

On Pilgrimage - February 1959

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Summary: Tells of a failed cooperative apartment effort. Describes the mess of moving to a new house, the dust of demolition next door, the temporary stop of the bread line, and the cost of flop housing. (DDLW #749).

This day's feast was spent at Peter Maurin Farm and after Mass we played the English Grail record of the Gelineaux psalms, a monks and children's choir. We had the book, so could follow it and the translation from the Jerusalem Bible is beautifully clear and simple. One can sing the refrain, the antiphon, very easily, and it stays in the mind. Now we have the Welch choral singers' version, and the French and the English.

They are unutterably beautiful gifts, otherwise we could never have afforded them. Still, expensive as they are, they should be a part of a Catholic family's library of records. They are well worth making sacrifices for. One sings with them, rather than just listens to them. It is all part of the new synthesis of Cult, Culture and Cultivation, Peter Maurin's synthesis, he called it, on which I am invited to speak somewhere around the first of April up in Boston, under the auspices of the St. Botolph Group. They ask me also to bring up some of the "art" of the Catholic Worker, which can include some beautiful pieces of wood carving that were made by a carpenter, a seaman and a prisoner for us especially. We once had a shop on Mott street, run by what we called the Catholic Union of the Unemployed, and it was so successful that the men were able to start what they called cooperative apartments, where they lived together as craftsmen. Some of them moved to the land where they rented an old farm house for ten dollars a month, and they earned their living by clamming and making crib sets and crucifixes. All these ventures were so prosperous that in the first case the men ended the experiment in a wild party which scattered them to the four winds after a free for all fight, and the rural venture ended with the marriage of the man and woman who sparked the venture. There also some of the men absconded with funds, after selling the bicycles and clam forks and tools. I am pretty well convinced, what with my experience of the CW activities of the last twenty five years, that God wants the total dedication of those who are working together with us, to voluntary poverty and the works of mercy. Which would mean that the money earned should go into a common purse, that all feeling of independence would be given up and our sense of the

Mystical Body so deepened that we would always be working with the idea – “Let your abundance supply their want.” That doesn’t mean that aside from the Catholic Worker and its particular program of action, such small groups would not be very successful indeed, a healthy cell within the old society, or rather a new society within the shell of the old. A few failures, a few falls! There is always the work of helping each other up again and starting again. Chesterton said, “It is not that Christianity has not been tried. It has been tried and found difficult.” People give up too easily.

Within the Catholic Worker, there has always been such emphasis placed on the works of mercy, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the harborless, that it has seemed to many of our intellectuals a top heavy performance. There was early criticism that we were taking on “rotten lumber that would sink the ship.” “Derelict” was the term used most often. As though Jesus did not come to live with the lost, to save the lost, to show them the way. His love was always shown most tenderly to the poor, the derelict, the prodigal son, so that he would leave the ninety nine just ones to go after the one. We are plunging deeper and ever deeper into the problem when we put aside these most workable ways for the time being, to stress the mutual aid of a war torn society. It is, in a way emergency work, the vanguard work we are doing. Others will come along, and have come along, to go forth from this school of action to work in the adult education movement, the credit union movement, the cooperative movement, to start new schools, to work as teachers, writers etc., apostles in new fields, wherever God leads them, wherever they find their vocation.

Yes, this was successful in its way, groups of unemployed who through self employment could become self-supporting and could have continued with persistence of direction. Examples of dedicated workers who have worked for the common good, however, to keep a house of hospitality going on the land, have been the men at the Peter Maurin Farm who have lived through many a crisis with us and who work and lead disciplined lives of labor. I remember Hans saying, “When I am confirmed I will take the name of Francis because I want to never work for wages again.” He had been a cook on tug boats who could earn a fancy salary, but he preferred to stay with us, and he built a chapel, an altar, started our bakery and still bakes our bread and does all our repair work. To write about each one of them would take a book.

The Synthesis

But I was talking about our synthesis: faith, the foundation of our lives, out of which springs all culture, all beauty of song and woodcarving and stained glass windows and printing, and poetry (I am thinking now of Brother Antoninus who as Bill Everson headed our Maurin House of Hospitality in Oakland, California.) And the basis of it all is the land, the good soil from which we ourselves spring, the dust of the earth.

