

# On Pilgrimage - September 1964

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*Summary: Urges direct action on behalf of the poor instead of just being critical of the clergy. Criticizes the bureaucracy of the War on Poverty and quotes from the Sermon on the Mount to stress the need for individual action, particularly in regards to helping African-Americans. Keywords: non-violence, voluntary poverty (DDLW #818).*

We have just finished making a retreat at our Catholic Worker farm at Tivoli, and as usual we come out of the retreat with what the world would call an upside down way of looking at things.

When I wrote last month about personal responsibility, the work of the layman and the work of the clergy, the controversies on the West Coast, the article brought a number of letters, some with bitter comment and some indicating that they had obtained better perspective on the situation and a more loving attitude. During our retreat we read Jorgensen's **Life of St. Francis**, and here are some less known words of the universally beloved St. Francis.

“Then the Lord gave me and still gives me so great a confidence in priests, that if they even persecuted me, I would for the sake of their consecration say nothing about it. And if I had the wisdom of Solomon and traveled in the parishes of poor priests, yet I would not preach without their permission. And them and all other priests I will fear, love, and honor as my superiors, and I will not look at their faults, for I see God's Son in them, and they are my superiors. And I do this because here on earth, I see nothing of the Son of the highest God, except His most holy body and blood, which the priests receive and which only they give to others. And these solemn secrets I will honor and venerate above everything and keep them in the most sacred places.”

In August on the feast of the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John went up on the mountain with Jesus, and saw him transfigured, shining in glory. This vision given to them to sustain them during the suffering of Jesus, faded and the words of the Gospel read, “They saw only Jesus.” Each year when I read this short phrase I have thought of it as a word to hold close to my heart to help me to regard properly all those most degraded ones we come into contact with, whom we see lying abandoned in gutters, and all those whom the world call the unworthy poor. And I thought this year how it applies to all, also to those in high places, to those who are in honor as well as to those in dishonor. “They saw only Jesus.”

I am not judging them who have cried out in criticism. Doubtless we need a Savonarola as well as a St. Francis. God gives us our temperaments.

I am not minimizing the evils of the sins of omission on part of clergy and laity in California, Louisiana, Philadelphia, Rochester, or almost any other city you want to name. I am not minimizing the sufferings of the Negro, in whom Christ is crucified over and over again. But I am trying to call attention to the attitude of Jesus, who should be our model. He said of the oppressors, whether foreign or local, whether priest or intellectual, or worker, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." He said, "Put up your sword," and that sword can be of tongue or pen.

Bernanos said, "Hell is not to love any more." Righteous wrath and indignation is usually not loving. Jesus said to love our enemies.

But to speak of the whole problem on the natural plane, it seems to me an enormous waste of energy to direct our attacks against the hierarchy instead of attacking the problem of the poverty of the Negro, his joblessness, his homelessness, the insult and injury which is inflicted on him. It is a temptation of the devil, a diversion of our energies. Direct action would be to rent and sell to Negroes in our own neighborhoods, or take in a Negro family as an immediate work of mercy, to find work, to start an industry, a pilot project - - in other words to use one's energies and imagination. Some actions would be fruitful and some would raise persecution and as much of a hullabaloo as the letter writing on the West Coast. Direct action, rather than the indirect action of asking why the hierarchy behaves as it does, would be more to the point.

## The Unpopular Front

**The Catholic Worker** is controversial also in its attitude to the war on poverty. To attack poverty by preaching voluntary poverty seems like madness. But again, it is direct action.

"The coat that hangs in your closet belongs to the poor." And to go further, "If anyone takes your coat, give him your cloak too." To be profligate in our love and generosity, spontaneous, to cut all the red tape of bureaucracy! "Open your mouth and I will fill it," says the Lord in the Psalms. The more you give away, the more the Lord will give you to give. It is a growth in faith. It is the attitude of the man whose life of common sense and faith is integrated.

To live with generosity in times of crisis is only common sense. In the time of earthquake, flood, fire, people give recklessly; even governments do this.

The trouble is most people do not see the poverty. Right now, in the Hudson Valley, the fruit is being picked by crews of Negroes from the South who have been moving up along the coast, and they are invisible to the eye, living back in the woods, on dirt roads, working deep in the orchards. With every migration some are left behind to work in the storage plants, in the packing sheds, and they have the worst houses, crowded together in rural slums. Sickness and destitution put some on the welfare rolls, and they are generally despised by the righteous tax payer. This is our attitude toward poverty when we do see it.

This morning, Tuesday, feast of the birthday of Mary, mother of Jesus, the lesson from **Morning Praise and Evensong**, (compiled by William Storey and published in paperback by Fides Press, Notre Dame, Ind.) was from the Sermon on the Mount:

“You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ I, on the contrary, declare to you: do not meet evil with evil. No, if someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other as well. And if a man intends by process of law to rob you of your coat, let him have your cloak as well. And if someone forces you to go one mile with him, go two miles with him. Give to anyone who asks you, and if someone would borrow from you, do not turn away.

“You have heard it said: ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ I, on the contrary, declare to you: love your enemies and pray for your persecutors, and thus prove yourselves children of your Father in heaven. He certainly lets his sun rise upon bad and good alike, and makes the rain fall on sinners as well as saints. Really, if you love those who love you what reward do you deserve? Do not tax collectors do as much? And if you have a friendly greeting for your brothers only, are you doing anything out of the common? Do not the heathen do as much? Be perfect then as your Heavenly Father is perfect.”

This really was the subject of the retreat that Father John J. Hugo gave us here at the Catholic Worker Farm at Tivoli. It is the ideal, the goal, at which we aim. We fall far short of everything we profess, but we certainly don’t want to water down the doctrine of Christ to fit ourselves. We can keep on striving toward it. “Lo, the Bridegroom cometh, go ye forth to meet him.” We have to go towards him. We have to do our share. For the rest, “His grace is sufficient for us, we can be confident.”

We had a good liturgical retreat, centered around the Mass. We said Lauds and Vespers, we sang beautiful hymns, compiled by a researcher and musicologist who works with Father in his parish. Labor Day was the feast of St. Joseph the Worker, and the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin followed, and we have just now said goodbye to Father, who is driving back to Pittsburgh and his parish. Retreatants came from San Francisco, from Maine, and points in between, and a few are still here. Our usual population of about thirty go on about their daily tasks.

## **To Vermont**

And I too am setting out this morning for Vermont, where I will continue to take care of the grandchildren for the next four months. I was there for the week before the retreat, because Tamar’s course in practical nursing has already started in Brattleboro (and she loves it).

I have had a week already of cooking and washing up and sewing and the general enjoyment of eight of my own, (Sue was still working at a summer resort near Rutland and I must pick her up there tomorrow) with half a dozen other neighboring children, much playing of Beatle records, not to speak of two melancholy ballads about a devil woman and a jack and a king. But after tomorrow they will all be in school and the quiet Fall will begin.