

PETER MAURIN, AGITATOR

PETER MAURIN was 72 years old when he died on May 15th, 1949. He was born in a small French community, 200 miles from Barcelona, one of a family of 23 children. His own mother died after giving birth to five children, and his father married again and there were eighteen more children. Amongst them now there are four teachers, three carpenters, some farm hands. Some of his sisters are nuns and some of his brothers are members of religious orders.

Some years ago Peter gave the following facts:

'My mother's name', he said, 'was Marie Pages. She died in 1885. Of her five children only I and Celestin, a brother who was eighteen months younger than I, and my sister Marie, two years younger than my brother, were left. My whole name is Aristide Pierre. Pierre was my grandfather and my godfather. He died at the age of ninety-four and he was never sick. He worked in the fields until he was eighty-five, and after that he could not because of his eyes. So he stayed home and made baskets and recited his rosary. He liked to work. He knew it was good for him.

'The last I heard of my brother he was the head of a school in Paris, St Clotilde's, a parish school. He had been a Christian Brother, but when they were secularised they no longer wore the garb but went on teaching just the same. One of my half-brothers taught for the Christian Brothers' school and he was married to a school teacher who taught in the public school. In the last war he had a bullet in his body seventy-one days when he was taken prisoner by the Germans. I, myself, taught at school with the Christian Brothers for about five years.

'Celestin was teaching in Pueblo, Mexico, when the last war broke out, and he returned to France, and because he had not served his time in the army he was put in the medical corps. He was buried alive by one shell bursting near him, and unburied by another. Another half-brother was lost in the war and there were five others in that war and maybe some in this.

'My youngest half-sister was a weakling but got stronger as she got older. She studied in England and she is a nun, I don't know which order, and is head of a school in Bolivia'.

One time when Peter was giving us slogans, as we sat around the table at the Easton farm, and he proposed the slogan: 'Eat what you raise and raise what you eat', we asked him what they ate in his family when he was a boy.

'We did not eat the calves, we sold them', he said. 'We ate pork every day. We raised no hops, so there was no beer. We raised no

grapes, so no wine. We had very little meat. We had plenty of bread—there was a communal oven. We had plenty of butter to season things with; we had eggs. We had codfish from the Brittany fishermen. They went all the way to Newfoundland and Iceland to fish. We had vegetable soups, salads and cheese.

'It was in 1882 when the public school system started, when I was five years old. It was obligatory in every village. My mother and father could not speak French, only a dialect like Catalan. (Joffre was born in French Catalonia and Foch in Basque Catalonia. Catalanian is spoken in Barcelona.) Our home language was more Latin than French. The name of our town was a Latin one, Oultet.

'The seat of our diocese was twelve miles away, and our parish church two miles away. Oultet had fifteen families and in the parish there were ten villages. There were two priests, and they worked very hard. To help make their living they worked in the garden. The villagers provided them with wood, and they got some little pay from the state, a compensation which was regulated by the concordat made by Napoleon.

'There are eighty-nine departments in France, and in my province, Languedoc, there were seven or nine departments.

'My father owned eighty sheep and there was a herder for all the village. He had an assistant in the summer. There were probably three thousand sheep in the flock and they grazed on what was still communal land. It was very cold in winter. The fuel we used was branches from the trees. We used to cut the branches every three years. The leaves were for the sheep and the branches for firewood. We cooked at an open fireplace.

'My father is dead, and my stepmother must be seventy-five by now. She was nineteen when she married my father. Last I heard, my brother was still farming and dealing in cattle.

'I lived there in the southern part of France, a peasant, on the soil, until I was fourteen, and then I went away to school. When I went to the Christian Brothers' school near Paris, and five years later when I was teaching there, I was a member of a study club in Paris. It was the same time Charles Péguy was there, but I did not know him, nor was I influenced by him. Instead I was interested in a group which published a paper which came out twice a week, called *Le Sillon*. It had nothing to do with the decentralist movement, no, but it was interested in ethics. It understood the chaos of the times. Marc Sangnier was editor and backer of the paper. Later my friends got out a weekly paper called *The Spirit of Democracy*. They were looking for an ideology. They were preoccupied about the idea of an élite in a democracy.

'I did not like the idea of revolution. I did not like the French revolution nor the English revolution. I did not wish to work to perpetuate the proletariat, so I never became a member of a union, even though here in America I did all kinds of hard labour. I was always interested in the land and man's life on the land.

'That is why I went homesteading to Canada, but after two years, when my partner was killed, I went around the country with work gangs and entered this country in 1911, where I have been ever since'.

Probably it was the sight of the poverty of Paris slums, and the thought of his peasant background, and the reading of Prince Peter Kropotkin, the Russian philosophical anarchist, that first led Peter to think of moving to Canada to settle on the land.

