

On Pilgrimage - September 1967

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Summary: After a quiet rising and a time of spiritual reading her writing time is filled with city street noises. Writes of migrant laborer conditions in New York and Vermont where much of the misery is hidden from view. Keywords: Negro, Black, Afro-American (DDLW #855).

If I don't wake up early enough to have a spiritual reading before rising to face the day, I feel cheated of a sustenance I badly need, considering the crowded days of conferences and visitors all summer in both country and city. This morning my reading was again from Father Ernesto Balducci's book, "John—The Transitional Pope" published by McGraw-Hill in 1964 and a real treasure. I have quoted from him before, and I have special esteem for Father Balducci because he is a conscientious objector to war, and has suffered for it as the late Father Lorenzo Milani did. The quotation from Pope John he cites on page 127 is this:

“The love of truth. On the day of my episcopal consecration the Church gave me a particular mandate concerning it: ‘Let him [the bishop] choose humility and truth and never forsake them for any flattery or threats. Let him not consider light to be darkness, or darkness light; let him not call evil good, or good evil. Let him learn from wise men and fools, so that he may profit from all.’”

These powerful words are used in the consecration of bishops, and I think of them now as I rejoice in the fact that six or seven Catholic bishops have come out against the Vietnam war. That the latest one to do so is Archbishop James Davis, of Santa Fe, New Mexico, reminds me of that great book of Willa Cather, “Death Comes for the Archbishop” which is about the first Bishop of Santa Fe and a most beautiful story of the period and surroundings.

September 8

Birthday of the Blessed Virgin. Twenty-two years ago today a dozen or so of us made a pilgrimage of penance to the shrine of Mother Cabrini, walking from 115 Mott St., where the Catholic Worker House of Hospitality was then located. We walked from Canal Street along Broadway to 208th Street. The Second World War had just ended. The bomb had been dropped in August on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (any means to an end!) and we have been living in fear and in “brush fire wars” ever since. The war goes on in Vietnam. If it ceased tomorrow, it would be going on in some other quarter of the globe and we, as the richest

nation, making so much money out of our armaments, would be very much involved still. The causes of war are still with us: fear, hatred, greed, and “each man seeking his own.”

One of the early Fathers of the Church once wrote that if we could stand on a mountain top and see all the misery and tragedy of the world, we could not survive the horror of it. Now we have television and can indeed see what is happening, can witness the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald, the torture of prisoners in Vietnam, the death of our own soldiers—horror upon horror, until the mind and soul are blunted, sated with blood, blood which cries out to heaven. Indeed Jesus is in agony until the end of the world.

Juliana of Norwich said, and it is for our comfort, “the worst has already happened and been remedied.” The worst being the Fall, and the remedy is still with us, “the same yesterday and today and forever.” Even today, there are samplings of heaven, in love expressed, in peace maintained. “All the way to heaven is heaven, because He said, ‘I am the Way.’” (All the way to hell can be hell too.)

Work is the great healer, the great remedy for many ills. Right now as I write, in the midst of the Friday hubbub of trucks with horns blaring, gears shifting at each light, the grinding up of the refuse of the city in sanitation trucks, the shriek of sirens, there is a labor of love going on. Two young men and two young women are engaged in thoroughly cleaning and “de-bugging” one of the apartments of this house of hospitality on Kenmare Street, where we will continue to live for two or three months more, until the house on First Street is renovated. There are three apartments on the second floor, one on the third, one on the fourth, and one on the fifth, —two apartments for men and four for women. A constant check is needed to keep them livable, and young men do not like to be checked, nor are they orderly. There are 25 apartments altogether in the house. The tenants are mostly Chinese or Italians and some of the apartments are visions of comfort, because these are the kind of tenants who have lived here, in what I call our Italian village, for thirty years or more. The house is well built but slanting, a bit sunk or settled since the subways were built underneath. The ceilings are high and it looks out on two streets, so we have plenty of light and air—and plenty of fumes too.

