

“Come, be my light...”

Readings for an Advent Quiet Day

Alfred Delp

Mother Maria Skobstova

Dorothy Day

Alfred Delp, S.J. (1907-1945)

Alfred Delp: Advent meditation from Tegel Prison, Berlin, December 1944

The deepest meaning of Advent cannot be understood by anyone who has not yet first experienced being terrified unto death about himself and his human prospects and likewise what is revealed within himself about the situation and constitution of mankind in general.

The entire message about God's coming, about the Day of Salvation, about the redemption drawing near, will be merely divine game-playing or sentimental lyricism unless it is grounded upon two clear findings of fact.

The first finding: insights into, and alarm over powerlessness and futility of human life in relation to its ultimate meaning and fulfillment. The powerlessness and futility are boundaries of our human existence and are also consequences of sin. At the same time, we are keenly aware that life does have an ultimate meaning and fulfillment. The second finding: the promise of God to be on our side, to come to meet us. God resolved to raise the boundaries of our existence and to overcome the consequences of sin.

However, as a result, the basic condition of life always has an Advent dimension: boundaries, and hunger, and thirst, and the lack of fulfillment, and promise, and movement toward another. That means, however, that we basically remain without shelter, under way, and open until the final encounter, with all the humble blessedness and painful pleasure of this openness.

Therefore there is no interim finality, and the attempt to create final conclusions is an old temptation of mankind. Hunger and thirst, and desert journeying, and the survival teamwork of mountaineers on a rope—these are the truth of our human condition. The promises given relate to this truth, not to arrogance and caprice. There really are promises given to this truth though, and we can and should rely upon them. The truth will make you free (Jn 8:32)

That truth is the essential theme of life. Everything else is only expression, result, application, consequence, testing, and practice. May God help us to wake up to ourselves and in doing so, to move from ourselves toward Him. Every temptation to live according to another condition is a deception. Our participation in this existential lie is really the sin for which we today—as individuals, as a generation, and as a continent—are so horribly doing penance. The way to salvation will be found only in an existential conversion and return to truth.

This is, however, a conversion and a return that allow for no procrastination... The existential untruth and continuing entanglement in it are not left to personal discretion. The lie is dangerously destructive. It has corroded our souls, destroyed our people, demolished our cities and countries, and already has left another generation bleed to death...

May we know and acknowledge the hunger and thirst above and beyond ourselves. Indeed, this is no waiting without hope. Rather, the heart receives the delightful warmth known to those who wait with certitude that the other is coming and has already set out on the way.

The terror that accompanies such an awakening to one's own situation is finally and conclusively overcome from within by the certitude that God has already set out and is on His way. Our destinies, still so interwoven with the inescapable "logical" and "mechanical" course of events, are really nothing other than the ways that God the Lord uses to bring about this definitive meaning, as well as His ongoing inquiry. "Lift up your heads: Your salvation is near" (Lk 21:28).

In the same way that lies have gone out from people's hearts, penetrating throughout the world and destroying it, so should—and so will—the truth begin its healing service within our hearts.

Light the candles wherever you can, you who have them. They are a real symbol of what must happen in Advent, what Advent must be, if we want to live.

God Alone Suffices. (Excerpted from Alfred Delp's diary entry, December 31, 1944.)

This year now ending leaves behind it a rich legacy of tasks and we must seriously consider how to tackle them. Above all else one thing is necessary religious minded people must become more devout; their dedication must be extended and intensified.

And that brings me to my own affairs. Have I grown in stature in the past year? Have I increased my value to the community? How do things stand with me?

Outwardly they have never been worse. This is the first New Year I have ever approached without so much as a crust of bread to my name. I have absolutely nothing I can call my own. The only gesture of goodwill I have encountered is that the jailer has fastened my handcuffs so loosely that I can slip my left hand out entirely. The handcuffs hang from my right wrist so at least I am able to write. But I have to keep alert with one ear as it were glued to the door—heaven help me if they should catch me at work!

And undeniably I find myself in the shadow of the scaffold. Unless I can disprove the accusations on every point I shall most certainly hang. The chances of this happening have never really seriously occupied my thoughts for long although naturally there have been moments of deep depression -handcuffs after all are a symbol of candidature for execution. I am in the power of the law which, in times like the present, is not a thing to be taken lightly.

An honest examination of conscience reveals much vanity, arrogance and self-esteem; and in the past also a certain amount of dishonesty. That was brought home to me when they called me a liar while I was being beaten up. They accused me of lying when they found I mentioned no names except those I knew they knew already. I prayed hard, asking God why he permitted me to be so brutally handled and then I saw that there was in my nature a tendency to pretend and deceive.

