

House of Hospitality

Dorothy Day

Chapter Five

Summary: Describes the seemingly endless stream of donations, visitors, and people in need that fill the long winter days and make writing difficult. Points to bits of humor and scenes of natural beauty that refresh the soul. Notes their bittersweet good fortune in moving to a larger but less expensive house. (DDLW #440).

1

IT IS cold and we are writing in the kitchen where there are no draughts. Barbara, Margaret's baby, sits on her mother's lap by the table and she, too, is writing an editorial, although she is only five months old. In her zeal she tries first to eat the pencil her fond mother has given her, and then the paper.

On the wall there are three pictures which attract her attention. She calls out to them, trying to crow. There is a Polish Madonna, a Negro Madonna and a picture of a Madonna and a worker by Ade Bethune.

Teresa is drawing pictures too, and when she shows them to the baby, Barbara laughs and makes bubbles. The black cat lies in restful abandon in front of the stove.

It is one of those rare evenings when there are no visitors, when the work of the day seems to be over, though it is only seven-thirty. It is a good time to sit and write editorials. An editorial, for instance, on charity. St. Saviour's High School and Cathedral High School sent down so many baskets of food, including hams and canned goods, potatoes and all the trimmings for Christmas dinners, that the office was piled high for at least three hours until they were all distributed. It is true it did not take long to distribute them, there is such need around here.

There were toys, too, dolls for the girls and other toys for the boys, all beautifully wrapped and be-ribboned.

Bundles of clothes came in, including many over coats, and they went out as fast as they came in. They were sent in response to the story of the man who had to accept a woman's woolen sweater in lieu of under wear or overcoat. I hope they keep on coming in.

I'd like to have everyone see the poor worn feet, clad in shoes that are falling apart, which find their way to the Catholic *Worker* office. A man came in this rainy morning and when

he took off one dilapidated rag of footwear, his sock had huge holes in the heel and was soaking wet at that. We made him put on a dry sock before trying on the pair of shoes we found for him, and he changed diffidently, there under the eye of the Blessed Virgin on the bookcase, looking down from her shrine of Christmas greens. But his poor, red feet were clean. Most of the men and women who come in from the lodging houses and from the streets manage cleanliness, with the help of the public baths. I heard of one man who washed his underwear in the public baths and sat there as long as he could in that steam-laden, enervating atmosphere until it was not quite too wet to put on again. For the rest, it could dry on his skin. Not a pleasant thought in bitter weather. Many of the men do this, he said.

Our prayer for the new year is that the members may be “mutually careful one for another.”

Teresa, who has been away to school this fall, was home for the holidays, perched like a little sparrow right at my elbow as I typed stories for the paper. She got a microscope set for Christmas and the best place to be engaging in scientific pursuits was usually right at the typewriter table by my side.

“Perhaps,” she would murmur to herself, “there’ll be bugs in the ice-box water Here is a slide with some of Tom’s blood on it . . . it’s not much good. . . . Don’t you want to look at a butterfly scale? And don’t forget to write in the paper that I went picketing with you on December 31st. . . . That’s a hot one!”

“Why don’t you want me to say ‘That’s a hot one’? I like to say it . . . you won’t let me say ‘Come over and see me some time’—so I’m going to say ‘That’s a hot one.’”

Going on the ferry over to Staten Island to take Teresa back to St. Patrick’s where she is going to school, the gulls stood out white against the gray sky. They swept and glided, swooping down into the water now and then after a fish. Their cries and the sound of the water as the boat churned through it were the only sounds in the winter stillness. Then there was the walk with Teresa up the country road, past a thicket of birches with the blue-green twilight sky behind them. To one side of the road was a field of yellow grass, bent by a soft wind. Alongside a path through the fields, there was a little brook gurgling cheerfully beneath the ice that caked it. There are still green things showing under the stubble, bits of wild carrot, the green of vines, even some wild geranium. And as the earth lost its color and darkened, there was still the radiance of a sunset flushing the sky.

