

On Pilgrimage - November 1946

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, November 1946, 1, 7, 8.

Summary: Reflects on how hard it is to leave the cares of the Catholic Worker as she begins a pilgrimage to other CW groups. Extols efforts at rural self-sufficiency (e.g. wool making) in St. Joseph, Minnesota, and visits friends in Minneapolis and Chicago. (DDLW #226).

Every year I like to make a real pilgrimage and visit some of our groups around the country. Usually these visits are coincident with a speaking engagement which pays my carfare. A questioner at one of the meetings asked me once where I got the money to travel around. I don't mind such questions because I lay myself open to it by talking about voluntary poverty. It is indeed a treat to travel, even by bus, one carries one's lunch of whole wheat bread, peanut butter and honey, and bananas. To be suddenly free from all the cares of Mott street and the farm. Though why I should let them weigh me down when others are in charge I do not know. One is supposed to cultivate first of all serenity of spirit, according to Scupoli and Dom Chapman and others, but one cannot help grieving over the sadness of others and trying to help make things different. To be surrounded by the destitute, the shelterless, to visit the prisoner and the sick, to be living, as a leader, in the midst of misery when so many look to you for solace and appeasement of pain—this is a burden which becomes at times well nigh unendurable. To recognize the little one can do, to know one's self to be an unprofitable servant and to try to guard the peace in one's own heart—it is necessary for this to go away once in a while—to drop everything. Retreats serve this purpose. And so do trips. On a trip as a pilgrim, one brings from one group to another the news of striving and growth and encouragement. I thought of Cassian, whose conferences I love, going from group to group through the Theban and Palestinian wastes, travelling around the whole Mediterranean world and letting us to this day share in the conferences of Abbot Pachomius and others.

I am no Cassian, but I will try to give news of my October trip through the middle west.

Green Bay

I left for Green Bay, Wisconsin, to attend the Rural Life Conference and to speak on the program of Sister Helene, of Sienna Heights College, Adrian, Michigan. She had visited me to bring an exhibit of rural culture and to talk about Peter's synthesis of Cult, Culture and Cultivation. So down at the farm Chris polished up his crucifix, and we dusted off the lovely plaque of the blessed Mother and the children of Maryfarm, which Eve Smith had sent to me for a Christmas present some years ago, and we got together the exhibit of Tamar's wool, showing all the things that can be knitted from the fleece of one sheep, a coat, hat, dress, afghan, and five pairs of socks, two children's and three adults'.

Rural Arts

From St. Benedict's farm in Upton, Massachusetts; from Don Humphrey's studio at St. Benedict's College, St. Joseph, Minnesota; from Mary Katherine Cotton's, one of the former members of our Rochester group, now married and living at Collegeville, Minn.; from Idella Gallagher, whose husband started the St. Louis house and who now teaches philosophy at Marquette, and from others, in addition to the work from Sister Helene's own studios, and from Sister Columbiere's rural school in Assumption, Ohio, the exhibits of weaving, lettering, carving, etc. were brought together and shipped, and for the first time the Catholic Rural Life conference was to have an exhibit of the rural arts, of the beauty which springs from work, done for love of God and love of one's fellows.

Space Sold

"This then is perfect joy." Before the exhibit was half unpacked, Sister Helene was told by one of the priests at the conference that the space had been sold to the Victor phonograph people for eighty-five dollars. Of course, conventions have to be paid for. Of course, the place was filled with concessions, space that had been sold to various commercial firms to display their wares to Sister teachers and pastors. The last I saw of the corner that had been reserved for us was the enthralled back of half a dozen sisters, watching the high kicking of some Flora Dora girls, which was shown on a screen set up on our table, while some gay popular music blared forth. "This then is perfect joy," as St. Francis said to his companion, in one of the most delightful of the Fioretti, while he conjured up the picture of himself and his companions being thrown out from their own home, by one of their own. "This then is perfect joy."

It is not necessary to say more. Except to point out as my son-in-law did, in reference to decentralism and distributism. One of the differences between the two is that the decentralists accept the machine civilization and the distributists fight industrial capitalism. Here was an example of hand work being displaced by a senseless machine in the most flagrant and idiotic way.

