

Letter to an Imprisoned Editor

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Summary: Summary: Notes that several editors of the Catholic Worker have been jailed for their beliefs and work for non-violence. A dialogue by letter with Ammon Hennacy who is in jail. Discussion of cooperatives and collectives in Spain, Cuba, China, and Israel. (DDLW #760).

January 1, 1960.

Dear Ammon: Instead of the usual On Pilgrimage column this month, I shall spend my first day of the new year writing you a long letter with all the news of the month. I have already written you the meager two pages which I am allowed to write once a week. This is the last month of your six month sentence and it is good to hear that you are being released for sure on January 20 and will set out on your journey around the country. And since this is an open letter, and there may be many new readers this month to add to the usual 62 or 63,000 or whatever it is whose names are on our mailing list, let me explain here that an editor of the Catholic Worker is in jail this time not for making a demonstration in City Hall park against the war game of a civil defense drill but for trespassing on the Omaha missile base and giving out copies of **The Catholic Worker**.

Peter Maurin used to say proudly that the Catholic Worker was not just a journal of opinion but a revolution, a movement, a way of life. To say the least it is an unusual paper, with one or another of its editors in jail. This last year for instance, there were three of its editors in jail in April for fifteen days, and another editor arrested for providing shelter for a deserter and letting him escape (leaving him free to make up his own mind as to the when and how of his return to the army). The head of the Chicago Catholic Worker Karl Meyer also served a six month sentence and came out on Thanksgiving Day to go back to his work of running a Catholic Worker house of hospitality in Chicago, with the help of two or three other young men. Karl was the youngest to go to jail and it is a happy thing to know that there are constantly young ones coming into the movement to join the old ones who persist in their “starry-eyed idealism” as the Nation once termed our state.

The Catholic Worker began in 1933, and is in its 28th year and since its beginning there have been wars—the Japanese-Chinese war, the Ethiopian war, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the Korean war, not to speak of the little wars in one or another part of the world, like the Indo-China War and the present French-Algerian war. Peter Maurin kept reminding us that the way to reach the unemployed, the poor, the workers, was through the works of mercy and starting in the midst of a depression as we did, there was plenty of work to do.

Our salvation depends on whether or not we perform these works. "Inasmuch as you did not do it unto the least of these you did not do it to me." But war is the opposite of the works of mercy. Instead of feeding the hungry, it forces more to go hungry. Instead of sheltering the homeless it destroys homes. If we are "peacemakers," and Jesus said blessed are the peacemakers, we must fight war.

And is it not a wonderful thing that the government considers us dangerous enough to their war preparations and so imprisons us? The newspapers may pay little attention to these demonstrations but the voices of men in jail carry farther than those at liberty. And besides how many more of the works of mercy are we practicing when we visit the prisoner, become one with these poor, the most impoverished of all, since they are deprived of man's most precious possession, his freedom.

I enjoyed your last letter, Ammon, written on Christmas day. You say that you got the two books permitted you, and the box of nuts. A meagre Christmas gift but all you were allowed. Myself, I did not care for the Danilo Dolci book since he did not tell of his own work of building a community in Sicily, or trying to instill a philosophy of work, and of forcing the issue of unemployment by leading men to work on roads and in the fields, even when there was no pay check,—a reverse strike, they called it. He was arrested for this and so his message about poverty is heard all over Europe. But his book does not do justice to him.

"I will review the book for the prison paper, and for the CW," you write. "Just as we put up with the Bowery and beatniks and so forth, so does Dolci put up with Palermo. None of us can do much. What we can do is to live among this misery—and in jail. And not for a minute edge toward the Ford Foundation, the bourgeois life, etc. This with faith is all anyone can do. Could Lot change Sodom and Gomorrah? . . . This is definite, I am getting out January 20. You can put it in the paper. I did not get the December issue yet in the library, and I never got a single issue of the paper myself. The Nation this week has an article by John Cort's brother David about Atlanta prison. Very hard to generalize about classes of criminals. Just as the Gallup poll is faked by the loaded questions so are the answers to questions asked in prison . . . It is good to hear about the visit of the French priests, and that priest in exile from Algeria . . . I read all those articles in the New York Times about Cuba and I do not agree with those people who criticize Castro. He does not claim to be a pacifist. But his enemies are ours too. The United Fruit Company, the sugar planters and so on. When we meet our old Communist friends it is not whether we agree on many things or not, but we have that old comradely feeling of the days when the issue was not obscured I hope you print the route I intend to take when I leave prison and let the exact dates from the way they happen for I could not write to the people. Our friends can write to **The Catholic Worker** and you can forward the letters to me and I will answer them and get in touch with them on the way. (Ed. note: I hope he types his answers as his writing takes hours to decipher.) About co-ops, I think those anarchist co-ops can work in a place like Spain as they did for a while where the fishermen and peasants are not corrupted by life as we are here. Much can be done, but so many come to us at the **Catholic Worker** running away from responsibility and it takes just this trait to succeed in a co-op. Yet as we do with all things, we must keep on trying."