Huge trucks go by loaded with steel drums of all colors, with steel castings of mysterious and fantastic shapes, and huge round-bodied trucks shaped like gasoline or milk trucks, which carry sugar, syrup, molasses and wine. I thought as I watched them this morning that if there were a depression—if peace should break out—these trucks would cease and there would be quiet on Kenmare Street. Once in my life time, as I traveled up and down the East Coast in the Thirties, I saw dead factories; wheels had stopped turning, no smoke, no fumes came from stacks and chimneys, the air was clear and quiet, and birds sang and weeds, including my favorite sweet clover, grew all around the factories.

But I must quit dreaming and go on with this writing. The trouble is, so much is happening day after day that it is hard to recall what happened during these past weeks that I must report on.

Migrant Workers

Last month, my friends, the Don Browns of Corning, New York, gave me hospitality on one of my “rural rides,” to use Cobbett’s title. Corning is in Steuben County, west of Binghamton

and south of the migrant county. Negroes work on the potatoes, Puerto Ricans in the muck lands where they were then harvesting lettuce, and later the whites will harvest grapes. Don, who is a chemist in the Corning Glass works, has long been concerned with the plight of the migrant. A hundred and twenty-five bills aimed at improving their condition have been introduced in Congress, but they have never got past committee. Whether or not the National Labor Relations Act will be broadened to include the farm worker is now being debated in Washington. It seems to me that this debate has been going on for a long time. The right of the farm worker to organize is under discussion, and some church groups are in favor of it, but with no right for the workers to strike for better wages and conditions.

They are not using the word **migrant** on the West Coast. Many have settled on the land, and though they travel to harvest the crops, it is within the limits of the Long Valley that they work. Some of the Negroes working in Steuben County have traveled all the way from Florida, and many go as far as Maine. But some of them settle in New York State, and Don Brown, told me something about the unspeakable hardship they suffer in the cold of winter. There is work all winter in the packing sheds, where they sort the potatoes but often it is only a few days work a week.

I saw two of the great packing sheds, Schuler's and McGunnicle's, great modern plants. But down an old railroad track nearby there were ten shacks where single men lived. We visited two camps near Avoka in which the houses were made of cement block with screened windows. In addition to a long dormitory with double-decker beds (bare mattresses and blankets) there was a kitchen where the workers could prepare their food.

It was a hot day, and in spite of the screened windows the flies came in through the door where the screen had broken through and hung about the bare light bulbs in the center of the dormitory. This was one of the best of the camps and was run by a Negro farm couple. Since he and his wife were both out in the fields, they obviously could not keep the place clean, and the entire place looked incredibly dreary to me. But then our own houses of hospitality present this same aspect, over and over again. The volunteer workers who come to us have to be ready for the most thankless labor, which they know, while they are doing it, will have to be done over and over again, week after week, day after day. It is hard to do a good job when you know that when you leave things will relapse into the same dirty clutter and confusion. One can only endure it by living with it permanently and continuing to cleanse the Augean stables. A grim thought, but this is both voluntary poverty and respect for manual labor. The first thing St. Francis after his conversion did was to repair a church, thinking the voice of God which he heard say to him "Francis, repair my Church" meant literally just that.

There are 120 camps within forty miles of Corning. Some are barracks-like houses and others are just truck bodies, very close together, so if one shack catches fire, everything is in danger. We asked one Negro who lived next to a shack where two men had been burned to death how his house had been spared and he said, "The Lord Jesus just put his arms around my house and saved it for me." Was this mischievous humor, or did he mean it? It is hard to think of Christianity as being alive when you see our fellow humans living under such conditions.

It is hard to call our brothers blacks, somehow (and should it be capitalized?) but today that is what they wish to be called. First it was Negro, then colored, and now blacks, and certainly the majority are not black any more than we are all "pink" as Bernard Shaw

called us. But maybe the men I saw are not as sophisticated as the city Negro. Perhaps I should say Afro-Americans. Anyway, they have their own church, and their own minister who preaches good long sermons, so the migrant ministry spent four hundred dollars on playground equipment so that the children could go out to play during the services, which take place Wednesday and Sundays. The church is in the center of the county and folk come from as far as thirty-five miles. It is so far away that they can shout praise and jubilation to the Lord as loud and long as they want, just as I have heard them do in Florida and even in Rome, where Langston Hughes' **Black Nativity** was put on, to the joy and delight of the Roman audience.

