Can you think of a word that describes a person who refused to pay taxes, didn't salute the flag, never voted, went to prison time and again for protests against war and social injustice? Who spoke in a plain and often rude way about our “way of life”? Who complained that the Church wasn’t paying enough attention to its own teaching and on occasion compared some of its pastors to blowfish and sharks? A troublemaker.

And there you have Dorothy Day in two words: saint and troublemaker. If Dorothy Day is ever canonized, the record of who she was, what she was like and how she did any good is not complete, as was a parish without what might be called a “Christ house.” For Dorothy, hospitality is simply practicing God’s hospitality to us with those around us. Christ ministry that led up to his execution. The one place in the New Testament where we hear him speaking in detail about who is saved and who isn’t occurs in the 25th chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel: “Welcome into the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of all ages, because I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a naked and you clothed me, I was homeless and you took me in, I was sick and you cared for me, I was in prison and you came to be with me. I tell you solemnly that what you did to the least person you did to me … and what you failed to do for the least person, you failed to do for me.”

It’s an astonishing text. It turns out that we are not saved because we excelled at theology or were amazingly clever or received great honors or wrote books about sanctity or never got in trouble or never made mistakes. We are saved because we attempted to be channels of God’s love and mercy. Period. It is a life inspired by the Gospel and sustained by the sacraments, the church calendar with its parade of saints, the rhythm of feasts and fasts. The corporal works of mercy — each of them an aspect of hospitality — were at the center of Dorothy’s life and the basis of the Catholic Worker movement. In addition there was also the day-after-day practice of what the Catholic Church calls the spiritual works of mercy: admonishing the sinner, instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving all injuries, praying for the living and the dead.

Dorothy helped us understand that a life of hospitality has many levels: there is hunger not only for food but also for faith, not only for a place at the table but also for a real welcome, not only for assistance but also for listening, not only words said as if recited from a script but kind words. There is not only hospitality of the door but also hospitality of the face and heart. Hospitality of the heart transforms the way we see people and how we respond to them. Their needs become important to us.

If Dorothy was one of the freest, least fear-driven persons I’ve ever known, she was also one of the most disciplined. This was most notable in her religious life. Whether traveling or at home, it was a rare day when Dorothy didn’t go to Mass, while on Saturday evenings she went to confession. Sacramental life was the bedrock of her existence. She never obliged anyone to follow her example, but God knows she gave an example. When I think of her, the first image that comes to mind is Dorothy on her knees praying before the Blessed Sacrament either in the chapel at the farm or in one of several urban parish churches near the Catholic Worker. One day, looking into the Bible and Missal she had left behind when she was summoned for an emergency phone call, I found long lists of people, living and dead, whom she prayed for daily. She had a special list of people who had committed suicide.

Occasionally she spoke about the importance of prayer: “We feed the hungry, yes,” she once explained. “We try to shelter the homeless and give them clothes, but there is strong faith at work. We pray. If an outsider who comes to visit us doesn’t pay attention to our praying and what that means, then he’ll miss the whole point.”

She was attentive to fast days and fast seasons. It was in that connection she told me a story about prayer. For many years, she said, she had been a heavy smoker. Her day began with lighting up a cigarette. Her big sacrifice every Lent was giving up smoking, but having to get by without a cigarette made her increasingly irritable as the days passed, until the rest of the community was praying with fervor that she would resume smoking. One year, as Lent approached, the priest who ordinarily heard her confessions told her not to give up cigarettes as usual but instead to pray daily, “Dear God, help me stop smoking.”

She used that prayer for several years without it having any impact on her addiction. Then one morning she woke up, reached for a cigarette, and realized she didn’t want it — and never smoked another. Moral? God answers prayers but one often has to be persistent.

One of the miracles of Dorothy’s life is that she remained part of what was often a conflict.

by Jim Forrest

Dorothy Day: Saint and Troublemaker

Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa
Please as she was when the Liturgy was translated into English, she didn’t take kindly to smudging the border between the sacred and mundane. When a priest close to the community used a coffee cup for a chalice at a Mass celebrated in the soup kitchen on First Street, she afterward took the cup, kissed it, and buried it in the back yard. It was no longer suited for coffee — it had held the Blood of Christ. I learned more about the Eucharist that day than I had from any book or sermon. It was a learning experience for the priest as well — thereafter he used a chalice.

