

On Pilgrimage – July 1951

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Summary: Homey account of the birth of her daughter Tamar's fifth child while at Peter Maurin Farm on Staten Island. Speaks of her writing as "an overflow of work, a flowering of work:"—the work of bread baking, cooking, cleaning, and dish washing. (DDLW #234).

Since the last issue of the Catholic Worker went to press, I have been on the Peter Maurin Farm, a long period of quiet, I was going to say, but as I listen to Becky, Sue, Eric and Jimmy rampaging around and raising the roof with their shouts, I cannot say much for the quiet. Nickie is asleep in his crib at the other end of the house, otherwise he would make the most noise of all. Mary Elizabeth is only six days old, but she can certainly add to the chorus if she feels like it. This latest Hennessy was born late Sunday at the Peter Maurin farm, Pleasant Plains, Staten Island, at four thirty in the morning. (I start reporting the noise rather than the baby because I have to work through the obstacle of the noise in order to get the great news on paper. O great, o beautiful, o glorious event, the birth of a baby!

We had been waiting, it seemed to us all, for a very long time. My daughter had expected the little one around the first of July, the doctor around the twentieth of June. But she waited until July 23, the feast of St. Mary Magdalene. My son-in-law is working for Sheed and Ward, the Catholic publishers, commuting every day and while they wait occupancy of their new home which is a mile away from here, mother, father and five children are staying with us. They occupy the end of the house Fr. Cordes lived in until he went for treatment at St. Mary's hospital in Brooklyn. (Now he is much better and visiting at Maryfarm, Newburgh.)

There is a houseful of people here, usually we sit down fifteen to the table, but still, typical grandmother that I am, I felt my presence to be indispensable, so I have been staying close to home, watching after the children, getting in a bit of writing and very little reading. I had missed three Friday night meetings but last Saturday Charles McCormick who usually drives the whole wheat bread which we bake here into New York for the breadline, was at Maryfarm on retreat, so I undertook to drive in. The entire trip back and forth should not take more than four hours, so warning Tamar not to have her baby until I got back I set out.

It was good to get into Chrystie street where a little birthday party was in progress for Anabelle Lunn who has charge of the clothes room. We all sat in the back yard and listened to records and had lemonade and home made cake which Jane O'Donnell had just pulled out of the oven.

I stayed just long enough to greet the family at St. Joseph's house and then set out again. At the last moment Michael Kovalak jumped into the car, and at the intersection of Chrystie

and Stanton we ran into (almost literally) Jean Duncan who decided to come down to see how her flower garden is progressing. With Jean sleeping in the back seat and Michael discoursing on Scriptural, speculative, moral, pastoral and ascetical theology (I didn't know there were so many kinds) and me thinking of Tamar, we crossed the ferry and drove along deserted Hylan Boulevard with the fresh smell of the sea and the dry smell of the fields in our nostrils, refreshing after the hot blasts that come back at you from the city pavements. We got home at eleven p.m. and found the house silent. It is beautiful how late it is at ten in the country when city life is in its manic stage on a Saturday night.

I slipped into the narrow shelf of a bed that I set up beside Eric's to keep Tamar from getting up in the night as a mother always does (Sue and Becky sleep in a double decker) and slept like a log. At five I was awakened by Mary shaking me—"Wake up, the baby is here, arrived ten minutes ago and the doctor wants you to bathe and dress it! I didn't know it myself until I came downstairs to put the oatmeal on." (Mary is the first up every morning.)

"With humility and discretion, with love and delight," St. Bonaventure's description of how we are to perform all our actions for the glory of God—these words leapt into my mind as I looked at mother and daughter lying happy side by side on the big bed.

Life and death, two tremendous and holy events; on some occasion accompanied by grief and terror and on others by peace and joy! Gigantic forces moving mysteriously, taking possession of one. It is with great thankfulness and joy that I report these events, knowing that our readers too, so many of them with families, with similar problems as our own, with similar lives, will rejoice with us. If I do not report on Tamar and David and their family, readers write into inquire, so this is a letter bringing the news up to date as to what is happening to the Hennessys.