On this altar much has been consumed by fire and much has been melted and become pliable. It has been one of God's blessings, and one of the signs of his indwelling grace, that I have been so wonderfully helped in keeping my vows. He will, I am confident, extend his blessing to my outward existence as soon as I am ready for the next task with which he wishes to entrust me. From this outward activity and intensified inner light new passion will be born to give witness for the living God, for I have truly learned to know him in these days of trial and to feel his healing presence. God alone suffices is literally and absolutely true. And I must have a passionate belief in my mission to mankind, showing the way to a fuller life and encouraging the willing capacity for it. These things I will do wholeheartedly – in nomine Domine [in the name of the Lord].

Excerpted from Alfred Delp's diary entry for the Feast of Epiphany, January 6, 1945.

The fate of mankind, my own fate, the verdict awaiting me, the significance of the feast, can all be summed up in the sentence surrender thyself to God and thou shalt find thyself again.

Others have you in their power now; they torture and frighten you, hound you from pillar to post. But the inner law of freedom sings that no death can kill us; life is eternal.

Pray and praise – the fundamental words of life, the steep roads to God, the doors that lead to fulfillment, the ways that lead a man to his true self.

Mother Maria Skobstova (1891-1945)

The Mysticism of Human Communion

The most doubtful, disputable, and satisfying thing about all the concepts of “Christianity turned toward the world,” “social Christianity,” and similar trends that have been put forward in modern times, is their secondary character, their incommensurability with the idea of Christian life understood as communion with God.

Something of the “second sort,” applied, appended, is not bad in itself, but is also not necessary – and in any case cannot exhaust the fullness of Christian life. Primary Christianity, on the other hand, exhausts everything, because it is oriented toward authentic spiritual life, that is, toward communion with God. In this characterization there is undoubtedly a portion of truth, because all the trends of social Christianity known to us are based on a certain rationalistic humanism, apply only the principle of Christian morality to “this world,” and do not seek a spiritual and mystical basis for their constructions.

To make social Christianity not only Christian-like but truly Christian, it is necessary to find one more dimension for it, to bring it out of flat soulfulness and two-dimensional moralism into the depths of multi-dimensional spirituality; to substantiate it mystically and spiritually. It seems to me that this coincides precisely with what Orthodoxy – which has not yet spoken in this area – can and must say; it will give greater depth to Catholic and Protestant attempts to turn a Christian face to the world.

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An extraordinary similarity of extremes can be observed in regard to the question of the world. On the one hand, worldly people are essentially separated from the world by an impenetrable wall. However much they give themselves to the joys of the world, whatever bustle they live in, there is always an impassable abyss in their consciousness: “I” and the world, which serves me, amuses me, grieves me, wearies me, and so on. The more egoistic a man is, that is, the more he belongs to the world, the more the world is some sort of inanimate comfort for him, or some sort of inanimate torture, to which his uniquely animate “I” is opposed. If he loves the world, science, art, nature, family, friends, politics, it is with what may be called lustful love – “my family,” “my art,” “my nature,” “my politics.” All this reveals, embodies, reflects, realizes a single excessive “I.” In this relation to the world there exist insuperable, high walls that separate man from man, nature, and God.

We may boldly say that the most worldly man is the most separated and disconnected from the life of the world.

But in Christianity, where two God-given commandments – about the love of God and the love of man – should resound, we often run into the same separation from man and from the world. It would seem that a Christian cannot say: “I love God, and therefore man is indifferent for me.” The apostle John answers him severely: “Hypocrite, how can you love God whom you have not seen, if you scorn your brother who is near to you?” But even if the Christian does not put it so crudely, still there is certain possibility of harming one’s love of man because of one’s love of God. Love of God – that is the chief and only thing. All the rest is just obedience, just a “job,” which in any case should not diminish the chief thing. As a result, man has his own monastery – in his spirit, behind high white walls. There he abides in the fullness and purity of his communion with God, and from there, by way of some sort of condescension, some sort of patronizing, he descends into the sinful and suffering world. He fulfills his duty of obedience before it, a duty that has a very strict and precise boundary. It must not disturb the inner rhythm of his life in God, a certain sacred comfort; it must not captivate him in the depths of his spirit, because in those depths abides the divine Holy of Holies. Pity, love, work, responsibility for the human soul, willingness to sacrifice – these are all necessary elements of obedience, but one must know moderation in them. They should not be allowed to overwhelm and disperse the spirit.

Compared to the chief thing, it is all not a deed but a job. Otherwise, one might lose one’s “I,” scatter it through the world. This “I” is, in a certain sense, opposed to the world. And the world either simply lies in evil, or is the field where we exercise our virtues – in any case, it is outside the “I.” Separation from the world

occurs on different principles here than with worldly people, but it is no less complete for all that. In this isolation of the “I” from the world, opposites meet.

