

On Pilgrimage - July/August 1947

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Summary: Mentions the many parish churches in the neighborhood, the lengthening food line, a grand Italian wedding, and the books she is reading. (DDLW #458).

We who live on this block of Mott Street have never known to which parish we belonged, whether to the Salesian parish down in Chinatown, Church of the Transfiguration or to the Franciscan parish on Baxter Street, Church of the Precious Blood. Some of our marriages have been performed in one church and some in another. Our baptisms and our funerals have usually been from Transfiguration. The Marykoll Sisters are at Transfiguration now and when the Salesian Sisters were there, my daughter also went to school there. We are attached to each parish, but for the past winter we have gone more frequently to Precious Blood because there the organist allows us to come up into the choir loft and help sing the Mass, a few of us or a lot of us, as the case may be. It is a great joy. And now Julia Purcelli has done some lettering in the baptistry – the Apostles Creed and the Our Father – so we are bound to this parish still more closely. On the other hand they hear confessions at the Salesian church every morning before every Mass, and there too there is a six o'clock and a seven o'clock Mass, with a meditation after the six o'clock Mass of a half an hour, the pastor of the church leading by reading some of St. Bernard, for instance on the love of God. At Precious Blood on the other hand, when there is a funeral at 10, there is no seven o'clock Mass; often there is only the eight o'clock and the nine o'clock. It is hard indeed to choose. And I suppose our readers, who live miles from church think of us. With such a choice, as privileged indeed. On Sunday morning it is a wonderful thing to go to the

St. Michael's chapel down on Mulberry Street, in back of old St. Patrick's Cathedral which is surrounded by a beautiful green church yard, with a cemetery filled with trees and shrubs. Toussaint Saint L'Overture, the Negro liberator, is supposed to be buried there. Also there are catacombs, so I've heard tell, beneath the church. When one goes to assist at the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, and listen to the superb Russian choir, one feels that here is prayer for Russia indeed.

When we are so broke as we are in midsummer, it is hard to tell from day to day how the food is going to come in to feed so many. The line is lengthening now in the morning, and by four in the afternoon the backyard is filled. On these hot sunny days all along the Bowery it is a customary sight, men homeless, shabby, sleeping in doorways, or quite frankly along the sidewalk. There has never been so flagrant a show of destitution before. During the LaGuardia administration there was a regular "clean up" and removal of what the city administration considered this "human waste." They were gathered up regularly and thrown

into jail. “Keep moving!” “Break it up!” Familiar phrases. Now there are knots of men in front of the employment agencies, and the railroad hiring offices, Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania, Long Island, Lackawanna, etc., more knots of men in the several “thieves’ markets” at Bayard and at Rivington streets exchanging everything from belts to shoes.

Stolen bread

One morning while Miss Lavin was helping clean the pecks of potatoes and carrots and onions for the soup line, a policeman came in and wanted to know if we wanted some stolen goods in the way of bread. Some petty thieves had walked off with a big box of pumpernickel, and as we usually pay five dollars a day for our supply of bread, this was a godsend. Another time on a Saturday night one of the men who rents a pushcart from the stable down the street for the vegetables he sells on the east side, brought us in a big hundred pound sack of string beans. “They won’t keep till Monday,” he said, brushing off our thanks. On another day an unemployed actor came in and contributed a dollar. A dollar buys a lot of split peas for soup.

Wedding

The wedding of Antoinette Arone and Gerry Marotta was a grand affair. Antoinette is one of about fourteen children born and brought up in our front house. Gerry keeps a butcher shop with his two brothers around the corner. They got married on a Sunday afternoon at five o’clock, and we found out that one of the reasons the Italians in our neighborhood do not have a nuptial Mass is because of the great reception celebrated afterward. It would be impossible to fast until noon and even with a noon day Mass, too long to wait for the reception in the evening. Another reason for having evening Masses, and a very good one too.

We all were on hand for the wedding and the mother and the father of the bride wept at losing their last child although she’ll be living as close as she can get to home, like all the other Arones. A note on the housing shortage. Despite a search of months, they could find no apartment and were forced to plan on sharing her married brother’s apartment of four rooms. The wedding reception was at the Manhattan Lyceum and the huge ballroom barely held the crowds that came, from little Diane Deodatus to the oldest relative of the family.

In the church the guests stood on the seats of the pews to see the bride, and at the reception she sat like a queen at the head of the hall, with her long satin train draped around her. Her father sat at one side and the groom at the other, and later in the evening the bride went from table to table, where sandwiches and beer and wine were heaped high, and allowed all the ladies to examine her dress and her ring. Everyone danced, young and old, Diana and Chickie and Elizabeth, and all the Anthony’s of the neighborhood.

Reading

For the last six months I have been reading Kafka's the Trial and the Castle, Kirkegaard, Leon Bloy, James Powers' Prince of Darkness and Harry Sylvester's Moon Gaffney. And I in turn have been working hard on my novel which will be called either the Dispossessed, or No Continuing City. With Irene and Jane to see visitors and Tom Sullivan, Bob Ludlow and Jack English to take care of the office and St. Joseph's House of Hospitality on Mott Street, and Gerry Griffen and Jack Thornton at the retreat house, Maryfarm, at Newburgh, and I shall take as much time off as I can this next couple of months to write.