

Fall Appeal - October 1965

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, October 1965, 2.

Summary: In asking for help she contrasts the government's "war against poverty" with the Catholic Worker's "true efficiency of the person-to-person encounter." Distinguishes between the poor and the destitute. (DDLW #833).

Loved Readers:

When John the Baptist was crying out for God's deliverance in the wilderness of those dangerous days (St. Teresa says all days are dangerous days) the people, frightened, asked him, "Then what are we to do?" His answer was, "The man with two shirts must share with him who has none, and anyone who has food must do the same." In this same simple spirit we are asking again for the help of our readers to pay up our bills. This will in turn extend our credit so that we can face the long winter ahead, which means heating bills as well as food bills. Hungry people are twice as cold as the well fed. An Arab saying is 'Fire is twice bread.'

This is the month of St. Francis, whom the whole world loves for his joyous acceptance of voluntary poverty. The poverty of the Pilgrim, recently popularized by J. D. Salinger, with a sack of bread on his back, a Bible in his pocket and unceasing prayer on his lips, is a joyful one. But man is not meant to live alone with dreams of poverty, or love, or peace. People are gregarious as well as communitarian, and over the years the scant half dozen of us have increased as the family grows larger. The community, at Tivoli, decreased by sickness and death, keeps filling up again so that, for the winter, all beds are taken in the one house that we heat. On Chrystie Street the soup line means far more than the free vegetables and fish and the donations of bread. The car that we used to pick supplies has recently been wrecked. The insurance may cover the cost of the car and the medical service for the broken arm of the injured one; but the delays mean expense.

It is always hard to ask, but our Lord told us, "Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find." It is even harder to live on this faith, in this spirit of abandonment, in these days of governmental war against poverty, because the tendency is to believe that Government can do so much better, with all the means at its disposal. But we know, with our 33 years of Catholic Worker experience, the true efficiency of the person-to-person encounter. It is a matter of constant examination of conscience for each of us because of our failure to love and to respond to the need presented to us.

I often think of how we were pushed into this work by our very readers who help us. People are always giving us more than we can use, so that it must be disbursed. More food than a

community of forty people can eat, more clothing than they can wear, and more books than they can read, so that our hands must always be open so that these goods can flow through them. The very big house we took over on Mott Street was not chosen because we wanted to get bigger, but because one of our readers placed this unused rear tenement at our disposal rent-free. When that was taken away, we had to buy a house, because no one would rent to our Bowery family and we could not disperse them. When that house was taken by the City, we could not afford to buy a house, because building-code standards had reached such heights that we had to disperse to apartments and one central loft building.

There will never be an end to our work. There are the poor we will always have with us—all those left out of social-security programs, whom social legislation does not reach, or all those who try to live on forty dollars a month, or who try to earn their living by collecting bottles, cartons, and old rags from the garbage of the City. Those who are too sick to work and too proud to beg are also part of our family. Indeed it is a misdemeanor to beg in New York City, and licenses are needed to sell pencils or shoe laces. Thank God our Holy Mother the State has too much respect for freedom to collect all these destitute by force and shepherd them into the vast hospitals on Welfare Island, or put them in dead storage out in the fifteen-thousand bed hospitals on Long Island. Those are the destitute, quite different from the poor. They come to us whenever we open a house or start a soup line. Would that every parish had some small house or store where this work could be begun! It all may appear to be foolish, weak and inadequate, but it is the Lord Himself who has commanded the work, and truly “the joy of the Lord is our strength.”

Our love and gratitude are always with you in Jesus our brother, present in the least of the these.

Dorothy Day