How hard it is to write when life moves so swiftly. I am jealous of the time I must sit with paper and pen and I wander around the beach and fields with correspondence, under my arm, the manuscript of the book, and with the beginnings of other articles I should be writing, which are part of the work, and I try to get something done besides take care of the children.

But as Peter Maurin used to tell us, art, culture, writing, song, everything is an overflow of work, a flowering of work. The work comes first, the break baking, cleaning, cooking, dish washing, clothes washing, and out of all these things, out of this stuff of life such as jobs, houses, meals, children and prayers, comes the writing, drawing, music, all of which colors it, glorifies it, makes it fuller and richer with gratitude to our Creator.

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It is just after lunch; we have just finished the rosary. Becky and Susie kneel for a while and sit for a while, and Sue eventually ends up by saying the beads with her dusty little feet, winding them in and out between her toes. Eric swings them rhythmically back and forth, keeping an attitude of prayer even though his lips never move. Next door Tamar is nursing the baby and David is pouring over his books—he has shelves of Cobbett and Gill, Belloc and Chesterton, and other distributist literature which tempts me every time I go into the room.

Now, Rita is out in the garden and with the help of the children will pull weeds for a couple of hours. It is the time of summer when everyone deserts the garden. Albert picks berries every day, and brings in bushel baskets of string beans. Some people are pickers and in their enthusiasm do nothing else.

If anyone wishes to come and help us, the big project right now is the chapel in the barn. We have been given enough sheet rock to insulate the entire barn; the roof has been repaired from the disaster of last fall's hurricane, and the bill for lumber has not been paid yet, and Hans Tunnesen has done a tremendous work most of the time without help. He has put in three big storm windows, making the frames himself, and now the barn is full of light and air. He has had a day's help here and there with the sheet rock—Michael, Jim Hunt, Ed Foerster and Pat Scupein, who has been baking all the bread. But now Pat, who came to us from the Trappists; our last baker went to the Trappists, is going to school on his GI bill, having worked for God for the past three months. Bill McAndrews is taking his place. It is a heavy job baking a hundred loaves a day with no machinery but one's hands to knead it and the oven to bake it. As Msgr. Ligutti pointed out, with the coming of the great machines there is no longer available the household machine. I keep hearing of kneading machines or mixing machines for bread, like the old-fashioned ice cream freezer, but I cannot put my hands on one. If any New England friends have one or half a dozen, let us know.

There is not much other news of the Peter Maurin Farm these days. While the retreats and discussions are going on at Newburgh, we are not planning any down here. We wait for our chapel to be finished. There has been a Saturday picnic group from Jersey City, and another one planned for August 11. A high school group from Brooklyn, sponsored by Monica House, will visit us on August 4 and help with weeding and bread baking. Some days we have a succession of visitors, yesterday Mike Gunn and two craftsmen friends, and then there is a spell when we are quiet, as quiet as a family of twelve people besides five children can be.

Yesterday I received a call about a young couple with twins seven months old who had been evicted from a hotel room, their only available housing. The reader who called asked if we could take them in. I told her if she and her friends could keep them going for another month we would have room for them here. Which brings me to a financial problem, which weighs on me heavily now that this month means a second payment on the mortgage and interest, and in October there are \$250 taxes due.

With the housing shortage, we would be able to rent the side of the house which the Hennessys are occupying now while they wait to get into their house. Their two tenants in turn are trying to find a reasonable rent. If we rented the rooms, with heat and hot water and separate bath, we could get enough to pay our installment on the mortgage almost. This would be one way of paying off the mortgage, the reasonable way. And yet there are these calls made on us over and over again. There are these families in the municipal lodging house who are badly in need of vacation for the mothers and children. If we work on faith, as, of course, we have been doing for so many years, we would trust to our Lord and St. Joseph to touch the hearts of our friends and readers to provide the payments when they fall due. And while we live on such charity, give our time to the sick and destitute, cooking for, cleaning after and living with these least of God's creatures, thus contributing our share to match the money that others give.