

Loaves and Fishes

Dorothy Day

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*Summary: A chapter from *Loaves and Fishes*. Describes her meeting Peter Maurin and getting out the first edition of *The Catholic Worker*. Recalls how Peter's program—roundtable discussions, houses of hospitality, and farm colonies—became the core Catholic Worker program. Extensive quotes from Peter Maurin, including an Easy Essay on utopianism and Christian communism. (DDLW #851).*

Ed. note: The following text is the bulk of chapter two of Dorothy Day's book *Loaves and Fishes*, published by Harper & Row in 1963, which is an account of the history of the Catholic Worker movement up to that time and may be read as a supplement to her earlier autobiographical work *The Long Loneliness* (Doubleday-Image paperback). When the later book appeared, Thomas Merton wrote: "Every American Christian should read Dorothy Day's *Loaves and Fishes*, because it explodes the comfortable myth that we have practically solved the 'problem of poverty' in our affluent society . . . I hope that those who read her book will be moved by it to serious thought and to some practical action: it is a credit to American democracy and to American Catholicism." And Norman Thomas described *Loaves and Fishes* as "an absorbingly well-written series of pictures of her work and of those she has gathered around her in connection with the Catholic Worker, its hospitality house and its community farm. I rejoice with new hope for mankind because of the kind of work that she and some of her associates are doing."

By DOROTHY DAY

Someone once said that it took me from December until May to bring out the paper. The truth is that I agreed at once. The delay was due chiefly to the fact that Peter, in his optimism about funds, was relying on a priest he knew who had a very plush rectory uptown on the West Side. His clerical friend would give us a mimeograph machine, paper, and space in the rectory basement. None of these were forthcoming— they had been only optimistic notions of Peter's.

But in the meantime Peter was educating me. I had a secular education, he said, and he would give me a Catholic outline of history. One way to study history was to read the lives of the saints down the centuries. Perhaps he chose this method because he had noticed my library, which contained a life of St. Teresa of Avila and her writings, especially about her spiritual foundations, and a life of St. Catherine of Siena. "Ah, there was a saint who had an influence on her times!" he exclaimed. Then he plunged into a discussion of St. Catherine's letters to the Popes and other public figures of the fourteenth century, in which she took them to task for their failings.

The date I had met Peter is clear in my mind because it was just after the feast of the Immaculate Conception, which is on December 8. I had visited the national shrine at Catholic University in Washington to pray for the hunger marchers. I felt keenly that God was more on the side of the hungry, the ragged, the unemployed, than on the side of the comfortable churchgoers, who gave so little heed to the misery of the needy and the groaning of the poor. I had prayed that some way should open up for me to do something, to line myself up on their side, to work for them, so that I would no longer feel I had been false to them in embracing my newfound faith.

The appearance of Peter Maurin, I felt with deep conviction, was the result of my prayers. Just as the good God had used the farmer Habakuk to bring the mess of food intended for the reapers to Daniel in the lions' den, so had He sent Peter Maurin to bring me the good intellectual food I needed to strengthen me to work for Him.

I learned shortly how he had happened to come to see me. He had heard of me on a visit to the **Commonweal**, our famous New York weekly edited by laymen. It had been started by Michael Williams, a veteran journalist, who had worked in San Francisco on the same paper with my father years before. Peter had also been told of my conversion by a red-headed Irish Communist with whom he struck up a conversation on a bench in Union Square. The Irishman told Peter that we both had similar ideas—namely, that the Catholic Church had a social teaching which could be applied to the problems of our day. So Peter had set out to find me.

Now he had someone to whom he could propound his program. He must have proposed it many times before, at Social Action conferences, in visits to public figures and chancery offices around the country. But he seemed to have got nowhere. It might have been his shabbiness, it might have been his thick accent, that prevented him from getting a hearing.

Perhaps it was because of my own radical background that Peter brought me a digest of the writings of Kropotkin one day, calling my attention especially to **Fields, Factories and Workshops**. He had gone over to the Rand School of Social Science for this, and carefully copied out the pertinent passages. He also liked **Mutual Aid** and **The Conquest of Bread**.

I was familiar with Kropotkin only through his **Memoirs of a Revolutionist**, which had originally run serially in the **Atlantic Monthly**. (Oh, far-off day of American freedom, when Karl Marx could write for the morning **Tribune** in New York, and Kropotkin could not only be published in the **Atlantic**, but be received as a guest in the homes of New England Unitarians, and in Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago!)

