

On Pilgrimage - August 1959

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Summary: Tells of their efforts to help the poor as best they can without a house of their own saying it reveals their faults. Recalls how their breadlines started in 1936. "We live in no ivory tower." (DDLW #754).

When one is overwhelmed with problems, when we have every variety of trouble during the month, when all variety of sins and sicknesses crop up and plague us – then it is impossible to write about them in this column. It would be offensive to air people's troubles in public, and would only complicate them.

And yet we believe that writing personality of our problems is of great help to all our readers who have in one form or another these same problems themselves. It helps to write about them, it clarifies the issues very often – so write about them I do – but for future publication, when the people involved are no longer involved, or the problems are settled, and besides, very often people do not recognize themselves when you do write about them.

We have to write about real problems. It is the quality in the Catholic Worker which "makes it dynamic" Peter Maurin used to say. It is not just a paper, it is a movement, it is a revolution.

Sundays

Right now, here on Staten Island, we have Sunday afternoon meetings with as many as fifty guests for supper which is served buffet style. We also often have a group of boys camping with Pat Maloney, who is a genius when it comes to taking care of boys. When the meeting started out in the grove last Sunday, the boys quietly packed up their tents and equipment and went to another part of the farm for the duration of the meeting.

We have a couple of teen age homeless boys brought to us by one of the parish priests in the neighborhood. We have two mothers and their babies. We have the older ones. We have the problems of the "shook up generation," and the geriatrics. They have a fancy name for the aging.

Molly said, "Noone will give you a job when you're old." We told her, "You have a job, you earn your living what with clearing tables, wiping dishes, tidying up the dining room." And Agnes goes serenely on, helping all of the house.

John Filliger, our farmer, is doing a double job this month, besides raising a wonderful crop of vegetables, he is **suffering**. Suffering is a spiritual work, but work just the same. He's helping bear the world's afflictions, by patiently accepting his own, a broken ankle. Ernest Lundgren has visited us several times this month and he too is suffering. It's extra hard on active workers. Joe Cotter and Hugh the rancher, are canning and the shelves in the bottom of the barn are already starting to fill up with two quart jars. Hans has taken out and repaired and put back in the stove in the chapel. Joe Roche keeps busy in the kitchen and laundry. Hanks helps in cooking three days a week. Hans and Deane baked bread. Bill Keane gives a hand in many things, answering letters, washing pots, praying in the chapel. Sounds funny to put these works together, the spiritual and the material, but "they all go together." Sometimes these humid days, you sweat more over praying than you do over the dish pan.

Visiting priests this last month have been Fr. Koch of North Carolina, Fr. Hovda, formerly of Berlin, North Dakota, and now of Caldwell Hall, Catholic University, and Fr. Becker, S.J. of the Social Order, St. Louis University and Fr. Zamborsky of Columbus, Ohio.

Last Year

We were still at Chrystie street and St. Joseph's house was still standing, last year at this time. Now it is razed to the ground and there is not standing a stone on a stone, as the saying is. We may think we have problems now but the problems of last summer were far worse, uncertain as we were as to where we should go, what we should do next. Everyone's suffered greatly from the impending change, and though there is still some suffering over the change, we are in general settled down and at work, and no change will be made unless we are pushed by the Lord into it. I often feel that if you truly want to do the will of God He will see to it that you do it, even if He has to take you by the hair of the head like Habbakuk and put you where He wants you.

No House

It is true we have no house, as such. But we have St. Joseph's Loft, and four apartments and another shaping up, and the overflow on the Bowery in little cubicles at the Salvation Army, clean, outside rooms, with clean linen, shower baths, hot water, and all for ninety cents a night, if you pay by the week. Francis Thompson said once that the Salvation Army was doing the work that the Third Order Franciscans should be doing. Certainly we can have only words of praise for the hotels for the poor which they run all over the country. If there were only such Catholic hospices! Breadlines prevail, convent, school, hospital, wherever possible, feed the hungry. There is still a breadline at St. Francis of Assisi on 32nd street. Alms are distributed but "the needy are not taken into your house." And what are surely needed are Houses of Hospitality, in many poor parishes, near many skid rows.