Here we must add the reservation that there is, of course, work that can essentially be called a “job.” When hermits wove mats and fashioned clay pots, it was a job. When we peel potatoes, mend underwear, do the accounts, ride the subway, that is also a job. But when the monks of old, by way of obedience, buried the dead, looked after lepers, preached to fallen women, denounced the unrighteous life, gave alms – that was not a job.

And when we act in our modern life, visiting the sick, feeding the unemployed, teaching children, keeping company with all kinds of human grief and failure, dealing with drunkards, criminals, madmen, the dejected, the gone-to-seed, with all the spiritual leprosy of our life, it is not a job and not only a tribute to obedience that has its limits within our chief endeavor – it is that very inner endeavor itself, an inseparable part of our main task. The more we go out into the world, the more we give ourselves to the world, the less we are of the world, because what is of the world does not give itself to the world.

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Let us try to substantiate this theologically, spiritually, and mystically. The great and only first founder of worldly endeavor was Christ, the Son of God, who descended into the world, became incarnate in the world, totally, entirely, without holding any reserve, as it were, for his divinity. Did he hold back his divinity and himself? Was he in the world merely as the obedient son of the Father?

In his worldly obedience he emptied himself, and his emptying is the only example for our path. God who became a child, God who fled into Egypt to escape Herod, God who sought friends and disciples in this world, God who wept from the depths of his spirit over Lazarus, who denounced the pharisees, who spoke of the fate of Jerusalem, who drove out demons, healed the sick, raised the dead, who finally, and most importantly gave his flesh and blood as food for the world, lifted up his body on the cross between the two thieves – when and at what moment did his example teach us about inner walls that separate us from the world? He was in the world with all his Godmanhood, not with some secondary properties. He did not keep himself, he gave himself without stint. “This is my body, which is broken for you” – shed to the end. In the sacrament of the eucharist, Christ gave himself, his God-man’s body, to the world, or rather, he united the world with himself in the communion with his God-man’s body. He made it into Godmanhood. And it would sound almost blasphemous if he had wanted to isolate some inner, deep Christ who remained alien to this God-man’s sacrifice. Christ’s love does not know how to measure and divide, does not know how to spare itself. Neither did Christ teach the apostles to be sparing and cautious in love – and he could not have taught them that, because he included them in the communion of the eucharistic sacrifice, made them into the body of Christ – and thereby gave them up to be immolated for the world. Here we need only learn and draw conclusions. It might be said paradoxically that in the sense of giving himself to the world, Christ was the most worldly of all the sons of Adam. But we already know that what is of the world does not give itself to the world.

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I think that the fullest understanding of Christ’s giving himself to the world, creating the one body of Christ, Godmanhood, is contained in the Orthodox idea of *sobornost*. And *sobornost* is not only some abstraction, on the one hand, nor is it, on the other hand, a higher reality having no inner connection with the individual human persons who constitute it: it is a higher reality because each of its members is a member of the body of Christ, full-grown and full-fledged, because he is that “soul” which is worth the whole world. Each man, manifested to us from the moment of the first Old Testament revelations as the image of God, in Christ discloses still more strongly and concretely his connection with God. He is indeed the image of God, the image of Christ, the icon of Christ. Who, after that, can differentiate the worldly from the Heavenly in the human soul, who can tell where the image of God ends and the heaviness of human flesh begins! In communing with the world in the person of each individual human being, we know that we are communing with the image of God, and, contemplating that image, we touch the archetype – we commune with God.

There is an authentic, and truly Orthodox, mysticism not only of communion with God, but also of communion with man. And communion with man in this sense is simply another form of communion with God. In communing with people we commune not only with like-minded people, friends, co-religionists, subordinates, superiors – not only, finally, with material for our exercises in obedience and love; we commune with Christ himself, and only a peculiar materialism with regard to Christ’s appearing and abiding in the world can explain our inability to meet him within the bustle, in the very depth of the human fall. Here indeed the point of the matter is not only the symbol of meeting with Christ – an act limited in time – but the reality of feeling our connection with the body of Christ, of being in Christ all the time, of associating ourselves indissolubly with him in his God-manly abiding in the world. He foresaw our rationalistic and proud lack of faith when he prophesied that, to his accusation, people would ask in perplexity: “Lord, when did we not visit you in the hospital or in prison, when did we refuse you a cup of water?” If they could believe that in every beggar and in every criminal Christ himself addresses us, they would treat people differently. But the point is precisely that our communion with people passes mostly on the level of Earthly encounters and is deprived of the authentic mysticism that turns it into communion with God. And we are given a perfectly real possibility in our communing in love with mankind, with the world, to feel ourselves in authentic communion with Christ.

