

# Where Are the Poor? They Are In Prisons, Too

Dorothy Day

*The Catholic Worker*, July-August 1955, 1,8.

*Summary: A graphic description of how she and 29 others were treated by the police, jailers, and courts after arrest for protesting air raid drills against nuclear attack. Gives a reason for the protest and decries the inhuman aspects of their treatment—crowding, lack of food, waiting.*

*Notes: “What a neglected work of mercy, visiting the prisoner.” (DDLW #241).*

We probably all experienced different things, the thirty of us who were arrested in City Hall Park at 2:05 p.m. June 15, for refusing to obey the Air Raid wardens and taking to shelter.

Here are some of the impressions, written down two days after the event, 24 hours after I was released on \$1,500 bail from the Woman’s Detention Home, a prison on Greenwich Avenue, at Ninth Street, in the heart of Greenwich village.

We, the thirty of us, were made up of seven from the Catholic Worker Group, Eileen Fantino and her two companions from East Harlem, and members of the War Resisters League and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and finally one lone bootblack named Rocco Parilli who was arrested because he wanted a drink of water just as the warning sounded. When the lawyers and judge turned to the papers, made out perhaps at the Elizabeth Street station, the indictment was against Parilli and 29 others.

He led us all, and was oblivious to us all. He was the first in the wagon and we thought him a member of the police force. He had on some kind of badge and a crucifix in his breast pocket which he took out and kissed now and again.

There were thirty of us piled in a police van meant to accommodate 10. Why did we do it? What did the Chancery office think of it all? Of these ten Catholics making a spectacle of themselves, “a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men.”

To answer that question, we got out one long leaflet, too long to be reprinted here, and one short statement to be read before the news reel camera. The short statement was inspired in this way. That morning in the mail, an old autographed copy of **True Humanism** by Jacques Maritain, filled with my own notes and markings, was returned in the mail anonymously post mark, New York after many long years with a borrower. The date of the publication was 1938, and it might have been borrowed at that time. One of the places marked provided me with the quotation I needed. My statement read:

We make this demonstration, not only to voice our opposition to war, not only to refuse to participate in psychological warfare, which this air raid drill is, but also as an act of public penance for having been the first people in the world to drop the atom bomb, to make the

hydrogen bomb. We are engaging only ourselves in this action, not the Church. We are acting as individual Catholics. Jacques Maritain, the French philosopher has written, "We are turning towards men, to speak and act among them, on the temporal plane, because, by our faith, by our baptism, by our confirmation, tiny as we are, we have the vocation of infusing into the world, wheresoever we are, the sap and savor of Christianity."

## **The Long Afternoon**

We went to the park at twelve thirty, after a light lunch at the Catholic Worker and began to give out leaflets and papers, in front of the Old Tribune building. At one thirty we went to the offices of the War Resisters League at 5 Beekman Place, and met with Bayard Rustin and A. J. Muste, where it was impressed upon everyone that the penalty for our civil disobedience was one year in jail and a \$500 fine, and everyone was asked if they wished to take that risk. Dick Kern, who believes in non-cooperation to the extent of "going limp," was rebuked as one who invited violence by his attitude, and he was told to go off two blocks and demonstrate by himself. However he clung to the crowd and went through his little act looking strangely pathetic and ridiculous as he was lifted like some grotesque animal by the arms and legs, unresisting but uncooperative by four large policemen. He is very young, is Dick, and his large round moon face, and dangling arms and legs were seen being pushed, or inserted through the narrow door where he joined the bootblack.

I am sure, that in spite of the warning of Bayard Rustin there were those among us coming along because it was a beautiful day, and there were 29 of us and it looked like a party. Catholics are used to the idea of martyrdom, reading daily in their missals the story of those who are racked and torn and hung head downwards, thrown in caldrons of scalding oil, flayed alive and flung to beasts, so that any suffering imprisonment would entail should be considered slight indeed.

Just before two p.m. we went to the park and sat down on the benches there, and when the sirens began their warning we continued to sit. That was all there was to it. A number of elaborately uniformed men with much brass, stars and ribbons upon their blue auxiliary police outfits marched upon us and told us to move. When we refused, they announced we were under arrest, and the police van was driven up inside the park, up over the curb, and we were loaded in and driven away,

## **Elizabeth Street Station**

Our first stop brought us very near to our old headquarters at 115 Mott Street. Every morning as we used to go to Mass on Mott Street we would pass a platoon of uniformed men coming from the station to go on duty. This was my first visit inside. The place is a barracks and is so unadorned, so dirty, so unpainted, that it was as though the men took pride in their unkempt quarters. In the large room where we were put under guard, there was one large illustration on the wall of a policeman aiming at a black target with many directions on how to shoot, to kill or not to kill perhaps? One by one we were taken before the desk,

questioned, listed, and brought to still another room. Many of the girls were asked if they took drugs. We were searched in a perfunctory manner by a police woman, and a pen knife, given me a few weeks before by Smokey Joe was taken away from me.