Theory of Revolution

Peter came day after day. He brought me books to read and the newest of his phased writings. There was to be no end to my learning.

One day I chanced upon Peter in his friend's uptown church. I had dropped in to say a few prayers. After some minutes I looked up. There was Peter, sitting in front of the Blessed Sacrament, evidently in deep meditation. He seemed totally unconscious of the presence

of anyone else in the church. He sat there in silence. Every now and then he would nod his head, and gesticulate with his hand, as though he were making one of his points to the Presence before Whom he sat so quietly. I did not want to disturb him.

Also, in my subconscious, I was probably tired of his constant conversation. His line of thought, the books he had given me to read, were all new to me and all ponderous. There was so much theory. I had read about Kropotkin the man, his life and adventures. In a way they told me much. I was not sure I wanted to know more. Peter read Kropotkin's theoretical works. It was the idea, the abstract thought, that got him and that he hoped would get me. Sitting there thinking back over the past weeks, I had to face the fact that Peter was hard to listen to. I would tune in some concert, some symphony, and beg him to be still. Tessa (my brother John's wife) and I both loved music, but Peter seemed to have no ear for it. He would be obedient for a time. But soon he would look at my forbidding face, and, seeing no yielding there, he would go over to the gentler Tessa, pulling a chair close to hers and leaning almost on the arm, he would begin to talk. He was incorrigible. Yet we were growing to love him, to greet him warmly when he came, to press food on him, knowing that he ate only one meal a day.

His willingness to talk to any visitor who dropped in, however, was a boon to us; it released us for our various chores. I, for example, could run into the front room to my typewriter and get some work done. I recall one visitor in particular, who came quite often, a sculptor named Hugh—, a tall man, heavy and quiet, with big brown eyes. He used to take out a flute and play while Peter talked to him.

“You are quite right, Peter,” he would say every now and then, nodding absently. Then he would go right on piping his simple tunes. He startled us one day, when a woman friend of ours came to call, by remarking after she had left that she used to come to his studio and sit in the nude on the mantelpiece. We concluded that she must have resembled some model who had once posed for him.

Usually by ten or eleven we urged our visitors to go. We were at home with them and felt free to send them on their way. On mild nights, Hugh and Peter would go on to Union Square to sit on a park bench. There they would continue their conversation—if it could be called that—with Hugh playing his flute, and Peter, gesticulating, haranguing him with his discussion of history, his analysis of ideas, old and new, and, in doing so, perhaps rehearsing his lessons for me the next day.

Placidly, Tessa awaited her baby, and I went on with my free-lancing. In the evenings, my brother and I (John was working days now) would talk over plans for the paper with Peter, who knew nothing about journalism. He would supply the ideas, and we would get out the paper for the “man in the street.”

Getting Into Print

My mind and heart were full of the part I had to play, self-centered creature that I was. I planned the makeup and the type, and what stories I would write to go with Peter's easy essays. I don't think we even consulted Peter as to whether he liked the title we had given to

his writings in the paper, "Easy Essays." He was so happy over the coming incarnation of his ideas in print that he never expressed himself on the subject. But he well knew that, in spite of the title, his essays were anything but easy. Like those in the Gospel, his were hard sayings—hard to work out in everyday life.

Having become convinced of this after several weeks, I went, on the advice of Father Joseph McSorley, former provincial of the Paulist Society and my good spiritual adviser at the time, to the Paulist Press. For an edition of two thousand copies, I was told, the price would be fifty- seven dollars.

I decided to wait until I had the cash in hand before getting out the first issue. I didn't want to run up any debts. I did no installment buying, although I didn't mind being late with the rent or skimping on groceries to speed the accumulation of enough money to pay the first bill. Father McSorley helped a lot by finding work for me to do. Father Harold Purcell gave me ten dollars, and Sister Peter Claver brought me a dollar which someone had just given to her.

All that winter Peter had come back and forth from Mt. Tremper in upstate New York, but by April he was in town all the time. Our plans were shaping up. Yet Peter was plainly not too well pleased with the way the paper was going.

I had sent my copy to the printer—news accounts of the exploitation of Negroes in the South, and the plight of the sharecroppers; child labor in our own neighborhood; some recent evictions; a local strike over wages and hours; pleas for better home relief, and so on—and we were waiting for proofs.

