CHAPTER 3

Houses of Hospitality

"We need houses of hospitality," Peter said, "to give to the rich an opportunity to serve the poor."

Our first house of hospitality came into being very shortly after *The Catholic Worker* did—while we were working on the second issue, in fact—in the barbershop we had taken below our Fifteenth Street apartment. A young woman, an unemployed textile worker about to have a baby, took charge of the kitchen and busied herself preparing meals for the homeless men who had already begun drifting in. It wasn't long before we were all eating in shifts.

The garden proved to be a fine place for coffee and talk. Young people flocked in, intent on putting their own social ideas into practice. The college students were often more disposed to discuss and argue than to work, and the old war between thinker and worker broke out at once. Peter welcomed the conflict. "It makes for clarification of thought," he said happily.

One day a professor of philosophy from Catholic University dropped in. He discoursed all day on "War and Christian Morals." As we served him his meals in the garden, the talk went on and on, people coming and going. Another time a Russian doctor, a German Benedictine priest, and a Mexican general were there all talking at once, each espousing his particular cause in his own accent. The Russian favored theocracy; the German priest talked

of "victim souls"; and the Mexican, inflamed by the persecution then going on, wanted us to help raise arms for a counter-revolution. Peter, in the interests of clarification of thought, talked in his French accent of farming communes.

By fall, letters pouring in from all over the country indicated that *The Catholic Worker* was a success. Running through these letters, Peter became so dazzled by them that, in the interests of further clarification of thought, he decided to take a bold step: he hired the ballroom of the Manhattan Lyceum, which was usually reserved for weddings and bar mitzvahs. He planned a series of Sunday afternoon lectures and discussions. He went so far as to advertise his first lecture with mimeographed leaflets. About fifteen people showed up.

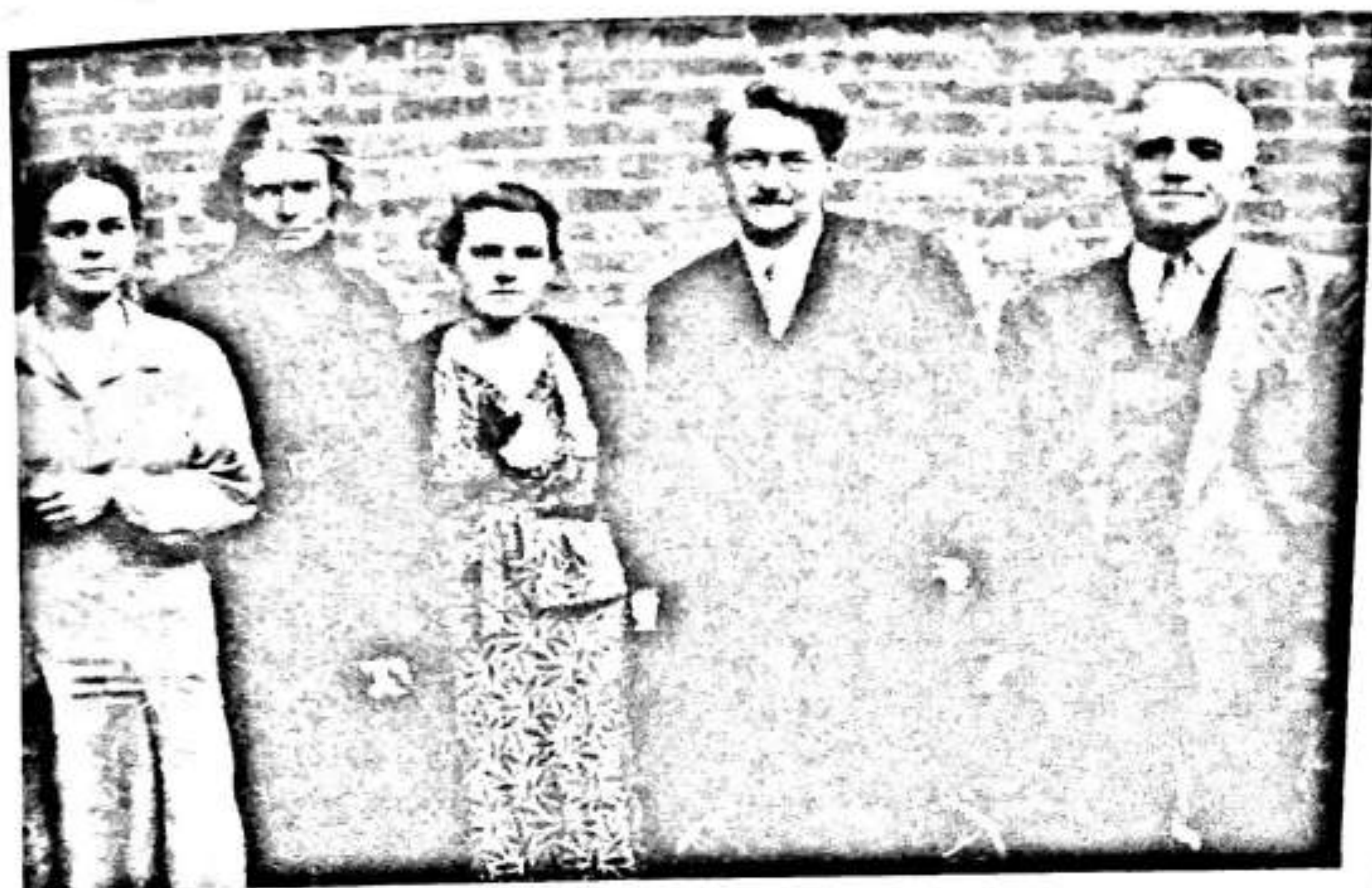
After that he contented himself with a small meeting room. But the gatherings were soon taken over by two young political actionists whose ambition it was to soapbox in the slums and start a Catholic political party. Overridden and shouted down, Peter walked quietly back to his benches in Union Square and we quit paying the rent on the room. The young men thought this uncharitable of us and accused us of not permitting freedom of speech.