It is good to think of these things, this first month of the year when we have been so distracted with our moving in the midst of bitter cold and high winds that froze the marrow of our bones. When I have stayed with Tamar and Dave in Vermont, I have never been as cold as here in New York with the dampness of the city winter.

This moving! Will we ever be settled? But of course the worst is over. I write here in our great bright loft, St. Joseph's loft at 39 Spring street, New York 12. There is plenty of room, thank God and St. Joseph, for the breadline to come and wait inside, for the first time since 1936 when we started it, or rather when it started itself. It grew by itself, – we did not start it or ever intend to submit men to the indignity of standing in line for a meager meal. (It always consoled me to see folk standing in line at expensive restaurants waiting for a table, or at a movie on Broadway!)

Other Moves

When we moved from Mott Street in 1950 the breadline came right after us, up the ten blocks or so along the Bowery, over East another block and there they were the next day waiting for their meal. This time we had to stop the line, had to put a notice out in front of the house on Chrystie street that there was no more line. By that time the house next door was being torn down, and it being in the neighborhood of the poor, little care was being taken by the wreckers to spare the passersby. A heavy dust of plaster, wood and brick dust settled over us all, literally inches thick. Every one in the house toiled and swept and dusted but we could not keep up with it and finally gave up. I was constantly shamed, though I am not a good housewife, at the disheveled state we were in those last months around Chrystie St. We breathed dust (you can imagine what that meant to the asthma people who are with us) we had it in our eyes, our clothes were heavy with it, we ate it in our food. Our pleasant back yard became a shambles of wreckage. Bricks flew in all directions, and on one occasion all but killed our cook as he went out to the back yard ice box to get some meat.

It was the falling bricks that made us give up the line. We have no public liability insurance, and cannot get any, considering the “nature of the work” we do, as Lloyds of London says! Our good lawyer, Dorothy Tully did everything she could to get it for us, and she could not. We just stopped the soup line a week or so before we moved, and everyone in the kitchen used to serving others, felt lost.

Neighbors

And then we moved here! A family neighborhood, most tenements sound and well cared for, a small playground across the street, with a few trees, and the Judson clinic across the street, a good little bakery downstairs and a few doors

over where good crusty Italian whole wheat bread is baked, old St. Patrick's one block away – oh so many advantages that I began to rejoice in moving. Women like to move furniture and men hate it. So I was beginning to cheer up. A sarcastic helper for the Puerto Rican mission across the park from us commented that he was surprised that we moved out without my making some dramatic move or demonstration. We had threatened after all to do just that, – sit out the eviction and make things difficult for the city. But on the one hand one cannot use human beings for demonstration purposes. We never have and never will.

We ourselves demonstrate each year in a protest against war games and risk the consequences, which have been jail each year for from one to thirty days and that is I suppose what people consider “dramatic.” Suffering is very often dramatic to those who are not enduring it.

Also we were bowing to the inevitable. These are occasions where non-resistance takes the place of non-violent resistance. Our house was a beauty. Rented out for profit, one could have paid a hundred to two hundred dollars a floor for such a house. For eight years we lived in comparative luxury, in warmth, with baths and plenty of hotwater, plenty of space, which of course rapidly filled up so that at the last even the parlor floor was covered with sleeping men at night.

We were not insensitive to the contrasts of men on a soup line and ourselves in our good warm house, to men sleeping on the floor and ourselves in beds (not all of them too comfortable). We began to search for evidence of poverty and sacrifice in our lives to reassure ourselves. Our poverty had to become more real, more interior. At the risk of offending him, I must tell on Tom Sullivan, so long one of our editors, both in Chicago and New York, and now teaching the poor in the Bronx. I was told by one of the Commonweal editors that when Tom went to his weekly meeting with John Cogley who had been his friend since school days, he never ate lunch with them, but just had coffee. He was just as penurious with others too, as he was with himself. When Charles McCormack, also a former editor drove the station wagon out to some of the hospitals on Long Island to visit the sick, always taking along others to share the ride and the work of mercy, Tom gave them just enough for gas but never enough for a cup of coffee on the side. Or that is the report made by Bob Ludlow, and he might have been teasing.

More Poverty

Anyway, the moving is done, and Bob Steed bore the brunt of it, not only driving the station wagon but doing a great part of the carting and lifting, fearful of the strains and ruptures for the older men.

