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INTRODUCTION

Erin Brigham

It seems appropriate that we begin *The Lane Center Series* with a volume on Dorothy Day, a woman who embodies the Catholic social tradition and demonstrates its relevance in the church, academy, and society. The authenticity of Day’s integration of faith and social justice allows her to speak to multiple audiences—devout Catholics, non-religious activists, scholars and students. Dorothy Day (1897-1980) read the signs of the times during her own life and responded in light of her faith—co-founding the Catholic Worker, advocating for peace and economic justice, and attending to the immediate needs of the most vulnerable in her community. As we work in the Joan and Ralph Lane Center for Catholic Studies and Social Thought to address contemporary social issues through the lens of the Catholic social tradition, Day serves as a model and inspiration.

This collection of essays emerged out of the conference, *Dorothy Day: A Life and Legacy* organized by the Lane Center on November 9th, 2013 at the University of San Francisco. In light of the US Catholic Bishops’ move to advance the cause of her canonization, the Lane Center wanted to create a conversation about this remarkable woman. Particularly, we wanted to highlight diverse perspectives on the movement toward her canonization from people with insight into her life and legacy. In addition to the authors featured in this volume, the event included voices...
from Catholic Workers in the San Francisco Bay Area who provided insight into the legacy of Dorothy Day in light of their experiences in the Catholic Worker community. The Lane Center also collaborated with USF Professor Eric Hongisto and students from his fall 2013 Mural Painting class, who created a large portrait of Dorothy Day and spoke about her significance at the conference. The mural, which now hangs in the Lane Center, memorializes Day’s life and legacy through art.

The portrait of Day captured in the mural—a woman strong in faith and conviction—emerges in these essays as well. Robert Ellsberg’s keynote address, “Dorothy Day: A Radical Saint” offers a personal reflection on Day’s life from a man who knew her. Ellsberg, editor-in-chief of Orbis Press, presents her as a radical activist, brilliant writer, and a faithful Catholic. USF professors Andrei Antokhin, Kimberly Conner, and Stephen Zunes offer interdisciplinary perspectives on different aspects of Day’s life. Antokhin explores Day’s approach to Catholicism through her devotion to St. Thérèse of Lisieux while Conner highlights Day’s devotion to great works of literature. Finally, Zunes presents Day’s influential approach to non-violence and identifies its significance today. These essays illuminate just some of the reasons why people from diverse backgrounds look up to Dorothy Day as a Catholic woman, a leader, an activist, and for many, a saint.

Erin Brigham
Editor, The Lane Center Series Volume I

DOROTHY DAY: A RADICAL SAINT

Robert Ellsberg

It is a privilege to speak here today, surrounded by so many people drawn to the life and mission of Dorothy Day, including scholars of her work, and perhaps people who knew her longer and better than I.

Although Dorothy was born over a century ago and died at the age of 83, I do not picture her as old. She retained until the end of her life a freshness and spirit of adventure, and were she here today she would no doubt urge us not to focus on her but to use our energies to address the critical challenges of the day, to launch a “revolution of the heart,” to create the kind of society where it is “easier to be good.”

Dorothy was certainly a personal writer. In all her writings it would be hard to find a single article on any abstract idea or principle that wasn’t rooted in her own personal experience. And yet she didn’t welcome personal attention. Though she was offered many honorary degrees, she consistently declined them, citing her respect for “Holy Wisdom.” As she once told me, “Too much praise makes you feel you must be doing something terribly wrong.”

Robert Ellsberg is the Publisher of Orbis Books. He was part of the Catholic Worker community during the last five years of Dorothy Day’s life (1975-80) and served for two years as managing editor of the Catholic Worker newspaper. He has edited Dorothy Day: Selected Writings, The Duty of Delight: The Diaries of Dorothy Day, and All the Way to Heaven: Selected Letters of Dorothy Day. He has written several award-winning books including All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Times, and writes a daily column on saints for “Give Us This Day.” He can be contacted at rellsberg@maryknoll.org.
Such praise, in any case, was a departure from the steady criticism she endured through most of her life. It began with the radical friends who accused her, after her conversion, of defecting to the side of the oppressor. Then came the critics who accused her of being a Communist agent, of seeking to undermine the church from within. Such criticism didn’t bother her much. She liked to say that it was the complacency of Christians, in her youth, that had made her love the Communists, and it was the Communists, in turn, with their love for the poor, who had finally led her to Christ.

In the face of her consistent pacifist witness she was charged with being weak, irrelevant, foolish. She embraced these charges: “We confess to being foolish and wish that we were more so.”