“I would have gathered together one hundred dollars and paid for space if I had known,” said Sister Helene mournfully, “just to get the work of these men and women recognized. And also to help them sell, and bring bread and butter to their children’s mouths.” (Butter is a dollar a pound in Wisconsin, the greatest dairy state in the union.)

Don Humphrey

Don Humphrey is one of our outstanding Catholic artists. I went directly from Green Bay, Wisconsin, where the conference was being held, to St. Joseph, Minnesota, which is a couple of hours out of Minneapolis. Here Don, Mary and their four children and another one expected, are living in a delightful old farm house on the property of St. Benedict’s college. It is a big farm house, though in bad repair, and they’d be glad to offer hospitality, by the way, to anyone going to St. Ben’s. The tuition is not great to this old and fine Benedictine school, and if a girl had board and room she could get a fine college course for very little. Don is teaching many arts at the school, copper and metal work, the polishing of semi-precious stones for chalices, wood carving, etc. He has a good shop on the grounds, right across from the bookbinding and printing shops. I spent a day in going over the school, since I had not been there for a good many years. St. Benedict’s started in 1852 as an Indian school. There are 600 acres around it, and there is enough farming done and enough cows to provide the table of the student with the best of food these days of scarcities.

Flax

I visited the old sisters who are in the weaving room, and one of them, Sister Patrina, who was one of four sisters who came from Germany many years ago, knows all about spinning and preparing flax. It is only the last two years that they have not planted flax out there. Flax is planted May sixteenth, she said, and picked around Assumption Day. They never planted more than a fourth of an acre. Then let it soak nine days in the lake on the farm, spread it in the fields for six weeks, then turn it and leave it for six weeks more. Then they put it in the boiler room to crisp. They showed me the hetchels, combs, paddles, distaffs and the three spinning wheels on which to spin flax, beautiful tools, and they showed me also the three grades of flax. In her family they used to weave a hundred yards of material a year. The children were set to work at spinning when they were six. They wove potato sacks first, then flour sacks, then sheets, towels, table cloths. Sister Patrina and the sisters from Germany brought their own spun and woven sheets with them as part of their dowry. Every year, too, she said, they had to knit six pairs of socks new for each member of the family and mend six pairs, putting in new toes and heels. Such industry!

How far we have gotten from the Christian tradition of the family, I thought, when I heard that word, dowry, when the mother helped her daughter prepare

for her marriage from the time she was a little girl, and where the father provided the son with land and tools. Now the child is expected to pay for his education and work for the parents instead of the parents for the children. All the result of the industrial revolution and the impoverishment of the peasants.

Sister Isabel

Sister Isabel, 83, is the candle maker of the community. The room she worked in smelled of honey and flowers. There are twenty hives on St. Benedict's farm from which they took 200 gallons of honey last year. The bees consume ten pounds of honey to make one pound of wax, Sister Isabel said. It was an aesthetic delight to go through her shop and see her good equipment for her work, and to see the beautiful rows of candles that she had made already that day. Another sister is an herbalist, Sister Hyacinth, and spent thirty of her years in religion with the Indians, and she told me of the virtues of wild violet leaves, plantain, parsley, burdock leaves and seeds, elderberries, red clover, sage and mullein.

Certainly these are things it would be good to learn.

Don Humphrey certainly has the sacramental attitude towards life. Anyone who works with God's good materials, as he does, and is co-creator with His maker has a life of joy in spite of the hardship which goes with the good life these days. Mary shares Don's interests, and point of view. She is a weaver when she has time from the children and housework.

St. Isador's Farm

They were both on St. Isador's farm with the Resers for two years but a farming commune these days which is twelve miles from church and which has to be built from the ground up, house and all, is no place for a man who has talents which are itching to be used. One of the greatest treasures Don has is wood which he cut and seasoned for his work. He has made cribs and beds and chests and benches for his own home. He has made a beautiful altar and candle sticks for a chapel in Minneapolis. He is doing the same kind of work for a Catholic hospital being opened by the Benedictines in the west.

