

MANN *A in the wilderness*

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Dorothy Day: Saint and Troublemaker

by Jim Forrest

Can you think of a word that describes a person who devoted much of her life to being with people many of us cross the street to avoid? Who for half a century did her best to make sure they didn't go hungry or freeze on winter nights? Who went to Mass every day until her legs couldn't take her that far, at which point communion was brought to her? Who prayed every day for friend and enemy alike and whose prayers, some are convinced, had miraculous results? Who went to confession every week? Who was devoted to the rosary? Who lived in community with the down-and-out for nearly half-a-century? Whose main goal in life was to follow Christ and to see him in the people around her?

A saint.

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 what she did is too complete and accessible for her to be hidden in wedding-cake icing. She will be the patron saint not only of homeless people and those who try to assist them but also of people who lose their temper. She may have been a saint, but Dorothy Day was not without rough edges.

To someone who told her she was too hot-headed, she replied, "I hold more temper in one minute than you will hold in your entire life." To a college student who asked a sarcastic question about her recipe for soup, she responded, "You cut the vegetables until your fingers bleed." To a journalist who told her it was the first time he had interviewed a saint, she replied, "Don't call me a saint — I don't want to be dismissed that easily."

On the other hand, as she said time and again, "We are all called to be saints." She didn't believe saints had different DNA than anyone else. Sanctity is merely loving God and your neighbor. It's not that hard. Sanctity is something ordinary. The scandal is not being a saint.

Her basic message was stunningly simple: we are called by God to love one another as He loves us. Love one another. No exceptions.

One of the ways we love one another is by practicing hospitality. For Dorothy a house without what she called a "Christ room" was incomplete, 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

is in the stranger, in the person who has nowhere to go and no one to welcome him. "Those who cannot see the face of Christ in the poor are atheists indeed," she often said. Her words were similar to those of St. John Chrysostom, one of the great voices of Christianity in the fourth century: "If you fail to recognize Christ in the beggar outside the church, you will not find him in the chalice."

Judging by the synoptic Gospels, the Last Judgment was not a topic Christ often addressed during the several years of public



Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa

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 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 (continued on next page)

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torn community for nearly half a century. Still more remarkable, she remained a person of hope and gratitude to the end. She often spoke of “the duty of hope.”

Even though the Archdiocese of New York launched a process in Rome for the formal recognition of Dorothy as a saint, and Rome has since given her the title Servant of God Dorothy Day, Dorothy was and remains a controversial lady. There was hardly anything she did which didn't attract criticism and the criticism still lingers. There is something about her to both challenge and irritate anyone who considers her life, witness and writings. Even hospitality scandalizes some people. We were blamed for making people worse, not better, because we were doing nothing to “reform them.” A social worker asked Dorothy one day how long the down-and-out were permitted to stay. “We let them stay forever,” Dorothy answered rather testily. “They live with us, they die with us, and we give them a Christian burial. We pray for them after they are dead. Once they are taken in, they become members of the family. Or rather they always were members of the family. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ.”

What got Dorothy in the most hot water was her social criticism. She pointed out that nationalism was a more powerful force in most people's lives than the Gospel. While she hated every kind of tyranny and never ceased to be thankful for America having taken in so many people fleeing poverty, repression and conscription, she was fierce in her criticism of capitalism and consumerism. She said America had a tendency to treat people like Kleenex — use them, then throw them away.

She had no kind words for war or anything having to do with it — for Dorothy war was simply murder wrapped in flags. She reminded us that the total number of people killed by Jesus and the apostles is zero. Dorothy was convinced Jesus had disarmed all his followers when he said to Peter, “Put away your sword, for whoever lives by the sword will perish by the sword.” A way of life based on hospitality and love, including love of enemies, left no room for killing. You couldn't practice the works of mercy and healing with one hand and the works of violence and destruction with the other, giving drink to the thirsty on Monday and on Tuesday bombing the water works. One must battle evil, as so many saints' lives demonstrate, only by nonviolent means. Even the best of wars is a disaster.

Dorothy was sometimes criticized for being too conservative a Catholic. How could she be so radical about social matters and so conservative about her Church? While she occasionally deplored statements or actions by members of the hierarchy and once picketed the New York chancery office in support of a strike by Catholic grave diggers, she was by no means an opponent of the bishops or someone campaigning for dogmatic changes in the Church. What was needed, she said, wasn't new doctrine but our living the existing doctrine. True, some pastors seemed barely Christian, but one had to aim for their conversion, an event that would not be hastened by berating them but rather by helping them see what their vocation requires. The way to do that was to set an example.

Pleased 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 work.”

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 wondering what hit you. On the one hand, she has given so many of us a home, physically and spiritually; on the other, she has shaken our very foundations.”

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."

PLEASE 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.

*closed on fourth Saturday of month

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.:

50 Bag lunches delivered to homeless.

Third Saturday of month, 8:00 a.m.:

Deliver food boxes to homes in need.

Websites: www.lvcw.org

www.catholicworker.org

LETTERS:



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

February 18, 2013

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 ambling 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*