

Requiem For Father Roy

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Summary: Tender obituary of Fr. Pacifique Roy telling of his long involvement with the Catholic Worker—his love of work, reverent way he said Mass, joy in feasting, and how he introduced the workers to the famous “retreat” which “made us feel the power of love.” Writes of his illness and death in his native Quebec. (DDLW #675).

Fr. Pacifique Roy, Josephite, is dead. He was taken ill in 1946, was unable to be active or say Mass until two months ago when a turn for the better enabled him to say Mass every day during the month of September. He became ill on the Feast of St. Francis, and died on the feast of the maternity of the Blessed Mother. He was buried two days later, and I did not receive word until a week later, so I could not go to his requiem mass. However, I can write his obituary.

I have written it already in a chapter called **Retreat** in **The Long Loneliness**, but it could occupy many chapters. This short article could not encompass all he meant to us.

Sister Peter Claver brought him one morning to the back kitchen and dining room on the second floor of the rear tenement on Mott street, where the Catholic Worker house was then located. He was impressed by our poverty, which made him feel at home used as he was to the homes of the colored in the south and in Baltimore where he was then stationed. He had the same immediate approach to the problems of the day that we had in the works of mercy. He always started to better conditions, giving away what he had in money, skill, as well as spiritual gifts. “Love is an exchange of gifts,” St. Ignatius said and the spiritual and the material were always inseparable to him. What he talked to us about was not the social order, but love and holiness without which man cannot see God. He spoke with such absorption that all who came, stayed to listen, and that day found him giving, and us receiving, a little “retreat”. It was the retreat of Fr. Lacouture, his fellow French-Canadian, which has inspired him as he inspired us that so that we began “to see all things new”. For me it was like falling in love again. I began to understand many things. Fr. Roy talked all that morning and all work was put aside to listen to him. Of course the cooking went on, and the serving went on, and people came and went, but we continued to listen. I don’t remember who of us were there, but I know all morning there was a group around him.

Although he was stationed in Baltimore, he thought nothing at all of running up to New York on his day off, and it got so we did the same, running down to Baltimore. We had a house there and there was many a visit from him, and many a day of recollection he gave. He was a great believer in fasting on bread and water during these days, although the “water” at

breakfast would consist of black coffee which helped keep us awake during the conferences. At the close of the day, he would feast many of us at his rectory, down in the basement of the church where the janitor, Mr. Green, used to cook up a good meal. One time it was roast groundhog.

Later Fr. Roy got permission to come and stay with us at Easton, Pa., at Maryfarm, and there the first thing he did was put in electricity, wiring the place with his own hands. Then he set himself and all others around him to work digging ditches to bring the water from the spring on the hill down to the barn where we set up dormitories for our retreats.

He did not reproach us with the fact that our austerity was often due to lack of vision and hard work. He just set to work to remedy it. We had hardship enough in the cold in the barn where the kitchen was downstairs, the chapel library, dormitories were upstairs. Father himself slept in the upper men's dormitory with old Mr. O'Connell, Peter Maurin, Duncan Chisolm, Hans Tunneson, Joe Cotter and I don't know how many others. The rest all loved him but Mr. O'Connell, who was a trial to us all, didn't love anyone. He perhaps was going through the dark night, to put a charitable interpretation on the matter. All natural love seemed to pruned away from him. One morning when we were singing the Mass down below the chapel (the men's dormitory was like a closed-in balcony in back) Mr. O'Connell began banging on the floor with his shoe and roaring for us to cut out the noise. Confined to his bed by illness, we had to keep him there for some weeks until he was able to return to his carpenter shop in which he also had his bedroom. Fr. Roy himself used to look wryly to his altar boys, Victor Smith and John Thornton as they sat at either side of him singing the Gloria out of tune, those first months we started singing the Mass.

We were better later on. We had a sung Mass every day because the diocese we were in did not permit the dialogue Mass, so we were the gainers when Fr. Roy decided on the sung Mass.

To him Mass was truly **the work** of the day and he spared no effort to make it as beautiful and worshipful as possible. Even during the coldest weather when the water froze in the cruet and his hands became numb when he said Mass slowly, reverently with a mind intent on the greatness, the awfulness of the Sacrifice. To one priest who complained of his powerlessness to cope with the darkness of the times, he said courageously (it is hard to correct a priest about so personal a matter) that if he would stop gargling the words of the Mass in his throat in a horrible parody of oral prayer, he would be making a beginning. That same priest who was also a sensitive soul never again slurred over the words of the Mass. When he emphasized the fact that the maniple used to be a cloth over the arm to wipe away the sweat and the tears of the first priests offering up the holy sacrifice and said that when we had participated in this great work of the day we had done the most we could possibly do, one of the members of our community took it too much to heart. On those days when we had no priest and Fr. Roy was away on one of his journeys, this fellow worker used to toil down and up the long hills to St. Joseph's two miles away and then lie recumbent for the rest of the day while the rest of the community, including his wife, chopped the wood, carted the water and did the work that meant warmth and food and shelter for the community. He had done his work for the day, he said, carrying the burden of the community for us all.