Cuba

I had been writing him about the talks by Wm. Horvath, and his study groups on co-operative housing, and the project he is trying to start in Harlem. Next summer we hope to have a folk school at the Peter Maurin Farm for some weeks in July so that people can get together and put in some serious sessions on these ideas of mutual aid and self help.

On one Friday evening during the month of December we had had speakers on the co-operative movement and the emphasis was all on enlightened self interest. "How to get people interested in cooperative and credit unions?" "Teach them how to save a dollar." Having listened to this approach for a few other meetings, I could not resist talking about other motives that move men, that inspire their actions. So I began quoting Claudel, "Youth demands the heroic." The series about Castro's Cuba had just come out written by a Tad Szulc, summing up what had happened in this first year since the Castro revolution, and I could not forbear reading aloud some of the paragraphs from the article. "The revolution had given the Cubans an honest government and a feeling that their rulers cared about them. The promise of social justice, erroneous as the regime's road toward it may be in the opinion of critics, brought about a foretaste of human dignity for the millions who had little knowledge of it under the old order of near feudal economy. Socially and economically, the revolution's supreme aim is to provide reasonably full employment all year."

There are 6,500,000 inhabitants of Cuba and the agricultural workers have had only three months work a year on the sugar plantations. Now they are working for diversification of crops through government cooperatives which are taking the place of the vast estates. There has been a great deal of expropriation of land, and most of the newspaper accounts have neglected to say that there is going to be compensation for the land taken over for the people. Most of them are emphasizing the fact that the "frantic and disorganized practices of land reform are said to have already caused serious injury to agriculture." Certainly it must have caused serious injury to capital invested in Cuba.

The Rev. Doctor Arthur Miller, moderator of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. asks the United States to be patient with Cuba and the Castro revolution. At least 95% of the people he met fully supported Castro and said he was honest, not a communist and is working for his own people. "I cannot become excited by the loss of land by companies like the United Fruit. These companies came to Latin America knowing the risks and have made huge profits for many years."

You see, Ammon, you are not the only one criticizing the United Fruit company.

There has not only been land reform, which I am especially interested in, after visiting so many of the migrant labor camps throughout the United States but there has attention paid to the educational system long neglected, which is being rebuilt from scratch; new schools are rising, teaching techniques are being modernized; children are being given free text books and materials. Under the Castro regime, according to the story in the New York Times, the city workers received a 50% decrease in rent and a 30% decrease in power costs. Their salaries have been raised 30% on the average.

"Their living standards were thus suddenly raised and in the first flush of gratitude they have not yet looked beyond tomorrow to notice the pitfalls of an artificially stimulated economy.

They saw the ambitious public works programs, the construction of new schools, housing units, aqueducts, hospitals and playgrounds. But few seem to have fully realized that an economy that in the view of most experts is bound to contract soon may eventually offer the dilemma of deficit financing or sacrifices of an austerity economy to keep these programs going.”

Hard to Understand

This is the economics that is hard for me to understand. Of course it is necessary in times of crisis to have an austerity regime. “Let your abundance supply their want,” St. Paul said. “If everyone tried to be poorer,” Peter Maurin used to say, “There would soon be no more poor.” The old I.W.W.’s used to refuse to work overtime when there were other men out of work, and one of the things they fought for was shorter hours so that all men could have jobs. Now the word automation is in the headlines, and the strikes in the steel plants, among the longshoremens, and in the transit system are partly caused by automation.

Fr. Gustave Weigel writing about the Catholic Church in America stated recently that the three things most demanded of Christians today were austerity, preached and lived; a deeper awareness of the reality of God; and a truer and more effective love for all men, including those who are our enemies.

