

The Fifth Anniversary of Peter Maurin's Death

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, June 1954, 1, 4.

Summary: Expresses her love of the Church, priests, and the sacraments against the backdrop of remembering Peter Maurin's death while going to a solemn Mass. Remembers Peter's habit of daily Mass and Communion. (DDLW #669).

At Maryfarm, Newburgh, where Peter died, Father John Faley is this morning offering up an anniversary Mass for him, and the group of twenty or so at the farm will sing the Mass. At Peter Maurin Farm, Staten Island, the group will offer up the eight o'clock Mass tomorrow at St. Joseph's Church in Rossville, with Father Clarence Duffy. Here in New York, at St. Joseph's House on Chrystie Street, each in his isolated way, just as Peter used to do, ambled quietly off to Mass at one of the dozen or so Churches around us and offered up our Mass for him, in gratitude for him, and begged his prayers for us. And all around the country we are sure that is happening too; people who read the *Catholic Worker* are remembering Peter.

I can see him now, getting up late because so much of his work took place at night, talking, teaching, in Union Square, in coffee houses, at meetings, at the office of the CW. While one was alive, it was time to work, and since working people had no time during the day, Peter made himself available to them at night.

So he rose at ten thirty or so, and sauntered, he was always leisurely; down the street, his hands clasped behind his back, his head slightly bent, thinking as he walked, on his way to St. Andrew's church. He never missed daily Mass and Communion.

This morning, there was a requiem Mass at old St. Patrick's Cathedral on Mott Street, at ten o'clock, and since there was the usual meeting last night here at Chrystie Street, I chose to go to that Mass. There had been first Holy Communion at the nine o'clock, and little girls in white veils still thronged the streets. A man was cutting grass in the church yard cemetery that surrounds the old cathedral and it was a pleasant rural sound in the midst of city noises.

Inside the Church with all the light and joy of the children hovering over it, the Mass was just starting. There were still flowers on the altar and an arch of green studded with carnations over the altar rail made the air fragrant. All around the enthroned white and gold statue of our Lady of Fatima were salmon pink gladiolas with long green stalks not yet budded out; below the altar were banked azaleas. A hundred or more vigil lights blazed and sent forth the hot sweet smell of wax to mingle with the incense. There were red roses before St. Therese and flowers before St. Anne and a watery sun seeped through the stained glass windows and competed with the candles.

There was only a handful of mourners up near the front of the Church, but the organ boomed forth and the voices of three men thundered the Kyrie Eleison, Christe Eleison with glorious confidence, and three priests and four altar boys offered up the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass with solemn dignity.

A great wave of gratitude to Holy Mother Church swept over me as I thought of the ministrations of these priests. At nine there had been the colorful and solemn and most happy occasion of all the little children of the parish making their first Holy Communion. And at ten this Mass for the dead!

All the great moments of life are here clothed with grandeur, recognition of man's dignity, his worth in the sight of God who loved him so much as to die for him. First Communion coming to young ones at a time when the desires of the flesh begin to grow, opening up their hearts to a love strong as death, showing them what love really means. St. Therese called her first Holy Communion "a kiss of love, a fusion." And now a requiem Mass which brought comfort to the afflicted, a sense of triumph. Death is swallowed up in victory.

I felt somewhat abashed going up to the communion rail, alone, in the midst of all the solemnity. I felt like a wayfarer, alone at the communion rail, having no immediate part as it were either with the feastings or mournings of those about me, like Lazarus at the gate, and the priests the rich men coming down to bring me food for body and soul, or rather as though God himself came with all pomp and grandeur bringing down his Son to the lowliest wayfarer, or sojourner.

As I made my thanksgiving, and remembered Peter, and prayed for him and to him, asking his aid, I was aroused too to think how like Peter, to horn in on this great and beautiful Mass with organ and and three priests and four altar boys, sharing someone else's grand Mass, like the poor man and beggar he was. Possessing nothing, yet he was possessing all things. As St. Paul said, "All things are yours, whether it be Paul, or Apollo, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come, for all are yours, and you are Christ's and Christ is God's."

I thought too of those who attacked the Church which so recognized our dignity and brought us such gifts,—I thought of Emmet McLaughlin, the Franciscan priest of Phoenix who has written an attack against the Church, and of those communists who attack the Church not knowing her and prayed for them. We know that through her priests we receive our rebirth in Christ, our communions, our healings of soul and body. She witnesses our marriages and helps us to die and our priests are ordained for these great and noble duties of bringing to us the sacraments, the means of grace which enable us to begin to truly live.

All this morning I was witnessing the regard Holy Church had for man, her recognition of his humanity. This ceremony can be done without, though it is a fitting clothing, and has been done without in mission countries and in times of persecution. But these ceremonies are an outward and visible sign, as the sacraments are, of the love which fills our lives, just as the marriage act is a sign of love, a kiss, an embrace, a tenderness, even a smile, all these are earthly things, which mean much more than the act itself. We are creatures of body and soul and those who reject Christ are rejecting the body and this life here and now.

While I prayed, thinking these things, my heart full of gratitude, another little girl postured

in front of the altar of our Lady, having her first communion picture taken, the sacristan stopped blowing out the candles to arrange her, in a properly pious attitude; the camera man was professional, the mother anxious, and there is always the danger, I thought, of the real significance of things being lost in the Martha-business of daily life. But a few scattered men (from the Bowery) were telling their beads in the rear of the church, quiet, contemplative, and I knew that for them, as for us all, the curtain is lifted now and again, and we see as through a glass darkly, the great things that God has prepared for those who love him. Peter knows, and knowing, will pray that we too may know.