

On Pilgrimage - March-April 1970

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, March-April 1970, 2, 8.

Summary: After attending Ammon Hennacy's funeral in Utah she travels to Florida and Georgia visiting friends, the Koinonia community, and a trappist monastery. Prays for courage in the face of vast poverty and violence. Encouraged by Catholic Pentecostal movement and return to prayer. (DDLW #499).

Although this is the March-April issue of the *Catholic Worker*, I must begin my On Pilgrimage with January 14, the day we went to press with the January issue and the day I flew to Kansas City to be interviewed for the Lenten series at the office of the *National Catholic Reporter*. It was there that I received news the next morning of Ammon Hennacy's death in Utah, so that I hastened there by "milk plane" (because the airline made so many stops) to be present at the funeral Friday morning. The February issue of the *Catholic Worker* is devoted entirely to Ammon so I did not write in my column of the hospitality I received in Kansas City from Mary Katherine Rabbitt and three other Sisters of Loretto who are living in an apartment and teaching in an academy of the Order where half the pupils are black. I could not help thinking of what a wonderful opportunity they had of learning more of our black fellow citizens as well as to study more about their backgrounds and histories. It is only these last years that we begin to realized how much we have studied all the histories save the histories of Africa and her peoples, and how little we have learned of the minorities in our own country.

But I saw little of Kansas City, hastening as I did to Salt Lake City. I remained in Utah only from Thursday to the following Tuesday, but I had time to visit the famous Mormon Tabernacle and not only hear the choir on Sunday but also attend one of the symphony concerts. Ammon's daughters, who are such fine musicians themselves, also went with their mother and their husbands to hear the rehearsal for that same concert which I heard later, before they drove back to Los Angeles. My own next stop was Florida.

Tallahassee

It was my first visit to Tallahassee, the capital of Florida, and Dr. William Miller (formerly head of the History Department at Marquette) who is now teaching at Florida State University, met me at the bus station and drove me out to Lloyd, a tiny place twenty miles east of the capital, where they are living in the beautiful, rambling house of his wife's aunt while they are rebuilding their own house across the road.

Dr. Miller and his wife were both born in northern Florida but both are anguished by the appalling poverty and ignorance which surround them, and by the contrast with the affluence of the north where they have lived for some years and in which, of course, they still live, both of them being teachers (and white). We drove through the pine woods all around them and came across a family only that hour rendered homeless by a fire which had burnt down the shack they lived in.

The remains were still smoldering. The weather was cold though sunny. It was not the hot stove, but a child playing with matches that had caused the fire. Fortunately the family escaped, but they lost all they possessed. Dr. Miller offered them refuge but another family next door had already taken them in. The job was to find another shelter. He himself had beds and blankets which he could contribute.

A few days later I was at Koinonia for a brief visit and saw the housing project which the Koinonia Partners are engaged in putting up on their property. What need there is for such projects, such very positive work for peace! Putting up forty houses for displaced families may be "too little and too late," but what insanity to take such an attitude, to say, "no use our doing any of these works because it is but a drop in the bucket and comes too late, and revolution is already upon us."

In war-torn countries rebuilding goes on continually: bridges, homes, schools, churches, destroyed and rebuilt even while shelters are being also constructed beneath the ground in such long-continuing struggles as that in Vietnam. To let men go hungry and naked and homeless just because of the vastness of the tragedy around us is madness indeed.

I am constantly being reminded of the need to keep up our courage and our work, not to give way to useless lethargy. The members of this family, burnt out and suddenly homeless, are our brothers, our sisters, our mothers and fathers. They are Jesus himself. "You have done it unto me."

To get more news of Koinonia's work write to Koinonia Partners, Route 2, Americus, Georgia, 31709 and ask for their February Newsletter.

I spoke to the history classes at Florida State College and met a number of the young people. Members of the SDS wanted me to speak but they are forbidden to hold meetings on the campus and they could find no other place at such short notice and I was leaving the next day. Dr. Miller drove me the short distance to Koinonia where the work is thriving in spite of some continued hostilities.

We felt it when we asked directions from some neighboring gas station attendants. Later when I asked one of the young people about it he mentioned that a recent visitor asking directions had met with no reply but a lunge at his throat. One must be prepared for anything, it seems. It was good to lunch with the entire community and later to have a visit with Mrs. Clarence Jordan and with the Wittkamper young men who are doing alternative service now at the Friends' World College on Long Island which I hope to visit soon. There are other families at Koinonia and a continual flow of visitors, some of whom stay and work for months at building, or in the pecan products, work which employs more than thirty of their neighbors.

I have often thought of our Catholic Worker community at First Street and at Tivoli, that it is a valid community, maintaining, in a way, a school of nonviolence pointing the way to

a new order, a classless society' and also running a small industry which is what getting out a paper which circulates 85,000 copies a month all over the world and whose circulation department and mailing circulation department gives employment, though without a salary, to many of our housemates and neighbors from the Bowery. We are all paid in food, clothing and shelter.

