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MY 30 YEARS WITH FATHER DIVINE:

Ex-member discusses money, love,
sex and faith in religious cult

BY RUTH BOAZ



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My THIRTY YEARS With FATHER DIVINE

BY RUTH BOAZ



"I was not the first of his followers to become his mistress, nor was I by any means the last," says Miss Boaz, author of this article about her intimate knowledge of Father Divine and his far-flung "kingdoms." She defected sect two years ago.



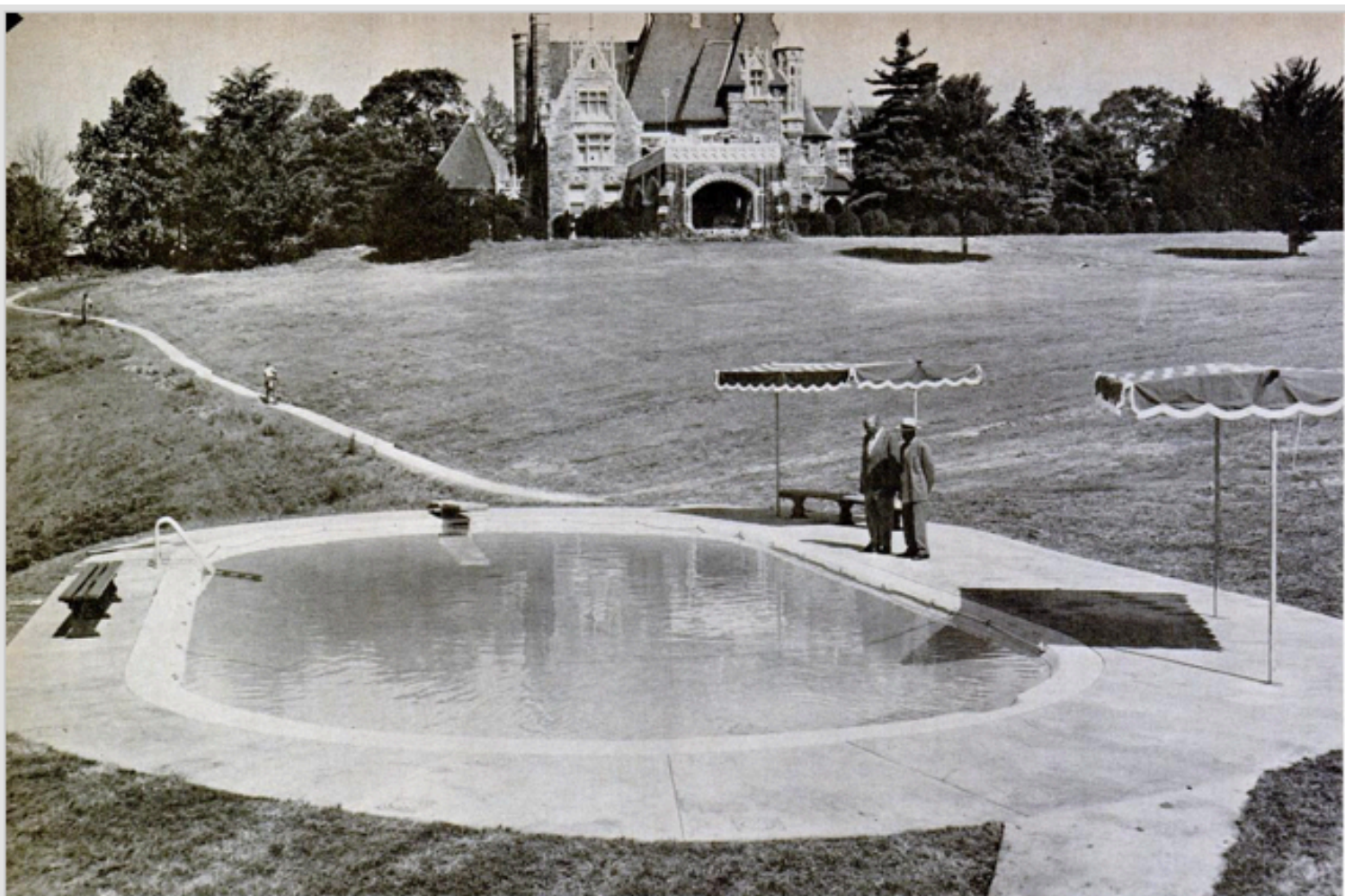
Female followers, including "angels" and "rosebuds," flank sect leader and Mother Divine (raising hand), his Canadian-born "virgin wife," at his Unity Mission in

