

On Pilgrimage - September 1956

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Summary: Graphic description of a visit to a prisoner on death row and other stories of terrible deaths in their neighborhood. Asks "Where to lay the blame?" Lashes out against "this rotten, decadent, putrid industrial capitalist system" calling for building up all forms of mutual aid. (DDLW #710).

There is a huge truck entrance to the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, and the visiting hours from 1:30 to 3:00 had begun when I arrived there a few weeks ago to see the Prisoner. He has been condemned to die, and we at the Catholic Worker got acquainted with him when he wrote to us offering us his library, his furniture, and even his eyes, when his sentence should have been carried out. His case was on appeal, and that appeal has been denied, and now it goes to another court, and as long as he has money to pay a lawyer, his case can go on. There is another convicted murderer in one of the Pennsylvania jails who has been appealing his case for the last eight years.

It is terrible to visit a jail. Men are not made to be confined like animals behind bars. Once a man escaped from this particular jail buried in a truck full of hot ashes, and another time some men escaped through the sewer. But they were all caught.

Once inside the huge entrance, there are show cases to the left where dolls and animals and boats and other things carved out of wood by the prisoners are on display. There is another gate going inside, and here I caught a glimpse of green, a privet hedge, which seems to grow everywhere even in our own stony back yard. "Is there any green?" I asked the prisoner later when he told me about his two hours exercise a day. "The men have stuck watermelon seeds in the cracks of the wall, but when they grow they are pulled out," he said.

To get to the visitors' room you go through a passageway into a long low room, also vaulted, passing wash rooms, a few cells, and there was a room divided by iron bars, with room for the prisoners on one side, and fourteen stools for visitors on the other. One could lean on a counter, up against a wire netting which covered the bars. The stools were low and the counter was low. There was one very young guard standing at the door where the prisoners came out to take their seats, facing their visitors and others sat waiting, young colored girls in crinoline, with bare arms, ballet shoes, impassive faces; others wide mouthed, rouged, laughing, full-bosomed. There was a mother and child, white, there was a gay blonde with a striped blouse and riding breeches and no stockings and bedroom slippers. Many of the women found it easier to stand than to sit, and they bent over like horses in stalls, to get as close to the wire and the bars as possible. They presented a variety of haunches, pink, blue,

flowered, striped, black and white, looking like the hind quarters of a zebra, or of horses, or even of some apes. In what grotesque positions people find themselves.

The place had filled up so when the Prisoner I had come to see was brought out, one of the others who had three visitors had to confine himself to one, and I squeezed in and sat on the stool between the woman and the two-year-old child perched on the counter in front of her, and the blonde with the horse's tail hair-do. There we were, elbow to elbow, each one seeing only the one ahead of him, those on my right communicating by silences, and those on my left by ardent sighs and kisses. The woman with the child was a plain woman with tightly-dressed brown hair and the child clapped his hands and called **Daddy** over and over. When the father looked at his child his face was warm and alive and when he turned to his wife there was a grim bitter look distorting it.

The Prisoner I came to see was a tall, well-built man, intelligent looking, blue-eyed, fair skin down which little drops of moisture trailed. It was a stifling day and as we talked a storm came up. Then one could hear the deluge through the three barred windows in back of the room. Thunder roared every now and then through the vaults.

We talked about Ammon's previous visit, the books of poetry I had sent, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Raymond R. F. Larrsen, and his copying the works of the latter.

It was hard to talk. "How the time must drag." "No, it goes very fast. You do not know where the days go." And then you remember the sentence of death, and you know the time slips by inexorably.

What men get used to. "Stringing them up by their thumbs for instance, they get used to that." I caught his talk only in snatches. "Get so they don't mind it. I was never normal. No one liked me. I antagonized. I teased, never knew when to stop. . . made enemies. Yes, I am legally sane. I know right from wrong. But the psychiatrists have listed me as all sorts of things. . . a monster. . . There is an arson case here, a young fellow back from Korea. He'd seen plenty of blazing houses over there. He was convicted of burning down some houses out Chester way, and given fifty years. No one died in the fires. He burnt barns and empty houses. There was great property damage. Judge refused to put him in a mental hospital because he might burn that down with the people in it. Jails are made of steel and stone. He gets no treatment here. If they do let him out in fifty years he may go out and do it all over again. Men are trained to destruction and then jailed for it.

"There are men of all ages here, boys to old men. It is no place for a boy to be. I am reading, studying, seeing how much I can learn. Languages, science. There is so much to learn and so little time."

Living by the exterior and interior senses, I thought, and not by faith, but how talk about faith? It is so hard. "Have you been away from it long?" I asked him. Only a few years. "Religion, it comes and goes. I only gave it up a short time ago." And now he had fallen into an abyss.

