

House of Hospitality

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Chapter, Eight

Summary: After describing their search for a farm and the move to Mott Street, most of the chapter is a clarification of why they support organizing and striking workers. Contrasts their peaceful methods with the communist calls for violence in a class war. Asserts a spiritual foundation based on the dignity of man, a philosophy of labor, and the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ. Wants workers to become owners and lauds the cooperative and back-to-the-land movements. (DDLW #443).

1

IF IT were not for the generosity of a subscriber who loaned us the use of his car for the search we might still be looking and our readers might still be looking for news of the farming commune we have been talking about starting all winter. The search was begun really a year ago and continued sporadically through the year. By Christmas we began to look more intensively.

Every time a group ventured out, the rain began to pour, turned to sleet, caked the pavements and hindered our advance. The elements themselves seemed to conspire against our hunt. Every time we went out we skidded into snow banks, went off the road, narrowly escaped collisions and barely saved the borrowed car from wreck.

But our farm was finally found on top of a mountain where level fields stretched out for twenty-eight acres and overlooked a magnificent scene on all sides. There are peach trees, some apple and cherry trees, raspberry bushes, half an acre of asparagus. The house has three bedrooms, each roomy enough for three beds and an attic big enough for eight. There is a large dining-room and good sized kitchen. The outbuildings are falling apart. The road to the place will always need mending. There are eight acres of woodland. The price of the farm is twelve hundred and fifty dollars, and we are able through the generosity of a friend to pay a thousand in cash and we can make up the rest immediately. In return for the use of this money, we are to build her a house and give her an acre of land. We have a good builder and the debt will be repaid or begin to be repaid at once.

We are beginning the farm as humbly as we began *The Catholic Worker* which started with no staff, no headquarters, no mailing list and no money. But this small beginning is part of our propaganda. St. Francis says you cannot know what you have not practiced. From now

on when we write about the land movement as a cure for unemployment we will be writing about a small group of people who are on the land and who, without funds and by making real sacrifices, are trying to build another way of life for themselves.

We have the land, the truck to do the moving and on April 15th a group will go to take possession. This experiment, written about from month to month, should be of interest to groups of families, to the unemployed, to the college graduate who comes out of school and does not know which way to turn.

2

When Communists and Socialists laughingly accuse us of wasting too much energy on temporal matters and remind us “Seek ye first the Kingdom of Heaven,” I think the words of the Pater Noster: “Thy Kingdom come *on earth* as it is in heaven.” We must make it possible for people to fulfill the new commandment Jesus gave—that we love all men. Communists like to say that it is only charity (in its present ugly sense of a dole) that’s enjoined, and they make charity seem ugly, and try to persuade men only to work for justice, when charity is highest of all and includes all. We must never forget that works of mercy include enlightening the ignorant and rebuking the sinner. St. Paul was advocating a boycott when he said:

“And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not esteem him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” (II Thessalonians, 3)

Thomas a Kempis says when we are feeling dry as dust, sad and unhappy, to employ ourselves in exterior works of mercy. I know by experience how some good brisk house-cleaning can revive one’s spirits. Manual labor, bringing order out of chaos, also brings serenity to the soul and we have been having a good deal of that lately, as we have moved from Charles Street.

3

Little Felicia stood on the sidewalk as we moved into the Mott Street house last week and surveyed us with a pleasant smile.

“Can we come into your office and to your meetings?” she wanted to know. Some young high school students stood around and read copies of the paper aloud and a group gathered and listened.

“Are the meetings free?” they asked.

Dominick who is eight and several of his black-eyed friends were the active ones, insisting on helping us to move in, helping to store things in the cellar down under the store where the office of the paper will be from now on.

Charlie O’Rourke and Frank O’Donnell stood down below while we passed them planks, small tables, sections of book cases and stored them away in corners for future moving to the farm.

“There’s a big rat like a kitten running around down here,” called Charlie O’Rourke calmly.

“We have lots of rats,” said Felicia. “When they come out in the room we jump up on the bed while my father chases them with the broom.”

