

On Pilgrimage - June 1955

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Summary: Discusses the problems with the selling of Maryfarm, the difficulties of construction at Peter Maurin Farm and extends an appeal for assistance. Recounts her trip to Montreal, Canada and her encounters with the various communities and people who live with the poor there. She concludes with a reflection on the values of work and silence. (DDLW #687).

My pilgrimages for some time now will be between New York and Staten Island, what with the changes that have been going on in the work and staff. Tom Sullivan's entrance into the Trappist Monastery at Conyers, Georgia will come as a great surprise to the readers of **Chrystie Street**. We are all praying that he will be praying for us, and although we miss him, we feel that in many ways he is closer than ever to us all.

We are trying again to dispose of Maryfarm, Newburgh, perhaps on a 99 year lease, and so the retreat in June will be the last to be held there. Fr. Casey will give our annual retreat there, and we hope that the next will be at Peter Maurin Farm, Staten Island. As it is we are going to have a day of recollection there one Sunday a month from now on and later we aim at a weekly conference on Sunday afternoon with vespers, rosary, benediction and compline after.

Activity

Right now there is a skeleton crew (a dozen people) at Maryfarm, and John Filliger is at Peter Maurin Farm helping Hans and Fr. Duffy, with the building and farming there. The carriage house is being made into two rooms, and there will be an additional room in the carpenter shop. Behind the chapel there is a large room which will hold several men, and of course the dormitories in both hay lofts, on either side of the chapel will take in the rest of the family. The women will be a little crowded for a while in the main house. The problem will be for us to keep the men warm in winter. At Maryfarm there were innumerable little stoves, wood-burning or coal-burning, according to the health and age of the room's occupant. Most of the cold months they burned coal. Another example of how expensive it is to be poor!

As soon as the carriage house is completed, the work on the new chapel will begin and we are very ambitious there. We want a basement to contain an oil burner, four rooms to house our resident priests and visitors and then the chapel. Philip Jebb, architect and son of Distributist editor Jebb, and grandson of Hilaire Belloc, who is visiting this country, is drawing up some plans for us. Other friends are studying New York City building codes, and whether or not we would be permitted to use the good clay all around us and the field stone to make a rammed earth building.

Help Needed

In spite of the fact that we are aiming to sell one farm, paying off the mortgages, paying back taxes, and our piled up bills, we will be taking whatever money we can get for Maryfarm, and it will come in installments at that. There is also a \$4,000 mortgage on Maryfarm. So I am afraid we are never going to be any richer, no matter how much buying and selling we do. The way we are building the two rooms in the carriage house is this: first lumber, and cement and sand and building blocks came from lecture money from Montreal where I visited last month. Second batch of lumber comes from \$20 Carol Perry contributed. The Marist Fathers contributed some flooring, and Frank O'Donnell some beams, and so it goes. It's hard on the builders, especially when a good carpenter and cement man comes along and offers his services free, and then no materials to work with! The lumber yard won't give us credit or we would be tempted to buy ahead!

Anybody want to help build a chapel? To be very direct, we have the workers, (and labor is one third the cost). We do need money for this project.

Canada

Last month pressure of events kept me from reporting on my visit to Canada. I spent only a week there but could fill the paper with all the people I met and the places I visited. There is not time to write in detail about the shrine of St. Joseph's and of Brother Andre and they are well known anyway. Fr. Murchland offered Holy Mass for us in the original little chapel and showed us all over the Mount, and it is glorious to see and best of all we loved the little room where Brother Andre lived with his oil stove, his little iron bed, and his few sticks of furniture. The devil bothered him so, just as he bothered the Cure d'Ars, that he took to himself a roommate, a sick barber, who slept in the same room with him, and to whom Bro. Andre ministered.

(We should be praying to Brother Andre as well as to St. Joseph, and of course Mother Cabrini, for these modest building projects of ours. Fr. Murchland is editor of the magazine published at the shrine and it is a very good one too.)

We began our visit to Montreal by going to the Mass at the shrine, which is offered up every evening at nine o'clock, and we ended it by my morning visit with Marjorie Connors who is in charge of Patricia house for women, on Murray street.

Labre House

The men's hospice, Labre House, on Duke street, is not more than ten blocks away, and Tony Walsh who initiated and keeps going this work of hospitality in Montreal was being plagued by the necessity of moving at the end of the week. We had lunch there one day, a group of us and we were greatly impressed by the good foundation they have made. Even if like Don Bosco they have to move again and again, each place they visit will be a home, a center, and the impress will remain among the people with whom they settle. There are weekly meetings, and the new paper published by the group, called Unity, will deal with the work of the lay apostolate.

You can subscribe by writing to Tony Walsh, UNITY, 123 Duke Street, Montreal.

Patricia House

I stayed at Patricia House while in Montreal, and felt greatly privileged to be in the same house with the Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld who live upstairs in their little Fraternity, which is made up of the upper floors of two old houses. Patricia House is one floor of one of the houses, and the back door looks out on a swamp of mud, a courtyard on which opens other small houses where families of twelve and fourteen people live. Here is real destitution. Patricia House is the poorest house on the street.

Mrs. Connors is sharing the little four room place (in which nevertheless four people can be accommodated) with another woman just at present, and every afternoon at supper time there is a group of children in the neighborhood who come in for supper. Clothes are distributed all the time, and there are always some of the women in the neighborhood to be found sitting over a companionable cup of tea or coffee with Mrs. Connors, pouring out some of the troubles of the neighborhood. The kitchen just holds a stove, sink and big square table which can seat eight children at a time. Usually about sixteen come in every night for the supper, of stew, soup and rolls and coffee. The politeness of these little French children from this dismal slum can be measured by the fact that I took a nap behind the curtain while Marjorie served supper. She loves to cook, and cooking with love, everything she serves is delicious. She cooks, she builds fires in the obstreperous stove and how she ever kept warm in a Montreal winter, is a mystery. The place is so small one always either roasts or freezes. It has the same clammy walls Mott street had. But Marjorie is a happy creature and it is sure that the love of God warms her as she too warms others around her.

