

Background for Peter Maurin

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, February 1945, 3,7.

Summary: A chapter from her unpublished book "Peter Maurin." Comments on P. Maurin's thoughts on capitalism and socialism and the idea that Papal Encyclicals try to make an "acquisitive society functional." (DDLW #151).

This is another chapter from "About Peter Maurin," by Dorothy Day. Every now and then we will run a chapter (not consecutive ones). We would like to be able to tell you when the book is going to come out, but we are trying to make up our minds whether or not to publish it ourselves. We would like to bring out a cheap, paper covered edition which would be within the price reach of all. But wartime and paper priorities and printing bills make us hesitate. If we had a printing fund (and anyone who is interested in our publishing the "Peter" book can let us hear from them) we might go ahead.

THIS noon I met Peter down at St. Andrew's Church and we walked along the Bowery to the Eclipse Restaurant, where he usually has his breakfast. The Eclipse is a large, square, unattractive store, larger than the usual coffee shop, with the walls painted a swampy green and the lights not very bright. This is probably a good thing because wherever one looks all is dirt and neglect.

Floors are dirty and covered with sawdust. Cockroaches chase each other in all directions. I don't mean that they are thick, but wherever you look between the piles of bread on the counter, under the edges of the tables, on the floor at your feet, on the wall where you hang your coat and see always a scurrying insect. It is the same in our own Houses of Hospitality, most of them.

Not that this condition is known only to those on the Bowery. One of our friends, a priest at a Benedictine priory, in order to comfort us when we were having coffee in our kitchen at Saint Joseph's House, told us about the cockroaches in their kitchen where they have a good deal of help. "Only the other night," he said, "I had missed supper and was looking for a snack in the ice box and there were so many cockroaches swarming over the box I was afraid to open the door for fear of letting them in. So I went to bed without anything to eat."

And last week I spoke in the hall of a Catholic institution where huge water bugs scurried this way and that around the floor at my feet. The priest who sat next to me killed one but after we saw three or four others we didn't bother.

These were the large, light-brown, variety, not like the big black water bugs you find in Florida which the natives there dignify with the name of palmbug.

I certainly don't think the poor ever get used to cockroaches, bed bugs, body lice, fleas, rats and such like vermin that go with poverty. They merely endure them, sometimes with patience, sometimes with a corroding bitterness that the comfortable and pious stigmatize as envy. Someone asked Peter once why God had created bedbugs, and he said: "For our patience, probably."

THE restaurant was filled with small tables, all of them crowded. Peter and I sat down with two Negroes. These left during the course of our conversation, and two sailors, heavily tattooed, took their places. They might have been Scandinavian, Finnish, Russian—It's hard to tell the nationality of these men.

On the walls were half a dozen cracked mirrors, some of them completely broken in half, and on the fragments, painted with chalk, food was advertised.

Pig ears, spaghetti, bread and tea, 15c.

Fried mush, one egg, coffee, 15c.

Peter ordered lamb stew which came at once, a huge bowl of it with three slices of bread and a very large mug of coffee for 20c.

It seemed to me that at every table around everyone was eating the same lamb stew, and when I ordered fried mush and an egg the waiter shook his head uncomprehendingly and said: "lamb stew," so I ordered it too. It was hot. There were a few pieces of potato and carrot, plenty of meat and plenty of grease.

Over on a counter there were desserts, and here they served not one baked apple, but three. Evidently they cater to robust appetites.

WE were looking at the daily paper as we went in, containing a story of a mine strike; also an account of the C.I.O. Convention.

We began talking of labor leaders, and Peter said: "Murray seems to be a religious man. John Lewis is a Welshman and the Welsh are very much akin to the Bretons. They are often mystics but mysticism may go in the wrong direction. From God-centered, they may become man-centered. Murray is a Catholic. They say he prays. I don't know about Lewis. I hear he has no religion. There may be the will to power. His mysticism may take that form but I don't know. Murray has made a very important analysis of unemployment. People fail to realize the importance of intelligent analysis of a situation before anything can be done about it."