“It’s funny when he catches them by the tail,” said her friend Susie gayly.

Our new home on Mott Street is a rear tenement of twenty rooms and an apartment in the front building and store in front, the use of all of which is given us by one of our readers. It is a good solid old house, the banisters like iron, the walls of brick and built to stay. There are plenty of windows and in the morning the sun comes in. We brought some plants in from Staten Island and hope eventually to have a little grotto out in the yard with St. Joseph in it, to oversee the house. The day-lilies and daisy plants will last for awhile and then can be replaced by other flowers from the farm.

We are overwhelmed with the space of our new home and so far as we ourselves are concerned, the rats do not bother us at all.

The moving day, Saturday, April 18th, was a happy one. There must have been twelve loads of furniture coming down from Charles Street on the old truck we bought last month. Hard as the work was, it meant that those able bodied ones who were working and who are king forward to working on the farming commune, were that much nearer to the country. One of the movers, with a gigantic icebox on his shoulders, grinned at me as he passed.

“I’m a longshoreman and I’m used to heavy work,” he said, stretching himself as he set down his load. **“The Catholic Worker”* has been a good friend of ours and when I and my friends came in to get some of your breakfast this morning and found you moving, we were glad we could help you.”

The work of painting and cleaning is still going on, but we are at home in that we feel settled and happy in our new abode, at home in that we are welcoming guests as usual, who we are sure will excuse the present disorder. There is love and devotion going into the decorating of the house. Our benefactor is donating linoleum for the kitchen and dining room and curtains for the entire house and it will be a clean cheerful place. We cannot promise always to be orderly when there are so many guests that the walls bulge with them. But the disorder that will be present will be a comfortable disorder.

The Lord sends us more rooms to accommodate guests and at once there are more guests, fellow workers who have no other place to go. There is a seamen’s strike going on and many of the men have been sleeping on the floor of the strike headquarters for weeks. Down in the country too, the house is crammed, and with this large community numbering about fifty who need to be fed three meals a day, we are faced with the fact that there is \$6.80 on hand and a grocery bill of two hundred, and a printing bill of four hundred. Rosemary, who leads the kitchen police, now says she can feed an able-bodied man for two dollars a week, but that is without meat.

4

It was after this early spring seamen’s strike that I made the following speech and rewrote it as an article afterwards, to try to clarify our stand in regard to conflicts such as the present one we were engaged in:

“Let us be honest, let us say that fundamentally, the stand we are taking is not on the ground of wages and hours and conditions of labor, but on the fundamental truth that men should be treated not as chattels, but as human beings, as ‘temples of the Holy Ghost.’ When Christ took on our human nature, when He became Man, He dignified and ennobled human nature. He said, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is within you.’ When men are striking, they are following an impulse, often blind, often uninformed, but a good impulse—one could even say an inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They are trying to uphold their rights to be treated not as slaves, but as men. They are fighting for a share in the management, for their right to be considered partners in the enterprise in which they are engaged. They are fighting against the idea of their labor as a commodity, to be bought and sold.

“Let us concede that the conditions at the Victor RCA plant down in Camden, where a strike started last month, which is said to involve 13,000 men, are not bad conditions, and that wages and hours are not bad. There probably is a company union which is supposed to take care of such conditions and complaints, but it perpetuates the enslavement of the worker.

“Let us concede that the conditions of the seamen are not so atrocious as the *Daily Worker* contends. (It is no use talking about the steward’s department on passenger ships which has had, and in some cases still has, unbearable hours and conditions of labor.) Let us get down to the fundamental point that the seamen are striking for the right to be considered partners, sharers in responsibility, the right to be treated as men and not as chattels.

“Is it not a cause worth fighting for? Is it not a cause which demands all the courage, and all the integrity, of the men involved? Let us be frank and make this our issue.

“Let us be honest and confess that it is the social order which we wish to change. The workers are never going to be satisfied, no matter how much pay they get, no matter what their hours are.