And then there was the criticism from within the Catholic Worker family—the eternal battle between the scholar and the worker, the constant griping and grumbling within a community made up, as she put it, of “the poor, the abandoned, the sick, the crazed, and the solitary human beings whom Christ so loved and in whom I see, with a terrible anguish, the body of this death.” There were those who felt she was a dictator and those who felt she was not dictator enough. On the other hand, many people also called her a saint: that was another matter. “Don’t call me a saint,” she was quoted as saying. “I don’t want to be dismissed that easily.” This was not because she was cynical about sainthood—far from it. What Dorothy opposed—and what saint wouldn’t?—was being put on a pedestal, fitted to some pre-conceived model of holiness that would strip her of her humanity and, at the same time, obscure the radical challenge of the gospel.

And yet today the church has initiated the cause for her canonization. I have supported that cause, above all because I believe she embodied the type of holiness most necessary for our time—a holiness that is not concerned with its own purity or perfection, but empties itself to confront the burning issues of our time: poverty, violence, the desecration of nature, the meaning of work, the yearning for community, freedom, and peace.

Of course, if she is eventually named Saint Dorothy, she will be a saint with an unusual backstory—having renounced Christianity in her youth and spent her early years as a journalist and activist for left-wing causes. Among canonized saints, she would probably be unique for having been twice arrested, once in Washington for picketing for women’s suffrage, and later in Chicago, where she was picked up on a morals charge when police raided an IWW house where she was staying. Her friends were anarchists and communists and literary bohemians. In the aftermath of an unhappy love affair she had an abortion. Hardly the standard fare of Butler’s *Lives*. And yet there was always in Dorothy some yearning for the transcendent. Like a character in Dostoevsky, she observed, “All my life I have been haunted by God.”

Yet even the circumstances of her conversion are unusual, prompted by the experience of pregnancy and giving birth. This occurred while she was living in Staten Island with a man she deeply loved, Forster Batterham. After years of strife and unhappiness, this experience of love and “natural happiness” turned her heart to the possibility of “a greater happiness to be obtained from life” than any she had ever known. When she became pregnant, she found herself wishing to have her child baptized in the Catholic Church, a step she would follow, though it meant a wrenching separation from Forster, who would have nothing to do with marriage. It also seemed, initially, to involve a painful betrayal of the working class. She believed the Catholic Church was the church of the poor. But to her radical friends—and sadly, to her as well—it seemed more like a friend of the rich, the ultimate defender of the status quo.

She was literally at a loss about how to reconcile her faith and her loyalty to the cause of the oppressed. After her baptism in 1927 she spent the next five years in a kind of wilderness, praying to find some way of reconciling her two loves.

The seeds of this dilemma went back much further. Even as a child Dorothy recognized the need for a new type of saint. In her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, she described her first childhood encounter with the lives of the saints, recalling how her heart was stirred by 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 the 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. The search for this path took her in December 1932 to Washington to cover a Hunger March of the Unemployed. As she watched the ragged parade of men, led by many of her old Communist comrades, she asked herself why Catholics weren’t leading such a march. This question led her on December 8—feast of the Immaculate Conception—to the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception where she offered up a prayer with tears anguish 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 soul, this world and the next.”

She believed her subsequent meeting with Peter Maurin—by some accounts he was waiting for her at her apartment when she returned to New York—was the
answer to this prayer. And in the Catholic Worker movement that they started she found the synthesis that she had been seeking.

Peter Maurin was a French immigrant of peasant origins, 20 years her senior, who had spent many years tramping around the country, devising a philosophy aimed at unleashing the radical social message of the gospels. Good peasant that he was, he liked the word radical, which means going to the roots. He wanted to call the paper the Catholic Radical—but in this, and in most cases, Dorothy prevailed. She wanted to style the paper as a Catholic answer to the communist Daily Worker. And so it became the Catholic Worker.

I think Peter Maurin’s major contribution was simply to give Dorothy “permission” to launch her own movement. Drawing on the lives of the saints he showed that it was not necessary to wait for anyone to authorize or sponsor the way of discipleship. The saints began immediately with whatever means were at hand. If God blessed their venture the means would arrive.

For Dorothy this meant launching her newspaper on May 1, 1933, with no money; calling it “The Catholic Worker” without seeking prior permission from the bishop or any other authority; daring to offer a “Catholic” perspective on social issues of the day that was far in advance of contemporary social teaching.

