

On Pilgrimage - July 1956

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Summary: Discusses the tendency to rewrite history to suit our present purposes with examples about Stalin and union organizing. "Who tells the truth nowadays?" Links finding truth to taking time to be quiet, alone, and getting enough sleep. (DDLW #245).

There was a story going around about Stalin, a long time ago, before the debunking period set in, which I enjoyed very much. Stalin was in his inner office, and a number of his helpers in the outer office suddenly heard a great burst of wrath. Someone was being dragged over the coals! (Verbally speaking, of course. No one admitted then that such things happened actually. It is only the Catholic Church which has had an inquisition.) After fifteen minutes of the harsh tirade within, the door opened, and Stalin was seen coming forth, alone. Inside the office was empty. "He has just made his fifteen minute period of self criticism," someone commented, breathing a sigh of relief. It was one of the recommended customs of the times.

There will no longer be any official, good natured stories about Stalin. And I might have believed that the present era of self criticism was a sincere attempts to admit past mistakes, past sins, and gigantic ones at that, if it were not for the latest news story yesterday which stated that Stalin was suspected of murdering his second wife, and keeping a harem of young girls! Now everything has said that can be said! If the murder charge won't stick, then ridicule may do the trick. An old politician becoming senile, with not one "Peaches Browning" with whom to relax after a long day of sentencing old Bolsheviks to be tortured, executed or sent to Siberian wastes (which are no longer wastes, of course) but a harem of them. A touch of the East here, the Oriental despot motif.

I want to take a longer view of history. When Fritz Eichenberg started the job of illustrating **The Idiot** last year, he found in a second hand store a wonderful book of travel, illustrated, about a journalist's trip through the Siberian prison camps, and what had started out as a white wash (else it would not have been permitted) turned out to be a damning and terrible indictment of the cruelty of the prison system under the Czar. I want to remember the history of the French revolution, and the revolution of 1848 and the uprisings after the Franco Prussian war, and the more recent persecution of the Church in France in 1905 when again religious orders were suppressed. And I want too, to study more intensively the history of my own country with its glories and its crimes, its ideal and its failures, its virtues and its sins. Newspapers disclose to us the temper of the day, the mind of the day, but the story played up on the front page one morning is often denied on the back page on the next morning.

There is no use in being taken in by this emotional upheaval in the USSR, now. I can well remember a pamphlet issued by the Communist party in the United States about John L.

Lewis, when the Communists were backing another union and Lewis was to be made a villain to the masses in a fight to dislodge him from his hard won position. The pamphlet accused Lewis as the vice president of the mine workers not only of gaining his position as mine leader by engineering the death of the former president who was a heavy drinker, by keeping him under the influence all the time, but also by degrading him morally, inducing him to frequent brothels, where he contracted a venereal disease. Later when the party line changed, when Lewis was in good repute again with the Communists, this pamphlet was hastily bought up, destroyed, obliterated as best they could, and Lewis, the first president of the CIO was the hero of the hour (because he was using many a strong and brave communist to organize in districts where less convinced men would turn tail and flee). I remembered this pamphlet when I saw the most recent criticisms of Stalin, in the attempts to obliterate his name and reputation from the far reaches of the Soviet land.

Similar charges have been made by workers against the mine owners. Labor always insisted that the mine owners brought burlesque shows to town the nights that union meetings were being called. They were accused of trying to seduce the union membership by much liquor and a goodly display of fleshly comeliness from the difficult and self denying job of building up an organization of workers.

Is it a mark of my class-war attitude, inherited from the days when I wrote for labor in the columns of **The Call** and **The Masses**, that I believed this of the “bosses,” and now refuse to believe it of Stalin? Is it that the bottle still smells of the liquor it once held? I do not think so. One sees too much in this present day of prosperity of the seduction of the masses with television sets and cars, not to speak of the more necessary expensive gadgets such as refrigerators, freezers, washing and drying and ironing machines, and so on. Man has been induced to sell his soul for a mess of potage, because he has no longer time to think of his soul and the saving of it, because he is too busy trying to pay off his debts for all these luxuries. Sometimes he has two jobs, and sometimes his wife has one besides. And still they are in debt, because they cannot pay off the time savers they have bought, because there is always a new one on the market, of new make, new color, new design, and the old one cannot be fixed because the screws or tools are also of new design.

How far from the truth can we get, with our modern advertising, which persuades men to find a paradise of ease here and now. Who tells the truth nowadays? If we say we do, we are lying, because Scripture says, “All men are liars.” And yet it is hard to find, in our examination of conscience, just where we have not been true, just where we have lied, in thought, word or deed.

