

On Pilgrimage - September 1965

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Grouses about plumbing problems, landlord issues, and needing money for a better house of hospitality. Says we need to do penance for the war in Vietnam, using all our life force. Discourses on love, sex, chastity, purity in relation to God and penance. (DDLW #830).

I'm sure that God means us to be happy, but these last few months we've had a pretty hard time of it, at least around 175 Christie Street. A major disaster in the way of clogged drains made it seem as though we were living in a sewer for a few weeks. We had to stop the breadline, stop the clothes line, stop the meetings. Somehow the "family" (which is anywhere from forty to sixty of us) had to keep things going. We continued to feed this number, get out and mail the paper, keeping to the upper floors of our three-story building and staying out of the basement and Siloe House, which is on the soggy ground.

This was the first time we had stopped the "line," except for the emergency of moving three times in the last twenty-eight years. Those two weeks, when there was a threat of having to stop altogether, made us take stock, make new beginnings, examine ourselves as to how we were working, in fact, do a little planning. So we are looking for advice and help.

First of all, since we are short of cash, the report is that my Spring appeal was not an appeal really, and not taken as such by our readers. We've been short many times before, and we believe that one of the great things about our work is that it shows God's providence for us and gives us an opportunity to exercise our faith. Of course it needs to be "tried like fine gold" as Saint Paul says, which indeed it is, and far more precious.

But it's this plumbing business which has made us take stock. First of all, the landlord wanted us to pay half the plumbing bill, which he said would result from needed repairs, of sixteen hundred dollars. It's one thing to be meek and humble of heart, but it's another to be lacking in common sense. We refused, of course. We also refused to pay our rent, and were threatened with eviction. The landlord has five hundred dollars of our money in security – usually the poor are made to pay a month's rent in advance. I've seen many an eviction, and I know that one has to go to court and there are delays and then if it is finally carried out, there is at least the advantage of having the marshal's men carry our worldly goods out and onto the street. A few friendly truckmen would have only half the burden of moving us. But moving us to where?

That's the problem. How to find a place to house such a family as ours, to get a house such a family as ours, to get a house in shape, to pass the building inspectors who like to consider us

a multiple dwelling, a rooming house, a hotel, a hospice. Standards were applied to us that are never applied to the landlords, or the corporations that own the tenements all around us.

As it looks now, we will not have to move right away, that is, until this section of the city is demolished by the coming of the Cooper Square project. Five of our apartments are threatened by the Lower Manhattan Expressway, which has finally been okayed by Mayor Wagner. The neighborhood had defeated the project many times, but now at last it looks as though it will go through. It probably means a few more years here at most.

Our immediate trouble is that we are faced with such rents. Already we have paid the landlord of the three-story loft building seventeen thousand dollars during our four years' occupancy, and have had to heat the place and make repairs besides. We rent several apartments for eight hundred dollars a month; five of them are "old law" and have to be heated by gas stoves, which means an enormous utility bill. Rents and utilities cannot wait. We beg for vegetables, we buy groceries and meats from day to day, but the other big bills must wait.

When we consider these sums going out month after month, we agree with Louis Murphy, head of the Detroit CW, that it is expensive to be poor. Like the Negro and the Puerto Rican, we pay double rents because we are poor, abandoned, derelict, and hence degraded.

We want to do better. We want to serve better. We would like to have a big house, as we did farther up Chrystie Street, before the city razed the entire block to make way for subway entrances. The only help we have comes from our readers and visitors. We must not only have faith in God's providence, we must also have faith in the rich; as Vinoba Bhave, Gandhi's aide, has, and pray that their hearts will be moved to come to our help, so that we will do better and be better ourselves. Part of poverty is the pettiness, the envy, the resentment, the discouragements, and the biggest part of our job is to overcome these things. But we also know that they too are all a part of poverty, real poverty, real suffering, to be recognized and accepted cheerfully.

One great step forward is our having acquired the property at Tivoli, which we were able to buy thanks to the land boom on Staten Island and our selling the Peter Maurin Farm. Already we see the great good such a beautiful place has done the sick, the afflicted ones who are brought there. No one can ever say to us again that nothing can be done about such a place as the Bowery or that the men that are part of that community cannot change.

