

On Pilgrimage - January 1965

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Summary: Spends four joyful months caring for her grandchildren while her daughter Tamar attends practical nursing school. Describes the struggle against the cold at their women's house of hospitality and challenging discussions about whether they are doing what they advocate (cult, culture, cultivation). Long quote from Gandhi on voluntary poverty. (DDLW #821).

People always want news so I will begin with that. News of each other, I mean. Somewhere in the correspondence of St. Ignatius and Francis Xavier, one writes to the other, "I am so eager for news of you that I even want to know of the fleas that are biting you." So I will start by giving an account of myself. It is so impossible to keep up with all the mail and do any other writing that I skipped writing the **On Pilgrimage** column two months of the four that I was in Vermont. So I announce now my deep gratitude for all the letters and Christmas cards and the help that we have received for our work, and beg our readers to excuse me from correspondence now until I get the new book I am working on finished and in print. How long that will take, who knows. Living in community takes much time, also speaking engagements and traveling. So I do beg our friends, our large Catholic Worker family who are scattered all over the United States and even further, to excuse my silence and take this column for a letter, a report. Be assured however of prayers. I doubt whether I ever read a letter without saying a prayer for the sender. I do, however, see all the letters which are addressed to me and pass them on to be acknowledged, and answered as best we can.

Vermont

When my daughter talked to me of her opportunity to take a year's course in practical nursing, with four months of her training in Brattleboro and eight months in the local hospital of Springfield, Vermont, we both recognized it as an opportunity of a life time to get training for a specific job. Her education in crafts in Canada and in agriculture and care of animals at Farmingdale, Long Island which had fitted her for her twenty years of married life and the raising of a family on the land, had not fitted her to hold down any job.

With children all day in school women have come to feel the isolation of the home, the lack of community facilities such as day nurseries. They know they have a contribution to make to the common good. Their talents are unused and undeveloped. And above all, there is the crucial need to earn money to help support and to educate and provide training in turn for the young ones.

She could only take the course offered by the government under the Manpower and Retraining Act if I could go to Vermont and stay for four months with the seven children of the nine who were home. When she returned to spend the last eight months at home while she worked from seven to three at the hospital in Springfield, she herself could take care of the children, all of whom were in school except Katy who is a little over four. It is planned that she join the family of a cousin for a few months until a permanent nursery school can be found locally.

I had dreaded the four months as a time when anything could happen and I thought of Sue's broken arm from tobogganing the winter before, and how Nickie had practically put out a tonsil when he fell off the porch with a sharp pencil in his mouth, and how Mary had been bitten by a baby rat she had found, not to speak of all the other dire happenings in Catholic Worker families all over the nation. When you get old you know too much. One must learn to mortify the interior senses which include the memory. I had always taken that to mean most especially never to remember injuries and grievances and hark back to them, or let them accumulate, and here I had to apply this basic teaching to my imagination which conjured up all kinds of trouble ahead.

Well, I had a wonderful time. It was unalloyed joy, those four months, to live in the midst of the beauty of Vermont and the beauty of children.

Tamar was home week ends, so I had longer visits with her than I had had for years.

Travel

It is four years since I have taken a long trip south and west and I plan to set out again on February first. I am to speak in Austin, Texas, February 22, in San Antonio, February 23, a day or so later in Houston, and then on to Tucson to speak at the University of Arizona. I want to visit the Oakland House of Hospitality and also the Salt Lake City House, and I have been invited also to Oklahoma City to speak there. I do not yet know my exact schedule but I hope to travel by car and go to North Carolina first, to Conyers, Georgia to visit one of our former editors, Jack English, now Fr. Charles, and then on to Natchez, Mississippi to visit friends and readers there. I do not as yet know my exact schedule but mail will be forwarded to me.

