Life of Prayer and Poverty

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Summary: Links a life of poverty (not destitution) and prayer as exemplified by Carroll McCool at St. Colette house in Oakland, CA. Quotes him at length on the life of prayer. (DDLW #644).

When I left New York, October first, I put in the hands of the statue of St. Francis, in the courtyard of the church at 32nd St., a bright red rose, and begged that he teach me ever more about poverty.

And now I am here on the west coast, having reached the furthest point of my travels, and I have indeed learned more about poverty, from Carroll McCool who runs the St. Colette house in Oakland, California. St. Colette house used to be Maurin House started three years ago by Charles Geohagan, who got the work under way and then had to leave. Bill Everson, whose poems appear in the Catholic Worker, and who is now Brother Antoninus, came to take over, and Carroll, just out of the Trappists at Utah, came for a visit. He was just staying for Lent, he said, and he is there yet, and he knows that it is his vocation. They changed the name of Maurin House to St. Collette's house because people took to calling it Moron house and it hurt Carroll both for the sake of Peter and for the poor, who were being despised.

Three years ago I visited this house and now when I am visiting it again, in the same cold rainy weather, the house is just the same. At Fifth street, across the street from a park, around the corner from markets, St. Vincent de Paul stores, and the Welfare bureau, there is this little store, part of a building which is soon to come down because of a highway (the same old story in every part of the country). In this little store, where there is a sink and a stove, and plenty of pots and pans, and two long tables which make an angle, six hundred men are fed every afternoon. There is no line because the men come and go from twelve until five. The work can all be done in that time. Vegetables by the sack, potatoes, carrots, cabbage, onions, all are donated, and there is meat and bones for stock. There is plenty of bread, at one cent a pound and there is always plenty of soup.

On the next block is another house, at 486 Fourth street, which is called simply the annex, and there is no name over the door. There are seventeen beds in one room, halfdozen in another, a few here and there, and at night about 35 men can be taken care of. There is a clothes room, and a small room for Carroll and a kitchen with a wood burner stove which heats the kitchen and takes the damp out of the house. Out in the back there is a long yard stacked with cliffs of wood against the fence–all that is necessary to keep warm, and given by the markets. There is also a garden with carnations in bloom and tomato plants growing

against the wall, and beds full of salad and herbs, grown by the two Italian men who lived upstairs. I have a sprig of sweet smelling thyme in my pocket now and it is smelling up my rosary beads.

Here in this house, or rather in an old damp shed in back of this house of the poor, Bill Everson set up his big hand press and turned out a masterpiece of printing art, on handmade paper, bound in vellum, and illustrated by Mary Fabilli–poems of exquisite beauty. Out of disorder and destitution, perfect beauty has sprung.

And in the little room off the dormitory Carroll leads a life of prayer.

"I learned to pray with him," Bill said to me when I visited him at St. Albert's later. "We prayed together and we prayed alone. Literally, Carroll is a man who prays without ceasing. No matter what happened, he was never perturbed. He just went on with his beads. He had them in his hands day and night. He wore them down by half while I was there. One day he had to go away for a week, and he handed me a rosary and two dollars (and thirty-five men around and a bread line of a thousand then.) I was terrified, but I kept to the beads and when he came back I handed him fifty dollars change. We prayed walking along Merritt Lake, and we prayed walking the streets. We prayed in his little room, kneeling, sitting. I came across **The Way of the Pilgrim**, in a Book of Russian Spirituality, and I read it aloud to him, and while I read, he prayed. Our life was prayer, literally. I would have died, living down there without it. I could never have stayed here, if I had not had it."

"Here" was St. Albert's Dominican house where I was first greeted by Francis Bates, who is now Frater Urban and who will be ordained next month. Francis was with the Catholic Worker house in Milwaukee and in one of our conscientious objector camps during the second war.

"Here" was where Brother Antoninus had set up his press again and where he is engaged, still at prayer, in setting up and printing the new Latin translation of the psalms, in an edition of fifty copies, one of which is to be sent to Pope Pius XII. He is the caretaker, too, of the incunabula (editions in the first fifty years of printing) and other rare volumes, one of which is the polyglot Bible, a rare item. There is one set at the Union Theological Seminary in New York.

"Here" was also where we attended compline at five, kneeling in the balcony above the monks ranged in rows, on either side of the church, clad in white with their black capes and hoods, chanting the psalms and singing antiphons and hymns, and closing with the procession and the incomparable Salve Regina.

"To think that this goes on in this day and age," said a non-Catholic friend who was with us. I said apologetically that our friends deplored the luxury of the surroundings, and he commented, "Do you call that luxury?" which comforted me but did not convince me.

