

On Pilgrimage - November 1951

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, November 1951, 1, 2, 6.

Summary: In the midst of reporting on a twenty-seven city speaking trip she laments that the state too often replaces personal responsibility for the poor. Repeats that the fundamental idea of the Catholic Worker is that we are made to love God and our brothers—the works of mercy practiced by each of us “at a personal sacrifice.” (DDLW #626).

In the last two months I have visited twenty-seven cities, journeying from Fall River, Massachusetts, as far west as Fargo, North Dakota. I have been bone-tired and mind-tired. I have slept like a log on busses and on trains, on boards and on beds, in rooms with babies and little children, in dormitories, and in single splendor. I have eaten in homes where elegance is the rule and at houses of hospitality with men from skid row. I have met old friends, and many new ones and have encountered some bitterness but on the whole the trip was one of the best I ever had. More and more, I have found people sympathetic to the fundamental idea of **The Catholic Worker**. And what is the fundamental idea? That man is made to love God and to love his brother. And when we say that all men are brothers, it means that the love we feel stems from the love of God.

We talk about love and we write about love, and love means that we must give and we must suffer. Who is not poor and we are not poor, who does not suffer, and we do not suffer? Love means embracing voluntary poverty too. We have got to begin to be poor. If we try to be poor, we will try to strip ourselves and put on Christ.

Love of our brothers, and voluntary poverty. Those are the things I began to talk about, and those are such fundamental topics that one could not talk about them without getting on to the subject of the modern State and war. The paternalistic state, the servile state, the coercive state that tries to do away with personal responsibility, that builds great institutions to take the place of the family, the parish. The coercive state whose prosperity is founded on preparations for war rather than on work to supply human needs. You get a lot of reading done when you are travelling, and one of the books I read on this trip was “Through Eastern Eyes,” by Fr. Von Straelen, published by Grailville, Loveland, Ohio.

The East is not impressed by our great institutions, Fr. Von Straelen quotes a critic as saying. Our orphanages, mental hospitals, homes for the aged, – all the other great buildings that loom on the horizon mean that there is no longer a loving family, no longer help from friends and neighbors to care for the sick, the orphaned, the cripple, the poor. It is the failure of Christianity that those buildings express, not its successes.

One reason for the breakdown of the family of course is that there is no longer the home big enough for all, and there is not enough homes to go around.

Martha House

The last thing I saw in Detroit, so that I left it weeping, was the thirteen children under six years old at Martha House, at 1818 Leverette St. St. Francis House is just around the corner a couple of blocks, and Louis Murphy and the men there try to do everything possible to make Martha House warm and comfortable for the families sheltered there. There are the three girls there too, Delros Espy, Ruth O'Rourke and Betty Hogan. They share the parlour in that too small house and the four mothers and their thirteen children are crowded into three bedrooms upstairs. There is a sitting room and a dining room and kitchen.

With all our institutions, with all the wealth in the city of Detroit, charitable bureaus, travelers' aid, the police, hospitals, priests, – all turn again and again to **The Catholic Worker**, for help in emergencies.

“And for every family we take in, we have to turn ten way,” one of the girls said sadly.

“And where do they go? They sit up all night in stations, in movie houses, in parking lots,” Lou Murphy said. And after they have been referred around sufficiently and still don't get lost, some agency, or the city, rents a room for them for twelve or fifteen dollars a week, – one room for a family of ten, perhaps, – eight children and mother and father. Of course the only place they get such a room is in a slum.

It is the same in New York. The influx of Puerto Ricans in our lower East side has meant the growth of rooming houses where whole families live in one room and cook, eat and sleep. There are no apartments so the city has to put its welfare clients in these hovels.

Hospices

Of course when I talk of our houses of hospitality everyone thinks right away that what I mean is that he should start a house of hospitality in his city or parish. People start to look uncomfortable and people talk about guilty consciences for not doing more for the poor. I always speak too, of how these duties are laid down for us in the 25th chapter of St. Matthew and that our salvation indeed depends on them – prayer, and fasting, and the alms which we would have to give as a result of fasting (whether that fast be in terms of food, or drink, theater or television or new car or a certain neighborhood to live in).

But I try always to explain that it is not just in terms of Peter Maurin's program of Round Table Discussions, Houses of Hospitality and Farming Communes that I am speaking. He said at the very beginning that the way to reach the masses of people, the poor and the destitute who did not know Christ (if they did they would be rich) was through the works of mercy, practiced by each one of us, “at a personal sacrifice,” he always added.

Christ Rooms

And since it all does depend on each one of us, that means that we must each try to have a Christ room in our homes where we can shelter others. Better still if there were an extra floor in our house (Oh those lucky people who live in houses!) that could be turned into a little apartment for a family. The fact of the matter is that so-called Christian people will not rent to families any more. No children allowed! Let them get in a housing project! Let the state, the city, bring that pressure to bear on them to limiting their families!

