

On Pilgrimage - January 1974

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Describes Christmas among family and friends in Vermont. Apologizes for always being behind in her mail. Reprints a letter from Ed Forand describing the tremendous inflation in the price of basic food commodities like beans. Continues the description of her trip to Ireland from the December 1973 Catholic Worker. Compares Belfast to cities like Detroit after the riots. Mentions several books about prisons. Concludes with a plea that readers remember all prisoners in their prayers. (DDLW #537).

Perkinsville, Vermont

Outside my window the snow is still falling from a sky which is grey. The forecast is rain and sleet to follow. Early in the morning Mary's Jim was called to clear and sand the roads. He works for the town, and is on call as early as 2 a.m. Martha is taking care of the animals. Maggie and Katy are chopping wood for the kitchen stove, and in the dining room the big wood stove which holds four large logs is heating the living room as well as taking the chill off the three bedrooms which open out from it.

I am very comfortable in my room which used to be Eric's (he lives in Springfield ten miles away with his little family). Becky, her husband John and four-year-old Sheila are in their newly built three-room cabin down the road in the next field. There is already a woodshed and a work shop added on to their little house. Have I accounted for all my grandchildren? Nickie is with us while his wife and three children are visiting her people in Connecticut; and Susie and Jack and the two children, Tanya and Kachina, are at Tivoli.

Hilaire is at the East Hill Farm in Chester, Vermont, a school run by the Bliss family, a school which combines academic work and farming. Tamar and I visited it Sunday, and though most of the children were home for the holidays, some of the students had to stay to take care of the animals, sheep, horses, cows and so on. It is a school under the guidance of the Blisses, built by the students, fed by the students, one might almost say run by the students, a discipline aimed at the common good most willingly accepted by all. I've admired this New England school for years and am happy that Hilaire has been accepted there. Happy too, to find one of Graham Carey's daughters one of the pupils. Graham Carey was a great friend of Eric Gill, whom Peter Maurin held up to us as one of the leaders we should follow. Gill played a great part in shaping what Peter called his synthesis of Cult, Culture and Cultivation, and Graham not only lived it but also helped us to get started on the farms we

have lived on, helping us purchase them, and supplying us with our first cows on several of them. The East Hill School is not far from my daughter's, and Hilaire runs home now and again to borrow his own saw. It is also near Weston Priory where the Benedictine monks are friends of ours. Dr. Bliss's school is not a Catholic school or a Quaker school or a Mennonite one or anything else, but a fine example of a New England school where young people delight in the variety of occupations. We sang a grace before the Sunday dinner, "Praise God from Whom all blessings flow," and I was glad that there was singing there, and folk dancing, too.

A note about singing: both on the picket line and at the Masses with the United Farm Workers, and in the farm prison where I spent almost two weeks last summer, we sang each evening at the Mass, one Spanish hymn after another. The thought came to me then that singing itself is a wonderful exercise in breathing. Why, oh why don't we have more singing in our Catholic Churches, like the singing at Monsignor Hellriegel's church in St. Louis where he has always paid a choir master to teach the children from the earliest grades, and whose singing inspires the entire church to sing? Chanting and singing are so natural a religious exercise, involving body and soul!

... If I do not give a report about my family once a year, as so many of our old friends do, I get letters complaining about it. So I have given my report, and add that all families have the same problems and the same sufferings, because there is no love without suffering. So let us rejoice with those who weep, and turn to Scripture for both weeping and rejoicing. I have great confidence in that saying of Julian of Norwich, "He will make everything to turn out well!" The Penguin edition of this classic, which was a favorite of Thomas Merton, brings me great comfort.

I spent Christmas with my sister, staying with her Christmas eve and Christmas day. The previous few days I had spent at Tivoli and am looking forward to getting up there again in February.

Letter Writing

"I have observed it in general of those who are very fond of scribbling other things, that they are least of all to be depended on for writing letters. God forbid that any of my friends should judge of my regard for them by the punctuality of my correspondence."

Edmund Burke, statesman, wrote that before the American revolution. I found it as a letterhead on a note from Conor Cruise O'Brien to Martin Corbin who is now teaching in Montreal. I have appropriated it as an excuse and an apology to all our readers. I cannot even promise to do better. I know I will never catch up on my mail. Forever there will be letters left unanswered, except for the prayers I say as I open my mail in the morning or read all the mail which has piled up while I am away on my pilgrimages. "To breathe prayers over them as I read them" sounds trite and pietistic, but I mean it. I'd pray out loud but there are enough people around here talking to themselves. Some of it irritates, some of it is heart-rending, a lot of it is cheery and bright.