I tried to comfort Peter (not that he needed comforting) by telling him of Lenin's widow, Madame Krupskaya, who wrote in her autobiography of the workers' schools which she and her husband had held in the parks of Paris and in the woods. At one such gathering on a Sunday afternoon there had been forty people! It was counted a success.

We had a workers' school of our own at the office that first winter. Peter invited all kinds of notables—famous priests and teachers—and many were the arguments that developed. Every night in the week there was a new speaker with whom Peter could take issue. He was never tired, for he had already acquired the habit of staying up until two or three in the morning, or as long as a discussion lasted, and then sleeping the next morning until just in time to get up for noonday Mass. I sometimes wondered if he were trying to emulate Marx and Proudhon, who once argued

all night and then continued their argument all the way across the English Channel without ever coming to any agreement.

The best was none too good for the poor, we thought, so we had such priests as Father La Farge, S.J., Father Joseph McSorley, and Father Paul Hanly Furfey of Catholic University, not to mention such distinguished visitors as Jacques Maritain and Hilaire Belloc.



Jacques Maritain (second from right) was one of many distinguished visitors. Beside him are Ade Bethune, Dorothy Day, Dorothy Weston, and Peter Maurin.

By coming to us, these men were now able to reach many more than the few dozen who crowded into the old store on East Fifteenth Street. Students and others in groups similar to ours which had already sprung up around the country were able to read their writings in *The Catholic Worker*, to ponder their thought, and to try making the synthesis of "cult, culture and cultivation," which Peter was always talking about.

The talks on liturgy and worship and scripture fell under the head of "cult." But, since the meetings included those of other faiths, they were also ecumenical. They were, in fact, the beginning of our work for peace among religious groups. We could all meet together, Peter pointed out, in our search for the common good. Culture was an outgrowth of cult, and Peter gave us digests of Eric Gill's writings and invited artists and writers to speak to us. Under "cultivation" the land movement and cooperatives were discussed.

While these talks were going on, Stanley, and Margaret, our cook, and Mary Sheehan used to sit out in the kitchen. Once Stanley said in awestruck tones, "If we paid these men for their lectures they would get a hundred dollars apiece."

"If they're so great," Mary would say, reaching for the coffeepot, "why don't you sit in there and listen to them?" And Margaret would shush them both in her own high, shrill voice.

