

On Pilgrimage - November 1958

Dorothy Day

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Summary: A homey atmosphere prevails on a rainy Sunday although they are about to be evicted with no replacement house in sight. Mulls over reports of increased use of processed food and scavenging food on Staten Island. (DDLW #746).

Last month Bob Steed talked so optimistically about the loft we had rented that our readers began to congratulate us on finding a place. But the loft is all window, east, west and south and there is no heat, and the one large gas stove is totally inadequate. One huge window is out in front and the only work we were able to do was the cleaning out and painting of the place which had been left in a fearful mess by the theatrical troupe and the ballet school which had occupied it last. I have enough imagination to see the windows repaired. Hatty hanging up curtains, a big kitchen stove and bake oven moved in, and the place a satisfactory day center. It will be good for meetings, for an office, and probably for a dining room and kitchen.

But there remains the problem of sleeping. Where are people going to be lodged. We are, of course, hoping for a miracle. First of all, an apartment which will hold twelve women. And in the same neighborhood, somewhere near enough to keep the sense of community which we have built up. Two apartments in the same house, and one for men, – this will do to start. Other men we can put in one of the cheap hotels on the Bowery, three block away. At 65 cents a night. We will manage, of course we will manage, but the expense of rents will be enormous. We cannot buy, even if we wanted to, even if a suitable house came along for which we could get what the city calls a certificate of occupancy, because so far there has been no offer of money made to us for our house.

People write in from all over saying that they cannot believe it to be true that the city can take a house and not pay for it. What does happen is that the house is taken by right of eminent domain, and payment is made from six months to a year later. A long time for people to do without their money. And the city does not pay us interest on the money they are withholding. Instead they allow us to borrow some of it back and then ask us for 6% interest. Another incident of the month, – an appraiser came in, took a swift run through the house while a cab stood outside waiting for him, and then went to our lawyer, offering to be our

appraiser for \$400. Four hundred dollars is enough for the down payment many a poor family makes on some shell of a house. What big sums people deal in.

We Are “Family”

No, we have no money to get another house, and we will be living from hand to mouth in order to scrape together the rents. Good friends from the Catholic Charities, and Monsignor Brennan from the Holy Name Mission both have offered to help in any way they can, but it would not mean finding us a place to keep our family together. And that is what we are, – a family, and we are trying to stick it out. “If we are just together” says Mollie, who has been with us for eight years or more, “that is all that matters.” She has even endured the breaking down of the television set with surprising equanimity, considering her love of television. It was an added blow – that collapse of television set. And then the rain, that kept everyone indoors for days on end.

Rain

As I write, this Sunday afternoon, on the Feast of Christ the King, the rain pours down and the streets are deserted. Across the street the plane trees are dropping yellow leaves in addition to rain drops. Across the street also huge beams two feet thick are piled, and one side of our house has been newly shored up. Holes are being dug around us, and engineers come in asking us when we are going to get out. When they start tearing down the house next door, our own house is liable to collapse. More engineers carrying drills and other mysterious machinery are to be seen every day going around in back of the house, behind the wall, into the yard behind the Chateau Gardens, which used to be St. Augustine’s church, where a jazz band blares in what once was the sanctuary, and where, when the Church was Russian Orthodox, the Blessed Sacrament rested.

I think of the old hymn, “We are pilgrims, we are strangers, we can tarry, we can tarry but an hour.”

But in the sitting room, which used to be the television room, which used to be the library, and which is still a bedroom for the hardy souls, the overflow, who can sleep on the floor, our household is gathered, listening to Margaret’s little radio which rests on a chair in front of her. On other days she is usually making braided rugs out of the lovely ties that come in to us. But today is Sunday so she rests in her rocking chair. She has a puppy, very fat with a pink bare belly, always visible since it is always rolling over to be scratched. There is also a kitten which is sick and somnolent, perched sedately in the middle of a cushion, paws tucked under, eyes closed. Larry even has a little white mouse which he carries around in his shirt pocket and takes out now and again to enchant the little ones among us. The littlest one who comes in is my godchild Dorothy

Corbin, and then there is Dylan Melbourne, about three, and there are other children like Harry, aged twenty, who are just as enamored as the others.