He worked on railroads and on occasion he was thrown into jail. He told of one such incident when he had been working somewhere down in Illinois, and, the job finished, set forth for Chicago, where he was to be paid. The old Biblical idea of not letting the sun set either on wrath or an unpaid workman is not in practice in our industrial system. The gandy dancers had to ride a freight, which was illegal, in order to get back to the city. They were taken off, arrested and confined to jail as vagrants and set loose again, either to repeat their misdemeanour or to walk the long trek into the city. Yes, Peter was well acquainted with poverty and injustice, rudeness and abuse.

He worked on farms, in brickyards, in steel mills, at every kind of unskilled labour from Chicago to New York. At one time he settled in Chicago for a while and gave French lessons, using the methods, so far as I can make out, of the Berlitz school, and he was pretty successful at it. He read constantly, he worked, he taught. Always he was the teacher. And when he could not get enough to listen he wrote out his ideas in neat, lettered script, duplicated it and distributed it himself on street corners, an undignified apostolate.

He stressed simple and fundamental truths, so simple they seemed obvious, and so powerful that they contain the energy to change people's lives, provided they are spread by people who really believe in them. It is this faith which makes them dynamic.

Perhaps that is what makes Peter so important a person, this tremendous faith he had, not only in God but in men. He was an apostle to the world. It is this which sets him apart from other men, from other saints of the Church of God who went around preaching penance, reminding men of their relationship with God and eternity. Peter thought not only in terms of eternity, but of this present life, where we are actors, where we are placed as though in a testing

ground, to prove ourselves, to prepare ourselves for eternal life.

Peter so felt the tremendous importance of this life, even though it be but a second in eternity where one day is as a thousand years, that he made one feel the magnificent significance of our work, our daily lives, the material of God's universe and what we did with it, how we used it.

The dignity of the worker. The dignity of work. The goodness of God's goods. Man as a co-creator. These were the things he believed in. He had faith in himself, in his own importance as a lay apostle, and that faith was sufficient for him to rise above any and all rebuffs from whatever source they came. He knew, he was confident, that he had a message. He always talked of the necessity of the long view, of the vision, in order to give ourselves the perspective we needed to see things in the light of eternity. That very long view made the work of the day, what we did here and now, so important that each thought, each decision, each step we took determined the future, not only for ourselves but for the world. 'For the others'.

Charles Péguy, to whose writings Peter introduced us, was always mindful of 'the others'. He used to say that when he appeared before God, God would say to him: 'Where are the others?'. So the problem was how to reach them, how to influence them.

When I first met Peter in 1932 he came brandishing *Nazareth or Social Chaos* by Fr Vincent McNabb. He had been working for the past seven years at a boys' camp which was run by one of the New York parishes. He helped mend roads, cut ice, worked around the barn and was general handyman, and in return received his board and lodging. Not that he got any cooked meals except what he prepared for himself. He allowed himself a few dollars' worth of groceries at the village store and made simple meals such as he was used to. When he came into New York every now and then to carry on his apostolate around Union Square and the Bowery, Wall Street and Columbus Circle, the priest who ran the camp gave him a dollar a day to live on. Out of this he paid for his 'flop' and his three meals. He knew all the humiliations of poverty as well as its meagreness. It might better be called destitution, this life he chose for himself, because I know that when Peter talked of poverty he meant the simple poverty of Nazareth, where it is supposed that St Joseph earned enough to feed and clothe his family.

Peter came to me, as I said, with Fr McNabb and with the Pope's encyclicals, not the ones on labour but those which had to do with the saints. He called our attention to one on St Francis of Assisi, and one on St Francis de Sales especially, quoting: 'Let no one think that the command, "Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is

perfect'', is addressed to a select few and that others are permitted to remain in an inferior degree of virtue. The law obliges, it is clear, absolutely everyone in the world without exception'.

He brought us Eric Gill, which he paraphrased, or synopsised for us in his neat phrased writing. He brought Kropotkin, Penty, Belloc and Chesterton and Harold Robbins.

The Sun of Justice, by the last-named writer, is filled with quotations from the Popes and the authorities for his social programme, which Peter used again and again to drive his points home. One especially was important to emphasise Peter's message, his concentration on the affairs of this world:

'The Catholic Church, that imperishable handwork of our all-merciful God, has for her immediate and natural purpose the saving of souls and securing our happiness in heaven. Yet in regard to things temporal she is the source of benefits as manifold and great as if the chief end of her existence were to ensure the prospering of our earthly life'. (Pope Leo XIII, *Immortale Dei*.)

I like to emphasise the quality in Peter—that he was always talking about our needs in this life. Although he emphasised as a technique the practice of the works of mercy as a way of showing our love for our brother, and reaching him to change his heart and mind, still one could never call him a *preacher*. He was diffident and reserved about his spiritual life and that of others. He himself went to daily Mass and communion, and if there were communal prayers such as prime and compline, or the rosary, he was always there to participate in it. He did not see to it that others were there; he was never in any sense a manager—he left that to others to do. He talked about these things and left it up to the group to do it if they wished. He valued freedom as God valued it, and here I quote Harold Robbins again: 'That he should be freely loved and served seems, so far as our thought can penetrate, to have been God's chief reason for calling us into being. At the cost of this freedom God could have established a world full of ORDER, but not of justice, for free will is of the essence of human justice'.

