

# On Pilgrimage - February 1972

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*Summary: Saddened by cuts to care at a nearby mental hospital, she calls for more conscientious objectors to do alternative service. Appreciates the work for the poor of Jean Vanier, Mother Theresa of Calcutta, and the Russian Orthodox saint, Alexander Nevsky. Reminisces about visits to Mississippi and the life and work of Medgar and Charles Evers for racial equality. (DDLW #518).*

On a day like this when it is ten above zero and a bitter wind seems to chill the room right through the ill-fitting window glass, one's mind wanders away from a recent visit to Mississippi, which I ought to be reporting, to the immediate concern of the Berrigan trial which is going on in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and to the even nearer concern which has been much on my mind – Willowbrook, Staten Island.

Bad as prisons are, Willowbrook, a huge mental hospital for “children”, is worse. Appropriations for hospitals have been cut back so that one fifth of the beds for the poor in Bellevue hospital are eliminated. Cutting down on personnel, has meant an understaffed Willowbrook and fearful neglect of the youngest and most helpless of our hospital population. On television there have been sights shown which have brought to mind Dachau and Auschwitz. Charges have been made that children are starving to death who are unable to feed themselves. The single attendant on a large, over-crowded ward cannot possibly adequately feed these helpless ones, one meal a day, let alone three.

These scenes reminded me of the second world war when many of our **Catholic Worker** family worked as conscientious objectors in Rosewood Hospital outside of Baltimore. They worked seven days a week, twelve hours a day, in order to have four days at the end of the month to come to New York and visit with friends. I went through that hospital and thanked God that here the crippled and retarded, hydrocephalic and idiot had the kindness of the c.o.'s and the gentleness which reflected their respect for life.

## Sum Total of Love

Jean Vanier, son of a former governor general of Canada, has started several “villages” for the retarded, and he wrote once that there were two great contributions which these most unfortunate of “little ones” could make – that was, to love and to be loved, and so increase the sum total of love in the world. It makes me happy to contemplate the work of William and Dorothy Gauchat who have represented the Catholic Worker in the Cleveland area for

many years. What was once a house of hospitality in Cleveland and a farming commune at Avon, Ohio has become now a hospice, or home, for thirty of these children. At Rosewood and Willowbrook the “children” are of all ages. But at Avon there are infants and small children and one I know, who is a spastic or a cerebral palsy victim who cannot speak, would have been put in a mental institution had not Bill and Dorothy adopted him.

The Willowbrook scene so graphically portrayed on television, made me long for a group of conscientious objectors who would choose to do such alternative service. I have always felt that, much as I am opposed to conscription for this latest, longest and most cruel and impersonal war, and in favor of resistance to it, that those young men who take such alternative service as will bring them in contact with the children in prisons (and there are such) and in mental hospitals, and those for the crippled and disabled, are performing a hard and arduous job and in a way, “being subject to every living creature,” as St. Paul suggested. Turning the other cheek, walking the extra mile, giving your tunic as well as your cloak, these are expressions of the over-flowing love of Christ in his poor, in “the least of His brethren.”

But as with so much in life, we must count the cost. Let those who can take it, take it. It would take a religious order like that of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, to “take” Willowbrook. I saw her with my own eyes in the house of the dying in Calcutta two years ago, kneeling by the side of one of these starving old women who had been picked up from the streets, and with three fingers, (they do not use spoons or forks) tucking rice and vegetables into the mouth of the patient who had come to life enough to open it like a bird being fed by its mother.

Everywhere there are discussions of non-violence and there is no end to the examination of conscience necessary. Are we violent in our judgement of others? Do we forgive seventy times seven? Do we forgive the jailor, the man who is afraid and uses violence instinctively? Do we forgive the rich, the exploiter? The self righteous?

While I was in Leningrad on that delightful three week’s trip which I made last summer, I wrote afterwards how I attended a liturgy with Geraldine Donovan at the monastery of St. Alexander Nevsky, one of the “working” churches where worship is still going on.

It is only now that I looked up St. Alexander Nevsky in Donald Attwater’s **Penguin Dictionary of Saints** (a delightful book). Helen, our guide in Leningrad, said to me, “He was canonized by the Czar because he was a great military hero. He defeated the Swedes.”

