

On Pilgrimage - June 1951

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Describes visiting the Tombs prison, the waiting, noise, anger. Berates herself for getting angry at guests who are a trial. Asks how to blend charity and the common good. Finally says "the secret is to take what comes." (DDLW #622).

It is June first. Our front windows look out on a wide street where trucks and cars speed by all day. Every now and then there is the sickening scream of brakes. Houston Street from which we are separated only by the sidewall of a theatre and a narrow vacant lot is one of the main crosstown streets so that the intersection of Chrystie, which becomes Second Avenue at this corner, is one of the busiest. But this is not just a bare vehicular street like Canal Street with never a spot of color to temper its brazen expanse. Across the street from us is Sara Delano Roosevelt Park where there used to be long solid blocks of tenements. Here are cool shaded walks in the alleys made by the overhanging branches of the sycamore trees. Privet hedges line the walks. In the center are sunken playgrounds for the children, with swings, slides, see-saws, basketball courts and plenty of room for roller skating and bicycling.

Last night I met Marge Hughes over in the park with her four children and we had a picnic of Italian sandwiches and pickles and cake. The children ate the pickles and cake of course, but even that soft fare was enough to make Tommy lose another tooth. It is too hot to eat these last two days. A haze hangs over the streets, even at seven in the morning.

Yesterday morning I went down to the Tombs to visit a prisoner and found myself one of a long line of women and children, colored and white. Visiting hours are from nine until eleven thirty, and batches of visitors go in every half hour. While you wait you can sit in a comfortable waiting room rather like that of a clinic, only bars are much in evidence, bars separating you from the wardens who take any parcels or money which you may wish to leave for a prisoner. When you go in you must go to one of two high desks where the police officers are checking visitors, one a woman, and tell your business, who the prisoner is, what is your relationship to him, why you wish to see him and so on. Then you are given a slip with the name of the prisoner on it and told to go next door and get the number of the floor the prisoner is on. Then you return, get another slip and are told to wait until the next group of visitors goes upstairs. Every half hour one crowd streams out and another line enters, going up a flight of stairs, past iron bars.

I had visited many jails before and the one at San Quentin was the most human. There I sat at a desk facing the prisoner and was able to enjoy a conversation with Tom Mooney. Down at Trenton penitentiary there was so ugly a system (one had to shout through a tiny

aperture in a room full of other shouting people) that the man we came to visit asked us to write him letters instead. (It is the crucifix he carved which hangs in our chapel at Peter Maurin Farm in Staten Island.)

The Tombs is a model prison so I expected better accommodations for visitors. What I found was a series of long halls with steel walls divided up into what looks like a row of open telephone booths. At eye level there is a heavy pane of glass not large enough to see more than part of the face of the man you are speaking to, and as I walked the length of the hall it was strange to see glimpses of foreheads, ears, eyes, noses, like Dada pictures hanging in an art gallery, all the same size, the same height. I was curiously peering into each pane of glass looking for my prisoner, since the number which had been given me had been taken by someone else.

There were telephones in each booth so it was easy to carry on a conversation even in the face of the other twenty five tete a tetes going on in the length of the room. The woman next to me was saying, "You've got to stand it. Six months isn't long." And the man facing me was saying, "You've got to get me out of this." Probably all the conversations were alike, there and in all the visiting rooms of all the jails in the country.

There is so little one can do but listen. It is so hard to say that one can do nothing. It is so easy to take the responsibility to pass the job on to someone else. To be charitable and say "Yes, we will take you in," when it means that someone else will have to bear the brunt of the difficulty at Peter Maurin Farm, at Maryfarm or at St. Joseph's house. It is hard to say no. It is hard to say it kindly, and not become angered by the threats, the blusterings, the recriminations of the person refused.

Anger is the opposite of love and I'm afraid I was tempted to anger several other times yesterday as I had to deal with a Sairey Gamp around here and a half nude drunken woman who comes in and out, staying just long enough to rest before going out on another pan handling tour along the Bowery. What to do? Bellevue refuses such cases and even when they are taken in on the alcohol ward they are released next day. Police do not want the bother of appearing in court against them and so do not pick them up and put them in the safe keeping of a jail until they recover somewhat. The House of the Good Shepherd takes only court cases so women cannot find refuge there. St. Zita's does not take them. Where can they go? They all feel they can come here, so here they are. If you lock the door they come in the window. They wander in through the basement door at any hour of the day, and you find them in one of the beds belonging to one of the other women, and going out again dressed in clothes belonging to one of the other women. You think about the common good and resolve that you must be firm and keep such nuisances out. Then you suddenly remember that tragic line—"It is better that one man perish than the whole nation perish."

And so the merrigoround continues. Charity and the common good.

Well, there they are and there is nothing to do, once they have a foothold. When other women come and ask for a bed, you just have to say, "We have so large and disorderly a family now we can take on no more. We have reached the saturation point." The sad thing is that when out of town visitors come there is no bed for them unless you fill up the floor space with mattresses.

And then, happy day, someone gets a job, or some relative comes and find another and insists on taking her home; or unhappy day, they go to the hospital for a long stay. Then there are a few empty beds and then your trial begins again. For much as you love your brother and sister, you feel the gnawing suspicion as you speak to them, “Are you going to break out on us, nice as you look now? Or just what particular kind of trial are you going to be?” Cut off the head of one tyrant and six others spring up in their place. Ah me! I am full of suspicion and anger and lack of brotherly love!

However, God sends us what He wants to send us and He sends us treasures too, and the bread gets kneaded and baked and clothes are given out and hundreds of meals are put on the table, and the dishes get washed, and right now the back yard is being cleaned out for our first back yard meeting this year. Fr. D’Arcy is to speak, and instead of being crowded in our library and peering in the doors and windows we will sit around our spacious yard which is separated by walls from two other yards, and from a tenement and an old Church. That old Church used to be the Greek Orthodox Cathedral but now it is a dance hall and a banquet hall and every Friday and Saturday night we hear music and laughter until the small hours.

Yes, the secret is to take what comes; whether it is a Fr. D’Arcy speaking on the mind and heart of love, or a Sairey Gamp. Easier said than done, since life isn’t reading a book or listening to a lecture, but living with people whom you love and over whom you grieve.

Hospital

And yesterday too I visited Joe Monroe who is in the t.b. ward of Willard Parker Hospital with fluid on the lungs. Bed rest is prescribed. We miss him so much. But thank God he is near enough so that the bus on the corner takes us almost to the door and visiting hours are Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday, and Bob and Tony and Lewis were also there yesterday, helping eat the candy they brought and enjoying a good gossip. In the next bed was another former CW, a man who had been in the house with us some time ago.