

On Pilgrimage - Oct/Nov 1969

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Visits to Chicago and Milwaukee

We went to press Thursday September 18th and the next night I took the Penn-Central train to Chicago, coach fare, plus a tiny closet sleeper in which it was all but impossible to undress or dress. The air conditioning failed and it was so hot that the wall along the side was like an oven. Besides having claustrophobia, the car rocked and swayed so that I felt seasick all the way. It was two hours late getting into Chicago and everyone said it was the worst trip they had ever had. So I returned to N.Y. on a nice comfortable bus, where one could stretch one's legs, lean back in the reclining seat and rest. It was a bright moonlit night and it was a joy to see the countryside, the farmlands, the little towns of Indiana and Ohio, as we passed them on the Turnpike. It was light when we bypassed Pittsburgh and all morning there was the delightful mountain scenery of Pennsylvania.

Happenings in Chicago

It was great to see Phil and Cathy Bredine and Brother Paul of the Taize family waiting for me to drive me out to Evanston where I was going to stay a few nights with Nina Polcyn, head of the St. Benet Book Shop, and formerly of Milwaukee Catholic Worker. As a matter of fact, she and David Host of Marquette both visited us one summer years ago and between the two of them, a group got together when they returned and started a house which went on for ten years. When the group scattered they landed on farms in Aitkin, Minn., and

Rhineland, Mo. and to c.o. camps and armies during the second world war, and later in the professions all over the country.

Now that Casa Maria is burgeoning with Michael Cullen the head of the work, with a fullfledged paper, The Catholic Radical, published every month which shows the Corita touch, not to speak of the inspiration of Fr. Dan Berrigan.

But to begin with my visit to Chicago, we took the shore drive from the loop to Evanston and people were still swimming and sunning themselves on the beaches. It was Saturday. We went through Lincoln Park where my sister and I used to play as children, and later even drove past the house on Webster Avenue where we used to live while I attended high school. When I think of our New York waterfronts I am inclined to find the Chicago waterfront one of the most beautiful in the world.

Nina and several others live on the second floor of a garage and old carriage house and her windows look out over a sea of trees. When the trees are bare, you can see the lake, and twice during the coming week Nina and I sat by the lake and once we ate our lunch there.

Sunday . . . the Sheil chapel at Northwestern University, a few blocks away was a good place to remember this Bishop who just died, and who started innumerable projects in Chicago, from the Golden Gloves with their huge gymnasium, the Sheil School for the study of Social Problems, a psychiatric clinic for disturbed children, and many another good works. There was a splendid musical accompaniment to the Mass that morning, guitars and drums and some of the Missa Luba was sung, a glorious shout of triumph. A young priest, Fr. Mueller, preached a good sermon especially directed to the freshmen and we all felt like freshmen in the spiritual life, all ready to make a new start.

In the afternoon Phil Bredine and his three-year-old daughter Erica called for me and we stopped to pick up Karl Meyer and saw Jean and the two children who were accompanied by a little boy who told us he was going to celebrate a special feast the next day, Yom Kippur. Between teasing Erica he told us that momentous news several times. His name was Michael. Karl's oldest is a straight, upright little boy with a joyful face full of suppressed mirth as he watched Erica and Michael getting acquainted.

"We have a tower," Erica told me as we proceeded down town to where the Bredines live on Armitage near Halsted. By a tower she means bay windows on the four story corner house which faced three street corners. We had a good vegetarian meal and ate up all of Kathie's home-made rye bread. There were about ten of us and we spoke of housing problems in the city, and the idea of a cooperative house of four to six apartments to begin with, and the idea of restitution, which Karl called balancing, tax refusal, the need for more prayer, and the Pentecostal movement which is so widespread today. That morning I had met members of the Pentecostals who had been among those attending a weekend, quarterly meeting of the National Catholic Laymen's Association. They were from various parts of Michigan. There is a move toward community living among these young people also, and already small communities have started. Right across the street from the Bredines is St. Teresa's Church (locked up during the day!) and later in the week when I spent the night at the Bredines, I awoke to the sound of the angelus bell.

Monday Rosemary Bannan came to Nina's to talk to me about Civil Disobedience, a talk

which lasted four hours. She is covering the trial of the eight people who are charged with conspiracy to cross state lines to start a riot. The only two of the group I know are Dave Dellinger and Abbie Hoffman, though we heard an hour's tape of a speech of Bobby Seale, the black defendant at one of our Friday meetings in New York.

