

On Pilgrimage - October/November 1966

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Summary: Reveals that a pilgrimage in September 1932 to the shrine of the Jesuit martyrs and her later prayer for a vocation at the Blessed mother shrine combined to draw Peter Maurin to her. Resolves to halt travelling to complete writing assignments after two speaking engagements already agreed to. Notes the first wedding of a grand child and death of her brother Donald. Notes the sadness of November with nature dying around us until we rise again. (DDLW #845).

I first met Peter Maurin just after the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1932, when I had returned from reporting the Hunger March of the Unemployed, which was a march on Washington from all parts of the country by seamen, shipworkers, textile workers, miners, and other workers, demanding social security, unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, aid for dependent children, and so on. (We have these things now because of the demonstrations, marches and other pilgrimages which took place then, and, think with hope of the present-day pilgrimages of the migrant and agricultural workers of California and Texas and the peace parades, sit-ins, vigils and the pamphleteering and leafleting which are going on today.) I have written before about praying at the Shrine of our Lady in Washington and of how I came back to New York to find Peter Maurin waiting for me with the suggestion that I use my journalistic background to get out a paper to reach the men in the street.

But I have never written about my solitary pilgrimage in September of that same year to the shrine of the Jesuit martyrs at Auriesville, New York. I had read in the Catholic News of a pilgrimage, which was to be sponsored by St. Michael's Church, to leave from Grand Central station on a Sunday morning, arrive at the shrine for mass at noon and return to New York after Benediction at four p.m. The cost was minimal. I had never made a religious pilgrimage and I knew nothing of this shrine, which was in the process of being built up as a popular place of pilgrimage. It was long before the mitigation of the rule of fasting, so I set out early with no comforting coffee and nothing to eat, as did the entire train load of St. Michael's parishioners. I read about the Jesuit martyrs long before I became a Catholic, in the compilation of their reports that Edna Kenton had edited. She was a friend of the old Masses, where I worked long before. I had never heard, however, of the Indian girl, Kateri Tekakwitha, who was born at this site, and I was fascinated when I read her story in pamphlet form. I had brought no lunch with me as the others had, and there was no place to purchase anything, because the one lunch stand was soon sold out. So I spend a day of penance there at Auriesville, with nothing to eat until I returned home after eight o'clock that night.

One never knows exactly what one's needs are, or what graces one receives on such occasions, but I often felt that this day of penance influenced my writing the next months so that Peter Maurin, reading the articles I had written dealing with the problems of poverty and unemployment, came to me with his message and his teaching, in answer to the prayers I said that day, and the day at the shrine of the Blessed Mother in Washington, where I prayed most especially for the hunger marchers, to whom I felt more akin than I did to the thousands at the shrines.

New Resolution

A few weeks ago, I again made a solitary pilgrimage to Auriesville, on my way back from speaking engagements at Rochester and Geneseo, New York. The shrine was all but deserted that late afternoon. The cafeteria was closing for the year that very day and the woman in charge showed me where her guesthouse was, up the hill. I was the last guest she was going to take that season, she said, as she and her husband were going down to Florida. I slept well that night, after a supper of a cheese sandwich, an apple and coffee made with hot water from the faucet. Mass was at seven the next morning, in the huge octagonal auditorium, with many altars. I was one of only three participating at the Mass.

I remained for a time in front of the statue of St. Isaac Jogues, thinking of that former pilgrimage so long ago. And suddenly it came to me: I had been going around the country, and yes, to Mexico, Italy and England too, speaking for many, many years now, telling the story of the Catholic Worker movement and its perennial philosophy of work and poverty, as the basis of peace and as an expression of the love of God and love of brother. For thirty-four years I have spent months of every year in traveling and speaking, and I never left our house of hospitality in New York, or one of our farms, without a wrench, without a sickness at having to go. And yet I was convinced that this was my vocation. Years ago, Father McSorley, of the Paulists, who was my first spiritual adviser, had told me to go where I was asked. I enjoyed all the trips, the meetings with all our groups and speaking at all our houses over the years, and I learned much from the encounters I had with other speakers and other groups, priests and people. I never came back without feeling enriched, and convinced too, that we were on the right path.

