

What Does Ammon Mean?

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Summary: Chronicles her relationship with Ammon Hennacy, describing his character and memories of him at the Catholic Worker. Praises his pacifism, voluntary poverty, works of mercy, joy, prison experiences, and compassion. Asks for prayers for his reconversion to the Church. (DDLW #826).

And by that title to this article, I mean: “What does Ammon mean to people, to the tens of thousands he has been in contact with during his life, before and after his association with ****The Catholic Worker?***** which he broke off four years ago when he went to Salt Lake City. And what does he mean to us now – after his marriage out of the Church?

I will try to answer these questions in this article, which I have been thinking about ever since we got the news a month ago. He wrote the news to me, told it to Mary Lathrop as she passed through Utah on her way to New York City; and told his story to four or five priests in Salt Lake City. The news has spread as news does in a village, which is what the Church in America sometimes seems to be. (Sometimes it seems like a country within a country.)

To write this I shall have to be very personal, but Ammon does not mind being written about, there is no false modesty about him, he accepts praise gracefully and gratefully, even though he brushes off or does not understand criticism.

Cardinal Newman once wrote in a meditation often reprinted on prayer cards, **“God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission – I may not know it in this life, but I shall be told it in another.”**

Ammon has always known his vocation, and that is to be a peacemaker, to oppose war by a lifetime of often solitary witness. To speak out, and to suffer the imprisonments that have occurred because of it. It was in Atlanta Federal Penitentiary that he was converted to Christianity (a Tolstoyan Christianity) that rejected what he called organized religion, and where he received so great a light, according to a rector of a seminary who read his writings, that it blinded him (and perhaps the rector meant, blinded him to any further search for truth). On reading again Tolstoy’s great novel **Resurrection** and encountering that scornful chapter on the celebration of the liturgy in the prison which so saddened me as unworthy of genius, I suddenly thought. “Well, if I can put up with this in Tolstoy, I can put up with and not judge Ammon Hennacy.” Still, as in a way his sponsor in Catholic circles and as his godmother, I must give an accounting of my feelings now.

I do not think that Ammon's pacifism would have made the impression on me that it did if it had not been backed up by so consistent a love for the poor and his determination to live poor, as he said, and that with a clear realization of their faults. He doesn't hesitate to apply to the men he lives with such terms as **bum** and **drunk** but he has always been ready to sacrifice himself for them and work for a change in the social order which would give man a share in the responsibility and creativity of work and its rewards which in turn might build in him a sense of the common good and his responsibility for it. Indeed Ammon's sense of responsibility for keeping up the Joe Hill House of Hospitality and St. Joseph's Refuge in Salt Lake City has led him lately to avoid civil disobedience, which might land him in prison and separate him from this work of mercy. And from his newly acquired wife.

Pacifism, voluntary poverty and the works of mercy, and added to that the ability to work harder than anyone else at manual labor –he is rightly famed for these things. We often said around **The Catholic Worker** that Ammon worked harder than any one, was stronger than anyone else, and though he was the oldest of our group, he seemed the youngest.

He wrote about his experiences in prison and at manual work in the book which he first called **The Autobiography of a Catholic Anarchist** and which he revised these last years and published himself this year under the title of **The Book of Ammon**. It is a book which makes fascinating reading, except for the last chapters, which give Ammon's religious opinions. As some men are tone-deaf to music, so he is to theology. As Peter Maurin would say, * *“he knows more and more about less and less”**along these lines. But the greater part of his book is sound and solid and filled with warmth and humor and vitality, the man shining through it all, with his immense joy in living.

Father Damasus Winzen, the famous Benedictine, once said that it was tragic that man today had lost this joy of life that children usually have. One could not conceive of Ammon's ever being bored or not knowing what man is here for. To Ammon man was very definitely here to struggle against the forces, the dominations and powers that threatened his freedom. To Ammon, the pacifist, life was a fight, and nothing gave him greater joy than this keen sense of struggle against gigantic forces and adversaries such as the military and the State. In fact, when he says that he has only a faint idea of Heaven, it is because he knows that the fight will be resolved there, the victory won, and life without a fight is inconceivable to Ammon. Life itself is something to be fought for, it is so precious, and right now he is carrying on a relentless war against capital punishment, fighting for the life of a young rapist-murderer in the death house in Utah whose appeal has just been turned down by the United States Supreme Court.

