him breathe. It took some talking, but finally he nodded his head he would go. Our people want to die at home. Our local volunteer ambulance came at once, and Mike was given every care, but he died twenty-four hours later. He was “waked” at White’s funeral parlor in Rhinebeck the following night, and next morning six pall bearers (his fellow workers at the farm) carried the casket into the church of St. Sylvia in Tivoli, just as Hans Tunnesen had been last month.

Mike Sullivan, Worker

The funeral liturgy was offered by Father Andy who also gave the homily. He spoke to us about life.

After the Mass our little cortege followed Mr. White’s station-wagon (which was the hearse) to the little cemetery on 9G, just north of Tivoli. Mike Sullivan is buried there with nine others of our C.W. family in the large plot which St. Sylvia’s pastor, Msgr. Kane generously gave us.

John Filliger had made white birch crosses, and Laura Waes had lettered the names on them. There was a row of nine of them there now.

The night before Mike died, some of us had read the Vesper psalms from the Office of the Dead in the little chapel which Mike himself, with the help of Kay

Lynch, had partitioned off at the end of the long, fifteen-bed dormitory which had been a casino years ago.

It would have been better if we who had gathered at the funeral parlor to say the rosary which Fr. Andy led, could have “waked” him in the chapel he built. Or even in the Community room, as we did years ago for Peter Maurin on Mott Street.

But with a population of babies (seven under five), early teenagers, and older teenagers, and the use of the Community room as library, sewing room, play room, ping pong room and conference room, it is not practicable to lay out the dead there. And our chapel is too small.

That community room, with its fifty feet of windows along the front, had been screened by Mike in summer, and sealed with plastic in winter to keep out the gales. Wherever you look Mike had worked. Plumbing jobs, un-stopping toilets and sinks, seeing about fuses and electrical work, furnaces and water heaters. Mike was a knowledgeable man.

Many, too, were the kindnesses Mike did for the women of the house. The old as well as the young. He liked and helped women. Getting up early as working men and children do, he was the one Sally, years ago (she is now ten) and Coretta Corbin (four) demanded breakfast from – an egg, toast, milk, cereal. He waited on them to let Rita get a little more much-needed sleep.

Coretta visited him daily on his sickbed before he was too ill, and we could hear a long one-sided conversation (a confusion of terms there) going on, little chatterbox as she was. Mike’s smile was enough for her. It wasn’t the candy he kept in his room—it was a *listeners* she wanted.

God bless Mike Sullivan. May he rest in Peace. It has been very hard to write this little obituary, coming so soon as it does after Jack English’s and Hans Tunnesen’s deaths.

Mail and Jottings

The rest of this column will be “jottings.” They were written before Mike died.

As a pilgrim, I comfortably stay at home and travel with maps, books, newspapers and journals. Maps may include detailed maps of Dutchess and Columbia counties on this side of the Hudson River where we live, and later, the counties on the other side. Then perhaps, when I catch up with mail, I can write some “rural rides” as Cobbett did in the Everyman edition. I must ask Stanley Vishnewski to hunt for them next time he goes to New York.

Stanley is now giving slide talks about the history of the Catholic Worker. He just gave one at a Friday night meeting, enthusiastically received. He’ll tell all his jokes, two of the simplest and most famous being, “We change the sheets

on our beds every week— from one bed to another,” and “Yes, we have room for you if you don’t mind sleeping thirteen in a bed,” and so on.

“When my mail is caught up”— “When I catch up on mail”—phrases always on my lips. Stanley says, “Half of it doesn’t need answering.” He himself had just received a letter asking for all my writings, tapes, pictures, etc., because the writer was going to write a thesis. “Just throw it in that shopping bag full of mail which is going to the archives,” he says.

It is true, I cannot keep up with the letters. The paper itself should answer questions asked. Read the **Catholic Worker**. If you are be-fuddled by it ask God to enlighten you. The gifts of the Holy Spirit should enlighten you. Pray for *knowledge*(and forgive me for trying to take a sabbatical leave from letters as well as speaking).

Our May issue, marking our 40th Anniversary, will have articles written by some of our editors. We hope it will be the kind of paper which we can hand and send out when we are asked, “What is The Catholic Worker all about?” I’m supposed to write on “Anarchism-Personalism.”

Publishing

Harper’s has sent me a little book for review of beautiful, enlightening, thought-provoking quotations from Teilhard de Chardin. It is a small, gift size book, bound in white, looking as though it were meant for a wedding gift since the title is **Love**. But it is for everyone, no matter what age or condition. Sex, energy, chastity, love— too bad I can’t quote a paragraph, but one has to ask permission of publishers and pay for such paragraphs, I’m told. (I cannot remember the price of the book.)

Speaking of prices of books and royalties to authors, the author gets 10% of the price of the book, hard cover. But by the time advance “royalties” are taken out (strange word, that, for rather insignificant sums), plus pay to some editorial assistant one could well do without (a former editor of a trade paper of Standard Oil was assigned to me once), and retyping (of course), how that first check decreases in size! And as for paper backs, editions of 75,000 are paid for by a \$750 advance. Does that mean the author gets 7 and a half cents a copy? I am all mixed up. I’m not good on arithmetic—someone else is— and 2 and a half cents a copy. So I warn all would-be authors never to expect to earn a living by writing. To be a writer one needs to have an overpowering desire to be heard.

But here it is Lent, and I should be fasting from “wanting to be heard.” So many sorrowful letters come in, and one feels one must remind those writers of the “duty of delight” as Ruskin phrased it. “To rejoice always, again I say rejoice” (the message of St. Paul). To tell them to pray for consolation, healing, light, courage, strength to endure. Prayers are always answered (one way or another). Such prayers bring strange joy on occasion, even in the midst of

seemingly unmitigated grief, even despair. Even in the midst of horror, one suddenly feels the touch of God's hand, and knows with Julian of Norwich that somehow or other "all will be well"—that "the worst has already happened and been repaired."

Other Books

Curtis Paperbacks, through its editor Patrick O'Connor, wishes me to call attention to the fact that my three books, **The Long Loneliness**,* *Loaves and Fishes**, and **On Pilgrimage—The Sixties**, are available at \$1.25 a copy. When I look at them I think, "I have written enough." But then I remember that admonition of Father John J. Hugo—"He who says he has done enough has already perished."

Don't write me for the source of the quotation. Write him. He is head of the Liturgical Commission of the Pittsburgh Diocese and has written many books himself, which ought to be read.

There is a "cottage industry" just begun and off it goes to a good start, bringing out a box of twelve tapes of Thomas Merton on **Prayer**. It was a joy to hear his voice. These conferences to his novices are well worth the money. You can buy them \$8.95 each, a few at a time, if you cannot afford them all. Far better than any other taped conferences I have heard. Very lively! Address: Electronic Paperbacks, Box 2, Chappaqua, New York, 10514.