Conyers

I had visited the Trappist Monastery at Huntsville, Utah and so could not miss a visit with our Trappist friends at Conyers, Georgia which is not far from Atlanta. Fr. Anthony has been given the job of almoner and he drove me around the neighborhood to deliver supplies in the way of food and warm clothing (much furniture given also) to the destitute families in their neighborhood. One house we visited had four rooms housing seventeen people, three married couples and their children. Another one-room house on our way to Atlanta was the home of a couple where the wife had suffered a stroke two years before. She sat all day in a chair and was nursed by her husband who worked in the neighborhood. Neither could read or write and both were comparatively young. There were no children.

The only thing that sustains Brother Anthony is prayer, he said. The idea of living in a great monastery in the midst of such destitution so bothered him that he lost his peace of mind until the Abbot made him the almoner, and all the time away from the hours of prayer which are the work of God and the work of the monk, were spent in these tasks. It takes courage to do what Fr. Anthony does, to accompany such work with prayer, with the people who are suffering so grievously.

I mean he does not fear to be a fool for Christ, he does not fear to bear the reproach of those who cannot bear the horror of giving so little and then accompanying it with prayer. He is not afraid to stand over this crippled, silent woman, and place his hands on her head, begging God to help her, to comfort her, to heal her, to give her strength, when he himself can do so little.

What I am trying to say is that we have all of us become so accustomed to liturgical prayer, the recitation of the psalms, morning and evening, praying in church during the Mass, that it is hard to pray spontaneously, with others, and for others, "at all times and in all places." Twenty-five years ago young people were self-conscious about praying the psalms of Lauds and Vespers with others. Now it is the immediate prayer of petition, intercession.

A breakthrough has come in the Catholic Pentecostal movement and the meetings which young students are having in colleges all over the country. There is truly a return to prayer. But it takes a great deal of courage and faith. Not only to do the praying, but to submit to being prayed for. I felt this at a little prayer meeting at the Trappists before I left. Fr. Anthony and some of the other priests wanted to pray for me, and as we sat in the little room in the crypt which they had made into a prayer room, they surrounded me and placed their hands upon me and prayed God for a safe journey and good health. God bless them.

We certainly need to pray for courage these days. "Dear God, please deliver me from the fear of my enemies." That is a line from the psalms. And another from the *Benedictus*. May

we “serve him without fear in holiness and justice before him all our days.” We need to pray to overcome our fears these days while we see the violence escalating and spreading to Laos and Cambodia, and continuing between Israeli and Arab, and at home in street fighting and bombings. It seems irreversible, the trend toward total war and only God can save us.

But what prayer has done for me is certainly to make me recognize the intensified growth in the non-violent movement through the country. The non-violent opposition to the war is expressing itself in the fight against poverty and injustice which is carried on not only by Cesar Chavez’ strike of the Farm Workers of California and the continued organizing of public opinion through the grape boycott, but also through organizing the unorganized into a union which is connected with neither CIO or AFL, the National Council of the Distributive workers, both black and white. *The Distributive Worker*, the official publication, comes to us from the national office at 13 Astor Place, the headquarters of District 65 which has joined forces with the new union. There is organizing going on in fifteen states, and for the first time a wave of organized is building up in the South.

A few years ago, I walked on the picket line during a hospital strike with the late Norman Thomas and was horrified to learn that although the workers put in a good eight hour day at hard labor, these workers in the kitchens, laundries and wards of our hospitals did not receive a living wage, but had to receive a welfare check to be able to pay their rent.

I visited the Atlanta headquarters of the new union while I was there, and felt the same sense of friendship that I had felt in Chicago when I attended the great Saturday mass meetings of Operation Breadbasket. Newspapers give space to news of violence, and young people are told again and again that the non-violent movement died with the assassination of Martin Luther King. But there is plenty of positive, constructive work going on.

While I was in Atlanta I stayed with Judy Felker who is working for the St. Vincent de Paul society. When she left her teaching with the Franciscan nuns of Minneapolis, she stayed with us for a while, both at Tivoli and New York, and later taught in Harlem. She had friends in Atlanta and joined them and is active in this society which was started by Frederic Ozanam, a student in France during the last century who wished not only to do the works of mercy but also to carry on historical studies. He wanted his students, when he became a professor, to study history to guide them in the present so that they could make the future different. I always remember the line from the movie “Monsieur Vincent” where he speaks to a peasant girl who has come to work for the poor in Paris:

“You will have to love them very much to make them forgive you for the food you give them.”

It has always been a hard and bitter task for both giver and receiver, and the closer we can share, living together and working together, the more we will learn to love.

I returned to New York February first, and during the last month have made only one short trip to Detroit, Windsor, Worcester and Boston.

In Boston I was most impressed with Haley House, 23 Dartmouth St. This house of hospitality was founded in 1967 and was named after Leo Haley, a young civil rights worker in Boston who suffered a sudden and tragic death while performing a work of mercy. The McKenna family are back in charge after a year off, and I was happy to have a short visit with Cathy and some of the others in the house.

In Worcester I had good meetings both at Assumption College and at the home of Michael True, who teaches American literature both at Assumption and Clark University.