

On Pilgrimage - June 1960

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Summary: Comments on not being arrested at the annual civil disobedience against New York City's air raid drills. Visits Tamar in Vermont. Continues her account of a West Coast trip focusing on the farm labor situation there. (DDLW #765).

The day we went to press, Chessman was put to death in the gas chamber at San Quenton. God have mercy on him and on us, and on all those who are our "victims." "We are all murderers," that is the name of a French film against capital punishment. The work against capital punishment goes on with the vigil kept at the entrance to Sing Sing each day a man is executed. There were two electrocutions during the month. The Glen Gardner group and others picketing at Trenton, New Jersey, won a respite for some young Negroes and their case will be reviewed. To visit the prisoner, to save life rather than to take it, to show our gratitude for life, for having been created—we consider this part of our duty as creatures, in relation to our Creator.

The annual air raid drill took place the day after we went to press, May 3. One never knows how many are going to show up. But thanks to the example of Janice Smith and her two little ones who sat it out last year in City Hall Park, hundreds of young mothers and their babies brought their lunches and spent some sunny hours in the park, adding their numbers to the hundreds of young students. Perhaps all had not intended civil disobedience, but the park was so packed that it would have been hard to clear out without pushing people out of the way, and so the majority stayed. The New York Times said 150; the Herald Tribune estimated 1,000, Dwight MacDonald and Norman Mailer who were participants this year, rebuked the Times in the letter column and stated, "We are convinced that those 1,000 people gathered, fully aware of the possibility of arrest, in order to demonstrate their belief that there is no possible defense against an atomic attack other than peace."

The Easter Ban the Bomb rally in Trafalgar Square London, brought out 75,000 people, according to the Times, calling for unilateral disarmament by Britain, the end of U.S. and British nuclear bases in Britain and withdrawal from alliances such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization, that are based on nuclear weapons. In Bonn, Germany there were more rallies.

Ammon, Deane and I were not arrested this year, thank God, but Zita Fearon, Diane Lewis and Tom Franz of Baltimore were all arrested and given five days in jail together with 23 others. The drill was on Tuesday, the trial on Friday (no bail was set), they entered jail Friday afternoon and were released Tuesday morning. There were mass picket lines around the jail.

Visiting Tamar and David

During the month I spent four days with my daughter and her family in Vermont and had the usual joyful time. The boys spent all their time fishing after school and Saturday. Up to May 15 (the season opens May first, Eric caught thirty-one trout and Nickie thirty-three.) Until they explained to me, I could not imagine what Tamar was talking about when she told them to go feed their worms. They dig a supply of night crawlers which sell for two cents a piece, and when they have a few hundred ahead, they have to feed them a handful of grain and bread crumbs.

“When I am not fishing,” Eric says, “I clean out the barn, help my father with the cows and the bull and help carry water to the barn in winter, and to the fields when there is a drought in summer. I can help feed the stock, chop and carry wood, feed the chickens and so on. But we are all the time fishing now.” There is no homework in the country school because the children have chores.

Six children are in school and at home there are Hilaire and Martha, three and five years old this summer. There will be a new baby in July.

Hilaire is a do-er, not a talker, but Martha enjoys conversation. “The reason the children” (the six older brothers and sisters) “have to go to catechism is because they swear,” she told me gravely. “Me, I never swear. . . God sees everything.” she added, “but I can’t see Him because He’s in back of me. I know my prayers and I tell them to Hilaire too.” Hilaire, red curly hair, blue eyes, broad red face, was leaning against my other knee most seriously. “When mama says prayers with us at night, the children laugh. I don’t like the way Daddy says prayers. He prays too loud and long.”

Probably she does not like them because Daddy’s prayers usually end in a roar for quiet. Tamar goes downstairs, leaving them to their usual riotous play before the great silence drops all at once over the house. Suddenly you realize there is quiet, blessed quiet.

