

# MANNA *in the wilderness*

September 2005

The Newsletter of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker

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## Dorothy Day: Recalling the Gift of Her Vision

Robert Ellsberg was at UNLV in August to accept the Pax Christi Book Award on behalf of Orbis Books where he is Editor-in-Chief. He is a former editor of *The Catholic Worker* and editor of the book *Dorothy Day: Selected Writings*. Following is an excerpt from a speech delivered by Robert Ellsberg at a gathering of individuals interested in the canonization of Dorothy Day on June 7, 2005 under the auspices of Cardinal Egan of New York. Dorothy Day was co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933. Dorothy Day was against sainthood because she did not "want to be dismissed so easily." She did not believe holiness was just for a few—or for those dedicated to formal religious life. It was simply a matter of taking seriously the logic of our baptismal vows to put off the old person and put on Christ—to grow constantly in our capacity for love through the exercise of mercy, compassion, and forgiveness.

by Robert Ellsberg

The shrinking number of those who were privileged to know Dorothy in her life bear the responsibility to make her spirit more widely known—not for the sake of honoring her, but for the sake of the church and future generations, who may be enriched and challenged by her message and her example to know the spirit of the living God.

There is no doubt that in many ways Dorothy's spirituality drew on very traditional sources. In essence, her vision was rooted in the twin commandments of the Gospel: to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself. A key text was the par-

able of the last judgment in Matthew 25 in which our salvation hinges on service to Christ in the poor and those in need.

Her spiritual life was rooted in the Eucharist, daily prayer, and reading of Scripture. A Benedictine Oblate since 1955, she revered the monastic values of work, community, hospitality, and peace. She drew



Dorothy Day  
drawing by Fritz Eichenberg

on the spirit of St. Francis in her espousal of voluntary poverty. Like St. Teresa of Avila, she was a passionate woman, a practical mystic, unafraid to strike out in new directions, to risk disapproval and seeing failure in pursuit of her cause. Like Mother Teresa of Calcutta she sought to recognize Christ in the distressing disguise of the poor and unwanted. With her favorite saint, Therese of Lisieux, she embraced "the little way," always emphasizing that it is not large projects and accomplishments that are most important in the eyes of God, but the doing of small things with love and faith. Each day at the Catholic Worker, she believed, brought a repetition of the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

It is of course possible to describe Dorothy in ways that stress her continuity with traditional models of holiness. But like any great saint, she also invented her own model—rooted in her own experience and temperament, in response to what she perceived as the great needs of her time.

In her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, Dorothy described her first childhood encounter with the lives of the saints.

She recalls how her heart was stirred by the stories of their charity toward the sick, the maimed, the leper. "But there was another question in my mind," she said. "Why was so much done in remedying the evil instead of avoiding it in the first place?...Where were the saints to try to change the social order, not just to minister to slaves, but to do away with slavery?"

In effect, Dorothy's vocation took form around this challenge. Her conversion to Catholicism and her work in founding the Catholic Worker movement would come many years later. But the great underlying task of her life was to join the practice of charity with the struggle for justice. It was in the search for this path that she prayed at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in 1932 that "some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor." She longed, as she put it, "to make a synthesis reconciling body and spirit, this world and the next." She believed her meeting with Peter Maurin was the answer to this prayer. In the Catholic Worker movement that

they started she found the synthesis that she had been seeking.

Many people remain confounded by Dorothy's ability to integrate a traditional style of Catholic piety with a radical style of social engagement. She said the rosary and went to daily Mass while also marching on picket lines and going to jail to protest war and injustice. But there was no paradox in her eyes.

She found the basis of that synthesis she had been seeking in the central doctrine of her faith: the Incarnation. Her subsequent mission was rooted in the radical social implications of this doctrine—the fact that God had entered our flesh and our history, so that all creation was hallowed, and whatever we did for our neighbors we did directly for him.

This strong incarnational faith was the (continued on back page)

**The great underlying task of her life was to join the practice of charity with the struggle for justice.**

## ROUND TABLE DISCUSSIONS

Come join us for Round Table Discussions the second Saturday of each month at the Catholic Worker House. From 8-8:30 a.m. refreshments will be served, from 8:30 - 10:30 a.m. will be the presentation. For info call 647-0728.

**Saturday, Oct. 8:** Brian Swimme Video & Discussion, Sr. Megan Rice, shcj  
**Saturday, Nov. 12:** Presentation on Dorothy Day by Julia Occhiogrosso  
**Saturday, Dec. 10:** Gary Cavalier; Money, Security & Community.

(continued from front page)

thread that united the various aspects of her life: her embrace of voluntary poverty and a life in community among the poor; her practice of the works of mercy—feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless; her prayer and commitment to the sacramental life of the church; her staunch commitment to social justice; her “seamless garment” approach to the protection of life, and her dedication to Gospel nonviolence. It was the Incarnation, ultimately, that showed the way to that synthesis reconciling “body and soul,” the spiritual and the material, the historical and the transcendent, the love of God and the love of neighbor, “this world and the next.”

