

# More About Holy Poverty. Which Is Voluntary Poverty.

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*Summary: "Am I my brothers keeper?" Argues that increased state intervention limits personal freedom and responsibility. Sees the social security legislation and other state programs as taking responsibility from the community, parish, family and person. Voluntary poverty on the other hand promotes responsibility, since it comes directly from the person. (DDLW #150).*

CLARIFICATION of thought is the first plank in the Catholic Worker Program.

There can be no revolution without a theory of revolution, Peter Maurin quotes Lenin as saying. Action must be preceded by thought: There is such a thing as the heresy of good works, "these accursed occupations," as St. Bernard calls them, which keep people from thinking. To feed the hungry, clothe the naked and shelter the harborless without also trying to change the social order so that people can feed, clothe and shelter themselves, is just to apply palliatives. It is to show a lack of faith in ones fellows, their responsibilities as children of God, heirs of heaven

Of course, "the poor we will always have with us." That has been flung in our teeth again and again, usually with the comment, "so why change things which our Lord said would always be?" But surely He did not intend that there would be quite so many of them We also have to repeat that line now that war is on and there is plentiful occupation.

"Surely, these men on your breadline, these men living in your house, could get work if they really wanted to?" And again and again we must say, "The poor ye have always with you." These are the lame, the halt, the blind, those injured in industrial accidents and those who have been driven to drink by our industrial order and the refugees and veterans from class, race and international war. There are those, too, who refuse to cooperate in this social order, who prefer to work here with us without salary. We could not do without them.

The great message which Peter Maurin has for the world today is the message of voluntary poverty, a message which he has preached by word and example. He is the most truly poor one among us. And because he has chosen to be poor, he has remained free; he has had time to think. He has lived a rich and abundant life because of that very poverty. "I think your most vital message is the praise of poverty," John Cort writes this month. But it is the most misunderstood message.

"Poverty and Pacifism" was misunderstood, and quite a few letters came in about it, but they were without rancor. On the other hand, "Cake and Circuses, which I wrote for the October issue just before the election, called forth many protests." That you personally could have

had part in it or sanctioned it, I cannot believe," one reader writes. "That the CATHOLIC WORKER should have been the instrumentality of its dissemination troubles me-how deep you will divine from the fact that I write you now and in so profoundly disturbed a mood, even after the passing of so many months." (This letter came in February.)

To answer this letter I shall have to reprint most of it, and then, of course, my answer will not satisfy.

"That mothers of six children can 'go on a binge of department store buying, movies and cigarettes, candies and radio, an even sometimes a car,' all on one hundred and eighty dollars month, strikes me as ridiculous, certainly the six children and their mother will not live very long 'If they just do without the necessities,' and the limits of 'running up debts' are not very remote, surely. From the former heads of the A.M.A. (does he mean the American Manufacturers' Association?) such matter would not seem strange, but it is almost unthinkable coming from a group concerned with the welfare of the poor and disadvantaged. But I find equal cause for concern, the nature of, the CATHOLIC WORKER considered, in the fact that this editorial should have been published on the very eve of the presidential election and that in it the CATHOLIC WORKER should have written that Mr. Roosevelt would be elected by the votes of 'millions who are bought and paid for.'

"Frankly, I cannot conceive that the bitterest partisanship could have stooped much lower. To print such an editorial under the caption of 'Comments on the news in the light of faith,' is to be guilty of sacrilege to write of it as done in the light of the 'folly of the cross' is blasphemy."

This is a comparatively mild letter compared to another received from a priest whose mother raised a large family and who is now receiving money from the three sons who are away at war.

First of all, let me apologize for the brevity of the editorial, which surely should have been clarified and treated at much greater length. It is no wonder that people misunderstand, and it is no wonder that such brevity, such shortness, sounds arrogant, and uncharitable. We owe it to our kind and charitable readers to try to explain at greater length what in our stupidity, and presumption we wrote so briefly.

In the first place, it shocks US that so many do not understand those basic principles of personalism, personal responsibility and voluntary poverty which have for the past twelve years been emphasized monthly in the CATHOLIC WORKER, and in the lives of those who have worked in our thirty-two houses and ten farms. (Now there are ten houses and ten farms.)

I will try to explain. Samuel Johnson said that a pensioner was a slave of the state. That is his definition in his famous dictionary. Of course, he himself was glad of his pension, human nature being what it is, and poverty being hard as it is.

We believe that social security legislation, now balled as a great victory for the poor and for the worker, is a great defeat for Christianity. It is an acceptance of the idea of force and compulsion. It is an acceptance of Cain's statement, on the part of the employer. "Am I my brother's keeper?" Since the employer can never be trusted to give a family wage, nor take care of the worker as he takes care of his machine when it is idle, the state must enter in and compel help on his part. Of course, economists say that business cannot afford to

act on Christian principles. It is impractical, uneconomic. But it is generally coming to be accepted that such a degree of centralization as ours is impractical, and that there must be decentralization. In other words, business has made a mess of things, and the state has had to enter in to rescue the worker from starvation.

Of course, Pope Pius XI said that, when such a crisis came about, in unemployment, fire, flood, earthquake, etc., the state had to enter in and help.

But we in our generation have more and more come to consider the state as bountiful Uncle Sam. "Uncle Sam will take care of it all. The race question, the labor question, the unemployment question." We will all be registered and tabulated and employed or put on a dole, and shunted from clinic to birth control clinic. "What right have people who have no work to have a baby?" How many poor Catholic mothers heard that during those grim years before the war!

