

Peter's Program

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Outlines P. Maurin's program for social reordering. Calls for a Green Revolution, a return to the villages. Finds his whole message embodied in personalism, which begins with oneself. Blames the C.W.'s problems in its lack of ability to limit itself. (DDLW #176).

With the May issue of *The Catholic Worker*, we begin now our 22nd year. Peter Maurin, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, died in 1949, May 15, on the feast of St. John Baptist de La Salle, in whose order of Christian Brothers he had taught for five years as a young man in Paris. He was preeminently a teacher, an agitator he liked to call himself, and he brought to us great books and great ideas, and great men, so that over the years, we have become a school for the service of God here and now. Many have come and gone in this work, finding their vocation in religion or in the world.

As usual we went out into Union Square this May Day to distribute some two thousand copies of the paper and to meet with old friends with whom we can talk of philosophical differences, and with whom we are united in a passion for peace and justice

Peter's Book

On this anniversary of Peter's death we announce another edition of Peter Maurin's *Easy Essays*, to be published by the Thistle Press which is also bringing out another one of the Fritz Eichenberg albums shortly (There may be a few copies of the first one left). This book will not only contain Peter's essays in new format but also some essays about Peter written by his friends, including one editorial from Blackfriars about Peter as prophet. When we listened to Abbe Pierre this month and his talk of the need for prophets, to bring to men in power the needs of the poor, to cry out unceasingly for justice, we thought of Peter.

Peter used to love to quote Eric Gill who said that Jesus Christ came to make the rich poor and the poor holy. As for the destitute, we can only reach them with love and the works of mercy, performed personally, at a sacrifice. You cannot preach to men with empty stomachs.

Our Temptation

Because Peter's program called for such practical things as houses of hospitality and farming communes or agronomic universities, we have often forgotten the first point in his program

which was the need for clarification of thought, the need to clarify the “theory of revolution.” He used to quote Lenin as saying, “there can be no revolution without a theory of revolution.” But Peter’s was the green revolution, a call for a return to the villages and the land “to make that kind of society where it is easier for men to be good.”

Realizing that we had all too often leaped into the active work of trying to initiate these farming communes and agronomic universities, when our vocation was to write and speak and go out into the highways and byways, and that even the model society wasn’t the first step in changing men’s hearts towards each other, we started in 1940 a retreat house where all could come and make five days silent retreat to begin again the work of putting off the old man and putting on our Lord Jesus Christ. With Him we could do all things, and without Him we could do nothing. Our farms, Maryfarm and Peter Maurin farm, became once again houses of hospitality on the land as well as places where we could have retreats and days of recollection. People who need hospitality and who are suffering in body mind and soul, are not the ones to be starting agronomic universities, even though God has always used the mean and lowly, the weak and powerless to do his work.

We will get the work initiated, that we know. As it is now all over the country things are being done that never would have been done if there had been no Peter Maurin back in 1932 broadcasting his ideas through the new medium of the Catholic Worker. Before that he had worked as an individual, spreading mimeographed sheets, or even hand written ones to all who would read, and stopped in the public squares all those who would listen.

Personalism, Anarchism, Libertarianism

His whole message was that everything began with one’s self. He termed his message a personalist one, and was much averse to the word socialist, since it had always been associated with the idea of political action, the action of the city or the state. He wanted us all to be what we wanted the other fellow to be. If every man became poor there would not be any destitute, he said. If everyone became better, everyone would be better off. He wanted us all “to quit passing the buck,” and trying to pass on the work to George to do. He loved using American slang, in his French peasant accent, which made it very funny, but it has kept his most popular essays from being appreciated in his native country, France.

Freedom

Above all it was in the name of man’s freedom that Peter opposed all “government ownership of the indigent,” as one Bishop put it. Men who were truly brothers would share what they had and that was the beginning of simple community. “Two ‘I’s’ make a we’,” he used to say, “and ‘we’ is a community and ‘they’ is a crowd,” a lonely crowd, he would have added if he had read Reisman’s book. Men were free, and they were always rejecting their freedom which brought with it so many responsibilities. He wanted no organization, so The Catholic Worker groups have always been free associations of people who are working together to get out a paper, to run houses of hospitality for themselves and for others who come in “off the road.”

