

On Pilgrimage - March 1948

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Summary: The birth of her third grandchild stimulates reflections on praising God, struggling to change the social order, staying hopeful and trusting in God while suffering. Quotes St. Paul and spiritual writers to bolster her spirit. (DDLW #465).

It has been a month of “ice, rains, snow and stormy winds,” and every morning after the routine of fires, breakfasts and dressing has taken place, Becky, Susie and I rock in the wicker chair and sing, “All ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord; oh ye ice and snow, oh ye cold and wind, oh ye winter and summer, oh ye trees in the woods, oh ye fire in the stove, oh ye Becky and Susie, bless ye the Lord, praise Him and magnify Him forever.” It is a song with infinite variations. You can include Mr. Clark’s cows, Leslie’s horses, the Hennessy goats, and all the human beings for miles around. I used to sing it when I went to the Episcopalian Church as a little girl and it’s in the Queen’s Work dialogue Mass book if anybody wants to sing it to their children. You can make up the tune, as well as add to the words, and the children don’t mind, and neither does the Lord, I’m sure. What are we here for anyway except to praise Him, to adore Him and to thank Him? . . . and there is plenty to remind us of that in the country.

Birth

And in-between the ice and snow there were a few radiant days of spring warmth, and on one of these days my third grandchild was born; Eric Dominic Hennessy, to be christened a son of God, and an heir of heaven, on Laetare Sunday, the feast of St. Thomas Aquinas. So now we’ve added another verse to our song every morning; there is one more creature to praise God.

My Congregationalist father bemoaned whenever a new grandchild was born, and never having been instructed in the sacraments, well he might! We hear it on every side—it is the cry of despair of the materialist: “Why bring children into so sad a world, of war and famine!” Fr. Hugo once quoted us a sentence from Newman to the effect that were it not for the life of grace (the child’s participation in the life of God)—the birth of a child would be a tragic instead of the joyful thing it is.

To those who have faith, who believe that “eye hath not seen nor ear heard what God hath promised to them that love Him,” the world’s tragedy can somehow be endured. Which is not to say that we do not suffer. Cy Echele, one of our St. Louis group, who has three

children of his own now, writes to us of his heartache at the sight of his own well-fed children, thinking of the agony of the world. "In peace is my bitterness most bitter," the psalmist said, and the Little Flower was fond of quoting. And Leon Bloy wrote that he had a fellowship of impatience "with all the rebellious, all the disappointed, all the thwarted, all the damned of this world." One of the only ways we can show our love for God is our love for our fellows, and the only way we can show that is by our "sympathy," which means "suffering with." Hence, voluntary poverty, which we keep trying to explain over and over again.

Most people say what good is our *involuntary* poverty? All the better, since there is no element of self-will in it. St. Angela of Foligno said that. The penances we chose for ourselves are not to be compared with the ones imposed by our circumstances of life. Which doesn't mean that we should leave the social order as it is in order that we can have the blessing of poverty, the sharing of poverty with others. Poverty is one thing, destitution is another. God put enough here on this earth for all to get along with, and He meant for all of us to have it, not just a few at the expense of the masses. We must rebel for others, we must resist, we must change by non-violent means an iniquitous social order that leads to war, with all the energy, vision and love that are in our hearts.

That doesn't mean, either, that the father of children and the mother should not strive for a good life for their children, and a good life doesn't mean radio and movies and car and washing machine and electricity and bath and all the things we have become accustomed to in this comfort-loving world. Children don't want these things. They want trees and grass and growing things, and it isn't so easy as it sounds to get them. Trying to get them means embracing poverty and hard work and suffering indeed.

My mother used to speak scornfully of those who she said "talked poor-mouth," and by that she meant did not appreciate all that they had in the way of blessings. They are like Esau, who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. Together with the joy that goes in knowing that we are sons of God should be a great thanksgiving. "All things are yours . . . the world, or life or death, or things present, or things to come; for all are yours; and you are Christ's and Christ is God's." 1 *Cor.*3: 22.

Yes, there is fear and a distraction these days over the state of the world. There was sadness in the Pope's Christmas message, in articles, in letters, in all endeavor. Yet, surely, all times, as St. Teresa said, are dangerous times.