Rather than just agitate about social injustice, the CW wrote about what society would look like if we truly organized ourselves by values of solidarity, community, love, human dignity—instead of selfishness and greed. What would the world look like if we truly recognized Christ in our neighbors? Dorothy and Peter believed it was not enough to write about these things—we have to live them out. This lead to houses of hospitality for the practice of the works of mercy. At the same time, it was not enough to care for the poor; it was necessary to challenge, protest, and resist the structures that caused poverty and the need for charity—particularly the diversion of resources to militarism.

Many people—conservatives and liberals alike—were 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.

The basis of the synthesis she had been seeking was to be found in the central doctrine of her faith: the Incarnation. Her subsequent mission was rooted in the radical social implications of this doctrine: that God had entered our humanity 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 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.”

The social implications of this incarnational or sacramental sensibility were obviously expressed in her response to poverty but they were expressed in a far more controversial way in her response to war. If Christ was present in the disguise of our neighbor, this was also true in his most terrible disguise—in the face of the one who is called our enemy.

It was Dorothy’s conviction that Jesus had come to offer a radical new definition of love as the ultimate law of our lives. “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.” It was a new commandment, for the love exemplified on the cross extended beyond friends and those who were on our side. Jesus had left us a definition of nonviolence, not only in his words, but in the manner of his life. By his death and resurrection he had converted the cross, a sign of defeat, into a symbol of life and hope. And he had come to substitute the cross for the sword or the bomb as an effective instrument of liberation and justice.

Over the years the Catholic Worker sponsored numerous protests against the dangers of nuclear war. For her own refusal to cooperate with New York City’s compulsory civil defense drills, Dorothy served several jail terms. Most Catholic leaders of the time probably thought this was a foolish gesture. This was at a time when many supposedly sane voices believed that if we killed 100 million people in the Soviet Union and only lost 50 million that would be a pretty successful outcome. In relation to such thinking, Dorothy did not mind being considered foolish, impractical, or even crazy.

She did not expect great things to happen overnight. She knew the slow pace by which change and new life comes. It was, in the phrase she repeated often, “by little and by little” that we were saved.

I recently spent a number of years editing Dorothy Day’s personal papers, including her diaries The Duty of Delight, and more recently her letters, All the Way to Heaven. The phrase, “the duty of delight,” was a favorite of Dorothy’s. She found it in a letter by the English critic John Ruskin. It recurs throughout her diaries so often as to become a kind of mantra, often after a recital of drudgery or disappointment. It served as a reminder to find God in all things—the sorrows of daily life and the moments of joy, both of which she experienced in abundance.
In the annals of the saints, Dorothy's diaries offer something unusual—an opportunity to follow, almost day by day, in the footsteps of a holy person. Through these writings we can trace the movements of her spirit and her quest for God. We can see her praying for wisdom and courage in meeting the challenges of her day. But we also join her as she watches television, devours mystery novels, goes to the movies, plays with her grandchildren, and listens to the Saturday radio broadcasts of the opera.

As familiar as I thought I was with Dorothy's life and writings, working with both her diaries and her letters revealed dimensions of her humanity that came as a revelation. In her letters the most astonishing discovery were the three dozen letters to Forster Batterham, the father of her daughter, the man she liked to call her "common-law husband." These letters date from the beginning of their romance in 1925 until the eve of her meeting with Peter Maurin in 1932. These letters, filled with passion and even erotic energy, reflect the depth of her love for Forster. "I think of you much and dream of you every night," she writes him, "and if my dreams could affect you over long distance, I am sure they would keep you awake."

Or this: "My desire for you is a painful rather than pleasurable emotion. It is a ravishing hunger which makes me want you more than anything in the world and makes me feel as though I could barely exist until I saw you again."

When she felt compelled to become a Catholic and Forster refused to get married, she separated from him. In *The Long Loneliness* she says it was literally a choice between God and man. But as the letters demonstrate, the break was not nearly as clear-cut as that. For five years she desperately hoped and prayed that Forster would change his mind and consent to marry her. It is extraordinary to realize on the one hand how much Dorothy's vocation depended on Forster's commitment to his own principles. If it had been up to Dorothy she would have married Forster, raised a houseful of children, and continued writing novels and plays. There would have been no Catholic Worker. God works in mysterious ways.

At the same time the story dramatizes the deep sacrifice that lay at the basis of Dorothy's vocation. It was the foundation for a lifetime of courage, perseverance, and dedication. It marked her deep sense of the heroic demands of faith. It also accounted for the high standards to which she held her friends and associates.

Dorothy Day was a witness or participant in many of the great social and ecclesial movements of her day. She traveled to Cuba after the Revolution. She fasted in Rome during Vatican II; she was shot at by the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia; she was arrested at 75 while picketing in California with the United Farmworkers. But her diaries are a reminder that most of any life is occupied with ordinary activities and pursuits. Inspired by her favorite saint, Thérèse of Lisieux, Dorothy was convinced that ordinary life was actually the true arena for holiness. Her spirituality was focused on the effort to practice forgiveness, charity, and patience with those closest at hand.