2

The work continues back in the office until late in the evening. Visitors from Chicago, from Maryland, from New Hampshire, from Buffalo. A worker from one of the chain stores who tells us about his long day: he gets up at five-thirty to assist at early Mass, and he is never through with his work until seven-thirty in the evening. He wants to help us by distributing the papers on Sundays. . . . A man comes in from East Eleventh Street to tell us how the paper has reinforced his faith, and to bring us some clothes for those that are poorer than he, and he is poor enough. All day, starting at eight-thirty, there are the unemployed. They want underwear, shoes, coats, information about Home Relief. Or they just want to talk to us. There are the unemployed all day, and in the evening there are those who work and have

no other time to come. So if the paper is rather disjointed and unfinished in its writing, it is because there is so much to do for twelve hours, and only a few of the left-over hours to write about the work and the thought behind the work.

As for our immediate assistants and co-workers—they continue faithfully in their voluntary co-operation. Two or three are always picketing, running errands, addressing envelopes, going to the postoffice, paying calls in the neighborhood, taking care of the needs of those who come in. The girls from the House of Hospitality helped us to picket the Mexican consulate on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and when they came in that morning to go with us to the high Mass which started the day's work, they told us how four of them said the rosary aloud together the night before for our persecuted fellow-workers in Mexico City.

During the month there was a call of distress from a man whose wife had just gone to the hospital to have her sixth child. His mother was to have taken care of the other five children, but the very next day she fell off a chair and broke her arm, so the little ones were left to the care of the nine-year-old eldest girl. The father found it impossible to get any help so an appeal was made to *The Catholic Worker*. One of the girls cooperating with us volunteered for the job and took charge of the little household. It meant ten days of good hard work, and one of the little ones, two years old, was ill. There was washing and ironing and cleaning to do, besides the marketing and cooking. A few of the afternoons some of the boys from the office went up to take care of the kids while she did the shopping. One of those who volunteered for this work was a seminarian on his vacation. He will make a good Franciscan, that boy. The girl had gone out on the job as an errand of mercy, not expecting any pay, but both the man and his wife insisted that she be paid and paid generously. She had been jobless for some time, so the money came in handy. The husband had been out of work for quite a time too, and money was hard earned in that big family, but it is the poor who are the most generous and the most appreciative. "I had not been able to find anyone to help us for love or money" he told us.

3

Someone wrote to us that he was always interested in hearing how the printing bill got paid—how we made out during the month. Well, this was a good month and, looking back to last Christmas when we were so poor that we had to skip our January edition, we praise the Lord and all His saints for the abundance this year. Christmas cards came to us enclosing money and little by little the bills were paid. The telephone was almost shut off but wasn't quite, the electric man came around to deprive us of light, but didn't (there had been an offering through the mail), there were a few meals of beans, and then a basket of food came in; and we were preparing to put off the January edition until late in the month when a generous check came in from a priest whom we would name except that we are afraid he would get sore, and so that bill was paid off and there was still twenty-five dollars in the bank.

This morning our dentist, who has been taking care of everybody for nothing for the last year, called up and said the marshal was on his doorstep, and miraculously enough there were twenty dollars for him. He had pulled a dozen teeth and filled another dozen and still

he said his bill was only fifteen dollars. We gave him what we had, however, and we are sure that somehow or other there will be enough money to pay for the mailing of the paper. It's true that only seventy-five cents came in today, but God will supply our wants.

4

It is just after midnight and I have been sitting in the outer office alone with two mad creatures with God in their hearts. All three of us tormented in our various ways—all three of us alone, so completely alone too. They were working at putting up the long table for Frank, the circulation manager, and all his assistants to work at. They had started at seven and it was a long, but beautifully efficient job. C.'s madness consists of going in for astrology—it is his passion and it must be regarded seriously. He is anxious to help us and he worked in the Harlem office, and now this big job, even paying for the lumber, and when I keep asking for an account he keeps putting me off. He is a young German and very solitary and inarticulate, except on the question of astrology.

