

# Letter On Hospices

Dorothy Day

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*Summary: Describes how Catholic Worker houses are run and the struggles with living the ideal of Christian love. Reflects on reconciling freedom and order. Maintains the primacy of the spiritual. Gives her positions on cooperation, house leadership, handling money, and the relation of the Catholic Worker to the hierarchy. Concludes by emphasizing the little way and voluntary poverty. (DDLW #183).*

(In answer to an inquiry about how to run a house of hospitality.)

During my recent trip there were many inquiries as to when we were going to open houses again through the west. I repeat, such centers must be opened by a local group who know what poverty and suffering mean, and who are willing to live in the house with those they serve. It can never be operated from the outside. Peter Maurin envisaged such houses as Houses of Catholic Action and that is the way he described them, using the phrase in its official term. That would mean of course the cooperation of the priests such as in Detroit and Rochester or Pittsburgh. It would mean also that the priest would influence others according to his own ideas on war, on politics, on labor, and the ideas motivating those who run the house will not be those of the editors of the *Catholic Worker*. But that happens again and again among the lay leaders of our houses. The important thing is that hospices, under Catholic auspices be started, no matter by whom, whether by Third Orders, Knights of Columbus, or oblates of St. Benedict. They do not have to be Catholic Worker Houses of Hospitality. We are always being accused of biting off more than we can chew, and indeed we always have more to feed, and to house, and to clothe than we can humanly handle. Breadlines are a disgrace. Each house should handle only what it can handle, which means that religious houses should restore the medieval idea of the hospice for guests, and that poor parishes should run hostels, etc. And everyone would share what he had instead of turning people to the city municipal lodging houses and Salvation Army. Here is the letter written to an inquirer:

Dear Fellow Worker in Christ:

Unless the seed fall into the ground and die, itself remaineth alone. But if it die it bringeth forth much fruit. So I don't expect any success in anything we are trying to do, either in getting out a paper, running houses of hospitality or

farming groups, or retreat houses on the land. I expect that everything we do be attended with human conflicts, and the suffering that goes with it, and that this suffering will water the seed to make it grow in the future. I expect that all our natural love for each other which is so warming and so encouraging and so much a reward of this kind of work and living, will be killed, put to death painfully by gossip, intrigue, suspicion, distrust, etc., and that this painful dying to self and the longing for the love of others will be rewarded by a tremendous increase of supernatural love amongst us all. I expect the most dangerous of sins cropping up amongst us, whether of sensuality or pride it does not matter, but that the struggle will go on to such an extent that God will not let it hinder the work but that the work will go on, because that work is our suffering and our sanctification.

So rejoice in failures, rejoice in suffering! I'm sending you a copy of *House of Hospitality*, which tells a great deal of our struggles. I'd like to have published a sequel to it, because I consider the things we are writing about and discussing fundamental to the problems of the day. I'm getting ready my material, made up of articles and stuff from my column. One of our heads of the Baltimore House of Hospitality, after reading the book said to me "Don't be so sad," and I had thought the book generally cheerful, though recognizing suffering as a necessity in the work.

One of the reasons we have so many helpers I suppose is that we put up with each other, though criticism is rife, and I sometimes think I am living amongst a bunch of anarchists, so vehemently do all accept Peter Maurin's writings and conversations on personal responsibility and "being what you want the other fellow to be" (And St. Augustine's "Love God and do as you will.") All of which is interpreted as meaning "I am on my own," though living in a community of people. It is thus in a House, and thus on the Farms. Which makes us like large headstrong families of vociferous people. We do keep more or less of a rule on the farm. We behave like a family in the House in town. People come to meals on time and try to get to bed at a reasonable hour, and it is generally recognized that daily Mass and communion are fundamental to the work.

"Unless the Lord build the house-" We read the *Soul of the Apostolate* and are afraid of the heresy of good works, we try to emphasize the primacy of the spiritual and the necessity of using our spiritual weapons, and in order to get practice in them, we emphasize the retreat and days of recollection.

One of the hardest things to put up with is the befuddlement which people fall into and hearing them groan, "What are *you* trying to do?" not "What are we trying to do." Or, "What is it all about?" Very often God withdraws His grace from us, as it, says in the *Imitation*, and we are left in darkness and then it is hard to see what it is all about. St. Augustine's vision of heaven, is where we all understand everything, and all is light. That is joy indeed.

What are we trying to do? We are trying to get to heaven, all of us. We are trying to lead a good life. We are trying to talk about and write about the

Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, the social principles of the Church and it is most astounding, the things that happen when you start trying to live this way. To perform the works of mercy becomes a dangerous practice. Our Baltimore House was closed as a public nuisance because we took in Negroes as well as whites. The boys were arrested and thrown in jail over night and accused of running a disorderly house. The opposition to feeding the hungry and clothing the naked is unceasing. There is much talk of the worthy and the unworthy poor, the futility of such panaceas. And yet our Lord himself gave us these jobs to do in his picture of the last Judgment, and as Fr. Furfey said once, we are not excused for ignorance. It is a good thing to live from day to day and from hour to hour.

