

House of Hospitality

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Chapter Thirteen

Summary: On speaking trips to California, Florida, and Alabama, she notes the many places she spoke to labor groups, the projects of many lay people, priests, and sisters, and a visit with the anti-union president of a steel mill. Describes the death and funeral of a seaman who lived at the Catholic Worker. Reiterates the principles of their work: smallness, giving shelter to the homeless, indoctrination, personal responsibility, teaching cooperation and mutual aid, and relying on God—"Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it. Recommends several books. (DDLW #448).

1

YESTERDAY on the bus to San Diego two older men were talking about the President, and loud enough for everyone in the bus to hear. They called him a yellow coward, with the heart of a louse, a maniac on the verge of total insanity. They talked of their investments and losses. They talked of public utilities. And every other minute they cursed him. Each mention of wages, public works, unions, led to increased bitterness.

"There'll be bloodshed yet," they concluded, and grimly added that they'd like to take part in it. Hate was etched into the bitter lines of their faces and into their voices.

I could not help comparing their attitude with that of the two hundred or so unemployed I had talked to the day before in Los Angeles at an open Forum of the Workers' Alliance. I talked of Christ the Worker, of a philosophy of labor, of the farming commune as a solution of unemployment. I told them of Peter, and his social program for the lay apostolate.

The men I talked to wanted work, not a dole. They wanted private property (the idea of homesteads and community farm combined appealed to them). They wanted peace and brotherhood. They were interested in government help but would rather have work, provided it meant something to them—was building for their security and future. They were interested in a constructive program, not in fighting a class war. And when I thought how betrayed they are by their intellectual leadership, my heart wept.

It was enough to make one weep just to hear those two men talking on the bus. I thought of Peter Maurin and how he loves to indoctrinate wherever he goes, talking on street corners and buses and restaurants, wherever he happens to be. But his is a conservative indoctrination, and not a message of hate.

I spent a few days in San Diego, and a full month in Los Angeles, speaking at schools and colleges and at the open forum which Dr. Julia Metcalfe holds every Monday night in her circulating library at Gramercy Place.

In San Francisco I was invited to speak before the Maritime Council of the Pacific, before the Marine Cooks and Stewards and before the Firemen's Union and the Machinists' Union, in addition to the seminary, St. Mary's College, San Francisco University, St. Boniface Hall, and many other groups, so numerous that I could not cover them all. I shall have to return next winter in order to fill some of the engagements I rashly made so far ahead.

It is good to speak to labor groups on the philosophy of labor which Peter Maurin is always talking about. Most union leaders throughout the country, A.F. of L., C.I.O., whatever they are, tend toward Marxism in their philosophy.

They have thought of labor as a commodity, in spite of the Magna Charta of labor, the Clayton laws of 1914, which stated that labor was not a commodity to be bought and sold. But they have treated their labor as a commodity to be bought and sold over a counter. They have not thought of labor as a discipline imposed upon us all (thanks to the Fall), and also as a vocation. They have not thought of the worker as a co-creator with God. (God gave us the materials and by developing these materials we also share in creation.)

One of the cheering notes of the trip was meeting priests who had been appointed for labor work in their dioceses. There was Monsignor Keating and Father O'Dwyer in Los Angeles, who had given a Mission (also many blankets) to the seamen during the 1936-1937 strike. Father Keating has an open Forum every Sunday night at the Labor Temple under the auspices of the St. Robert Bellarmine Guild for Labor and Industry of which Father Keating and Father O'Dwyer are the directors, although Archbishop Cantwell is the president. Both the directors are fraternal members of the Central Trades and Labor Council, and both C.I.O. and A.F. of L. members attend the meetings of the Guild.

In San Francisco, Father Donahue, who also teaches at the St. Patrick's Seminary at Menlo Park has been appointed to study the problems of labor. I met Father Donahue the day I arrived and he drove me down to see Father O'Kelly, the seamen's priest, who has headquarters for seamen at old St. Brendan's Church. Thereafter Father O'Kelly (who always insisted upon calling me Miss O'Day) drove me about himself, giving me several days of his time to see San Francisco and to drive out to see Tom Mooney.

One of my pleasantest memories of San Francisco was the dinner I had with Father O'Kelly, Father Donahue and Father Phillips who had been in a rural parish north of San Francisco for fifteen years and who had organized the apple growers into a cooperative. Both priests spoke at the social action conference held for priests in the Archdiocese during the summer.