One evening an old Russian friend, André Salama, showed up with a great loaf of East Side rye bread, a pot of sweet butter, plenty of zakuska, and a bottle of vodka. While the meeting went on in the front office, we had a feast around the kitchen table. Salama had come to tell me about some wonderful prayers to the Mother of God, prayers very much like our own to the Mother of God, which he had found in the Russian liturgy. Every now and then he sang them lustily between his hearty quaffs of vodka.

Revelry and serious discussions—they went together in those early years. It was only when some of the young fellows who had come to help us showed signs of being alcoholics that the rest of us gave up these pleasures. Peter set the example. As soon as the situation became clear to him, he refused the glass of wine which we had been offering him at closing time when we put out the lights for the night and went to our various abodes.

Presently we rented an apartment down the street to house our first group of women guests—about half a dozen then—and took another place behind old St. Brigid's Church, on Seventh Street, to accommodate the men. Life was not all peaceful, by any means, for some of them drank, but the real problem that continued to

dog us was space. When a priest on the West Side, on the edge of Greenwich Village, urged us to rent an old house in his parish, we moved. The new quarters, on Charles Street, were somewhat bigger; at least we could all be together in one place and in that way shore each other up. In the course of the year we were able to spend there, we started a maternity guild and a workers' school. By then, of course, we were already quite experienced in such matters as collecting and distributing clothes, while the kitchen detail continued to work overtime.

But we needed still more room. One of our readers, Gertrude Burke, who had inherited some tenements on lower Mott Street, offered us the use of an abandoned rear building if we would collect the rent on the buildings in the front. I went down to look it over. My first reaction was one of righteous indignation that anyone would be willing to ask for rent on such a place, so I refused her offer.

Then, as more and more people came to us and we were more and more hard-pressed, I thought again of Miss Burke and repented of my rashness. She often came to visit us with a friend, a retired telegrapher named Mary Lane. Mary's blind faith in our integrity was a constant reassurance to Gertrude, who had frequent qualms over our lack of conformity with the viewpoint of the diocesan press. I wondered whether I should not reopen the question with her and ask if she wouldn't let us have the rear building without any obligation to collect rents.

Around that time I had a speaking engagement at the Good Shepherd Convent in Troy, New York. This convent, like other similar ones, housed young women committed to them by the courts on all kinds of charges. Connected with the convent is a house of the Magdalenes, an order within an order, made up of women who have sinned and repented. They are strictly cloistered, and the active and more honored nuns treat them with reverence and depend on their prayers. I was given the privilege of speaking with the Magdalenes. While telling them about our women in need, I asked them especially to pray for a bigger house for us. Then, thinking of the admonition "Pray as though all depended

on God, and work as though all depended on yourself," I wrote my letter to Miss Burke.

Her reply came within a week. We should have accepted her offer in the first place, she wrote, for she had willed both houses to the widows who ran the House of Calvary, a hospital for poor cancer patients in the Bronx. Nevertheless, she said she had asked them if we could have the use of the empty rear building, and they had consented.

The generosity of these women was remarkable. They waited, at first, to discover what use we would make of the twenty-room building. Then, when they saw the plastering and painting that went on, they paid for some heavy repairs which they knew we could not possibly do ourselves. Later they put up a new fire escape and improved the building by constructing "fire-retarding halls." And, not least of all, they serenely endured a lot of complaints from neighbors about our growing family. We were never sure who actually footed the repair bills; it might have been Gertrude Burke, and then again it might have been the widows. Had it been the former, the widows might well have looked wistfully (one could not say grudgingly) at the money spent on us, which could have been given to their more deserving charity. As Dwight MacDonald, who wrote a series about us for *The New Yorker*, said, our mission seemed to be the *un*deserving poor. But, given the widows exalted outlook, they probably figured that if we saved one soul we were worth our keep. (One soul, it has been said, is enough bishopric for any bishop.)

Since the Catholic Worker is a movement rather than an accredited charitable organization, the widows even paid our taxes. The point we make of emphasizing personal responsibility, rather than state or organized responsibility, has cost us a good deal through the years, but in this instance it was costing them.

We were to live on Mott Street for fourteen years, from 1936 to 1950. As we needed more room, we rented apartments in the front building when they became empty, until finally we were occupying thirty-eight rooms and two stores.

