

On Pilgrimage - October 1946

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Summary: Rambling reflections on workers, the need for saint-revolutionists, monasticism, shared work, living on the land, and Catholic Workers leaving to become priests. (DDLW #429).

The Church and Work, which appeared in the September issue is coming out as one of the monthly REPRINTS of the National Commission for Catholic Action Study (National Federation of Catholic College Students) at the University of Dayton. This recognition of the point we are making makes us happy indeed. When I started with article number one, I had in mind the second article, specific instances of the interests of the priests in the worker, as evidenced by the seamen's strike in 1937, the National Biscuit Company strike, the Republic Steel strike, the Akron Rubber strikes, and in the organization into unions of the textile workers, and the Edison workers. We could speak from first hand experience in all these situations. Are the priests on the side of the worker, to change his life, so that he can lead a good life, with his little community, the family? Or are they on the side of big business, in their acceptance of the status quo? Are they on the side of St. Thomas who believed that a certain amount of goods was necessary to lead a good life? On the side of the popes who believe that those goods consist not in electric ice boxes, inlaid linoleum, radios, cars, but in property "which is proper to man," a piece of earth to cultivate, room for a goodly sized family, privacy, work for all, opportunity for education, not in schools of business, such as our colleges now have become, but in schools such as are envisioned by Ryan, in his book on a Catholic University (Sheed and Ward). Still another article can be answers to objections. But we wished, too, in this series, to have not only criticisms emphasized but solutions. We wish to inspire a vision of another way of life. We want to stir up in some the idea of a mission, so that there will be lay missionaries to preach this crusade for the good life, other Moses', other St. Francis', and other St. Benedict Joseph Labres.

Ben Joe Again

Our readers who have been with us for some years are well acquainted with the articles written by Ben Joe Labray, our present-day working class saint.

That character was born back in 1938 in an idle moment of waiting, specifically when Margaret Bigham and I were sitting down by the docks in New York waiting for a seaman fellow-worker to come off ship after a long South American trip. There was a copy of Sir Roger de Coverley in the car and in starting to read about this composite character, whose articles were written by a number of men, I thought of a good idea for a series. Why not get a number of our fellow workers to write articles which would show in some small way a new character in history, a new kind of saint for our times, the kind of saint we need, the saint-revolutionist who would not only use the spiritual weapons of prayer, poverty and penance, but would try to begin, here and now, that kind of a social order which would indicate his sincere belief in the doctrine of brotherhood. He would be a character half real, half imagined. He would be a saint of the poor, one of the lumpen proletariat who recognized not only the misery of his state, but the sin it led to. And I remembered St. Benedict Joseph Labre, who was a bum, who reacted against the effete delicacy of his time when men wore ruffles and laces and powder and curls, by going unwashed, in rags; who rebelled against the luxury and wealth and hoggishness of his time by asking nothing for himself (like our own Peter Maurin) who did penance for the world and died in a gutter. And in remembering him, I decided to use his name, changed somewhat, so I signed the articles which began and continued for some years, by the name of Ben Joe Labray.

Objection

I wrote the first and a few of the others. Bill Evans, Joe Hughes, Tim O'Brien wrote the rest. They continued until a priest in Brooklyn, whose church is named after our good saint, objected, feeling that we were casting dishonor on his patron. I wonder if his parishioners appreciated St. Ben Joe. I wonder if they would have sat next to him, in his filth and vermin, in these days when dirt and sin are synonymous in people's minds and unless you have hot and cold running water, flush toilets, daily baths and other plumbing appurtenances, you are either slovenly poor white trash, demented, a medievalist, a loafer with no self-respect, or a machine smasher.

C.C.C.

Down at the farm at Easton, Penn., which cost \$6,000 and is all paid for, there are four families and a dozen single people. We have cult, culture and cultivation. All summer we have had priests to offer Mass for us and to give us conferences on doctrine. Fr. Damasus will be the next one on November 8. We have the sung Mass; we have our own carved statues, done by our friends; we have folk dances on Saturday nights, and picnics and walks; we write, we print, we carve, we draw occasionally; we till the earth and build and cook and bake and wash.

We have many children. We eat well and sleep well (and to eat well and sleep well is often a penance to modern man), and we are trying to pray well. But we have outhouses, and no baths nor showers. Pail bathing is the order of the day.

Squatters Strike

One of our Ben Joe Labrays, who is still with us in the city, is well acquainted with our work and ideals, but now having a wife and children and a job as fireman in an uptown hospital, he does not do much writing except for letters now and then. I had been telling him and his wife about a visit to Keyport, to St. Paul's Priory, last week. There was Irene, Julia and I. We had a good visit there with the Langlois family: Norman used to run the Burlington House of Hospitality, Mike Lynch used to cook for the Rutland House of Hospitality, Tom Barry with his printing press used to be our neighbor at Easton for a brief period, and has long been a friend (and critic) of the CW. And then, in talking to Fr. Damasus, we were feeling lighthearted and frivolous, so we told him that the Catholic Worker, inspired by the noble energy of the Communists of London, were going to stage another sit-down, squatters strike here in the United States, but in our case we would organize families and converge from all parts of the country on a Benedictine Monastery. We had passed up St. Paul's because it was only a priory and just beginning; there was not enough acreage, and besides, there were enough CW's around.

