

On Pilgrimage - March 1961

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The Catholic Worker, March 1961, 1, 3.

Summary: Spends a week in Balmorhea, Texas, while her car is repaired. Describes the apostolic works in the area as well as the living and working conditions of poor cotton pickers. Says suffering is "the strongest of all the spiritual weapons." (DDLW #780).

This is Balmorhea, Texas, within four hours of El Paso, and I am within two stops of California. I am writing from a little house called Bethany, which looks over miles of desert to the foothills of the Davis Mountains. Those foothills are five thousand feet high, and here it is three thousand feet up so that the first few days I suffered with a nagging little headache. I am resting here, to get the car fixed up, a valve job, and to wait for my 1961 plates to be sent on to me from New York. I do not know how I started out on December 28th without them. Everything else about the car was checked carefully, but we all overlooked a most important item, our plates, without which I would soon be stopped on the road.

Down the highway about half a mile from where I am, the old highway dips off over an irrigation ditch and leads through a grove of cottonwoods, to the Church of Christ the King, and to the Casa Maria Reina, formerly the rectory of the priest and now the center for one of the Combermere missions. Theresa Davis is in charge, and there is Marilyn and Joe, who make up the team, together with Fr. Paul and Anne, an associate who is teaching in the grade school of nearby Saragosa, and Eddie Doherty, who is visiting for a month here in this southwest desert. All are members of the secular institute founded by Catherine Doherty which is made up of men and women and priests, and numbers right now seventy-five with fifty in training, a preparation which lasts five years. There is also another visitor, Raejean, so the center is busy indeed.

The day begins at a quarter of six and continues until eleven at night, because some of their teaching must be at night. Their job is to teach catechism to all the children of the district and last night there was an evening of film strip, scenes from the Old Testament, with accompanying comments. I have been able to see some of the surrounding country since Joe and Anne and Marilyn all have to drive the children home who stay for catechism and the Mass which is at five each day.

It is amazing the number of visitors who drop by. I have been here just a week and during that time there were five nurses taking a winter vacation, and they came from Belgium, England and Canada; there were two young hitchhikers fed; there was the family stranded on the road that Mary and I had met on our way here from San Antonio (Mary has gone back to New York by bus, a three-day trip, non-stop, and I am proceeding alone). There are

visitors from the neighborhood, young Mexican girls, mothers who come in with delicious bowls of Mexican food, children who are waiting to go to Mass, who sit in the big living room and either listen to music or look at picture books; there are the young Mexican women being trained to teach catechism, too.

The house is made up of kitchen, dining room, small room where Eddie sits at his desk and divides his time between typewriter and his rock collection, living room and recreation room (television), two bedrooms and bath. It is small, as rectories go, but makes a very good and homelike meeting place and all the mothers and young women and children seem to take much joy in visiting there.

The Pius XII Center a mile away has three classrooms and it is near the public school so catechism is taught there and Mass offered every other day. On the other weekdays, Mass is at the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Saragosa, and it is there, too, in another little center which used to be another adobe brick church, that the children are taught. It is cold now and the children are all wearing shoes, but they still dress in thin cotton clothes and perhaps short-sleeved sweaters, but show little indication of suffering from the cold. They are used to suffering and accept discomfort. But on cold, cloudy days, one wonders how they keep warm in their little one-room huts which dot the landscape or cling to the banks of the irrigation ditches and creeks. But there are sometimes a dozen in such a hovel and just human warmth, I suppose, takes off the chill.

How hard it is ever to mention our voluntary poverty in such surroundings. No one is working now among the few thousands in the district. It is the tail end of the cotton picking, and I have seen only a dozen braceros still here, working in the fields, and only one cotton gin among the dozens hereabouts under operation. The people are living frugally on beans and tortillas, and occasionally on the delicious green chile which they peel and cook up with cheese and milk. One of the families brought us some tortilla dish last night and the girls stayed to show Marilyn how to make this side dish.

One of the reasons there is still cotton picking is that this last fall has been one of the rainiest seasons Texas has had for a long time, and the bolls did not open. So there has been a sporadic picking of cotton up till now. We got out of the car, Theresa and I, and went over to the truck to watch one of the men dumping his long sack into the great trailer by the side of the road. He carried it over his shoulder like a long bolster, weighed it (it was 76 pounds) and then clambered up on the truck and loosening either end, hung it over a beam and shook out the cotton which was being picked at this time of the year, husks and all. They are getting a cent and a half a pound now, and by working ten hours at high speed can make five dollars a day.

And they do work speedily. The sack is tied around their waists like an apron, and stretches out between their legs. They proceed down between two rows, and pick fast with both hands, stuffing the bag between their legs, which they have to shake back every now and then to push the cotton back. It is a long, heavy job, picking seventy-five pounds of cotton, dragging it along the field after one. The growers justify the contract with the Mexican government by saying they have not enough local labor to do the job in this long rich valley where the finest cotton in the world is grown, soft as silk, long fibered. But perhaps the people are not around because there is no work for them. One sees many a pickup truck on the road with moving

families, looking for work. There are many abandoned huts along the roads and ditches.

When the season is at its height, some growers have more than 300 braceros and the taverns and general stores are full. On the one little road where Casa Maria Reina is there are ten taverns, some little more than a hut, with the word BEER lettered in black across the front. In one larger tavern in Saragosa during picking season there are one hundred prostitutes brought in on Saturday nights for the entertainment of the braceros, and nothing is said or done about what might be really white slave traffic. Where do these women all come from? And are they not forced, many of them, into prostitution because of the insufferable conditions under which they have lived? It is no use saying that people are used to hunger, cold and hovels and hard gruelling work under a sun that blazes down day after day, until the heat reaches 130 degrees.

The group at Casa Maria Reina are where the children need them most, and they realize keenly the difference between their condition and that of the people they are serving. Such contrasts make the need for the constant daily practice of little sacrifices, little mortifications, a constant denial of self which is certainly harder than the occasional large gesture, an outward show of sacrifice which gets acclaim. I so often think of this around **The Catholic Worker** with its outward show of poverty, an appearance very often and not a reality with the self-indulgence which is so prevalent among each and every one of us Americans. (Reading a story like the one we presented from Korea two months ago makes us realize this over and over again, and it is good to print such stories so that we may constantly repent and start over again, God help us.)

The Rest of the Month

To work backward, we came here from San Antonio where we spent a day visiting the old missions, four of them and only one in good repair although all of them are being used for Sunday Mass; also we took part in a stand-in with the colored students from half a dozen colleges, including Catholic ones in the neighborhood. There were a number of white students with them, and some older people who looked like teachers. A priest stood by who said he would have joined us except that the movie theatre was showing "Suzie Wong" and he certainly would not see that even if he had been permitted to bring a dozen colored brothers in with him. The demonstration was peaceful and the behavior on either side courteous. Allen Stehling and his sister Linda took part with us. Allen is an artist who works for a department store, the largest in San Antonio, as a decorator, and Linda is a student at college. Their mother, a widow, is as young as they, and teaches school. It is a fine family, and we had a good meeting that night in an artist friend's studio. Allen is going to do a picture for the CW for us soon, and I shall keep reminding him, if it does not appear. I like his work immensely. It was shown two years ago at the Liturgical conference held at Notre Dame.

One notable thing about San Antonio, the beauty of the little park which borders the San Antonio river which winds through the town, is owing to the work of the unemployed during the great depression. We wandered along the river side which is below the level of the street, and watched the service men in strange, tank-like boats, some of which were motored and some of which they worked with their feet, solemnly like children on tricycles. There are

several little restaurants along the river bank, and the park walk was open to all, a lovely place to spend Sunday morning after Mass. When one contrasts the ugliness of our river banks in all our great cities, one must admire the vision of the former mayor of San Antonio who saw that the unemployed were put to work on a project which is bringing joy to generations. It redeems the entire city which has slums like every other city visited. And yet Fr. Bruckberger insists we are a country which has done away with poverty.

Corpus Christi

Corpus Christi, a city of great beauty and delightful friends: We were guests of Anne Dobson, who is the society editor of the local paper and lives with her sister and mother, and has a little apartment next to their garage where we were put up in comfort. We had a crowded two days. We spent all one afternoon talking to Fr. Fernandez about the *cursillistas* about whom we will write in an article for the Commonweal. An article about New Orleans and Baton Rouge will appear in that magazine soon. There is not enough room in **The Catholic Worker** to cover all the stimulating contacts on this trip. There are not only the secular institutes such as Caritas, in New Orleans, Abita Springs and Baton Rouge, but that of Madonna House, Combermere, which is so alive, so well trained, and so active.

I visited two families, the Johnsons and the Flowers, both of them anxious and determined to work in the apostolate so far as their vocations, as married folk, teachers, parents, will allow them. Tom Flower travels for a pharmaceutical firm and covers a large territory in southern Texas. He was a former coast guard and has had an adventurous past, fishing and sailing among the Virgin Islands and Cuba and off the coast of Florida, before he married and settled in Corpus Christi. His wife was an occupational therapist; both the Johnsons were teachers and he is interested in getting out a Family Round Robin and I am going to send him a list of names of families who might be interested in this venture – the beginnings maybe of a monthly, run by and written for Catholic families. Ed Willock was interested in such a venture, and maybe he will bless it now.

We had a good meeting on Wednesday and Thursday nights, and also at Friday noon at our trip to San Antonio. Tom had our car serviced and filled with gas and oil in the morning, while he took time off to drive us all to Padre Island, which has so hard a beach that one can drive on it all the way to the Mexican border. It was a gentle calm day, but still not warm enough for a picnic. I was sorry to leave these friends with whom we felt so much at home.

There were no meetings between Baton Rouge and Corpus Christi and we covered long stretches of desert, reclaimed desert, sheep and goat herds and cattle ranches, and tiny towns in the hills. One place we stopped at for the night was flat as a platter but surrounded by mountains so close that we felt we were in the crater of a dead volcano.

Before we reached New Orleans, we stopped at Natchez and before that in Arkansas where we visited Elizabeth Burrow, known to John Cogley, Tom Sullivan and all our Chicago friends in the earliest days of **The Catholic Worker** there. She breaks our hearts with her courage in the face of physical and mental suffering; physical because she has cancer; mental because of the hostility of her people of the South towards the Negro. She cringes at the sight of sin,

and Faubus and his forebears sicken her and it is as though she were flayed alive in a long, slow martyrdom.

Visiting Elizabeth, I remembered the words of Therese of Lisieux, “Let us suffer if needs be, in bitterness, so long as we suffer.” And Elizabeth is “accounted worthy to suffer,” as it was said of the apostles in the early days of the Church. Suffering is the strongest of all the spiritual weapons being used in this non-violent revolution going on so slowly in the South.

To be continued. . .