

On Pilgrimage - April 1958

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Summary: Refutes the rumor they are closing the house of hospitality. Describes their search for a new house and difficulties with the city housing codes. Decries the violence of children after witnessing an incident in a nearby Church. (DDLW #737).

A story has been sent out by the N. C. W. C. news service about “the closing” of the House of Hospitality in New York by the city. I understand that the story included the statement that we were looking for another place, but this statement was left out of many of the news stories in the diocesan press, and our friends have been left with the impression that the House is closing. This is not true. We are hunting daily for a new place and we will continue even if we have to rent a store front to feed the hungry, clothe the naked. When it comes to sheltering the harborless, with all the deaths by fire in our great and crowded cities, it becomes harder to find a place where we would get a certificate of occupancy from the city.

We repeat as we have many times before, that while there are slums, we must live in them, to share the condition of the poor. At the same time we have improved every house we lived in, and made it a place of comfort and peace. One story printed about us said that we had been living in a fire trap, and that the city had to clamp down on us. The truth of the matter is that when I was given a suspended sentence as a slum landlord (a sentence that still stands) the house had two fire escapes, back and front, though the building at Chrystie street is only two rooms deep. In our repairs, the building department made us take one fire escape down! We also had a night watchman and fire extinguishers on each floor.

When we purchased the building with the help of St. Joseph eight years ago, there were no violations against the house. In the ensuing six years, more and more laws were added to the books, so that there were about twelve violations, many of them minor. For instance, there is a requirement that there be lights over the doors into the halls and that these lights be on at all times. There is also the requirement that we have steel self-closing doors, each of which cost over a hundred dollars. There was also a complete sprinkler system put in from top to bottom, in the halls and in every room and office although it is only required by law in the halls. In the recent fatal factory fire around the corner from us, the fire commissioner said there were no violations, and yet there was no sprinkler system.

A New York Times reporter was recently taken around by some of our group to visit some Puerto Rican rooming houses in the neighborhoods, and he was appalled by the conditions. Yet there is nothing done by the fire department about these houses where whole families live and cook and heat their crowded quarters as best they can. There is a recent law which

requires that landlords put in steam heat and that has meant the closing of many buildings and the overcrowding of others. While we are looking for a new home for the Catholic Worker, we are looking at many empty tenement houses which need just these improvements, which means that in addition to buying the building, we must make it conformable to the laws of the city. Our lawyer inquires from the city planning board as to whether this or that house is to be torn down in the near future (five or ten years) and often is given the answer that there are no plans made for that area or that block.

Yet before we made \$24,000 worth of improvements on the house at Chrystie St., these same inquiries were made, and a year and a half later, we received the warning that the new subway will necessitate our building being torn down. Next door to us are two huge apartment houses where Italian and Puerto Rican families live in some measure of decency. They too are being forced to move and it is all but impossible for them to find apartments or to get into "projects."

For many years there was poverty and yet some security as to residence. Now, all over the city, families are being displaced, human beings and their needs are being ignored.

Pike Street

As for myself I would rather live in an Italian neighborhood where there is such basic Catholicism that the ancient virtue of hospitality is understood. For fifteen years we lived on Mott Street and saw many examples of personal responsibility. Families took care of their own. The old and senile were not put away in institutions but were cared for by the younger generation. It was understood that destitution of mind and body often made it necessary for people to beg. In many cities it is against the law, and in our many visits to courts in the last few years we saw many vagrants and beggars convicted and sent to the "island." According to the New York Times real estate section of March 23, Minneapolis proposes to wipe out Skid Row and one proposal is to run all beggars and vagrants out of town. In Tucson where I visited recently on my way back from Mexico I saw a policed fenced-in encampment where vagrants were "detained," not arrested, and put up in tents and set to work on roads. I wonder if they were paid for this labor so that they could travel and look for work elsewhere.