Since Peter was hungry he talked more or less in fragments so we had no time on this occasion to talk in detail about the labor situation. I mentioned that we had an engagement for next Monday with Helene Isvolsky, the author of "Soviet Man Now" and "Dark Before Dusk," which I had read with much interest. Also she has had a few articles in *Commonweal* recently. Her father, Peter said, was a Russian diplomat and formulated the foreign policies in the time of the Tsar.

He was minister to France at the time Poincare gave Russia carte blanche in the Balkans. These were the days when the alliances were built up that brought about the great war.

“He was too Machiavellian a statesman. Helene Isvolsky has been in Paris since the World War, I understand. Jaures, head of the Socialists in France, accused Isvolsky of trying to bring war. Someone killed Jaures two days before the war began.”

Peter went on eating his lamb stew with great appetite. He had been traveling all night, coming from Philadelphia, where the Catechetical Congress had been going on the last few days. I had asked him to go down there because many Bishops are very interested in Peter's ideas. Bishop Eustace, of Camden, Bishop O'Hara, of Kansas City, who is head of the conference; Bishop Boyle, of Pittsburgh; Bishop Ryan, of Bismarck, North Dakota. I don't know how many he saw, I don't imagine, in a huge congress of this kind, there was much chance to talk.

Peter did not look in the least tired, but, of course, he looked rather dirty, traveling as he had done, jumping from New York to Boston, then back to Philadelphia and then home again. His shirt was wilted, and his suit crushed and unpressed. It hadn't been cleaned for a long time because he had no other suit.

AS Peter finished up the last crumbs of his bread and the last drops of stew, he looked around him and called attention to the type of workers. “Not many loafers here,” he said. “Contractors come down here to the Bowery and get these men for railroad jobs or contracting jobs. Sometimes there is intelligent conversation with intelligent criticism. I worked with one of these gangs going out of Chicago to Peoria once. They didn't give us our pay. Only paper, that we were supposed to cash when we got back to Chicago. We had to take a box car back and we were arrested for that and thrown in jail. We had to walk a good part of the day and we took corn from the fields and ate the raw corn.” I thought of Christ and His disciples, as he said this.

“I was with a Finn from Helsingfors. As soon as he got to Chicago he drank up all his money. These workers don't get much and many of them drink.”

“How did you make out at the Socialist meeting at Boston?”

“All right, said Peter.”The other speaker tried to bring a philosophy of private property from the Pope's encyclicals. I gave him the philosophy, the essence of it. Of course, they would only give me 20 or 25 minutes, so I had to keep it short.”

“Do you remember which essays you gave?”

“I only took a few. Of course, I had to select here and there to give the essence. I started with the idea of *Folk Schools*. Then *Logical and Practical, Real Man, Better and Better Off, Big Shots and Little Shots, Two of a Kind, Tug of War*. I told them I am the son of a peasant who could neither read nor write and so I am pre-capitalistic. Yes, I am pre-capitalistic and I don't like capitalism and I

don't like Socialism, which is the child of capitalism. That is father and son. I don't like the father and I don't like the son."

"How many were there at the meeting?"

"Not many. They didn't advertise it."

"That's good. We don't like advertising."

"That's all right. I told them about the fallacy of saving and the wisdom of giving—*He Left So Much, The First Christians, Self Organization, On the Farming Commune, Firing the Boss*. Then *The Land of Refuge, Free Guest Houses, Rural Centers in Ireland, The Irish Scholars*, and I told them they don't have to keep up with the Irish politicians. They can keep up with the Irish scholars, and go in for Irish Communism.