But this morning, as I left the Auriesville shrine, I felt, with sudden peace and certitude, "I am not going out to speak any more. I am going to write. I am going to write the pamphlet on the works of mercy which John Todd asked me to write when I met him three years ago in England. I am going to write four articles for **Ave Maria** which they requested for the coming Advent. I am going to finish that short article for the **Jesus Caritas** bulletin, and most of all, I want to write the book I promised Harpers,"**All Is Grace.**"

William James once wrote that when you make a resolution, you should proclaim it or publish it, and that this will give you strength to stick to it. So I publish this. I am going to stay home.

Thoreau's Journal

But I still had two engagements to keep, made last summer, and one of them was to speak on a panel at Brandeis University on **Poverty and the Church**. Judith Gregory met me at the bus station just in time for dinner and the meeting, and later I spent the night at her apartment, which she shares with three other young women in Cambridge. When I spoke to her of my resolution, she gave me a wonderful quotation from Thoreau's journals (all fourteen volumes of which her mother had read):

Thinking this afternoon of the prospect of my writing lectures and going abroad to read them the next winter, I realized how incomparably great the advantages of obscurity and poverty which I have enjoyed so long (and may still perhaps enjoy). I thought with what more than princely, with what poetical, leisure I had spent my years hitherto, without care or engagement, fancy-free. I have given myself up to nature; I have lived so many springs and summers and autumns and winters as if I had nothing else to do but LIVE them, and imbibe whatever nutriment they had for me; I have spent a couple of years, for instance, with the flowers chiefly, having none other so binding engagement as to observe when they opened; I could have afforded to spend a whole fall observing the changing tints of the foliage. Ah, how I have thriven on solitude and poverty! I cannot overstate this advantage. I do not see how I could have enjoyed it, if the public had been expecting as much of me as there is danger now that they will. If I go abroad lecturing, how shall I ever recover the lost winter? (Vol. VII, Sept. 1854.)

Rochester and Geneseo

The other engagements I had were at the University of Rochester and at the State College at Geneseo. Eloise Wilkin gave me hospitality in Rochester. She is an illustrator of children's books and a doll designer too. I enjoyed my stay there with her and our drive to the Trappist monastery near Geneseo the next day to visit the monks before my evening meeting. This is the simplest of all the Trappist monasteries I have visited; I forgot to ask if they had building plans. I hope not. It does seem to me that in times like these, when there is famine and homelessness in the world, there should be a moratorium on the building of bigger church institutions. However, the monastery seems to be the same as when I visited three years ago and the monks number thirty-six, I believe. They work for their living by the sweat of their brow, not only by keeping up the place and raising beef cattle for sale but also in baking thirty-five thousand loaves of bread a week (thanks to modern machinery) for sale in Rochester, Buffalo, Syracuse and Elmira. When it is baked trucks form a big baking company come right to the gates and take it away for delivery. I was very glad to hear about this, because Monks' Bread is now sold everywhere and I had heard they had sold the franchise. What has happened is that they have sold it to a big flour company, which distributes their mix, on each bag of which the monks are paid a royalty, which the monks give to the poor. I know that we benefit by their charity regularly. My own complaint at this time is that

the entrance to the chapel is inside the enclosure, so that women visitors are not able to be present at the singing of the divine office. I was glad to hear that there will be at least that minimum of building; the making of another entrance. As it was we went down to the retreat house through the rolling fields and visited the chapel there. I love this part of New York, where you can look way off to the horizon in every direction and overhead that great blue bowl of sky! Abbot Jerome is a Biblical scholar, and I should have liked much to have remained for a longer visit, but I had a supper and speaking engagement and Eloise had to return to Rochester. We had had such a pleasant visit together that I hated to see her go. She had come to our Pax conference this summer and is one of those who works at prayer for peace, saying much of the divine office each day for that intention.

What interested me before about Piffard, New York, the location of the monastery of Our Lady of Geneseo, is the knowledge that enormous salt mines are worked all through that district. Indeed the salt strata run all the way from Lake Ontario to West Virginia; three hundred and fifty men are employed around Piffard and Restof. It is the largest operating salt mine in the world and the local pastor told me that half a million people could take shelter in it. There is already a narrow-gauge railroad, the Geneseo and Wyoming, called locally the Gee Whizz. Looking into the **Encyclopedia Britannica** for more information, I found nothing about salt mines themselves but a great deal about salt and the commerce in it. There is a long history of religious use, and bread and salt has always been a symbol of hospitality. Salt has been used to seal covenants and is so mentioned in the Book of Numbers. Soldiers in the time of the Roman Empire used to be paid in salt, and I recall the expression still heard, "He is not worth his salt." After reading this one can understand a little better the significance of Gandhi's Salt March.

