Peter the Materialist

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Summary: Another chapter from her unpublished biography of Peter Maurin. Describes St. Francis as the great personalist and goes on to explicate a philosophy of work. Sees it as a gift, a vocation that one should find what he/she does best and develop it. Encourages scholars to become workers and workers to become scholars in order that more understanding exit between the two. Defends Peter from the criticism of being a materialist and portrays him as an apostle to the world, not of the world. (DDLW #152).

(Another chapter from a biography of Peter Maurin, lay apostle, founder of the Catholic Worker movement.)

Peter is always getting back to Saint Francis of Assisi, who was most truly the "great personalist." In his poverty, rich; in renouncing all, possessing all; generous, giving out of his heart, sowing generously and reaping generously, humble and asking when in need, possessing freedom and all joy.

Without doubt, Peter is a free and joyous person. And it is the freedom and joyousness that comes from a clear heart and soul. There are those who might say it comes because of his anarchistic nature, his refusal to enter into political controversy, his refusal to use worldly means to change the social order. He does not indeed refuse to use mystical means, physical means, secular means, the means that are at hand. But the means of expediency that men have turned to for so many ages, he disdains. He is no diplomat; he is no politician. He has so thoroughly discouraged in his followers the use of political means that he has been termed an anarchist by many, especially by our dear Jesuit friend, Father Dowling, who often has often come to us and talked to us of proportional representation.

To give up superfluous possession! Peter has no income so does not need to worry about income taxes. He does not worry about rationing. He uses those things he needs, in the way of clothing and food, "as though he used them not." He has no worries about style, fit, fashion. He eats what is put before him, and if he prefers anything he prefers vegetable stews to meat, a hot drink to a cold, oil to butter. He does not smoke; he does not drink wine only "because it causes his brother to stumble." Otherwise, he believes in feasts as well as fasts, and there are, after all, many feast days, days of rejoicing, weddings, baptismal feasts, name days, and all the Saints' days.

Saint Francis desired that men should work with their hands. Peter enjoys manual labor. He used to tell the late Father Virgil Michel that if Benedictines had kept to their early ideal of manual labor, there would not be so many breakdowns from mental over-work. "We must use

the whole man," says Peter, "so that we may be holy men." He may be quoting – it sounds like Eric Gill, but it also sounds like Peter.

There is nothing he likes better than building fires, and to get down and poke a grate fire until it is all but out, and poke kindling wood in under the coals, and shake it down, and finally dump it, and rebuild it altogether – that is fun! Then to laboriously go over the coal – (we have no sifters) getting out the pieces so none will be wasted, and to empty the ashes – and usually the wind blows them all over Peter, his grey hair, his iron grey suit and shoes.

I've seen him setting out like that, to give a lecture somewhere all unbrushed and uncombed, and run after him to refurbish him a bit for company. "It is for the sake of others"' I tell him.

But Peter is oblivious of appearances. There is not much in the way of manual labor he can do around Mott Street except to help keep the fires going and to mend chairs. We are always short of chairs, so each one is a treasure. Since people live out of doors, a good part of the winter as well as the summer, the women in the tenement on either side of us, back and front, come down on the sidewalk when their work in the house is done, and just sit. Usually they come into the store, which is the office, and take the chairs. If they like the chairs they bring them upstairs with them to their homes, leaving us the old broken-down ones.

"That is the way the voluntarily poor are treated," I tell Peter. "How long does it take Christianity to work, anyway? Because of our generosity in letting them borrow our chairs, because we believe that when someone takes our coat we should offer him our cloak too, then the argument is, 'they do not appreciate good things, they don't value what they have, so we might as well take them. We take care of them.' I've seen that argument working in people's minds hundreds of times. They justify themselves cleverly. The poor don't know the difference, they say. 'Them as has gits,' and from them who have not, what they have shall be taken away. That's us."

Peter does not answer, but takes the broken-down chairs, or those too heavy to be moved, which they have left us, and mends them uncomplainingly.