When they came we cut them out and started making a dummy, pasting them up on the eight pages of a tabloid the size of the Nation, writing headlines, and experimenting with different kinds of type. Peter looked over what I had written as it came back from the printer. I could see that, far from being happy about it, he was becoming more and more disturbed. One day, while looking over some fresh proofs, he shook his head. His expression was one of great sadness. "It's everyone's paper," he said. I was pleased. I thought that was what we both wanted. "And everyone's paper is no one's paper," he added with a sigh.

He rose without another word and went out the door. Later we learned indirectly that he had gone back upstate. It was some time before we heard from him again.

We kept hoping that he would be on hand for that historic May Day in 1933 when we ventured out in Union Square to sell the first issue. He wasn't. A friendly priest sent three young men to accompany me. One of them was Joe Bennett, a tall, gangling blond boy from Denver, who was to work closely with us for some months. The day was bright and warm and beautiful. The square was packed with demonstrators and paraders, listening to speeches, carrying on disputes among themselves, or glancing through the great masses of literature being given out or sold, which so soon were litter on the ground. The two younger men, intimidated and discouraged by the slighting comments of the champions of labor and the left, soon fled. Religion in Union Square! It was preposterous! If we had been representing Jehovah's Witnesses, we might have had a friendlier reception. But people associated with the Roman Catholic Church! Joe Bennett and I stuck it out, reveling in the bright spring sunshine. We did not sell many papers, but we did enjoy the discussions into which we were drawn. One Irishman looked at the masthead and rebuked us for the line which read "a

penny a copy.” We were in the pay of the English, he said. Next month we changed it to “a cent a copy” just to placate the Irish.

We knew Peter would not have let this go without making a point. He would have said, “When an Irishman met an Irishman a thousand years ago, they started a monastery. Now, when an Irishman meets an Irishman, you know what they start.” Then he would have gone on with a long discourse on Gaelic culture, on how it was the Irish who kept civilization alive through the Dark Ages, and on and on, until his adversary would have forgotten all about his heat over the penny.

Another protest came from a Negro, who pointed out that the two workers on our masthead, standing on either side of our title, the *Catholic Worker*, were both white men. One had a pick and the other had a shovel. “Why not have one white and the other colored?” he wanted to know.

We thought it was a good suggestion. Before our next issue came out we found an artist who made a new masthead for us, a white man and a colored man, each with his implements of toil, clasping hands, with the figure of Christ in the background, uniting them. Joe Bennett and I sat on park benches that first day, got our first touch of sunburn and gradually relaxed. In spite of our small sales and the uncertain prospects for the future, it was with a happy feeling of accomplishment that I returned to East Fifteenth Street that evening.

Lost Leader

But I missed Peter Maurin. We had been so excited at the idea of launching a new paper, small though it was, and we had had so many details to attend to, that there was not much time to miss him before the paper came out. But now I did. His absence gave me an uneasy feeling, reminding me that our paper was not reflecting his thought, although it was he who had given us the idea.

Then, for a while, I was too busy again to think much about it. Copies had to be mailed out to editors of diocesan papers and to men and women prominent in the Catholic world. Mail began to come in praising our first effort. Some letters even contained donations to help us continue our work. I was lighthearted with success. We had started. Tessa’s baby was born the week after the **Catholic Worker** was launched. A few days later my brother got a job, editing the small-town paper in Dobbs Ferry, up the Hudson River, and moved his family there.

At the same time a barbershop on the street floor below our apartment house became empty. I could see that it would be ideal for an office. It was a long shop, and narrow. In back of it was a bedroom, and beyond that a kitchen. A door opened on the backyard, and the paved space in front of the garden made an ideal spot for an outdoor sitting room where we could receive guests and even serve afternoon tea. So, with a few pieces of second-hand furniture—a desk, a table, a filing case, and a couple of chairs—we made still another start.

More and more people began to come. Two constant visitors at the office of the **Catholic Worker** were a thin, shabby, and rather furtive-looking pair whom Peter had picked up in Union Square earlier in the spring before he went away. To him they represented “the worker.”

They would listen to him untiringly and without interrupting. They were the beginning of an audience, something to build on—not very promising, but something. After one of Peter’s discussions in the square, they usually followed him to my place, where, if there was not a bit of change forthcoming, there was at least bread and sweet tea. Peter would say each time, “They have no place to sleep.” He was sure that I would produce the dollar needed for two beds on the Bowery. But often there was no dollar, so they stayed for lunch instead.