With these pets, with this music, with conversation and newspapers and books, and an occasional game, and the rosary at noon every day, and crowds of mothers and children coming in every morning for clothing from Veronica, it is a cheerful room. Every now and then an old lady from the neighborhood who comes from some cheerless bed in a lodging, falls asleep in her chair and all but topples out. She is caught by one of the others, and if people are feeling courteous she is given a rocking chair, with arms, so that she is in less danger of falling when she nods.

This afternoon, the room smells of the apples which fill a huge bowl on the table. Smokey peels his and pares them and eats them quartered. Every man on the soup line has been getting an apple with his bean soup and bread, thanks to Maryknoll. When we see their big truck pull up, we bless them for the gifts they bring, an expression of love on their part for their brothers on the line. They brought enough this last time for us to bring some crates to the farm to be made into apple sauce. God bless them all at Maryknoll.

Down at Koinonia there is a coordinator of jobs, someone who sees what is to be done, delegating each one to do some particular work, and providing the materials for it. I wish we had someone with that efficiency. Many come in and ask if there is anything they can do. And usually the one who is in the office looks blank and realizing it will take him away from the present work, says vaguely that he does not know – nothing right now, come again some other time when we are mailing out the paper.

Here and now I will be a coordinator in a fashion, and say that any of our friends who wishes to come in to help **will** find plenty of work. The upper floors have been kept nice and clean, thanks to people like Scotch Mary and some of the men who have a sense of order. But the main floor and the kitchen level is looking pretty crummy. It needs sweeping, mopping, dusting, the insides of the windows need washing so we can see out of them – there are apples to cut up for apple sauce, and spinach to wash and beans to string. And we wish some strong minded woman would come in to the kitchen at night when the meal is over and bake a batch of bread, using what utensils there are around. It could be quick bread or risen bread, just so that we would have that reassuring delightful smell of fresh bread in the house. But we warn any such helper to bring her tools, her broom, her mop, her dust cloths, her tools. You see how hopeless it is? For who is going to walk through the streets of New York with this equipment?

One reason things look as though they are going to rack and ruin is because people feel they do not own the house of hospitality any more. It belongs to the city. But the meals go on, so the cleaning too should go on, and the gradual packing and getting ready for the day when the marshal comes and puts us all out on the street. It seems to me the city is also forced to put your poor bits of furniture into storage for you too? Or are we expecting too much?

Death

This morning we went to the Liturgy at St. Michael's chapel on Mulberry street where we usually meet Helene Iswolski on a Sunday morning, and Anne Marie Stokes who sings in the choir. This morning after the liturgy of the Mass, there was the **panikhida**, the prayers for the dead, very movingly sung. Fr. Rogosch spoke of the great charity of Gabrielle Chandler who had also been a benefactor of **The Catholic Worker** since the very earliest days. She first came to see us when we had our office on Fifteenth street, and she and her husband paid the rent for the women's house of hospitality for the first year. We were lodged then in an apartment down the street from the office. One of the more recent acts of tenderness was her buying a crib for the eighth baby of a needy Negro family. Fr. Rogosch told how when the Russian chapel was getting under way, Gabrielle Chandler and her husband Porter came to help him clean on Saturdays, in preparation for the liturgy. Also how she helped many Russians who were in need. What a consoling thought, "their works follow them." She suffered a great deal, and one can only rejoice she has now a place of "refreshment, light and peace."

The Land

Due to a bad case of conjunctivitis, I spent some weeks of the month in the country. When Charlie McCormack was around he used to look at me with lifted eyebrow and echo, "country?" meaning that Staten Island was after all part of New York City. Actually it is far more country than Newburgh was. There rich old houses line route 17K so that it looked like a suburb. Also it was seldom that one saw anyone walking. Here on the island there is so little traffic that one can walk or bicycle and go mushrooming through the woods, walking for miles without encountering a soul, at the south end of the island. Whenever I see men walking along with double shopping bags, coming out of the woods, I know what they have been doing, and stop them and ask them if they have any luck. One way to learn to know the edible varieties is to go out with them, or to look over the "catch." Last week two old fellows showed me a very large grey mushroom shirred and scalloped in clusters, weighing, they said, about two pounds. Some of the mushroom pickers are Italian, some Ukrainian, and many drive over from nearby Jersey, coming from Perth Amboy.