We are scattered, but not altogether settled yet. Some of the more feeble are visiting Peter Maurin Farm until we find better quarters for them. We have two

small, two-room apartments on the sixth floor walk up, of an old tenement down the street. Sometimes the heat doesn't reach the top of the building, and we are pretty cramped. The rooms are painted atrociously, cerise, or a hideous pink, I cannot describe the color of the bedroom. The kitchen is green and there are two or three patches of linoleum on the floor. The bathtub is beside the sink and one must climb into it, via a steady chair. Maybe a rope from the ceiling would enable old bones to hoist themselves in and out. These little rooms are literally cells, and mean one person to a room. The house is quiet and decent, and thank God for hot water and heat, one of the moves of the city in the betterment of the slums.

Jeanne d'Arc Residence

The rest of the women are staying temporarily at the Residence on 24th street, maintained by Sisters of Providence from France. The place was started back in the last century by a priest from the French Church who saw the need for French immigrant girls. Later it included Irish and South Americans, and the original red brick building not as large as St. Joseph's House at Chrystie street, was rebuilt to become a place for 250 women where they pay fifty cents a night for a room, a small additional charge of 25c a week for gas to cook a chop or warm up soup or boil an egg and water for tea in a common kitchen in the basement; and 10c for electricity for using the washer and iron for their clothes. There is a chapel with a most beautiful painting of Joan of Arc amongst her sheep, one of them a nursing ewe, and every morning Mass is offered at seven o'clock. In the evening at six there is the rosary. It is dormitory accommodation of course at that price, and there are four or six in a room, each bed with a large locker with plenty of room for clothing and for food too. There are no rules about leaving the premises – one can stay all day and there are sitting rooms and library and a television set for the evening. But smoking is forbidden and lights must be out in the dormitory at ten o'clock at night. I stayed there for a week and what a welcome rule that was. To go to bed like a child at ten, and sleep until six and arise to Mass in the house and a good breakfast of cereal, French bread and coffee which is almost all milk – what a welcome interlude after so many years of having visitors come in at all hours of the night. Some of our women are still there, but I am part time across the street with Hattie and Mary and part time at Peter Maurin Farm, trying to straighten out the materials which were moved down there into the loom room. We have brought two looms and a spinning wheel into the loft room from the farm, and our friend Mary Allard will work with us removing the pieces of material now on them, and helping us to set them up again. Both Charles Butterworth and I are going to try to do some spinning and weaving each day as an exercise, an act of faith, a meditation. Also it makes for conversation.

The Men

Naturally I was most interested in the women moving and getting settled. I was happy to see Veronica who had helped us so in the clothes room for so many years, happily settled with her two parakeets, her potted plants and her own bed at Roger and Mary's on Avenue B. Too far away for casual calls, but I'm taking them up on a dinner invitation soon. As for the men, we are paying an enormous price each month for accommodations on the Bowery. To take care of 25 men, at 75c a night for thirty days costs \$562.50 a month. The only way I can console myself for this huge outlay is to think how much one family spends on rent these days in New York. I visited an apartment a few months ago which I am sure must have cost five hundred a month and it housed only two. So I am sure St. Joseph will not think we are extravagant. As long as we have the money we will spend it for "flops" as the saying is along the Bowery. These are the men who have been with us a long time and who are in the physical state which keeps them from getting jobs. They are also men who are very much a part of our work and who have been working with us for long periods. After all, we console ourselves, our Father is a millionaire, who owns heaven and earth and all that in them is.

The greatest suffering is the stairs we have to climb. Two long long flights up to the office on Spring. Six flights to the apartment and the same stairs too in Jeanne d'Arc home. So one gets in the habit of taking them easy. All the hotels on the Bowery are the same too.

The Soupline

And what of the soup line. Stopped last month around the fifth, it was not more than ten days later that more and more men began dropping in around meal time, so that now we are again serving 125 at a meal, and this time an entire meal and not just soup. Somehow the food stretches and if it doesn't we get back to soup again. And now the men are standing inside, out of the weather. There can be no line in this neighborhood, our neighbors have impressed that upon us very vociferously. One in particular has come in and made a great fuss, but our good landlord who has a name like a grand opera aria has reassured us. So we ask your prayers and of course always your help. We feel weak and defenseless in the face of the opposition which betrays such a materialistic and unloving attitude, but in Him we can do all things, in Him who strengthens us. Our parish priests are for us, so who can be against us? Come visit us on Friday night. Our meetings are still going on.