Of course, it is the very circumstances of our lives that lead us to write as we do. We see these ideas worked out all around us. We see the result of this way of thinking on all sides. We live with the poor, we are of the poor. We know their virtues and their vices. We know their generousities and their extravagances. Their very generosity makes them extravagant and improvident.

Please do not think we are blaming the poor when we talk so frankly about their failings, which they, too, will acknowledge. They do not want people to be sentimental about them. They do not want people to idealize them. I think they realize pretty well that they are but dust, and one of our jobs, too, is to make them realize that they are also a little less than the angels.

We are not being uncharitable to them when we talk about a binge or department store buying. Did I say that? What I meant was installment-plan buying. Who do we blame for such installment-plan buying, for the movies, cigarettes, radio, magazines, or all the trash, the worthless trash with which they try to comfort their poor hard lives. We do not blame them, God knows. We blame the advertising men, the household loan companies, the cheap stores, the radio, the movies.

The people are seduced, robbed, stupefied, drugged and demoralized daily. They are robbed just as surely as though those flat pocketbooks of those shabby mothers were pilfered of the pennies, dimes and nickels by sneak thieves.

The people say proudly, "We got it coming to us. We pay taxes, this ain't charity. It's justice." And they hug their sweets, their liquor, their movies, their radio, their dissipations to them, in a vain endeavor to find forgetfulness of the cold and ugliness, the leaking plumbing, the cold water, the lack of coal, the ugly housing, the hideous job, or if they are housewives who stay at home, from the wet diapers, the smelly clothes and beds, the shoddy mattresses and blankets and furniture that the children break to pieces, the crowded quarters where the poor mothers' heads reverberate with the din of the not too healthy children.

Yes, they pay taxes, and It is the city and the state and the federal government that is robbing them and pilfering them, too, They are taxed for every bite they eat, every shoddy rag they put on. They are taxed on their jobs, there are deductions for this and that, there are the war bonds, eighteen dollars for a twenty-five dollar war bond, paid on the installment plan. And

they are not only being taxed, but they are being seduced. Their virtue is being drained from them. They are made into war profiteers, they are forced into the position of usurers. The whole nation, every man woman and child, is forced to become a profiteer-hideous word-in this war.

Some of our readers wrote indignantly, "Do you think \$180 is exorbitant for the government to pay? They should be paying much more. I do not see how they can live on that, prices being what they are."

What I tried to say was that that puny, insignificant \$180 which looms tremendous in the minds of the poor, was not enough for essentials. Could they rent a decent house to live in? Or could they buy a house? Pope Pius said that as many of the workers as possible should become owners. Is there any chance to become an owner on a hundred and eighty dollars a month?

Peter Maurin likes to talk about the treason of the intellectuals. With the expose of waste and inefficiency on the part of government, of graft and the spoils system ("You take this job in return for the help you gave me in getting elected") I should say that not only advertising men, not only the manufacturer robs and cheats the poor, but also the government. How quickly graft and scandals are forgotten! In Russia graft, corruption and waste in government circles are considered treason, and men have paid for it with their lives. And our Catholic employers and politicians speak at Communion breakfasts, and as long as they prosper they are held in honor; as long as they are in power they are respected. They go to Communion, they go to Mass. You must not judge them. If you speak ill of them, you are being uncharitable.

Yes, the poor have been robbed of the good material things of life, and when they asked for bread, they have been given a stone. They have been robbed of a philosophy of labor. They have been betrayed by their teachers and their political leaders. They have been robbed of their skills and made tenders of the machine. They cannot cook; they have been given the can. They cannot spin or weave or sew-they are urged to go to Klein's and get a dress for four ninety-eight.

Bought and paid for? Yes, bought and paid for by their own most generous feelings of gratitude. Of course, they feel grateful. In spite of their talk about taxes and justice, they are grateful to the good, kind government that takes care of them. St. Teresa said that she was of so grateful a temperament she could be bought with a sardine. St. Ignites said that love is an exchange of gifts. The government gives its paternal care and the people give their support to that particular governing body. Naturally they do not want change.

But who is to take care of them if the government does not? That is a question in a day when all are turning to the state, and when people are asking, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Certainly we all should know that it is not the province of the government to practice the works of mercy, or go in for insurance. Smaller bodies, decentralized groups, should be caring for all such needs.

The first unit of society is the family. The family should look after its own and, in addition, as the early fathers said, "every home should have a Christ room in it, so that hospitality may be practiced." "The coat that hangs in your closet belongs to the poor." "If your brother is hungry, it is your responsibility."

“When did we see Thee hungry, when did we see Thee naked?” People either plead ignorance or they say “It is none of my responsibility.” But we are all members one of another, so we are obliged in conscience to help each other. The parish is the next unit, and there are local councils of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Then there is the city, and the larger body of charitable groups. And there are the unions, where mutual aid and fraternal charity is also practiced. For those who are not Catholics there are lodges fraternal organizations, where there is a long tradition of charity. But now there is a dependence on the state. Hospitals once Catholic are subsidized by the state. Orphanages once supported by Catholic charity receive their aid from community chests. And when it is not the state it is bingo parties!

THE poor mother of six cannot reject the one hundred and eighty dollars. She cannot say, “Keep your miserable, puny, insufficient \$180 which you give men in exchange for my husband.” She has poverty, involuntary poverty.

But we must reject it. We must keep on talking about voluntary poverty, and holy poverty, because it is only it we can consent to strip ourselves that we can put on Christ. It is only if we love poverty that we are going to have the means to help others. If we love poverty we will be free to give up a job, to speak when we feel it would be wrong to be silent. We can only talk about voluntary poverty because we believe Christians must be fools for Christ. We can only embrace voluntary poverty in the light of faith.