Christ said, I am the way, **the Truth**, the life. The trouble is, He is so hard to find. There is so little time, and the danger is so great that we will die before we have begun to live, spiritually speaking of course. (Because as I write that sentence, I can think of three people who have lamented to me that they have never lived, have had no experience, have never been fulfilled, are unwanted, rejected, and so on, with infinite sadness.) They are not talking about the spiritual life, but the life of the senses. They do not realize how universal is their complaint, “lest having Him they may have naught beside.” And they flee the Hound of Heaven, because they do not want Him just yet. They are like St. Augustine, saying, “Give me purity, O Lord, but not yet.” Because they cannot give up their love or their desire for

love, and that intensity of life, which comes with love. They do not believe Him when He says, “I have come to bring life, and to bring it more abundantly.”

There are times in our lives when we feel life flow in our veins, feel ourselves to be alive, we can look into our hearts and find there the Holy Trinity, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. But we need to be alone, we need to have time, to be at rest, to be rested too.

That brings us to another trouble, we never get enough rest, enough sleep, enough immobility. I know a mother once, who had one small child and she said she was kept so busy that at night when everyone was in bed, husband and child, that is, she liked to just sit and savor her leisure. That was before the days of television. Now people just sit in front of that, and look and look and even if they are bored, or dull, they cannot bear to go to bed, because what comes next might be more interesting. Or they stay up and read detective stories and cannot put out the light until they are stupefied, until the last page is turned. They are too tired to sleep—that moment has been passed when they could have rested, could have slept.

We need to sleep, we need to rest, we need to lose consciousness, to die in this way, in order to live—and this is on the natural plane. But grace builds on nature, and we must live a good natural life in order to lead the supernatural life to its fullest.

Baron Von Hugel used to say that every morning as he made his plans for the day, he used to draw up a schedule of work to be done, and then cut half of it out. I should do the same about reading—draw up a list of books to be read, and then cut half of them out.

There is a time to do nothing, when one needs to do nothing, and now for me is one of those times. It is June, and we are preparing for our summer retreat. There are visitors in abundance and they help in the work, whether it is dishwashing, painting, repairing or just getting ready for the retreat. There is Andy, a seaman, between trips. He has been a dozen times around the world, and now he is doing a seaman’s job of painting the porches. Hans Tunneson, another seaman is repairing the rotted posts and screening in one porch. Andy talks of the cottage in Ireland by the sea, and Hans talks of his family farm in Norway. To them, in a way, **The Catholic Worker** farm on Staten Island, is that cottage in Ireland and that farm in Norway. John Filliger, another seaman, is making hay, and Stanley, in between a typing job and a printing job, and work on a book he is writing, called **Lithuanian Boy**, is helping him. A young graduate of Annapolis, fourth of a family of nine children, and a young lad from the slums of New York, paroled to us after a two year stint in prison, are also helping. Jim and Joe are doing a wiring job, putting up outside lights on the barn entrances, the two dormitories where men sleep, and two young women, chambermaid and typist, are cleaning the two women’s dormitories in the house, the attic and the children’s playroom. We have two sick ones with asthma and when there are more visitors, they will get more attention. It is like an inn by the side of the road, this farm in Staten Island, and we never know who is coming, nor how long they are going to stay. Those who come to spend the summer, go back to Chicago, or to summer school, and those who come to spend a week end, stay for a year. We cannot talk about a dedicated lay apostolate, because we are a “house of hospitality.” The wandering monks find us an attractive stopping off place, and some of them spend their time in the chapel praying, and some of them build meditation places down by the brook. There is also the Stations of the Cross, put up along the meadow in the center of the farm, erected but not canonically, by one of our guests, who is at present on Ward’s

Island, or Ryker's Island or one of the city prisons for drinking.

And with all the comings and goings, with all the work to be done, suddenly there is time, here in this oasis, to sit and pray, to sit and think.

Even with the seven grandchildren, on a quiet beach, one can sit by the side of the sea, and while Eric and Nickie are collecting snails, and Susie is floating out to sea on a raft, and Tamar with her three other little girls, hovering around her like butterflies, collects shells with quiet absorption, I sit by the edge of the water, no breeze stirring, watching the shifting colors of the dead calm bay, with the gentle tide coming in around me, and rejoice in the Lord, in peace and stillness unutterable, and there is singing in my heart, with the three children exiled in Babylon, "All ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord, praise and exalt Him above all forever.