All the while Peter was in the country I was visited regularly by the pair of them. They always announced themselves before I opened the door: “Dolan and Egan here again.” It got so that my personal friends, knowing how exasperated I was becoming at having my time taken up, used to call out upon arriving, “Dolan and Egan here again.”

Thus it was with repressed impatience that I heard one day a knock on the door of my apartment above the barbershop. I stood there, braced for the familiar greeting. When it did not come, I opened the door anyway - there stood Peter Maurin.

“Peter! Where have you been?” My relief was so great that my welcome was ardent. “Where were you on May Day? Thousands of people in Union Square and not a sign of Peter!”

“Everyone’s paper is no one’s paper,” he repeated, shaking his head. Peter seemed rested and not so dusty as usual. His gray eyes told me that he was glad to be back. While I prepared coffee and soup and put out the bread, he went on and on, and I let him, content to wait until he was eating his soup to tell him all that had been happening. When his mouth was full he would listen.

I got no explanation from him as to why he had gone away. The closest he came to it was to say wryly, with a shrug, “Man proposes and woman disposes.” But he looked at me and smiled and his eyes warmed. I could see that he was happy to be back and ready to get on with his mission. He was full of patience, ready to look at me now not as a Catherine of Siena, already enlightened by the Holy Spirit, but as an ex-Socialist, ex- I.W.W., ex-Communist, in whom he might find some concordance, some basis on which to build. But unions and strikes and the fight for better wages and hours would remain my immediate concern. As St. Augustine said, “The bottle will still smell of the liquor it once held.” I continued on this track until Peter had enlightened my mind and enlarged my heart to see further, more in accord with the liberty of Christ, of which St. Paul was always speaking.

Peter took up right where he had left off, pulling a book from his pocket to continue my schooling. It might have been an encyclical on St. Francis of Assisi; or something by Eric Gill, writer, sculptor, artist, craftsman; living at that time in a community in England; or the short book **Nazareth or Social Chaos** by Father Vincent McNabb, O.P., who had encouraged that community. It was only gradually, through many conversations, that I came to understand enough of his thinking to realize why he considered the stories in the first issue of the **Catholic Worker** inadequate.

He often spoke of what he called “a philosophy of work.” “Work, not wages—work is not a commodity to be bought and sold” was one of his slogans. “Personal responsibility, not state responsibility” was another. A favorite source of his was **The Personalist Manifesto** by Emmanuel Mounier, which he would go around extemporaneously translating from the French for the benefit of anyone who would listen. He finally persuaded Father Virgil Michel,

a Benedictine priest of St. John's Abbey in Minnesota, to translate it. Peter got it published. "A personalist is a **go-giver**, not a **go-getter**," he used to say. "He tries to give what he has instead of trying to get what the other fellow has. He tries to be good by doing good to the other fellow. He has a social doctrine of the common good. He is alter-centered, not self-centered."

Philosophy of Labor

Much later, when I had a look at that first issue, I could see more clearly what bothered Peter. We had emphasized wages and hours while he was trying to talk about a philosophy of work. I had written of women in industry, children in industry, of sweatshops and strikes.

"Strikes don't strike me!" Peter kept saying, stubbornly. It must have appeared to him that we were just urging the patching-up of the industrial system instead of trying to rebuild society itself with a philosophy so old it seemed like new. Even the name of the paper did not satisfy him. He would have preferred **Catholic Radical**, since he believed that radicals should, as their name implied, get at the roots of things. The second issue of the paper, the June-July number, showed that we had been talking things over. My editorial said:

Peter Maurin (whose name we misspelled in the last issue) has his program which is embodied in his contribution this month. Because his program is specific and definite, he thinks it is better to withdraw his name from the editorial board and continue his contact with the paper as a contributor.

Then came Peter's editorial:

As an editor, it will be assumed that I sponsor or advocate any reform suggested in the pages of the Catholic Worker. I would rather definitely sign my own work, letting it be understood what I stand for.

My program stands for three things: Round-table discussions is one and I hope to have the first one at the Manhattan Lyceum the last Sunday in June. We can have a hall holding 150 people for eight hours for ten dollars. I have paid a deposit of three. I have no more money now but I will beg the rest. I hope everyone will come to this meeting. I want Communists, radicals, priests, and laity. I want everyone to set forth his own views. I want clarification of thought.