Born in 1219, died in 1263, canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1547, this grand prince of Novgorod, Vladimir and Kiev saved Russia “by his policy of conciliation towards the invading Tartars and firm resistance to enemies on the west.” His name of Nevsky came from his victory in 1240 over the Swedes on the river Neva; he defeated the Teutonic knights at Lake Peipus in 1242 and drove out the Lithuanians soon after. But he was no mere ambitious conqueror: ‘God is not on the side of force,’ he said ‘but of truth and justice.’ He had several times to make long journeys to the Tartar overlords to intercede for his people, and earned much obloquy thereby from those who disapproved of his policy. He bore the unjust accusations patiently and the religious integrity of his life, together with his great services to his people caused him to be venerated as a saint."

I must say that reading this combination of courage and non-violence too, makes it easier

for me to write about Charles Evers whom I met when I was visiting Mississippi in the Fall. Speaking engagements in California had enabled me to visit Cesar Chavez and the farm workers at La Paz, and I came home by the southern route hoping to be able to visit in turn the wood cutters of Mississippi. In later issues we will have more news about the organization of these wood cutters, both black and white, who met together last fall, had fish fries together, and who won the first struggle for justice (of a sort) from the Masonite company and the paper companies which used the pulp wood they cut and deliver to them. Right now rainy weather has made it impossible for their trucks to get into the woods, and it is the weather which is causing their hardships rather than the System.

## Yesterdays

Over the years I have visited the state of Mississippi many times and there have been two houses of hospitality in the South, one in Memphis, Tennessee, the state where my father was born and grew up, and one in Houma, Louisiana, which Father Jerome Drolet started many years ago. When I visited the house in Memphis, I slept overnight in the big store which Helen Caldwell had fitted out with cribs for a day-care shelter. Negro mothers used to come in early in the dark morning and leave their infants, with a nursing bottle and a can of evaporated milk by the side of them, and steal out into the still dark streets, to be picked up by trucks that drove them to the cotton fields of Mississippi for a day's picking. Even after the cotton picking machine was perfected, there was the back-breaking labor of filling those long sacks with the cotton still left on the bushes. Ammon Hennacy did this work in Eli, Arizona and said it was the hardest agricultural work that he had ever done in his life. Helen Caldwell was a black herself and her little son Butch used to go out on a Saturday and pick cotton, too.

One day I drove with my black friends down to Mound Bayou, an all-black town in the Delta region of Mississippi where I was to speak at a school run by Catholic Sisters. It was at a time when it was still against the law to stay in the home of a Negro friend, so both in Memphis and at Mound Bayou, I was breaking the law. Our house in Baltimore which was crowded with both whites and blacks had been closed as a public nuisance at the beginning of the second world war.

After a few days in Mound Bayou, a Negro priest drove me through the little town of Money, Mississippi, where Emmet Till, the black youth from Chicago, had been dragged out of the home of his relatives in the dead of night and beaten to death or drowned. For whistling, it was charged, at a white woman who owned a candy store. We drove through other towns and arrived at my next stop, Greenwood, where there was a settlement house for blacks, run by white women, one of whom I had known for some time.

I have known what it was to be followed by a car of white men because I was in a car with a black, and I remembered too the time that a white woman was dragged out of a car and whipped by Ku Kluxers. This was at the time that the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union had its headquarters in Memphis and organizing of both whites and blacks went on in Arkansas and Mississippi. These stories I had written about in 1935, two years after the **Catholic Worker** started.

## Charles Evers

It was a joyful visit I paid this time to the State of Mississippi, to drive with my friends to Fayette where a black man is mayor of an integrated town twenty-five miles north of Natchez. My friend Marge Baroni is working for Charles Evers, as she had worked for him in Natchez where she and her husband live. With some of her friends she helped integrate the hotel dining room.

You risk your life down in Mississippi for a friendship and perhaps that is why there is a feeling there that is hard to describe. Charles Evers himself spoke of it in this way, in the story taken down on tape by Grace Halsell, and published last year by World Publishing Company.

