

ON PILGRIMAGE

The Seventies

DOROTHY DAY

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As a new decade began, Dorothy recounted a visit over the Christmas holidays with her daughter Tamar and her family in Perkinsville, Vermont. Yet her intention to describe a happy family gathering was shadowed by “ongoing war and desolation” in Vietnam. These two themes were joined in excitement over the impending arrival of her grandson Eric, returning safely following his service as an Army Ranger in Vietnam. After describing the general atmosphere in a house “overrun with children and young people, cats and dogs, celebrating a midwinter festival in the midst of ice and snow,” her thoughts turned to a prescient article she had written about Vietnam as early as 1954.

THIS HAS BEEN A TIME OF MUCH FEASTING and great joy, the return of a grandson from Vietnam, a happy holiday in Vermont, snowed in for a week. My daughter’s home in Vermont reminded me, as Tivoli so often has, of Tolstoy’s home, of the picture he drew of a joyous home community at Christmastime, in *War and Peace*...

[While the rest of the family celebrated my grandson Nickie’s birthday,] I stayed home and read a book about the Vietnamese war with the French and the defeat of the French in 1954. We had already become involved in this war with financial aid. We are now in this Vietnamese war so much longer than either the First World War or World War II. I remember reading an article in the *New Yorker* which brought it home vividly in 1962. But long before, in 1954, I had written an article for *The Catholic Worker* entitled “Theophane Venard and Ho Chi Minh,” about the heroic saint. I’d like to reprint

it, sixteen years later, now that the North Vietnamese leader has so recently died.¹

As a young man Ho Chi Minh had traveled from Indo-China to Paris, and on one of his first voyages he had stopped in the ports of New York and Boston. One story is that he had worked in Harlem briefly, and perhaps—who knows—he had stopped in the Chinese and Italian area on Mott Street where the Catholic Worker had its house for fifteen years, from 1936 to 1950. Perhaps he came in for a meal with us. London, Montreal, and New York have seen many exiles and political fugitives. If we *had* had the privilege of giving hospitality to a Ho Chi Minh, with what respect and interest we would have served him, as a man of vision, as a patriot, a rebel against foreign invaders. I pointed out this fantasy of mine to some of the young people around here who work on the soup line each day, young people of vision and imagination too, in regard to our own work. I spoke in order to make the point of the obligation we are under to respect everyone we encounter each day. There is that which is of God in every man, as the Quakers say. We believe that we are all members or potential members of the Mystical Body of Christ, members of one another as St. Paul said. We are all one body in Christ. St. Peter himself said that St. Paul was hard to understand, but the I.W.W.² understood this particular doctrine when they said “an injury to one is an injury to all,” with beautiful simplicity.

I was in Perkinsville to wait with the rest of the family for the return of Eric from Vietnam. Two Christmases ago he had been drafted and was due to report January 2. He was a few months out

1. “Theophane Venard and Ho Chi Minh” appeared in the November 1954 issue of the *CW*. The occasion was the defeat of the French in Indochina, but Dorothy’s keen attention to this story proved far-sighted. She had contrasted Ho Chi Minh, the champion of the anti-colonial struggle, with St. Theophane Venard, a nineteenth-century French missionary who died as a martyr in Vietnam, speculating about how differently history might have unfolded if the methods of the saint had typified the encounter between Europe and the rest of the world. Ho Chi Minh had gone on to become president of Communist North Vietnam and died in September 1969.

2. The Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) was a radical labor organization that advocated for “One Big Union” and deployed strikes and other forms of direct action. In her youth, Dorothy had proudly joined the union, and she continued to invoke many of its slogans, including “an injury to one is an injury to all” and its aim of building “a new world in the shell of the old.”

of high school and his friends had been drafted and some were already in service. He did not grow up in a pacifist atmosphere. His father was a Belloc and Chesterton man and, as in so many American families, there were veterans on all sides. So he went. And now he was coming home. He had written that he was due on December 19th or 20th, and we kept listening for the phone.

One of his friends who had served in Vietnam came in that afternoon looking for Eric, and he spoke of the Vietcong burying thousands alive in Hue [following the Tet Offensive in 1968]. "I know," he said. "I saw those corpses." He spoke defensively as though I, as a pacifist, was on the side of the Vietcong. It is hard to talk to each other, the words of Christianity mean so little: "All men are brothers. God wills that all men be saved. Love your enemy. Deliver me from the fear of my enemies," so that I can be close enough to them to know and love them.

Certainly I did not then nor later refer to the terrible stories being printed in the daily papers of massacres, rapes, kidnappings, captives who refused to talk being dropped from helicopters, the torture of prisoners. But these facts are in the minds of all, and I am sure that young soldiers on leave or being discharged from service are going to be on the defensive and will be bending over backwards to defend this country any way. But no soldier I ever met wants to talk about the war itself, about the action, the combat, especially to a woman, to a relative.