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And this makes perfectly clear what our relations to people, to their souls, to their deeds, to human destiny, to human history as a whole should be. During a service the priest does not only cense the icons of the savior, the mother of God, and the saints. He also censes the icon-people, the image of God in the people who are present. And as they leave the church precincts, these people remain as much the images of God, worthy of being censed and venerated. Our relations with people should be an authentic and profound veneration.

There are notions in Orthodoxy that attract our hearts but are not always clear to us, are not revealed to the end. We are like it when the “churching” of life is discussed, but few people understand what it means. Indeed, must we attend all the church services in order to “church” our life? Or hang an icon in every room and burn an icon-lamp in front of it? No, the churching of life is the sense of the whole world as one church, adorned with icons that should be venerated, that should be honored and loved, because these icons are true images of God that have the holiness of the living God upon them.

Just as fascinating, though enigmatic, for us is the expression “liturgy outside the church.” The church liturgy and the words spoken in it give us the key for understanding this notion. We hear: “Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess....” And further on: “Thine own of thine own we offer unto thee, on behalf of all and for all.” These “others” whom we love with one mind in the church also work with us outside the church, rejoicing, suffering, living. And those who are his and of him, offering unto him on behalf of all and for all, are indeed “all,” that is, all possible encounters on our way, all people sent to us by God. The wall of the church did not separate some small flock from them all. On the other hand, we believe that the eucharistic sacrament offers up the Lamb of God, the body of Christ, as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. And, being in communion with this sacrificial body, we ourselves become offered in sacrifice – “on behalf of all and for all.” In this sense, the liturgy outside the church is our sacrificial ministry in the church of the world, adorned with living icons of God, our common ministry, an all-human sacrificial offering of love, the great act of our God-manly union, the united prayerful breath of our God-manly spirit. In this liturgical communion with people, we partake of a communion with God, we really become one flock and one shepherd, one body, of which the inalienable head is Christ.

To clarify everything, we must make a few more reservations. Only this approach to the world and to man makes it impossible to say that the world distracts us, that man devours our concentration with his bustle. It is our own sinful distraction that distracts us and our own sinful bustle that devours our concentration. We get from the world and from man what we count on getting from them. We may get a disturbing neighbor in the same apartment, or an all-too-merry drinking companion, or a capricious and slow-witted student, or obnoxious

ladies, or seedy old codgers, and so on, and relations with them will only weary us physically, annoy us inwardly, deaden us spiritually. But, through Christ's image in man, we may partake of the body of Christ. If our approach to the world is correct and spiritual, we will not have only to give to it from our spiritual poverty, but we will receive infinitely more from the face of Christ that lives in it, from our communion with Christ, from the consciousness of being a part of Christ's body.

And it seems to me that this mysticism of human communion is the only authentic basis for any external Christian activity, for social Christianity, which in this sense has not been born yet, for a Christianity turned toward the world, and so on. Social endeavor should be just as much a liturgy outside the church as any communion with man in the name of Christ. Otherwise, even if it is based on Christian morals, it will merely be Christian-like, essentially secondary. Everything in the world can be Christian, but only if it is pervaded by the authentic awe of communion with God, which is also possible on the path of authentic communion with man. But outside this chief thing, there is no authentic Christianity. Such, it seems to me, are the difficult demands Christianity must place before all attempts at building life.

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Having begun with what is biggest and most absolute, let us throw a bridge across to our everyday destiny, to each fact of our small, concrete lives – and they are emigrant lives, which means that we cannot really talk about any great perspectives.

However, each of us is given a destiny which is no whit smaller and no less tragic because it is given us in Paris and not in Moscow. It was given each of us to be born, to love, to have friends, to thirst for creativity, to feel compassion, justice, a longing for eternity, and to each of us will be given death. We stand before the truth of the Lord and want to fulfill its commands.

And the truth of the Lord tells us that the heavens cannot contain it, but it is contained in the manger in Bethlehem; that it creates and upholds the world, and falls under the weight of the cross on the way to Golgotha; that it is more than the universe, and at the same time does not scorn a cup of water offered by a compassionate hand. The truth of the Lord abolishes the difference between the immense and the insignificant. Let us try to build our small, our insignificant life in the same way as the Great Architect builds the planetary system of the immense universe.

People make a choice between the sorrowful face of Christ in the name of the joy of life. He who rejects the sorrowful face of Christ in the name of the joys of life believes in those joys, but tragedy is born at the moment when he discovers that those joys are not joyful. Forced, mechanized labor gives us no joy; entertainment, more or less monotonous, differing only in the degree to which it exhausts our nerves, gives us no joy; the whole of this bitter life gives us no joy. Without Christ the world attains the maximum of bitterness, because it attains the maximum of meaninglessness.