The City

Meanwhile I have had a week in December, and all of January to enjoy the farm at Tivoli and its warmth and space, and in the city to share the poverty and cold of those at Chrystie Street and Kenmare St. Chrystie Street is of course St. Joseph's house of hospitality and it is as bright and colorful as paint can make it over these joyful holidays. As for Kenmare Street, where the women have four apartments, unheated, with cold halls and wind whistling through cracks around the windows, –it is hard to get used to after four months in the country, in a house as warm as toast and with a Franklin stove in the living room besides, burning good pine logs.

But here at Kenmare St. we go to bed with a hot water bottle at our feet (an empty pint is just the proper size) and a wool cap on our heads and a muffler around the neck. When you are heating with the gas oven you want to cut it off at night, and besides that the cold comes through the bricks if your bed is against the outside wall. Next time Hiroshi, Placid or Michael come in for a cup of tea and some bread and butter of an evening (our dinner is at five thirty and by nine people are in the humor for a snack) I'll get them to move all the furniture in my room so that the bookcase and desk are against the outside wall, and the bed against the wall between this apartment and the next which houses four young women. With these little apartments we have both privacy and community which works out better than our other women's houses of hospitality of the past which we had as part of St. Joseph's houses as a whole. We are decentralized indeed and in a way scattered among our neighbors who are also drawn into our community through their charity. They give us furniture when they are buying new. They give us delightful Italian dishes on feast days; and we find clothes hanging on our doorknobs and Missouri Marie returns the charity by writing letters for the Italian women upstairs who speaks English perfectly but cannot write it, and by doing the shopping for the landlady when she is ill, and so on.

I suppose it would be politer not to allude to people around the CW as German George, Polish Walter, Ukrainian Mike and Missouri Marie. And thinking of my sister-in-law who was formerly Teresa de Aragon, I will Americanize a European custom and allude to George German, Walter Poland, Mike Ukraine and Marie Missouri hereafter.

To go back to the subject of cold. There is an Arab saying **"Fire is twice bread."** Certainly it is a hard and miserable thing to be cold. It is hard to work. It is hard to keep clean. It is hard to forget the body, this cumbrous instrument of the mind and soul. When the senses are all at peace, satisfied and content, the exercises of the mind and soul seem to be going smoothly. I have thought a good deal along these lines in connection with poverty and destitution and the attitudes of those who suffer these affronts in a prosperous land. I have thought of them when people talk of the demands of labor for higher wages and shorter hours. There have been occasional critical comments about the Catholic

Worker—why do we emphasize these material things? Why are we frozen in these attitudes, these positions about poverty and the social order? It is because we must be like the importunate widow before the unjust judge, like the man who came to borrow some loaves to feed his hungry family and knocked at the door of his friend until he got what he wanted from him.

We emphasize the material because we are working to make that kind of a society in which it is easier for men to be good. And while the triple revolution of automation, civil rights and peacemaking is going on, we have to rack our brains, use our imagination, seize upon every opportunity, every encounter, to enlighten our own minds as well as those of others, to inflame our own hearts as well as those of others, that we may all be working for the common good, and towards that Eternal Good for which all hearts long.

The Land

New Year's I spent at Tivoli. A cold clear day, twenty above, the muddy ruts of the road all hardened, so walking and driving is easier. No snow left, ice is again forming on the river. The wind from the north and white caps are on the river. Outside my window russet leaves still cling to the oaks and make a rich contrast to the evergreens. The ever changing mountains on the other side of the river are clearly marked today, every ridge and valley clearly outlined. We have had such fog this past week that it is as though we were living on the edge of an abyss.

Today is the feast of the circumcision, and also the feast of the baptism of Jesus. Baptism is for us a circumcision of the heart. It is the first shedding of blood on the part of Jesus for us, since he was born man for us, to live with us, to share our sufferings. It is for us, in behalf of us, in our stead, for those of us who do not recognize Him.

One hears so much sneering about “the blood of the Lamb kind of religion.” Those who talk this way are thinking that they are combatting superstition, idolatry, remnants of paganism and human sacrifice left over to pollute the purity of Christianity.