Father Paul of St. Boniface's parish is a friend of *The Catholic Worker* at a big down town church which reminds me of St. Francis of Assisi on 32nd Street, New York. One of the features of the church are communal breakfasts after the Tuesday novena Masses and after first Fridays, held in a big hall where I spoke on several Thursday nights. I spoke in St. Elizabeth's Parish in Oakland, also a Franciscan church, to three groups in the morning, afternoon and evening.

Father Paul had visited us this summer at Mott Street, and our *Catholic Worker* friends in San Francisco keep in touch with each other through him.

I visited also the Berkeley Book Guild which is right at the gates of the university, handy for the thousands of passersby. Meetings are held and Father Phillips is giving a course in cooperatives. Mrs. P. W. Alston loaned her library to the store and when she moves to New Orleans as she intends next summer, she wants to loan it to a store down town in order to encourage the starting of a Catholic Book Store in that very Catholic city. Dr. Ann Nicholson and Mrs. Alston are the spirits behind the work.

The very best library I have ever seen about the country is the Paulist library next door to St. Mary's where there is an immense reading room with tables filled with magazines and comfortable chairs and very good lighting. Employed and unemployed frequent the place and spend hours in reading. There wasn't a day passed that I did not drop in while I was in San Francisco. For Minna Berger, who runs the library, through Father Gillis, was our first *Catholic Worker* in that city, and every month she displays the paper in the window.

It is scarcely necessary to start a hospice for men, for the St. Vincent de Paul Shelter has housed 78,652 men in the last year. There are three hundred and twenty beds, and breakfast is also served. Bed and breakfast cost fifteen cents, and if men have not the money, some agency supplies it. There is a day shelter next door, with an open fire place and tables and benches. Next door there is a handball court and there is a gym downstairs. In the basement of the night shelter there are showers and wash tubs and a barber shop, in addition to storage room for baggage.

Altogether I lost count of the number of times I spoke or the number of miles I traveled.

During the trip I spoke at two seminaries in addition to many colleges and Church groups, also to auto workers, steel workers, agricultural workers and unemployed.

I talked at length with Archbishop Mooney, Bishop Schrembs and Archbishop Cantwell who have all been very helpful and encouraging in the work we are doing in their diocese.

2

I am staying for the day and night at the distractingly beautiful home of one of our readers up in New London right on the Long Island Sound. I woke up this morning feeling as though I were in a lighthouse. The house hangs right out over the water, and the soft gray waves played gently against the rocks below my window. The sky was overcast, the water gray, the sky blue and there were lavender tones on the horizon. The rocks stood out, yellow and brown. Such beauty makes me very happy. It is something you can store away in yourself to think about and refresh yourself with during times of stress and turmoil.

I have been travelling incessantly for the past month and will not be back at *The Catholic Worker* office until tomorrow. I have been down to West Palm Beach where I spoke to different groups, poor ones and rich ones. After a week there I proceeded to a little farm upstate where some of our readers are trying to build up a co-operative farm, and after a night and day there, I took the bus to Birmingham, Alabama. In Birmingham, I was the

guest of Sister Peter Claver, a member of the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity, who is an old friend. It was Sister Peter Claver who gave the first dollar to *The Catholic Worker* almost five years ago when she was engaged in colored mission work in Newark, N. J. and the Oranges. Now she is stationed in Birmingham where the Missionary Servants have charge of the Catholic Charities. She and her Sisters, seven of them, were staying in a little house built right on the back of a church in the outskirts of Birmingham, near the steel plant. The parishioners, most of them Italian, work in the plant.

The priest there is an Italian who knew Don Luigi Sturzo, former head of the Popular Party of Italy, now an exile in England, writing for English periodicals.

Father Donazann, I was happy to find, recognized the fact that Father Sturzo did far more to combat Communism in Italy (by doing away with the reasons for it) than Mussolini, who later reaped the credit where Father Sturzo had sown. Father Donazann told us how workers in his American parish were dropped from the steel mills when they joined a union years ago, and had never been rehired from that day to this.

Sister Peter Claver's office, and the headquarters of the Catholic Charity Bureau in Birmingham, is on a poor street, in a poor little house of four or five rooms. The house is unpainted but "very nice inside", said Teresa, who was going around with me. She stayed there with one of the other Sisters while Sister Peter Claver and I traveled about.