One woman looked at me sadly as I talked one afternoon, and said that she had four bedrooms and two baths in her house. And another said ruefully, “we are always on the receiving end, never the giving.”

Difficulties

I can well see all the difficulties. A husband cannot impose such a charitable custom on his wife, as sheltering the harborless, without her consent and cooperation, nor the wife the husband. But they can begin to talk over these things together, to explore the possibilities. People could begin to think about these things. When they build or when they rent, they can get a bigger place and sometimes the bigger houses are cheaper since people want small, compact places nowadays when there will not be so much to do, nor so much trouble in heating. But they might begin to think in terms of community! After all community can be in the city as well as in the country.

Community

One friend I visited in Chicago had an apartment that was large, light and airy, surrounded by a garden and trees, with a back porch and a front porch, with heat and bath and hot water, all for forty dollars a month. This was because she put up with the railroad trains down the street, and gas tanks in the rear.

She was definitely on the wrong side of the tracks. Downstairs there was another large apartment divided into two. Negroes were beginning to move into the neighborhood. In this section of the south side there was not that mass movement out of a neighborhood when Negroes moved in that has marked some of the districts in Chicago. All around the Chicago University, another friend who teaches there reports, there have been a steady influx of Negroes, who have taken run down property and improved it and since there is good supervision to prevent dividing and overcrowding slum conditions did not begin to be built up.

The friend with the beautiful apartment said that there was a possibility of the building being sold. It had not occurred to her to try to buy it. Poor teachers usually do not have down payments. But given the down payment, most people could keep up payments, what with one job or another in a big city. They would be willing to make many a sacrifice to keep their own home, especially such a one as this. She could even rent to Negroes and so have an

interracial house, or she could divide the house so that it was cooperatively owned. I had heard that Fr. Lux, the Dominican, when he was stationed in Chicago, had seen to it that an eight-apartment house was bought cooperatively by Negroes and reconditioned. So much could be done in the way of housing if people had vision. So much misery could be alleviated.

The children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light. They build up fortunes and lose them. They bring pipe lines from west to east. They put up gigantic skyscrapers, they build factories, they venture much, not for the common good but for profit. And why not these risks for the common good?

There is a new book out by Allan Watts, called *The Wisdom of Insecurity* published by Pantheon Press in New York, which sounds fascinating. We children of light, who have everything to gain, hang onto our husks and our potage as though this were to be all for this world and the next.

Hierarchy

The statement of the hierarchy of Australia last month made my task of talking about the poor and the destitute all the easier.

“To the north of Australia lie a thousand million people suffering from a dreadful poverty which must be seen to be realized,” the statement reads. “How was it that a few million Australians maintained their independence and their comfort in the face of such a set of circumstances?” And the answer made by the Archbishops was, “militarism, colonialism, exploitation.”

The recent Popes have talked of an attack on poverty, before they speak of attacking Communism. “Go to the poor,” Pius XI cried out. All the saints have begun their mission by seeking Christ among the poor.

Report

But this article was to be a report, and there is too much to report. I spoke at Dayton and at Lima. In Chicago I spoke at five high schools, at St. Procopius Abbey, at the Sheil school, at the Calvert Club, at the Thomas Moore book club, at Friendship House. I visited the John Mella family and all their children, and one of them dying so they need prayers. I visited the Al Reser's and another baby is due there. I had breakfast with Jacques Maritain and the O'Mearas and the Neffs, after Mass on the feast of Christ the King and I had dinner at the Peter Maurin House just south of Grand Street on Ogden and Hubbard on Chicago's near northwest side, with eighteen men and Betty Schneider of Friendship House and Fr. Cantwell and Father Chrysostom. John Boylston, Ruth Ann Heaney's brother, is living in the house, and Ed Boylston his brother is helping serve the line on West Madison Street at night, and Bob Bosshart is director of the house which is as comfortable a little center as any I've seen. But they need more room. They have light and air, and cleanliness and color, but they need space. As usual the kitchen was the heart of the home and the cooking was excellent.

Another day I visited Fr. Carrabine, and lunched with Lois Schumacher and dined with the Spencers. There were a dozen more things I wanted to do in Chicago but there were speaking engagements that I had to make so I could not stay as long as I wished. I like Chicago. There are still conductors as well as motormen on the street cars (the fare is 18c) and there are many small houses and trees and grass plots in the slums. There is the smell of burning leaves, there is the walk along the lakefront, there is the narrow twisting river with its many bridges.

Appleton, Wis.

