

On Pilgrimage - March 1956

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Summary: Relishes attending plays by Chekov and comments on the need to develop ones talents to combat a sense of futility in this age. Says to be a personalist is to be communitarian and writes vignettes of some of those around her. Notes the need to grow in the spiritual life. Keyword: work (DDLW #700).

We are happy to announce that the snow drops, the hyacinths, the irises, the crocuses are up in Tamar's garden and have to be protected against the wicked chickens and geese who are ready to bobble them up. Last Sunday the children found pollywogs in the brook at Peter Maurin Farm. Spring is just around the corner. I can remember one March when I planted radishes, peas, and lettuce on the fourth, and I can remember another March when there were three blizzards. No telling what this month, this most unpredictable month, has in store for us.

On this day of writing, I look back on a month spent mostly in the city, with weekends on the farm. This coming month there will be plenty of visits, because people are always dropping in to see us from all parts of the world, but it will be a Lenten month with the quieter pleasures and recreation of walking and reading. We saw and heard Boris Goudonoff one night, Michael Kovalak, Bob Steed and I, and we went early, waiting in line for the dollar and a quarter standing room. It was a mild night and the line moved quickly, we got good places where we could look down that vast dark mysterious cavern of an opera house and see the gorgeous sets and choral effects of the Mousorgsky opera. In case our readers will exclaim about voluntary poverty I hasten to say that Agnes Bird contributed one dollar toward my admission, and Ammon Hennacy fifty cents! One evening at the theater I enjoyed even more. Chekov has always been one of my favorite authors and a new translation by Stark Young of his plays have been put on this winter at the Fourth Street Play House, a few blocks away, one of the many little theaters springing up in the neighborhood. Ammon had used some of the money from the sale of his book to take me to **The Three Sisters**, **The Cherry Orchard**, and last week to **Uncle Vanya**. In all of the plays there is a curious emphasis on work—the need of the human being to work in order to redeem himself and achieve some measure of happiness and satisfaction out of life. We are living in an age when there is such a sense of futility and purposelessness, such a sense of individual frustration, that these plays are curiously apt. That is why they have achieved such popularity. Every night there is a packed house, and it is a none too comfortable a house at that. The two-dollar seats are cramped but still near enough to make one feel an intimate part of the group on the stage.

Paradoxes

On the one hand to be humble, to acknowledge one self a “grain of sand” as St. Therese used to say—“dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return” and on the other hand to recognize one’s dignity as a son of God, with particular talents and vocations, which must be developed. To know that each one has his own contribution to make to our age, that none else can make, and work is necessary to develop it! How many writers, teachers, doctors, musicians, singers, there are among us who have not developed their capacities for lack of some spirit, some energy, some sense of the importance of what each one has to do! I know this very well, and I am sure other writers do, this need to prod oneself on to work. The closing lines of Uncle Vanya, are most appealing. Sonya says,—

“There is nothing for it. We must go on living! We shall go on living, Uncle Vanya. We shall live through a long, long chain of days and weary evenings; we shall patiently bear the trials that fate sends us; we shall work for others, both now and in our old age and have no rest; and when our time comes we shall die without a murmur, and there beyond the grave we shall say that we have suffered, that we have wept, that life has been bitter to us, and God will have pity on us, and you and I, uncle, dear uncle, shall see a life that is bright, lovely, beautiful. We shall rejoice and look back at these troubles of ours with tenderness, with a smile—and we shall rest. I have faith, uncle; I have fervent passionate faith. We shall rest.”

And the old nurse goes on with her knitting, and the intellectual old mother goes on reading her pamphlet, and Sonya kneels by her uncle’s side and comforts him in his unhappy love, and the deserted husband who has supported his wife, her lover and their children, like Osee of old, sits to one side, playing on his guitar.

Neither Turgenyev nor Chekov those great masters of short story and play commit themselves, but they write of people of faith with such tenderness, such beauty, that one could almost say they believed, because they wished to believe.

Happenings

What else happened during the month? On the day we last mailed out the February Catholic Worker, Eugene Exman and Victor Gollancz and his wife came to call, the latter two from England. Gollancz is the compiler of several anthologies, the most famous GOD AND MAN, and is a publisher himself in Britain. He has also won fame for his relief work after the war both in Germany and China. Eugene Exman is religious editor of Harpers, and at present he has my finished manuscript on The Little Flower. Whether or not it will be printed is another matter. There may be much more work on it to do, who knows.

Speakings

On Friday, February third, I spoke at St. Joseph’s College in Brooklyn and had dinner beforehand with the young women of the Grail, at Monica House. To even go for dinner in that atmosphere, is a foretaste of heaven, and the weekend of conferences that they were

preparing made me envious. I thought of delightful visits I had had in Loveland where one is transported into an entirely different atmosphere. The Christian mentality, rather than that of the world predominates. The kind of society, as Peter Maurin used to say where it is easier for man to be good.

The following week I spoke at St. Thomas' Episcopal Church auditorium at Farmingdale, L. I. for Brotherhood Week and the Sunday after that, at the Rutgers and Douglas Colleges' Newman Club at New Brunswick. This coming weekend, just before the paper goes to press, I am speaking at Syracuse at a conference on peace, at which the two other speakers will be Cecil Hinshaw and Owen Lattimore.

On The Bowery

With all these evening engagements, and days on Staten Island, which is only a couple of hours, and fifty cents carfare away, I was much of my time at St. Joseph's House, which is the heart of the work, the headquarters, the place where the paper is gotten out, where discussions are held, all because we try to show our love for God by our love for our brother. That love is pretty well pruned, time and again, by the little conflicts that come with daily living, with community. One cannot be a personalist, taking upon oneself the care of one's brother in need, without becoming a communitarian, and St. Joseph's House of Hospitality is our community.