Little Sisters

It poured rain that first morning I was there, and to open either front or back door meant going through a Niagara. Gutters are unknown here. We went through this cold shower bath to get upstairs to the Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld who have the apartment and the garret above us. Although only two or three usually live in these "Fraternities" there are seven there now, what with some of the little sisters waiting to get working visa's to the U.S. so they can open the first house in Chicago. The little chapel (there is a Holy Hour every Thursday which our friends attend) is bare and beautiful with an altar made of three blocks of wood. The stations are crosses, there are twelve square stools for the Little Sisters to sit on. Adjoining it there is a sitting room and kitchen. Upstairs there is a dormitory in the attic. I am going to have dinner with them on Thursday before the Holy Hour. From seven to eight on Thursday Dr. Seng has a little clinic for the children in the neighborhood downstairs at Patricia House.

Foyer de Charitie

Leo Kinbough is an old friend of ours who came to make retreats at Maryfarm, Easton, and since those early days he has had much to do with the beginnings of the community of poor families which came somehow or other to become the Foyer de Charitie, the beginnings of a house of divine providence like that of Joseph Cottelengo in Italy. Leo is one of the few who have had a vision of a community of **families** dedicated to voluntary poverty (not destitution) since they had little homes and ground to till, a combination of private and common property such as Peter dreamed of in his farming communes. A start was made, and some families are still there, but now the weight of the effort has been put behind the hospital and the care of the **single** destitute person. Just as many other family community efforts have failed, and mainly for want of the physical and financial support of the single and unencumbered, so too Leo's work is a seed which has fallen into the ground and died. It is following the pattern of all work for Christ. The personalist and communitarian revolution which Emmanuel Mounier wrote of is still unbalanced in that the emphasis is still on the personalist instead of on the communitarian.

Samaritains

A group in Montreal, the Samaritains, however, have been dedicating their help to families this last fourteen years. There are 75 or 80 of them (I am not sure of my figures) and they live in community under the direction of Abbe Saey of St. Irene's parish on Atwater street. There are three centers, one of them an infirmary, which is the most attractive of the three. After a short but good visit with Fr. Saey, and obtaining his blessing, one of the Samaritains

took us down the street to a big corner store which was curtained in white and indistinguishable from the surrounding stores by any mark except cleanliness. On opening the store door, however, the inner door showed a crucifix, and holy water font. When we went in the first thing, aside from the women who were engaged in various works of sewing, mending, cooking, etc., was two long rows of black bound books on the wall.

They are the writings of the saints, our guide told us, St. John Chrysostom and others of the early fathers, right down to the saints recently canonized.

The girls wear a uniform garb, black, dark blue or grey, very plain and serviceable, and rather like that of modern orders of women, such as the Missionary Servants of the Holy Trinity. Some of the girls have work rooms and make all the clothes, from heavy overcoats to denim aprons and dark dresses.

Two things I had heard of these women and girls were most striking and made me want to know more of them. One was that they served the poor families, going out two by two working one day at cooking, washing, cleaning, and spending the next day in prayer. That does not mean that the needy family with the sick mother went without help that alternate day. While one girl prayed, the other worked. There was refreshment for soul and mind and body so that there was no danger of their becoming "empty cisterns."

Silence

The other great thing which struck me was the fact that aside from a little necessary talk in the families when they were at work, they kept complete silence. That silence was the most useful for work too, as they were there to work, not to waste time in conversation with the family they helped. They could listen, they could talk a little, but the work came first, serving the family.

I enjoyed my visit with the girls very much. For one thing, they know **The Catholic Worker** and their faces broke into radiant smiles to greet us. Leo did what interpreting was necessary, and our guide also spoke English.

Work

Just before I left New York Ammon Hennacy and I had visited the little Fourth Street Play House and saw Chekoff's Three Sisters which was excellently done, and one of the things which amused us just as much as their nostalgia for the city and the future and the boredom with the present, was the nostalgia for work. What is needed, two of the most attractive characters kept insisting, was the "one should work," work to exhaustion, so that one could fall asleep feeling one had earned his rest.

One character, the fiance up to the time he was killed in a duel, was always on the way to work in the lumber yard, having given up his service in the army, which

Tolstoi pointed out was an excuse in those days for doing nothing. "Soldiering on the job" as an expression dates from the times when there were few battles and the life of the army was an honorable and irresponsible one. In our days the white collar job, the clerk's position, is looked to by immigrant parents as a release for their children from drudgery of manual labor.

Work, prayer, silence, these are the works, the spiritual arms of the Samaritains. They are the "just men" who are saving Canada. Silence is the rarest spiritual work of the day. Once Aldous Huxley on reading in **The Catholic Worker** about the silence of our retreats and the effort to have silence in our retreatouse, sent us a check for twenty five dollars. "Anything to further the cause of silence," he wrote. Here there is truly silence, and the hard work which means earning one's living by the sweat of one's brow. The spirit of love was palpable and there was none of the somberness one might expect from the rigorous lives these women lead. In the infirmary the work is suffering and silence and prayer, and what work is necessary to keep the place going.

And this silence was chosen by the girls themselves after some years of working together, and only consented to by Fr. Saey, because of their insistence. "Since then," he remarked once to Leo, "they have had peace and so have I."