After three decades under self-proclaimed

A MAN who calls himself Father Divine and is worshipped by thousands as the one true God rules a strange domain which stretches from its capital in Philadelphia to such distant outposts as Sydney, Australia and Zurich, Switzerland. The kingdom of Father Divine is founded on ignorance, superstition and fear. Its polyglot population is drawn from many religious backgrounds and nationalities and consists principally of an odd collection of neurotics, misfits and fanatics held together by a fearful discipline and a mystical, unquestioning belief in the small, shrewd Negro who is their leader.

I am one of many thousands who have fallen under the baleful spell of this most unusual man and whose lives have been wrecked thereby. For well over half of my life I was spiritually and physically enslaved to this strange, enigmatic personality. I really believed that he was God and considered it a privilege to be in his presence. For three unbelievable decades I was under total subjection to his will. His word was my command. I had no other life than the one he dictated for me.

The grip of Father Divine upon his followers is so inexorable that very few ever escape. Only a few have succeeded in shaking themselves free from the spiritual shackles of this man. A number have actually left the movement, but live in a form of mental bondage conditioned by a strange, nameless fear.



Thirty-two-room mansion in Montgomery County near Philadelphia is home and headquarters of Father Divine. Spiritual leader's failure to appear in public within recent months has given rise to rumors, claiming that he is already dead and that his death is being kept a secret by his top lieutenants in order to keep organization from crumbling.

30 YEARS WITH FATHER *Continued*

opened any Peace Missions in New York City. He was then operating from Sayville, L. I., his original headquarters. That night I gained admittance to one of Father's banquets through a letter of introduction which I had been given by a member. Mother and I stood at the back of the room as Father entered to wild cheering and clapping. He knew we were there and motioned for us to take designated places at the table. I was given the seat of honor which had been occupied by one of his favored white secretaries, Christian Life, the ex-wife of a well-known movie actor. From that moment I replaced her both at the banquet table and in Father's affections.



Thirty years ago, Divine posed with supporters and policemen outside New York court building after dismissal of suit filed against him by Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Group charged he had boarded children without city permit.

When the banquet ended, Father left the room and walked outside to a waiting Rolls Royce. He sent Christian Life to get me. I went outside and for a few minutes talked to him. He asked me many questions about myself. "I suppose you're weary and want to rest and relax," he said to me. "No," I answered, "I'm not weary and I don't want to rest." He looked at me closely and asked: "Well, then, what do you want?" I told him softly, "I want to go with you." He took me with him in his car to another meeting of his followers in Harlem. At the meeting I watched transfixed as Father entered into the spirit of the proceedings, swaying and singing. I was absolutely enthralled. When the hysteria subsided, I made my way to the podium in front of Father and testified. I told the hundreds of people assembled there that I knew "beyond the shadow of a doubt" that Father Divine was God. I declared that he was the savior I had been seeking for some time. Father arose immediately after I spoke and said that he had revealed himself to me. "She will always be with me and be abundantly blessed," he said.

The following day I was summoned to see Father Divine in his private office in Mom Sarah's home. There he told me that my name would henceforth be **Ruth Boaz**. A warm glow permeated my body as I sat and talked with him. In my heart I had never felt so happy; I loved him very much. If he were God, I thought, how fortunate am I. I could unload my burden of sin and seek forgiveness. As though divining my thoughts, he leaned over and said tenderly: "You can tell me *everything*." Between sobs and tears I related the awful story of my life.