There was just enough truth in what he said to make us feel guilty at our sloth.

Bur Fr. Roy's Mass once offered did not prevent him from being a most diligent worker. He had what Peter Maurin called a philosophy of labor. He took great joy in it and counted any day lost that did not see some heavy manual work performed. He felt he could not eat his bread without having shed some sweat. And if visitors and errands and other duties deterred him, he started in after supper putting up shelves, hammering, sawing, finishing off some piece of work until midnight.

In addition to saying his office, he spent an hour of adoration and in order to make us share this hour he urged us to go to the chapel right after breakfast to pray. I can still hear the scratching of Jane O'Donnell's pen as she got off some letters in the last pew, or the turning of pages of one or the other of us as we tried to avoid the onerous duty of praying. We preferred to read about God rather than to face Him. Fr. Roy himself had his troubles. Every time a car drove up or a delivery was made, one could see the stirring of his expressive back, the slight twitch of his head.

He was a good looking man, tall, lean, with warm and yet piercing eyes: slow, sure, meditative in his movements. He had good hands well used to toil. I remember when I once cut my hand slicing bread, he laughed and said, "Rejoice in the Lord always!" and later when he cut his hand on the circular saw and had to drive himself, streaming with the blood to the hospital four miles away, I asked him when I returned from the city whether he had rejoiced. "I danced with joy," he said, "especially when they were sewing me up."

He liked to sing French folk songs and I remember Polly Robinson driving in to the city with us singing with him. She was a Quaker and a pacifist, visiting us for a bit, and when Fr. Roy, with French discretion thought about it after he justified his singing with "One must reach people in many ways, you know." But it was he who was severe, not us. He didn't like a radio in the house, and certainly he would never have stood for television. Both let in too much of the world. It would make for tepidity, he thought and the lukewarm, God vomits out of his mouth.

But he loved parties and we celebrated many feast days. He loved to go down to the A&P on Saturday night and collect their leftovers which they gave us free and many a time we were up late cleaning turkeys with already odorous insides, and burying luxury fish in the snow outside in lieu of a deep freeze. We didn't care if the dogs got them, nor did we care much for turkey when we got through. When he had to pay for food (he was almost too paternal we often thought) he'd buy pigs feet or such cheap delicacies and Eileen McCarthy used to beg him for a little of the pig higher up. She meant a ham, of course, but Father countered her Irish wit with some of his own; he brought her some pigs' tails!

He shopped, he built, he dug, he all but started a lumber mill. It was during the war and there was a great scarcity of lumber, so one day during his hour's meditation, with his eyes glued to the floor before him, it occurred to him that the boards on the floor, used to accommodating trucks and farm wagons and tractors were unnecessarily thick for a chapel and library. He started at the very conclusion of his hour, tearing up the boards from the floor of the chapel, leaving great chasms looking down to the depths of the former cow stalls below. It did not matter that a retreat was to start the following Friday night. In fact there were still great gaps in the floor when the retreatants started to arrive, and they were put to work nailing down the floor with the boards which had come in greater quantity from

the saw mill on the hill made from the four inch thick flooring that he had taken up. He quadrupled his supply of wood by the move.

Hans Tunnesen kept up with him in much of his work, though Hans was cooking and baking at the time. He complained though that all the work Fr. Roy did was geared to tall men—the sink was too high, the shelves too high, the tables and benches too high—even the toilet seats in the new outhouses which Fr. Roy built were too high, indelicate though it may be to mention it. But it all goes to show how encompassing, how all embracing his love and fatherly concern for us was.

Our life in those years was indeed beautiful, with work, with song, with worship, with feastings and fastings. He was strict about the latter and many a supper was of corn meal mush or oatmeal. He ate with us, he shared all our hardships, he rejoiced and sorrowed with us. He heard our confessions and he gave us the bread of life.

And he introduced us to **the retreat**. We always refer to it as that or as “the basic retreat,” although we have made many a stimulating retreat since under men who have never heard of Fr. Roy or Fr. Lacouture. He gave us conference after conference and gave the same conferences over and over again, with the same enthusiasm. We didn’t mind it when he would insist that Fr. Onesimus Lacouture was the greatest preacher since St. Paul. We were used to enthusiasms that tended to exaggeration and hyperbole. We knew what he meant. What he convinced us of was that God loved us and had so loved us that He gave his own Son, why by His life and death sent forth a stream of graces that made us brothers in grace, closer than blood brothers to Him and to each other. He made us know what love meant and what the inevitable suffering of love meant. He taught us when there were hatreds and rivalries among us and bitterness and resentments, that we were undergoing purifications, prunings, in order to bear a greater fruit of love. He made us feel the power of love, he kept our faith in love. Soloviev has written of this power, in *The Meaning of Love*.