The other, Bernard Adelson, I met when I spoke at Father Rothlauf's last year. He came down the next night and has been with us ever since, off and on, one time speaking in an inspired fashion of the Mystical Body, of other Christs, of the Psalms, quoting them in the Hebrew, and then going off into a perfect mania of persecution talk, holding his head and speaking of madness and death.

As I sit I am weeping. I have been torn recently by people, by things that happen. Surely we are, here in our community, made up of poor lost ones, the abandoned ones, the sick, the crazed and the solitary human beings whom Christ so loved and in whom I see, with a terrible anguish, the body of this death. And out in the streets wandering somewhere is Mr. Minas, solitary among a multitude, surrounded by us all day long, but not one of us save in his humanity, denying, not knowing—yet clinging to some dream, some ideal of beauty which he tries to express in the poetry which no one but he can read.

Catherine is tossing in her bed, unable to sleep, because of the wailing of cats in the back yard who act as though all the devils were in them—Catherine, too, with the misery of her illness hanging over her—with the uncertainty, the pain and the nerve-racking treatments she undergoes.

I have seen too much suffering recently. There is the girl Father Michael sent me to visit in Woonsocket, who suffers in her skeleton body the torments Christ suffered. But I cannot write about her; it is impossible to talk about these supernatural manifestations which are beyond my comprehension.

5

This morning a young Socialist came to breakfast. (Usually as I come from Mass there is somebody waiting at the door to get in.) He had formerly been a Communist and now he is a Socialist. We spoke of the arguments as to the existence of God, especially the argument from conscience. The Communists have also absolute standards of right or wrong, regardless

of what they may say. Their practice of self-criticism proves this. From whom do those standards come? They would say from Karl Marx or Lenin, I suppose.

In the evening I attended a meeting where there was a young Catholic lawyer who had just returned from a visit to Mexico. He was enthusiastic about the public improvements in the State of Sonora, the playgrounds (there was one place just as good as Jones Beach!) and the roads, and I don't know what all, and the fact that the peons were earning two pesos a day on some of the plantations and the women could wear silk stockings!

Rodolpho Calles must have some good points, he said. This, in spite of the fact that not a church is open in the state and not a priest allowed! When I contemplate civilization which offers us silk stockings and playgrounds and electric ice boxes in return for the love of God, I begin to long for a good class war, with the civiliziers lined up to be liquidated.

Franciscan spirit grows hereabouts. Last night Mr. Minas, who is devoted to our black cat, was discovered washing her chest with my washrag and drying her with my towel and then anointing her with a warming unguent for a bad cough! It is good I discovered him in the act. Then big Dan, our chief-of-staff on the streets of New York (he sells the paper, either on Fourteenth Street or in front of Macy's every day) took one of my blankets to cover the old horse who helps us deliver our Manhattan bundles of papers every month. He is a truly Catholic Worker horse, Dan says, and when they go up Fifth Avenue and pass St. Patrick's Cathedral, the horse genuflects!

Dan delivers the papers all over New York every month when the new issue comes out, and then during the month he sells. He likes to get next to some Communist who is selling the *Daily Worker*, and as the latter shouts "Read the *Daily Worker,*" Dan replies, "Read *The Catholic Worker* daily!"

Once he saw me coming and modified his shout to "*Catholic Worker* romance on every page, read *The Catholic Worker!*" He is huge and boisterous and friendly and has come to be known to everyone. We will never be able to find out how many thousands of subscriptions have come in through Big Dan and Stanley Vishnewsky, who have shared the street apostolate. Stanley writes besides, and has had articles accepted by both *America* and the *Commonweal*, and many of the little bits he has written for the CW have been reprinted in foreign papers. He has a distinct style and humor, a freshness that is rare.

Mary Sheehan has been a faithful saleswoman on Fourteenth Street too. One of her sallies was reported to me recently. A Communist passing by started cursing the Cardinal. "Why, he gets drunk every Saturday night with his housekeeper!" he said, hoping to get a rise out of Mary.

"And doesn't that just show how democratic he is," Mary retorted.