Perhaps Dorothy Day’s main achievement is that she taught us the “Little Way” of love. It was chiefly through the writings of St. Therese of Lisieux that Dorothy had been drawn to the “Little Way.” No term, in her mind, better described the ideal Christian way of doing things. As she once put it, “Paper work, cleaning the house, dealing with the innumerable visitors who come all through the day, answering the phone, keeping patience and acting intelligently, which is to find some meaning in all that happens — these things, too, are the works of peace, and often seem like a very little way.”

“It is the living from day to day,” Dorothy remarked, “taking no thought for the morrow, seeing Christ in all who come to us, and trying literally to follow the Gospel that resulted in this way.”

She died 33 years ago but it seems more and more people are aware of her. This past Ash Wednesday, preaching in St. Peter’s Basilica, Pope Benedict described Dorothy Day as “a model of conversion.” Meeting a few days ago with Cardinal Dolan, he spoke of her as “a saint for our times.”

Writing in The Catholic Worker some years ago, one of her grandchildren, Kate Hennessy, talked of the impact on her own life of her remarkable grandmother: “To have known Dorothy means spending the rest of your life of doing things. As she once put it, ‘Paper work, cleaning the house, dealing with the innumerable visitors who come all through the day, answering the phone, keeping patience and acting intelligently, which is to find some meaning in all that happens—these things, too, are the works of peace, and often seem like a very little way’.

“I am one of the many whose foundations were shaken. I too am still wondering what hit me.”

This article is edited from a speech on June 8, 2013 for the Portsmouth Institute at Portsmouth Abbey in Rhode Island. Jim Forrest is the author of the book on the life of Dorothy Day: “Love is the Measure.”

PLEASING JOIN US:
(CLOSED AUGUST 7 - 17, 2013)
Wednesday-Saturday*, 6:00 a.m.:
Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.

Wednesday-Saturday*, 6:30 a.m.:
Breakfast served to the poor & homeless.

Wednesday, 8:00 a.m - 2:00 p.m.: Hospitality Day, we invite 20 homeless men home for showers, to wash clothes, and to have a great lunch.

Thursday, 9:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.: Vigil for Peace in front of Federal Court-house, 333 Las Vegas Blvd. S.

Thursday, 10:30 a.m.:
Soup kitchen dedicated to homeless.

Third Saturday of month, 8:00 a.m.:
Deliver food boxes to homes in need.

Websites: www.lvcw.org
www.catholicworker.org

Dear Gary and Julia,
I have tried a new commitment for Lent this year and you are a part of it. It is time for me to reach out to those who have helped God make an impact on my life. Both of you certainly have done that. It became clear to me today that you are the ones I need to connect to.

As you may know, I am still in Belize. I’ve been here for a little over three years and am open to be here for ten. Today Christ came ambushing down the street with a broomstick for a cane and alcohol throughout his whole system, bearing the name; “Doug.” You see, Doug is a regular who comes to the door looking for me to give him food because he is hungry. To be honest, I often feel an internal grumbling, an anxiety when I see him come down the street. Many times I feel like turning the other way. Then, those feelings bring about my memories of volunteering at the Catholic Worker.

This afternoon, after giving Doug a bowl of rice with stewed beans, he looked up to me and asked me to pray over him. Of course I did. He is lonely and addicted. He is lost and needs to be numb. As I prayed over him I put my hand on his shoulder. Intellectually I was providing him touch. In reality, I was able to be touched by him, through my hands. I’m not sure who was offering the prayer.

Anyway, both of you have taught and continue to teach me how to be with Christ. You have introduced me to our sister Dorothy Day. I am forever grateful. I often reflect on the first time I ever went to the soup line back in 1998. I was terrified. I volunteered to pour the coffee because I didn’t have to look up. It took me a few weeks before I would even say “Good Morning” to those who served me with their presence.

What am I getting at here? I believe and know that through the work Christ blesses unto you, I was able to find my vocation to serve. Being on the soup line has given me the courage to be outside of the country. It has given me the courage to make a stand and commit my life as a Viatorian. All of this connects me to you in ways that are not necessarily tangible, or in my daily thoughts. It is a deeper soul-connection. May you know that I hold you deep in my heart as you continue the good work God has placed in your being. When you have your hard days seek my heart, and I will seek yours. Thank you for giving your hearts like a book of Gospels for all to see and imitate. I look forward to a graced moment when we can reconnect face-to-face and heart-to-heart.

Love, John Eustice

From left: Ryan Hall, Patrick "Q" Quilao, Pauline Villapando, John Eustice in 2000.

February 18, 2013

LETTERS:

FROM RHODE ISLAND