“This, of course, is the contention of the ship owners, of employers and industrialists the world over. They know that strikes are going to go on, no matter what concessions are made along these lines. They too will not face the fundamental issues involved.

“During the seamen’s strike in the spring and the months after when the men were staying at the Catholic Worker House on Mott Street—there were about fifty who came and found jobs and went away to have their places taken by others—we had an opportunity to talk to many of them. There was many a round table discussion over the preparation of vegetables and the washing of dishes and the mailing out of the paper (for the men joined in our work while they were with us). They have written to us since they left, and they return to see us when they come back into port.

“One night we were talking with a Communist, a young fellow from Iowa, born of a Catholic father and a Methodist mother. It was hard to talk to him—we were both convinced we were right, we were both animated by the truth—but he refused to concede the spiritual. Philosophically we differed. But a great many truths came out in these arguments.

“He used to stand in the middle of the kitchen floor, a dish towel in his hands, and suspend all operations while he talked. Tennessee, Yank, Ryan and the others went on working, laughing at his earnestness and his inability to co-ordinate work and discussion.

“He used to take refuge in anti-clericalism, in attacks on our refusal to face facts, in what he liked to label our ‘sentimentality.’ Often he would be driven to name-calling because he felt himself defeated in argument and there was no other refuge for him.

“But there were many things we agreed on.

“He was telling us one night how he caused a disturbance on board ship over the constant mess of stew they had been served. Overtime work, crowded quarters, uncomfortable mattresses, the menu, all these were the issues seized upon as a chance for a disturbance, a miniature strike. He had been spending his days at sea figuring out ways to forward the revolution, and on this occasion it was stew.

“We asked him whether he really thought that a cause worth fighting for to the shedding of blood. We asked him whether the other seamen, who were fundamentally sane, did not object to these obstructionist tactics of the Communist. If they did not hinder their own cause by this tactic?

“He maintained that if they would not join in it was because they were cowardly and selfish.

“We maintained that it was because they knew it was not the cause for which they were fighting.

“We pointed out that there on Mott Street they were sleeping six in an apartment, between blankets, no sheets, that the food was insufficient, and the washing facilities most primitive. They had no showers, no hot water to wash out their clothes. (And they were always washing out their clothes. A cleaner lot of men would be hard to find.) They had to walk ten blocks to get to a public bath.

“We pointed out that if the men were running the ship themselves, they would put up with any sacrifice, go without food, submit to crowded quarters, take a minimum of pay, if only they were recognized as masters of their own destinies. ‘And that is why we are working towards a workers’ republic,’ he said triumphantly.

“We made him admit that some men were capable of leadership and others weren’t, that some men were trained to hold certain positions and had to hold them. We brought out Tawney’s ideas of functional classes as opposed to acquisitive classes.

“But the worker had no chance to improve himself so he could become an officer, he claimed. Or if he had, he was still in the position of being a flunkey, or a hireling of the masters. There was always the profit system, the idea of labor being sold as a commodity, whether it was the labor of the captain or the crew.

“It was, we conceded, the whole social system that was out of joint. And it was to reconstruct the social order, that we were throwing ourselves in with the workers, whether in factories or shipyards or on the sea.

“The co-operative movement is a good one because it offers an opportunity to rebuild within the shell of the old with a new philosophy, which is a philosophy so old that it seems like new. And in the co-operative movement there is a chance for a real united front and for a peaceful and ethical accomplishment of our aims. But where there is no chance at co-operative enterprise right now, in factories and on ships, what then?

“The Popes have hit the nail on the head. ‘No man may outrage with impunity that human dignity which God Himself treats with reverence . . . Religion teaches the rich man and employer that their work people are not their slaves; that they must respect in every man his dignity as a man and as a Christian; that labor is an honorable employment: and that it is shameful and inhuman to treat men like chattels to make money by, or to look upon them merely as so much muscle or physical power.’