## Thirtieth Street Station

On our next ride the men were taken to Delancey and Clinton Streets, and the women to Thirtieth Street. Our drivers seemed to get lost among one way streets and we drove past St. Francis Church and around the block before we arrived at the gloomy looking building which was a women's detention house, where there was a cage, built within the building very similar to the cages in which they house lions at the zoo. It is two stories tall, built rather strangely into the building, and looking out on dark bare walls. There is neither light nor air except artificial light of course. The place had just been hosed down and was dripping wet, ceilings, walls and floors. In each cell, into which we were locked separately, there was a metal plank to sit or lie on, and an open toilet. The front of the cell was open so that we could see several of our neighbors. Judith Beck was opposite me, diagonally. It was by now five o'clock and we had been detained three hours, and our demonstration had been going on for five hours. Judith had not eaten since breakfast and began asking for food. The matron, a young woman with a horse's tail haircut was amiable enough, but made no attempt to allow us to sent out and pay for sandwiches and coffee, or any other food. We were there almost three hours and at Eight were brought downtown in another police van to the Night Court which is held in the Center Street building which is both the Tombs and courthouse. There we were, eleven of us, together with two others, who were later increased by five more, kept in a tiny cell, nine by eleven perhaps, with a bench along one wall, an open toilet and sink in a corner, for the next four hours.

The cell was not big enough for us all to sit down. Usually four or five of us had to be standing up. There were two other cells for the accommodations of women, right alongside, but no attempt was made to use these though the benches along two walls would have enabled some of the women to lie down. There again we had no food and Judith, who is very slight, was very hungry indeed, and again and again asked if we could not get something to eat. The matron jokingly handed her a little packet of six oatmeal cookies which she passed around, making half a cookie to each. For fifteen or sixteen women there seemed to be an interminable amount of paper work going on for all those hours, so no one had time to provide anything to eat.

Judith is an actress in the Living Theatre Group, which has a little playhouse on One Hundredth street, Manhattan. She and her husband were playing in **Phedre**, by Racine. In our hours of association we found Judith a gay and attractive little companion. She told us the story of Phedra, and even acted part of it though she said that through hunger she was forgetting all her lines.

Finally after much more standing and waiting, we were all called up to Night Court, the men coming from down below stairs. They were able to tell us that during their hours of waiting, they had been able to send out for food which an attendant courteously served them, and they had not, up to then been cramped as we were, into one tiny cell.

There was more waiting in a "bull pen," the "cooler," outside the court, in a most inhuman cage, already crowded with human beings, men picked up from the Bowery, from the parks, all kinds and colors and conditions of men. We were all as crowded together as on a crowded subway.

When we were finally called out around eleven thirty into the court which was filled with many of our friends, we were a bit light headed with relief, perhaps. Anyway, when the police attendant began miscalling everyone's names there were smiles on a great many faces.

Judge Kaplan began shouting at once, "what all the stir was about, and Judith, from the wide semicircle which we had formed, spoke up in a very clear voice,"We are hungry. We are light headed."

She was dressed rather dramatically all in white with a long white scarf with her black hair falling down around her shoulders. She has clearly marked beautiful features and very expressive eyes. She admits she is always acting. That is her profession. "My husband and I greatly over estimate my talent," she told us.

Anyway, she was acting, she was putting the post light on herself, and

in very much the wrong place. The judge demanded she come up before the bench. He asked her if she had ever been in a mental institution (after a few other questions) and she pertly replied, "No, have you?" This made the judge go into a rage, an anything but judicious attitude. He lost his temper completely, shouted, and demanded that she be taken to Bellevue for observation.

Then occurred that scene which the World Telegram referred to sarcastically in a description, as a riot staged by so-called pacifists, of such dimensions that the additional squad cars had to be called out, and 29 reserve policemen. Judith had screamed out at this sentence to the Psychiatric ward, her husband had also shouted out and both were dragged from the court room, he in one direction and she in the other. There were such a crowd of prisoners, and Judith was struggling so, that she was carried, by several police, above the heads of the defendants, her little legs kicking like those of a ballet dancer. It was a terrible scene. Several men cried out, some of the women started to weep, the judge himself took a recess, demanding that we be sent back to the bull pen. If anyone ever deserved to be sentenced to Bellevue psychiatric ward, it was Judge Kaplan for his exhibition of temper.

Again we went back to that ugly pen, that cage where even more men had been pressed in, and there again we waited, not only till the recess was over, but also until a number of other cases had been called up. Our whole night had been one of terrible waiting. Judith was brought down stairs and we could hear her from above, screaming again and demanding food.

Finally, when our case was called, we went back in the court to find it had been cleared of spectators by the judge, and we were treated to a speech by the judge in which we were called murderers, and our bail was fixed at \$1,500 each (we had expected fifty). The case was postponed until June 23, and again we women were brought to that little pen downstairs, where there was by now an additional drug addict, an old Puerto Rican woman, crying aloud and staggering around the cell, retching and overcome with stomach cramps. Her entire face was black and blue and she complained that she had been kicked in the stomach. Judith was sitting in there alone with her and three other colored prisoners, dismal indeed. She

was very sorry she had made such a scene, and had so lost her temper. It should have been understandable what with hunger, terrible fatigue, exhaustion too at seeing such human misery and such actual but perhaps not realized sadism.