How good it is to get away from the city, from radio and news every hour, and demonstrations and crises. I’m all in favor of communities of desert fathers, or desert families, “the building of a new society within the shell of the old.” Not that any place is safe. Up in Vermont there are missile bases all around Lake Champlain, and Swanton, they say, is a booming town. We need to get to that state of mind where we reject prosperity and embrace poverty, to find the freedom St. Francis sang about. How far we all are from it! But we can keep talking about it, reminding people of it, and striving a little way to attain it. A lot of the college students I talked to on my trip had never thought in terms of voluntary poverty as a great and powerful means towards peace. My friend Alice Kathryn says she is going to be a cheer leader for the saints even though she cannot get very far in practicing what she so admires. One thinks of the psalms, **“Draw me, and I will run to the odor of thine ointments!” Enlarge thou my heart, that thou mayest enter in.”** It will have to be the Lord’s doing, not mine.

Whitby School

But of course we can do and begin to do, and study to do. We have free will. Up to Whitby school, the only Montessori school in the country, at Greenwich, Connecticut, they are making a start in teaching children the great natural virtues, of silence, concentration, love of work, perseverance, dignity, and so on—that will make a good foundation for the work of grace. Nancy Rambusch has written several articles for **Jubilee** and perhaps you can get reprints by writing to RP Jubilee, 377 Park Avenue South, New York 16. Anyway you ought to subscribe to this most stimulating magazine. I heard Nancy Rambusch talk to a group of teachers, and she speaks so well and is so inspiring that one wonders she is allowed to stay home to work. Gertrude Mueller is one of the teachers there and we had a very good visit. We have known her family for many years.

Other News

Fr. Joseph Becker, S.J. visited the Peter Maurin Farm for a weekend. Irene Mary Naughton, one of our former editors who is now working with the lay apostolate in Yucatan, was here on a visit and we went to Mass one morning together and had a long breakfast talk afterward. Now she is gone again for a few years. Twice I spoke this month, at the New School for Social Research, and at the Catholic Worker Friday night meeting. Also I had a brief retreat over one week-end, at the convent of Mary Reparatrix, on 28th street. Gail Malley, working in Egypt as Irene is in Yucatan, spoke on a Friday night, a magnificent talk.

The Summer Ahead

Beth Rogers is leaving for a short vacation at her home in Atlanta, Georgia and Judith Gregory and Ralph Madsen will take her place at the Peter Maurin Farm temporarily. There is a good staff at Spring street, with Ammon and Charles Butterworth and Beth Steed and Deane Mowrer. As for me I am writing a new foreword for a new edition of Peter Maurin's **Green Revolution**, a collection of his easy essays to be published by the Academy Guild Press in September; articles for **Dissent** and **Jubilee**; proof in to be revised on my **Therese** book which is being published by Fides Press in the Fall; and the new book, **The Last Eleven Years** which Harper will print, to follow up **The Long Loneliness**. The beach house is a good place to work even though there is much company there and more to come during the summer. But Marge Hughes has a genius for hospitality and is always ready with the coffee pot and spaghetti, baked beans, fried rice, boiled potatoes and all the other delicious starchy fillers that take care of the unexpected guest. (They should all bring fruit, never candy.)

West Coast Continued

Next winter when I return to the west coast, I shall arrange my trip in another way. For one thing, I will not accept so many speaking engagements, and so become too tired to

write. One or two a week will be enough. This three a day business, besides lunch and dinner and so on, takes it out of one. What I hope to do is rent a little hut in Starvation Flats, near Kay Brickey, on the outskirts of Tracy. She is the wife of a railroad man, mother of a family of boys and her little house is right next to Christo Rey center which is like the Guadalupe Center, the Holy Spirit Center, etc., with Chapel, Recreation Hall, kitchen, basketball, stations of the Cross, and a center for fiestas.