Ammon likes that quotation from St. Catherine of Siena, who said: **“All the Way to Heaven is Heaven, because He said ‘I am the Way**’**” Yes, Ammon believes so much in Heaven here and now that he cannot really believe in any “pie in the sky by and by,” to quote the words of one Joe Hill's songs. He believed in reincarnation, probably because it would enable him to go on with fighting, which is the breath of life to him.

Ammon has described the life of the poor as Maxim Gorky has, and his compassion shines forth in his prison accounts. When he was on Riker's Island the men from the Bowery confined there moved him so in their “innocence” that he went to confession. Confession was a rare thing with Ammon, because he had no sense of guilt; he committed no mortal sins,

he said, and so felt no need of that grace he so little understood. But he did understand at that moment, I believe, that he himself was not worthy to be considered poor and one of them; his voluntary poverty was so rich compared to their destitution. It was one of his rare moments of humility. He went to confession again after seeing **La Strada**, an Italian film that stirred him in somewhat the same way.

Yes, Ammon liked to go to the movies on occasion, and he liked sweets and was always asking why someone did not bake him a raisin pie to feast on after one of his fasts. Ammon was a strict vegetarian but did not like fanatic vegetarians and used to make fun of them. He did not make a religion of it, he said, and when on a Sunday our cook would scramble the eggs with chopped-up bacon to make the treat go further he would push the meat to one side and eat the eggs. The men in the kitchen loved him, probably for “doing time” so often, and always saw to it that he got some extra food, like a fried pepper or a cheese omelet. They never showed much imagination, but he appreciated their thoughtfulness. He fasted regularly from Thursday night until Friday evening, a 24-hour fast, and once a year, as penance for our dropping the bomb on Hiroshima, he fasted one day for each year since the bomb was dropped. This coming year it will be twenty days of complete fasting: no food or fruit juices.

Prayer Life

Prayer and fasting. All the while he was with us in New York he was a daily communicant, and in the back of his missal were the names of all those who had asked his prayers, and he told me that he read them over each day right after receiving communion, when he “was closest to Our Lord.” Naming them over this way in the presence of God was the strongest prayer, he felt. Certainly the kind of meditative reading he did was a prayer, and in the early years after his baptism as a Catholic he did a good deal of this type of reading, in the missal, and in some of the lives of the saints. He also read **The Spirit of Catholicism** by Karl Adam.

And if as time passed he did not give wholehearted assent to the Church any longer, seeing only her faults, he did always give assent to people. If anyone needed a bed, he gave his. I remember when he slept under the table in the big library in the old Chrystie Street place, which Roger O’Neil had turned into a dormitory for all the extra men to come and sleep in each night. What did it matter that the room became lousy and that all our books were stolen, to be sold for a drink? These guests were doing us a favor by relieving us of superfluous possessions. At least we could rationalize our loss in this way, to keep from being too disturbed by it. Ammon was the only one of our crowd so to share the destitution of the others. **“If anyone asks for your coat, give him your cloak too. If anyone asks you to walk a mile, walk with him a second mile. From him who asks of you, do not turn aside.”**He did not boast of these deeds as he did of his jail sentences.

He sold **Catholic Workerson** the street every day of the week, and his pockets were always full of pennies so that he could give the price of a “flop,” as the men call it, if we had no room in the house.

He was rich in friends, and when he had enemies he tried to visit them and win them over to his way of thinking, or if not that, to win their friendship. He played Indian records to John

Cort's children, he pruned the fruit trees in Carl Paulson's orchard, he chopped down a dead tree in Diana Lewis' yard, he helped me clean Tamar's cellar and yard and bury the trash when she lived on Staten Island.

He won the friendship of young men because he made them see how important the witness of only one person could be. Knowing history as he did, he could reinforce his position by quotations, by examples of what great things one man could accomplish when he was on the side of justice and truth. As Father Hauser made us realize how great a calling ours was, called to be the sons of God, only a little less than the angels, Ammon dealt with man on the natural level and made him realize what his freedom meant and how freely he could chose to love God and brother. Grace builds on nature, so I always felt that Ammon, in his emphasis on this world, was doing the work of the laymen and preparing them to act like sons of Good.