The next step in the program is houses of hospitality. In the Middle Ages it was an obligation of the bishop to provide houses of hospitality or hospices for the wayfarer. They are especially necessary now and necessary to my program, as halfway houses. I am hoping that someone will donate a house rent-free for six months so that a start may be made. A priest will be at the head of it and men gathered from our roundtable discussions will be recruited to work in the houses cooperatively and eventually be sent out to farm colonies or agronomic universities. Which comes to the third step in my program. People will have to go back to the land. The machine has displaced labor. The cities are overcrowded. The land will have to take care of them.

My whole scheme is a Utopian, Christian communism. I am not afraid of the word communism. I am not saying that my program is for everyone. It is for those who choose to embrace it. I am not opposed to private property with responsibility. But those who own private property should never forget it is a trust.

This succinct listing of his aims was not even the lead editorial. Perhaps it sounded too utopian for my tastes; perhaps I was irked because women were left out in his description of a house of hospitality, where he spoke of a group of men living under a priest. In addition to Peter's editorial, there were several of his easy essays. In one, recommending the formation of houses of hospitality and farming communes, he wrote in his troubadour mood:

We need round-table discussions to keep trained minds from becoming academic.

We need round-table discussions to keep untrained minds from becoming superficial.

We need round-table discussions to learn from scholars how things would be, if they were as they should be.

We need round-table discussions to learn from scholars how a path can be made from things as they are to things as they should be.

We need houses of hospitality to give to the rich the opportunity to serve the poor.

We need houses of hospitality to bring the Bishops to the people and the people to the Bishops.

We need houses of hospitality to bring back to institutions the technique of institutions.

We need houses of hospitality to bring social justice through Catholic Action.

The unemployed need free rent. They can have that in an agronomic university.

The unemployed need free fuel. They can get that in an agronomic university.

The unemployed need free food. They can raise that in an agronomic university.

The unemployed need to acquire skill. They can do that in an agronomic university.

There were other articles on more mundane matters. One stated that readers had contributed \$156.50. That, with what money I got from free-lancing, would keep us going. There was also a report on distribution: papers were being mailed out all over the country in bundles of ten or twenty; Dolan and Eagan had been selling on the streets (they kept the money to pay for their "eats and tobacco"); and I too had embarked on the great adventure of going out to face up to "the man on the street."

So we continued through the summer. Since this was the depression and there were no jobs, almost immediately we found ourselves a group, a staff, which grew steadily in numbers. Joe Bennett, our first salesman, was still with us. Soon we were joined by Stanley Vishnewski, a seventeen-year-old Lithuanian boy from the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn who used to walk to New York over the bridge every day and then twenty-five blocks uptown to Fifteenth Street. He sold the paper, too, and ran errands and worked without wages despite the urging of his father, a tailor, that he ought to be looking for a job. (Stanley has remained with us ever since.) . . .

That summer Peter performed with gusto his role as a troubadour of God. During dinner he talked—or rather he chanted—and his essays made a pleasant accompaniment to our meals.

One of them, “A Case for Utopia,” which we printed later in our paper, is especially pertinent today:

The world would be better off if people tried to become better, and people would become better if they stopped trying to become better off.

For when everyone tries to become better off nobody is better off.

But when everyone tries to become better everybody is better off.

Everyone would be rich if nobody tried to become richer, and nobody would be poor if everybody tried to be the poorest.

And everybody would be what he ought to be if everybody tried to be what he wants the other fellow to be.

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What we do Loaves and Fishes offers a gathering place for our neighbors where they can find food, clothing, and community. Normally, on Saturday mornings between 350 to 425 neighbors visit us and now we are providing over 1,000 bags of groceries to our neighbors in need every week. Food: We offer prepacked bags of groceries on Saturday mornings and deliveries throughout the week. We strive to provide a wide array of nutritious, culturally appropriate food that can include fresh produce, meat, eggs, bread, and canned goods. History and Etymology for loaves and fishes. so called from the 5 barley loaves and 2 fishes with which Jesus miraculously fed a multitude of 5000 (John 6) that he later reproached for their greater interest in the food than in him (John 6: 26). Keep scrolling for more. Learn More about loaves and fishes. Share loaves and fishes. Post the Definition of loaves and fishes to Facebook Share the Definition of loaves and fishes on Twitter. Dictionary Entries near loaves and fishes. loathly. loathsome. loathy. loaves and fishes.