Yes, we have only nine houses and four farms. Before the war we had thirty-two houses, but the young men were all taken- literally every one. In New York here we had only a few older men. Now we have three or four young ones around all the time helping. You know how it is, a crowd attracts a crowd. At the same time, we have several other houses in Rochester and Philadelphia which are badly in need of help, and everyone wishes to stay here in New York. And no central authority to say "Go here or there." One of the reasons we have so much help is it is voluntary and there is no "boss." Of course I have the right to say who cannot be head of a house, and the groups accept my authority there. But at the same time, I can pass a judgment and say "so and so does not represent the movement," and so and so will go right on representing the movement, and there are quite a few who believe themselves to be the only surviving Catholic Workers. Oh yes, our movement is full of generals, and full of Pecksniffs to such an extent that the air positively reeks with piety and smugness and self righteousness at times and I wonder people do not flee from us in disgust. I keep taking vows of holy silence to escape it, but I reek of it too. Alas. It is so easy to talk, and so hard to do. It is so easy to love people in theory. But anyway, we do hang on to those principles that each should be the least, should take the least place, that each should take less, so that others can have more, that each should regard himself as the worst. And then we go ahead and fall seven times daily, and seven times seven. We talk about taking the least, and then we accumulate books. We saw them put them in the general library, and then all the nice autographed editions of Eric Gill and Maritain disappear. I still moan over losing a Philip Hagren catechism twelve years ago. How little detached I am. We try to make our own corner in our slum attractive with paint and curtains and soap and water and so we are luxuriating in the midst of poverty. We seek privacy in which to read and study and write and pray, and privacy is the most valuable thing in the world and the most expensive.

We are convinced that the world can be saved only by a return to these ideas: voluntary poverty, manual labor, works of mercy, hospitality. They are fundamental. They are more important than getting out a paper, than lecturing, than writing books. And yet we have to do those things because we must give a reason, as St. Peter says for the faith that is in us. (And our faith must be tried as tho by "fire") an old teaching.

We see many things springing out of the Catholic Worker movement. Other papers spring forth, people write books, having been stimulated by these living ideas which we water with our tears, a new teaching in education is coming forth. Also workers schools, workers groups, priests on the picket line, priests at labor meetings. But as yet we do not see the voluntary poverty by the Cure of Ars, yes, but not in the priests in America of today. Voluntary poverty and houses of hospitality remain the most important thing in the movement, and more and more important in such years of chaos as these. But we do not as yet see these ideas taking hold among the intellectuals. But we do among many of our readers, and we know that the heart is drawn and the attraction is there, and sooner or later these ideas will take hold. The younger clergy, many of them, are hungry for penance and poverty

Peter Maurin emphasized the primacy of the spiritual, the correlation of the spiritual and the material, translating these ideas into actual living today, whether in the city or the country, in shop, office, field, factory or workshop, as Kropotkin says.

With these war years. we have come to emphasize more our opposition to the use of force, the necessity of sanctity, of aiming at perfection, at a spiritual renewal while undertaking the making of a new social order. Hence our emphasis on retreats.

We are sending you some literature, Fr. Hugo's retreat notes, his answers to objections, his Gospel of Peace. To answer a few of your questions.

## Help

We get helpers because we first of all do the work ourselves, scrubbing, cleaning, cooking, etc. If we have to do it alone, all right, but usually people walk in the door and seeing you enjoying yourself at such tasks as washing windows, they ask to help. I cooked last night to fill in when Jack English wanted to get away early to meet a friend. He is cooking because the colored man who cooked went off on a job. Jack met Mary Gill, spent some week ends there when he was in England in the service. He formerly started one of our houses in Cleveland. This afternoon I will start to wash windows, but someone will come along and help. The dignity of labor, the joy of it, the penance of it, a philosophy of labor—all these things are matters of discussion while we actually work

## Leaders

We have no committees. Wherever in our houses we have had them they do not work. The person in charge of the house, living in the house, working there, is father and mother of the group. The Benedictine ideal, not the idea of majority

rule. The leader may make mistakes, but he can repair them. He has to stand a lot of criticism, and keep going; or leave, or step down and let another take his place. People could take turns, but in general it is best to have one leader to take responsibilities and make decisions. We are absolutely opposed to committees. Personal responsibility, “littleness” are points too important to the work to be neglected. They are the very basis.

## Money

Here where we get out the paper, we list what money comes in, we card catalogue it, because we send out the paper and have a mailing list. In the other houses what comes in is paid out for the bills, by the head of the house and his authority and integrity is not questioned. If it is, he just bears it, unjust accusation and insinuation. If he is in charge, he receives contributions, pays the bills, and keeps no books any more than the average family does. There is never enough to worry about.

## Relation to the Hierarchy

We do not feel that we need permission from the clergy or Bishops to start a house to practice the works of mercy. If they do not like it, they can tell us to stop and we will gladly do so. But asking them to approve *before* any work is done is like asking them to assume a certain amount of responsibility for us. We are the gutter sweepers of the diocese, the head of our Detroit house said once.

We have no official chaplains but God has been good and has sent us priests to give conferences and courses, and we go to them with our problems. The Rochester house has had a faithful friend, a priest from the seminary comes in weekly to say Mass in the chapel in the house for eight years now. The Detroit house has a priest approved by the Cardinal there. The Cleveland house has none. Nor the Harrisburg house. In Pittsburgh the Bishop gave an old orphanage for the work and a priest is living in it.

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P.S. (When one of the group read over the letter, she urged that a further point be added. “Remind people that such work is monotonous,” she said. “We all talk about *the little way*, and mothers especially know how one meal follows on another, and daily there is washing, and the house to pick up, and the wild romantic glamour of married life soon fades to give place to something deeper. It is the same with the work. People come in all of a glow to help the poor, and their very compassion makes them think there must be some quicker way to serve

them: make laws, change conditions, get better housing, working conditions, racial justice, etc. But the immediate work remains, the works of mercy, and there are few to do them. Perseverance, endurance, faithfulness to the poor—we should be wedded to Lady Poverty as St. Francis was—these are the things to stress.”)