Monday night Brother Paul of the Taize community and I spent all evening with Carl Zietlow and an office full of people, including Frank Marfia who had been with us at the Bredines, at a sort of planning session such as I had attended before at the War Resisters with A. J. Muste, Bayard Rustin and Ammon Hennacy and many others. These were the offices on South Dearborn of the American Friends Service Committee and the Non Violent Training Center.

We had a sandwich supper as we talked and later I talked of the work in New York, of the Catholic Worker, the problems of getting out a paper and mailing it to 80,000 people, of hospitality, study and prayer, which I think we all feel more and more in need of. We are starting a Tuesday evening prayer meeting, which at present resembles a silent Quaker meeting more than anything else, except that, in addition to spontaneous prayers of praise and thanksgiving, we are petitioning the Holy Spirit for light and a growth in love.

Again there was a beautiful drive back along Grant Park and Lincoln Park, the scene of such brutality and violence last year during the demonstrations of youth against war at the Democratic convention.

Tuesday afternoon Brother Paul called for me and Nina to spend the evening at the Taize house, at 119 West Locust Street, just off Clark Street. One of the reasons I came to Chicago was to visit this house and meet this group.

“In establishing at Taize a common life at the heart of Protestantism we have no other intention than to bring together men who wish to commit themselves to follow in the footsteps of Christ, in order to be a living sign of the Church's Unity.”

“Community life brings into being a microcosm of the Church; on a small scale it gives an image of the whole reality of the Church. Thus the humble sign of community can have effects which far transcend the limitations of its members. Much more than ideas, the world of today needs images. No idea could possibly gain credit, unless supported by a visible reality; otherwise it would only be an ideology. Any sign, however weak, gains value in that it is a living reality.”

These are the words of Roger Schutz, the founder of the Taize community, named after the village where a group of four young men started in 1940 the community in that tiny village in Burgundy. The group has grown steadily and all the members earn their living in the professions, at farming, or at any job which takes them out among men. They live a life under vows and hold all goods in common. This last summer more than 2000 students from all over Europe visited the village and camped out around the community to share in the life of prayer for a time.

It was good to enjoy the hospitality of the Taize community though most of them were in France at the time I was visiting Chicago. I will certainly make the Taize community my stopping off place when I am going to Chicago or through Chicago from now on. I felt perfectly at home and greatly enriched by my contact with them. Their spirit is much akin

to that of the Little Brothers of Charles de Foucauld, a spirit of prayer and loving kindness, and simplicity. And certainly of holy poverty. Theirs is a large old house on the near north side, spotlessly clean and with not only room for the community but for guests. There are additional guest rooms over a garage where they can offer hospitality for the wayfarer.

While we were meeting together that evening a number of young people from the peace groups came in and when our discussion ended we saw the candlelight procession passing on Clark Street from Lincoln Park to the court house where the trial of the Conspiracy Eight would begin the next day.

In addition to the demonstrations in relation to the trial there were constant demonstrations of both black and white workers over the discrimination against black workers in the building trade and construction works. There are few black workers who are members of these unions and few apprentices are admitted into the unions. This is a fight which is going on all over the country, in Pittsburgh, and many other cities. Ralph Abernathy and Jesse Jackson, both of them leaders in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, have been particularly active these last months. As successor to Martin Luther King, Abernathy has worn himself out of late, and when I heard him speak at Operation Bread Basket Saturday morning in Chicago (Jesse Jackson's weekly prayer meeting), he said he was an empty pitcher and that he had come there to be filled, and I am sure he was.

Operation Breadbasket

These Saturday meetings which started four years ago while Martin Luther King was alive, which began right after his stoning in a Chicago suburb, were held in a church. But week after week a larger church had to be found as the crowd attending the meetings grew. Now they are held on the far south side, at 89th Street and Halsted, at the Clark Theater which looks like an opera house and holds more than five thousand people. The crowds start coming at seven in the morning in order to get a seat and when Kathie Bredine, Brother Paul, Brother Blaise and I arrived we had to climb to the top gallery and sit separated from each other, so crowded it was.

Jesse Jackson was speaking as we arrived, so far down in the pit that it was impossible to see his face. He is a young man, only 29 and his voice is a powerful one, and all the while he talked, the organist and various instruments of the orchestra accented his words and phrases with little trills, whimsical accompaniments and he himself spoke with a lilt, with a rhythm of speech that sometimes set the people to swaying.