The Trappists

We were debating, I said, about the relative merits of the Trappist monastery out in Iowa, where there is 8,000 acres, and Subiaco, Arkansas, where I visited once and was impressed by the Italian and German villages in the neighborhood. Besides they are building a church there and they would need labor and so be more apt to welcome such an influx of families. They must have Brothers with skills, and they could teach willing workers.

A Letter

So this morning a letter has arrived from Ben Joe, but a Ben Joe now with a family who is working in the city, heaving coal in an uptown hospital for thirty dollars a week.

"Take a look," writes he, "at the article in Time magazine about Latrobe, Pennsylvania, where St. Vincent's Abbey is located. Is it an inspiration of the Holy Ghost or what that I should be reading that article just when you were talking about a squatter's strike on a Benedictine lawn. Perhaps you've seen

it already, but perhaps if they were properly approached they'd consent to the CW Squatters Beachhead. It would be an excellent idea, too, and I've been dreaming about it all day. Ten fairly well indoctrinated families could go there and willingly throw in toward building it up. Imagine: a coal mine on the premises—and a brewery! Lots of woods. When a member of the community felt **called**, instead of going way up to the cold New England Trappist place, he could go right into the Benedictines and feel at home. After all, we have a lot of vocations. Two of the crowd went away to study to be priests only this last week. What about Easton moving out there if we got too crowded. An entirely new start. Fr. Faber says we always ought to be making beginnings. Three thousand acres is a hell of a lot" (he should have said **heaven**) "and the place seems to be dying out as though their work were done. No doubt they have oodles of farm equipment available too. Everybody would get a new lease on life—more encouragement, lots of room so that each family wouldn't be on the lap of each other. Lots of room for little shops and a printery. The Church is already there. On to Latrobe!"

The Spread of Monasticism

Of course, the article in Time was misleading, and the facts were half facts and misrepresented. The reporter stated that Monasticism had never really taken hold in the United States—that the monks had died out until now there were only twenty-five! There was no count of the thousands who had gone out from Latrobe, and had spread to the far corners of the country. Monasteries are meant to branch out. I have here among a pile of letters to be answered, one from Abbot Dunne of Gethsemani, Kentucky, telling of the plans for the founding of another Abbey. "It is scarcely three full years since we sent out our first contingent to the South and now we are again overcrowded here at the Mother-Abbey."

Tovarish

Coming home on the Third Avenue El from a visit with Eileen at the hospital, the train was not crowded, but one of our brothers, a furniture worker from Odessa, insisted on sitting by my side. He had a half-filled bottle which he kept offering me to drink out of, and two big onion sandwiches. He kept calling me Tovarish most lovingly. I must have looked very motherly to him, because he immediately started to tell me how he needed a home. "Plenty of work," he kept saying, "and plenty of money—but no place to live. Plenty of food and drink, yes, plenty of drink, but no place to be at home. My rooms are full of bed bugs. They say if you don't like—get out. Where to go! No home, nowhere. Haven't you got a place for me?" He was very wistful, but I was glad when he removed

his lurching body at 14th Street, and shouting wild cries of elation or despair, staggered off the train.

Home

Mott Street is Home, as well as the farm. We must never forget to stress the “communitarian” aspect of our work when we are stressing the need for private property, for a bit of land, for tools to work with, and a home. We can only do it **together**. It is only a group sharing voluntary poverty together that can have a rich life.

Down at the farm it has been beautiful sultry weather. The equinoctial storms held off until the thirtieth of the month when it began to be cold and rainy. Before that the long quiet days were beautiful. John Filliger was ploughing the lower field for winter wheat, and his two white horses, their manes well trimmed were a picture against the green background.

Further up the hill the sheep and Angora goat were grazing quietly, their wool already long and heavy. We have worked with wool a good deal this summer, washing the fleeces, teasing the wool, carding it and spinning. Now that we have a good new spinning wheel (it is wonderful to have a good tool) we can spin our wool instead of sending it away to be spun. One fleece cost \$1.80 to be spun last year, and there must have been nine pounds of wool. Now we have finished knitting all that wool, and there is an entire outfit for Rebecca, a new blanket for the new baby Susanna, and five pairs of socks, two for children. This was all from the one sheep Tamar received as a wedding present from Fr. Magee. We are saving the wool from the other sheep for weaving blankets on our new loom for Peter.

To The Land

Ade Bethune said once that people always thought of making leaps backward instead of one step at a time, when they were retreating from the blind alleys G. K. Chesterton speaks of. Those in the city should certainly start preparing for the land by learning to weave and spin. I’m not sure of the latter skill, but one can learn the former right here in New York at various schools. Or one can go to Canada for a month or so, as Msgr. Ligutti has suggested. Taking one step at a time, one can learn knitting, cooking, baking, sewing, while one is in the city. We know of four city families who are working towards life in the country, and seriously preparing themselves.

Appeal

We are sending out our appeal this month, and this month has surely been a month of disasters—one tragedy after another, of illness, mental and physical, homelessness, hunger and death, unfolding before us. Kichi Harada died, a Japanese artist and lecturer who has been with us for ten years. Our work has increased and our funds have diminished. Our bills have piled high. So we are sending out a letter begging your help.

Good News

Happy news of the month is of the going away of two of our friends to study Latin in preparation for their study for the priesthood. Jack English who went through the war on a bomber, was shot down over Rumania. Spent a year in a prisoner's camp there, has gone to the Dominican college at Providence. Peter Fondis who was a conscientious objector and spent his time in those concentration camps mistakenly called Civilian Public Service camps, is going to St. Mary's in Kentucky.