

Letter #10
Finale

The call was from a Police Sargent who had befriended us. Would I talk to his Lieutenant? On he came. "Father I wouldn't blame you if you hung up. Do you know who I am?" I knew. One of those who harassed, harangued, spread false rumors, deprived kids of every civil and legal right. "Father, my own fifteen year old boy has been missing over a week. If I weren't so desperate, the wife and all, I'd never ask you. After he left, I found out he had been doing drugs". "Jim" I said, "I'm sorry but I won't help you. I can't help you. Not because he is your son. No matter what kid came down that Pike, whether I had been asked to watch for him or not, whether he was your son or not, I would help him, whether you called or not. But Jim, I've taken your advice and the advice of all officialdom: 'Let them alone and they'll go home'. I'm not there any more Jim."

"Father, I was so wrong. I wish to God we had a million like you." He was crying. I was crying. You should be crying for what we have done to other people's children. Weep not for me but for your children. God, must we wait until it is one of our own before we understand? If you love only those who love you, you are no better than the tax gatherers or the publicans.

But I say to you - love those who do not love you (dress like you, wear their hair your way, adopt your brand of sexual morality and politics and religion). He might have said - love a freak, a runaway, a street kid - and then. . .

Publisher Loeb said of me "if this newspaper publisher had anything to do with the matter, this Priest would be stripped of his priestly garments and revealed as the agitator which we certainly think he is." Perhaps I should be chastened but I am reminded of another Priest of whom similar things were said. It was in His Name and in His footsteps that I went to the streets. To Him and to this young and gentle generation, I am grateful for these years. They came closer to Christianity than they knew. If there is a heaven and if it has streets and if I make it, look for me there among its street people where there will then be no tears, no sorrow. God will wipe it all away.

Advice to a Young Reader who is Thinking of Running:

Don't do it. The world of the street is as senseless and depraved as the adult one from which you would run. If my words have in any way seemed to approve it, then I have misled you. I seek to explain, not entice.

If the openness, the love, the charm, the acceptance, of street people has leaked through, let me tell you it is not because of the street but in spite of it. The street has become a horror, just as the peace and love and flowers of Haight-Ashbury have turned into the violence of speed freaks.

There must be another way to preserve your humanity and individuality against the onslaughts of a sick society. I believe your generation will find it. I hope to live long enough to see the beautiful world you are planting come to fruition.

I have tried to explain why kids react as they do to excesses in adult society. But reactions are often excesses in themselves and to explain them is in no way to approve them.

Following is my Prayer for Runaways.

Father Paul

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A Prayer for Runaways

Jesus Christ, Lord of the Universe, King of the World, you who were once a boy and a runaway, who asked his parents in the Temple, "Why did you search for me?"

You of whose parents, Mary and Joseph, the Scriptures say, "they did not understand", enlighten and sustain the parents of today's children.

You who had no place to lay your head, protect these "children with windy feet" and give them safe crash pads.

You whose Precursor said "let him who has two tunics share with him who has none; and let him who has food do likewise", bless these kids who care about one another.

You who parhanded the glass of water from the woman at the well, preserve from starvation, sickness and overdose these children of the night.

You whose hair was long and whose feet were sandaled, stave off those violent Christians who beat up people who dress differently. You know what it is like to be mocked and beaten and hated.

You who were without honor in your own town, help us to see our obligation to respect and to care for other people's vagrant children.

You whose life began with rejection at the inn and ended with rejection by your own Father, console those many runaways who more truly should be termed "throwaways".

You whose friend was a prostitute, who were crucified because you ate and drank with sinners, strengthen those adults who see Christ in young strangers, and preserve our migrant children from predatory adults.

You who said about your persecutors, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do", forgive those authorities who treat like chattel and deprive of human and civil rights kids who have no one to protect them in your name.

You who stood before politicians as they washed their hands of your blood, soften the hearts of those who erroneously follow a hard line with wandering youth, or who do nothing. Not to decide is to decide.

You whose friends deserted when you were busted, comfort our kids in jail for standing on or smoking grass.