Oh, my God, I remember the cruelties in my own life, my own angers and hatreds, and then the words of Jesus, "But I say unto you, that he who says, **Thou fool** is in danger of everlasting fire." I remember seeing some boys stoning a cat, hung up by its tail. I remember a movie I saw years ago, of Pancho Villa, and how he had one of his enemies buried up to his

neck, and his face and head were smeared with honey near an ant hill, and an old fat woman sitting next to me screamed with mirth to match the victim's cries. And I saw Shorty once, and some of the others at table, laughing at a man with epileptic seizures, as his arms jerked and he could not get his food to his mouth. And so often on Friday nights there is loud and raucous laughter when someone distracted in mind asks involved questions.

Where does cruelty begin and end? We fail by little and by little. If we do not correspond to the grace God gives us He will withdraw it. Judge no man lest you yourself be judged. There but for the grace of God, I go. Let him who is without sin cast the first stone. We must forgive seventy times seven.

On the one hand a murder committed through lust. On the other hand, "He who looks at a woman to lust after her, has already committed adultery in his heart." Our contact with sin should only cause us to see it as the reflection of what is in ourselves. This is not to condone, nor to pity. Last month we saw "**The Ice Man Cometh**" and if anything it is a lesson showing us the corroding effects of pity. Only God can have compassion on the multitude, one thinks, in such cases as these. This visit was to respond, to answer a call, to communicate with a brother, to be obedient to the duty of the moment, to stand by and to pray. To pray that the Prisoner will again pray himself that anguished prayer, "I believe, help thou my unbelief." And the Jesus prayer, "O my Lord Jesus, have mercy on me a sinner."

Outside, in the fresh air, speeding along the highway in a Trailways bus, I counted the wild flowers along the gullies and the hills, Queen Anne's Lace, blue sailor, Bouncing Betsy, orange field lilies, milkweed blossoms, butter and eggs, purple and white clover, wild carrot and wild parsley, black eyed susans, mullein and elderberry. How good God is that He should give us such beauty.

"The world is too much with us." When I am in New York, after peace at Peter Maurin Farm, suddenly we are surrounded by violence. This last month there were two bodies found wrapped up in burlap and stuffed into the trunk of a car, across the street. A few days later a crazed old man of seventy killed the woman janitor of his building, and the owner of it who had come to collect the rent. He had been infatuated with this young mother of a family, who worked so hard in this building, and was jealous and suspicious of the owner who came to see her regularly.

Then this morning a man was found dead on a park bench, just opposite our front windows. Chrystie Street runs north and south, along the west side of the parkway which was made when the city planners tore down all the old tenements from Houston to Manhattan bridge. This park has playgrounds for the children of the area, and the benches surrounding the playgrounds are always filled with the homeless. Just opposite the house, just south of Houston, we always see the benches filled. This man who died must have just come from our Coffee Line at six thirty, gone over to the park bench, put his head down on his folded arm and then quietly died of heart failure. His posture was peaceful. He had been dead several hours when we returned from morning Mass and saw the ambulance from Bellevue Hospital taking him away.

I talked to the policeman standing there and asked him whether he had called a priest when he found the body. "No use," he said. "He had been dead about two hours,"

“But I had been told by priests that when one died in his sleep or very suddenly as this man did, one should always call the priest to give conditional absolution.”

“Well, the priests at the mission told me that if the man had been dead some time, we did not need to call them.”

May God have mercy on his soul. May this poor man and all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

Another incident. Some teenagers got rough down on the lower east side, with two plain clothes-men and one fourteen-year-old hit one of the detectives with a bat. Flinging his bat to one side, the youth fled, and the detective shot after him. The second bullet struck him in the chest.

And here is the most horrifying story of all. And where to lay the blame?

A Puerto Rican woman, very poor and disheveled, went into a tavern to make a telephone call, and having difficulty in getting her number, began to make a disturbance. She could not speak English, and when she objected to being evicted from the tavern, clung to the door and resisted. The bartender called the police, who in turn called the Bellevue ambulance from the psychiatric ward where she was taken. She continued to make a disturbance there about her children, but none could understand what she was talking about, and after a few days she calmed down and told another Puerto Rican woman that they were being well cared for. Ten days is the usual stay for observation at Bellevue Psychiatric ward. In about ten days a social worker from the department of welfare went to the tenement where the woman lived, to make a routine visit—she usually went there every two weeks. She knocked on the door and no one answered. Trying the door knob she found it open and went in. As soon as she opened the door a dreadful smell offended her. Entering the three little rooms she found there two dead babies, lying in bed, dead from starvation. They had been dead some days. The house was one of those rabbit warrens, a huge tenement, filled with little apartments, so crammed, so filled with people with problems, with the desperate struggle to make ends meet, so filled with noise, that if the babies had cried, who was there to hear them? Radio and television, the noises of the street, the noises of other children, all these sounds drowned out the weak cries of those starving children who lay there mute and failing until death took them. O God, you have to make up to those little ones, what they have suffered here on this earth! O God, how to understand this mystery of suffering? How to forgive the heartlessness of men who grind the faces of the poor, who trample on their hearts.

