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Distributism Is Not Dead

Dorothy Day

1956

The very fact that people are always burying distributism is evidence of the fact that it is not dead as a solution. John Stanley buried it last year in the *Commonweal* and Social Justice of the Central Verein in St. Louis some months ago buried it. But it is an issue that won't be buried, because distributism is a system conformable to the needs of man and his nature.

We write of farming communes as an ideal form of institution towards which we should aim, and for which we should plan and we will continue to write about those which are in existence today in a continuing attempt as a way of living. We feel that there are ways of combating the servile state, and working towards a restoration of property.

During those months there was an exchange of visits between Soviet farmers to this country and some of our farmers to the U.S.S.R. there were some very interesting newspaper accounts. One of our Iowa farmers visited some large scale collective farms where 5,000 or so Russians were employed by the State in spite of the fact that they were using modern machinery. This was a collective farm, but each family was allotted anywhere from half an acre to two acres, and on this small plot they had their own cow

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and chickens and pigs, and raised such an amount of vegetables, that it was due to their efforts that so much foodstuffs were able to go on the market. The cities would be hard put to find the foods they needed, were it not for these smaller plots.

At the same time one would feel that communal farming of such vast acreage as there is in the Soviet Union and the United States would not be out of place in the raising of wheat and flax and cotton and fruits and other such stuffs that demand large acreage and in some cases many men employed.

Here in the U.S. we have our migrant laborers, millions of them, to harvest the crops, and they live ill-fed, ill-clad, ill-housed and are definitely a problem in our economy. In Russia they seem to be stabilized. The very mention of such numbers would indicate that there could be no speed up, though planting and harvest time necessarily mean long hours, from dawn to dark, with corresponding shorter hours and lighter toil in winter.

I've been told on farms I have visited in my trips around the country that winter is just as hard as summer for the individual farmer, since the animals have to be fed more often (not having the grazing they do in the summer) and the work is done under the difficult conditions of the cold and dark, with fewer laborers.

Governor Harriman talked of poverty being a national problem and he was doubtless thinking of migrants, and Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Negroes and our city and country slums. Labor leaders have talked of pockets of unemployment. Where industry has moved south, or to another town there is great fanfare over enterprising real estate men who buy up the factories and invite other diversified industries to take over. With all our prosperity there is still the specter of unemployment.

But on the land, as Peter Maurin always said, there is no unemployment. There is food, clothing, shelter, and fuel and work to do. Proof of this is in spite of our poverty and pockets of unemployment, is the fact that in all the 23 years of the Catholic Worker, only one farmer has come to us, and that was John Filliger, who

was a seaman during the 1936 strike, who seeing our need, stayed with us. There is the saying, "Scratch a seaman and you will find a farmer."

In the New World Chesterton series published by Sheed and Ward, the volume *Tremendous Trifles* has an essay called *The Dickensian*. Our readers will remember that G. K.'s *Weekly* championed Distributism and his two books, *What's Wrong with the World* and *Outline of Sanity* are basic Volumes to read on Distributism, together with *The Sun of Justice*, by Harold Robbins, his friend.

In this essay, *The Dickensian*, Chesterton and a stranger meet on a little pleasure boat crawling up Yarmouth Harbor. The stranger is mourning the passing of good old things like the wooden figureheads on ships and he prowls around the old parts of the town looking for traces of Dickens in Yarmouth. During the course of the afternoon they visit a church and there is a stained glass window which was flaming "with all the passionate heraldry of the most fierce and ecstatic of Christian Arts," there was the angel of the resurrection. Chesterton dashed out of the church, dragging his friend after him, to buy as he said, ginger beer, postal cards, to listen to the concertinas, to ride on a donkey. And when the Dickens enthusiast all but decided Chesterton needed to be committed to a mental hospital, the latter explains:

"There are certain writers to whom humanity owes much, whose talent is yet of so shy or retrospective a type that we do well to link it with certain quaint places, or certain perishing associations." And he went on to say that were Dickens living today, he would not be harking back to the past, but dealing with things just as he found them. So that he, Chesterton, was being particularly Dickensian by enjoying his surroundings as they were, and beginning from there.

It is the same with Distributism. It needs to be constantly rewritten, re-assessed, restated, with the wisdom and clear-sightedness of a Chesterton who by his paradoxes, made us see our lives and

our problems in the light of Faith, who can help us today to make a synthesis of Cult, Culture and Cultivation.

In spite of the nuclear age we are living in, we can plant our gardens even if they are only window boxes, we can awaken ourselves to God's good earth and in little ways start going out on pilgrimage, to the suburbs, to the country, and when we get the grace, we may so put off the old man, and put on Christ, that we will begin to do without all that the City of man offers us, and build up the farming commune, the Village, the "city" of God, wherein justice dwelleth.