

On Pilgrimage - April 1963

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Complains about a litter-filled city park, wondering why the unemployed aren't put to work to beautify it. Receives a gift of Spanish language lessons and enjoys a visit to her daughter's family in Vermont. Eulogizes Joe Roach, a long-time resident at their farm—"Joe was another Lazarus." (DDLW #801).

It is the last day of March and the weather is so warm and mild and so many of us are recovering from the flu that one cannot think of anything but how wonderful it is to sit on a park bench and bask in the sun. There should be benches on every street corner in the city. Down in our Italian section people pull out their chairs and sit out by the curb where there will be no danger of anything falling from the window sills of any of the five stories above them.

Children come from school and stop to buy ices, and children fret over too many clothes. But every now and then as you turn a corner, a wind springs up and you realize that at sunset it will be cold again. Buds are coming out on the bushes in the park, and in the swampy sections of Staten Island as people come to and from the farm, the call of the spring peepers is poignant.

Across the street from the three-story loft building which is our office, dining room and all day quarters, the long park which extends from Houston Street to Delancey which was the result of urban renewal many years ago and brought the displacement of many families, is still a shambles. Garbage, tin cans, litter of all kinds and also human beings, sitting on what is left of a stone wall. Children play in the midst of this litter. Five years ago we were displaced by the city, because of the new subway link being constructed from our home at 223 Chrystie Street, three blocks north of us, and since then the park has been like this.

So much work could be done there, and nightly we hear about the unemployment problem among the old and the young, the problems of automation. But there is no money for the employment of the young or for more schools or playgrounds. Only for missiles, or for the exploration of space.

My room mate Marie ruminates on this every night. "Don't you think it's foolish, spending all this money on space?" she asks me. She used to gather newspapers from the trash receptacles all over the city every afternoon and come back in the evening to give us our choice. We didn't have much choice last month. I ask her for the **Wall Street Journal**, but she doesn't often get that. The few copies I saw in this time of dearth fascinate me. One issue told all about how complicated is the life of Roy Cohn, who prosecuted Hiss and who

is or rather was our staunch defender against communism. He does not have time for that now, except for an occasional foray into the field to keep his hand in. I heard him one night shouting down a lawyer from Northwestern University over the case of Morton Sobell who is still in Atlanta Federal prison.

The lawyer was trying to talk about the legal aspects of the case and Morton's chances for freedom. Silence would be the only weapon against such an opponent as Cohn. Any way, his affairs seem to be very complicated now and he is mixed up in all kinds of ownership of businesses, all of which was set forth by the **Wall Street Journal** in a front page right hand column and perhaps a Balzac could understand it but I could not. Anyway he did not seem to be prospering along these lines and perhaps that was why he was back on the radio, to get his hand in, or rather voice in on what had won him acclaim in the past. Also the Wall Street Journal told of peasant uprisings in Mexico.

I ask Marie for the **Christian Science Monitor** too, as there are nature notes, and feature articles about Maine and New England and rural life which make very pleasant reading in the New York slums. She has the **Post** now, Murray Kempton doesn't work there any more, but there are some interesting stories about a woman with eighteen cats and how she was sent away to a mental hospital, and about a vagrant who was picked up with \$50,000 on him.

There is always so much happening. But it was too bad about the woman; with the cats. "I do love little kittens," Marie said. "One time I was talking with a poor man on the Bowery and he said he did not believe in God, and I told him that even if I did not go to the Volunteers of America every Sunday night where they talk to you about God, I would believe there was a God because he made little kittens. And puppies, and the birds." There is a pet store on Delancey that Marie stops by every day.

Things That Happen

This winter Hattie has died. She was with us probably fifteen years. Scotch Mary is in Columbus hospital with a broken hip. She fell on the ice. Mollie got a broken hip too and she has just been operated on for cataracts in Bellevue hospital. Michele has found herself an apartment. So has Phyllis, so has Norma. They take in others, too, in emergency. Millie who does so much to keep things neat around the CW has her little room and her privacy. Terry and Barbara are in the apartment in front of us, and Terry Becker will come down from St. Joseph's College to help us Easter week. That accounts for the women and girls who are with us in the city. There is also Josephine and the Catherines and Ruth and a number of others who come in for the day and for meals. Sometimes I think how few women we have, and then I look around and there are more than I realized. But there is no one in charge as Julia, or Irene or Jane used to be. We have no woman's house, as such. We live together in some cases, or as neighbors, each independent. I keep wishing over the years that someone would buy a hostel for women where they could get a dormitory bed for fifty cents a night or a little cell with a door. So much still to be done. Doesn't some woman want to run an inn by the side of the road for women who are poor?

Meanwhile

Meanwhile we are getting along very well. I am staying in town and have done no travelling since Christmas, except for a week end jaunt to Toronto, a flying trip to Pittsburgh, and one three day visit to Tamar. The reason for sticking so close to home is that one of the Christmas presents I received was one hundred lessons in Spanish at the Berlitz School. What a friend, to give me such a present! And how I have enjoyed the winter, in spite of being up and down with the flu!