Christianity is Paschal joy, Christianity is collaboration with God, Christianity is an obligation newly undertaken by mankind to cultivate the Lord's paradise, once rejected in the fall; and in the thicket of this paradise, overgrown with the weeds of many centuries of sin and the thorns of our dry and loveless life, Christianity commands us to root up, plow, sow, weed, and harvest.

Authentic, God-manly, integral, *sobornoe* Christianity calls us in the Paschal song: "Let us embrace one another." In the liturgy we say, "Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess...." Let us love – meaning not only one mind, but also one activity, meaning a common life. It is necessary to build our relations to man and to the world not on human and worldly laws, but within the revelation of the divine commandment. To see in man the image of God and in the world God's creation. It is necessary to understand that Christianity demands of us not only the mysticism of communion with God, but also the mysticism of communion with man.

Dorothy Day (1897-1980)

Room for Christ, *The Catholic Worker*, 1948

It is no use saying that we are born two thousand years too late to give room to Christ. Nor will those who live at the end of the world have been born too late. Christ is always with us, always asking for room in our hearts.

But now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that he speaks, with the eyes of store clerks, factory workers, and children that he gazes; with the hands of office workers, slum dwellers, and suburban housewives that he gives. It is with the feet of soldiers and tramps that he walks, and with the heart of anyone in need that he longs for shelter. And giving shelter or food to anyone who asks for it, or needs it, is giving to Christ.

We can do now what those who knew him in the days of his flesh did. I am sure that the shepherds did not adore and then go away to leave Mary and her child in the stable, but somehow found them room, even though what they had to offer might have been primitive enough. All that the friends of Christ did for him in his lifetime, we can do. Peter's mother-in-law hastened to cook a meal for him, and if anything in the Gospels can be inferred, it surely is that she gave the very best she had, with no thought of extravagance. Matthew made a feast for him, inviting the whole town, so that the house was in an uproar of enjoyment, and the straitlaced Pharisees — the good people — were scandalized.

The people of Samaria, despised and isolated, were overjoyed to give him hospitality, and for days he walked and ate and slept among them. And the loveliest of all relationships in Christ's life, after his relationship with his mother, is his friendship with Martha, Mary, and Lazarus and the continual hospitality he found with them. It is a staggering thought that there were once two sisters and a brother whom Jesus looked on almost as his family and where he found a second home, where Martha got on with her work, bustling around in her house-proud way, and Mary simply sat in silence with him.

If we hadn't got Christ's own words for it, it would seem raving lunacy to believe that if I offer a bed and food and hospitality to some man or woman or child, I am replaying the part of Lazarus or Martha or Mary, and that my guest is Christ. There is nothing to show it, perhaps. There are no halos already glowing round their heads — at least none that human eyes can see. It is not likely that I shall be vouchsafed the vision of Elizabeth of Hungary, who put the leper in her bed and later, going to tend him, saw no longer the leper's stricken face, but the face of Christ. The part of a Peter Claver, who gave a stricken black man his bed and slept on the floor at his side, is more likely ours. For Peter Claver never saw anything with his bodily eyes except the exhausted faces of the blacks; he had only faith in Christ's own words that these people were Christ. And when on one occasion [they]... ran from the room, panic-stricken before the disgusting sight of some sickness, he was astonished. "You mustn't go," he said, and you can still hear his surprise that anyone could forget the truth: "You mustn't leave him — it is Christ."

Some time ago I saw the death notice of a sergeant-pilot who had been killed on active service. After the usual information, a message was added which, I imagine, is likely to be imitated. It said that anyone who had ever known the dead boy would always be sure of a welcome at his parents' home. So, even now that the war is over, the father and mother will go on taking in strangers for the simple reason that they will be reminded of their dead son by the friends he made.

That is rather like the custom that existed among the first generations of Christians, when faith was a bright fire that warmed more than those who kept it burning. In every house then, a room was kept ready for any stranger who might ask for shelter; it was even called "the stranger's room"; and this not because these people, like the parents of the dead airman, thought they could trace something of someone they loved in the stranger who used

it, not because the man or woman to whom they gave shelter reminded them of Christ, but because — plain and simple and stupendous fact — he *was* Christ.

It would be foolish to pretend that it is always easy to remember this. If everyone were holy and handsome, with *alter Christus* shining in neon lighting from them, it would be easy to see Christ in everyone. If Mary had appeared in Bethlehem clothed, as Saint John says, with the sun, a crown of twelve stars on her head, and the moon under her feet, then people would have fought to make room for her. But that was not God's way for her, nor is it Christ's way for himself, now when he is disguised under every type of humanity that treads the Earth.