No Class War

In addition to being opposed to international and civil wars he was opposed to race wars and class wars. He had taken to himself that new constitution that new rule of the Sermon on the Mount, and truly loved his enemies and wanted to do good to all men, including those who injured him or tried to enslave him. He literally believed in overcoming evil with good, hatred with love. He loved the rich as well as the poor, and he wanted to make the rich envy the poor who were so close to Christ, and to try to become closer to them by giving of their means to start these schools, farming communes and agronomic universities. Houses of hospitality are always run by the generosity of the poor who work in them and by the donations of the more comfortably off who send what they can to keep them going. But one realizes more and more that farmers and agronomists and craftsmen do not seek hospitality, do not “come in off the road.” They might give a year or so of their lives if there were the tools to work with, even the houses to live in. It is a pitiful thing to house priests in chicken coops even though they have the privacy of one room, in these converted shelters. It is hard to expect a craftsman to work when he is cooped up in a dormitory and there is no space for his tools.

We Are All Greedy

No, another one of our mistakes in the past is that we have wanted to be all things, to do all things and while we have learned by doing, we have also learned what we cannot do. We can agitate, we can initiate, we can arouse the conscience but we cannot start a housing project for the destitute as Abbe Pierre has in Paris; or a model village, or an agronomic university either. Part of Abbe Pierre’s great wisdom is that he limited himself to that most important work of the day, sheltering the harborless, without question, with the love of his fellow poor. He himself had gone out to sleep in the doorways, on the hard pavements, in order to give his bed to a destitute woman and child, and in reward for this folly of love, he had been enabled to arouse the people of France, so that in a brief year, more was accomplished than he had ever been able to accomplish by his seven years in the house of deputies in Paris. How Peter would have loved his single mindedness, his purity of vision!

We have had many with us who could not find their vocation. There have been the wandering monks that St. Benedict talked of. They want religious life and life in the world. They want to have families and to preach, not teach. They wanted so much, not recognizing it was God Himself they wanted, that they could not develop the talents God gave them, and wander year after year wondering what God wants them to do. Peter would tell them, “first of all, earn a living by the sweat of your own brow, not some one else’s. Choose a work that can be considered honorable, and can be classed under the heading of a work of mercy, serving your brothers, not exploiting them. Man’s work is as important to him as bread, and by it he gains his bread. And by it he gains love too, because he serves his brother, and love is an exchange of gifts. How often I have seen people begin to love each other, because they worked together. They began to “know” each other through the work they shared.

St. Benedict

How Peter loved St. Benedict whose motto was “Work and Pray.” He is happy, no doubt, that I, his co-worker, was professed last month as a full oblate of St. Benedict, attached to St. Procopius Abbey, the mission of which is to work for unity between east and west, and which aims to set up a shrine to the eastern saints, at the monastery at Lisle, Illinois. He loved St. Benedict because he said that what the workers needed most was a philosophy of work. He loved St. Francis because he said St. Francis, through his voluntary poverty, was free as a bird. St. Francis was the personalist, St. Benedict the communitarian.

And Now, Sad News

This issue of the paper is being gotten out by Charles McCormack, Roger O’Neil, Ammon Hennacy, Pete Asaro, Peter Carey, Bob Stewart and Isadore Fazio. The sad news we have to tell is that Tom Sullivan is taking an indefinite leave of absence. The decision came very suddenly for the rest of us, and there has been great grief around the place. It was like Tom to wait until the death of Shorty before he made up his mind. He had wanted to go, he said, for a year, but such human needs as Shorty’s kept him like iron chains. When Shorty died last month, he made his decision. The Lord does strange things with us. Like Habbukuk we are plucked by the hair of the head and deposited here and there in the apostolate. We had all thought that Tom, like Charlie O’Rourke, was with us for life. Vain assumption. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Tom was with the Chicago house and Chicago Catholic Worker until the war, and after the war he came to the New York house where, aside from the interval of a year—he went to Chicago for a wedding and didn’t come back—when he went to Loyola and worked for TODAY magazine—he has been with us since, writing for, and making up **The Catholic Worker** each month, heading the house, having charge of the finances, and in general performing all the works of mercy.

Who knows—it may be like the last trip? This time he went for a vacation, and writes to tell us he is not coming back. Perhaps in a year, after a retreat, after a sabbatical year, he will be back. It is whatever God wants. There is some meaning to it all, Charlie McCormack said, with a very great sigh.

“Never mind,” said Joe Motyka, who has been with us almost as long as Tom. “We got the paper out during the war, and we’ll get it out again.” Anyone familiar with Joe can hear his hardboiled accents, as he said it, but they know too, the sadness in his heart and in John Pohl’s heart and the rest of the Chrystie street gang, at the absence of a friend