I went to the Cenacle at three this afternoon, going up on the bus through a heavy fog. The trees on the Drive were beautiful standing out so alone, the only things of beauty in a gray, dark world. I love such days; so much is hidden, and only single things like a tree or bush stand out. These are good days to walk in, not too cold, and if you go down by the docks at the foot of Twenty-third or Fourteenth or Tenth Street, the world seems to come to an end right there. There is a rare stillness only broken by the sound of the water washing against the piers. And when, as along Riverside Drive, you have the trees as well as the sense of the

water (if you do not have the sight of it) there is a poignant midwinter beauty, a very restful interlude in a crowded life.

A Franciscan missionary priest from China came in late night—well after eleven—with Mr. Walsh, who is a pressman on one of the Hearst papers. Mr. Walsh has been one of our supporters for the last year and it is due to his efforts that many missionary priests in China have received copies of *The Catholic Worker*. He lived in China for some time himself and has a keen interest in the affairs over there.

There was good conversation for some hours and before Father Burtschy left he said that he would see to it that some of the writings of Peter Maurin were translated into Chinese for one of the two Catholic dailies. It was great to contemplate seeing Peter's Easy Essays in Chinese, but it was astounding to consider the fact that there are two Chinese Catholic dailies.

Other interesting visitors during the week were a Maltese Catholic who spoke glowingly of his devotion to St. Paul, and of the devotion of all those on the island from which he comes; and a former I.W.W. seaman who was converted to the Church some five or six Years ago.

The gray heavy cold of winter has closed in. Such bitter days the streets are deserted early in the evening except for a few people who scurry along, blown by or facing the wind, seeking shelter.

Every morning from eight o'clock on, men come to the office, pinched and blue with the cold, seeking clothes. Small shoes, cut here and there to make them bigger, trousers, patched or pleated, shrunken and stained by the weather. Someone is sending us a bag of oatmeal today, which means that we can continue to feed those who come to us, warm their insides, if we cannot warm their outsides with an additional garment.

6

We have moved from Fifteenth Street, and these last weeks have been so busy I could not write. It made me miserable to leave our garden, our East side where I have lived for so long. But one of the priests at St. Veronica's called our attention to a house in his parish which has twelve rooms so large that we can accommodate all our guests in the House of Hospitality in addition to the offices.

Dorothy and Tom will remain in their apartment on the East side, Frank and Loretta live uptown, but the rest of the crowd can live in the house, the men on the second floor and the women on the third. We will be crowded, but the rent will be cut in half. In addition to rent for the two married couples, we have been paying one hundred dollars a month for stores and the apartment for the women.

The young ones all like it, but I, who am fifteen years older and feel like the grandmother of the revolution, find it hard to be torn up by the roots like this. I lived at the place on Fifteenth Street before the paper started, I enjoyed the garden for four long summers. There I could have Teresa with me during her vacations. Now we have only a tiny hall bedroom to share with each other.

This summer, however, we are going to rent a house and garden on Staten Island, a first step towards the land, and there she can vacation with the little Negro children from our Harlem group and with the West side longshoremen's children who will visit with us. She loves the beach, and I will run back and forth as much as I can.

Christmas Day ten of us took bundles of papers down to the Municipal Lodging House at South Ferry, where 12,000 men were being fed Christmas dinner. Up at the 25th Street Lodging House 5,000 more were being provided with Christmas dinners and cigarettes. We were not given permission to give out the papers in the dining room, but we stood outside the entrance and went along South Street distributing. It was a bright sunshiny day, and very pleasant, down there by Battery Park.

The reception accorded the papers was heartening. Many of the workers knew it and had been reading it. One unemployed miner from Pennsylvania, who had come to New York to try for work along the waterfront, condemned wholeheartedly the leadership of the longshoremen's union. "I'm no Communist," he said, "I'm a Catholic, but what I say is that the unions need cleaning up."

We stood there on a cold street corner discussing the Catholic teaching on organization of workers and the friendly interview ended with his inviting me to have lunch with him.

"I'm not broke yet," he said (though he was coatless), "and I could buy my Christmas dinner myself. If you won't have a bite to eat, here, take a dime for the papers."

And I couldn't refuse him because I knew, as he did, that every little bit helps.