We may be living on the verge of eternity, but that should not make us dismal. The early Christians rejoiced to think that the end of the world was near, as they thought. Over and over again, even to the Seventh Day Adventists today, people have been expecting the end of the world. Are we so unready to face God? Do we love this world so much? Are we so avid for the joys here that we perceive so darkly those to come? "Eye hath not seen nor ear heard the joy God has prepared for those who love Him." There will be love without pain, work without sweat, children without that orneriness that reminds us of the Fall and what it did to man's nature. Here "the eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear with hearing." It is one of the strange paradoxes of Christian life that we can say with St. Paul, "As dying, yet behold, we live." We can suffer with others, we can see plainly the frightful chaos of the world, the unbelievable sufferings of hunger and pain and labor in the world, and yet we know by faith "that the sufferings of this world cannot be compared to the joy that is to

come.” Often we comfort ourselves with words, but if we pray enough the conviction will come, too, that Christ is our King, not Stalin, Atlee or Truman, that He has all things in His hands, and that all works together for good to those that love Him.

Oh, but the misery of those who do not, who because of suffering, turn from Him, curse God and die. It is hard to think of these things, it is not to be understood, we cannot expect to understand. “Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief!”

There is another attitude of despair that I cannot agree with—that expressed by Peter Michaels in *Integrity* in the November issue. “It is too late for any purely economic or political nostrum even if a good one.” It is interesting to speculate as to whether Belloc’s and Chesterton’s distributism (which was essentially an economic scheme) might have saved England and possibly Europe if it had been applied in, say, the twenties. One wonders if some correction of the ills of usury wouldn’t have mended many matters once. Quite possibly so. While we were suffering from acute mortal sin there was the possibility of turning back, and whereas it could have to be accompanied by a turning back to God also, it could possibly have started with economic reform. Chesterton’s insistence that we go back to where we took the wrong road, and his insistence that it had to be done very quickly, were probably quite correct at that time. It was the eleventh hour. We didn’t turn back. Now it is midnight and we are dying.

But we are still in the flesh. Body and soul are not separated. We still have to take care of Brother Ass and the most of us must do it by the sweat of our brows. How are we going to feed, clothe and shelter ourselves? By going along with the present social order?

Chesterton balanced the spiritual and material. He wasn’t just thinking of the *economic* solution. Like our Lord, “he knew what was in man.” Chesterton has some of the best spiritual reading I know.

The Pope has told us to work to change the social order. He has called for social justice in his five points made before the Catholic Actionists. He has called for us to work with all men of good will, which means those, too, who as Maritain says, work for truth and justice, though they deny Him (and whom have they seen to reflect Him?)

There is so much we can do, and one of the things is to thank God, who has given us “a strong conflict.” And what is there to worry about? Juliana of Norwich said that after all, the worst has already happened, the Fall, and that has been remedied. So let us banish fear and work to increase the love in our hearts. One of the ways to do it is to read St. Paul and follow the advice of St. Paul, and not to be reading all the war-mongering, the hate-mongering of the daily press. “Whatsoever things are pure and good and true, think on these things.” In Newman’s words, “. . . we sinners as we are, have a spiritual principle in us, if we did but exert it, so great, so wondrous, that all the powers in the visible world, all the conceivable forces and appetites of matter, all the physical miracles which are at this day in the process of discovery, almost superseding time and space, dispensing with numbers and mind, all these powers of nature are nothing to this gift within us. . .” “I can do all things, through Christ, who strengthens me.” Phil. iv. 13.

And let us pray with Claudel, “Lord it is not so easy to escape You, and, if he goes not to You by what he has of light, may he go to You by what he has of darkness; and if not by

what he has of straight, may he go to You by what he has of indirection; and if not by what he has of simple, let him go by what in him is manifold and laborious and entangled, and if he desire evil let it be such evil as is compatible only with good. And if he desire disorder, may it be that disorder which shall mean the rending and overthrow of those walls about him which bar him from salvation.

“I mean him and that multitude with him which he is darkly implicating, for he is one of those who cannot be saved except in saving all that mass which takes its form in their wake.”