You who became angry and violent at the money-changers understand adolescent frustration with injustice, immorality and hypocrisy.

You who, while rejecting the sin, accepted the sinfully impure, yet railed against the hypocrites, help our country get its values straight.

You who came that we might have life and have it more abundantly - who raised Jairus' teen-aged daughter and the widow's son, raise our teenagers to the vision of a life they can desire and not need killer narcotics to escape it or make it more colorful. "God damn the pusher man".

You who cautioned "do not be anxious for your life, what you shall eat; nor yet for your body what you shall put on" still the voices of those who ridicule the clothing of street people.

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A Prayer for Runaways, Cont'd.

"Weep not for me but for your children" you told those parents on the way,
and now behold - the ancient keen of Rachel is again abroad in our land.
Parents mourning for their lost children.

May we who work with children hear and heed in time!

Father Paul R. Shanley
Ministry to Alienated Youth
"on the street" in Boston.

May 1, 1970

Letter #11
Communes

When the adult harassment on the street and the spectacle of horror became overwhelming with no prospect of diminution and no hope of being effective, I began to think about what I might do instead for these kids. I was expecting a mass dropout from high school and widespread violence which of course came. At the height of the violence, I knew many kids were planning to repair to woodland communes. So I decided to hit the road and visit communes.

I began to schedule lectures in such a way that I could visit the communes in the area, bring the leaders to town and attempt a rapprochement between them. There were few if any teenage agricultural communes which were making it. Amnesiac adults had made the very same error. "Leave them alone and they will go home". In one, some of my friends burned to death when fire engines could not get up the snowy road that had been deliberately "left alone" by the snowplows. Every college should offer courses in communal and cooperative living. We have the knowledge. We know why the Brook Farms failed and the Mormons and Shakers prospered. We have a rich history of communal and cooperative living in America.

But don't tell the kids. Harass them instead - about toilets and septic tanks and every other blue law ignored for years with impunity by straights. And these, recall, are often middleclass kids without the foggiest notion of winter survival. Will Christians reach out? I doubt it.

In one diocese there is a law that priests must wear black suits and Roman collars when they appear in public. It's like asking Joe Namath to play football in a tuxedo to expect me to tramp around winter woods that way. (157 inches of snow that year!) I was invited to speak at a CCD Congress but after one lecture, the Bishop spotted me and would not allow me to continue.

In still another diocese I was forbidden to celebrate Liturgy except on a table which had never been used for eating. If you've ever been to a commune, you would know that is impossible to find. Why, even Jesus of Nazareth would have been unable to have the Last Supper under that restriction.

So, seeing the handwriting on the wall, that we were now going to do the same to communards as we had to street people and being incapable of that route of controversy again, I finally threw in the towel and after 25 years of youth work retired from the scene.

An AP story which went across the country erroneously gave many the

impression that I had given up on the kids, not the adults, and had gone off to start a commune in California. (I was going to visit communes.) In the next few days, I received dozens of calls and letters from young professionals, shrinks, lawyers, teachers, social workers and others. All had the same tenor "the hell with this - I'm coming with you. Where is your commune?"

These were the college kids of yesterday who took the prevailing advice and went back to school, got their degrees, and came out to get into and change the system - and learned you can't. Now they too were alienated. As previously explained, when you try to correct the immorality, hypocrisy and injustice and get your head busted (literally or figuratively) you have only two options: drop out (chemically or physically) or turn to violence. We have always affirmed that alienation (or drugs) was not the prerogative of youth. That it is a problem for any American of any age once he sees the scene and attempts to correct it. Recent disclosures attest to the accuracy of our contention - drugs in Vietnam, drugs in industry, dropping out among professionals, etc.

I know a doctor and two nurses who gave up medicine and are living in a city commune. When I was the speaker at the New England Pediatric Society dinner and touched on this, I could see the disbelief in the eyes of many doctors' wives, until a young doctor jumped up and said "He's right; I'm getting out of this country as fast as I can. Everything he is telling you, I have experienced."

What I turned to was working with adults and sent out the flyer: What Ever Became of the "Street Priest".

More to come.

Father Paul