Old men and young children and women, Ammon won them all. We often teased him about his "girl friends," all the women who invited to supper, and we accused him, in spite of his fasts, of gluttony in the face of so much dining out. We could make a litany of his devoted friends: Alice, Dorothy, Ginny, Pat, Janey, Eileen, Vivian, Mary, Carol and Molly. We all enjoyed him and his affection, which he was not at all averse to showing. He was affectionate and he was lonely, as celibate men are lonely, as priests are lonely.

Once I accused him of not knowing what it was to suffer, and he looked at me suddenly with stricken eyes and said: "When my wife left me with two girls, I cried myself to sleet at night for a long time." Teased about a current infatuation, he defended himself: "Never remember the time I was not in love with some woman." Another time, on the West Coast, when we were meeting his son-in-law he said: "I have only loved one woman in my life, and that is my wife. And I suppose he found a little of her in each of the woman he came in contact with.

Of course they are all young and beautiful and it was natural that he should love them. I remember Father Farina once telling a young woman around **The Catholic Worker** who was always falling in and out of love: "It is the love of God stirring within you." And St. Augustine said that we should always love everyone as though he or she were the only one. If we saw people as God sees them, we should indeed see the beauties of each unique soul. And if we had the love of God in us we would indeed be seeing them as God sees them. So we always felt that Ammon had much of the love of God in him, that he should be so loving to people.

Yet I suppose he was always lonely. Each soul stands alone, and it is hard not to have children and grandchildren. I remember a celibate who worked with us saying to me wistfully one time, "How wonderful that you have relatives, a sister and brother whom you visit, and a daughter and grandchildren. You are rich."

So now Ammon has found a friend, a companion.

Devotion to Mary

But how can I help but sorrow, believing as I do that our soul's life depends on our daily super-substantial bread, Jesus Christ become incarnate, taking on our flesh through the

flesh of Mary. Her assent “**Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy word,**” is enough reason for our devotion to the Blessed Mother, which Ammon found hard to understand, even as Cardinal Newman before him did at the beginning of his conversion.

After all, as St. Augustine said, “**The flesh of Jesus is the flesh of Mary.**” If we love Jesus in His humanity (and the conversion of the two Saint Teresas came about because of a sudden realization of it) we must love His Blessed Mother. When I say conversion I mean one of them many conversions we must all pass through. The saints themselves spoke of these experiences as conversions.

So perhaps Ammon is on the way to going through another conversion in his long and adventurous life, and I do not mean a conversion to another faith but a return to and a deepening of his understanding of the Catholic faith.

I cannot help but feel, of course, that we have failed him, that our example was such that he was not inspired, enlivened, by Catholics as he was by such people as Dave Dellinger, editor of **Liberation**, and Clarence Jordan, of the Koinonia community in Americus, Georgia. These two men had his whole-hearted respect. Realizing this, our own failures, we can only pray that God will give him further light, that another conversion, that is, a turning to God and a return to his own strong mission, will come about, and that he will begin to see the Church in perspective, as founded by Christ on the Rock of Peter and enduring to this day in spite of the tares among the wheat – in spite of the scandals. Reading that same book, **Resurrection**, previously referred to, I remember how the hero, suddenly faced with the degradation of the girl he had ruined, and his own sense of responsibility for it, suddenly hated all his surroundings and all the people in them, friends, relatives, servants. But as his recognition of his own personal responsibility increased, he was filled with light and joy and began to love them as poor fellow human beings, and not to judge them, but only himself. So we hope Ammon will some day see the wheat, not the tares, in the Church.

We will continue to print Ammon’s accounts of his life at Joe Hill House and St. Joseph’s Refuge and pledge faithfulness to our friendship with him, but at the same time we ask for prayers for him, “**that all things work together for good to them that love God,**” and we ask especially the prayers of St. Joan of Arc, his favorite saint, for him. She herself recanted once and went against her “voices,” but later repented of her recantation. And at the same time that we pray for Ammon, let us ourselves pray for final perseverance and faithfulness to the end, to that Church, our Mother, who nourishes us from the “breasts of her tenderness,” as well as with the strong meat of the Gospel, and with the Body of Our Lord Himself in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar.