

## He Didn't Walk Alone!

Jayen

Upbeat

V. 4, n.3, 1971

It happened not long ago during John's vacation. He was spending it in New York with his old friend, Dan. Dan and he were close friends – especially in High School where they played baseball together. Dan was the short fast kind – and a good shooter. John was tall – a good rebounder. Together they were great. But it was soon afterwards that they found that Dan was sick...badly sick. He lost hope – and now he had turned to drugs. John knew that he must help him, but he felt like he was walking alone.

That evening John walked alone down Second Avenue, his steps slow and shuffling; wool cloak and brown hair fluttering slightly as the winter wind cut through the city. He seemed unaffected by reality, solemnly entrenched in private thought. A light, wet snow had transformed his dark beard into a maze of tiny frozen crystals, causing his face to take on somewhat of a glow as he passed streetlight after streetlight. It was a handsome face: strong and rugged, yet sad, as if he carried some burdensome and inescapable weight. He wasn't able to exactly explain this feeling of weight, but he knew that when it came to Dan and his situation, he must help – he read it as doing the work of Christ. Not that he would ever say that, 'cause the other kids would think he was crazy. But he took it literally now, he filled it with meaning, that he must help the "sick and suffering" as the Liturgy proclaimed. He must do his best to help the "poor" as Christ taught in the Beatitudes – and to him Dan was "poor" Dan. He was in search for that special "joy" that the Church was always talking about.

But he didn't always feel that way. It really began at a point when he really began to think that the Liturgy was simply irrelevant – a waste of time! But he wanted to be fair. He figured that it can't be only this – the Church must mean something if it has been around for so long and if people were really able to experience God through it. He listened. And it was to understand what those words were actually saying. Not hearing as before, but LISTENING to what the whole Church was expressing – and now it was different! And on that particular Sunday he even listened to Father Tom's sermon! He usually tried to sneak out during the sermon if he could, but this time he wanted to listen. And it was strange that it all happened at once; Father Tom's sermon had the very same expression as the whole Liturgy! It was almost like it was all planned. Father Tom said that Orthodox Christians must GIVE THEIR LIVES for Christ and all that He taught – and suddenly the words shot through his mind: "let us commend ourselves and all our lives unto Christ our God!" HE said that although the physical Church was present, it was first the "people of God" and suddenly he heard: "and for those who enter it with faith, reverence and the fear of God." He said that Christians have a particular "love" and fellowship with one another and suddenly he heard: "let us LOVE ONE ANOTHER" and "asking for the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" He said that we are called to ACTION and not only words to help those in such great need, and he heard: "for the sick and the suffering." And that was it! It wouldn't leave him! Liturgy was LIFE! IT was really the way life SHOULD be!

All this brought a new excitement to John's life. But, it is true, sometimes he just felt like giving up. It seemed hopeless with Dan.

Anyway, on that evening, he passed an open door where three young men were improvising on some guitar and tambourine music. They were Dan's friends. The tall boy with the tambourine yelled out. "Hey, John, how was the show?" Tickets for the Fillmore were hard to get for the Hendrix concert. They were sold out the first day, and if you had one, everyone knew about it. His face suddenly brightened as he stopped walking. Trying not to offend them, John answered, "Just beautiful – great...Any of you see Dan?" Bob, one of the guitarists, frowned. "We were just gonna ask you that. He really shouldn't be out alone." It wasn't just because Dan was an addict, but they all knew that he had this physical illness and the snow always had a bad effect on him. John became solemn. Suddenly they all said, "Happy New Year, man" (which became the kid of greeting of cheer at any time of the year) in a stuttered way, sort of hoping to cheer him up. They knew that he was trying to help Dan kick the habit – and they respected him for his efforts, even if they disagreed with him. John continued on his way, grinning momentarily at the simultaneity of their farewell.

Suddenly he ran into Dan around the corner, and he backed off and laughed. John knew – and he hated it when Dan was like that. "Got any cash, John?" "Wow, I was just looking for you. Are you straight?" as if he didn't know. "Sure," Dan was taken aback, but John continued. "I just saw Bob and Jim and Mike back there. I guess you want to go, go back"...go back, go back, go back...The words reverberated in Dan's head, and he screamed, "I can't. I can't go back. NO, I can't." John knew it was different this time, and he didn't know what to do! Dan began to run! But he barely got half a block away when he landed in a snow pile. But the way he fell looked to John as if he couldn't have been hurt. John ran after him. "Com'mon, you faker. Get up man. It's too cold!" There was no answer. John's head was swimming. All these strange things were running through his mind. "The-sick-and-the-suffering...help-us,-save-us,-have-mercy-on-us...a-Christian-ending-to-our-lives. God, is this what all that means? But I want to run, I can't face it...but Father Tom's sermon...and offering our lives to Christ"...and it rushed into his mind at once. It all seemed unreal. But Dan was lying there, and that made it all real, the situation, the Liturgy, the fellowship, the sick. Real! He picked Dan up and began running toward the hospital. He didn't even remember how he got there. But he did.