It caused many a controversy, Peter's ideas of freedom, especially on our farms where there was so much unusual and unaccustomed (for city people) work to be done. Some people have the habit of work and fell in gladly. The poor who were sick and disabled were not expected to work; they were expected to rest and recover, and Peter was sensitive in regard to the works of mercy. He felt that they should be freely performed, with no expectation of thanks, and he did not want them to feel that 'work on the woodpile' was expected as a return for the bread and soup they were given. But

there were many who could have worked but did not, and I can remember one hard summer when several young men sat under the trees and carried on a sit-down strike against what they termed the lack of organisation. They would do nothing until they were ordered to, they said, and although Peter set the example by clearing away a tremendous trash heap left by former tenants and burying it, and breaking up rock to mend our hilly roads which were always being washed out, and although he pointed out that the roads needed mending and that the tools were available, nevertheless the three young men sat under a tree and tried to build up their faction for a full month.

Peter would go to such extremes 'to make a point', to instigate and to illustrate a discussion on freedom, responsibility, self-employment, 'being what you want the other fellow to be', that I can well understand the criticisms that have always been levelled at the *Catholic Worker* programme and technique.

Peter Maurin's programme of action, in the face of the crisis of the day, a crisis that has continued these last twenty years through a great depression and a war, remains the same now as it did when we first met back in 1933:

1. To reach the man in the street with the social teachings of the Church.
2. To reach the masses through the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, at a personal sacrifice, which means voluntary poverty.
3. To found Houses of Hospitality for the practice of the works of mercy.
4. To build up a lay apostolate through round-table discussions for the clarification of thought.
5. To found farming communes for the cure of unemployment. To solve the problem of the machine. To work for the restoration of property and the combating of the servile state; for the building up of the family, the original community, the first unit of society.

Peter was ill for the past five years, suffering with a heart condition that resulted in hardening of the arteries of the brain. He lost his memory to a great extent, and we felt that his inability to think was his martyrdom. He was the poor man of his day, and he had literally given up everything for Christ. He indulged in no idle words, though he was a prodigious talker and teacher, and so in his last years he sat in silence amongst us. He had to be led around and cared for like a child, he whose freedom and manhood meant so much. He was meek with it all. We are going to print his book,

Catholic Radicalism, this week, but he died before we could put a copy in his hands. He was buried in a donated grave, and now we hear that since there is already a tombstone there, we can only have his name included with the owners of the plot, so that he has not even the gravestone which Ada de Bethune was to carve for him as his own.

He has set us all the example in selflessness, and in a terrible zeal that God's will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

All of us here in our ten houses and half-dozen farms, and many of our readers who are working as apostles throughout the country, feel with an intense gratitude and love the privilege that was ours to be called to work with him.

Peter died on May 15th, on the feast of St Jean Baptiste de La Salle, and was buried by the Salesian Fathers from the Church of the Transfiguration on Mott Street. For one night he was laid out at Maryfarm, Newburgh, New York, and a requiem Mass was sung by the group at the farm, which is the nearest thing we have to one of Peter's agronomic universities; then his body was brought to New York, 60 miles away, and laid out in the store at 115 Mott Street, which is the office of the *Catholic Worker* and the St Joseph's House of Hospitality. Neighbours and friends, priests and laymen came throughout the day and night to pray at his coffin, and the next morning Cardinal Spellman sent a representative, Monsignor Nelson, to the funeral Mass, which was sung by the entire congregation. He was buried in St John's Cemetery, across the East River, on Long Island, in the family plot of Father Pierre Conway, O.P.

DOROTHY DAY.

THE FUTURE OF OFFENSIVE WAR¹

WHEN two societies which are only materially distinct² from each other come into collision neither is to be sacrificed to placate the other, but the interests of each are to be catered for in a rigidly fair manner.

¹ Adapted from INSTITUTIONES JURIS PUBLICI ECCLESIASTICI, Vol. 1 (*Jus Publicum Internum*) Pars I, Titulus iii. art. 3 (Relationes societatum perfectarum in statu conflictus) Principium 2.—Vatican, Polyglot, 3rd Edition (1947) pp. 149-55.

The principles and discussion in this text-book (which was welcomed at its first appearance in 1936 by Cardinal Pacelli himself) are naturally intended for students of law. But this section has already received wide publicity and interest in Germany and it is thought preferable to give as near a translation as possible, rather than mere comment, for readers to consider. Naturally it must be remembered that this is only one section in a text-book and that consequently in order to put it in article form it has had to be adapted. It does however fairly represent the views of Mgr Ottaviani.

² 'Society' in this context means a society which is at once specifically one and