Appleton is the home of the infamous Senator McCarthy, and it is also the home of my friends, Emmett and Mary Durnin, and I stopped by for the day to visit them. They had lost their oldest daughter, two months ago, of leukemia, and it was wonderful to see the fortitude with which they accepted their loss. "She knew she was going to die," Mary said, "and we helped her prepare for it. She liked to have us read to her, and I read her the story of Marie Goretti, and Emmett read her *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. She was only sick a month. She was only eight but she was such a help always, and she helped other mothers in the neighborhood too."

Emmett used to drive a ten-ton truck in New York; now he works in a paper mill. The neighborhood they live in is a real little community with the mutual aid and sharing which comes in poorer communities. The houses are on the edge of town and the children walk over a mile into school every day. All around are fields and woods and Mary is happy that the move was made away from New York two years ago.

St. Cloud

I had a good visit with the Humphreys for several days. Mary and Don have seven children now, John and Rachel, Michael, Sue, Paul, Thomas and Mary Ellen, and she is my godchild. I had time to knit her a pair of pink socks while I was there, and there were great talks with Don who had spent an idyllic winter or so up at St. Isadore's farm in northern Minnesota with Al and Catherine Reser and their children the first years of the war. There were nostalgic yarns about hunting and fishing, and wood chopping and the log cabins that the families lived in. Martie Paul, who is now at Holy Family Farm at Rhineland, Mo., built the cabins with the help of some of the men from the Minneapolis House of Hospitality. He was the pioneer at the Minnesota farm.

Don makes chalices now and he has a big work shop in back of the house where he works. The furniture in the house is his own, he is a versatile craftsman as well as artist and the entire lower floor of the ten-room brick house which they recently bought after a sale of Don's pictures (he is also a painter of distinction, and a muralist, if there is such a word) is almost all one room, what with the knocking out of partitions. There was a big kitchen range giving good heat, and as usual with Catholic Worker families, no bath, and the usual outhouse. But Don's was unusual in that it had no door!

Mary is a valiant woman who sews for the entire family, weaves, cooks, and cares for her large family with a great ease and calm that are refreshing indeed.

There were so many in Minnesota to visit, and so many speeches to make. I spoke at St. John's, had a good visit with the new Abbot, Baldwin Dvorak and with Fr. Godfrey, editor of *Orate Fratres*. And more families, the Cottons, the Doyles. I stayed at Maryfarm in Little Canada, St. Paul, and spoke at Mendota and in Minneapolis.

The last engagement was in Fargo, North Dakota, where it was good to see Father Robert Havda again and to get the promise from him that he would come to us next summer for a week's discussion on war and peace, for conscientious objectors from past and present wars. There was a good and friendly audience there, many of them coming from towns all around, and I felt the warmth of the people and priests in this section. I should have liked to have stayed to visit the beet fields and the sugar beet factory that controls the situation out there, and to go on further west, but I had been away almost two months and was anxious to get home.

Korean Soldiers

The bus coming east from Fargo was all the way from Seattle, and there were half a dozen soldiers who had just returned from Korea. The boy next to me talked to me about the "enemy." There was no end to them, he said – you just felt there were countless millions, coming on and on, and no matter how you shot into them, they kept coming. Your machine gun would get hot, so hot you'd have to abandon it and they keep coming. There are women in the army, too. All over the world now the women are in the armies. We're just where we were when we started, he said, and we will have to stay unless war starts some place else. No one sees an end to it. They live like animals. They eat cat, dog, dried fish, rice. Yes he was glad to get home and it was a long trip. He'd have to go all the way to the east coast. Why didn't he go by coach plane? Why it cost \$113 dollars and it was only \$53 by bus. You could live a long time on sixty dollars! God bless him.

Home Again

And now I am home again, writing this on Chrystie Street and it is midnight, All Saints Day. The house is quiet. Not long since I went down into the kitchen to get myself some toast and coffee to keep awake. There's always two or three of the men there to help you, and Michael was standing over the radio getting the late news. Outside the cars go by in a continual stream down Chrystie Street which is like a boulevard. There are still yellow leaves on the plane trees across the street. The streets are still noisy but the house is quiet. It is cold out and a good part of the day it rained. Bu the house is warm, and there are blankets for the beds. Charlie McCormick has gone down to Staten Island to fetch in a load of bread for the coffee line in the morning, the good whole wheat bread, that Bill McAndrews makes every other day. Tomorrow night Bill will bring in another load which will do us for over the weekend.

We had Mass down there in Staten Island this morning, on the Peter Maurin Farm, in the new chapel which Hans Tunnesen and Ed Foerster have been working on for months. The rain poured down, drumming on the roof so that you could scarcely hear the chant, and anyway it was only Jane and Joe Cueller who could sing. Our voices were faint with the cold, because the chapel is not heated yet, no stove up, and our breath made a cloud before us. Beckie, Susie and Eric were there with Tamar, and Nickie and Mary were still in bed. David had gone early to work.

It is a beautiful feast day and I am happy to be home. I am happy too that this long account is ended, and now I can feel my trip is really over.