So we want a place in the city, in the slums, maintained in decent poverty, but not the destitution which is so weakening and degrading.

"Blessed are those who understand concerning the needy and the poor." If you can help us to get a real House of Hospitality, please do. Not a big one, but one that can be more of a model, so that those who visit us can say: "Let's try and do that too. Let's start such a little mutual aid center in our poor parishes." As it is now, our work may arouse the conscience, it may make men aware of the depth of poverty around us, but it is scarcely imitable.

Please, too, if you know people who are rich in this world's goods, show them this column. Say to them: "If you were travelling around this beautiful world and saw art treasures, shawls, vases, music, you would not carry them along home with you. You would send them ahead, and enjoy them when you end your journey." Someone has said: "You can take into heaven only what you have given away"

The paradox is that just as in the natural order, if you sow sparingly you will reap sparingly. What you give away will come back to you a hundredfold, even in this life, Jesus said, and “knowing what was in man,” he added, “with tribulations too.”

Readers Respond

When some of our friends read the foregoing, they made contributions of two thousand three hundred dollars. So we have the start of a building fund now, although when they gave it to us they said, perhaps doubting whether we could gather the money together to get a house: “Use it for daily needs, for food and utilities if you have to.” But we are putting it aside for the house, which we will eventually have to have, considering the slum clearance going on all around us.

And even as I write this, I am on my way to Rome again on a pilgrimage for peace to fast with some twenty other women in penance there. My fare is paid on the Italian lines through a kind friend of the work and I have hospitality in Rome, so my trip will not be an expensive one. But of course I feel apologetic, thinking of all those who cannot go and who would like to. The only way I can make up to them for their deprivation is to write a good travelogue, a true **On Pilgrimage**, for them next month.

During my absence there will be plenty of help in both Tivoli and Chrystie Street to keep things going, and perhaps a house will even be found in the city by the time I get back, so that we can begin to move.

Johannine Wisdom

When Pope John was journeying in North Africa before he was made a Cardinal, he wrote that his trip brought home to him vividly “the problem of the conversion of the people without the faith. The whole life and purpose of the Church, of the priesthood, of true and good diplomacy is there: Give me souls: take all the rest.”

And I thought to myself, “We are the Church too, we the laity,” and this is our problem also. This is why we are opposing war, and right now the war in Vietnam. Souls are being lost. War is a sin against Love, against life. God is Love, and he wills that all men be saved. The whole purpose of our life is Love. Why did God create us? Because He loved us. Why do we love him? Because He first loved us. And God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son to us, to show us our salvation, knowing that in the exercise of our freedom we were going to continue to crucify Him to the end of the world. We are doing it now in Vietnam, in the death of every man woman and child. “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren ye have done it unto me.

In his **Journal of a Soul**, Pope John wrote: “while the war rages, the peoples can only turn to the Miserere and beg for the Lord’s mercy, that it may outweigh His justice and with a great outpouring of grace bring the powerful men of this world to their senses and persuade them to make peace.” “The two great evils which are poisoning the world today are

secularism and nationalism. The former is characteristic of the men in power and of lay folk in general. The latter is found even among ecclesiastics.”

This last month I have been reading many of Pope John’s Encyclical letters—realizing that he will always be known for **Pacem in Terris** and **Mater et Magistra** (**Peace on Earth and Mother and Teacher**.) Gordon Zahn reviewed the **Journal of a Soul in Peace News** and said that if the pious practices and devotions which were played down in most appraisals of what Pope John has meant for the modern world were capable of producing such a world figure we should pay more attention to them.

Last night I read **Poenitentiam Agere** and wished we could print the entire plea for penance, “an invitation to the faithful” to prepare for and make fruitful the work of the Vatican Council, which is this month beginning its fourth session.