But I remember an instructor in philosophy drafted into the infantry (he refused officers' training) in the Second World War, and how he said at war's end that in the midst of the horror of destruction and bombardments, he felt a strange and terrible sense of exultation.

The boys, one can only think of them as boys, were drafted just out of high school. Two or three who kept coming in to inquire if Eric had been heard from talked of going back to work for a while and then going to college in the fall. One was studying business administration already, and the other "programming," something to do with computers, I suppose.

I could only think, as I listened to them talking of work, of the need to emphasize working for the common good, rather than working for increased salaries, and more luxuries. Peter Maurin used to emphasize so much the doctrine of the common good. I must look up that article in *Resurgence* on the Buddhist concept of work. We

hope to reprint this later in the *CW*.³ The Benedictine philosophy of work, as Peter Maurin used to call it, was that work had to engage body and soul. Work was prayer, sometimes monotonous and exhausting, involving suffering and strain, but always there was that moment of satisfaction, even of exhilaration. Recently I read Joseph Conrad's novelette, *Youth*, which is the story of grueling work at sea in the effort to survive a storm and later a fire in a leaky tub of a ship bound for Bangkok.

Saturday, Sunday and Monday. We were still waiting. Monday there were heavy storm warnings but in Vermont they pay little attention to these. Tamar's house is large, four bedrooms upstairs, poorly heated except for the two just above the living room, and three downstairs, and a big living room and kitchen. Before I left I think there were seventeen young people coming and going, rushing in and out, filling up on peanut butter and honey sandwiches, occasionally quiet, but otherwise listening to the record player which one or the other of them would turn up to its loudest. I guess I had a complete course in rock this vacation, but I began to wonder, my bedroom being right off the living room, about brain damage. The snow continued. Our waiting continued. The Christmas tree was put up, presents were wrapped, Christmas day came and went, and still no Eric.

Next morning, the day after Christmas, the phone rang at nine o'clock and Hilaire got to the phone first. It was he, Eric Dominic Hennessy, staff sergeant, Ranger, home from the wars. It took him as long to get from Kennedy airport to Vermont as it did to fly from Vietnam to Seattle. His was the last flight to Kennedy airport in that particular storm, but the buses still ran and got him to Charleston, New Hampshire. It took two hours for his friends to get him from Charleston to Perkinsville, what with skidding into snow drifts several times. But at two a.m. on the morning of December 27th, Eric was home again. God be thanked.

There are so many things I wished to write about and so far I have given my column to the story of a happy Christmas, a picture of

3. E. F. Schumacher's article on "Buddhist Economics" later appeared in his landmark book *Small Is Beautiful* (1973), which Dorothy greatly admired. Schumacher, a British exponent of "alternative economics" (and a Catholic), would later publish several pieces in the *CW* before his death in 1977.

family life, of a house overrun with children and young people, cats and dogs, celebrating a midwinter festival in the midst of ice and snow. (In the midst too, of continuing war and desolation.)

A family where, as in all families, there are grave differences of opinion or points of view, and yet united and happy. There is always an unspoken agreement, just as there was in my family of three brothers and a sister, parents and in-laws, not to dispute, not to argue, but to find points of agreement and concordance, if possible, rather than the painful differences, religious and political. What a mystery each one is to another. I remember reading about Hugh of St. Victor who complained to God that he did not value His love because as God He loved each creature He had made, and God replied to him, "Yes, but just as each creature is unique, I love them with a unique love." We can only try to share each other's joys and sufferings and to grow in love and understanding. Not to judge, but to pray to understand.

FEBRUARY 1970

Ammon Hennacy: "Non-Church" Christian

Ammon Hennacy, who died on January 14, 1970, occupied a significant place in the annals of the Catholic Worker, and in Dorothy's life. A swash-buckling radical who called himself "the One Man Revolution," Hennacy had been imprisoned as a conscientious objector during World War I. While in prison he read the Bible and proclaimed himself a follower of Jesus—"the greatest revolutionary of all time." A strict vegetarian, a dedicated anarchist and pacifist who lived at a subsistence level, Hennacy began in the 1940s to contribute articles to The Catholic Worker chronicling his "life at hard labor." In 1952, drawn by Dorothy's example, he joined the Catholic Worker community in New York City. There, he inspired a new era of activism, selling copies of the paper on the streets and helping to organize annual protests against the city's compulsory civil defense drills.

Hennacy eventually became a Catholic, with Dorothy serving as his godmother. But he was never suited to "thinking with the Church." Ultimately, he left New York and started his own house of hospitality in Salt Lake City, named after Joe Hill, the great labor martyr. Though she was saddened by his departure from the Church, Dorothy always gave him credit for his faith, courage, and prophetic witness. He was, she said, "the most