

On Pilgrimage - May 1973

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Summary: Series of reflections on the occasion of their 40th anniversary. Laments little time to read, recalls the books Peter Maurin recommended and his constant agitating. Notes the primacy of conscience, defends critics of the Pope, and the need for Christ rooms. Keywords: Philosophy of the CW, obedience, folly of the cross (DDLW #529).

This issue celebrates our fortieth anniversary. And the psalm verse comes to mind, “Thy youth shall be renewed like the eagle’s.”

I can apply that to the Catholic Worker which over the years is renewed and revitalized year after year. Peter Maurin said once, quoting Ibsen, “The truth should be restated every twenty years.”

That line sticks in my mind, journalist that I am. Christ is our Truth—“True God and true man, like unto us in all things save sin.” When I was a little girl I used to wish I’d hurry and grow up so that I’d not “sin” any more. Of course, I did not use that word—probably it was “be bad”—because most children have a keen sense of right and wrong.

“The truth should be restated”—which phrase means, in my mind, that we have to take truths—statements, dogmas—which are old and stale, and develop them in the light of growing knowledge and understanding which we gain from experience and our contacts with those around us.

The Catholic Worker House of Hospitality and Farm is a school, as well as a flophouse, a soupline, which we sometimes contemplate with despair and think, “Can’t we ever get beyond this? Is this *all* we can do? When are we going to read, study, enrich ourselves with all this stimulating thought Peter Maurin has given us glimpses of? When are we going to get a chance to read **Personalism** by Emmanuel Mounier, that young man who started **Esprit** in Paris the same year the **CW** started, and the book Peter Maurin was the first to translate into English? Mounier died young, but he lived fully and accomplished much for ‘the clarification of thought’ that Peter talked of as the first step in ‘rebuilding the social order.’ When can we read **Fields, Factories and Workshops, Mutual Aid, Diary of a Revolutionist** by Kropotkin, the philosophical anarchist? And now there is also Teilhard de Chardin, also a personalist who has much to teach us.”

Souplines, Houses

The books will always be there. If we give up many other distractions, we can turn to them. We can browse among the millions of words written and often just what we need can nourish us, enlighten us, strengthen us—in fact, be our food just as Christ, the Word, is also our food.

It is an amazing thing that the soup line still goes on, that college students, seminarians, nuns, priests have taken to manual work, raising food as at the farm—many for the first time putting their hands in the soil, to the plough, to kneading the dough, reroofing a building, leveling roads, serving tables, washing dishes, “trying to make that sort of society where it is easier for man to be good.” (When I say “man,” remember St. Paul writes “there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female.”) We are all one, “members of one another, and when the health of one member suffers, the health of the whole body is lowered.” Yet each person is so unique, so loveable. (It is no wonder they don’t like to be written about.)

Besides, living as we do with men and women of all ages who “come in”—some staying to help, others moving on—it is not right to discriminate. But of course there are some who come to give their time and talents and stay for longer or shorter periods, as in a school.

Peter’s Recommendations

Certainly it is the first time many young students have become acquainted with the “man in the street”—so much talked of. Peter Maurin quotes Cardinal Newman as saying, “If you wish to reach the man in the street, go to the man in the street.”

The first recommendation of Peter Maurin in outlining his program was “round table discussions for clarification of thought.” (Of course, he conducted them everywhere—on park benches, in Bowery restaurants, in discussions with professors at Columbia University, and with priests and bishops, not only at social action conferences, but in visits to episcopal residences. I must not forget his calls on John Moody and Thomas Woodlock on Wall Street.)

He would have liked to see in me another Catherine of Siena who would boldly confront bishops and Wall Street magnates. I disappointed him in that, preferring the second step in his program, reaching the poor through the works of feeding, clothing and sheltering, in what he called “houses of hospitality” (where the works of mercy could be carried out).

Since the works of mercy are the opposite of the works of war (where food supplies are flooded and bombed out, shelters destroyed, and clothing burnt off the backs of men, women and children by napalm), we were almost immediately involved in anti-war work, some of which took us to jail. Going to jail is a spiritual work of mercy—visiting the prisoner on a grass-roots level.

God’s Messengers

George Woodcock in his review in the **Nation**, March 19, of William Miller’s book **A Harsh and Dreadful Love** states that he “cannot think of being at one with a state of mind that

can see the Pope as ‘Our Dear Sweet Christ on Earth.’ ” (I do not know why he capitalized this phrase except that it makes it look more ridiculous.) Evidently he does not know Catherine of Siena or her times, far worse times than these for popes and the Church. In fact, there were three men contending for that office, and Catherine, backing one of them, who had fled to Avignon, kept urging him by letter and by visits to France (on foot) to return to his job of being head of the Church. She tempered her strong criticisms and rebukes by calling him, at times, “our dear, sweet Christ on earth.” In other words, she was trying to seek concordances, and some political and spiritual solution for the troubles of the day. She was trying to make him forgive her effrontery by reminding him of his responsibility as one who sat in the chair of Peter, the same Peter who had denied Christ three times, who had no desire to wash the feet of others. Peter looked for power as James and John did. After the descent of the Dove, he changed. (Many another Pope has reminded us of eagles and vultures rather than the Dove, the symbol of Peace as well as of the Holy Spirit.)

We are all supposed to see Christ in each other. “Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least (or worst) of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me.” It is hard to see the dear sweet Christ in many a pestering drunk that comes in demanding attention. “Love is a harsh and dreadful thing, for Jesus to ask of us.” “You love God as much as the one you love the least.” These staggering, unlovely, filthy ones who come in waving a bottle at you and cursing you, and saying “Peter Maurin started these places for the likes of us!” are God’s messengers. I am reminded of the classic story of St. Teresa of Avila who, when she fell off her stumbling mule into the shallow river and cried out to God in protest, heard Him say, “This is the way I treat my friends” (a sardonic or a humorous God?). And she flung back at him, “That is why you have so few of them.” It has the flavor of Hasidism—that tale.