Fr. Duggan whom we first met when he was at St. Mary's as a nearly ordained priest, near our Maurin House of Hospitality in Oakland, (now no more) has been working with the poor Mexicans for the last eight years. He met me at Kay's and drove me around the section pointing to a group of huts as his "cooperative housing" and a toolshed, barn, pig-pen, and tiny garden as his "farming commune."

We visited homes where little girls were busily engaged in making the supper of tortillas, in this case made not of cornmeal but of white flour, and beans. It is their staple diet. The mothers and fathers were out in the asparagus fields and the packing sheds these days and often work begins for them at four in the morning.

A.W.O.C.

But there are many unemployed. With the importation of the "bracero," the local farm laborers are not hired.

For the last year the CIO-AFL has started organizing farm labor in the area and we visited their headquarters in the Labor Temple, in Stockton.

Fr. McCullough and I visited Norman Smith and had lunch with him next day.

He is an old auto-worker organizer and has been on the job for the past year. Henry Anderson, their research worker was in Washington, but Norman Smith gave me a series of reports compiled by Anderson, which are comprehensive, brilliantly written and cover the situation better than any writing I have seen on the problems of farm labor on the west coast. Anyone who wished to go into this study more thoroughly should write for the research papers which the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee are putting out.

Labor Pools

The growers have encouraged the immigration of Japanese, Hindus, Filipinos, Arabs, American dust bowl refugees, Mexican wet-backs and Mexican contracted workers. "In each case the imported group has been poverty stricken, disadvantaged, inarticulate, and undefended," one report reads.

"In their cropping practices, California growers have never had to be concerned with normal problems of labor supply and utilization. They have chosen to plant those crops which tended to yield maximum profit, which have been for the most part, those requiring a large amount of hand labor."

Mr. Anderson has compiled a great amount of data as to the kind of crops, the peaks and troughs of employment in the various counties, and has reached conclusions with a vision which is rare in such studies.

If agriculture were for the common good, and for the service of men and to supply their needs for work as well as for food there could be worked out more diversified farming practices so that there could be work for all the year around.

“No Wanderlust —————

“The AWOC rejects categorically the rationalizations of growers who claim Mexican-Americans have wanderlust in their souls, and the like. A survey recently conducted among migrants by the Oregon Bureau of Labor revealed that the overwhelming majority were migrants because they could not survive any other way.

“The human costs of such an enforced state of impermanence are beyond calculation and among other costs must be reckoned the damage this condition works upon the collective conscience of our civilization.”

... “By and large, the abilities latent in this sizable population group are forever lost to the society at large... Everyone who has examined conditions as they actually are, agree that the hardest working migrants are burdened by extended periods in which they are travelling, looking for work, or unable to work due to inclement weather, sickness, or some other reason.”

Anderson goes on to point out that although migrants have received a great amount of attention from popular writers and religious groups, they still make up only a small portion of people who work on the land. On the average the largest number of migrants employed at the peak of the harvest in one year was 16.7% of the total labor force. Local workers accounted for 21%. The bulk of the farm labor is performed by braceros, imported Mexican workers.

Mr. Anderson makes a detailed analysis in this paper, “Humane Resources and California Agriculture,” to point out that “California has nearly enough residents to fill her season farm labor needs, if seasonal demand curves are smoothed out by staggered plantings, crop diversification and the like.

“In the absence of such developments, the reservoir of potential resident workers is unemployed much of the time. Or more accurately, under-employed. The peculiar labor practices of agriculture permit available work to be “spread around” almost without limit. It makes little difference to the farmer with 25 acres of apricots whether ten men or 50 men pack his fruit. Under the piece rate system his labor costs are exactly the same in both cases. In fact, there at work within the farm labor market powerful influences toward the employment of more workers than are objectively needed. Most farmers turn over their harvesting operations to labor contractors. The temptation is very great for these contractors to use labor inefficiently. They customarily receive from the grower a fixed profit per box or crate, and in addition, they are permitted whatever they are able to pry from the workers for service rendered. The more they are able to realize from the sale of sandwiches, cold drinks, cigarettes and so forth.”

