

On Pilgrimage - February 1953

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Begins her report of a cross-country speaking and visiting trip by criticizing the Church for expensive building projects in the midst of inferior housing for the poor. Highlights some of the people and projects to help the poor. Visits Ammon Hennacy in Phoenix. Describes herself as a pilgrim. (DDLW #643).

Now I am home again in peace and joy, after traveling from New York to Vancouver, down the coast to San Diego, across the South through Phoenix and New Orleans, down to Tampa and West Palm Beach and up through Atlanta to New York. And I did quite a bit of zigzagging through the middle west, too. The entire trip took four months and it was a sketchy trip at that. I could have travelled four years and not exhausted Catholic Worker contacts. New England was left out altogether, and the east. But I visited many Catholic Worker houses, farms, groups in the city and families and groups of families in the countryside.

The articles that I wrote these past three months were about Helen Caldwell's work in Memphis, about the idea of family communities on the land, about working among the migrants, about Carroll McCool and St. Colletta's house of Hospitality in Oakland (in this issue). I'm afraid liturgists will object to the last article on the grounds of too much emphasis on private devotion and too little on corporate devotion, the Mass and the Office. I haven't read over the article since I wrote it before Christmas, but I am convinced that daily Mass and communion, and recitation of whatever part of the office the busy layman can achieve, will result in a desire to live as closely united to God as possible, in "the practice of the presence of God," to use Brother Lawrence's phrase, and the practice of "praying without ceasing." The very word practice brings with it the idea of learning. We practice scales in learning the piano. And any practice is awkward and difficult. But it is necessary to attain any kind of proficiency in the spiritual life.

One thing is sure, that it is only prayer that helps one stand the rigors of such a round-the-country trip by bus, staying up often on the bus, meeting people constantly, speaking sometimes several times a day. I had several attacks of flu, a migraine headache, a slight case

of scabies, various rheumatic pains and stiffness of the joints, infected eyes and other assorted ills during the four months, but recovered and continued, and I mention these ailments, all of which are common enough, because Fr. Coady, of Antigonish fame, once said that we could do ten times as much as we think we can do. I mention these ailments too for the benefit of our readers who are also suffering in similar ways so that we can remember these are the ills the flesh is heir to, and we all have to keep going somehow or other.

During the trip I filled four notebooks, ten cent store variety, and in a few days I will sit down and digest them before tossing them into a waste basket. I visited St. Meinrad's, Indiana; Pius the Tenth Monastery, Missouri; Subiaco Abbey, Ark.; St. John's, Minnesota; Mt. Angel, Oregon; St. Leo's, Florida; Our Lady of the Holy Ghost, Georgia and wherever I visited a monastery or convent, I felt a rejoicing in my heart, and wondered why more people did not enter. In the missal it says that before the French revolution there were 35,000 Benedictine monasteries in France. I suppose there were times in history when half the population decided to spend their lives in praising God. Such peace, order and joy in the opus Dei!

There was a great deal of building going on all over the country, building of Churches and schools for the poor, as in the Los Angeles diocese, and a building up these same monasteries. When I am visiting there, I feel how much the faithful should be helping with their contributions to uphold these arms of prayer all over the country, and I feel that I want to appeal to our friends to send contributions. But I also feel, and have so expressed it in the paper again and again, that the building is all on too grand a scale. Granted that they are building for generations to come and are trying to take care of increased vocations, housing them, schooling them and so on. The fact remains that while the poor are homeless, while there are slums such as I saw all over the country from one end to another, such building should be modest indeed. In the Scandinavian countries churches and monasteries have endured through the ages even of wooden construction. Here in this country, there is such a fear of fire, that before a score of years is past, those in authority think they must replace such temporary buildings with brick and mortar and steel girders and enormous structures go up all over the land, and the poor continue to live in shacks and shanties, and the religious are housed in the equivalent of palaces.

I feel I must repeat these things over and over again, crying out for buildings for the poor, for homes for families , and if I kept silent the very stones of the street would cry out.

