

Day After Day - April 1943

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, April 1943

Summary: Mediates on the Catholic Worker's mission to all the poor—including those who are deemed unworthy of assistance by some who blame the poor for their condition. Concludes the story of her Southern travels with observations on Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. Updates readers on the status of the women's Bayard Street shelter and the history behind Ade Bethune's illustrated Stations of the Cross. (DDLW #388).

April first and a grey, rainy day. But it is warmer, thank God, and there is a soft, warm, peaceful feeling of Spring. Peter Maurin and I went to noonday Mass at St. Andrews and wandered down the Bowery afterward and had a round-table discussion in a little restaurant around the corner from the printers. We go to press tomorrow.

Since the women's house on Bayard street was condemned (as a building) by the city, and the women have moved back to the top floor front at 115 Mott St., there is more a sense of community around the place. The dinners are companionable, and the whole house sits down together at six. Smiddy, Michael, Joe, Bob and Red are the kitchen force, and they take on extra duties too, Michael helping out in the office and Smiddy taking care of Anne's baby (the Easter baby of two years ago) for an hour or so while he stirred the tall pots which reached up over his head on the stove. This is the Smiddy who is also called Shorty, not the Baltimore Franklin Smith who takes charge of the clothes room, the coffee line in the morning and the shopping, not to speak of teaching catechism to the public school children and admonishing sinners in his inimitable way (usually those with bottles). In the office, Charlie O'Rourke and Jack Thornton hold the fort with whatever volunteers they can get. Arthur Sheehan and Dwight Larowe both happen to be on hand now, though both will start travelling soon in behalf of the c.o.'s and the camps. Dave Mason, released from jail, is in charge of print shop, mimeographing and in general is second in command around Mott street. Jack Thornton manages the house.

I must give this news for our readers, as an answer to questions which come from all points, even far-off Africa.

Another question everyone is asking is how we are managing to feed the breadlines with all the rationing. We have only five hundred a day now, mostly people

disabled and unemployed. And the ration boards have given us 12,720 points for meats, fats, fish, cheese; 13,820 points for processed foods; one hundred pounds of sugar a week and 220 pounds of coffee a month. So you see our trouble is only in getting the money. We used to get 125 pounds of coffee a week, now we get fifty-five. We get about eight-five pounds of bread a day. Fortunately our creditors trust us, so we keep on until they tell us to stop. We know the Lord won't let us down, not with such friends as the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph interceding for His poor.

Guest Cook

Every now and then we have a guest cook, and several times this last month, on St. Joseph's Day, the Feast of the Annunciation, and last night, we had John Erit's most magnificent Roman spaghetti with a sauce which had been simmered for three hours. There has been much companionable discourse at this evening meal at six and last night Miss Harada, our Japanese guest, who used to teach flower arrangement at Columbia and who has been with us as a refugee since Japanese aggression began, undertook to teach us a few Japanese words, for **father** and **mother**, for **milk** and **bread** and there was much gayety over the tender and funny words for mother and father. "When a friend speaks even two words in one's language, it relieves the loneliness of the heart," she said.

And I thought suddenly of the bitter devastation of this war, and the ruthless extermination of all those Japanese in that convoy. Indeed that was a noble victory, what with the machine-gunning of all the helpless survivors clinging to bits of wreckage in that vast ocean.

The Undeserving

A friend sent us a dollar yesterday, and with it the remark: "Enclosed is for bread, but not to make bums out of those who should be earning their own."

I thought of that this morning when I passed a little group of four who always seem to be hanging around the place, out in front, in the coffee room, in the doorways. Always drunk, sometimes prostrate on the sidewalk, sometimes sitting on the curb, they give a picture of despair or hilarity, according to the mood they are in. And, to the minds of many of our friends, they epitomize the six hundred or so who come here to eat every day.