I could not help thinking how little penance we have done these last years, how little mortification, how little dying to self, which is what mortification is. To mortify is to put to death, to do violence to oneself. “You have not yet resisted unto blood,” St. Paul said. “Without the shedding of blood there is no salvation.” Blood means life in Biblical terms. Some years ago I saw a man die of a heart attack before my eyes, and his skin became like wax as the blood stopped moving in the veins and seemed to drain back to the heart.

If our cause is a mighty one, and surely peace on earth in these days is the great issue of the day, and if we are opposing the powers of darkness, of nothingness, of destruction, and working on the side of light and life, then surely we must use our greatest weapons—the life forces that are in each one of us. To stand on the side of life we must give up our own lives. “He who would save his life must lose it.”

Combining these thoughts of penance, mortification, and sex, I can only write what I truly believe, and that is that outside of marriage, and to some extent inside of marriage, there must be a fine regard for chastity and purity, and emphasis on their necessity.

“Puritanical” has come to be a term of opprobrium, used to describe those who regard sex as purely an animal instinct, characteristic of brute force and energy, indeed somewhat filthy, mixed up with the plumbing operations of the body. Little children get things mixed up in this way.

But a young person falling under the attraction of another human being for the first time discovers the transforming quality of sex, and sees it truly for the expression of love that it is, used throughout the Bible as an illustration of God’s love for man. There is nothing higher, nothing sweeter, nothing more beautiful than this love. It is sung in the Cantic of Canticles, it is told in the Book of Osee.

Sometimes the Scriptures seem full of one great love song in the midst of tragic and gory history. Sexual love is seen as a mighty force in man, his creative power. Man is co-creator with God, made in the image and likeness of God. What a gift of oneself then is this celibacy that is embraced by clergy and religious, and by laymen—in some cases willingly, in other cases unwillingly. When marriages are broken up by death and separations the unwilling celibate (since there is no element of self-will in it) has the power to offer this great gift to God—no trivial gift this sex, so often used in life as a plaything.

Puritans probably started out by considering everything as dross compared to the love of God. Indeed, St. Paul used still stronger words—he considered all as dung, and for using such words he suffered the same criticisms as the Puritans do.

But we all surely know the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing and it is the same with the other senses. To look for satisfaction is to find only momentary well-being and fulfillment, and in the end satiety may result in the loss of all desire and striving, and a deadening of all sensitivity.

Aldous Huxley presented a vision of hell in his novel “After Many a Summer Dies the Swan,” where he portrays sex turned to sadism. Looking for a paperback by Dr. Benjamin Spock on the treatment of abnormal and crippled children, I was horrified to see how sex and sadism seem to be the theme of so much of our paperback literature. Sex and war, which is the opposite of the works of Mercy, are closely allied.

In the Book of Maccabees, the young men were supposed to be in the state of grace before going into battle. Nowadays, young men going on leave before battle are given contraceptives. And our country calls itself Christian. What a misuse of life forces!

The best thing to do with the best of things is to give them up, some spiritual writer said. Give up your life to save it. Sow in order to reap. Sow blind sex to reap love, a transfiguration of the senses.

To take this position is not to consider sex wicked and secret and ugly. Secret and solitary sin is ugly, as D. H. Lawrence pointed out, because it **is** solitary, it is unnatural, directed to solitary pleasure, not a natural sharing with another of a human and natural need. It is misusing something great and powerful—a lever that could move the world toward life, not death, that horror of nothingness toward which it seems to be moving.

The plea for penance, a giving up of so great, beautiful, powerful and even terrible a thing, is an offering worthy of God, if indeed any offering can be considered worthy. It is seeing sex in its context, marriage in its perspective. It is a plea for penance. It is a plea for purity of all the senses, through voluntary mortification, a word used constantly by Pope John, who said, “Many importunately seek rather frantically earthly pleasures, and disfigure and weaken the noblest energies of the spirit. Against this irregular way of living, which unchains often the lowest passions and brings eternal salvation into grave danger, it is necessary that Christians react with the strength of the martyrs and saints, who have always given testimony for the Catholic Church.

“In such a way all can contribute, according to their particular status, to the better outcome of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, which must bring about a reblossoming of Christian life.”