Whose fault is it? Where to lay the blame? Was it the fault of the impatient tavern keeper or bartender who called the police in the first place instead of patiently trying to find out what the woman wanted, why she was having a hard time in getting her telephone message across. She had been trying to call the camp up in Nanuet where her two older children were being cared for. She had been deserted by her husband, she could not work, she could not speak English. Was it the fault of the welfare people? They are usually overworked, exhausted with the suffering they see around them. They are doing people a favor by not calling on them

more than once every two weeks. Was it the fault of the authorities at Bellevue Psychiatric hospital? They should have people there who understood Spanish and could find out the situation of the woman as soon as she was brought in, of course. I should say that the fault was there more than anywhere else. I know that several of our friends who could not assert themselves had been made to wait all day long at the clinics, and on two occasions have actually been forgotten, left sitting on the benches until after five o'clock after a long day seeking help.. So much money is spent on buildings and so little on people, on social workers, on attendants, on doctors. Even the resident doctors get little or nothing for their services. The laborer is worthy of his hire. People always fall back on the phrase, "It is the system." We need to change the system. We need to overthrow, not the government, as the authorities are always accusing the Communists "of conspiring to teach to do," but this rotten, decadent, putrid industrial capitalist system which breeds such suffering in the whited sepulcher of New York.

On the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I always remember how it is the voice of the people which first makes the feast. Down the ages, the people held the view that just as Christ rose from the dead, just as we recited in the creed that we believed in the resurrection of the body, so also we believed that that dear flesh which bore the Son of God did not suffer corruption in the grave but was borne up into Heaven. "Much weight must be given to the common sentiment of the faithful," the parish bulletin says from old St. Patrick's Church. "Paulinus of Nola, an author of great weight bids us adhere to the voice of the faithful, since the spirit of God breathes upon them all."

This demands much thought and study, considering the common man's addiction to all the bread and circuses that are presented to him today. But Guardini in "The Church and the Catholic" has written beautifully about the people, and Pope Pius XII in one of his Christmas messages, has differentiated beautifully between the terms "the people" and "the masses."

Thinking on these things, one realizes how important it is to go to the people, to be one of the poor, one of the workers, to be one with the man on the street, and there to discuss with him, to bring him "the good news," the gospel, the peace on earth that can begin here and now. That's why Ammon Hennacy's picketing is important, that is why we go out on the street with placards, and with copies of **The Catholic Worker**. We have a chance to come face to face with objections, with correction, and to begin again and again with simplicity, to state in ever simpler terms what we believe is our "talent" to bring to the world today, invested and multiplied until the people themselves renounce war and say that no property rights, no Suez Canal, no oil wells, no balance of power are sufficient reasons for going to even a "localized war"; that we do not believe in "our country, right or wrong," although we love our own native land and would not chose to live anywhere else.

We are happy to see the peoples of Iceland and others objecting to our air bases and we hope that the people will awaken to the fact that our occupation of islands like Formosa for defense of our coasts is just as fantastic as if the Russians occupied Vancouver and Newfoundland as air bases to defend themselves.

The principles we stand for in the moral order, in the natural order, and, of course, in the supernatural order cannot be defended by force of arms.

We enjoy reading our parish bulletins. One time there was an article of Dr. John J. Hugo reprinted, and there are always quotations from spiritual writers and instruction. It is an old familiar thing this parish bulletin, but there is a new syndicated one in some churches whose teaching I find most objectionable. In the last few issues there are detailed articles on how to make money grow, treating money as though it were something alive, instead of a means of exchange, quite worthless in itself. There are elaborate examples of a Mr. C. and a Mr. D. who made gifts to the church of \$2500 a year for ten years which accounts up to \$25,000. And yet it costs him only \$12,500. What miracle is this? You figure it out this way. You get out of paying federal income taxes on that amount and that is a great saving. The money is reinvested by the financial wizards of the church and the dividend on that is then reinvested, and all added together, and counting on increasing prosperity and employment for the next years, it is all very simply put down on paper like an example of arithmetic.

Even more interesting is the fact that if you make an initial investment of \$250, the true cost at the end of ten years is \$7,350, and if you make an initial investment of \$2,500, your true cost at the end of ten years is only \$8,700.

I must say that when I think of a dollar I think of beans for the soup line or lodging for someone sleeping on the sidewalk, or a growing farming commune, and the increase I love to think of is the growth of life in the soul and the soil, and the seed falling into the ground and dying and bringing forth much fruit. You should see the bushel baskets of tomatoes and cucumbers being brought into the House of Hospitality in town, and the shelves of jars filling up in the barn for winter. This is real wealth.

Peter Maurin would give forth right now with an essay on money lending at interest, and the evils of the capitalist acquisitive society and how it is immoral to use money to make money.

We need to study more how to build up credit unions, producers' cooperatives, maternity guilds, and other forms of mutual aid, building these new institutions within the shell of the old.