This morning as I came from Mass, I passed the little vegetable woman around the corner, washing her mustard greens in a huge barrel of cold water. Her hands were raw and cold. It was one of those grey mornings, wet and misty, and the pavement was slimy under foot.

I commiserated with her over her hands, and she said: “What are you going to do? If you don’t work, you don’t eat.”

What a tradition of industry these Italians have—working steadily from morning to night, earning their income by pennies, and educating their children by those same pennies, even putting them through college.

When I passed this same little knot of men in front of the house, whom I had passed on the way to church, I told them about the little Italian woman, and they hung their heads sheepishly and went away. I don’t know what can be done—except to pray. Here are the most humiliated of men, the most despised, the evidence of their sins is flagrant and ever present. And as to what brought them to this pass—war and poverty, disease and sorrow—who can tell? Why question? We must see Christ everywhere, even in His most degraded guise.

We take care of men by the tens of thousands during the course of the year, and there is no time to stop and figure who are the worthy or who are the unworthy. We are each of us unprofitable servants. We are guilty of each other’s sins.

Travel Continued

I did not tell in the last issue of my visit to Atlanta, where Sara Fahy is running a clinic for colored at 358 Forrest Avenue NE., which is really the beginning of a colored hospital. So attractive a place was it that I wished I could stay for months and help her. Sara is sister to Sister Peter Claver, often mentioned in these columns.

At Birmingham, Father Giri and Father Michael took me around to the missions in the outlying districts around the city. The little town of Margaret is specially memorable for its attitude, still maintained in 1943, on labor and organization. On one of the winding roads leading to the little mining town there is the sign board with the notice:

“This mine is an important part of our National Defense program. Any person who attempts to interfere with the operation of this mine is giving aid to Hitler and will be regarded by us as an enemy to our Country.—Margaret Welfare Societies.”

Men have been beaten and shot for attempting to organize the workers in these towns owned by the de Bardeleben family who own the Alabama Fuel and Iron company. The sons of the family all began at the bottom in working for the company and one of them married a foreman’s daughter. Through pressure of wholesale dismissal of other members of her family, the girl permitted the marriage to be annulled.

The paternalistic attitude of the owners does not extend to good housing for their workers. There is insecurity, suspicion, class war, here in this small town in the hills.

Fr. George Smith

After visiting colored workers and white workers, plantation hands and miners, it was interesting to go to the Horse River Valley in South Carolina to see the conditions in the mill towns where the poor white workers in the mills are exploited. There are many among them suffering from pellagra, hook worm, tuberculosis, venereal diseases. Their housing is miserable and there is always a large proportion among them who are in the direst poverty from unemployment and disease. Fr. Smith of Aiken, South Carolina, although he has a parish in a fashionable winter resort, has interested himself in work up and down the valley for these poor of God. He has started a Handicraft and Welfare center in Horse Creek Valley, gotten Sisters of Christian Doctrine to come and take hold of the work there, and now is getting a clinic under way. Fr. Smith's church is the only one in 1,200 square miles. Though it celebrated its 75th anniversary there are only 126 Catholics in the parish.

The harvest is great and the laborers are few. However, the Lord told us to **pray** for laborers, and He would send them, so there is something we can do about it.

These travel notes are all too brief and give a very inadequate picture of the poverty witnessed and the efforts made to combat it. Over and over again we meet good people who are under the delusion that there is little poverty in the United States, that we are all enjoying a high standard of living, and when presented with such pictures as these they can scarcely believe them. "It must be their own fault. They are shiftless, they drink, they go to moving pictures and do not save their money. Everyone can get a job these days." These are the comments they make.

A. de Bethune

The stations of the cross published in this Lenten issue of the paper, are as all our readers know, by Ade De Bethune, art editor of The Catholic Worker. The little texts beneath each picture came to us in a letter from a priest, and we do not know the authorship. Many a letter we always receive about these stations, asking for extra copies so that they can be cut out and pasted up for use. The first time we printed them, a policeman on the corner beat came in and asked for copies for his eight children.