“These are fundamental principles which the A. F. of L. has neglected to bring out. They have based their appeal on enlightened self-interest, a phrase reeking with selfishness and containing a warning and a threat. A warning to the workers of the world that they are working for themselves alone, and not as ‘members one of another.’ One can see how it has worked out in this country. What percentage of the workers are organized? A fraction only of the laboring men of the country. And how has the highly organized workman cared for his poorer brother? There has grown up an aristocracy of labor, so that it is an irksome fact that bricklayers and printers receive more than farmers or editors in the necessary goods of this world—in goods which we should strive for in order that we may have those God-given means to develop to the full and achieve the Kingdom of Heaven.

“We are not losing sight of the fact that our end is spiritual. We are not losing sight of the fact that these better conditions of labor are means to an end. But the labor movement has lost sight of this fact. The leaders have forgotten such a thing as a philosophy of labor. They have not given to the worker the philosophy of labor, and they have betrayed him.

“And the inarticulate rank and file throughout the world is rising up in rebellion, and are being labeled Communists for so doing, for refusing to accept the authority of such leaders, which they very rightly do not consider just authority. They intuitively know better than their leaders what they are looking for. But they allow themselves to be misled and deceived.

“We have so positive a program that we need all our energy, we have to bend all our forces, material and spiritual, to this end, to promulgate it. Let us uphold our positive program of changing the social order.

“But let us too examine the Communist means to the end which they claim they are working for, a true brotherhood of man. We do not talk about a classless society, because we acknowledge functional classes as opposed to acquisitive classes.

“We agree with this end, but we do not agree on the means to attain it.

“The Communists say: ‘All men are our brothers except the capitalists, so we will kill them off.’ They do not actually believe in the dignity of man as a human being, because they try to set off one or another class of men and say ‘they are not our brothers and never will be. So let us liquidate them,’ and then to point their argument they say with scorn, ‘Do you ever think to convert J. P. Morgan, or Rockefeller or Charlie Schwab?’

“They are protesting against man’s brutality to man, and at the same time they perpetuate it. It is like having one more war to end all wars. We disagree with this technique of class war, without which the Communist says the brotherhood of man can never be achieved.

“‘Nothing will be achieved until the worker rises up in arms and forcibly takes the position that is his,’ the Communist says. ‘Your movement, which trusts to peaceful means, radical

though it may seem, is doomed to failure.’

“We admit that we may seem to fail, but we recall to our readers the ostensible failure of Christ when he died on the Cross, forsaken by all His followers. Out of this failure a new world sprang up. We recall to our readers the folly of the Cross which St. Paul talks about.

“When we participate in strikes, when we go out on picket lines and distribute leaflets, when we speak at strike meetings, we are there because we are reaching the workers when they are massed together for action. We are taking advantage of a situation. We may not agree that to strike was the wise thing to do in that particular case. We believe that the work of organization must be thorough before any strike action occurs, unless indeed the strike is a spontaneous one which is the outcome of unbearable conditions.

“We oppose all use of violence as un-Christian. We do not believe in persuading scabs with clubs. They are workers, too, and the reason they are scabs is because the work of organization has been neglected.

“We oppose the misuse of private property while we uphold the right of private property. The Holy Father says that ‘as many as possible of the workers should become owners,’ and how else in many cases except by developing the co-operative ideal?

“While we are upholding co-operatives as a part of the Christian social order, we are upholding at the same time unions, as organizations of workers wherein they can be indoctrinated and taught to rebuild the social order. While we stress the back-to-the-land movement so that the worker may be ‘deproletarianized,’ we are not going to leave the city to the Communist.

“Month by month, in every struggle, in every strike, on every picket line, we shall do our best to join with the worker in his struggle for recognition as a man and not as a chattel. We reiterate the slogan of the old I.W.W.’s: ‘An injury to one is an injury to all.’ St. Paul says ‘When the health of one member of the Mystical Body suffers, the health of the whole body is lowered.’

“We are all members, one of another, in the Mystical Body of Christ, so let us work together for Christian solidarity.”