Yesterday Fr. Deacy from our cathedral parish came in and talked of the long lines of people that came to the rectory every day. No one is turned away, all can see a priest, and all have

the luxury of a little private office to tell their woes in. "I see over and over again the need for houses of hospitality," he said. "I thought of what you had written of buildings and the kind of humble barrack-like buildings the Missionary Servants of the Blessed Trinity have all over the country."

I was glad he spoke of this, because this month an anniversary issue came into the office of **The Preservation of the Faith**, the monthly picture journal the Order puts out from Silver Spring, Maryland, where their seminary is located. It contains pictures of their work in Mississippi, Alabama, Kentucky, Tennessee, Oklahoma, North Carolina and many other places. I have visited many of these places, and have seen these buildings like barracks, at their seminary at Holy Trinity, Alabama. St. Peter Claver's is a mission in Alabama where the program includes the building of new cement block houses to replace the old frame cabins the Negroes are living in. I remember a visit I paid to an old Negro woman there, lying in her spotlessly clean bed in the center of a tiny cabin where the roof leaked all around, a place so rickety that one would think a puff of wind would level it to the ground. It is the seminarians themselves that do the work, learning to build to live in poverty and hard work, in steady patient prayer. This work was begun by Fr. Judge, a Vincentian from Brooklyn, in a tiny cabin in the South in 1919 with only two helpers, and there are now 168 priests and brothers. Fr. Judge started an order for sisters too who are also working among the abandoned, and they number even more than the priests.

The last stop I made at one of our places, was in West Palm Beach where Madeleine Crider is building up a little rest house on 25 acres of pine grove (also called Maryfarm), and I was thrilled to hear that she used to go to confession many years ago as a young girl to Fr. Judge when he was stationed in Brooklyn.

I hope our readers will bear with me for this constant criticism of great building programs. But the poor cry out by day and by night. Blessed is he who is mindful of the needy and the poor. I know some colored sisters who lived for years in an old farmhouse and picked up wood through the scrubs and beach around them, who recently put up a fine little novitiate, simple enough, but exorbitantly expensive. "Can you use thirty or so mirrors and bed lamps," they asked us. "The contractor furnishes you know and we have no way of getting money back on them."

Contractors! Is it with their tongue in their cheek that they say, "Nothing is too good for the poor Sisters!" and then supply them with the most expensive of plumbing and electric fixtures, not to speak of bedlamps and mirrors. And who ever heard of sisters using either.

Contractors get wealthy on the work they do for the church, and the more wealthy they get, the more they are respected and the less they are questioned. It is all in the line of business. To conduct a drive to raise funds a man versed in business practices is paid fifteen thousand dollars. The architect gets at least another \$25,000 for his plans and they are considered a great bargain. One such architect included enclosed swimming pools for the Sisters, so I heard on this trip. Bedlamps and mirrors fade into insignificance beside this.

Yes, I am convinced that the clergy are taken for a ride by the contractors who are the more honored the more wealth they accumulate, and then when persecution comes the clergy are the ones who are crucified to their church doors, hung from telegraph poles, stuffed into holes of prisons and left to rot.

We in America are like Dives sitting at the banquet table, and the rest of the world, Asia, India, Africa, are like Lazarus sitting at the gate. God help us. One half the world pledged to fight the Church, and we go on piling field on field, building on building.

I look at my note book to continue talking of my trip and it falls open at this notation. "Lunch with a social worker. She tells me of a family of starving migrants. Father is not certified as disabled so there is no aid for dependent children, of which there are seven. Mother goes out picking beans and leaves her three months old baby all day, from early morning till late at night. Father no where around half the time. Two little girls raped by tramps. Children found eating watermelon rind and wild berries."

"Mexican family living in a basement—eight children. One room, dirt floor. Fire built on floor and tin plate over bricks cooking. When I spoke to about this case, she, a daily communicant said, "Why aren't they continent? They didn't have to have eight children."

Another note: "Someone says that Romy Hammes, a car dealer of Kankakee, Ill., invests his money in housing for workers and families."

Another note on migrants: "No legislation applies to them. No social security, no child labor laws, no medical care, no minimum wage laws, no housing standards, no sanitary regulations. They cannot vote, they are sixty percent illiterate. The labor contractor cheats them, and yet they make a vast contribution to our economic welfare. They are cheated by gamblers, prostitutes, drink and dope. There has been some missionary effort to win migrants by good deeds, and to win help from the grower and processor by making him realize that it will help his labor situation. But the employers are afraid if they make things too good, the worker will hang around with his family after the crops are picked."

