

On Pilgrimage - February 1969

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The Catholic Worker, February 1969, pp. 2,5

Summary: Highlights the struggle and despair of the times, recounts a conversation on faith with Mike Gold, an old Communist friend. Discourses on penance and voluntary suffering as acts of love that increase hope. Says we each have unique vocations to the works of mercy. (DDLW #894).

Reading is the oil that keeps the lamp burning, the Fathers of the Church wrote. So I recommend the Peace Calendar, Readings for the Centenary of Gandhi's birth, edited by Mark Morris and put out by the War Resisters League, 5 Beekman Street, New York, N.Y. 10038. Martin Luther King's books, most of them in paperback, always inspire one with the hope, faith and love to continue the daily struggle.

We certainly must have the long view into the future to see and realize the awakening of the masses of people throughout the world and the growth of a new vision among them of a world which is personalist and communitarian. **The great problem is: what means are to be used?**

Thank God we are not living in that time when Africa was divided between all the European powers, and England, France and Holland dominated the Far East, when nobody knew or cared that their comfort in the West was built on the blood, sweat, and tears of toilers of the world.

The battle at home now is to conquer the bitterness, the sense of futility and despair that grows among the young and turns them to violence, a violence which is magnified by the press, the radio and television. We lose sight of the poor people's cooperatives and boycotts, the conquest of bread, as Kropotkin called it, which goes on daily in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, not to speak of California, Texas, and all the states where Mexicans have been imported for agricultural labor. They have come into our cities too, so that "workers and peasants" have united in the struggle and the story of the grape pickers' nonviolent long drawn out battle has reached Canada and the shores of Sweden and Finland, where dock workers have refused to unload the grapes picked by scab labor in California. Our own government, our enemy the State, has become the instrument of the growers in buying up the grapes and shipping them overseas to the troops in Vietnam.

The work of unionization, the formation of credit unions and cooperatives, especially cooperative housing, must go on, as must the work of building up hope and a sense in men of their own capacity for change, and for bringing about change.

The only thing that keeps hope alive is work, and study must go with it, to keep one's hope and vision alive.

Faith

I was talking to Mike Gold, my old Communist friend, when he returned from France with his wife and two sons years ago. Our Christian-Marxist dialogue went like this:

“My sons are named Karl and Nicholas,” he reminded me as we spoke of his children and my grandchildren.

“My second grandson is called Nicholas too.”

“But mine is named after a different person than yours. Mine is named after Lenin.

“Mine after the saint by that name and the Nicholases in Russia are too, though they may not know it.”

So I stopped the argument, having had the last word, by inviting him over, and he brought me a present, a picture of St. Anne, from Brittany, carefully rolled in a newspaper, so that it was flat for framing. While we stood in the Catholic Worker kitchen and talked the dialogue continued:

I said: “How hard it is to have faith in men when we see their racist attitudes, their fears of each other fed by the daily press. There is a lot of racism around the Catholic Worker movement, made up as it is of men from the Bowery and skid rows, as well as from the colleges. Class war and race war go on daily and we are a school for nonviolence.” His eyes alight with faith, Mike said, “But it is the poor and the wretched, the insulted and the injured, who bring about the changes in the world, the great changes that are taking place.”

I could not help but think that just as we cannot love God whom we do not see unless we love our brother whom we do see, it followed that our faith in man (as he could be) should increase our faith in God and His ever-present aid. “I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.” “Without Him I can do nothing.” And this very small conversation made me pray the more.

But how can we show our love by war, by the extermination of our enemies? If we are followers of Christ, there is no room for speaking of the “just war.” We have to remember that God loves all men, that God wills all men to be saved, that indeed all men are brothers. We must love the jailer as well as the one in prison. We must do that seemingly utterly impossible thing: love our enemy.

Penance

This last month I spoke to a convocation of youth, fifteen hundred of them, in Toronto; to fifty members of the Association of Urban Sisters, working in Roxbury, Massachusetts; at a meeting in the Methodist Church, of Red Hook, New York, attended by our friends and

neighbors of towns surrounding Tivoli. There were also members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars there. It was a peaceful meeting, all in all.

The Boston meeting was held on Ash Wednesday, and I spoke of penance. I said that I could understand a Kateri Tekathwitha taking on the severest of penances to atone for the cruelty of her people to the Europeans and for the white cruelty to the Indians. (One must judge oneself first.) Or the penances of a St. Rose of Lima, in a time when the Indians were systematically being killed off, and African slave labor was being imported to supply the labor which the Indians could not stand up under.

Penance seems to be ruled out today. One hears the Mass described as Sacrament, not as Sacrifice. But how are we to keep our courage unless the Cross, that mighty failure, is kept in view? Is the follower greater than his master? What attracts one in a Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh is the hardships and the suffering they endured in living their lives of faith and hope. It is not the violence, the killing of one's enemies. A man is a man, and to hear him crying out in pain and anguish, whether he is friend or enemy, is to have one's heart torn in unutterable sorrow. The impulse to stand out against the State and go to jail rather than serve is an instinct for penance, to take on some of the suffering of the world, to share in it.

Father Anthony Mullaney, O.S.B. who is one of the "Milwaukee Fourteen" priests and laymen who burned draft records with napalm- -"burning property, not people"- - told me, when I met him in Boston the other day, that over a hundred of the students of St. Anselm's in Manchester, New Hampshire, signed a petition to the court, which they are going to send when the Milwaukee 14 are sentenced, offering to divide up the months or years the fourteen have to serve, and take on the sentences for them. He will be speaking next month at Town Hall, and we will learn more about, this: What is this but an offer to do penance, another example of trying to follow in the steps of Christ, who took on himself our sins and in so doing overcame both sin and death?

This is, in effect what Chuck Matthei, Chicago draft refuser, is doing, in not cooperating with the prison authorities when they seized him most brutally and literally dragged him, handcuffed, to West St. Federal prison in New York, where he is now, fasting from food, and sometimes water, too.

To just read about these things or hear of them is not enough. One must meet Chuck and see the brightness of his face, feel the gentle and joyous and truly loving spirit, to get a glimpse of an understanding of what he is doing.

The thing is to recognize that not all are called, not all have the vocation, to demonstrate in this way, to fast, to endure the pain and long drawn out nerve-racking suffering of prison life. We do what we can, and the whole field of all the works of mercy is open to us. There is a saying, "Do what you are doing." If you are a student, study, prepare, in order to give to others, and keep alive in yourselves, the vision of a new social order. All work, whether building, increasing food production, running credit unions, working in factories which produce for true human needs, working in the smallest of industries, the handcrafts – all these things can come under the heading of the works of mercy, which are the opposite of the works of war.

It is a penance to work, to give oneself to others, to endure the pinpricks of community

living. One would certainly say on many occasions, “give me a good thorough, frank outgoing war, rather than the sneak attacks, stabs in the back, sparring, detracting, defaming, hand to hand jockeying for position that goes on in offices and good works of all kinds, another and miserably petty kind of war.” St. Paul said that “he died daily.” This too is penance, to be taken cheerfully, joyfully, with the hope that our own faith and joy in believing will strengthen Chuck and all the others in jail.

Let us remember too, those “mutineers,” the soldiers who protested the killing of one of their number by a shot in the back in the Presidio on the West Coast, and their sixteen-year sentences at hard labor.

So let us rejoice in our own petty sufferings and thank God we have a little penance to offer, in this holy season. “An injury to one is an injury to all,” the Industrial Workers of the World proclaimed: So an act of love, a voluntary taking on oneself of some of the pain of the world, increases the courage and love and hope of all.