Of course, there is on occasion violence. I came back from my Christmas visiting to find that the towel racks in the bathroom on the women's floor have disappeared. Have they been

ripped out, to use as weapons of attack, or has some one only done it “to annoy, because she knows it teases”? This morning to ward off the noise I have my radio on – Berlioz, Schubert, Chopin, etc. It is not a distraction, it is a pacifier. As St. Teresa of Avila said as she grabbed her castanets and started to dance during the hour of recreation in her unheated convent, “One must do something to make life bearable!” Had she encountered a hostile atmosphere which further chilled the air, on the return from one of her pilgrimages? I just gave St. Teresa’s Foundations to Ruth Collins to tide her over a rough period in her work for the Harlem project in which Jerome and Rita, Ruth and John, and we too, down here on First Street are all involved. I should include John McGee and his wife Margaret, and Carmen Mathews too, in this co-op housing project. I should call it a co-op rather than a “foundation.” In the modern sense, Dwight McDonald once described a foundation as a large body of money surrounded by people trying to get some of it. Words change their meanings over the centuries.

The work really is an attempt to take over an old tenement and repair it so it is livable, and keep the families living in it (some were born in it) rather than let it be demolished and the people scattered who have long been neighbors.

And oh, in all non-violent works to “build within the shell of the old,” the suffering which goes on, pain which turns into joy when we realize that such suffering keeps us close to Christ, and we learn that “in the Cross is joy of spirit,” as the **Imitation** says.

Yes, I feel guilty about not answering letters. I apologize because I know I cannot keep up with the work and because I have two speaking engagements in January, in New England (the hardest time of the year to travel there, yet the most beautiful), and in February, March, and April, too. But I am suddenly cheered by a letter from a reader who tells me to go on traveling, that she enjoys my journeys. And this after a very inadequate account of them. (I am engrossed as soon as I get home, especially on First Street by the sufferings around me, but also with its compensating joys—an increase of love and trust in our family of “undesirables.” What a beautiful word “desire” is, reminding us that the Lord said, “With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer.” I read that in the King James version years ago and felt the passion of desire which he felt – the yearning in his heart for all men, not just his friends. And now I read that Grand Central Station is closing its doors from 12-6 a.m. for fear the waiting rooms will be filled with **undesirables**. But the Lord desires them with strong desire in his heart – these homeless ones. “As long as you have done it unto one of the least of these, you have done it unto Me!”

Prices

Our Christmas season is over now, and we did indeed feast, what with the generosity of our friends who supplied us with much canned goods and many turkeys, 25 from the United Parcel Company for one thing. I am reminded of a Christmas when, in return for turkeys we had given them, a few of our neighbors brought us “surplus commodities” such as bags of quick-cooking rolled oats. In the depression we used to get cans of “home relief beef,” brought in as gifts from our neighbors in exchange for clothes or some of the goodies our

readers sent in. Believe it or not, we got honey from Illinois once, and oysters from Maryland, and a frozen salmon by air freight from Seattle!

This is all a preliminary to writing what Ed Forand wants me to write about, and that is the price of beans, peas and lentils, which are a basis for our morning caldron of soup which serves hundreds of men each morning. Ed himself is one of our editors, our treasurer and keeper of accounts, who pays all the bills, who supports himself with a part-time job, and makes the soup Monday, Wednesday and Friday, which means very early rising.

His note to me, placed on my desk this morning, reads:

“Dear Dorothy:

Frank Donovan tells me you want to write something on the increase of the price of beans and so forth. I priced many of them at the supermarkets and all I can say is that gang in Washington must be going mad (I know we are supposed to remember everyone in our prayers, but there are some who make it very difficult). Read these and weep. Whole pea, 63c a pound; green split pea, 75c; yellow, 57c; pinto bean, 63c; lima, 53c; chick pea, 57c; white pea bean, 63c. Keeping in mind that when we get figures from the government, on the increase in prices on a monthly wholesale index, if the increase is 1% to 2% each month, this is considered high. Also when people complain about 4, 5 or 6% increases, they yell inflation. Now take peas, beans, etc., an absolutely necessary staple for the Puerto Ricans, blacks – any poor. Up to a short time ago we could, for approximately \$30, get 300 lbs. of beans, lentils or split peas. This same lot costs us now anywhere from \$180 to at least \$200. The beans and so forth sold in the retail stores would cost a few cents more each pound than we paid for them by buying in 100 lb. bags – but in either case the inflationary increase amounts to not 2% or even 10% but 500 or 600%. I don’t think anything else in the country has been inflated like this, whether Cadillacs, yachts or what have you. Please write a scathing article! Peace, but to men of good will! Love, **Ed Forand.**”

I think his article is scathing enough. I could not do better. Thank God the young crowd goes up to the market at Hunt’s Point and begs for food, and down to the fish market to get donations there. Carmen Mathews, our favorite actress, gave us canned hams, and Trappists sent cheese to us and to the Maryknoll Cloister nuns who are living in the slums here on the lower east side who then passed them on to us.

Now that Christmas is over the soup gets a bit thin now and again, but there is plenty of bread and tea and coffee, and we manage to feed all who come just as I saw it done in my last summer’s visit to the Martin de Porres house in San Francisco and the Ammon Hennacy house in Los Angeles. There is truly a continuation of the loaves and fishes miracle going on all the time, when folks start this simple gesture of love, of breaking bread with our brothers and sisters in Christ. “They knew Him in the breaking of bread,” is the comforting and terse statement in Luke 24:35.