Another note: “Individual case workers park their cars across the street from the Bishop Blanchet house of hospitality in Portland to see how many men on relief are getting an extra meal on the line. Fifty young married couples, the Blanchet Club of Portland University, started this shelter, and John Little is in charge of it, an energetic young man in his early twenties. Fr. Kennard is chaplain and he is young too. He said Fr. Reinhold of Sunnyside, Washington, had been a great influence in the lives of many young priests in the North West. (And all over the country, too, through his writing.)

Pressure was brought to bear on Archbishop Howard to stop the breadline, by merchants who said that it contributed to the delinquency of men to feed them; that most of them could get work if they wanted it. In commenting on state aid, the archbishop said that “he did not believe in state ownership of the indigent.”

In writing as I do about buildings and the poor, I do not wish to seem critical of persons. To meet sisters like Sister Charitina, out in Spokane, at the Franciscan school there, who had just come back from prison in China makes one feel how much more necessary it is to speak out. Sister sat there in a poor convent in Spokane where the school is on the first floors, and the dormitory for the sisters in the attic where the snow comes in during the winter and the consuming heat in summer, and told of the conditions in the jails in China. They spent a good deal of time singing to lift their hearts, she said, even popular songs. One priest said he occupied his mind by solving problems in calculus.

Interruptions

Writing this column means interruptions every fifteen minutes or so to answer the telephone or to see some visitors. The office in St. Joseph’s house is always a scene of comings and goings. So one must seem incoherent in such a report as this. The easiest way to cover my trip is to work backwards as I travelled and I have already spoken of Madeleine Krider’s place at West Palm Beach, Florida. Anyone wishing to write to her about it, address Lake Park, Fla. Anyone going to Florida, be sure to visit her.

Before I reached Maryfarm, Florida, I spoke at St. Leo’s which is forty miles from Tampa, and I slept in the room usually reserved for Bishops, since the other guest room was occupied. It was an old building put up by the lay brothers themselves, stone by stone. The bath was a screened in affair in a corner of the room, and it reminded me of a tenement apartment I once had where the tub had been put into a bedroom and covered over to look like a chest. Other tenement tubs are often beside the kitchen sink. It rejoiced me to see these humble quarters. Of course the room was huge. Fr. Bernard and Fr. Ernest were old friends there since both had been stationed at Farmingdale, Long Island when Tamar went to the agricultural school there. Fr. Ernest is the farmer, and is a genius at building and horticulture. Abbot Francis

was gentle and gracious. I talked to the boys (there is a high school there) and they were disappointed I was not Doris Day.

New Orleans

On my way from New Orleans, I stopped at Mobile for four hours to visit Alma Taylor, one of the Maryfarm group from St. Paul. She is working at the Blessed Martin Hospital for Negroes and it is a beautiful Y-shaped, one-floor hospital, spacious and comfortable. Bishop Sheen's great generosity makes this work possible in Mobile. The extent of my appreciation of this is measured by a letter just received from Helen Caldwell Day from her little Blessed Martin House of Hospitality in Memphis, Tenn.

"Butch has to have another operation on his leg and foot in June, unless they improve remarkably. I'm trying with exercise to throw the balance in his favor but that deformity is coming back and I doubt if exercise can help much now. Please pray for him, I told you about the hospital situation here for the colored. The only one that will take him (unless this new one they've just completed will) is horribly filthy and the staff woefully inadequate. (Speaking as a nurse and not just as a mother)."

Caritas House

Dr. Bertha Mugrauer and Mary Linda Hronek are living in a little four-room half of a frame house in a colored parish here. I slept in the living room and while the girls got up at five and got off to their hour and early Mass, I slept blissfully late and made the eight o'clock Mass. Visited homes on the levee, shacks on stilts that extend for more than a mile. Aside from cold and lack of plumbing facilities, the natural beauty of the situation charmed me of course. Coming back from visiting our friends we found a man prostrate across the railroad tracks and with difficulty persuaded him, drunk as he was, to permit our friends to take him home. He wanted to end it all, he said. He also lived on the levee.