During the next several days I confessed all of my sins and transgressions while Father listened patiently. I desired to be cleansed of my sins. Father assured me that I was forgiven. I reached over and clasped his hands in mine and caressed them, as I had always desired to do. He whispered in my ear: "I wonder why I love you so." I knew then that I was in love with him. Spiritual love soon became physical love. I gave myself to Father Divine, believing that it was a holy experience. At first I questioned the necessity for physical

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First Mother Divine (above) disappeared from public view in 1941. Five years later, after marrying the present Mother Divine—with whom (below) he is cutting 10th wedding anniversary cake—he confided to his followers that his first spouse had died.



30 YEARS WITH FATHER *Continued*

love. But Father calmed my fears and dismissed my objections by explaining that Jesus Christ was not the product of an immaculate conception, but the result of a physical union between Mary and Joseph. "Mary was no virgin," Father used to say as he made love to me. "Whenever there is physical conception there must be physical cohabitation." These were shattering words for me to listen to, since all my life I had believed in the virginity of Mary and the immaculate conception of Jesus.

Father Divine preached sexual abstinence—"non-sex" he called it—to his followers, but freely engaged in it himself. I was not the first of his followers to become his mistress nor was I by any means the last. Our relationship confused me. More than once I asked him why, if sex was forbidden to the followers, did he personally indulge? I'll never forget his answer. "When I have sex relations with you I am bringing your desire to the surface so that I can eliminate it. God is the only one who can do as he pleases."

For the next two years I served as one of his confidential secretaries, accompanying him wherever he went, reading to him, proofreading his sermons, screening his correspondence. I worked with him in his inner office with his other confidential secretary, Peace Branch. I considered it a joy and a privilege to serve him. I had never been so happy in my life.

Suddenly one day the honeymoon ended. A new, attractive, younger secretary was added to the staff and Father turned his attention to her. I became a back number, and was cast out of the inner circle.

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Her apparent to her husband's far-flung domain, youthful Mother Divine keeps tight control of organization's business affairs. Insiders, however, doubt that movement will be able to survive long without Father Divine.

30 YEARS WITH FATHER Continued

I was told by Father to go out and get a domestic job. The Peace Mission employment bureau found a job for me as housekeeper with a family in Long Island. The first job paid \$40 a month. Later, as a cook, I was paid \$75 a month. I worked in domestic service for nine years, always living in where I worked. I gave Father all but a few dollars of my monthly earnings. On my day off I would visit Father at his headquarters, enjoy a pleasant visit with him and "donate" my earnings which I always enclosed in an envelope at his request.

The Divine Kingdom recognizes neither the sacredness of the family as a unit nor the permanence of family relationships. Those who enter the Kingdom must disavow their families and reject all ties with relatives. If a family enters the Kingdom as a unit, the husband and wife are immediately separated and the children are sent to a home. The mother-child relationship is severed forever and Father and Mother Divine become the parent figures for the children.

The Divine movement cost me the love of my mother and daughter. Both my mother and my daughter, then a teen-ager, were with me in New York when I decided to become a Divine follower. I never spoke to either one of them again nor recognized our kinship in any tangible way. My daughter soon became dissatisfied with Kingdom life, and one day, walked out into the streets of Harlem and never came back. She was only 14. Her parting message to me, delivered through one of Father's secretaries, whom I had supplanted in his affections, was brief but pathetic. "Tell God good-bye," was all she said. I never saw her again, nor have I ever heard from her.

Several years later when my mother died, a letter edged in black arrived for me. I turned it into the Kingdom office unopened, and was told by one of the secretaries that my mother had died. The authorities in the community where she had died had written requesting information as to the disposal of her remains. True to my vows, I refused to answer the letter or to send instructions regarding her burial. My act was later commended. One follower told me that I had passed "the acid test." The follower further stated: "One who passes this test can be trusted." I passed the test but lost my family.

Since he started operating in Sayville, L. I., some 35 years ago, Father Divine has collected many millions from his devout followers. The financial structure of the Kingdom is supported by income from three main sources: property, personal belongings, home furnishings, assets and monies of new entering members. To be "wholeheartedly consecrated" is the highest state any Divine follower can reach. This involves submitting oneself completely to the will and discipline of Father Divine. A consecrated follower is expected to give up all his or her worldly possessions, convert property to cash and "donate" everything to Father. Once the money is turned over it is never seen again. Nor may consecrated followers inquire about how much money they have donated or what happened to it. In the Kingdom of Father Divine money is a dirty word. Followers are forbidden to discuss financial matters with anyone inside or outside the movement. Followers are warned that the punishment for discussing money transactions is death.

An aged Divine follower who now works as a domestic told a close

friend recently when asked what she did with her earnings: "Father said that if anyone told that they had given any money to the mission they would die. Yes, die, like that, for talking! I know one person who told it and she did die. Father said that if you told one person you would die. I don't tell anybody anything."

Father Divine is a fantastically wealthy man. Wealthy, that is, in the sense that he controls vast sums of money. Father has always denied having wealth or owning any property. Actually, it cannot be proven that he has a penny. "Mother Divine or neither myself claim or legally own any property at this time," Father Divine said in a 1955 address. The followers own the movement's properties, he claimed.

By far the largest portion of Divine's annual income derives from the wages, salaries and donations of followers who are employed at outside jobs. Father calls this type of work "working out in the service." Thus followers who work at outside jobs are distinguished from those who work full-time inside the movement, though Father always maintained that all workers enjoyed equal respect in his eyes. A follower can enjoy consecrated status even if he works at non-Kingdom jobs providing he donates generously to the movement. Thousands of Divine followers work at all kinds of jobs from domestics to stenographers, auto mechanics, chauffeurs, engineers, government workers, teachers, nurses and tradesmen. Consecrated followers are in all professions, trades and categories of employment. These outside co-workers donate each week some part of their earnings. Each person is expected to withhold enough money for his or her personal needs.

Until Father became ill the followers usually paid their money directly to him. However, certain followers were instructed to give their money to one of the secretaries or Saint Mary Bloom, chief housekeeper of the organization. Money was usually given to Father during his interviewing hours. For years the outside co-workers paid their tribute to Father Divine either on pay day or on their day off. Father directed that all donations be put in envelopes. By Divine decree the interviews at which donations were given were not to exceed five seconds. The five-second method of receiving money from the followers continued throughout the last 10 years of his active leadership. Since Father's illness forced him to withdraw behind the gray, mysterious walls of Woodmont, the 32-room Gothic style castle in Montgomery County near Philadelphia, the donations have been received by Dorothy Darling, Father's long-time financial secretary and aide.

Father used to dramatically return all contributions and donations sent to him by outsiders, whether identified or anonymous. A number of wealthy persons left him considerable fortunes and large estates, but he shrewdly refused to accept these gifts. By so doing, he cleverly built up an image of a man who demands nothing and takes nothing. Secretly, however, he collected millions from his consecrated followers.

There has been a definite decline in receipts from followers' earnings in the last 18 months since Father's total withdrawal from public view, though no one admits this. Hundreds of dollars still pour daily into the coffers of the Divine organization.

All the co-workers who perform duties inside the Peace Mission



Sensational banking practice caught nation's eye in 1949 when several Divine followers arrived with battered suitcases at Newark, N. J., Federal Trust Co. to deposit their contents—nearly half a million dollars. Group came without guards.