I saw the broken-down houses where not one but a number of families lived. In one such house there were twenty-four people living—men, women and children. I saw a corn crib which a young couple had lined with broken-up cartons to insulate it and where they had burned sticks of wood in an open pail to warm themselves while a child was born to them in the dead of winter. I saw the debris of another camp where one man raving with the fever of pneumonia had staggered out and fallen into an old pit which had once been covered by an outhouse long since used for kindling wood. He was unable to get out and was found frozen to death the next day.

Ignorance

Father Paul Hanley Furfey once said to us in a conference that it is obvious from the 25th chapter of St. Matthew that God does not forgive ignorance. "When did we see you naked and not cover you, a stranger and never made you welcome? And the Lord will answer, 'I tell you solemnly, in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me.'"

I remember how long we lived on Maryfarm at Newburgh, in the midst of apple orchards, and yet never knew who picked the crops, or realized how many of the workers were hidden away on the back roads in shacks never seen by those who drive by on the highways. It was only when we picked up an old sick Negro on the highway that we began to see the immediacy of the problem. It is all around us, just as every city is filled with ghettos and slums.

If we keep harping on these things, it is in order to arouse the conscience. Because here in this Hudson River valley, when these black brothers and sisters of ours wish to settle, they are not made welcome. They may find jobs, the hard jobs, but how to find housing? That is the problem.

So this year, beginning next week in fact, a day-care center is being opened at the Catholic Worker Farm at Tivoli, to care for the pre-school children of the migrant families who have come north to harvest the apples. There will be children ranging from eight months old to six years. The center will be under the auspices of New York State, and workers, equipment and transportation are being provided by the State. Mrs. Ann George of Albany represents the New York State Migrant Child Care Committee, and is ably assisted by Mrs. Pearl Johnson, and Mr. Gus Rhodes and Mr. John Murray of the Dutchess County Office of Economic Opportunity.

I will be away while this activity takes place, so perhaps Deane will give an account of it in her October column. We are merely providing the space, the former casino and grounds, which are ample for the children, but planning the program has involved many telephone calls and consultations and our own education in the press. A migrant grandmother and an eighteen-year-old girl farm worker as well as our neighbor Mrs. Lorraine Freeman, and others will be working with the program, and there is a daily visiting of camps and mothers and children to prepare for it. Yesterday two men from Syracuse showed up from the State Day Care Training Center to bring cots, cribs, playpens, tables and chairs and a beautiful assortment of well built children's toys.

We've been having adults use the facilities of this farm in discussion all summer and many young swimmers in the pool, but these will be the youngest children we have yet accommodated, and at the sweetest age.

Pilgrimaging Again

and as for me, I am setting out for Rome again.

From the eleventh to the eighteenth of October there will be an International Congress of the Laity, a gathering of twenty-five hundred Catholic lay people from all over the world, and, as I understand it, the talks and discussions will be in every language and simultaneously translated, just as at the United Nations, so that one will be able to don earphones and understand representatives from Africa, Asia and Europe. Our dear friend Marguerite Tjader Harris is taking care of my expenses and I shall try to repay her by giving a good account of the trip and the conferences for our ninety thousand readers.

Do we have so many? Who knows. We send out the papers, and they go to libraries and schools as well as to individuals. On the other hand, I once caught Mrs. Rubino, an old friend on East Fifteenth Street, lining her garbage can with a copy of the CW. But of course we get letters beginning, "I found your paper in a dentist's office"; or "I found your paper in a coal mine six miles out under the Atlantic ocean," or "I found your paper under a mattress in a cheap hotel in Tampico." These last two testimonials as to how far the **Catholic Worker** travels are literally true, though we received them years ago.

More recently, on board ship in 1965 on my way home from the fast in Rome at which I participated, during the last session of the Second Vatican Council, I received at my table, tourist class, a bottle of wine, sent to me with the compliments of the purser of that ship of the American Export line. When he came to see me later, he said that he had received the **Catholic Worker** from one of the seamen who maintained a little circulating library on board ship and passed the paper around.

What need do we have for a circulation manager? Smokey Joe can just sit beside his desk and take the subscriptions which come in, and Gordon McCarthy will attend to the stencils.