We had a meeting in the evening and almost sixty friends and neighbors came, colored and white. I visited Loyola and Francis Xavier Colleges also that day, and it was good to talk to Fr. Fichter, S.J. who wrote **A Southern Parish**, the last two volumes of which have been held up. Fr. Twomey, S.J. is in charge of the Institute of Industrial Relations. Much work is being done by young priests all through Louisiana, helping organize both farmers and workers and forming cooperatives. It is heartening to hear of colored and white farmers sitting down and talking over their common problems together. The Agricultural Workers Union of the A.F. of L. is organizing among the sugar cane workers and strawberry workers, and the young priests are going to the meetings and helping.

Across Texas

It took me three days to cross Texas by bus, stopping at El Paso, Big Spring, and Houston before I reached New Orleans. I had no engagements in Texas, though of course we have

many friends and I wished that I were beginning my trip rather than ending it. I had gotten on the bus at Tucson, taking leave of Ammon Hennacy and Bea and Mathew Trudelle who had been my hosts in Phoenix where I stayed a week.

My visit in Phoenix included two speaking engagements, one at St. Mary's and one at St. Francis Xavier, the former Franciscan and the latter Jesuit. I can scarcely list all the people Ammon introduced me to, all the friends he has made through his constant protest against war and taxes for war, and his distribution of the Catholic Worker. But I can give a little glimpse of Ammon's living quarters, in his little three room bungalow on Lin Orme's place some five miles out of town.

Ammon likes to call our Lord the Celestial Bulldozer to indicate that ones way is smoothed for one, the rough ways made plain and the crooked straight. He arrived in Phoenix broke, he said, as he came further south out of the dairy region to the farming section of the country where he could work by the day and not by the month and so avoid the withholding tax. He slept all night on an anarchist's floor (one of the readers of the CW) and got up at daylight to go to the slave market, as the corner is named in every town in every state, Calif., Texas, Florida, New Mexico and Arizona, where immigrant workers are employed. Some times there are as many as 200 trucks, sometimes only 25. They go as far as seventy miles away for the day's work. Mexican trucks take only Mexicans. He got on the second truck, owned by the Arena brothers, a corporation which owns land in California, Colorado, and Arizona, and specializes in lettuce, melons, cabbage, celery. This was October 7, 1947, the year the withholding tax began. At the end of his day's work he asked if there was a shack on the place where he could sleep, and a fellow worker told him of one down the road and he took his sleeping bag and camped out there for the night. He stayed there for some months and as it was on land rented by Mr. Orme to the company, he became acquainted with that old gentleman who later invited him to occupy the vacant shack on his own land. There is one room and two porches, rather than three rooms, really, and before Ammon lived there, twelve Mexicans had camped out there. I sat on the porch one afternoon with Ammon and drank strong black coffee, brewed on a little kitchen stove, stuffed with mesquite which burned fragrantly while we talked. Outside there were china berry trees, eucalyptus trees and pomegranate bushes. Birds were singing in every tree and bush as the sun set. "Before the spraying of cotton there used to be ten to every one there is now," said the old Pioneer. There are many trees around his house, tamarack, olive, orange and grape fruit. Fields upon fields stretch out on every side until they reach the far away mountains. On all sides of us there were miles of cabbages that had never been harvested because of a drop in the price, and the Arena brothers had rented out the fields to some sheep owner who had quartered some thousand sheep there to crop them. The shepherd had set up his little tent and outside of it he sat in the fading light by a fire, wrapped in his blanket because the evening hours are cold. We went to see him and offered him a Catholic Worker, though of course he did not know English, showing him Fritz Eichenberg front page pictures. We could not tell whether he was Mexican or Basque, but he lived always with his sheep, and though he was a hireling, he could go about among them and they were not disturbed. "They can always be led," Ammon said, "But not driven." "How like us," I thought. I offered the shepherd my rosary, trying to establish some contact with him, and he got up quickly and went to his tent and brought out his own rosary to show me which hung there where he slept.

