

On Pilgrimage - July/August 1958

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Delights in the refreshing mornings for study and prayer at their beach houses on Staten Island, in spite of noisy children in the evening. Observes that many priests disapprove of Ammon Henacy's long fasts for peace. Suggests that the modest and prudent keep their work going more than the extremists they often attract. (DDLW #741).

This last six weeks I have spent a good deal of time with children, since our latest "project" as Hans calls it, is a couple of bungalows on the beach where not only children and their mothers can come for some of the refreshment, light and peace we ought to have on this side of the grave, but where some of our fatigued fellow workers can come for rest. It is wonderful to hear the lapping of the waves and the cry of the gulls on the beach, to smell the acrid odor of the privet hedge in bloom, and the sweet clover drying on the window sill, the seaweed and salt air,—an indescribable mixture of odors. There have been no storms as yet, and no particularly high tides, but Stanley is looking forward to equinoctial storms with all the flotsam and jetsam of the beach. And he is beginning to dream about a houseboat to be anchored in our little harbor.

We are near enough to the farm for visits back and forth, and Hans has been putting in a staircase to the attic and repairing here and there, and Mike has been watching over plumbing, electricity and grass cutting. But now we are pretty much on our own. When we go to the farm for a meal, and the four and five-year-olds start chasing chickens, the older ones on the farm rejoice that we are not staying longer. They have week-end guests camping on the hill in back of the woods,—Pat Maloney and some of the boys he has found in his wanderings around New York. He started with six each weekend,—last week it had increased to 14, some of whom he had to send home early, and now let us hope there will be a happy mean.

All is not beer and skittles, as my mother used to say, meaning that life is not all pleasant sounds —our slum children can't get to sleep before midnight.

It is quietest and most beautiful in the early morning when there are a few hours when one can read and study. Sometimes when I hear the wailings from our little Maryhouse, (I am sleeping in Nazareth, the second bungalow, which acts as a buffer between Maryhouse, which is turbulent, and the quiet neighbors on our other side), I think, "Is this an image of life, getting harder and harder as the day passes, and ending in the deadly fatigue that all mothers of large families know at the end of the day?"

Last night one of the children howled desperately all evening, it seemed, about everything. Everything was contrary to it,—mother, brother and sister. Silence did not descend on us

until almost twelve when the two little Puerto Rican families closed the door facing Nazareth and the windows, and the sound was kept in.

But the mornings! The joyful mornings, the wonderful beginnings again. Every morning is a resurrection.

The book which I have enjoyed these quiet mornings was Bouyer's liturgical Piety. On Page 119, he writes, "to eat is a sacred action for man because it is like being created anew, since all life comes from God."

This rings so true to women who are the nourishers of the race. Built from her flesh in the womb, nourished from her breast, man receives as it were a thanksgiving from the woman, who originally came from his flesh, which in turn was created out of nothing by God.

And in work like that of **The Catholic Worker** hospices, where there are breadlines as well as meals for all those living in our houses—over a hundred people here in the New York area, so much time is giving to raising, buying and preparing food. What cooperators those who work in the kitchen these hot summer days!

And here in this issue we have the story of Ammon's fasting for forty days, like the fathers of the desert and the prophets of Israel and as so many of the peoples in the world do today, perform. There are still famines in the world, still people dying of starvation, while we feast on the abundance that America has to offer. Even the poor feast from their small wages, in their deplorable housing, because they feel that here at least, there is one appetite they can satisfy and . there is never enough money to do much with. It is always feast or famine with them.

In a way Ammon's fast reminds us that man does not live on bread alone, that he can go for long periods on very scant rations; that with the grace of God, he can live as Daniel and the three youths in Babylon did, on grain and beans and water. If he has the will to do it! If there is some reason for doing it! Devotion to a cause, to an ideal of peace, makes it easy for Ammon. He is a John the Baptist calling attention to the urgency of the day.—that we need to wake and use the means called for by Our Lady of Fatima, to bring peace to the world. What touched me extremely in the story of Fatima was the immediate response of the three little children, who for penance began to share their meager lunch of bread, to give it away to those poorer than they, and to fast. Prayer and fasting always have gone together. Our Lady called for prayer and penance, but we do not see much of it yet.

