

Dorothy Day, the Catholic Worker, and the Liturgy

By Patrick Jordan | Volume 4.1 Winter 2018



Fritz Eichenberg, "Christ of the Breadlines," woodcut, 1950.

In the opening lines of *The Other America*, Michael Harrington's classic study of mid-twentieth-century poverty in the United States, the author acknowledges that it was through "Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement that I first came into contact with the terrible reality of involuntary poverty and the magnificent ideal of voluntary poverty." His eye-opening portrait revealed a depth of poverty in the United States that had been largely hidden at the time. Yet it was in fact the "economic underworld of American life," he wrote, "a culture, an institution, a way of life." Harrington had spent two years (1951-52) at the Catholic Worker house near New York City's Bowery. While his study of poverty would take him to the far corners of the land—from inner cities and migrant camps to the forgotten hollers of coal country—Harrington nonetheless wrote that his Catholic Worker experience had been "the one place in the Other America where the poor are actually the sum total of misfits from all the social classes." The end of the line for the Bowery, he noted, "is the hospital and potter's field."¹

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For nearly half a century, the poverty of New York's Bowery was the chosen home and daily experience of Dorothy Day (1897-1980). In 1933, she and Peter Maurin (1877-1949) founded the Catholic Worker

movement, a radical alternative to the poverty-generating culture of American capitalism. As Maurin put it succinctly in one of his “Easy Essays”: “I want a change, and a radical change, from an acquisitive society to a functional society, from a society of go-getters to a society of go-givers.”^[2]

The Catholic Worker’s platform was based on the daily practice of the works of mercy (feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick, visiting the prisoner, burying the dead, and forgiving one’s enemies), all at a personal sacrifice. The aim was to create small communities based on what Maurin called “cult, culture, and cultivation.” The Catholic Worker was not meant to be just another social-service agency, designed to alleviate the privations of the poor. It was a personalist and communitarian movement, inspired and maintained by sharing the poverty of the crucified Christ in the poor. As Day wrote in 1950: “It is our greatest message, to be poor with the poor.”^[3] In fact, she elaborated, “We cannot even see our brother in need without first stripping ourselves.”^[4] Further, the Catholic Worker’s life of voluntary poverty was meant to arouse “indifferent Catholics to the crying need of a return to the spirit of Franciscan poverty and charity.”^[5]

Still, Dorothy Day was never content simply to direct others about what *they* should be doing. First and foremost, she undertook to live these hard teachings herself. “In what does our poverty consist?” she was asked in 1961. “In toilets out of commission in town, dishwashers who wipe their noses on the dish towels, people who are mental cases.”^[6] There was but one means of being able to live in such a challenging environment, year in and year out, fully and humanly. “Without the sacraments of the Church,” Day wrote, “primarily the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper as it is sometimes called, I certainly do not think that I could go on.”^[7]

Because of the economic order, she wrote later during the Vietnam War, our “streets are alive with not just drunk and drug addicts but with the saddest of all victims of our war economy, the ‘insane.’”

From the beginning of their movement, both Maurin and Day were in contact with the Benedictines at St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. At the time, both Abbot Alcuin Deutsch and Dom Virgil Michel were pioneers in the liturgical movement in the United States. Day wrote to Deutsch in 1934: “We have been trying from the start of our work to link up the liturgy with the Church’s social doctrine, realizing that the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ is at the root of both.”^[8] That same year, Virgil Michel requested that the abbot send copies of all the books published by the abbey’s Liturgical Press to the New York Catholic Worker, “to help you [as he wrote to Day] and to spread the work of the liturgical movement.”^[9] The abbot did so, and also instituted an exchange subscription between *Orate Fratres* (later *Worship*), the abbey’s heralded periodical on liturgical matters, and *The Catholic Worker* paper. Both Day and Maurin traveled to Collegeville in those early years, and Virgil Michel in turn visited the Catholic Worker in New York in 1935. His article in *Orate Fratres* that same November (“The Liturgy the Basis of Social Regeneration”) underscored the many concordances his analysis shared with themes in *The Catholic Worker*, particularly the emphasis on societal cooperation rather than competition, and on community rather than individualism—the latter, Michel noted, a hallmark of capitalist societies.^[10] To this, Day boldly added: “It is the present social ‘order’ that brings on wars today,” which is why “it is impossible save by heroic charity to live in the present social order and be Christians.”^[11] Because of the economic order, she wrote later during the Vietnam War, our “streets are

alive with not just drunk and drug addicts but with the saddest of all victims of our war economy, the 'insane.'"^[12]