To go on, having been “turned on” by Mr. Woodcock’s review. He takes up, as many have taken up, my oft-quoted statement, perhaps as well remembered by non-Catholic readers as any remark I have ever made, that if the Chancery Office ordered me to stop publishing the **Catholic Worker**, I would do so.

Such a statement needs clarification, of course. My understanding of the teaching of the Church is that we must follow our conscience, even an erroneous conscience. My reading of Cardinal Newman confirms that. I think it is in Bouyer’s life of Newman that he quotes Newman as saying he drank a toast to “conscience first, the Pope second.” My conscientious reasoning, if asked to cease publishing, would be this: I may be held responsible for what goes in the paper, but I am a member of an unincorporated association of the Catholic Worker, made up of a very active group of young people who so ardently esteem the ideas of Peter Maurin that right now they are adding a few of his Easy Essays at the end of our evening recitation of Vespers in the basement of our New York house of hospitality. Whatever happened to me, I could count on them to carry on Peter’s program, founded on a new synthesis of cult, culture and cultivation. They would be a group, amongst whom always the one would be looked to as leader who works the hardest at “being what you would have the other fellow be,” who takes responsibility and perseveres, does not grow weary, rejoices in tribulations, who knows how, “when there is no love to put love, and so find love” (St. John of the Cross)—and so the work would go on. Its “youth would be renewed like the eagle’s,” to use that happy psalm verse.

Yes, I can well see myself obeying—and under the cloak of obedience, sit in a rocking chair on a porch and watch the majestic Hudson and its ships pass by; and read, and write more. What kind of obedience would that be? A joy indeed.

The Folly of the Cross

I am glad that Mr. Woodcock knows and appreciates Dostoyevsky as he does. I am glad that Lewis Mumford, in a television interview with Bill Moyers, says he reads over once a year Fr. Zossima's instructions to his monks (in **The Brothers Karamazov**).

I do not think I could have carried on with a loving heart all these years without Dostoyevsky's understanding of poverty, suffering and drunkenness. The drunken father of Sonya in **Crime and Punishment**, the story Grushenka told in **The Brothers Karamazov** about the depraved sinner "who gave away an onion," the little tailor who took in the honest thief, sharing his corner of a room—all this helped me to an understanding of St. Paul's "folly of the cross"—that passionate, suffering St. Paul who is still criticized today, even as our present "dear sweet Christ on earth" is, Paul VI.

Our anarchism stems from Kropotkin. (Peter Maurin introduced me to **Fields, Factories and Workshops, Mutual Aid** and **The Conquest of Bread**. I had only read his "Life of a Revolutionist" which ran in the **Atlantic Monthly** years ago.) Our anarchism is that of a Lewis Mumford, or a Paul Goodman, a decentralist, personalist point of view. Peter Maurin's function as teacher and leader of the Catholic Worker movement was to translate for us Emmanuel Mounier's "Personalist Manifesto," to talk to us about the Personalist-Communitarian Revolution which Mounier wrote about in **Esprit**. Martin Corbin, who is the scholar in the CW movement, has all Mounier's works in French and is trying to get more of his writings translated. (Mounier's last book, **Personalism**, is in paperback, published by the Notre Dame Press, Indiana. Get it.)

A further note: When I spoke of loving the unlovable and cited the drunk who was abusing us a few paragraphs back, I was also thinking of one who shouted at one of our volunteers—"With all that publicity you got this year on television (Bill Moyers' program) you're taking in millions of dollars and all you give us is a bowl of soup."

But of course, aside from a few bequests of a thousand dollars, we have not been overwhelmed with donations. We've had enough to keep going on. With inflation, increased mailing and printing costs, a staggering increase in rents and food costs, carfares, daily supplies, etc., we just get along.

Christ-Rooms Needed

We are daily tormented by the need for a woman's shelter. There are so many shopping-bag women sleeping on the streets or in empty buildings. But from sad experience of building codes, fire and health department requirements, we know the costs would be astronomical. The house we are in now cost us \$35,000, \$15,000 down and two mortgages, one of which

is now paid off, and the additional costs of architects' plans (according to building code requirements) added \$45,000 for the rebuilding before we got a certificate of occupancy.

What I would like to see is a house for women, with each woman having her separate room with key—an old convent, for instance, with separate cells. The Episcopalian Church used to run a shelter for women, dormitory style with double decker beds, on Stanton Street. They gave it up and the Salvation Army took it over. They charged 45 cents a night. There is no shelter there for man nor woman now. The Joan of Arc Residence, which I once stayed at between movings, is very good, but packed to the doors. Besides, the kind of women we have will not give up their shopping bags, discarded clothes picked out of trash cans, which they would fight like tigers to hold on to. To keep them they will sleep in doorways and empty buildings. In winter they wear four coats to keep warm, and lug them around all summer in anticipation of the future cold. And we must bear the consequences of our permissiveness in our own house, by periodic outbreaks of cockroaches, head lice, and other kinds, too. Woe is me!

So we will hug our personalist philosophy to us, and go on talking of a Christ-room in every house, and are rewarded most recently by one of our friends taking in one of our guests. Each one takes one. There is always somebody, somewhere, for each one. Let us get them together.

Marge Hughes, with a population at the Farm of one hundred over the Easter holiday and more comings and goings with summer, looks longingly at a neighboring farm where there could be a tent colony and many organic gardens. The beginnings of an agronomic university such as Peter Maurin talked of? Perhaps.