We were all kept there until two a.m. and still no food. Judith was taken to Bellevue finally, and I suppose a great deal of red tape and paper work, and rigmarole was gone through again.

Roger O'Neil and Charles McCormack, Agnes Bird and Betty Bartelme, finally got sandwiches in to us at 2:30 a.m. before we were taken to the detention house, where we sat another hour before we were assigned to cells.

The pictures that will remain with us. There is one of Helen Russell and Mary Ann McCoy sitting on either side of the drug addict, embracing her and comforting her, as she writhes in agony, retching and crying out. Her black hair hangs limp around her face and she looks more an Indian than Puerto Rican or Negro. And I think how strange to see such loving kindness and solicitude in a nurse when there is so much cold severity in the nurses at the detention house on Greenwich street. There another trained nurse in dealing with another drug addict who had voluntarily committed herself said—"Go on, shake," taunting her. "Shake some more. I am sure you can shake more than that. I've seen plenty putting on this act, and better!" But Helen Russell is kind, kind, and Mary Ann embraces the poor woman with her long slim white arms, and Eileen sits there, her face green, her eyes half closed looking as though she were crucified.

## Phedre

There is that picture of Phedre, her head thrown back, reciting with rapt face the lines of Racine; and later singing with the others Zumgali-gali, an Israeli song which has the refrain, "Man was made for the land the land was made for man."

There are the two tall well dressed Negro girls who work in a jam factory in Brooklyn, brought in on the complaint of the sister in law of one of them in a dispute over fifteen dollars, and they laughed over the ribald jokes and pranks played in their factory and when Edith Horwitz said in surprise that people didn't act so in the factories where she had worked, they laughed still more. All the girls sang together, and the Negro girls with them, a Leadbelly song of the Georgia chain gang which comes on records and has an expletive at the end of each line, a gasped out "Wah!"

And then there is the line up in the courts, which we attended on three other days after our release on bail, and the sight of men picked up on the Bowery and in the city parks, and all the expensive machinery of city government used to dole out fines and punishment to the pettiest of offenders, those sleeping in the parks, selling neckties on the street corners, begging alms. These are the poor who fill the jails, and occupy the courts. The "big" man can hire lawyers, can "beat the rap," and when he is really caught and imprisoned even then he is treated with respect because he got away with it so long, or did it in a big way. The man who begs an alms is arrested. The man who steals a million dollars is honored. *Blessed are the poor, and cursed the rich.* These are not my words but the words of scripture.

I emphasize the food aspect of the case because of what happened to Judith. She had begun her day with the typical American breakfast of toast and coffee, and had had nothing substantial for more than twenty-four hours. On any fast, it is the first twenty-four hours that is hard. After that it is easier as those of us who have fasted up to ten days know. Also I wish to emphasize the fact that being sent to the psychiatric ward is often used here in New York as a threatened punishment and a punishment for anyone who is not subservient and submissive to the abuse of authority, to any one who speaks up against injustice in our public hospital wards. Our old friend John Griffen had had a spat with a nurse in the t.b. hospital on Welfare Island and had been shipped over to the psychiatric division. When Steve Hergenhan complained of the food at the Municipal lodging house, he had been so threatened. Steve wrote some articles afterwards for the CW on the Municipal lodging house and when the city sent delegates to us asking why we had not complained to them instead of publishing the articles, we told them of this new form of punishment—sentencing to a madhouse rather than a prison. A psychiatric ward is for treatment, not punishment.

Another thing I would like to call attention to is the inhuman crowding. From the outside the Tombs is a great imposing building, but inside we were packed like animals for shipment in cages. We saw these same cages at Delancey street, Thirtieth street and Second street. We pass by them daily and do not realize that inside are men and women penned, inside there is the weeping and the groaning of despair. What a neglected work of mercy, visiting the prisoner.

“When were you in Prison, Lord, and we did not visit you?” It is a hard picture Christ presents. He did not forgive this ignorance. “Inasmuch as you did not visit these prisoners ye did not visit Me.”

“But they are guilty, they are the scum of the earth, they are the refuse, they are the offscourings. They drink, they take dope, they are prostitutes. They are vicious themselves and they make others vicious. They even sell drugs to little children. They are where they belong. Prison is too good for them. We can’t pamper them.”

“I have come to call them to repentance. I have come to be with publicans and sinners. I have come for the lost sheep. I am more there with these most miserable ones than with the judges sitting on the high seats.” This is not sentimentality. This is truth.

Oh yes, one can hear these things very plainly lying in a cell when we were finally permitted to lie down, locked in again in these rows of cages, in a bare stark cell that would outdo the Carmelite in austerity. It was good to kneel there on the floor beside the bed and thank God for the opportunity to be there, to be so stripped of all the earth holds dear to share in some little way the life of prisoners, guilty and innocent, all over the world.

This was but a slight experience, this imprisonment, and our readers have no opportunity actually of visiting the prisoner, we realize that. We have got to pray. With love, there is not time, no space, nor bars.