To see how far one realizes this, it is a good thing to ask honestly what you would do, or have done, when a beggar asked at your house for food. Would you — or did you — give it on an old cracked plate, thinking that was good enough? Do you think that Martha and Mary thought that the old and chipped dish was good enough for their guest?

In Christ's human life, there were always a few who made up for the neglect of the crowd. The shepherds did it; their hurrying to the crib atoned for the people who would flee from Christ. The wise men did it; their journey across the world made up for those who refused to stir one hand's breadth from the routine of their lives to go to Christ. Even the gifts the wise men brought have in themselves an obscure recompense and atonement for what would follow later in this child's life. For they brought gold, the king's emblem, to make up for the crown of thorns that he would wear; they offered incense, the symbol of praise, to make up for the mockery and the spitting; they gave him the myrrh, to heal and soothe, and he was wounded from head to foot and no one bathed his wounds. The women at the foot of the cross did it too, making up for the crowd who stood by and sneered.

We can do it too, exactly as they did. We are not born too late. We do it by seeing Christ and serving Christ in friends and strangers, in everyone we come in contact with.

All this can be proved, if proof is needed, by the doctrines of the church. We can talk about Christ's mystical body, about the vine and the branches, about the communion of saints. But Christ himself has proved it for us, and no one has to go further than that. For he said that a glass of water given to a beggar was given to him. He had Heaven hinge on the way we act toward him in his disguise of commonplace, frail, ordinary humanity.

Did you give me food when I was hungry?

Did you give me to drink when I was thirsty?

Did you give me clothes when my own were rags?

Did you come to see me when I was sick, or in prison or in trouble?

And to those who say, aghast, that they never had a chance to do such a thing, that they lived two thousand years too late, he will say again what they had the chance of knowing all their lives, that if these things were done for the very least of his brethren they were done to him.

For a total Christian, the goad of duty is not needed — always prodding one to perform this or that good deed. It is not a duty to help Christ, it is a privilege. Is it likely that Martha and Mary sat back and considered that they had done all that was expected of them — is it likely that Peter's mother-in-law grudgingly served the chicken she had meant to keep till Sunday because she thought it was her "duty"? She did it gladly; she would have served ten chickens if she had had them.

If that is the way they gave hospitality to Christ, then certainly it is the way it should still be given. Not for the sake of humanity. Not because it might be Christ who stays with us, comes to see us, takes up our time. Not

because these people remind us of Christ, as those soldiers and airmen remind the parents of their son, but because they *are* Christ, asking us to find room for him, exactly as he did at the first Christmas.

Excerpt from *On Pilgrimage*, 1948

Advent is a time of waiting, of expectation, of silence; waiting for our Lord to be born. A pregnant woman is so happy, so content. She lives in such a garment of silence, and it is as though she were listening to hear the stir of life within her. One always hears that stirring compared to the rustling of a bird in the hand. But the intentness with which one awaits such stirring is like nothing so much as a blanket of silence.

Be still. Did I hear something?

Be still and see that I am God.

Zundel, in *Our Lady of Wisdom*, has some beautiful passages on silence:

“Do we understand at last that action must be born in silence, and abide in silence, and issue in silence, and that its power must be an emanation and the radiation of silence, since its sole aim is to make men capable of hearing the Word that silently reverberates in their souls? All speech and reasoning, all eloquence and science, all methods and all psychologies, all slogans and suggestions are not worth a minute of silence in which the soul, completely open, yields itself to the embrace of the Spirit. In solitude Christ speaks to the heart, as a modest lover who embraces not His beloved before all the world. In silence we hear so much that is beautiful. The other day I saw a young mother who said, "The happiest hour of the day is that early morning hour when I lie and listen to the baby practising sounds and words. She has such a gentle little voice."

St. James says, "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man." ... To love with understanding and without understanding. To love blindly, and to folly. To see only what is lovable. To think only on these things. To see the best in everyone around, their virtues rather than their faults. To see Christ in them.

Many people think an examination of conscience is a morbid affair. Péguy has some verses which Donald Gallagher read to me once in the St. Louis House of Hospitality. (He and Cy Echele opened the house there.) They were about examination of conscience. There is a place for it, he said, at the beginning of the Mass. "I have sinned in thought, word, and deed, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault." But after you get done with it, don't go on brooding about it; don't keep thinking of it. You wipe your feet at the door of the church as you go in, and you do not keep contemplating your dirty feet.

Here is my examination at the beginning of Advent, at the beginning of a new year. Lack of charity, criticism of superiors, of neighbours, of friends and enemies. Idle talk, impatience, lack of self-control and mortification towards self, and of love towards others. Pride and presumption. (It is good to have visitors -- one's faults stand out in the company of others.) Self-will, desire not to be corrected, to have one's own way. The desire in turn to correct others, impatience in thought and speech.

The remedy is recollection and silence.