Kieran Dugan found a place on Pike Street last month which he thought would do as it answered very much to the description of the old place we had on Mott Street. (The younger generation look back with nostalgia to our days in the Italian slums.) There were two stores, both very narrow, below them were basements, and above, six stories with three apartments on each floor. On one side was a synagogue "and the Jews also understand about charity," Kieran said. It was open and sunny in front and had a beautiful view of the bridge to Brooklyn but the other rooms were dark. Buildings facing it had been torn down and the narrow street had been replaced by open areas. One block away was the church of St. Teresa of Avila, an old Irish parish which had now become a Puerto Rican one. There was a great mixture of Negro, Puerto Rican, Irish, Italian and Jew in the neighborhood which was predominantly a family neighborhood and not one of small industry as our present section is rapidly becoming. Fr. Myers of the Episcopalian settlements and missions on East Broadway and Henry Street has written about the gangs and their wars in this neighborhood and he has been called in as

mediator between gangs, and as a prominent member of the lower East Side Neighborhood Association in one or another period of terror in this teen age gang section.

“Brighton Rock” Incident

Ammon and I walked down to Pike Street, which is at the foot of Allen, last week, to look at the house and we walked around the block to survey the neighborhood, stopping in the church for a visit. It was after five and though the church was open on both sides, and one could enjoy the vivid colors of the stained glass windows, it was quite dark within. There was only the light of the candles burning in rows before one or another of the statues of the saints and the Blessed Mother.

As we knelt there, a woman half way down the middle aisle turned from her kneeling posture and said aloud, “I know you are hiding back there in the pews.”

There was a shuffling sound and a scurrying, and then a small voice piped up. “I’m going to get you, when those people go out. I’m going to get you.”

The woman got up behind the altar rail and into the sacristy and then came back. “I’m going to tell the Monsignor on you,” she said, as she knelt down again.

There was more scuffling, and a small boy of nine or ten went up the aisle and threatened her, coming very close to her and leaning over her.

“What do you mean by bringing a knife into church,” she cried.

I had been thinking that this encounter between the small boy and the old lady was a family affair, that she was an over-indulgent relative, aunt, mother or grandmother, who was now paying in public teasing and torment for her lack of discipline at home.

But then a little colored girl ran in too, and the two children stood in front of the woman and first one and then the other struck at her. A Puerto Rican woman who had been praying before the Blessed Mother, the only other person in the dark church but ourselves, got up at that minute and went over and spoke to the children, taking the boy by the shoulder and ushering him out of the church. “I’m coming back,” he kept saying. “I’m going to get her.”

Ammon and I went out too and stood there on the steps, which were banked by privet hedges in wooden pails which were about to fall apart. We talked to the boy and girl. The Puerto Rican woman, who had a quiet air of authority, could not speak English. The little boy was Irish, sandyhaired, very pale, as though he lived in a cellar. His clothes were ragged and he answered our questions though he was on the defensive. He wanted to know if we were Catholic, and then repeated, “Are you Roman Catholic?” He had seen the St Patrick’s day parade but not been part of it. The little girl was Episcopalian, but she did not know Fr Myers she said. We were trying to bring the incident down to the normal, but there was something very gruesome about the situation, very menacing. What spirit is there in the air these days, of ugly resentment and hatred and desire for violence among children. We have always had violence and robbery and murder among adults where millions are herded together in the slums which are worsened by the too rapid tearing down of the old and the screening for rehousing. We have never before had such war of childhood against adults.

Were these two children also “locked out” by parents working, and so in effect homeless? What work there is to do to maintain these Houses of Hospitality of ours which are so much needed since “the poor we will always have with us.” (I am quoting the words of Jesus.)

We have sent our appeal this month so that we can pay the bills which have accumulated these past six months, and with the additional plea that you will help us get a new home. St. Teresa of Avila said she never was turned down by St. Joseph, and we are begging him to care for our needs. In a way it is St. Joseph against the all- encroaching State and City. He is patron of the universal Church, and our patron, and as foster father of our Lord we can ask anything of Him so we are confident.

“Lord, what would you have me do?” St. Paul asked, and we are asking the same thing. If You want this work to go on, it will go on. Thy will be done. **Be it done unto me according to Thy word.**

Seeing nothing else before us (and surely it cannot be against our Lord’s will to practice the works of mercy) we go confidently on, hunting a new home. Nothing can stop us. If God be with us, who can be against us? Of ourselves we can do nothing. We are penniless, without influence in this world. **But with Him we can do all things.**