I love to see Catholic Charity workers living among the poor in small places, in places so humble that the poor do not fear to come. If we only had small centers like that through all the cities, in many parishes, instead of one large central bureau, charity would mean love.

I had interviews with the vice-presidents of the United States Steel Company and the Gulf States Steel Company. The latter is a Catholic who did not agree with "either Pope Leo XIII or Pope Pius XI, in their encyclicals on labor," he said very frankly.

Mr. Geohegan, of the Gulf States Steel, invited us out to see his plant at Gadsden, a town fifty miles away where the Sisters conduct the Holy Name of Jesus Hospital, the only institution the community has. So that afternoon, two of the Sisters, and Teresa and I, drove on to the hospital where we stayed over night. It was Teresa's eleventh birthday the next day, and while the Sisters arranged a little party for her and escorted her around the hospital, Sister Peter Claver and I went to Alabama City, a part of Gadsden, where the steel plant is located. Sister Peter Claver is a good companion—I wish she were working with us. I always have the feeling about both her and Father Joachim, that they fit in everywhere, just as Father Joachim, a few years ago before he was ordained, came and encouraged us, in our picket line in front of a New York City department store, so Sister Peter Claver was perfectly at home in the noise and confusion of a steel mill. I can imagine either of them going anywhere in their quest for souls.

We spent hours at the plant, walking what seemed miles while we covered the whole production, from the making of steel to the making of nails and barbed wire. We watched them pour out the molten metal into huge cauldrons (they have six open hearth furnaces) and then into forms. We watched the reheating and the rolling mills where they pressed out the blocks of metal into thin plates. We watched them corrugate the plates. We watched the men work with long coils of the flaming metal, whirl them like lassoes as they were made into cables

and wire.

Much of the work was dangerous and laborious. The men took pride in it, calling us to their different machines, which they slowed up in order that we might watch the processes which turned out our nails and chicken fencing.

They wear shoes the toes of which withstand 2500 pounds pressure (when working around the furnaces) and all the men wear glasses to protect their eyes. And in spite of the terrific heat (the metal reaches 2900 degrees, I believe), they must wear reasonably heavy clothes to guard them from sparks and bits of molten steel and slag.

There are three thousand workers in this plant, and the president has declared that never will he permit a union. Wages have been increased and hours shortened, but that these gains have been brought about by the pressure of workers attempting to organize throughout the industry, is a fact that Mr. Geohegan disputes.

3

Fred Brown is no longer unemployed. He no longer goes to the union hall on Eleventh Avenue every day to see whether his number is called. Fred Brown, seaman, twenty-four years old, shipped out on his last voyage a few weeks ago. He had been staying with us on Mott Street for four months, and we had known him for the past year or so. He was taken sick on the Monday following the feast of the Immaculate Conception and by Thursday night he was dead.

He had gone to Communion along with the rest of us on the feast day and on the Tuesday night before he lapsed into unconsciousness and was taken to the hospital, he had said to one of his former shipmates, sitting by his bedside, "While I'm ashore, I'm going to get to daily Mass after this when I get better."

We went to see him at Columbus Hospital Wednesday and Thursday but he was unconscious while we were there, and Thursday evening at five o'clock he died. It was a bitter shock; not just his death (it had been a good death after all) but because the tragedy of his passing was made bitter by a theft in the house, the theft of his one suit of clothes.

He had nothing, as most seamen have nothing, and just before his death, his one suit had been taken. (There are, of course, those among us of the lame, the halt and the blind, who commit these despicable acts driven by God knows what necessity, but who must be forgiven as we need to be forgiven our own mean sins.) Fred would have forgiven them; wryly, perhaps, and with a shrug, but far more readily than we did on this occasion.

But the misery that this poor dead boy had nothing to be buried in remained a tragic incident connected with his death. Jim Schneid, a recent Catholic Worker recruit and so still possessed of two suits, gave him one of his, his Sunday one. They were the same height, over six feet and about the same age.

The body was brought to Graciano's funeral parlor around the corner on Mulberry Street and laid out there on Saturday. The delay occurred because Fred's only relative, his brother,

could not be found. Then, until Monday evening, his friends stood watch at the bier, hour by hour.

On Monday morning, the hours from four to six fell to me, and I read a meditation on Purgatory which was healing for my sadness.