We never intended to start breadlines at our houses, but the men came and those who could not get in, to sit down with us, formed in lines outside the door. This started with us in 1936

at the time of the seamen's strike and has continued to this spring. Then our greatly enlarged quarters—a loft is so much bigger than a dining room such as we had at Chrystie street — meant that the men came into the house and so early, so long before the meal was ready to serve that twice a day there were 250 men crammed in at the end of the loft, waiting for their meal. They had to climb two steep flights of steps with only a little landing in between, to reach us, and it was frightening to contemplate a man falling down those stairs or a panic or a fire. Situated as we are now, high above the street, in an old loft building, we can no longer have the line as such. But we still serve meals to the Family, and to a number of women who stay at the Salvation Army nights but with us during the day. Larry is still cooking bread and fish. Bob is looking for a store near the Bowery where the neighbors will not feel that we are bringing all the residents from skid row to offend the eye, not to speak of the nostril.

Hard as it is to write about such things, offensive as they may be to some delicate souls, the fact remains that the men do offend, and one of the reasons is that doorways and hallways are used as toilets, and unoccupied houses are broken into for such use. Our great and comfortable city provides very few comfort stations. In Paris there is quite frank recognition of such needs. But not in New York. I did not realize this so keenly until I mentioned this at Peter Maurin farm in front of one of our roving visitors who said the reason he came to the CW was just that—he could find no comfort station anywhere else and he was dressed too poorly to go to a restaurant or bar. Having arrived, he stayed!

Reasons for coming to The Catholic Worker! A volunteer who was coming for the summer and did not, was deterred by one of her teachers who informed her that her desire to help with the destitute was a “death wish.”

Decentralized

The fact remains that there is at present no House of Hospitality nor breadline, and when I am visiting other cities the first question is, when are you going to get a house. We do not know. We do know this however: we are closer to reality, closer to living with the poor, more able to do something for those who get in touch with us, very personally, than we were before. We provide shelter in an institution run by others who are trained for it and who keep order and cleanliness. We pay for it with whatever money we can beg. We pay rents on apartments and people are cared for there, who can be trusted in a small setup such as the Catholic Worker: trusted that is, not to fall asleep in bed with a lighted cigaret, trusted not to come in drunk and stupefied. We are scattered like seeds throughout the neighborhood, in closer touch with people, with families, with the slums. We cannot be accused of romantic illusions about poverty, about the poor, about the “worker.” We live in no ivory tower. And we see constantly in ourselves, the faults we see in others. Whatever we see to blame in them, is a recognition of what is in our own selves reflected as in a mirror. If it were not so, we would not recognize it, we would not see it. These things are hard to explain, hard to write about. What I mean is, that if the Christ life is strong in us, if we are nourished daily by the food which is the body and blood of Christ, so that we are “putting off the old man and putting on Christ,” then we are able to find Christ in others, simply because He told us to, because He said of those we are living with, “You are doing this to Me.” He said it, and our

faith, tried as though by fire, grows with exercise.

The breadline “showed.” It was showy. They were there for all to see. How many men are being fed! How this goes on year after year! Yes, it is a minor miracle, but it is heartbreaking that these men come in just for soup and bread, and then go on, and we do not know their names, we do not recognize their faces, we can in no way assuage their anguish.

“Is this what you meant when you talked about Houses of Hospitality?” I asked Peter Maurin one day when our house in Baltimore was being closed by injunction, because it was overcrowded and breaking the law when it sheltered both Negro and white.

“It serves to arouse the conscience at least,” was his only reply at that time.

Our Work Now

Certainly none of use are trained social workers, none of us know how to run a house. We have talents, we believe, in the line of communication. We write about poverty which still exists throughout the country, Fr. Bruckberger to the contrary. We write about the social order and the solutions being found. Some of us have more decided convictions than others. Some emphasize one approach, some another. The liberty of Christ prevailing, diversity of opinion prevails, as it always has, in the staff of **The Catholic Worker**. At the same time, there is a fundamental agreement among us, we get along together, thank God! So we will continue, as best we can, writing, speaking, traveling, and living with the poor, trying to be more truly poor, more truly peaceful, more truly loving, in every circumstance, in jail or in freedom.