Berlitz

For one thing I like the atmosphere of the Berlitz school where you cannot speak a word of English but must speak Spanish for two hours, a day with one or another teacher who may be from Spain, Chile or Cuba! Most of the time I had a teacher from Spain who had traveled and worked all over South America and Central America, who had fought in the Riff, who had a most adventurous life and who enjoyed our conversations on pacifism, anarchism, farming communes, literature and so on. My trouble is that I think in English and translate, and hear and translate, but I am getting better, now that I have had seventy lessons. We go through the lessons in the book and talk about food, travel, the time of day, the weather, the amenities of life, and then discuss a little of the news of the day. I am beginning to feel confident that with patience, on the part of my hearers, and on my own part with myself, I will begin to understand more quickly.

I already feel at home and enjoy mightily following the Mass each day in Spanish, in the missal Fr. La Mountain at Holy Crucifix church gave me. Someone said, that Fr. Louis Merton says, that the Bible in Spanish was most beautiful.

What cheers me in my study is remembering that Raissa Maritain wrote how she sat as a little girl, miserable in her French classrooms when her family moved from Russia to France and how suddenly she began to understand. And a priest told me that when he was studying in a French Canadian seminary where they teach in Latin, after agonizing months, he too began suddenly to understand. This sounds like a miracle to me. But Lou and Lenna Jones in Cuba said the same. Suddenly, after studying for months,— they understood.

There is something about going back to school again which is very stimulating. From the office, or from our apartments to the Berlitz school down near Trinity Church it takes only fifteen minutes to ride on the Broadway bus, and for those who work in the area it is simple. I saw Chinese, Japanese, French, Germans and Americans all coming in to study.

This week end I brought Mary O'Neil (Roger's Mary) down to the beach house for a couple of days by the sea. She had been sick in the Woman and Children's Infirmary and Roger was taking care of the children at the Glen Gardner community. It was beautiful weather all day from the early morning "Get up, it is late o'clock," of little Johnny Hughes next door, until now at sundown. Johnny is wearing his first pair of suspenders which he calls his "red fenders" and which make him look, he thinks, like the firemen who came rushing down to the beach tonight to put out a brush fire just off the road which was threatening the

beach houses. They have been on 450 calls in the last few days, and they look with dread on the Easter holidays when children will be home, and fires on the beaches are liable with a sudden shift of wind to bring sparks into the fields and woods at our end of the island. They blame too many of the fires on the children and forget the cigaret from the passing motorist, and the dumping of trash along the roadside, the broken glass which under the sun's rays starts fires amid the litter and dry grass. (I look at so much of this from the standpoint of employment and work teams now, and see so many places which could be made beautiful which are eye sores now.)

Vermont

I had a lovely visit to Vermont and saw the Hennessy family. All are well, (our readers demand news of them.) Becky is 18, April third, and is going to college in the fall. The three oldest grandchildren work summers at what they can get to do, Becky in a summer resort, Sue baby-sitting and Eric on a neighboring farm, where he earned his living last summer, board and ten dollars a month. He shot his first deer in the middle of the season last fall and Nick is still the best fisherman.

How wonderful these visits. Mary at twelve is the most competent and reliable of baby tenders, and Margaret reads to all of them, she is ten, and Martha is helpful in so many ways, sitting on the side of the sink washing huge messes of dishes for the family of nine children. The older girls can cook, bake, and do other household chores, but they have heavy studies. Still Sue gets in a lot of work in the house. And then there are Hilaire and Katey, who smiles always and says yes! When Nickie was little he used to say, firmly, "Not me!" but Mary always said, "Me, too!" Katey is very soft spoken with her little "yes."

"We say prayers in school," Martha and Margaret tell me, "and we sing our grace at noon. Like this: In the morning it is the Our Father, and then Teacher reads us a prayer out of a book. She has three books. Then at noon we sing. 'O the Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord for giving me the things I need—the sun and rain and the apple seeds—O the Lord is good to me.'"

Yes, they have prayer in the little public school in Vermont, and prayer in the home, and prayer and catechism with the sisters on Saturday morning.

Post-script

Joe Roach suddenly died,—one of the men on the farm, just after lunch, falling in his room by the side of his bed. The priest was called at once, and the ambulance, but Joe died while the priest was anointing him, with Jean Walsh, our dear nurse who tends all the sick at the farm at his side, and Monsignor Dolan, our pastor, saying the prayers for him of the last great sacrament. He was dead before the ambulance arrived a moment later.

Joe was one of the poor. He came to us when we had the farm at Newburgh a dozen years ago. He had a bad back injury when he worked on a farm upstate and was too crippled to work elsewhere. As far as we knew he had no compensation of any kind, and as with so many

who were with us told us little of his family. But the police were able to locate a brother who claimed the body and will bury Joe in Newburgh in the plot of his family.

Joe was another Lazarus who had little in this life. He was poor in every way, having nothing of this world's goods, and little health of body. He had nothing when he died, and it is a humbling thing, going through the effects of one who has been with us for so long, to see how little accumulations there were, only the simple needs of a change of clothing, radio perhaps for the news and the sports, a few paper back books, a prayer book. He performed his religious duties, he earned his own living by the sweat of his brow, never failing to put in hours of work with us, washing pots, doing laundry, and he also served the poor,—all those who came to the farm in their need, or to conferences, days of recollection or discussion. As Peter always reminded us, we take into Heaven with us only that which we have given away in this life, and Joe had asked little for himself and had given what he had.

Let us pray for him and for all the other poor among our readers,—those who are poor in bodily health, or soul's health as well as for those who are poor in this world's goods. May the love and affection Joe so craved for in this life be his now, "Heaped up, pressed down and running over."