As he waited, he thought, "why did I have to get involved? Why did I have to come to New York? Why didn't I listen to my mother and make it easy on myself?" He almost felt angry at Dan for getting him into the whole thing. The doctor in the emergency room knew it too. The nurses and orderlies sped oxygen, a monitoring machine, and an electronic heart stimulator to Dan's side. But ten minutes later, the doctor sat slowly next to John's side in the hall and shook his head. "O.D. Barbiturates. I'm sorry." Tears filled John's eyes and his face was somehow more solemn than ever, even though he had expected it all to happen. What was he going to tell Dan's mother? And the way she cried as John said he was going to try and help Dan. He mumbled a thanks to the doctor and shuffled across the street to the room that he and Dan shared.

Dan hadn't left much. As John sank into a chair, his head was filled with their last days together. John remembered just a week ago when Dan returned from Phoenix House after only two weeks. "I can't win," he'd said, "I can't fight it anymore. It's too strong." Dan had made him promise to comfort his sister if it happened. Both laughed nervously at this, but each knew it was a very clear possibility.

Dan's sister and his records were all Dan cared about in the world, and John somehow felt a particular reverence for them both. But he knew it wasn't going to be easy. His "weight," he knew now, was strangely a type of joy – the joy of helping. And he was driven by those words of Father Tom's – about a different type of "joy," not the usual kind, but the kind which must be experienced instead of "discussed," or "thought about." But who would ever understand "joy" in this way, in the midst of suffering? He knew that this feeling was his to bear alone; nobody would ever be able to understand it. But the weight was still to be carried; he knew that he had to take the next step, he knew that he had to carry the message to Dan's sister.

Five days later, John's bus pulled up in front of the VISTA office in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Dan could never understand his sister's "devotion," as he used to call it, to something so lost. But he said that "she's" that kind of creature, like you, John." From the VISTA office John found that the only vehicle available for his trip to the actual reservation was a bus. In fifteen minutes John started on a three and a half hour trip to the reservation near the border of New Mexico. He felt kind of stupid; all by himself in this big bus, but the scenery was beautiful, and it gave him a chance to think.

Nancy's face brightened as she saw him, but she broke into tears as she hugged him and realized why he had come. John nodded gravely as she searched for a glimmer of hope in his face, even though she knew there was none. They began walking to the cabin behind the little chapel. John was always amazed at the chapel – it had only changed slightly in the three times he had visited it, but it had a simple beauty.

In the corner of her cabin sat a little Navajo boy reading in a stumbling manner. The boy bolted up as John and Nancy entered. As John looked into his eyes, Dan's words about them "being lost" entered his mind. John patted his thick black hair and told him to tell his friends that he'd take them for a ride in the bus before it was returned to the city. Little Joey flashed out with a yell and ran out as John and Nancy sat at the table.

A telepathic agreement between them shifted the conversation away from Dan. They had both expected it. There was so little to say now.

John's face was still drawn as he looked out the window. "Mud huts, broken-down cars. Not enough clothes. How do they live? And they remain happy!" "I don't know. It seems like a miracle every day that I stay here. They have nothing but the land and God. And this land can hardly be cultivated. Joey's father has a few sheep, and he's the richest one here. But they never give up hope – hope for something. And they're happy." Shouting outside interrupted the conversation. John ran out and grinned. He opened the doors of the bus and fifteen kids jumped in. Joey's cousin, a tall, dark young man, stood quietly aside. John threw him the keys. "Really can I?" His face lit up. He had driven

John's Volkswagen, which he had left there at the beginning of the summer when he had been there last, but he didn't hesitate a moment. The engine was started before John could begin to issue his warning. "Remember that it's not mine, so get it back here in one piece"...John could hear Nancy's words about their "journey." John thought, "such a pitiful sight, how can they be happy over a bus ride?"

Three days passed. John and Nancy talked it all out by now and it was time to say good bye. He unloaded the extra food he had taken for the trip into her cabin. "I know they won't take it from me outright. But you know them. They'll take it from you"...The whole village gathered around John as he put his things in the little V.W. There was a kind of sadness which hung over them as he pulled away. In their eyes he was special and he felt that. But it wasn't pity that he felt, and he wondered, could it be that "joy" again? Nancy's eyes filled with tears. Dan was gone, but she was happy that he shared at least that part of his life with John.

As John drove away in his little V.W., he knew that he would return to the reservation after his next term. But he knew something more: he knew that the joy which Father Tom called the "JOY of Christ" was there, even in the middle of poverty, and he knew that, even if he had failed in his helping of Dan to kick the habit, at least Nancy seemed to realize that he tried – and he tried with his whole heart.

And there she was, with a tremendous hope, despite her losses, because she was doing God's work..."for the sick and the suffering...."

Strange, John thought, I came to *bring* – to bring bad news, and instead, I *received* – I received the good news, the news of hope, the news of love, the news of sacrifice, the news of that "joy"..."let us commend ourselves and each other unto Christ...."

John couldn't wait to see Father Tom. He wanted to tell him that he, knew, now; he knew that he didn't walk alone.