Continued on Next Page

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30 YEARS WITH FATHER *Continued*

movement—waitresses, cooks, chambermaids, chauffeurs, housekeepers, secretaries, etc.—must sign contracts which state that they are working voluntarily and will never ask any compensation for services rendered. Every consecrated follower working outside has a "space" reserved for him in a Kingdom building. A "space" is half a bed, and whether or not it is occupied the follower must pay weekly rent for it. No one is permitted to select his or her roommate; that is the prerogative of the management of the building. Roommates are selected according to color. No two white followers may share adjoining spaces, but Negro members can be roommates providing they are of different complexions.

Members of the Divine movement are exempt from Social Security obligations. Father has always been a vigorous foe of Social Security as well as all forms of pensions and life insurance and welfare assistance. Tips and gifts are similarly outlawed. Many followers and ex-followers now wish they did enjoy Social Security benefits. Others secretly disobey Father's stern injunction and pay their Social Security tax. Followers pay a heavy price for the questionable privilege of being "wholeheartedly consecrated and in His perfect will." Like thousands of other followers I am not covered by Social Security and therefore have no retirement benefits.

For 20 years I was a willing and devout outside co-worker, first as a domestic worker and then as a hospital and private licensed nurse. During those years I earned an estimated \$75,000, at least \$50,000 of which I gave to Father Divine. I gave as little as \$10 a week and as much as \$1,000 at a time. No receipt was ever issued and no record ever made of these payments.

Divine organized the Kingdom on a cooperative basis around 1933 and began buying properties throughout Harlem. The new plan was based on so-called joint or cooperative purchases of property by groups of his followers. Dozens of properties—houses, buildings, churches, hotels, etc.—have been bought in this way during the last 32 years. The system is erroneously called cooperative. It is Father who has always decided which properties were to be purchased and which to be sold. The followers, even those listed on the deeds as co-owners, were never consulted. Terms of purchases and sales were negotiated by his attorneys. Wherever it was found expedient, white followers were used to buy properties located in racially restricted sections.

Very few followers have been given lump sums in settlement of claims against the movement. A white Canadian, who became disillusioned after a number of years of service in the movement, asked for the return of all monies he had donated. He was paid off reluctantly and returned to his home in Canada. After this incident one of the confidential secretaries reported: "Mother was very angry when McKenzie received his money back. She said 'no one else will ever get any money back. This is positively the last time we will ever return any money.'"

Others did get their money back, however, after that, but very few. Many more consecrated members have left the movement without demanding or receiving reimbursement for monies donated. Two of Father's closest secretaries, Blessed Real and Quiet Devotion, left the Kingdom and "went back into the world." But on the whole the rate of defection from the movement is negligible in comparison with the total membership. When members leave they usually do so quietly, without making any trouble.

The most publicized instances of defection from the kingdom were Thomas and Verinda Brown and Humility, all original members of the first Sayville mission. Both sued Father Divine for the recovery of funds, but neither collected.

Only a small number of Father Divine's intimate inner circle knows exactly how much money the movement possesses and the combined value of properties held. Father, Mother Divine, Dorothy Darling and Saint Mary Bloom comprise this group. One or two others like Sweet Child and Anita have a working knowledge of the organization's finances. The rank and file membership are totally ignorant of the financial facts of the Divine Kingdom, and of course play no part in setting policy or making decisions. Only the hierarchy does that.

One of the most tragic aspects of the Divine movement is the callous manner in which aged followers are treated. A small number of the aged are permitted to stay in headquarters in Woodmont until their death. They are usually buried immediately and quietly, without a



Sizeable white following of cultist includes group (above) at Melbourne (Australia) Town Hall, celebrating "marriage of the lamb (Divine) and his spotless virgin bride" and youths (below) worshipping at Peace Mission in Stuttgart, Germany.



ceremony. Followers entitled to this kind of burial include the secretaries, housekeepers, or any of the loyal few of his personal staff, or a follower who has given an unusually large amount of money to the movement. A handful of elderly and ailing followers are sometimes kept in a home maintained by the Peace Mission Movement where they wait for death.