These things are quoted by D. MacMaster in **Unity**, which is published monthly by the associates of the Benedict Labre House at 208 Young Street, Montreal, and we are urging our readers to subscribe for this little paper which also is published like the Catholic Worker for 25 cents a year. We hope subscribers send more to help in their hospice.

And it is these same things that are needed in a non-violent revolution, and in Castro’s violent one.

Another writer quoting Fr. Weigel in the Times of London sums up his three points as austerity, God awareness and brotherly love. These are the motives which should urge us on to a greater effort to reform the social order.

In the life of the CW we have had the privilege of meeting such priests as Fr. Marion Ganey, who started credit unions and rescued the poor from loan sharks in British Honduras and in the Fiji Islands and Fr. McCarthy in our own South West, with Sante Fe for his center. There is Fr. Donald Hessler of Yucatan, the Maryknoll priest who has been the forerunner of much of this work in the mission field. These are priests who have come to talk to us, and now we have our friend William Horvath, who is a bricklayer by trade, a union man, a worker, who is a dedicated enthusiast for cooperatives and who has been having articles in each issue of the Catholic Worker. If we do not use this way, the workers will have recourse always to bloody revolution.

“Thou art neither cold nor hot. . . because thou art lukewarm. . . I am about to vomit thee out of my mouth,” our Lord says. Far better to revolt violently than to do nothing about the poor destitute.

Here is a long quotation about co-ops which I found in my diary, from a book called “From the Land of the Chinese People,” by Cornelia Spencer and published in 1951, by J. B. Lippincott.

“When the Japanese invasion drove the Chinese from Nanking to Hankow and then inland, what has been called one of the greatest migrations in history began. Schools and colleges started on the long trek to the west, on foot, boats, rickshaw, trucks and cars, some of them conducting classes as they went. Families went in the same way, all headed for what came to be called Free China. . . China had no equipment to fight Japan except by guerrilla warfare. The population of Szechwan where Chungking stands, had to support not only itself but the thousands now arriving as refugees. They dug houses in the rocks and when houses were bombed out, they were rebuilt.

“Mr. Rewl Alley who had long been in China began to think of some way that the people here in besieged China could produce enough to save themselves. Others worked with him. The Chinese Industrial Cooperatives started. There was not much money, but there were plenty of people of different trades and abilities. Seven people could start a cooperative. Perhaps seven blacksmiths got together. They could borrow a small sum for capital from a control organization which was set up, and begin producing hoes and hammers and chisels and all the things they were used to making. They repaid a certain percentage of the loan each month, reinvested a certain percentage and had a certain percentage to use themselves for their living. This kept the capital built up so that other groups could start.

“Machine shops, printers, soapmakers, weavers, laundrymen, carpenters—anyone who knew a trade could begin producing. The first big order was made by the Chinese government for one million woolen blankets for the army. In the early days of the war a large number of wounded Chinese soldiers had frozen to death wrapped only in cotton blankets. Now thousands of spinners had to be trained, 7,500 new spinning wheels had to be made, 750 special hand looms had to be constructed. Aluminum for the wheels came from Japanese planes that had been shot down. But in spite of the difficulty of the undertaking, the blankets were delivered on time, and by the end of 1942 three million blankets had been made by the cooperatives. One found young Chinese with all sorts of college degrees working in the cooperatives, for all the skill that China had was needed to create where there were parts lacking, to use ingenuity and creativeness. Many of the little factories were hidden in old temples, in secret places in deep ravines, in homes. They had to be mobile in case of a raid. In 1944 the Chinese Industrial Cooperatives produced more than two hundred and fifty sorts of things. There were about 2,000 cooperatives with 30,000 members. They now have cooperative clinics and hospitals and nurseries and banks.”