On the first day of October, my oldest grand-daughter Becky was married to John Houghton of Newport, New Hampshire, which is the town of his birth and of his father's before him. Their wedding took place at St. Mary's church, in Springfield, Vermont and the reception was at Weathersfield Center Church, which is much used for such receptions and where the yearly town meeting takes place. This historic church is on a country road and surrounded by maples and elms and pines in all their glory. Myrtle Baker baked the wedding cake, Mrs. Bullard guided everyone in all the arrangements, her daughter Sue drove the bridal car, the bride dressed at the Foley home down the road and Foleys and Bullard and Bakers and of course friends and relatives of the bride-groom were the guests. The church hall was so beautifully decorated with fall leaves by Judy Barton that the Pierce sisters, who were using the hall for a tea that afternoon, begged that the decorations be left. With all the joy and the excitement no one noticed how it was raining, not even the bride. I am so much there as I write this, sitting by my window in Trivoli, that I was startled at hearing the New York Central 9:30 train go by the window, wondering, with a start, where I was and what was that noise. A first grandchild's wedding is a wonderful thing.

Death

And then, after the wedding, news came of my older brother's death in Helsinki of a hearth attack, at the age of 71. He had lived in northern Europe since 1921 and had only returned

once to the States, in 1934, for a short visit. Both my sister and mother, however, had paid him long visits and he had kept up a long and most cheerful correspondence with my sister. Only two weeks before his death he had written me, telling of a fishing trip he had just enjoyed, of the political situation in Finland, and recommending ultra-short wave treatments, at least of twenty of them, as a treatment for my arthritis, saying that he had had them for painful joints in the knees and had not had a pain since. They cost him, he said, only fifty cents a treatment in Finnish money. Hospital care is seven dollars a day over there. Donald never wrote without asking God to bless us all. Though he tried to avoid controversy, because he disagreed with my religious and political attitudes, he found it hard not to allude to these differences and so he wrote more frequently to my sister. I enjoyed all his letters and most especially his discussion of concerts he attended. When my sister visited him it seemed to me that she went to opera, ballet and concert every night in the week. Aside from mother and father, this is the first death among us and we feel it keenly. Family ties are strong.

All Souls

November is the month when we should most especially remember the dead. November first commemorates All Saints, canonized or uncanonized, and there are undoubtedly more of the latter than the former, since, as St. Paul says, we are all called to be saints, that is, to be whole men, in whom the life of the spirit has progressively become stronger so that in putting off the “old man,” we become “new men.” There is a great deal of talk in both Russian and Chinese Communist circles about the necessity too. Christ took on our humanity so that we could put on His divinity. He showed us the way and we are a lifetime learning it.

The philosopher Unamuno writes in **The Tragic Sense of Life** that all men are haunted by the thought of death, no matter how hard they try to push it out of their consciousness. During this very season of October and November we see all things dying around us; there is a chill in the air and a sadness in the wind in the trees outside the window. Just to see the sudden rain of leaves in a gust of wind, to hear the sound of their dry rustle along the pavement, is a part of sadness. But the season is also crowned with glory, with promise, with a flaming assertion of God’s promise. St. Paul expresses this faith, this mystery;

**“This corruptible body must put on
incorruption, and this mortal body must
on immortality. But when this mortal
body puts on immortality, then shall
come to pass the word that is written,
“Death is swallowed up in victory! O
death, where is your victory? O death,
where is your sting?”**”

When I think of all those in our house of hospitality in New York and on our farms, who lived and died with us, through all the long years, whose names are written down in a little prayer

book of mine containing the Office of the Dead, strange juxtapositions, such as Josephine and Father Pacifique Roy, Bebo Chandler and Solange Falgouste, Bill Duffy and Otto Spaeth—I think only of the mercy of God and how “He wills that all men be saved.”

And of course through all my life I have prayed in our so persistent war times for those involved in war, directly or indirectly. God have mercy on us all, and may we say with Job,

**“I know that my Redeemer lives, and
that on that last day I shall rise out of
the earth and be clothed again with my
skin, and in my flesh I shall see God. It
will not be some other being, but I myself
shall see Him. My own eyes shall look
upon Him. This my hope lives deep in
my heart.”**