Some followers who suffer mental breakdowns or become senile are committed to mental institutions. During the years before his physical collapse, Father Divine occasionally visited select followers who were inmates of such institutions. I know because I frequently accompanied him on these missions.

Though the Divine movement was founded on the principle of absolute, unqualified equality, color has always been a factor in its history. From the outset Father decreed that there should be no color distinctions made or tolerated. One of his first residence rules was that rooms and beds in all missions be occupied interracial. Anti-Negro prejudice would never be permitted and would be severely punished if discovered, but white followers have on occasion been mistreated by some colored fellow angels. Hostile remarks, pokes in the ribs, ugly looks and false charges can reflect the deep though understandable resentment many of the Negro members feel toward the white angels. Subtle friction between white and colored angels often created minor crises which required adjudication by Father himself. Generally, though, racial harmony prevails—at least on the surface.

Originally the movement was largely led and influenced by colored persons, but as white membership increased the number of whites in the leadership also grew. Since World War II there has been a trend toward greater assignment of authority in key offices to white persons. Today at least one-fourth of all Divine followers in the United States are white. But there are large non-Negro memberships in foreign countries like New Zealand, Germany and Switzerland.

Ominous rumblings of discontent over the growth of white leadership of the movement have been heard in recent years. A predominantly colored membership is now bossed by a largely white leadership. Of the six top officials four are white. Sister Happy Word, head of the California missions, is slated to move up soon to a national position. Simon Peter, the white manager of a Divine-owned grocery store

30 YEARS WITH FATHER *Continued*

in West Philadelphia, is known to aspire to succeed Father Divine. One angel was heard to remark recently: "That Simon Peter has his eye on Father's empty chair."

Who will assume leadership when Father Divine dies? Father has long recognized the critical dilemma presented by the succession problem and years ago began preparing the Kingdom for his inevitable departure from the scene. He predicted to the angels that they would begin to see less and less of him physically. "With or without a body I shall accomplish the purpose for which I came," he assured them.

For nearly 18 months now, Father's devout followers have not seen their leader in the flesh, but have worshiped his empty chair, singing love songs and gesturing toward it. In the course of a typical meeting in Woodmont's banquet hall, Mother Divine leads a "love march" in which the followers march around the room and pass by the empty chair. Each follower speaks words of endearment to Father Divine as he passes by and some prostrate themselves on the floor. Mother Divine sits in her chair beside the empty one, smiling serenely as the followers show their devotion.

There is only one logical successor to Father Divine and that is Mother Divine. After Father passes, her task will be to successfully replace a legend of our time. Born Edna Ruth Rithings 38 years ago in Canada, Mother has for 19 years now been preparing herself with Father's connivance to occupy the throne of the self-styled "Almighty God" she married in Washington in 1946. She is now the administrative head of the organization, controls its finances and makes the important decisions. She is the undisputed Queen of the Kingdom, though she vehemently denies this. "Father is just the same as he always was," she told me recently. "Father Divine is God." But Father is not the same as he was, and will never be the same. He is a sick, helpless old man in a sad state of physical decline. The man whom thousands consider God is a diabetic whose mental powers are failing rapidly.

The age of Father Divine has for years been a subject of spirited speculation and mystery. Based on verified personal accounts and documents, his age is at least 100. The first Mother Divine who died in 1941, gave the date of their marriage as 1882, and this was confirmed by Father himself. Until five years ago Father maintained remarkably good health and made regular public appearances. His illnesses were hushed up and kept from his followers. It was never admitted that he suffered from diabetes, but for years he ate specially prepared food and took insulin. During the late 1950s he stopped eating the same food served at his banquet tables. In 1960 he was taken to Philadelphia's Bryn Mawr Hospital in a diabetic coma and admitted under an assumed name. After receiving treatment there he recovered.