Perhaps Fr. Lacouture was not much of a theologian as theologians go, nor Fr. Roy either. Perhaps there was “inexactitude of expression,” perhaps he was misunderstood and people went to extremes in their hatred of the world; perhaps he was a reproach to the clergy in his condemnation of luxury and even more in the implied reproach of his way of living, in his unuttered criticism, his lack of human respect. I suppose he felt his lack but he tried to make up for it by giving us the best he had and the lives of the saints to read and the Imitation of Christ, chapter by chapter as penance in the Confessional.

He also sent us to Fr. John J. Hugo of the Pittsburgh diocese of whom I can write much, and probably will in a future story of the retreat. “The man who can really give the retreat is Fr. Hugo,” he always told us, and before even Fr. Roy had come to live with us, we had gone for those retreats at Oakmount, which brought such joy to our souls. Fr. Roy himself visited Pittsburgh and stayed at St. Anthony’s Village where the retreats were held, and at the House of Our Lady of Good Counsel, which was started in the Hill District. He was the despair of the other priests by the charge account which he ran up at “Jimbels,” as he called the store, for photographic materials, he was preparing slides of the Shroud of Turin and the lives of the saints to teach the children and all of us, and the colored on the Hill at the time.

Fr. Roy’s wanderings took him on a trip to St. John’s in Minnesota where he prepared a

retreat which ninety-five priests attended and which Fr. Hugo gave. It caused a good deal of controversy among the more articulate of the priests, but many a letter I received from priests who made the retreat and who found out too, that it made all things new. Fr. Flannigan of Boys' Town was one of them.

I could say that if it were not for Fr. Roy, **Applied Christianity** by Fr. Hugo would never have been written, or gone into the many editions that it did—or those other masterly works. **In the Vineyard, The Weapons of the Spirit, The Gospel of Peace, Catholics Can Be Conscientious Objectors** and **The Crime of Conscription**, not one of which has ever been condemned through the controversy about this presentation of Christian-doctrine goes on still.

That we must die in order to live, die to the natural to put on Christ, we must offer ourselves up as a sacrifice with Christ. Many of the priests who have taught this doctrine have experienced it. Fr. Roy used to say, “God takes us at our word. We little know what we say.” He himself after a few years with us most certainly became a “victim soul” to use an expression of modern piety which has become stereotyped and shop worn. He loved above all things, in the natural order, his active life of work. He had a passion for work, one could see it, just as Peter Maurin had a passion for thinking, for indoctrinating. Both were great teachers, who taught by their single mindedness and their lives. And both had to pay the price.

One morning, not long after his extensive traveling and preaching in the south (it showed the greatness and wisdom of his superior that he was given such complete liberty) he got up to say Mass in our barn chapel and we were horrified to find him suddenly communicating right after the Sanctus bell, before even he had consecrated the Host. By the vagueness of his words and gestures we saw that something had happened, something similar to what had happened to Peter Maurin. He might have had a slight stroke in his sleep which impaired his memory, it might have been a blood clot on the brain,—none of us knew enough about these things to say. It was hard to get him to a doctor. What he wanted, he said, reverting almost to childhood, was to go home. He wanted to get up to Montreal, where in the bosom of his family, he could be diagnosed and treated. “Maybe he needed the rest of his teeth pulled out,” he said naively. His nephew was a dentist and he could do it.

So Harold Keane took him by plane to Montreal and he took up his home in his sister's house. The next thing we heard was that he was in the Hotel Dieu, in the ward for mental patients. What had happened was that he had gotten lost, had wandered away in upstate Quebec and was found in a tiny village, living with a priest too, and serving as altar boy. The priest had not known he was a priest too, dressed in a suit over a pair of pajamas as he was, but took him to be some poor man, wandering in. (Mauriac said that Christ was a man so much like other men that it took the kiss of a Judas to single him out.)

I went to see him in the mental hospital where it is also customary here in the states also to put people who have lost their memories. He remembered me, but not the others at the farm. He cried a little when he showed me a bruised face where one of the other patients, another priest, had struck him. He told me how an attendant changing his bed had called him a dirty old pig. He wept like a child and then remembering, suddenly smiled and said, “Rejoice!” I was crying too, and in our shared tears, I felt free to ask him something I would

never had said otherwise, feeling that it would be an unwarranted and most indelicate prying. "Are you, have you offered yourself," I asked, "as a victim?"

It was then he said to me, "We are always saying to God things we don't really mean, and he takes us at our word. He really loves us and and believes us."

Fr. Roy didn't have to say in the hospital very long. He could go home again to his dearly loved sister, Mrs. Riendeau who with her husband carefully cared for him this summer. (His order always paid all his expenses.) Then there was an opportunity for him to live in a retreat for old and ill priests at Trois Rivières, Quebec, where with the help and guidance of a brother priest, he was enabled to offer up once more the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. For only two months he had this great privilege and then he became ill with what they took to be a slight case of grippe and within less than a fortnight, he died. He was fully conscious when he received the last rites of the Church and he died, his sister wrote me, rejoicing.

Eye has not seen, nor ear heard what the Lord has promised to them that serve Him. And since Wisdom is the most active of all active things, Fr. Roy is once again active though most assuredly, with an activity which enables him to rest in peace.