Then there was music, singing from the choir of a hundred young people dressed in white blouses and dark skirts or slacks (the women are asked not to come in slacks) and the hymns were sung loud and slow and clear with the whole choir swaying slowly back and forth and the audience joined and pretty soon all were singing. There were prayers too, and we clasped each others' hands then and at the end, of music, song, orchestra, organ and people and linking arms there was the usual **We Shall Overcome**.

It was a beautiful meeting and one felt the union of all these people in preparation for the struggle, the non-violent struggle, which would be going on during the coming week, for jobs,

for housing, for life itself.

I thanked God while I was at that meeting, that the Non-Violent Resistance Movement in the country had such leadership as Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, Ralph Abernathy, not to speak of Cesar Chavez and his Mexican and Filipino companions in the boycott and strike movement of the farm workers of California and the Southwest.

Newspapers and television bring to the public all the violence people think of as “action” and have helped inspire more violence. It is certainly the work of all peace groups, students, teachers and writers to do their part to reach the people with leafleting and articles and papers about non-violence.

My visit to Milwaukee was a brief and crowded one. It seems that Fr. James Groppi has turned everyone on in that city. I do not know how many times he has been arrested, espousing the cause of the Afro-American as he has done these past years with mighty marches, peaceful protests for open housing. When welfare cuts meant that the poor were not going to have the money to pay the rents on whatever housing they could get, Fr. Groppi led a march last month to the capital of Wisconsin to protest the cuts. That march was on the way when I visited Milwaukee and hundreds more joined the march each day for an hour or for a few miles to show their sympathy. Now, as I write he is in jail and cannot be released on bail because of previous convictions. “It is a holy act to go to jail,” Fr. Groppi said, and we are praying that he is getting “a rest from his labors” during this interim for the lifetime struggle ahead. Going to jail is a dying—a slow dying. He is one who is laying down his life for others. Following this writing Father Groppi received a six-month sentence in a Milwaukee court for violation of probation. In February, 1968 he had been found guilty of resisting arrest during a 1967 civil rights demonstration and had been sentenced to two years probation. His present imprisonment is under appeal.

I had wanted to join the march but arthritis cripples me to limit walking, so instead I was driven out to visit the families, a dozen of them, who had moved into the empty barracks of Fort Sheridan by the Tenants’ Union. Many of the heads of families had work but had been evicted from their rented houses by urban renewal or for some other reason (too many children). Other families were being moved in the day I visited and while I was there, two Army men drove up and went on tour of inspection, perhaps to turn on the water and electricity and heating system. There had already been cold days when temperatures dropped to forty degrees. On this day, however, children were playing happily on the lawns around the houses which had been for the use of non-commissioned officers when this section of the fort had been in use. But already the men had found ways to turn on the water.

Because civilians were involved, the procedure for removing trespassers required the Army to go through the Justice Department and the Justice Department could then go through the U.S. Attorney’s office in Milwaukee to get a court order to have federal marshals evict the families. So far no action had been taken, and everyone was helping the families with food, blankets, clothing and even heating units for the apartments. There is no national coverage of such revolutionary events as this unless blood is shed, unless there is the aura of violence, so I do not know how things are working at the present moment.

Men and women are working together on these protests throughout the city, and what with

the work of the Casa Maria, 1131 N. 21st Street, it seems to me women have a double job. Meals are served there, hospitality is given and the place teems with children, including infants. There are the Cullen children and the Thompson children and across the street there is a day care center which is a Montessori school, occupying three rooms of the Highland Methodist Church. There are forty to fifty children there taught by a group of volunteers without salary. There is plenty of room for all their activities in the spacious main body of the church, and the downstairs has become a dining room where meals are served every night.

It reminded me of the communal strike kitchen at Coachella, California and the Filipino Hall at Delano, which has been carrying on for the four years of the Grape Strike. In addition to this Highland Community Center, as this has been called, there is The Living Room where some Marquette students taking a leave of absence from college are running an apartment, like an annex for men of skid row.

And of course there is a book shop, and an underground paper, and the involvement of a great many students at Marquette. But to find out more about this very lively crowd, write for **The Catholic Radical**, at the address of the Casa Maria given above. Mike himself, one of the Milwaukee Fourteen, is being brought to trial in November. His companions in the burning of draft records—are all at present serving their two-year terms, and he has been left in suspense, not knowing whether he will be imprisoned or deported to Ireland. Pray for him and for his valiant wife.