Advancing senility greatly restricted his Philadelphia movements after that. His residence was moved in 1962 from the Circle Mission Church in South Philadelphia to the spacious, stately mansion called Woodmont, "the mount of the House of the Lord," which overlooks the Schuylkill River. For some months he was carried downstairs daily and placed in his chair at the head of the banquet table before the dining room doors were opened. Once he was seated, the doors were opened and his followers were allowed to enter and participate in the regular banquet service. He ate his special food with his fingers and was always assisted by Mother Divine. Often he was removed from the dining room against his will.

Except for a handful of the inner circle, he has not been seen for over a year. He is unable to perform elementary bodily functions and is under constant care. The last time I saw Father Divine he appeared to be not only seriously incapacitated, but in a state of deterioration. One follower who has had nursing training and experience saw him recently and concluded that he was the victim of a stroke.

The most recent reports of Father's condition coming from inside his Woodmont retreat prove that his once "ageless, holy" body is now a pitiable, emaciated figure ravaged by ill health and crippled by age. His most fanatical followers refuse to admit that Father Divine is dying or even that he is ill. They believe that he has ascended to a higher spiritual realm where he has taken into his own body all of the physical afflictions of mankind.

Mother Divine's spiritual image to the movement's membership rests to a large extent on her virginity so long extolled by Father in many public utterances. This carefully nurtured image, I am convinced, is

founded on fact. I do not believe Father has ever violated Mother's virginity. He did not because he could not afford to shake her belief in his divinity because of the great role he had chosen for her to play as head of the movement after his death.

Father and Mother never occupied the same bedroom in the 19 years of their marriage. Throughout these years Mother's constant companion and roommate has been Peaceful Love, a sweet and affectionate person who belong to the Rosebuds, the organization's young women's auxiliary. Mother genuinely believes that she is the "queen of the universe," predestined by God to play her present role.

It is doubtful whether the Divine movement can survive for long if Mother becomes titular head when Father dies. The hard core of the present membership will accept her because Father has instructed them to do so. The growth rate of the movement has been greatly reduced in the last few years. Not many prospective followers would accept a woman as deity.

My disillusionment with Father Divine began slowly and reluctantly but developed quickly. It has taken me years to sever the powerful influence which he wielded over my entire being. Several shocking, traumatic experiences shook my faith in the man I once believed was God, and in the entire edifice of the movement he had created. In 1955, I suffered a heart attack. On June 6 of that year, I was discharged by a Philadelphia hospital and went to the Divine Lorraine Hotel where I had lived for several years. I expected to recuperate there. Instead of peace, I found conflict. Instead of sympathy, I was received with hostility. There was an argument which resulted in my being evicted from the hotel. I reported this personally to Father and was appalled by his answer, which I shall never forget. "If you are in need, go to the Salvation Army," he told me.

I soon found employment which paid sufficiently to enable me to make a complete financial recovery. But I remained under the yoke of Father Divine's bondage and was a victim of the fear which pervades the entire movement. Periodically I returned to the Kingdom and donated large sums of money to Father personally. He always received it with a smile. I told Father that I was being treated for my heart condition. In 1960, my fear began to leave me and I was able to think clearly. By this time, I was convinced that Father Divine was a cruel and cynical imposter, but it was very difficult for me to completely break the iron grip of his influence over my mind. He has a deadly control over the consecrated followers which only the power of Jesus Christ can break. I know, because I gave my heart to the Lord and was saved thereby.

For years I worshiped a false god. I practiced a pagan religion based on the deception and exploitation of people by an evil man. I regret the folly of my actions. I am sorry that I wasted my life. I lost my family and damaged my health. My life was misspent, but I am not defeated. I feel happier in body and mind since severing all ties with that organization and finding the true God in whom I put my trust.

A Christian again, Mrs. Boaz enters Assemblies of God Church in New York. "I have returned to the worship of the one true God. I am a happier woman now," she says.