Contractors who operate out of Oakland charge their workers \$1.50 a day for transportation, 25 cents for the use of a sack, and a dollar a day for lunch. Soft drinks are 15 cents and

charges for other incidentals are proportional. The minimum cost to the worker for the contractors services is \$2.75 a day."

According to government figures, the average cotton picker earns about fifty cents an hour and cannot pick more than 250 lbs. of cotton a day. They leave as early as 2:30 a.m. and return as late as 9:30 p.m.

Measure of Hope

The fact that such research is being done; that organizing has gotten under way for the first time by the CIO-AFL, and lastly the presence of a grower such as Frederick S. Van Dyke of the Van Dyke Ranch Stockton, California, who has gone over, one might say, to the cause of the poor and the worker – these are the things that give one hope. Not to speak of the presence of such priests as Fr. McDonnell, Fr. McCullough, Fr. Duggan and Fr. Garcia who are working with farm labor in this section of California.

When one remembers Gandhi and his association with industrialists, and his overcoming class hatreds; and of Vinoha Bhave and his land-gift movement, one has reason to hope that with prayer and work, changes will eventually come about in the savage picture which has not changed in California, nor any where else in the country since Steinberk wrote *Grapes of Wrath* and of *Dubious Battle*.

Van Dyke

Frederick Van Dyke is a fifth generation farmer in the San Joaquin County, and at a conference in Chicago last October he read a paper about the Agricultural Employer's responsibility for the Stabilization of Farm Labor. He owns about nine hundred acres of fruitful land and grows grapes, tomatoes, asparagus, cucumbers, sugar beets, plums, walnuts, cherries and most of the other crops common to his section of California. For many years, he said, his thinking about farm labor problems was no different from that of his friends and neighbors. "Then," he wrote,

"Last year between the months of June and November, something happened. I became involved in political activity in the county and in the course of this activity I went from door to door in many neighborhoods where farm workers and former farm workers were concentrated. I talked, hour after hour, day after day, with these people. Anglos, Negroes, Mexican-Americans, Filipino - Americans and others.

"I talked with literally thousands of persons who were engaged in farm labor at the present time. I learned a number of things which as an agricultural employer I should have known all along. I found hundreds of families living in shacks in the midst of the richest farming area in the world. We have a type of soil in the San Joaquin County called peat dirt – it is so rich in organic matter that the soil itself is combustible. Our delta country is posted with signs warning people about this fire hazard. . . "

"I found I could not shrug off the poverty of these people as something of their own making. They were not loafers; they were not alcoholics; they were not dull-witted. Most of them

were responsible, hard-working folks, trying to make a living in a trade which they happened to have particular skill agricultural work.”

What surprised Mr. Van Dyke was the lack of bitterness, the absence of hatred. “These people were not whiners and moaners,” he pointed out. They gave him a welcome that he knew he did not deserve. He began to examine his conscience as to his responsibility and since then he has been working with the organizing committee. He is also a friend of the priests who are working with the bracero and Mexican local labor. He himself is a Presbyterian.

One Man Revolution

This in itself, this awakening of conscience, together with the presence of such men as Anderson and the priests and lay workers who are helping them gives me for the first time a sense of hope in relation to the farm labor and migrant problem. Just as I have faith in the fundamental importance of “the one-man revolution,” and personalism, as a prelude and an absolute prerequisite to communitarianism, so I have faith in the feasibility of peaceful change, non-violent resistance and “rebuilding society within the shell of the old.”

There is no use trying to complete the account of my travels in this issue, but we trust that with the next issue, I shall have covered the entire trip. It is hard not to go into details about these matters that interest me so much, and even then I cannot feel that I have covered anything adequately.

But even to give a picture, to give a suggestion of the great work there is to be done in the world and to tell in some small way of the people who are working, not from self-interest, but from a desire for the common good, this is about all one can do in such limited space.