

I
Dear Rosemary,

January 1978

Since my newsletter to you last Easter, the Journal has given up the ghost for the time being, so I have to search my old memory for another circular letter.....

First of all, I want to thank all of you who have written, telephoned, or wired for my 50 years Jubilee in The Grail last August 15th, and to whom I have wanted to write many times. It was a wonderful day, full of memories and full of inexpressible gratitude in my heart. Needless to say, it was celebrated here as Madonna House knows how. It began with a festive Mass in the morning. It was the Feast of the Assumption, Archbishop Raya (of the Eastern Rite) declared ~~this~~ this the feast of all women, and the MM men met all women at the door of the Chapel by presenting them with a flower. The homily given by Father Callahan was interrupted by many rounds of applause, as it was also Catherine's birthday, and that of Archbishop Raya.

I was thinking of that day 50 years ago when my mother and my youngest sister took me to "de Voorde", a small villa near The Hague where the "Women of Nazareth" (as we were then called) had started their training. The next morning a few dozen hens, a gaggle of geese, and half a dozen turkeys arrived as part of my luggage. They were temporarily housed in a rickety dog kennel with a wirenetting run. By the next morning they had found their way out and into the green meadows bordering on the garden. The geese went further afield and could only be discovered with field glasses! One of the hens, used to prowl freely, and searching for a quiet place, found her way through the slightly open chapel window on the ground floor and laid her egg on the cushion before the altar,--and that is where she managed to lay it with great cunning every day until a chicken run and nesting boxes were provided.....It seemed like yesterday!

A quotation from Father Callahan's homily: "This is a very glorious day. When we look at what the Lord has done, it is glorious. First, for our Golden Jubilarian. I wish that she could consider that when they write the history of The Grail, it is going to be noted that their president spent her retirement in prayer, in a hermitage, in a poustinia. This example is going to be of great spiritual value to all the members of The Grail who will follow her. We do not see it now as God sees it." It is of course in full tradition of the founder, Father van Ginneken's early idea of The Grail, namely of prayer-members alongside the active workers--and of his original plan for The Grail in Java.---

There was a sequence to all these celebrations. Many of you may not realize that in Canada, about 100 miles west of Toronto, there is a place called Stratford, Ontario, which every year for 5 months produces a Shakespeare Festival of a superior and exquisite quality. I had only recently heard of this, and had been sent some truly inviting literature about it. When a Jubilee gift from a group of special friends in U.K. suddenly arrived in my mail, I felt I could not give them a greater pleasure than to plan an excursion to Stratford with a friend of mine, who had been there; so off we went on August 19th, and I am still aglow with the memory of it! The performance, a matinee of ROMEO & JULIET was so exquisite and so powerful, that when the curtain came down, we were both speechless and silent for several minutes; I thought to myself: I could not go to the evening performance, after this superb show; I felt totally exhausted but I did not want to spoil N's fun. After sitting quietly and without speech for about 10 minutes, she said "how do you feel about tonight?"

I hesitated, but I need not have worried; we went out for a cup of tea and decided that it had been such a 100% beautiful performance--every way, that it was enough for the day; we needed time to absorb it and talk about it. So we returned the tickets to the box office where hundreds of hopeful people were waiting for any returns!

I think I have mentioned to you before some of the wild life around my poustinia. Were I a Gerald Durrell, I could write a book: 'A Zoo on my Island'-- The last 4 months I have hardly seen any of the colourful birds, but I expect they have gone to warmer climes....However, I do not lack regular visitors; some brown squirrels during the day and the grey flying squirrel after 8 PM! They are most comical and entertaining. Last year the grey couple had 2 skittish youngsters and it was interesting to see how they were trained against lurking danger; alas in spite of it they were killed by some roving enemy and only their grey tails with the little hind legs were found near my cabin. Their favourite food is apple peels, and sweepings from the threshing floor; though 'toasted' breadcrusts also are acceptable. They are slightly smaller than the red squirrel, and the "wings" with which they glide down to my porch and on to the woodpile are more like the webbed wings of a bat, but one never sees them unfolded or spread out. When they sit on my log pile, they look exactly like a red squirrel only somewhat smaller, and with large black, shiny eyes as they have extra lenses to see in the dark....I have made various overtures to them to make their nest on or near my porch, but so far without success, though they are more friendly every day.

