

Spring Mobilization

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Summary: Brief commentary on a massive nonviolent demonstration against the Vietnam War led by Martin Luther King and Benjamin Spock. (DDLW #849).

Christ is our Peace! On April 15th I could not help but think of that poem of Francis Thompson's about meeting Christ at Charing Cross. I felt that the hundreds of thousands of people who assembled in the Sheep Meadow at Central Park, New York City, coming from all points east of the Mississippi, and from St. Louis (not to speak of other cities further west) were meeting him too, in each other, on this great peace march. It was the greatest mass meeting and march in American history and clearly demonstrated to the American people as a whole the unpopularity of the war in Vietnam and the longing of the people for peace. On the same day there was a similar demonstration in San Francisco, the largest ever held in that city.

“I Was There”

Those who came on that cold and threatening day (it did not rain until evening) were happy that they could say, “I was there.” My position was a vantage point on a high rock where many others were perched outside Sheep Meadow, which was already crowded with groups of demonstrators. My companions on that knoll were Raona Wilson and her three-week-old baby, Monica Cornell and her two-year old Tom Jr., Sheila Maloney and her baby, Hermine Evans, from Chicago, and many others who came and went. Karl Meyer led a Chicago contingent and there was a spirit of elation among all those from the Midwest, after an all-night trip on the bus which brought them into town just in time for the massing in the park.

Most of the Catholic Worker staff was present, and there were many former Catholic Workers, including Betty Bartelme, religious editor at Macmillan, Agnes (Bird) McCormack, and Eleanor (Corrigan) Gosselin with her husband and children. Eleanor was the secretary of the first PAX group in this country before World War II. I could not begin to name all who were there. Indeed I would not make a very good politician—my memory for names is so poor. Our Catholic Worker crowd were supposed to gather under the G or H signs (pacifist or religious groups) so that we could find one another—but of course there was a great deal of mingling of all the groups, and the march was so slow-moving that there was plenty of time for visiting and picnicking.

The marchers began to leave the park about noon, and Central Park was not evacuated until after four, so there were few indeed who heard the speakers.

The march was headed by Dr. Martin Luther King, and I was delighted to hear that, in addition to Dr. Benjamin Spock and many others, our own dear friend Msgr. Charles Owen Rice, who formerly headed the St. Joseph's House of Hospitality in Pittsburgh and is famous as a labor priest, marched at Dr. King's right hand.

The speeches went on all afternoon but it was hard for those who were crowded into the U.N. plaza, and every side street, from Forty-second to Forty-seventh, to hear, even though the loudspeaking system was a good one. I had a point of vantage on the steps of Holy Family Church, which we were not at first permitted to occupy. Eileen Egan, secretary of the American Pax Association, and Dr. Cecil Gill, from Cardiff, Wales, joined me in the rear of the church, where I had a chance to do some heartfelt praying. When we came out again on the steps, Dr. Gill expressed his wonder at the peacefulness of this enormous gathering. It would have been different in England, he implied.

We were permitted to remain on the steps then because Father Richard McSorley, the Jesuit, and Brother David, the Benedictine monk were there, and the police became a bit more permissive. Two of the priests who joined us in watching the continued arrival of the marchers, greeted us before they left, and when I asked who the pastor of Holy Family Church was, I found that it was Msgr. Timothy Flynn himself I was speaking to and his assistant. Msgr. Flynn asked me to send him books to add to his peace collection in the circulating library attached to Holy Family Church. I hope that our readers will help in this project. It was a beautiful and most satisfactory day, and aside from a few little skirmishes with high school kids who were out looking for excitement, there were almost no disturbances. The police were co-operative and to be commended on their courteous handling of what was estimated by most to be almost a half million people.