"That's a good, positive program for Boston"

"I TOLD them of the Communism that was brought by the Jesuits to the Indians in Paraguay, and by the Franciscans to the Indians of Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and California. A fellow who was interested said, 'How is it that they got out of Paraguay?' and I was telling him that the Indians in Paraguay didn't like the white people. They were keeping away from the Jesuits because they were white. Because the whites robbed them and made slaves of them. And so the Jesuits formed there that communal life and gave them guns and told them to shoot whites when whites tried to force them into slavery. So friends of the white people were complaining to the Bishops in Europe against the Jesuits exciting the Indians; and the Pope, who was a Franciscan, suppressed the Jesuits because they had given arms. There was an old man from Austria there who knew all about it, who even knew the name of the Pope. About 70 years old.

"Then I gave them a philosophy of history and that interested them. They don't know those things. That gives them a light. Glass, the Socialist, put it this way. He said that we were Christian communists—but he was trying to figure out the encyclicals on the social order. These encyclicals, I told him, were trying to make an acquisitive society functional. We consider this society a product of capitalism and we are trying to go back to a functional society: they had one once, before it had decayed into acquisitiveness.

The original guilds had the idea. There is a pamphlet, *'The Sound Old Guilds*,' the Paulist Press publishes it. Glass had a better conception of guilds than most people.

"There were no guilds in rural districts. What they had was an ideology. The ideology of the Gospel.

The encyclicals try to convert an acquisitive society into a functional society. We personally renounce the acquisitive society altogether. It is a question of techniques.

"If the others are eager, they would start associations of Catholic employers. They don't. They just talk about it. They would have the cooperation of the

A.C.T.U., which fosters changing an acquisitive society into a functional one. We go back, it is simpler. We go back to the simple life. Even Thoreau was talking about it, and Gandhi is an admirer of Thoreau.

The National Catholic Welfare Conference used to be connected with the Rural Life Conference. The Catholic Rural Life Conference talks about homesteads. We favor communes. What we foster did exist one time. We go back.

"IT was the same with the House of Hospitality. We had to prove to the Bishops it could be done. The Bishop of Sacramento says it almost does itself. It is not like people asking for money and saying, 'rely on my judgment.' It's people who give of themselves to the leaders themselves.

"Some will tell me that is not in the encyclicals. They don't know the encyclicals. The one on St. Francis for instance. Ours is Franciscan and Benedictine stuff.

"They have abandoned Franciscanism and so we will show them the way by proving it can be done.

"The idea is now people don't work if they don't get wages. Even the workers become just as acquisitive as the Chambers of Commerce. We know some workers who can't take it. Some get drunk. They become intoxicated with the spirits. We think they can become intoxicated with the spirit and wouldn't care about spirits any more. Father Gillis says things are becoming worse. But when things become worse people cease to be indifferent. That is the hardest thing to contend with—indifference. People are preoccupied about this world. About people living in this world. If we were more preoccupied about the next world, maybe it would solve the problems of this world, too. People are beginning to pay attention to the priests and Bishops now. The papers feature those things now.

"Gerry was saying the Bishops' statements seemed to please everybody. Their position makes for it. We have to present these ideas in such a way they would—that is where intelligence wins—that the religious orders would again profess those things. But they have become like the professors that don't profess. They say that they are not practical. Now they admit the House of Hospitality was practical. And my cracks—logic with cracks—are not considered to be wisecracks and they give me a hearing. So I got Bishops reading my stuff. When the Abbott of Saint Meinrad's was here, he asked me 'Where do you get all those ideas? I told him I didn't get them—they got me. Now they give me a hearing.

The secretaries wouldn't listen to me but I have succeeded in getting over their secretaries. Because they think I've got something on the ball. Through carrying out the farming commune program we prove we may be able to bring the Franciscans back to Franciscanism. And if you bring the Franciscans back to Franciscanism you will have the stuff for the Jesuits, too, as well as the Benedictines. When the Jesuits and Benedictines and Franciscans get our line of practicality then the Knights of Columbus will get it too. And when the Knights of Columbus get it, then the Free Masons will get it and the Free Masons will be

both free and masons. Masons because they will construct. When press them, is not? Because the ideas get me I got to ex-people expect that from me." [sic]