“The soul in Purgatory feels the irresistible attraction of that Beauty of which he has a glimpse at judgment. He is drawn to it with a vehemence which carries with it his whole being, and flings him upon God as the wave upon the shore. And he is driven back incessantly, for he is not yet ready for the embrace of the all-Holy”.

Father O'Donnell, Apostolate of the Sea Chaplain, sang the solemn high Mass at the Shrine Church, at Twenty-first Street and Tenth Avenue, a few doors away from where our strike kitchen was last year at this same time. In his generosity it was not just a low Mass, but the most solemn, the most glorious the Church could offer.

As we sped up the Hudson River viaduct from Canal Street to reach the Church, we could see smoke coming from the stacks of the *Leviathan*. “She too is preparing for her last voyage,” one of Fred's shipmates said. When we crossed the East River an hour later to reach Calvary Cemetery, a freighter passed beneath the bridge, on its way out to sea, the sea that Fred would never travel again. It was a beautiful sunny day, soft and mild, and out at Calvary the bare trees stood out blue black against a sky bright as the Virgin's robe.

Father O'Donnell, Father Dugan and Father Quinn accompanied Fred's body to the grave and blessed it. As we knelt about the open grave, the ground beneath our knees felt damp and springy. All around us was the death of winter, the life of tree, bush and vine imprisoned in the ground.

But that good earth beneath my knees, that earth which was accepting Fred into her embrace, that very earth echoed the promise of the Resurrection and reminded us of the words of job:

“I firmly believe that my Redeemer liveth, and that I shall rise again from the earth on the last day and that in my own flesh I shall see my God.”

4

Outside the rain pours down in sheets but it is warm. Men stood on our coffee line this morning like dripping pedestals, but at least they were not shuddering with the cold as they have been so many mornings lately. I was looking over our last February issue this morning and note that we were feeding about four hundred men a morning then. Now the line has doubled and still we go on. God alone knows how, because these last two weeks there has been nothing in the bank. just what came in every few days went to the grocer, and the printer waits patiently. Half a dozen speaking engagements brought in some money which went right to the wholesalers for coffee, sugar, milk and bread.

We spoke last year too, of the necessity of starting this work in other centers throughout the country, and we write with joy that Pittsburgh, Detroit, Milwaukee, Boston, Houma and many other places have started and are feeding the Ambassadors of God who come to them.

Already over in England, the staff of the English Catholic Worker has opened a House. We know the difficulties of these undertakings, so it is in place to reiterate some of the principles by which we began our work.

We emphasize always the necessity of smallness. The ideal, of course, would be that each Christian, conscious of his duty in the lay apostolate, should take in one of the homeless as an honored guest, remembering Christ's words:

"Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto me."

The poor are more conscious of this obligation than those who are comfortably off. I know of any number of cases where families already overburdened and crowded, have taken in orphaned children, homeless aged, poor who were not members of their families but who were akin to them because they were fellow sufferers in this disordered world.

But if family complications make this impossible, then let our friends keep in mind the small beginnings. I might almost say that it is impossible to do this work unless they themselves are ready to live there with their guests, who soon cease to be guests and become fellow workers. It is necessary, because those who have the ideal in mind, who have the will to make the beginnings, must be the ones who are on hand to guide the work. Otherwise it is just another charity organization, and the homeless might as well go to the missions or municipal lodging houses or breadlines which throughout the depression have become well-organized and accepted as a permanent part of our civilization. And that we certainly do not want to perpetuate.

We began with a store, expanded on to an apartment rented in the neighborhood, from thence we moved to a twelve-room house and now we have twenty-four rooms here in Mott Street.

It is not enough to feed and shelter those who come. The work of indoctrination must go on. There must be time for conversations, and what better place than over the supper table? There must be meetings, discussion groups, the distribution of literature. There must be some one always on hand to do whatever comes up, whether that emergency is to go out on a picket line, attend a Communist meeting for the purpose of distributing literature, care for the sick or settle disputes. And there are always arguments and differences of opinion in work of this kind, and it is good that it should be so because it makes for clarification of thought, as Peter says, and cultivates the art of human contacts.

We call attention again to the fact that the Communists have set themselves to do four things, according to the reports of the last meeting of the Third International: to build up anti-war and anti-fascist groups in the colleges; to organize the industrial workers; to start a farm-labor party and to organize the unemployed.