Later when we surveyed the dormitory of St. Collette's House together, and again I felt like apologizing that this was all one could do–he commented that it was just like the bunk houses he had seen for students working in the forestry department in summer, and like those for the sailors in the Navy on Treasure Island in the bay before they were shipped out to the Orient. So we weren't doing so bad, our little flock, to whom had been given such great promises.

Later on, I talked to Carroll for a few hours and I learned a great deal from this usually silent and solitary person.

"If I left poverty, I'd lose my soul," he said. 'And how can a man lead a life of prayer without leading a life of poverty too," he wondered. And when I asked him to tell me about himself, he did so quite simply, answering my questions. He had been a factory worker, then in the army for four years, then with the Trappists for a year. "I don't know why I left," he said. "Father Abbot said that he thought I had an extraordinary vocation. I guess this is it. I have been here three years now and I don't intend to quit."

As a little boy he had wanted to pray. He had a brother and a sister but it had not taken them as it did him. "God shows us in our youth very often. I had a very happy childhood. One of the dreams I had over and over again was that I was wandering around looking for a church to pray in. I never found it, but I dreamed I kept on praying. One July fourth I went into the church and prayed ten rosaries. The Sister at school said that people didn't think of God on secular holidays. Our Lord always told the apostles to pray–pray–pray. You never see any good in it perhaps but it's being used. It's our Lord's plan for us. We have to do it. Activity without it is worthless. It takes patience to pray. You've got to discipline your life. Poverty and prayer, those are the things. I try to be as inactive as possible!"

This in the midst of housing and feeding thousands of men over the years!

"I used to go on spiritual binges," he said rather shame-facedly. "Down in Cincinnati, I used to work for some months and save enough to live on and then spend all my time in church. I was hungry for prayer. I used to read Fr. Willy Doyle. Do you remember how he prayed? He used to work so hard at it that sometimes he hated to wake up to continue a life of prayer. God is a hard task master. He takes you at your word. It could not be too easy for Benedict Joseph Labre. Or the Little Flower either. They say she used to drag herself up to bed at night, hardly able to take one step after the other. And then to be cold. But it is not a monotonous life. Things happen to you. You get a taste for it, you wake up at night to pray. It is warmth and comfort to the heart, too, and it just goes on and on, inside you, you pray even while you talk, while you listen to others talk.

"Think of the other monotonies in life. Up in the dime store, Bing Crosby recordings singing Adeste Fidelis all day, over and over. And all the gadgets going round and round, most of them no good to anyone.

"I love Bernadette–all the little saints. She was poor, and she saw our Lady on a dump heap, a place outside the town which was a waste land. She was poor mentally too. Just a slow witted child. But what do any of us know about God? No matter what they say of God. He isn't that.

"Werfel, Simone Weil–too bad they didn't become Catholics, but I suppose it was God's plan. Anyway, it's wonderful."

There is loneliness at times of course. "But one time when I felt that way I picked up something by St. Thomas and he talked about the loneliness of the agony in the garden and the loneliness of the damned in hell. We are going to have one or the other."

I thought, as he spoke, of the story of Dives and Lazarus, the former sitting feasting at the

table and the latter crouched at the gate in his rags. And one went to Abraham's bosom and the other went to hell. Jesus Christ put it very simply too–that gulf between the rich and the poor and their last ends.

It was a bare little room where we sat and the pad on the bed was woefully thin. There were skimpy blankets and one sheet. There were two straight back chairs. There was room for nothing else. On the wall with other holy pictures there was a card containing a quotation from St. Augustine:

O poor man, hear me: if you have

God, what have you not?

O rich man, hear me: if you have

not God, what have you?

And I rejoiced as I sat there with Carroll McCool talking about prayer, that here was poverty, dingy, unpainted, crowded, ugly poverty, in the midst of the richest, most luxurious–plush life in the world, portrayed for all the world in the movies which go out to all the world from the southern part of the state. We saw a little of that poverty portrayed in a movie, Monsieur Vincent. We read about it in the lives of the saints. But here it is, in actuality. No paint, no linoleum, no bright curtains at the windows, no desperate effort to keep up appearances, no admirable but futile and agonizingly fatiguing effort to put a better face on things, crowding out time for prayer. Here is poverty, but here also is shelter for thirty-four men and food for 600 daily. There is a roof above and a bed to sleep in and warm covers to shut out the sad world. There is the companionship of others, those who come to get help and stay to help others. This is not destitution and though people may shudder at the drab and cramped surroundings, it is holy poverty, a gift of God, and into which Christ chose to be born.