In her February 1941 "On Pilgrimage" column, Day wrote that "food for the body is not enough. There must be food for the soul. Hence, leaders of the work, as many as we can induce to join us, must go to daily Mass." In a similar vein, reflecting on the renewal of the liturgy instituted by Vatican II, Day wrote "the Mass begins our day; it is our food and drink, our delight, our refreshment, our courage, our light." It enables us, she continued, "literally 'to put on Christ,' as St. Paul said. . . . Only by nourishing ourselves as we have been bidden to do by Christ, by eating His body and drinking His blood, can we become Christ and put on the new man."^[13]

But putting on the new man would entail taking on the suffering of others, for, as Day noted, "our sacraments flow from the fountain of the Cross."^[14] In her copy of Louis Bouyer's *Liturgical Piety*, she had underlined a passage about taking up one's cross. If one hopes to refuse doing harm to others, Bouyer wrote, one "cannot avoid taking the burden of their pain upon himself. But this fact also is what causes the Christian to love the world with the love of Him Who 'so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son.'"^[15]

It was because of the liturgical movement that Day and the Catholic Worker came to emphasize the importance, not only of the Mass, but also of praying throughout the day, including community evening prayer. "It was the liturgy which led us to praying the psalms with the Church," she remembered, "leading us to an understanding joy in prayer."^[16] Without prayer, she repeated in 1969, "we could not continue. As breath is to the body, prayer is to the soul."^[17]

Dorothy Day began her own day by savoring a cup of coffee and reciting the psalms. (When traveling, she carried a jar of instant coffee, which allowed her to rise early without troubling her hosts: all she had to do was add tap water.) "Often," she remarked, "I find that I have started praying before I am really awake, just as I fall asleep praying Lord Jesus, have mercy on us sinners, over and over."^[18] She valued repetitious prayer, particularly the rosary and the psalms. "Strange how repetition, reading the [psalms] each day, instead of becoming stale and repetitious, becomes even fresher: verses stand out, a light glows on what was obscure and hidden. There is an increase in understanding."^[19]

For Day, faith (and prayer) came first, which in turn led to an increase in knowledge and understanding. Her prayer was neither fuzzy nor ethereal, but concrete and sacramental: "Woke this morning with the feeling very strong—I belong to someone to whom I owe devotion. Recalled early love and that joyous sense of being not on my own, but belonging to someone who loved me completely."^[20] Ten years after her conversion she had written that "one cannot properly be said to understand the love of God without understanding the deepest fleshly as well as spiritual love between man and woman. The two should go hand in hand. You cannot separate the soul from the body."^[21] The following year she recounted that, "The other day at the Communion rail it was as though the Lord held my shoulder tightly in his clasp."^[22] Similarly, writing in 1970 for the *Third Hour*, an ecumenical journal, she described prayer as "the clasp of the hand, the joy of keen delight in the consciousness of the Other. Indeed, it is like falling in love."^[23]

It should be clear by now that Dorothy Day had a highly attuned aesthetic sense, one that included an appreciation of both physical and natural beauty. This sense extended to the arts and music, particularly to orchestral works and opera. In the liturgy, she appreciated the sung psalms of Joseph Gelineau and invited the composer Mary Lou Williams to present her jazz Mass at a Catholic Worker

peace conference. She loved the 10:30 Puerto Rican Mass at her local parish, she wrote in 1979, the year before she died, because “the entire congregation sings so heartily.”^[24] She was particularly appreciative that the Vatican Council had “broken down barriers between the clergy and the laity.”^[25]

In 1967, Day attended the Congress on the Laity in Rome, where she was chosen to be one of two American representatives (the other being astronaut James McDivitt) to receive Communion from Pope Paul VI. It was not a particularly prayerful experience for her. (She and the other 150 communicants chosen to approach the pope had been herded into a special staging area prior to the Mass.) But, she recounted, when she did receive the Eucharist, she felt happy to be “representing the men from our soup line, the pickets from Delano and all of Cesar Chavez’s fellow workers, and the little babies and small children of the agricultural workers who are present at our day-care center at our farm at Tivoli.”^[26]

Three years later, Day and her friend Eileen Egan of Catholic Relief Services were flying to Australia, where Day was to address a Vietnam Moratorium rally at Sydney’s Town Hall. As they crossed the International Dateline, Egan remarked to Day that fortuitously they had missed the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. “Don’t rejoice,” Day told Egan. “We are missing the feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord.”^[27]