Houses of Hospitality will bring workers and scholars together. They will provide a place for industrial workers to discuss Christian principles of organization as set forth in the Encyclicals. They will emphasize personal action, personal responsibility in addition to political action and state responsibility. They will care for the unemployed and teach principles of co-operation and mutual aid. They will be a half-way house towards farming communes and homesteads.

We have a big program but we warn our fellow workers to keep in mind small beginnings.

The smaller the group, the more work is done.

And let us remember, “Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.”

In the editorial of this issue of *The Catholic Worker*, we speak of plans to form unemployed groups with the end in view of getting them on the land, of starting a movement in that direction all over the country. We do this with the full recognition that these bread lines, this work of feeding the hungry, must always go on. “For the poor we have always with us.” That is a saying which has irked many for nineteen hundred years. They have not been able to take it. The Marxists use it with sneers, saying that Christianity preaches “pie in the sky”, and the rich use it to excuse themselves from aiding those same poor. But we must recognize the hard fact, that no matter how good a social order, there will always be the lame, the halt and the blind who must be helped, those poor of Christ, the least of His children, whom He loved, and through whom there is a swift and easy road to find Him.

I came across the most profound expression of this last month in Bernano’s *Diary of a Country Priest*, a tremendously moving book which has become a best seller in France. Poverty and suffering, and the joy of Christ found through them! The book is overwhelming on first reading, and one feels the necessity of going over passages again and again to get their full meanings. All of us who are engaged in trying to build a new social order, who consider ourselves revolutionaries, need this book for a fuller understanding of the place our work takes in the temporal scheme. It helps us to preserve a balance.

Peter is always making lists of books for people to read so I shall give my own list herewith:

Diary of a Country Priest; Mauriac’s *Life of Christ*; Dostoievsky’s *Legend of the Grand Inquisitor* in the *Brothers Karamazov*; Chautard’s *Soul of the Apostolate*; Father Knox’s *Abridged Bible*; Maritain’s *Freedom in the Modern World*, and *True Humanism*. That is plenty for several years’ reading.

5

We are always having fresh occasion to make the point of personal responsibility, much to the amazement of our hearers who often doubt our sanity when we start expounding. It was the Health Department last month. We protested their right to come into our home at 115 Mott Street and snoop around our kitchen. We were not running a restaurant or a lodging house, we explained. We were a group of individuals exercising personal responsibility in caring for those who came to us. They were not strangers, we pointed out, since we regarded them as brothers in Christ. We were not an institution, or a Home with a capital letter, but a home, a private home. We were protesting in general against the tendency of the day to emphasize state responsibility, and we considered ourselves good Americans as well as Christians in working as individuals. We were protesting against organized charity which made so many hate the beautiful word charity.

We were able to convince the supervisor and the office man as to our principles and motives, but not so the inspector, who surveyed us with a stony glare and a great contempt. We did finally concede that we do come under the law which held that we were feeding the public, when it came to the coffee line, and that we would have to comply with their regulations

there. So now the work is going on, with no money in sight to pay the plumber. St. Joseph, the good workman, will have to take care of this for us.

When we succeed in persuading our readers to take the homeless into their homes; having a Christ room in the house as St. Jerome said, then we will be known as Christians because of the way we love one another. We should have hospices in all the poor parishes. We should have coffee lines to take care of the transients; we should have this help we give sweetened by mutual forbearance and Christian Charity. But we need more Christian homes where the poor are sheltered and cared for.

Last winter, the Communist readers of the *Daily Worker* fed a few thousand seamen on Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. When they gave a banquet they did not invite their rich neighbor, but the men who were in need. And what an indoctrination this was! They were knowing Marxist teaching through the breaking of bread, instead of Christian.

So we do not cease to urge more personal responsibility on the part of those readers who can help in this way. Too often we are afraid of the poor, of the worker. We do not realize that we know him, and Christ through him, in the breaking of bread.

It saddens us to have *The Catholic Worker* come down again to four pages, but it is better than skipping a number. We are so broke that we dare not run up a printer's bill. We are most daring in regard to groceries, feeling confident that our Lord will not let us down. He is too grateful to St. Joseph for the care He got on this earth to disregard his requests, and St. Joseph is our special protector in this work. And the one thing we are sure of in feeding the unemployed is that our Lord wants us to do this work, so we must do it. We are liable to make mistakes in the paper, not being theologians or philosophers, nor experts in the line of economics and sociology; but we can make no mistake in feeding God's hungry ones.