Meanness about giving time to others and wasting it myself. Constant desire for comfort. First impulse is always to make myself comfortable. If cold, to put on warmth; if hot, to become cool; if hungry, to eat; and what one likes -- always the first thought is of one's own comfort... Enlarge Thou my heart, Lord, that Thou mayest enter in.

Poverty and Precarity, *The Catholic Worker*, May 1952

Poverty is a very mysterious thing. We need to be always writing and thinking about it. It would seem strange that we must strive to be poor, to remain poor. "Just give me a chance" I can hear people say, "Just let me get my debts paid. Just let me get a few of the things I need and then I'll begin to think of poverty and its pleasures. Meanwhile, I've had nothing but."

This last month I have talked to a man who lives in a four room apartment with a wife and four children and relatives besides. He may have a regular job and enough food to go around, but he is poor in light and air and space. Down at the Peter Maurin farm each of the corners of the woman's dormitory are occupied, and when an extra visitor comes she must live in the middle of the room. During a visit to Georgia and South Carolina I have seen the shacks Negroes are living in, and the trailer camps around Augusta, Georgia, where the Hydrogen Bomb plant is under construction. They may have trailers but they are also poor, physically speaking, in the things that are necessary for a good life. Trailers cost money, so do cars, and food is high and no matter how high wages go, a sudden illness, and accumulation of doctor and hospital bills may mean a sudden plunge into destitution. Everybody talks about security and everybody shudders at the idea of poverty. And in fear and anguish people succumb, mentally and physically, until our hospitals, especially our mental hospitals, are crowded all over the country.

I am convinced that if we had an understanding and a love of poverty we would begin to be as free and joyous as St. Francis, who had a passion for Lady Poverty and lives on with us in joyous poverty through all the centuries since his death.

It is hard to write about poverty. We live in a slum neighborhood that is becoming ever more crowded with Puerto Ricans who are doubling up in unspeakably filthy, dark, crowded tenements on the lower east side and in Harlem, who have the lowest wages in the city, who do the hardest work, who are little and undernourished from generations of privation and exploitation by us. ...

It is hard to write about poverty when a visitor tells you of how he and his family all lived in a basement room and did sweat shop work at night to make ends meet, and how the landlord came in and belabored them for not paying his exorbitant rent.

It is hard to write about poverty when the back yard at Chrystie street still has the stock of furniture piled to one side that was put out on the street in an eviction in a next door tenement.

How can we say to these people, "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven," when we are living comfortably in a warm house, sitting down to a good table, and are clothed decently. Maybe not so decently. I had occasion to visit the City Shelter last month where families are cared for, and I sat there for a couple of hours, contemplating poverty and destitution, a family of these same Puerto Ricans with two of the children asleep in the parents' arms, and four others sprawling against them; a young couple, the mother pregnant; and elderly Negro who had a job she said but wasn't to go on it till next night. I made myself known to a young man in charge (I did not want to appear to be spying on them when all I wanted to know was the latest in the apartment-finding situation for homeless families) and he apologized for making me wait saying that he had thought I was one of the clients.

We must talk about poverty because people lose sight of it, can scarcely believe that it exists. So many decent people come in to visit us and tell us how their families were brought up in poverty and how, through hard work and decent habits and cooperation, they managed to educate all the children and raise up priests and nuns to the Church. They concede that health and good habits, a good family, take them out of the poverty class, no matter

how mean the slum they may have been forced to inhabit. No, they don't know about the poor. Their conception of poverty is something neat and well ordered as a nun's cell.

And maybe no one can be told, maybe they will have to experience it. Or maybe it is a grace which they must pray for. We usually get what we pray for, and maybe we are afraid to pray for it. And yet I am convinced that it is the grace we most need in this age of crisis, at this time when expenditures reach into the billions to defend "our American way of life." Maybe it is this defense which will bring down upon us this poverty which we do not pray for.

I can remember our first efforts nineteen years ago. (With this issue we start our twentieth year.) We had no office, no equipment but a typewriter which was pawned the first month. We wrote the paper on park benches and at the kitchen table. In an effort to achieve a little of the destitution of our neighbors we gave away even our furniture and sat on boxes. But as fast as we gave things away people brought more. We gave away blankets to needy families, started our first house of hospitality and people gathered together what blankets we needed. We gave away food and more food came in. I can remember a haunch of venison from the Canadian Northwest, a can of oysters from Maryland, a container of honey from Illinois. Even now it comes in, a salmon from Seattle, flown across the continent; nothing is too good for the poor. There is no one working with **The Catholic Worker** getting a salary, so no one is bothered with income tax, and since all of the leaders of the work give up job and salary, others of our readers feel called upon to give, and help us keep the work going. And then we experience a poverty of another kind, a poverty of interior goods of reputation. It is said often and with some scorn, "Why don't they get jobs and help the poor that way? Why are they living off others, begging?" Just this last month a long letter came in along these lines, and another group in St. Louis emphasized that they didn't live by begging.