But here is one of the basic evils of our system. An artist, and also a writer is expected to do his work for God, which is a funny way of putting it when he has a family of children to feed. Then when he does, instead of gratitude, he usually is labeled shiftless and improvident. If he were paid for his work as Rambusch artists are paid, he would be admired and esteemed. But if he is an unknown and living in the country for the sake of his children, far from the work he must do, he is up against it.

Teaching

A teacher's job is an engrossing one, for every enthusiast is a teacher. But it is notoriously badly paid. So how can the family man achieve ownership, unless he is subsidized by the Bishops, rather than the government which talks of granting loans, not land, to veterans.

But I am running into another article rather than reporting a pilgrimage. I visited with the Smelsers, the Muellers, the McCarthys in Minneapolis—all interested in the land, and all teachers. I visited the Heaney's and the Gallaghers in Milwaukee, and Donald is a teacher at Marquette and Larry is working in a brewery, saving money for a farm. It is wonderful to see Ruth Ann, who has the carriage and air of queen, in her spacious kitchen, surrounded by Mary, Ann, Joseph, and Teresa, and there is another one coming in this family, too. It looks as though they we're going to be on the land by spring, working with Martie Paul and Ruth Ann's brother, all of them putting what they have into it. The farm they are thinking of is a quarter of a mile to a church, and that Church is a place of pilgrimage twice a year and the Blessed Mother is supposed to have appeared there. If they are there by the time I go to Wisconsin again in the spring, I shall surely visit them and report on it. The trouble is that farming must be learned from the ground up, and for people living as the Heaneys do, without coffee, tea, sugar, little meat, in real poverty, it would be easy except for a mortgage. That will be a problem.

Don and Idella Gallagher have shown their faith by buying an old brick farmhouse, charmingly situated near a church, with a good garden around it, an ideal place as it is just outside the city where Don works, and rural besides. They are looking forward to having family conferences out there, and having already had one Catholic Worker party.

In Chicago

In Chicago I visited the two Reser families on the North Side and had lunch with Tom Sullivan, John Cogley, Jim O'Gara and Fr. Carrabine at the offices of Today, a fortnightly published for Cisca at 638 Deming place, a quiet street I used to skate on as a child.

Al Reser started the Catholic Worker House of Hospitality in Chicago which is now closed since the war. He has four children, and works as all fathers do, at home as well as at work, but he is most interested in the family Apostolate and as part of it wants to start a collection to rebuild the homes of the families of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, as a conscience fund. There are Jesuits there whom he will ask to administer the fund, but he is willing to sponsor, and take up the correspondence work about it, together with his wife, Catherine. If anyone is interested in getting this conscience fund going, let him get in touch with Al Reser, 1749 W. Allison St., Chicago, Ill. This last month some friend in

California sent us \$500 in cash to send food packages to Europe. It was an anonymous donation and we do thank whoever it was for their trust in us. The money has been spent and the food packages are on their way, to Germany, Italy, France, Finland, Poland, Hungary, etc. Maybe someone will send \$5000 or so for the rebuilding of homes for the Japanese families we have injured so cruelly. The latest news about the atom bomb is that those it has not killed outright will die of cancer within the next ten or fifteen years.

Our Lady of Wayside Farm

Another good visit this trip was to the Gauchats at our Lady of the Wayside Farm. It was a great joy to see there old fields reclaimed for wheat that had been lying idle for years, and ploughing under way for the spring. Ray Knight is helping Bill and, in addition to the farm work, Bill drives the school bus and delivers grain from the mill to add to the farm income. Through the years the Blessed Martin House of Hospitality goes on, and about fifty men a day come for breakfast and supper and about ten men are housed. It was good to have our meeting there and again it was families who come together for discussion and study.

Even Dorothy adds to the family income by tinting photographs, and her sale of Christmas cards last winter paid the expenses of the new baby. There are three now, sturdy little girls, and I was there for the birthday party of the oldest, Anita Marie.

The Hugos

My last stop on the way home was at the Hugo's in Kittanning, where we had a delightful old-fashioned taffee pull, Mr. Lawrence Hugo officiating. He showed me how to make it, so I shall introduce this custom of candy making at the farm and Mott St. For the group that were there he used four cups of molasses and two of sugar. It is a healthy kind of candy for the children, and they help make it themselves, so that is why I speak of it here. It's another step out of the industrial set-up when we make our own.