But blood means **life**. People talk of man's life-blood. A few years ago there was a man cooking at the Catholic Worker by the name of Roy. We had a wedding one summer day, and he worked hard to help with the wedding feast which we were all celebrating in the back courtyard of our old place on Chrystie Street. Suddenly he was stricken and asked to be helped to his room. Larry helped him up the one flight of stairs and leaned out the window to call me. Roy was unconscious, breathing heavily and turning yellow. Larry and I knelt on either side of the bed, saying an act of contrition for him because we could see he was dying. We held his hands, so he would feel some one close to him, just as we would want some one close to us and I kept calling on the Name of Jesus.

“Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them”

We had sent for the priest of course who came and anointed him. But as we knelt there, holding his cold hands, we could see all the blood being drained from his body, so that he looked like wax, and I felt that there must be a huge clot around the heart, all the blood of his body in fact, drained to that spot. And I thought that when Christ died, when the spear entered his side, all the blood from his body must have drained down onto the soil at the foot of the cross to impregnate the earth, to seed it. We are dust, and to dust we shall return, but what a holy earth it is now. Just as all water is holy because He was baptized in the Jordan.

“A new commandment I give unto you, that as I have loved you, so you are to love others, and give your life for them.” Every drop of our blood.

St. Paul said that we had not yet resisted unto blood. We all thought of that when John Doebele years ago got beaten up in Chicago by a gang of kids when he was returning from giving all his savings and whatever else he could collect to a Negro woman whose house had been burned down by white neighbors. When John had to go to the hospital with a broken rib and a bloody face, we could only say of ourselves, “We have not yet resisted the evil of racism to the point of willingly giving our life’s blood.”

We may no longer regard the rite of circumcision as part of our religion. But men are still shedding their blood for love of brothers throughout the south.

Midwinter Doldrums

Twice in the last few days there has been the heartfelt cry, “What are we doing and why are we doing it?” or “When are we going to begin to do it?” And since there are so often questions as to what the Catholic Worker is all about, I will try to begin this new year with a little discussion of aims and purposes.

Specifically the questions were, “When are we going to do the things we are always talking about—starting a farming commune, an agronomic university—a folk school—a synthesis of cult, culture and cultivation.” And criticisms followed of all our fellow workers, and a discussion of the kind of people we **ought** to be having in order to have the kind of place we are always talking about wanting to have. One of our fellow workers began one evening—“Have you given up the idea of—” With one it was “When are we going to start?” With the other it was “Have you given up?”

God forbid that we should ever give up or get discouraged or stop trying. Our motto is that phrase from the psalms, “Now I have begun.” But at the same time, “man proposes and God disposes.”—“This is the way I will have it done,” says the Lord, and we must submit. God writes straight with crooked lines, and I am convinced that we are indeed accomplishing not only what He wants us to

do, but what we have set out to do. I am convinced that we are on the right path, on the Way.

And as for that cry, “When are we going to begin?” I could only point out the priest who was visiting us, and who would hear confessions, who would say Mass the next morning, who was sitting with us all day discussing voluntary poverty and the involuntary destitution of the world, and how to approach these problems personally. Here, right now, at this very moment is our “cult, culture and cultivation,” Peter Maurin’s synthesis that he talked so much about during the years of 1933 to 1949, that he spent with us and was our teacher.

I could only point out, “Here, the last few days we have had a Franciscan, a Jesuit, and a diocesan priest visiting us, offering Mass, discussing with us problems—this comes under the heading of cult. We have a library which is splendid in its scope so that studies can be pursued, languages, history, sociology, theology, Scripture, literature. Culture and cultivation could also include weaving, knitting, carpentry, stained-glass, calligraphy. At one time or another young people interested in one or another of these pursuits have been with us. Cultivation means also a field of potatoes, an orchard to put in come spring, the use of the soil, the study of trees, water, weather.”

