

On Pilgrimage - March/April 1974

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Summary: Describes the misery she sees and their efforts to open a new women's house of hospitality. Diary-like account of visits to friends in Virginia, Georgia, and the William Miller (her biographer) family in Florida. (DDLW #539).

It is March Twelfth as I write this and it is cold. Outside it is 20 degrees and a harsh wind makes it feel like nine below. So says the forecaster on the radio as I start this column for the March-April issue of the **Catholic Worker**. Always, it seems to me, it gets colder just before the official day of spring begins. March 21; just as it is always darker just before dawn. Which reminds me that my sister and I used to console ourselves when we had attacks of adolescent blues with the reminder that it was always “darker just before dawn.” Our mother used to speak to us in aphorisms which always made us cheer up.

At Home

Folks who come to us in their need are “at home” with us. That is the only cheerful thing I can say when I see constantly the human misery around me. I come back from a short speaking trip (short in time if not in distance) to see one woman sleeping on a chair just inside the door, with her head on two telephone books resting against a heavy stone statue of St. Joseph which is on the window sill. On still another row of chairs against the wall, another is prone, covered with her coat. Upstairs in the mailing and television room, there is still another young woman, stark upright but with a heavy scarf covering her head and face. Sometimes when I have climbed the stairs to the third floor where seven women, with all their belongings, fill our limited space, I may pass another woman lying against the wall in the hall.

The city shelter for women holds forty-seven. The women in charge do the best they can with the limited space they have, and they take in the most difficult cases. Why all this destitution and homelessness? Because there are ever more ghastly, insanely structured buildings going up (instead of homes for the poor), constructed of glass it would seem, no windows which can ever be opened. I remember how Smokey Joe used to complain of the new Tombs with never a window that opened, never a breath of fresh air. “Air conditioning, to hell with it,” he would cry out. Higher and higher the buildings go, and lower and lower people are plunged into destitution.

Park Benches

A priest came to see us in January. The end of the month was mild and reminded me of the old song, "It's June in January when you're in love," which they were singing in 1933 when the CW started. The priest came at two in the morning and rang our bell and got no answer, so seeing a fire in a trash basket at the end of First Street near the bocci court, he betook himself there. There are trees there! The sun comes up at the end of our street, over the East River! There were benches under the trees which were inviting, and several men were keeping the fire going in the metal basket with trash from the city streets. A woman lay out on a bench, covered over with one of the three coats she always wore.

Just as the youth of the country are doing, priests also are experimenting as to their garb, and this priest was in shabby clothes and down at the heel. He took to a neighboring bench to rest his weary feet and wait out the night. We knew the woman on the adjoining bench. She was one who had refused our hospitality but was waiting to get into our new house where hopefully she could have a room of her own.

The New House

And this waiting explains why I was encountering so many on my return from speaking. "When is the house going to be open?" "There are certainly going to be many delays," I can only point out. Just as it was before we could move to the First Street house.

The music school which has inhabited the buildings which we have acquired is ready to move but has not obtained its "certificate of occupancy" from the City ("holy mother the city"), which takes care of only 47 women in the City Shelter though many others are cared for by "Welfare", in old hotels scattered around the city.

Although the house is paid for, there will be many changes needed to turn it from a school into a shelter, so there are delays ahead, and we must continue in patience where we are for some time yet. If we get into it by the end of the warm weather we will be lucky. We are all acquainted with "the law's delays," and building codes are strict. And even when we are moved, the First Street house, St. Joseph's House, must continue to care for the soup line and the clothes room and for the men, because the Third Street house will be a woman's House primarily. What shall we name it? Maryhouse? God is good and I know we will be helped over all our difficulties as we have been before. Jesus Christ, who "took on our humanity so that we could share in his divinity, was born of the Virgin Mary and became man." This I believe. And St. Augustine wrote, "The flesh of Jesus is the flesh of Mary." "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us!" how great the dignity of woman, how large a part she has played in the redemption of the world.

Diary of the Month

In February we went to press on the 15th. On the 17th I took the bus to Washington, D.C. where I visited Michael Kirwan's family. Ruth Kirwan and I share a love for St. Therese

and have read all we can get our hands on about her “Little Way,” which seems so often to accomplish great things. We reprinted the William James card on smallness, because of Therese, and now our old New England friend Graham Carey sent us a book **Small is Beautiful** by E. F. Schumacher which will be reviewed in a later issue.

In Washington I also visited the Franciscan Monastery, to see our old friend Fr. Kevin Mooney, who with his brother Denis spent long years in the Middle East. I visited Fr. Denis’s grave there, remembering gratefully the retreats he gave us in Pittsburgh, during that famous retreat movement in the forties which Fr. John J. Hugo carried on with much opposition.

From Washington I took a bus to Charlottesville, a trip which took me through Occoquan to which in 1917 I was sentenced for a month’s imprisonment for picketing the White House with the suffragists. Fr. Stickle met me at Charlottesville and drove me to Innisfree Village where I was visiting the family of two of our fellow workers around First Street. There are eleven children in the family which has been engaged for some time in work for the retarded. The father is a nurse by profession, and his family makes up one of the twelve families at Innisfree, each of which cares for adult retarded, many of whom have proven to be skillful in many other ways than book learning. I saw some weaving done by one of the girls in the Murray family home.