The breadlines were not long in forming. In an old issue of the paper I find this description, written in the mid-thirties, which gives a good picture of the lines in those grim days:

ON THE COFFEE LINE

by One of the Servers

Having spent most of the night in heated discussion and neglecting the time, I was in no mood to crawl out at 5:30 this morning to do a turn on the breadline. But the quickest way to forget sleepiness is to roll out, wet my face and turn on the radio in the store—this I did.

It is hard to cut a mountain of bread and prepare it for serving. I say hard because it seems hours before the job is complete. The eyes of the men outside peering in keep saying—it's cold out here, or, he's about ready now. The bread is all set (this about 6:15) and Scotty has the first 100 gallons of steaming coffee ready to serve and we open the door.

On a cold morning such as this I can imagine the stream of hope that flows through the long line right down Mott Street and around the corner on Canal. Cups are taken and the three-hour session of feeding our friends is under way. I can watch the faces and see thanks written between the lines denoting age and fatigue and worry.

Ade Bethune's drawings always arrest the attention of the men for a moment. No matter how anxious they are about reaching the coffee pot there is always time to cast eyes along the wall. Many are old faces who come every morning. One I call the "Cardinal" because of his purple knitted cap so worn and shy of edges it looks like a skull cap. He always has a kindly word. As usual my Japanese friend comes early. He too always has a greeting.

Now today there are three youngsters with unkempt hair, wrinkled clothes and looking very tired. Knocking around the country with no place to wash or get cleaned is new to

them. In spite of their youth and strength the condition is more obvious. The oldsters are more used to it. Every morning there are several who carry shopping bags or bundles with their last few belongings. They place them under the table so as to better handle a hot cup and a huge chunk of bread.

One of the regular bundle-toters had a new coat this morning. All winter he has had a trench coat heavy with the dirt of many night's sleeping out and smoke from many a fire. His new coat must have belonged to some stylish young boy with extreme taste. In spite of this he looked better, the coat was warmer and he had a more confident air.

I am relieved now to go to Mass which means I must pass a whole block of hungry, waiting men. It seems a long walk some mornings, especially when it is cold or wet. I receive greetings from those who have come to know us. I wish many more would pass them during their long days to give them a chance to share and realize their troubles. The line is broken at the corner so as to enable pedestrians to pass. The line running west on Canal Street extends for about 200 feet. It is really impossible, then, to forget them at Mass.

On returning it is easy to recognize the familiar hats, coats, shoes, and other misfitting clothing of the regular comers. All, after being out for hours in the cold, are hunched against the weather and have their hands in their pockets. Across the street three are at a fire made of cardboard boxes. The huge flames will soon die away. There is one Negro and two aged white men. None talk but just stare at the flames, absorbing the heat and probably seeing better days gone by.

I can recognize one of my regular friends. He is a midwesterner with an attractive drawl. He lives his nights in subway trains. The newspapers in his pockets he has picked up from trains and generally gives them to us. A small gift indeed but a gift given out of real appreciation. He is tanned because

of two warm days sitting in the park facing the new spring sun and catching up on much needed sleep.

Here comes the little Irishman who will ask for the softest kind of bread. He has no teeth and cannot chew the crusts of the rye bread. He appreciates our remembering this and he knows we will have some kind of soft bread ready.

They continue to come. When I am busy putting peanut butter on bread and can't see their faces I can recognize the arms that reach for bread. One gets to know all the familiar marks of the garments. The hands of some tremble from age, sickness or drink. It is near closing time and the line thins out. They must go out now into a world seemingly full of people whose hearts are as hard and cold as the pavements they must walk all day in quest of their needs. Walk they must for if they sit in the park (when it is warm) the police will shoo them off. Then there is the worry of the next meal or that night's sleeping arrangements. Here starts their long weary trek as to Calvary. They meet no Veronica on their way to relieve their tiredness nor is there a Simon of Cyrene to relieve the burden of the cross. It is awful to think this will start again tomorrow.