So Ammon goes to an extreme! Our own dear priests at old St. Patrick's responded with the utmost sympathy and promised their prayers and the Trappists in Georgia and Virginia prayed daily for him. Ammon said that he knew it was prayers and not just his own will that kept him going.

But other priests, of course were not so sympathetic. They met him coldly, and expressed their disapproval of such extreme action. They distrust, and too often rightly, the extreme. There is a story told about St. Dominic, that the devil boasted that he would tempt his order of preachers by gluttony on the one hand and fasting on the other, so that Dominic made it a point to urge his followers to keep to an even mean.

I can understand these priests and their reaction. We too see many who come to work with us

who are the extremists, who fall away at the heat of the day, while the modest, the prudent, the fearful keep going, advancing little by little and so keep the work going.

At the same time these priests do not know Ammon who should not be judged by the tone of his writings, or even by some of the things he says, taken out of context. He is offering his life for his brothers and he has to prove it constantly, to himself and to others. Rightly, in this great work, he calls to pacifists to show they are ready to lay down their lives – to live differently, to embrace poverty, to reject the fruits of injustice, to do with less, so that others can have more, in order to make a beginning of peace now. How many things we should do without, we **can** do without. Our own examinations of conscience can tell us these things. We sin against our vocation to holy poverty, in many little ways.

And how many things children want from morning till night. Their desires are limitless. Working with children you can see how parents through their very love try to make up to their children by gifts and sense pleasures for what they find it so impossible to give them these days,–real training.

Living in community you come back over and over to the conclusion that the emphasis must be placed first on the personalist. “Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven.” Discipline your own life, grow in grace, and your children will do what you do, rather than what you say. There is no telling them. They must see and learn for themselves.

All these reflections make me treasure these early morning times of study. Even Holy Mass and communion are not enough, when one rushes in and out of church, as we rush to and from our work.

All this is talking to myself of course. I am the one who needs these countless reminders.

Hans

While Hans was building the stairs and putting up gutters on the roof and doing various other jobs before he got sick, we had good conversation at table. The children were talking of the dangers of floating out to sea on the inflated inner tubes, and he told of his shipwreck in the Gulf of Mexico many years ago. The ship was the North Star and it was a lumber ship – a three-masted schooner from Boston or Maine. She had a little donkey boiler which hoisted the sail, a little bit easier on the crew of fourteen who sailed her. She was carrying telegraph poles, wired to the deck and three days out from New Orleans, a hurricane struck and the ship broke in two. The captain asked for volunteers to unwire the lumber but none could make it: It was sure death. They took to the boats, Hans in the captain’s and with the help of sail, the seven of them made Veracruz in a week. They had only a cask of water and sea biscuit and a bottle of brandy for medicine. The other boat was picked up by a freighter. The American consul in Veracruz saw to it that they got some clothing, (Hans was in singlet and dungarees) and paid their fare to New Orleans but there they were on the beach while they fought with the company for their pay. When they got it was three day’s pay, the amount coming to them for their three days on the boat before it cracked up. “There was no union in those days,” Hans said.

We call attention to Robt. Casey's story in this issue of the strike in Hawaii and the communal work engaged in by the strikers. We omitted to give Irene Mary Naughton's address in the last issue of the Catholic Worker which printed her letter from Yucatan. They need help there and I beg our readers to send what they can. Everyone can spare a little. Even the apostles who followed Our Lord had a money bag from which they gave alms, and He had so embraced poverty that He had no place to lay His head. It was our Lord too who told the story of the widow's mite. Peter Maurin used to say, "If everyone tried to be the poorest, none would be poor." And one of my Spanish in-laws always said. "There is always enough for one more,—everyone take a little less." So send what you can to Irene Naughton, Calle 15 de Sept. 22, Chetumal, Quin. Roo, Mexico.