On the farm there is plenty of work for all; another reason why Peter was always extolling the land. People cannot live without working. Work is as necessary as bread. But what is needed is a philosophy of work. Work is a gift, a vocation. Before the fall, Adam was given the garden to cultivate. It was only after the fall that all nature travailed and groaned so that man has to work with the sweat of his brow and combat earthquakes, floods, droughts, boll weevils, Japanese beetles, fatigue and sloth. We have to recognize work as a penance, but we must also recognize work as a gift. Man has talents which God has given him, and he must develop these talents. He must find the work he can do best, and then learn to do it well, for his own sake and the sake of his fellows.

Peter's indoctrinations about scholars and workers has this practical result around the houses of hospitality. When the scholar starts scrubbing and cleaning house, the cooperation from the worker is more willing, more spontaneous. Everyone wants to help. The labor and exercise tends to relieve the discouragement that often threatens to encompass the scholar. He understands better after a bout with a mop the discouragements of the poor man, his slothfulness, his hopelessness. He begins, too, to understand what Christ meant when he said He came to minister, not to be ministered unto. He begins to understand the humiliations

of the very poor, and by seeking them voluntarily he finds peace and rest in them. "My yoke is easy and my burden light." "The meek shall inherit the earth." But these things are not understood until practiced. Saint Francis said, "You cannot know what you have not practiced."

A Jewish convert, who had been making a Retreat with us at Maryfarm, said some weeks after, "It is hard to live in the upside-down world of the gospels." Truly it is a world of paradoxes, giving up one's life in order to save it, dying to live. It is voluntary poverty, stripping oneself even of what the world calls dignity, honor, human respect.

For truly it must be admitted that one does not always have the respect of the poor, of the workers. There was Smitty who gave out clothes in the basement store room every day, and for three hours he took the abuse of the women and men who came for underwear and socks and sweaters and coats.

"These clothes are sent in here for us. You're holding out on us. You gave it to him yesterday and now you have nothing for me. You're selling the stuff yourself." Smitty meekly accepted all rebukes. He was in rags himself, down at the heel, wearing his clothes until we begged him to find something else in order to wash the things he had on. He was so poor, and looked so poor, that the miserable ones who came suspected him of their own vices. He must drink – he *must* steal – it is beyond reason that anyone voluntarily should stay down in that dingy rat-ridden hole, under the five-story tenement and give out clothes and bits of literature, and keep on taking abuse as meekly as he did.

And already he had been up since five o'clock in the morning, getting the coffee ready for the breadline, slicing the bread, which the men soak in their coffee. There were over a hundred men every morning. There used to be many times that number, but in war time, there were not so many unemployed. There are the old, the crippled, the unemployables in the neighborhood. They are served in one of the two stores which front our St. Joseph's House of Hospitality. The store is long and narrow and there is not enough room for tables and chairs. The men must come in on a line, be served their coffee and bread at a counter, drink it and eat their soaked-up bread, and then go out and let another batch of thirty or so come in. They can go back on the line again and take their turn on second helpings, and they can take all the bread they wish in their ragged pockets.

Smitty has helpers of course – Alex, the Russian, who was torpedoed in the last war, and afloat for hours. There is a little Swiss fellow, very critical of the men he is serving.

Peter says, "people learn the art of human contacts by living in a house of Hospitality."

Many a time Peter makes what he calls "points," but I do not understand for months. He builds up a program of action, his listeners concede the necessity of working out such a program – and then he expects them to guide their lives thereby, readjusting themselves to these new ideas which he has presented. If he fails to influence others as he has hoped, he shrugs his shoulders and goes on propounding social doctrine. He is content to wait until circumstances arise which will be more favorable for the working out of his ideas. Certainly through the fifty thousand readers of THE CATHOLIC WORKER (that is its present circulation), he has found for himself many readers, many listeners.

He had invitations to speak at colleges, seminaries and groups throughout the country. Through the Houses of Hospitality which have been established, he has built up groups for round table discussions. Through the farming communes, he has directed attention to fundamental economic ideas.