It sometimes seemed that the more space we had, the more people came to us for help, so that our quarters were never quite adequate. But somehow we managed. Characters of every description and from every corner of life turned up—and we welcomed them all. They "joined" the Catholic Worker in many ways. Some came with their suitcases, intending to stay with us a year, and, shocked by our poverty, lingered only for the night. Others came for a weekend and remained for years. Someone visiting us simply to challenge some "point" made in an article in the paper would become a permanent member of our community. A seventy-year-old man named Mr. Breen strode in one day with a cane and a fountain pen, sat down at a table without a word, and, in a beautiful calligraphy, began to answer a trayful of letters. His task completed, he announced he was staying for good.

Mr. Breen is someone we will not soon forget. A former newspaperman, his talk was filled with words like "kikes," "dinges" and "dagos," and he prided himself on his family background, education, and penmanship. His wife and children had all died, and at the age of seventy he found himself destitute, living in the municipal lodging house. There were thousands being sheltered there that winter; Mr. Breen's greatest affliction was having to share the hospitality of the city with Negroes. He had been put off home relief because he was always threatening the investigators with his cane. He was beaten up one night at the lodging house (age is no protection there) for his racist attitudes. Wandering around the next morning, he discovered us.

Mr. Breen's racism was not long in showing itself. It caused us difficulties, but it did give us a chance to practice our pacifism. At about the time of his arrival, a Negro had come to us. He was good-looking and ambitious, with a deep, resonant voice. He loved to read aloud. His great hope was to become a radio announcer. He had no interest whatever in racial justice; he thought only in terms of getting ahead. He felt himself above any manual labor, choosing instead to type or file or perform some other kind of clerical work, all of which he did badly. Conscious as we were of the indignities his people had suffered at the hands of our own white race, our collective guilt made us put up with him in spite of his behavior, which was, at times, insufferable.

From their first encounter, Mr. Breen took delight in insulting him. Mr. Rose, the Negro, promptly found ways to get even. In my absence, he would sit at my desk, put his feet up on it, and taunt Mr. Breen with the liking white women had for colored men. Upon my return, Mr. Breen would vent his spleen on me, calling me a "nigger lover."

Whenever we heard Mr. Breen roaring while we were doing the household chores, we would rush in to find out what was the matter. We would see Mr. Rose sitting calmly at his desk, appearing to be working diligently, while Mr. Breen, his dirty white hair tossing, his eyes bulging out of his apoplectic face,

stood over him, sputtering with rage. (Mr. Breen did, indeed, have several strokes that winter, once narrowly escaping death.)

He lived in a little hall bedroom; he had the old newspaperman's habit of reading all the papers, then dropping them around him when he had finished. Aware of the danger, we picked up after him as best we could, but we couldn't keep him from getting at matches and cigarettes. One night, after lighting a cigarette, he was unable to shake out the flame of his match. He just dropped it, still burning, among the papers and set fire to them. Fortunately, another guest was nearby at the time, a guest about whom we knew nothing except that his name was Mr. Freeman and that he said he had been a rabbi and become a Catholic. He tried to rescue Mr. Breen, but all the while the old man kept beating him off with his cane and calling him a "god-damn Jew." But Mr. Freeman saved him anyway.

Mr. Breen remained with us until he died. As the end drew near, we all sat around his bedside, taking turns saying the rosary. In his last moments, Mr. Breen looked up at us and said,

"I have only one possession left in the world—my cane. I want you to have it. Take it—take it and wrap it around the necks of some of these bastards around here."

Then he turned on us a beatific smile. In his weak voice he whispered,

"God has been good to me."

And smiling, he died.

"A house of hostility," Stanley used to say, after incidents like this. Sometimes we did feel sad, indeed, when our houses seemed to be filled more with hate and angry words than with the love we were seeking.

But as St. John of the Cross said, "Where there is no love, put love and you will take out love."

Despite Peter's oft-repeated dictum, "Strikes don't strike me," we did what we could by word and deed to help the worker in his fight for better conditions and higher wages. Every issue of the paper was crowded with labor news; the thirties was a time

of great struggle for workers, of course, and at one point we printed a large box headed "July 4th News—Independence Day" with twenty-three separate sections, each summarizing the present state of a major strike then going on somewhere around the nation.