From this reflection on the Incarnation came her profound sense of the sacramentality of things. If bread and wine, the work of human hands, could become the body of Christ, what else might we discover in the world around us, if we had eyes to see properly. All created things had a holiness to them. She loved beauty—whether in art, music, literature, or in nature. She loved books, handcrafts, and anything done with care. She was never happier than when she was near the ocean. When she couldn't leave the city she surrounded her walls with postcards of lakes, forests, icebergs. But she could also see beauty where others saw only misery and squalor, because all things spoke to her of their Creator—sometimes in glory, sometimes on the Cross.

I remember so many of Dorothy's qualities: her courage, her humor, her boundless curiosity, her capacity for indignation, her fascination with detail, the personal and particular over abstract concepts, her effervescent laughter. But if there is any quality I particularly associate with Dorothy it was gratitude. It was such gratitude and happiness at the birth of her daughter that first turned her heart to God: “No human creature could receive or contain so vast a flood of love and joy as I often felt after the birth of my child. With this came the need to worship, to adore.” It was this gratefulness that led to her decision to have her child baptized and to fol-

## BOOK REVIEW:

# Losing Moses on the Freeway

by Stevi Carroll

In *Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America*, Chris Hedges discusses the Decalogue in a contemporary and challenging way. Hedges graduated from seminary at Harvard Divinity School and instead of being ordained, pursued a career as a war correspondent in places like El Salvador, Nicaragua and Bosnia. His war and other life experiences and insights illuminate his writing.

My favorite chapter is “Decalogue V, The Family: Honor your father and your mother.” In it, he remembers his own father, the responsibilities and ideals his father instilled in him and how, many years later, these lessons influence a commence-

low by joining the Catholic Church, even though this entailed great personal sacrifice. Appropriately, the words on her gravestone are DEO GRATIAS.

But her gratefulness and love for the church did not remove her apprehension of its sins and failures. She constantly judged the church, in which she included herself, by the image of its founder, praying for forgiveness and a spirit of conversion.

Like many great saints of the past, Dorothy helped the church to recover forgot-

ten notes of the Gospel. St. Francis helped the church recover the memory of Jesus as a poor man. So Dorothy helped the church remember the spirit of Gospel nonviolence. She took seriously the command to love your enemies, not just as a counsel of perfection for a select few, but as a standard for Christian discipleship. She believed literally that Jesus offered a new commandment—to love one another as he loved us. She believed, with other peacemakers like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, that in the era of total war, nonviolence was not just a moral but a practical imperative. She proclaimed this message in season and out—regardless of public opinion, the threat of persecution, or the disapproval of fellow Catholics.

ment address Hedges gave at Rockford College in May of 2003. Rockford College's most famous alumnus was Jane Addams who was, among other things, a pacifist. From the response of many of the graduates, Addams beliefs are not taught nor shared by the students. Reading this speech is itself worth reading this book.

The veil may not drop off our eyes after reading *Losing Moses on the Freeway*, but our way of seeing, and understanding, both the 10 Commandments and the United States' behavior will be altered.

Also by Chris Hedges: *What Every Person Should Know About War and War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*.

This example of Dorothy Day is especially relevant in these times we are living through, when once again the Gospel narrative is made to seem foolish and irrelevant in the face of organized violence and evil. Once again we are confronting a situation in which massive violence is preferred as the only realistic solution to our problems, and a just cause is invoked to justify virtually any means. Dorothy Day continues to challenge us with the memory that the Cross and not the Sword is the essential symbol of our faith.

PRAY  
FOR  
PEACE  
IN OUR  
WORLD!

(FOR  
TAB)

THANK  
YOU FOR  
YOUR  
SUPPORT!

**Second Annual  
Volunteer and Donor  
Appreciation Dinner  
Oktoberfest Feast and  
Soupline Olympics  
Sunday, October 16, 2005  
3 - 6 p.m., call 647-0728 to RSVP  
by Oct. 11 and for location.**

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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

### PLEASE JOIN US:

- Wed., Fri., Sat., 6:00 a.m.:** Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.
  - Wednesday-Saturday, 6:30 a.m.:** Breakfast served at G & McWilliams street to the poor and homeless.
  - Last Saturday of month; 8:30 a.m.:** Deliver food to homes in need.
  - Wednesday; 8 a.m. -noon:** Hospitality Day, we invite 7 homeless men & women home for showers, to wash clothes, & lunch.
  - Thursday; 8 a.m. - 9 a.m.:** Vigil for Peace in front of Federal Courthouse, 333 S. Las Vegas Blvd.
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