To him there is a synthesis about all his ideas – they fit together; as blueprints for a new world they are unsurpassed, idyllic. But, when it comes to working them out, given the human material, the lack of equipment, the vagaries of human nature – there is the rub! Do they work? Does Christianity work? If it fails it is glorious in its failure, the failure of the Cross.

I do know this–that when people come into contact with Peter Maurin, they change, they awaken, they begin to see, things become as new, they look at life in the light of the Gospels. They admit the truth he possesses and lives by, and though they themselves fail to go the whole way their faces are turned at least toward the light. And Peter is patient. Looking at things as he does in the light of history, taking the long view, he is content to play his part, to live by his principles and to wait.

As Pascal said, "It is not ours to see the triumph of truth, but to fight on its behalf."

I have always thought of Peter as an apostle to *the world*. In the essays printed in THE CATHOLIC WORKER, many of them contain an outline of history, a criticism of history, an outline of simple solutions. They all have to do with the *world*, this life which we know and love, with the needs of our *bodies* for food, clothing and shelter. His philosophy, his sociology, his economics have a truly religious foundation. There is a synthesis in his instructions to us all, and it is not just to use the catchy phrases that he lists his quotations under the headings, *Cult, Culture and Cultivation*.

Father Furfey of the Catholic University, in his book, "The History of Social Thought," brings out in his first chapter how long the history of the human race is. Richarz, he says, has summarized the evidence which proves that 30,000 years is the absolute minimum, and then he goes on to talk about early human remains of the Pleistocene period, which began from 300,000 to a million years ago, with the weight of opinion inclining more and more to the larger figure. Thomas Mann, in the prelude to Joseph and His Brothers, says that experts estimate the age of the human species as 500,000 years, and calls it a scant reckoning. By the side of these figures, the 1,945 years of Christianity seem relatively an instant in the history of the world.

With this fresh point of view, Peter does not find it at all extraordinary to expect people to try to begin now to put into practice some of the social ideas, not only of the New Testament, but of the old. Unless we try to put these ideas into practice, we are guilty of secularism, so tersely condemned by Pope Pius XI. Unless we are trying to put the social ideas of the Gospel into practice, we are not showing our love for our neighbor. "And how can we love God Whom we have not seen, unless we love our brother whom we do see," as Saint John wrote. Unless we are putting these social ideas into practice, recognizing the correlation of the soul and body, we are using religion as an insurance policy, as a prop, as a comfort in affliction, and not only is religion then truly an opiate of the people, but we are like men who "beholding our face in a glass, go away, not mindful of what manner of men we are."

Peter does not talk subjectively about religion. He brings to us quotations and books and ideas that, by stimulating the mind to know, will encourage the heart to love.

Three quotations from the first letter of Saint John epitomize Peter's religious attitude for me.

"No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abideth in us; and His charity is perfected in us. . . "

"If any man say: I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar. For he that loveth not his brother whom he seeth, how can he love God whom he seeth not?. . . "

"He that hath the substance of this world and shall see his brother in need and shall shut up his heart from him; how doth the charity of God abide in him?"

And there is that sentence of Saint James, "If a brother or sister be naked and want daily food, and one of you say to them, Go in peace, be ye warmed and filled; yet give them not those things that are necessary for the body, what shall it profit?"

And, of course, to sum it all up, there are those never-to-be-forgotten words of Our Lord, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me."

It is the above quotations that point the reason for Peter's preoccupation with the material details of this world, with the social order, with the need of rebuilding as he says, "within the shell of the old, with a philosophy which is so old that it looks like new."

And this preoccupation of his with business, with economics, with agriculture, with labor, with capital, with credit unions, maternity guilds, with cooperatives, his unceasing emphasis on the fact that these are the vital concerns of religion, have led people to think of him as a *materialist!* "Laying too much emphasis on the material!" they say, piously, and return to their prayers. "After all, we must use our spiritual weapons, we must devote ourselves to religious service, and all these things will be added unto us." And withdrawing themselves, "keeping themselves unspotted from the world," they again are guilty of secularism, of using religion as an opiate.