One of the first strikes we participated in directly was a brewery workers' strike. (We pointed out that their work was a work of mercy because they gave drink to the thirsty!) Writing about the strike, I stressed the idea of cooperative ownership and management referred to in Pius XI's encyclical "Forty Years After," to raise the worker from the proletariat. (John XXIII, in "Mater et Magistra," was to continue along the same lines much later.)

A year and a half later the famous seamen's strike broke out in New York, and we not only gave cheer and *The Catholic Worker* to the men on the picket lines but went so far as to open a special strike branch on the West Side, which became a hangout for many of the idle seamen. We fed thousands of them a day there. Huge coffee pots were on the stove, and we had kegs of peanut butter and cottage cheese and jam, and bread without limit. At first we paid for everything. After our money gave out, we ran up bills for everything, and were left with a debt of three thousand dollars by the time the strike had run its three-month course. People are always glad to donate money to "charity," but when it is a question of hungry strikers many call them "Communists" and refuse to help. Nevertheless, we begged St. Joseph himself, and he, as always, came to our aid. I cannot improve on a worker's account of an incident that occurred early that January, 1937:

> Use Terrorism Upon Seamen . . . Rock Thrown
> Thru Window of Catholic Worker's Strike Branch
>
> . . . At 3 a.m. last Tuesday a New Year's present was delivered to the Catholic Worker (Waterfront Branch) via the front window. It came in the form of a paving stone. We now have a new window and half of the stone is used to bolster up our stove and the other half is used to keep

the bread knife sharp, as we are slicing up 150 long loaves of bread daily.

We had been writing about our house of hospitality experiment in *The Catholic Worker*, and very quickly other houses began springing up all over the country—in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Sacramento, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Boston, Memphis, Pittsburgh, and a score of other cities, including London and Wigan, England. At one time there were some forty of them. All these Catholic houses were operated independently.

In one city, a second, rival house was opened by those calling themselves the "spirituals," as opposed to "the Brother Eliases" in the first house. The well-meaning "spirituals" stayed up all night drinking with their charges in order to show a delightful sense of equality with them, but in a few months they had so exhausted themselves in these good works that they had to close the house. (Another story has it that the spiritual leaders were forced to give up their attempt to run a house when it was discovered that their happy charges had taken to robbing the poor boxes of the neighboring church.)

In general, however, the houses were so truly successful that in many cases the bishops wanted more of them. They did a unique job—taking up the slack, you might say, for all the odds and ends of people who didn't fit in anywhere else. The Travelers Aid, the city hospitals, the police, social workers, psychiatrists, doctors, priests, lawyers—all kinds of people called on hospitality houses for help in sheltering the homeless.

We in New York, for example, got letters from the father of a delinquent boy down in the Argentine who begged us to take in his son and make something of him. A seminarian in Chicago sent us a crippled fellow, and from a well-meaning housewife in Binghamton came a paraplegic. In Pittsburgh an alcoholic girl, disappointed in love, tried to commit suicide by jumping off a scaffolding on a church that was being repaired; and when she was released from the hospital someone brought her with her back in a brace, all the way from Pittsburgh to New York for us to care

for. I remember sitting in the chapel at our farm in Newburgh that night, wondering if there was not a single charitable family in the Pittsburgh area to take in the young woman. But it was the community that was needed, a group of people who could spell one another and take turns coping with difficult situations.

No two houses of hospitality have ever been alike. The house directors have differed widely in personality and in their approach to their work; though poverty's problems may seem the same everywhere, poverty's conditions within each community have varied, as have the response and support of benefactors and diocesan leaders.

With the coming of World War II and the conscription of so many young men, the number of houses of hospitality declined. In the years after the war, during the period of so-called "full employment" a large number of men released from the army had jobs to which they returned. Others went to college under the G.I. Bill of Rights. Furthermore, social legislation, with such measures as unemployment insurance, aid for dependent children and social security, was now in effect. Many felt that these would ameliorate on a mass scale the same ills and abuses which houses of hospitality had been set up to relieve in their way.

Nevertheless, the latter have remained unique in their spirit of mutual aid and community. As we face a new threat of unemployment under the shadow of automation, as we face daily terrors of world destruction, such centers of mutual help in a spirit of brotherhood—under whatever name, or in whatever guise—were never more desperately needed than they are right now.