When I use examples of collective or cooperative farms in Russia and China, the scene of violent revolution, I must point out too the work done in the kibbutzim in Israel, where there are also not only state farms but cooperative farms. There were also examples of cooperative industry and agriculture in Spain before Franco, and which of course have been wiped out. Dictators have wiped out such efforts by the people, and dictators have also built up such cooperatives. If Castro puts to one side any idea of elections at the present time and continues to hold the position he has seized, while he puts through the reforms he is trying for, he is no different from the labor leaders in the United States, who originally with great effort seized control of their dormant unions and continued to hold power after they were successful. There may be elections, but a Joe Curran, a Lewis, a Reuther will continue to reign for life or until a stronger man can take his place. Their salaries will be high and they

will ruthlessly fight all opposition until they themselves are ready to resign. The peaceful Benedictine ideal is on the same pattern in its way. The Abbot should take advice from all according to the rule and listen to the youngest who is free to speak his mind, as well as the oldest, but once elected, he is Abbot for life, the father of his vast family, and his decisions must be followed, and it must be left to time to show him wrong.

Cooperative Review

For those who are interested in co-ops and whose talents lie along these lines, there is the Review of the International Catholic Co-operative Centre which is now in its second year. It is a quarterly publication in English and is obtained from 30 Rue des Champs, Ciney, Belgium, for \$2 a year.

When we are writing in the Catholic Worker we can only suggest the direction research may take. Peter Maurin used to tell the young people who came to listen to our discussions, to find what they wanted to do in life, and then study and prepare for it, to concentrate on such research and study. He was scornful of those who know “more and more about less and less” and let their time be frittered away in idle chatter and newsmongering.

Speaking at a parish meeting one evening last month, I was so unfortunate as to speak of a book, “Three who Made a Revolution,” by Bertram Wolf, and to talk of the years of study and planning that went into the Russian revolution. One of my listeners indignantly asked me how dared I hold up for example such men as Trotsky, Lenin and Stalin, and went on to indicate that we should read nothing about them, but think only of extirpating them. I was reminded of articles I have seen in some of our diocesan papers, and of a statement of Baron von Hugel that he would soon lose his faith if he read much of the diocesan press, which in our own time so often reflects the thinking of William Randolph Hearst and of the editorial writers of the Daily News.

Hospitality

Our own particular gifts are those of editors and pilgrims, speakers and writers, with a love of poverty and hospitality which go together. I don't think there will be any cooperatives started around **The Catholic Worker** office on Spring Street, but we can certainly patronize the small grocer and baker, if there is no cooperative in our district. You, Ammon, will be the pacifist anarchist who more nearly exemplifies the life of austerity than any we know, not to speak of manual labor and availability to all.

I cannot conclude this column, these many columns, without tribute to Marjorie Swann, participant in Omaha Action, who has also served a six months term in the woman's federal prison in West Virginia; to all those who are continuing the vigil at Fort Detrick in Frederick, Maryland, where poison gas and germ warfare are in preparation for future conflicts, who for months and months have stood in rain and cold at the gates of the plant, who go from house to house to make their appeal to change public opinion and public apathy. Willard Uphaus too, who is serving a term in New Hampshire of a year, for refusing to turn over to the state

the names of those who have come to the pacifist World Fellowship Camp that he was in charge of, must be remembered with respect and sympathy. God bless them all this coming year.

There is the Ghana team too, led by Michael Scott and participated in by Bayard Rustin with many others, who are protesting near the field of action, the testing of nuclear weapons in the Sahara. There may not be much news of these continuing demonstrations and protests in the daily press, but governments, the men in power, are familiar with their witness. People will read of the voyage of **The Golden Rule**, published by Doubleday and to be reviewed later, as a great adventure story that will do much to change men's thinking.

Mail

Much is happening all over the world, and our own small lives are filled here at **The Catholic Worker**, with the people we are caring for, the opus dei, and last but not least, the mail. We beg all our benefactors, all our friends and readers throughout the country who have written to us, who have sent us presents, and money to help pay the bills of feeding and sheltering people, to be patient and to know that answers to their greetings will come eventually. The mail piles high and there are not enough to do the work. So you who are reading this letter to Ammon, please receive our thanks our deep gratitude to you and to God who has sent us such friends, and if you feel neglected, if your address has not been on your letter, if you do not, for some reason get thanked by us,—God will thank you. You will truly have your reward.

And your mail, Ammon.

You have a folder full of cards and notes, Ammon, and we will send them to you care of Francis who will be meeting you at the gate of the prison, I hear. Archbishop Roberts, S.J. sends you cordial greetings and congratulations, and at the other end of the, (I shall not say social ladder), there is Francis Balem, convicted murderer, who sent us both a card from his prison. So remember to pray for him, as well as for the archbishop, and for all of us too, at St. Joseph's Loft, Spring St., New York.