It would complicate things rather, I can only explain, to give Roger a salary for his work of fourteen hours a day in the kitchen, clothes room and house; to pay Jane a salary for running the woman's house, and Beth and Annabelle for giving out clothes; for making stencils all day and helping with the sick and the poor; and Bob and Tom for their work—and then have them all turn the money right back in to support the work. Or to make it more complicated, they might all go out and get jobs, and bring the money home to pay their board and room and the salaries of others to run the house. It is simpler just to be poor. It is simpler to beg. The thing to do is not to hold out on to anything. That might smack of the Ananias and Saphira act.

But the tragedy is that we do, we all do. We hold on to our books, our tools, such as typewriters, our clothes, and instead of rejoicing when they are taken from us we lament. We protest at people taking time or privacy. We are holding on to these goods. It is a good thing to remember.

Occasionally, as we start thinking of poverty, usually after reading the life of such a saint as Benedict Joseph Labre, we dream of going out on our solitary own, living with the destitute, sleeping on park benches or in the Shelter, living in the Churches, sitting before the blessed Sacrament as we see so many doing, from the Municipal lodging house around the corner. And when these thoughts come on warm spring days when the children are playing in the park, and it is good to be out on the city streets, we know that this too is luxury and we are deceiving ourselves, and that it is the warm sun we want, and rest, and time to think and read, and freedom from the people that press in on us from early morning until late at night. No it is not simple, this business of poverty.

"True poverty is rare," a saintly priest writes to us from Martinique. "Nowadays communities are good, I am sure, but they are mistaken about poverty. They accept, admit on principle, poverty, but everything must be good and strong, buildings must be fireproof. **Precarity** is rejected everywhere, and precarity is an essential

element of poverty. That has been forgotten. Here we want precarity in everything except the church. These last days our refectory was near collapsing.

We have put several supplemental poles and thus it will last, maybe two or three years more. Some day it will fall on our heads and that will be funny. Precarity enables us to help very much the poor. When a community is always building, and enlarging, and embellishing, which is good in itself, there is nothing left over for the poor. We have no right to do this as long as there are slums and breadlines somewhere."

Over and over again in the history of the church the saints have emphasized poverty. Every community which has been started, has begun in poverty and in incredible hardships by the rank and file priest and brother and monk and nun who gave their youth and energy to good works. And the result has always been that the orders thrived, the foundations grew, property was extended till holdings and buildings were accumulated and although there was still individual poverty, there was corporate wealth. It is hard to keep poor.

One way to keep poor of course is not to accept money which is the result of defrauding the poor. Here is a story of St. Ignatius of Sardinia, a Capuchin just canonized last October. Ignatius used to go out from his monastery with a sack to beg from the people of the town but he would never go to a merchant who had built up his fortune by defrauding the poor. Franchino, the rich man, fumed every time he passed his door, at being so neglected, though this perhaps seems even more unbelievable than the climax of the story. His concern, however, was not the loss of the opportunity to give an alms, but he fear of public opinion. He complained at the friary, whereupon the Father Guardian ordered St. Ignatius to beg from the merchant the next time he went out

"Very well," said Ignatius obediently. "If you wish it, Father, I will go, but I would not have the Capuchins dine on the blood of the poor."

The merchant received Ignatius with great flattery and gave him generous alms, asking him to come again in the future. But hardly had Ignatius left the house with his sack on his shoulder than drops of blood began oozing from the sack. They trickled down on Franchino's doorstep and down through the street to the monastery. Everywhere Ignatius went a trickle of blood followed him. When he arrived at the friary he laid the sack at the Father Guardian's feet. "What is this?" gasped the Guardian. "This," St. Ignatius said, "is the blood of the poor."

This story was contained in the last column written by a great Catholic Layman, a worker for social justice, F.P. Kenkel, editor of the Central Verein in St. Louis, and always a friend of Peter Maurin, founder of The Catholic Worker.

Mr. Kenkel's last comment was, that the universal crisis in the world today was because of love of money. "The present Egyptian crisis is but one scene in the great oriental drama that has been unfolding for the past years," he wrote. "The Far East and the Near East" (and he might have said all Africa also), "together constitute a great sack from which blood is oozing. The flow will not stop as long as our interests in those people are dominated largely by financial and economic considerations."

"Voluntary poverty," Peter Maurin would say, "Is the answer. Through voluntary poverty others will be induced to help his brothers. We cannot see our brother in need without stripping ourselves. It is the only way we have of showing our love.