

# On Pilgrimage - May 1950

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*Summary: Appeals for financial help to acquire a new house of hospitality. Describes in detail her experience of fasting for peace and reflects on the meaning of fasting, quoting Gandhi. (DDLW #610).*

The most severe crisis in the seventeen years of our existence is facing us now. Today, May Day, is our anniversary. It was on this day that we got out on the streets for the first time with the first issue of the *Catholic Worker*. Today we begin our eighteenth year of publication. And today, we are faced with the need to find ourselves a new home. Since 1936 we have had our office and our hospice at 115 Mott St. Unlike any other paper in the world, we were **compelled** by our very readers to do something about the crisis and the solutions we were writing about. Unlike any other paper in the world, our readers came to our doorsteps and asked food, clothing and shelter, and we could not say to them, "Go, be thou filled," but we had to serve them. Unlike any other paper in the world, our readers packed their suitcases and came to stay for months at a time on our farms and at our houses of hospitality to argue the points made by the paper. **Hospitality** is a word which Peter Maurin taught us to construe literally.

The situation is not hopeless. We have found the house we want, and if the dear Lord, who has multiplied our loaves and fishes these many years, wants us to have it, we will. It costs twenty-five thousand dollars. Most people pay twelve or fifteen thousand dollars these days for an ordinary home for their families, when they are considering a home at all. Prices in New York City are of course high. We do not mind discussing our finances frankly. When schools and convents are built our diocesan papers talk about the hundreds of thousands they cost, emphasizing the expense to which we are put to maintain our parochial school system. There is a need to be frank about costs.

We have 65,000 copies of the paper each month which go out to many readers all over the country. Some copies may be read by a whole family or school. Other copies may be used to line garbage cans with. We do not know how many readers we have. We may have ten thousand readers to subscribe for ten friends each who are bored and do not read the paper. How can we estimate our reader strength? Just the same, if everyone who is interested in the work could help us, we would soon have our house. We are going to make our appeal this month, by letter, by word of mouth, and we are doing it here too. Maybe you are saving money for old age, or for the education of your children and so on. Maybe you will **loan** us money if you cannot give it. If people have trusted us enough in the past to dispense their charity for them (and people have sent us as much as \$1500 at a time to be spent solely for

Europe) then perhaps they will trust us now to use their money for this emergency and pay them back in a year or two, without interest.

It does indeed seem an enormous sum to raise. We need big donations as well as small. We have only a month or six weeks to raise the money, so we implore your help. Ask your friends, your fellow workers.

## **The Long Fast**

During Holy Week this year a group gathered in Washington at a settlement hospice called Inspiration House, to **fast for peace** for the week. It was a time of intense penance and prayer. Many of those fasting engaged in demonstration and distribution of literature. Aside from distributing hand bills at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception on Palm Sunday, I spent my time in the penance we set out to do.

Here are some of the things Gandhi has said about fasting:

“In the case of fasting of this nature, there is not much scope for it to thrive or become popular for the simple reason that it is such an agonizing process that ordinary human nature shudders at the very thought of having to undergo it. It is only by training that the body can do without food for any length of time. The undisciplined and weak would soon give up the idea.

“I firmly believe that by this means one can convince the world of the sincerity of one’s view.

“Fasting for light and penance is a hoary institution. It can be observed commonly in Christianity and Islamism while Hinduism is replete with instances of fasting for purification. But it is a privilege if it is also a duty. In my own case I have assumed this right for the present occasion.

“In my opinion fasting for purification of self and others is an age-long institution and it will subsist so long as man believes in God. It is the prayer to the Almighty from the anguished heart.”

## **Bayard Rustin, Leader**

About forty people engaged in the fast, lead by Bayard Rustin, Negro secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Ammon Hennacy drove from Phoenix, Arizona with two Hopi Indians who wished to visit the Indian Commissioner and with Joe Craigmyle who had just recently been released from jail for non-registration. Ammon came to Mass with me each day, at the Sacred Heart Church which was far enough from the house to mean riding on the street car and then walking three blocks besides. Joe came on one occasion and another time a young mother from Tracy, California, who had left her children with friends to accompany an old Negro woman. They rode five days and nights on a bus to arrive on time to begin the fast on Sunday. The fast had started at midnight Saturday. On another morning, the young editor of the Peacemaker from Yellow Springs, Ohio accompanied us.

Mary Houston and Mabel Knight gave me staunch support, coming to visit me and helping me on Palm Sunday to give out my leaflets, visiting me evenings. I had my last meal with them at St. Peter Claver Center in Washington, and when I left, Mabel took me to the train. I was forced to break my fast on the fourth day to return to New York due to the serious illness of Charlie O'Rourke who was taken to Bellevue after a heart attack. He was on the critical list for several weeks but is better now. I resumed the fast Good Friday and Irene Naughton kept me company for that day. Dave Mason continued with the fast in Washington.

Physically the fast was difficult only the first two days when I suffered dizziness and nausea and a peculiar nervousness that was most distracting. Psychologically the suffering is the keenest. Not to have that communion three times a day, when you sit down with your fellows and break bread with them makes you feel withdrawn from the land of the living. You feel a sense of death, a dying to this world which is almost literal. I do believe a woman feels this most keenly because she is the nourisher—it is her function to feed the baby, the child, to prepare meals for the family.

Never before, however, have I felt such joy and strength from Holy Communion. If we feel such a dying when food is withdrawn from the body, how great is that suffering, of which we are so unconscious, of the soul at not being nourished. And I do not mean by Holy Communion alone, because by the nature of man's and woman's work, it is often impossible for them to receive every day. I am a firm believer in evening Mass for the workers. But the nourishment which comes from spiritual Communion, from the receiving of the Word through the Scriptures, from spiritual reading! We can have that, if we will, wherever we are, wherever we are placed in life.

### **“Too Much Sorrow”**

Last night at the supper table one of the girls in the House of Hospitality broke down in the middle of the meal and suddenly cried out, “Too much sorrow, there is too much sorrow. I am tired of it.” She began to cry, with her face all twisted up like a child's, the tears running down her cheeks.

And it had indeed been a weekend of sorrows. First one of the men in the house who had come to us off and on between jobs made a retreat with us up on the farm at Newburgh, broke down mentally and begged to be sent to the hospital. Then we woke yesterday morning to the news that Bill Duffy had died sometime in the night. He was found lying fully clothed by the side of the bed, on the top floor of the rear house. He had been with us for ten or twelve years and helped us by keeping the hot water boiler going and sweeping out the yard and halls and emptying the ash and garbage cans. He lived and died in poverty, and I could only thank God that he died with us and not in some doorway on the Bowery. The Franciscan priest from Precious Blood Church came hastening through the streets wrapped in his brown cape, and old Bill received Extreme Unction and conditional absolution. We knelt around the body later and said the Rosary and some of the boys sat with him reading the office of the dead while they waited for the body to be taken away. We will have a requiem Mass this week and we will have to make our arrangements for the funeral today.

The girl who cried was thinking of her own sorrows, not old Bill's because he had lived a long life, he was over seventy, and we know that God in His mercy and love for all His little ones holds him. "He will overshadow thee with his shoulders and under his wings thou shalt trust." Many a time with us deaths and funerals are happy occasions, not sorrowful. A door is opening into refreshment, light and peace, after long grinding years of poverty and pain. And I say this not with any lack of appreciation of life which is beautiful to us all and to which we cling, knowing no other. But we speak in faith.