“We know that once we can end racial hatred in Mississippi it’s going to be the best place to live because there is a closeness between black and white, and it’s there even now, although, as I’ve said none of us can understand it. It’s a relationship that – bad as it may have been socially and otherwise – we all know is there. I guess we all know about it because when a black person gets sick the white people in Mississippi, most of them, seem to care... When I was campaigning for mayor, I knew there were many blacks who were going to vote for my white opponents. It’s one of those can’t explain things, but it’s there. I don’t think any white person can explain why Mississippi is so unique. Maybe it’s because 90 percent of us, white and black, are poor people.”

Evers tells frankly of his search for money, the corruption he got into both in the army and at Chicago where he had gone, leaving his brother Medgar to carry on the fight in Mississippi. He tells it himself, very frankly, just as Malcolm X did. Perhaps it was so no one could use it against him when he campaigned for Governor.

When Medgar Evers was shot to death by a white man who went scot free, Charles had to choose between vengeance and killing, or taking up the work his brother had started in the NAACP.

Charles Evers’ story is about his efforts to get the vote for his people, to get public offices from them side by side with the white men. But it is also the story of two brothers and their love for each other. He told of all the mischief they got into and all the stealing they did as kids to get even with the whites for the cheating practices against them, cheating them out of their pay. Stealing pecans and cane syrup to sell, bootlegging wine. They worked, they walked three miles to school the four months of the year that they went to school.

From the time they were babies, they were always roommates. Charles tells how he used to take care of Medgar, who was two years younger. “I remember us kicking each other out of the bed where we slept together. But I always warmed it for him, because, Man! Was that bedroom cold! I used to get a spot warm, then move over and let him have it because he was the baby.” “Medgar was clumsy, very bookish, very sharp and very loveable. He never wanted to hurt anybody. All the battling we got into, that was my doing, not his.”

He tells of the church-going, the revivals, his mother’s Bible reading and how his father used to take the two of them in his rocking chair telling them stories. It was a strong and loving family, seven children altogether.

“And at the revivals everyone was getting saved and happy, they were shouting and they were kissing. Right now I kiss almost everyone I see. And it’s because of my training. It’s not that I’m being fresh. My Momma’s people and all my people, everybody, we’d kiss each other when we saw each other. Momma always said, ‘It’s showing that you care. It’s affection that you show people. It’s the concern.’ And when you’re close to someone and kiss them on the cheek it shows that you’re not afraid of them. It means that they are no different from you, and that we’re all the same people. Most country people are that way, very affectionate.”

When Charles Evers took up his present work, it was his brother working in him, he said. Certainly his whole way of life was changed. One can scarcely say that he was or is a non-violent man. But he has found a better way and he does not want to hate. He was not alone in the work. He acknowledges the debt to the thousand young white students, boys and girls, he calls them, who did a tremendous job in Mississippi in preparing the blacks to go to the polls. It was another case of the blood of martyrs being the seed sown in that black soil. “Unless the grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it remains alone. But if it does it gains much fruit.”

There were many deaths through those years, mostly black deaths, unreported. I have visited Marge Baroni a number of times, and the first time it was just after the death of a black man who had his own little cleaning establishment in a small town just across the Mississippi from Natchez, in the state of Louisiana. The whites in that area, taking affront at something he had said or done, had locked him in his store, set fire to it.

On another occasion, when Marge and I were looking out at the sunset over that great river, she pointed out a spot by an island where, she said, the bodies of two blacks had been found, hands chained behind their backs and beaten to death. That was in 1964 when a search was being made for the bodies of the three civil rights workers, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney, found later buried in a newly constructed dam. “That’s when things started to change in Mississippi,” Charles Evers said.

## **Love, no hate**

It is through love of his brother that Mr. Evers has learned to control and redirect the forces of hatred and violence in his own strong nature; and through his mother’s teachings and all those prayers said in the home and in the little churches, so many of which were burned. “The things we learnt in childhood are part of our soul,” St. Irenaeus wrote back in the second century.

Fayette, where Charles Evers is mayor, is the only town in Jefferson county. It is 70% black and in 1964 not one black was registered to vote in the county. Sixty percent were on welfare. Now he is mayor, judge and prosecuting attorney, and his aim is frankly law and order in his area and to “kill welfare in Jefferson county.” This is one of his most startling statements. Already some industry has come in, good industry. Already, he is helping wood cutters organize for better wages.