Speaking of talents and occupations, Tivoli is not only a school of a sort, but also a house of hospitality on the land. Our very life, the life we have chosen or into which we have been pushed, into which God Himself has placed us so that we have no choice, is founded on voluntary poverty and the works of mercy, the latter practiced with the means provided by poverty, our own acceptance of a life without visible means of support. And at that we possess collectively far more than we would ever have individually, through our own efforts.

During the month of December, in the notes I kept of my reading, there is one on the feast of St. Damasus, Spaniard, who lived from 366 to 384. It was he who commissioned St. Jerome to translate the Bible into the vernacular (which at that time was Latin.) It was a time of great luxury among the bishops, according to Butler in his **Lives of the Saints**. They scandalized the non-Christian by the way they lived. “I would willingly become a Christian if I could live as the Bishop of Rome lives,” said the prefect of Rome.

The young priests who visited us during the holiday (and one of them had been a missionary in Brazil) were most concerned about the problem of poverty. And the contrast between their own way of living and that of the poor around them.

Certainly we are afflicted with a great sense of guilt at our prosperity here in the United States, though it is only in the last few years that the knowledge that there are destitute in our own midst has occurred to government.

Here are some thoughts of Gandhi on the subject of voluntary poverty:

“When I found myself drawn into the political coil, I asked myself what was necessary for me in order to remain absolutely untouched by immorality, by untruth, by what is known as political gain . . . It was a difficult struggle in the

beginning and it was a wrestle with my wife and—as I can vividly recall—with my children also. Be that as it may, I came definitely to the conclusion that, if I had to serve the people in whose midst my life was cast and of whose difficulties I was witnesses from day to day, I must discard all wealth, all possession.”

"I cannot tell you with truth that, when this belief came to me, I discarded everything immediately. I must confess to you that progress at first was slow. And now, as I recall those days of struggle, I remember that it was also painful in the beginning. But, as days went by, I saw that I had to throw overboard many other things which I used to consider as mine, and a time came when it became a matter of positive joy to give up those things. And one after another then, by almost geometric progression, the things slipped away from me. And, as I am describing my experiences, I can say a great burden fell off my shoulders, and I felt that I could walk with ease and do my work also in the service of my fellow men with great comfort and still greater joy. The possession of anything then became a troublesome thing and a burden.

"Exploring the cause of my joy, I found that if I kept anything as my own, I had to defend it against the whole world . . . And then I said to myself, I can only possess certain things when I know that others, who also want to possess similar things, are able to do so. But we know that such a thing is an impossibility. Therefore the only thing that can be possessed by all is non-possession.

"You might then well say to me: but you are keeping many things on your body even as you are speaking about voluntary poverty and not possessing anything whatsoever! And you taunt would be right, if you only superficially understood the meaning of the thing that I am speaking about just now. It is really the spirit behind. Whilst you have the body, you will have to have something to clothe the body with also. But then you will take for the body not all that you can get, but the least possible, the least with which you can do. You will take for your house not many mansions, but the least cover that you can do with. And similarly with reference to your food and so on.

"Now you see that there is here a daily conflict between what you and we understand today as civilization and the state which I am picturing to you as a state of bliss and a desirable state. On the other hand, the basis of culture for civilization is understood to be the multiplication of all your wants. If you have one room, you will desire to have two rooms, three rooms, the more the merrier. And similarly, you will want to have as much furniture as you can put in your house, and so on, endlessly. And the more you possess, the better culture you represent, or some such thing. I am putting it perhaps not as nicely as the advocates of that civilization would put it but I am putting it to you in the manner I understand it.

"On the other hand, you find the less you possess, the less you want, the better you are. And better for what? Not for enjoyment of this life, but for enjoyment of personal service to your fellow human beings; service to which you dedicate yourself, body soul and mind . . .

“And those who have followed out this vow of poverty to the fullest extent possible (to reach absolute perfection is an impossibility, but the fullest extent for a human being) those who have reached the ideal of that state, they testify that when you dispossess yourself of everything you have, you really possess all the treasures of the world.”

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