Ireland

I ended my last sketchy column in the December issue just as I was about to go to Belfast, Ireland. (It was not really a column last month but a series of letters I wrote home.) I flew

over to Ireland from England after dark and the trip took only 45 minutes. There seems to be a lot of coming and going between Liverpool and Belfast, and it is claimed that Liverpool has increased by fifteen percent in population since the Trouble started. I was only twenty-four hours in Belfast, staying that night at a Simon house and talking to the folks there; they spoke only of their personal troubles, not of the tragedy of the city. Their attitude was hopeless; it seemed as though they felt it had always been going on, this bitter strife between brothers, and always would. The streets seemed desolate and deserted, and yet it was a familiar sight to me, having visited just such places in Detroit and Chicago after riots and fires made havoc of formerly friendly neighborhoods. I took the train for Dublin and was delighted to be greeted there by Jane Sammon of our First Street house who had been in England with me and had gone to Dublin before me. I stayed at the Campbell House and went to the annual meeting of the Simons; and having received a letter from Michael Cullen telling us of his move to Ventry, a small fishing and boat-building village in the southwest of Ireland, Jane and I took the train to Tralee the next day and were met by Michael and Pat McElligott. We had a most delightful two days and left in a flooding rainstorm only making the plane at Shannon Airport because the plane itself was late in taking off. Having had a two-day glimpse of Ireland, I fell in love with it, and will most surely make another pilgrimage there. We were right on the bay from which St. Brendan set forth on his travels, and we saw through the mists the road which led up to St. Brendan's mountain which is almost 3000 feet high. We saw the stone houses and the stone fences and the bright green fields, and still there were purple flowers and the hedgerows and a few palms which let us know that the weather was tempered by the Gulf Stream. I want to go back and read the lives of the saints and scholars and make a month-long retreat there. God willing

Ammon, Prisons

Other things to think about this month. January 14, 1970 is the date of Ammon Hennacy's death, and when I finish writing this column I'll be sitting down reading over some of his stories of the Indians, or the date palm groves where he worked, or the irrigating he did, or of the prison cells he had been in. I have a goodly selection of books about prisons and prisoners, beginning with Dostoevsky's **House of the Dead**, Chekhov's book about the prison settlement on **Sakhalin**, Kropotkin's **In Russian and French Prisons**, and now the 1973 edition of **Walls and Bars** by Eugene V. Debs, published by Charles H. Kerr and Company in Chicago. And of course there is **The First Circle**, by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Prize winner, and his **Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich**, both stories of the labor camps of Russia. There is a lot about prisons in Ammon's book, and we strongly recommend it for the spirit he showed. He never pulled his punches but tried to convert others to his own point of view, including the guards and keepers during his imprisonments. He had plenty of blind spots, was a WASP of sorts, became a Catholic because he loved the Catholic Worker, left the Church because he could not accept its discipline, loved the saints because they suffered martyrdoms and emulated their courage, esteeming courage as the highest virtue. His was a lifelong struggle against war and capital punishment, and one might say he died on the picket line, protesting the coming execution of two convicted murderers. He was taken to a Catholic hospital where he was nursed by nuns and visited daily by a dear friend, a

priest, who anointed him before he died. His Protestant and Catholic friends attended his funeral Mass in Salt Lake City. His first wife and two daughters and their husbands flew and drove up for the funeral and a Unitarian family which Ammon held dear provided the funeral breakfast for us all. If our readers wish to read Ammon's autobiography, which I consider a classic, write to Joan Thomas, Box 25, Phoenix Arizona 85001.

The December 22 number of the **Peacemaker** contains the story of Dan Goodman's Selective Service violations, for which he was sentenced in an Indianapolis court to six years, four incarcerated years and two on probation. Read the **Peacemaker** to keep in touch with prisoners of conscience. Write 10208 Sylvan Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45241.

A long article which begins on the front page of the **Wall Street Journal** for January 2, tells of what is called Aversion Therapy, and the subhead continues with the ominous words, "punishing people to change behavior" The article tells facts and figures, names names and states the drugs used to "change behavior." The article questions – "Is It Old Fashioned Torture?"

Jessica Mitford has written a book on **Kind and Usual Punishment** which should be read and pondered on. Nothing has changed since the slaughter of both prisoners and guards at Attica a few years ago, and we need to do all we can to keep in touch with prisoners and protect them and work for them.

The book which has just been published by Charles H. Kerr and Co., Chicago, containing Eugene Debs' prison writings and his suggestions as to what can be done, is well worth studying. Ammon had the greatest admiration and love for this great leader in the labor movement who polled one million votes for President while he was in prison during the First World War. Just now as I am finishing writing this column, I read over the story of the prisoners' reaction to Debs' departure from Atlanta Penitentiary, where Ammon also served during the First World War, and was once again deeply moved.

Let us pray for all the prisoners we know, for those who write to us, such as Martin Sostre whose picture hangs on our office wall, and Eddie Sanchez and Arthur Banks, and all the other men, the countless thousands of men and women who are held behind prison bars. When even the prestigious **Wall Street Journal** publishes such a column of horrors, we must awake to the condition of these sufferers and do what we can to help them. Pray also for Father Lyle and his halfway house for prisoners in East Harlem.