At the Eucharistic Congress held in Philadelphia in 1976, however, Day did not miss the feast—or the anniversary. That Hiroshima Day she gave a major address to 8,000 attendees at a session titled “Women and the Eucharist.” (As it happened, downtown at the cathedral, Mass was simultaneously being offered for the armed forces.) In her remarks, Day said that she had probably been asked to speak at the assembly because she was associated with “breadlines, with hungry men and women, and all the destitute in our big cities.” She then recalled her conversion fifty years before, the gratitude she felt for her daughter Tamar’s birth, and her own subsequent love of the sacraments. The Church, Day said, was her mother and nourisher. It taught her “the crowning love of the life of the Spirit.” She then reminded her listeners that penance must come *before* Communion, “otherwise we partake of the Sacrament unworthily.” Finally, Day pivoted to the most painful part of her address: that on that particular August 6 in Philadelphia, a Mass was being “celebrated” (“how strange to use such a word” in this instance, she said) for the military. Had no one in charge of the Eucharistic Congress remembered the significance of Hiroshima Day? “Why not a Mass for the military on some other day?” she inquired. “I plead,” she concluded, “that we will regard that military Mass, and all other Masses today, as an act of penance, begging God to forgive us . . . for the sin of our country, which we love.”^[28] When she had finished, there was thunderous and prolonged applause.^[29]

At the end of an article she had written for *Commonweal* five years following the bombing of Hiroshima, Day quoted the French author Georges Bernanos on how to maintain hope in the nuclear age: “Every article of Christ’s divine charity is today more precious for your security—for your security, I say—than all the atom bombs in all the stock piles,” Bernanos had written.^[30] It is only by our love—exemplified in the works of mercy, Day noted elsewhere—that we will be judged: a love strengthened and sustained by Scripture and the Eucharist, which in turn have a “strength no power on earth can withstand.”^[31] For Dorothy Day, the life of witness, of poverty, and of prayer were all of a piece. But it was the last—what Peter Maurin called “the primacy of the spiritual”—that enlivened and sustained the others.



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^[1] Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 5, 23, 10, 91.

^[2] Peter Maurin, *The Green Revolution: Easy Essays on Catholic Radicalism*. Second revised edition (Fresno, California: Academy Guild Press, 1961), 63.

^[3] Dorothy Day, *The Duty of Delight: The Diaries of Dorothy Day* [hereafter *Diaries*]. Edited by Robert Ellsberg (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008), 143.

^[4] *The Catholic Worker*, May 1952. See, *By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day* [hereafter *Little*]. Edited by Robert Ellsberg (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 109.

^[5] *The Catholic Worker*, June 1934. In *ibid*, 63.

^[6] *Diaries*, 315, May 24, 1961.

^[7] *Diaries*, 498, November 5, 1970.

^[8] See Brigid O'Shea Merriman, *Searching for Christ: The Spirituality of Dorothy Day* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 77.

^[9] *Ibid*.

^[10] *Ibid*, 80.

^[11] *The Catholic Worker*, May 1972, see *Little*, 314. *Diaries*, 76, February 14, 1944.

^[12] *Diaries*, 581, August 7, 1972.

^[13] "The Council and the Mass," *The Catholic Worker*, September 1962, 2. See Merriman, *op.cit.*, 98.

^[14] See William D. Miller, *All Is Grace: The Spirituality of Dorothy Day* [hereafter *All*] (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1987), 198.

^[15] Louis Bouyer, *Liturgical Piety*. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955), 271.

^[16] Acceptance speech for the National Liturgical Conference Award, August 8, 1968. See *All*, 116.

^[17] *Diaries*, 458, July 9, 1969.

^[18] Ibid., 436, February 4, 1969.

^[19] Ibid., 51, January 17, 1940.

^[20] Ibid., 383, June 16, 1966.

^[21] Ibid, 26, August 6, 1937.

^[22] Ibid, 32, August 10, 1938.

^[23] See, *Little*, 183.

^[24] *Diaries*, 623, January 21, 1979.

^[25] *Little*, 331.

^[26] See, *On Pilgrimage: The Sixties* (New York: Curtis Books, 1972), 139.

^[27] Eileen Egan, "Dorothy Day: Pilgrim of Peace," in *A Revolution of the Heart: Essays on the Catholic Worker*, edited by Patrick G. Coy (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 103.

^[28] *The Catholic Worker*, September 1976, 1, 5.

^[29] Egan, op. cit., 71.

^[30] "The Scandal of the Works of Mercy," *Commonweal*, November 4, 1949. Reprinted in *Hold Nothing Back: Writings by Dorothy Day*, edited by Patrick Jordan (Collegeville, Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 2016), 65.

^[31] *The Catholic Worker*, June 1972, in *Little*, 316.

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