Hospitality

Phoenix is not so big a town, and perhaps that is why the “Charity kitchen,” as it is called, is so homelike and happy a place. Mr. Bedway, a member of the St. Vincent de Paul society, is cook and he has six helpers. Since November 20, 16,959 meals have been served.

The place is an old restaurant with a counter all around and anyone can go in, sit down and be served, no questions asked. The serving goes on for several hours in the middle of the day and for several hours in the evening, and there is no rush, no line, just people coming and going all the time, like any restaurant. Ammon and I sat down and had some good coffee, and noticed then that the only sign in the place, aside from the Grace, lettered on the wall, was one over the coffee urn, “two cups per person.” Fr. Victor, Franciscan, is the spiritual director and 435 W. Washington Street, the location. And Mr. Bedway helps to find jobs, places to live, etc. The work was started by the fourteen conferences of the St. Vincent de Paul society of the county, and since labor and much of the food is donated, there is only the rent and gas and electric to worry about.

There should be one in every town. From 400 to 600 a day are served.

St. Anthony’s Kitchen

There is of course that great one in St. Boniface parish in San Francisco, to jump ahead a bit, where a thousand a day eat, and where the hungry come from eleven on to pass cafeteria style along the steam tables and are given all they can eat and drink. They too are served by groups of volunteer men and women, and one priest who has charge of the place is always on hand to say grace before the line starts. He is the one who is responsible for the work, and the day I saw him he was shuffling about with a broken toe which did not keep him from going on with his work.

Such charity is so contagious that one feels the spirit of it in all the works in this parish. There is a credit union, an employment agency, a maternity guild, a library and reading room, a school and a Church and I went there as soon as I arrived for noon day Mass. It delighted my heart to see a huge pile of Catholic Workers with other papers on the stand inside the door, and I was kneeling where I could see people taking them as they left the Church. When I went into the rectory next door later to look up Fr. Brandan I waited on a bench beside an old man and started talking to him about the breadline. “What time does it begin,” I asked him.

“You are too late now,” he said sympathetically. “The women are always served first. I’m on old age assistance now myself and I go to help out, to pour coffee. You can have all you want. Let me help you. Can’t do much—” and he put his hand in his pocket to get me the price of a meal. I was infinitely touched, at such kindness.

Northwest

I have spoken of the shelter in Portland. There is none in Seattle now connected with our group, but a St. Vincent de Paul man, Peter Empt, still maintains a house and breadline there. Out in Spokane, Bishop White spoke of the need for a shelter for men on the road and a place where they could eat. He too was concerned about the State moving in on our children, taking possession of them.

Midwest

To go back still further, I must call attention to the work of Fr. Judge's housekeeper at Willmar, Minn., who has a clothes room in her basement and feeds sometimes a dozen men a day a good meal. Another young priest who confessed that the housekeeper did not allow the priests in the kitchen and would not serve the poor herself told me that as he gave a sandwich to a man who came to the door, the ambassador of Christ remarked to him that he had been served a full meal at the parish church in Willmar.

Home Again

I want to write another entire article for next month on the families I met along the way, since this is already too long. I shall leave it to the discretion of Tom Sullivan, who makes up the paper, to cut it.

Now I am home again to a brisk New York winter, in a crowded house on Chrystie Street, to bare trees in the park across the way, to a bay with gulls wheeling over head and the ferry rides and the fogs, the Peter Maurin Farm with its good smell of fresh baking bread, and the broad fields around that Fr. Duffy has had ploughed during the fall. All is order and peace there right now, though they have had a hectic winter with many disturbed people with them.

And now too I see my grandchildren, one of them in the hospital again this winter with pneumonia but the rest comparatively well. I have not as yet visited Maryfarm but will go there soon as the paper comes out on Monday. The trip has been long and hard but it has also been a vacation. And now I must learn all over again to live at peace in three households when I'd like to settle down in one or another of them and not stir out a foot for months to come. How good it would be to be hemmed in by a blizzard! When will I be able to finish my Teresa book?

After all, it still will take a life time to learn that my particular vocation, at least, is not to settle down, take roots, enjoy a home, but in the words of the hymn of John Wesley, "to be a pilgrim."