The same afternoon I visited my daughter’s friends, the Scarpas, who have lived for years near an Amish community not far from Innisfree. Mario moved from Vermont because he insisted on teaching his children at home. So far, in these last twelve years or so, he has succeeded. He has a large vinegar mill, a herd of goats, and they do in a way succeed in “raising what they eat and eating what they raise.” (I am quoting one of Peter Maurin’s slogans.)

Fr. Stickle showed me around the University which was founded by Thomas Jefferson. It inspired me with the desire to read more of Jefferson and study that period of our history. From what Fr. Stickle told me, his ideas of what a university should be need to be revived once again.

Cheryl Nelson from Muskegan, Michigan is one of the volunteers at Innisfree Village and intends to make a life work with the retarded. She is returning to the university to continue her studies. She drove me around the Village which is situated at Crozet, Virginia.

The next day another bus ride took me through Danville to Durham where I was met by Sue Dodd, whose aunt, Anna Dodd, is an old friend of ours in Lexington, Kentucky. Sue works at Chapel Hill, and after a night with her we drove to Conyers, Georgia to visit the Trappists where I spoke to the monks and expressed my great gratitude to the Abbot for all he had done for our former associate editor Jack English, who joined the order when he returned from World War II.

The next morning, after a breakfast which the Abbot himself served us in the women’s guest house near a little lake, we set out for Atlanta where Sue wanted to visit the Visitation nuns who had been her teachers in Kentucky. Their order was started by one of my favorite saints, Francis de Sales. His writings nourished me in the early days of my conversion. It is a very severe, cloistered order, or perhaps I should say that this foundation of the order is living a life of real poverty and prayer in the heart of Atlanta, in very confined quarters.

Parting with Sue, I took a bus for Tallahassee where I visited Dr. William Miller, who wrote **A Harsh and Dreadful Love** which has just now come out in paper back (Doubleday Books, \$1.95). It can be obtained in any paper back store which carries good books. Unfortunately, Curtis, the company which published my three paper backs at the more modest price of \$1.25, is not well known. (It had always been my ambition to appear in paper back in bus stations and drug stores, but I came across my books only once, though I search on every trip. I do not find them in the backs of churches which carry paper backs either. Frustration, frustration!) So I will advertise myself and ask our readers who wish copies to send for all three, or one of them: **The Long Loneliness, Loaves and Fishes, and On Pilgrimage: The Sixties**. We'll send them **book rate** which is cheap but slow.

Florida

Tallahassee was bitter cold at night, but warm and sunny during the day. The Miller home is set in the woods and the family owns a bit of property. They are clearing some of the woods to start a garden this year.

Dr. Miller is working on a book about Peter Maurin and his ideas, and we are all looking forward to it, hoping that he will quote much from Peter and his sources. Dr. Miller's wife is a brilliant woman, a teacher and a student herself, and I learned a great deal from her. She is writing a thesis on Thornton Wilder, a modern writer I know little about and must know more. I like being introduced to new books by people whose ideas I respect. She is mother of a large family and has always had aged relatives in her home. There is peace and quiet there. I spoke to classes in the Department of Religion of the University, and then went by bus to Sarasota where our old and dear friends the Magees now live many months of the year.

John Magee with Arthur Sheehan ran the Boston House of Hospitality for many years (though Arthur did a lot of wandering with Peter Maurin), and started the first farm at Upton, Massachusetts. John visited us often at Easton where we had the first farm connected with the New York Catholic Worker. I feel both farms made noble efforts to run a real farm commune, agronomic universities as Peter wanted to call them. We ran colloquiums where Ade Bethune, Peter Maurin and Fr. Joseph Wood and other priests gave conferences, as Bill Gauchat's Cleveland farm did. All had discussions on Cult, Culture and Cultivation.

John Magee went on to raise a family on another farm at Athol, Massachusetts with his wife, a doctor and psychiatrist. John became Superintendent of Schools in Massachusetts. He is now in the position (from his own hard work and genius) to help us, and has come to the rescue a number of times with large gifts to both the New York Catholic Worker and the Harlem cooperative project which has involved Ruth Collins, Bill Horvath, Rita Davis Smith, John Coster and all the black families in the old tenement. It is a school in itself, this attempt to start at the bottom and work up, and not at the top (through government aid or grants) working down to the people and getting nowhere.

Vassar

I got home from the South in time to fill an engagement at Vassar where a goodly crowd of students listened to me tell about prisons and especially about the peace movement which is still going on, with Cesar Chavez in this country, Danilo Dolci in Sicily, Vinoba Bhave in India—all non-violent. Their work and life style is practically a school of non-violence for us to study.

The very idea and work towards an alternative society on the part of the young is also a vital part of the peace movement which is very much alive. I might have been saying this very thing when I looked to the back of the hall and saw my granddaughter and her two children, Kachina and Tanya, and many others from the Catholic Worker Farm at Tivoli, one hour away. It was good that I was at the close of my talk because seeing Tanya and Kachina transformed me immediately from speaker into a great grandmother. Unfortunately I could not go back with them since I had to return to New York to write this column for the press tomorrow.