Then, a few months ago I looked out of the window one evening and saw a large creature, prowling in front of my cabin. I found on inquiry it was a raccoon; large, rather bulky, with long black shiny coat and large white circles round his eyes as if he had some strange sunglasses on. He (or she) inspected my porch, my woodpile; even tried to climb on it but the logs began to shift and he gave up. A few days later I heard a strange grunting noise; it went on and on and I thought he might be fighting with the squirrels. Not at all, she was walking round in front of my cabin with 2 beautiful smaller creatures following her. I thought they must be her young; but they seemed too different somehow; they were fairly narrow, oblong animals with a somewhat pointed head, two white stripes along their back, and a tail like a plume waving behind them. I laughed out loud and they walked away. The next day on inquiry, I gathered they were: skunks!!.... Two days later they were back; with the raccoon; but the latter was preoccupied. It had a bee in its bonnet; it must climb up that partition of my porch and settle in the corner of the shallow eaves. It tried and tried and more logs fell each time, and I thought she had given up. Imagine my surprise when early the next morning when I came out to see the damage, I found Mrs. Raccoon ensconced in the inside top left corner of my porch, on a beam that I did not think could accommodate her. She stared at me with her large goggles but did not move; we were friends! When I left the poustinia for lunch at midday, she was still there, but her back was turned and she was snoring!....At 6 PM just before I went over for supper, she clambered down and disappeared. She must have come to the conclusion that these logs were too unstable for a daily climb up and down. I had the log pile re-assembled, but she has not tried again; neither have I seen the skunks again. Any natural historian among you who has any ideas about this?

III

You will be glad to know that Margaret (Morton) came to visit me over Christmas and you can guess that we had a wonderful time; I received much first-hand news and all kinds of lovely presents among which was a 'mobile' of 8 little silvery sailing boats, a fascinating sight. After she left I spent a day in poustinia, praying for all of you, your Grail intentions, initiatives and endeavours, and your families.....

A few days ago yet another book by Catherine came from the printers. She wrote three in one week last December! This one is called SOBORNOST, meaning UNITY in a new and profound way. I have sent a copy to Betty, so you have probably seen it. Here is a brief quote: "Sobornost is mind-blowing, because God hungers for men's love just as men hunger for God's love. St. Augustine said: Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee. The incredible thing, the mind-blowing thing is that God reciprocates...."

This hunger for God takes palpable shape and physical shape in prayer, for prayer is both palpable and physical, even though its roots are deep in the mysterious hearts of men. Sobornost expresses itself in the West through the Prayer of the Presence of God, which is standing still before God, realising his Presence inside and outside oneself. It is a powerful prayer. It is a prayer that doesn't need a special place in which to be prayed: the world is its chapel. It can be prayed in a streetcar, while talking, while walking, while lecturing. Because it is the supreme act of man loving God and being aware of Him, it is prayer without words.

Sobornost expresses itself in the East through the Jesus Prayer, which begins with a constant repetition of the name of Jesus and with the addition at first of: "have mercy on me a sinner." It is recited like a mantra, a repetitious prayer that has rhythm...the rhythm that breath has. Breathe in, breathe out, and recite the prayer rhythmically as you do. But soon it ceases to be something that you can do, and it becomes something that you live. One is lost in the awesome, holy Presence of God,--for the Jesus Prayer brings God as vividly before the soul as the prayer of the Presence of God. So much so that even sleep does not interrupt it for "I sleep and my heart watcheth".

It is prayed almost as if God prayed in you. There is no explanation for it. It just is. With every sentence which ceases to be a sentence but is breath and life, one comes closer and closer and closer to God until God and you, God and I, are united in a sobornost that nothing can break.

In a way both for the West and the East, the Prayer of the Presence of God and the Jesus Prayer are keys to silence. In this silence we find out who we truly are....."

Love and warmth writes to 1978

Yours