Yesterday I was listening to a discussion on the radio of how they are processing the potato crop, setting up potato-flake plants in Maine, the Dakotas and so forth. No longer are they going to dump potatoes or dye them for animal feed consumption, giving them to farmers for pigs but forbidding them to humans, in some mad governmental policy. According to the broadcast, only 11 per cent of the population live on the land, and all the rest of the population use processed foods, so that there is less and less processing in the home. The south leads with the daily baking of corn bread.

I must laugh when I hear the figures. Thomas Woodlock of the Wall Street Journal told me once that you can make figures tell any tale you wish. He did not trust statistics. All around us we see garden patches, as well as big truck farms, and the mushroom hunters and the fisherman and the do-it-yourself crowd give the lie to this.

Theft

Speaking of fishing, there was one delightful day when we walked along the shore at low tide and saw a seagull making a vain attempt to pick up a large sea bass he had found in a deep pool. He got it out of the pool for a few feet and dropped it among the rocks where we could see it leaping. We had no compunction about stealing that juicy morsel from the seagull. It was big enough for a helping to serve three of us, including Jimmy Hughes who will eat anything, venturesome soul, including eel.

Books

Reading Malcolm Cowley's **Time of the Rhetoricians** in New World Writing, he says that "the central function of literature is to broaden or deepen our sense of life." Under this definition fall such books as "**The Sea Around Us**" and "**Under the Sea Winds**," by Rachel Carson, and N. J. Berrill's **The Living Tide**, all of them in paper back now. There is a great deal in the second book about sea birds and eels, and in the Berrill book there is a long discussion of the horse shoe crab which is called **Limulus** and is not a crab at all, but the oldest living animal, unchanged for hundreds of millions of years."The fact of the horse shoe crab in relation to ourselves, is of interest to the scientist," Berrill says. First of all, its fantastic antiquity makes it an object of world wide inquiry, and then, why has it not changed and developed as man has, the scientists ask. Man himself, according to their theories comes from the sea as does all life.

The problem of evolution has never bothered me, nor the exact time when "God breathed into man a living soul." It was the observation of these beauties along the sea shore that brought me to a stunned recognition of God as creator of infinite beauty and variety.

"From the foundations of the world men have caught sight of His invisible natures, His eternal power and His divineness, as they are known through His creatures." Romans 1, 20: Knox translation.

Fishing Boats

When the slime of corruption seems to cover the pavements of the city in the slums, in the steady rain of the last week, it is a relief to go the few miles on the

five cent ferry over to the island, and down to the beach where there is the rich life of the shore. Out on the calm bay there are fishing boats, with their crows' nests out for menhaden, a fish which is not good for eating but for many other things like fish oil and fish meal. I do not know what use is made of the seaweed around this section but further up in New England it is gathered for paint, shoe polish, cosmetics, puddings, chocolate syrup and other foods. Occasionally in the early summer they are washed up in great numbers on the beach, floundering about and dying by the hundreds. I do not know whether this is due to some plague in the water, man-made or not, or whether they have been spawning and dying as some other fish do.

Baron von Hugel writes that we should have interests on different levels to relieve the tension in our lives. And only the other day I saw an article in the evening paper on knitting as a tranquillizer. The study of sea weeds and other aspects of shore life, and knitting too have given me great relief in these times of stress. I almost forget the holes that are being dug around us, the immanent collapse of our building, and come to myself with a start and go out hunting again, investigating stoves and plumbing fixtures for the loft. "They," holy mother the city, has even taken our good kitchen stove, and we must buy another.

Anyway, we repeat, we may have a loft, a day shelter, the bare bones of a place, but there is no place yet to sleep. We are looking for a miracle in the way of an apartment, three or four apartments in the same house, within our means. A miracle indeed. St. Therese, St. Anthony, St. Joseph (to go back through time) will be looking out for us we are sure. And our guardian angels!

Speaking

Hoping that we would be settled to some extent, I had promised to make half a dozen stops during the month of November at various schools, and since I will be paid, and we need the money, and one must earn a living, I go out reluctantly, to Yale, Assumption College, Brandeis, St. Anselm's, St. Viator's and also to Rochester, Indianapolis, and Lafayette, Indiana. I am praying to the fifty or sixty guardian angels who are also part of our household to keep watch, hold up the building, stand guard at the doors, and in general hold the family as well as the individuals together in safety until I return.