We have become in a way famous, not as a settlement house, or a mission, but as a place where we all live together as a family, in close and intimate association of daily life, even though according to our policy no questions are asked, and often we know people only by their first names. This is to insure that respect for men as brothers and to prevent people from having to tell those little lies, make those evasions, by which they try to retain their privacy and their self respect. In a number of modern novels our work has been pictured as houses which are sinks of iniquity, into which the young leaders of the work throughout the country have plunged, if not to rehabilitate, at least to share in that hell of poverty and sin and disease. As followers of Christ, who, "when He ascended up on high led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men. Now that He ascended, what is it but that He also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?" (Ephesians 4:8-9).

Too often however, all that the outsiders see in our poverty is the blackness of hell, and they see men as a mass, not as individuals, as persons, made in the likeness of God, creatures of body and soul, temples of the Holy Ghost. It is one of the reasons why I like to write about people to try to make others see these things. (John McKeon did this superably in his series **Poverty Progress.**)

Michael

Just now I passed Italian Michael in the hall. We have had a Ukrainian Michael, a Polish Michael, a Carpatho-Russian Michael, an Irish Michael, and now recently there is a Puerto Rican Michael. I also know a Japanese Michael. May St. Michael the archangel bless them

all. Italian Michael was shuffling through the hall in his stocking feet and I asked him if he had a cold. But no, it was because he was trying to warm his feet, after walking up to 9th street and back to buy the day-old bread for ten cents a loaf. (No baker in our midst right now!) Every morning Mike gets up at four to help one or two others to serve the coffee line.

Just last week he did a wonderful job of cleaning up our yard making it ready for meetings. Mike spent some time with us on Staten Island, and when he wasn't working with Fr. Duffy, he chopped wood for the two or three wood burning stoves we have in the barn and house. One time I found him sitting outside during dinner, and when I asked him why he did not come in and eat, he said that he had done no work, and if he didn't work, he wouldn't eat!

Larry and Roy

How can I describe the soup that these two put out every day? What with the donation of about a ton of lima beans, we have a thick bodied soup full of chopped vegetables and meat stock and whatever else they can find left over in the ice box from the dinner before. Many a time when the pan cakes which Smokey Joe calls collision mats are served, or hash, people beg for the soup too, or take it as an alternate. Ammon Hennacy just about lives on it. It is truly a holy soup. One of the reasons it is so good is that it is prepared with love and friendship.

Anna

I have written of Anna before, how she bundles herself up in dozens of coats and scarves and covers her hair with a silk stocking pulled down nunlike over her brow and head to cover all her hair and then drapes over that a multitude of scarves. For many years she only came to our door for something to eat, and would take her soup or coffee standing out in the entry. Now she comes early in the mornings and often as I am on my way to Mass, I pass her, walking in the street in her heavy men's shoes, pulling behind her one or two heavy cartons in which she carries all her belongings. Now she spends her days in the library, smoking, rolling her own from her allotment of Bugler which the men all get, and when she gets tired of the society there, she goes out in the hall and sits in a little rocking chair by the door. Often as I come in late at night she is still there, murmuring about the cold outdoors, and when we beg her to stay she flees. One night I found her lying on the floor of the hall, and when I covered her with a blanket she waited until I was upstairs and then got up, folded up the blanket, returning it to the night watchman, and went off into the night. "I got places to stay," she always says.

Pilgrims

I could write about so many of our friends, those who live with us, and those who work elsewhere and come to visit us. John Murray, living on a tiny pension, for instance, who has helped us build up Peter Maurin Farm, cementing the dirt floor of the basement to make a

kitchen and a laundry, digging up the garden when everyone sat around talking of tractors and horses, digging ditches for pipes for the tubs installed in the basement, staying with us between jobs at Mt. Loretto, St. Vincent's and countless other places where he pushed a heavy mop or handled heavy pots and sacks and did other work with phenomenal strength for a man of his years. He is in St. Vincent's in New York right now and almost recovered and ready to go out again to his room on the Bowery. There is Stanley Borowsky who also helps us between jobs, and who last week walked from Brooklyn to Pleasant Plains in Staten Island. He stayed a week with us and during that time walked to the end of the island, fourteen miles and back again to visit Fr. Faley. And with his hard manual labor, he fasts and he prays. Stanley Borowsky, Mike Kovalak, Mary Roberts, Ammon and I and the girls in East Harlem, and Pat Rusk, all have a sense of the intimacy of shared suffering, what with having been in jail together last June. It is the only way in which we have ever been permitted to perform that work of mercy of visiting the prisoner as well as the sick.

Pray

There will be two days of recollection, one on Friday, March second, at the Peter Maurin Farm, with Fr. Carabine, S.J. giving us conferences morning and afternoon. We are hoping he will come the night before, offer Mass at seven-thirty the next morning and have conferences during the day which will be spent in holy silence, ending at supper at five-thirty. There will also be our usual monthly conference, from Fr. Guerin, Marist. His last conference was attended by friends from Dayton, Ohio and Philadelphia. It was well worth coming for. He is trying to teach us how to develop in the spiritual life, how to grow as sons of God. If we do not grow it is as though we were like a child in the womb who says to himself, "I am quite comfortable here, why should I try to grow. How do I know if there is any other life. What need have I to walk or to breathe. I think I will continue in my present comfort and not worry." We are here in the womb of time, and we will be born to eternal life. We must begin to develop, to grow. This is done by good works, done for the love of God, not for the love of self, and by the Sacraments, those channels by which divine life flows into our souls. These are some of the things Fr. Guerin is talking to us about every first Sunday of the month, and after the hour's conference there is benediction and an hour of questions.