Here the title, *The Duty of Delight*, really summarizes her approach to life. She believed that delight, like love, is a matter of discipline, a matter of the will. It is one thing to feel delight when things are delightful. It is one thing to love people who are loveable. But the heart of the gospel is adding love, even where there is no love. Loving the person beside us—even if that person is disagreeable. If you will to love someone, if you will to see Christ in them, you can do it—so she believed. That didn't mean it was any easier for Dorothy than for the rest of us. But it was the exercise of charity in these small ways that equipped her for the extraordinary and heroic actions she performed on a wider stage.

The Diaries offer a frank and candid picture of the strain and stress of Catholic Worker life—the overwhelming demands on Dorothy's time and attention, the rebukes and resentments she faced from those in her own community, the demands of leadership. "I fail people daily," she wrote. "God help me, when they come to me for aid and sympathy. There are too many of them, whichever way I turn. It is not that I can do anything. I must always disappoint them and arouse their bitterness, especially when it is material things they want. But I deny them the Christ in me when I do not show them tenderness, love. God forgive me, and make up to them for it."

Often she refers to her temptation to simply walk away from the Catholic Worker: "The opposition to the work, the idea that I did not understand or interpret Peter Maurin correctly. . . There has been many an occasion when I never wanted to see a CW again." But then, she adds: "Some such thought as that of St. John of the Cross would come, 'Where there is no love, put love, and you will find love,' and makes all right. When it comes down to it, even on the natural plane, it is much happier and more enlivening to love than to be loved."

She reacted strongly against the loose sexual mores of the 1960s counter-culture, and resisted their intrusion at the Worker. At the same time, the memory of her own youthful struggles made her particularly sensitive to the searching and sufferings of youth. To a young woman in distress she wrote, "Please forgive me for presuming to write you so personally—to intrude on you and your suffering, as I am doing, but I felt I had to—because I have gone through so much of the same suffering as you in the confusion of my youth and my search for love. . . It is a very real agony of our own, wanting human love, fulfillment, and one so easily sees all the imperfections of this love we seek, the inability of others ever to satisfy this need of ours, the constant failure of those nearest and
dearest to understand, to respond.”

In response to the insecurity, the sorrows, and drudgery of life among the “insulted and injured,” she tried always to remember “the duty of delight”: “I was thinking how, as one gets older, we are tempted to sadness, knowing life as it is here on earth, the suffering, the Cross. And how we must overcome it daily, growing in love, and the joy which goes with loving.”

And through her diaries and letters we see her gradually slowing down, adjusting, after a heart attack, to the end of her restless travels. In her youth, she writes, she had received a great “revelation”—that for anyone attuned to the life of the mind, the future held the promise of unending fascination. And now she could observe, “No matter how old I get. ... no matter how feeble, short of breath, incapable of walking more than a few blocks, what with heart murmurs, heart failure, emphysema perhaps, arthritis in feet and knees, with all these symptoms of age and decrepitude, my heart can still leap for joy as I read and suddenly assent to some great truth enunciated by some great mind and heart.”

She kept writing until a few days before her death on November 29, 1980. I think about Dorothy now, all these years later, in these times we are living through, when once again the gospel narrative seems somehow foolish and irrelevant in the face of terrorism, surveillance, and endless war. Once again we confront a situation in which violence is proffered as the only realistic solution to our problems, and national security is invoked to justify virtually any means. We see the growing chasm between rich and poor, so many hungry, so many searching for work; the struggle of immigrants to be treated with dignity; the contempt directed at the poor and unemployed as mere “takers”—while the so-called 1% amass off-shore riches. We see the earth ravaged in a short-term search for resources, at the threat of ruining the ecological foundation of human life. We see homelessness, epidemics of gun violence, the vast growth of the prison system.

Dorothy and Peter Maurin had answers for all these problems—answers they found plainly in the gospels. And once again they raise the question: What would our society look like if it were organized around values of compassion, justice, solidarity, concern for the common good, rather than selfishness, greed, and fear?

No doubt if she were with us today she would be urging us to celebrate the words and witness of Pope Francis and the model of church he has exemplified, in the spirit of his namesake, St. Francis: a church of and for the poor, a church that embraces those on the margins, a church that cries out for peace and the good of creation, a church that exemplifies the spirit of mercy, compassion, and forgiveness.

But the challenge remains for all who honor Dorothy’s memory. For me the fundamental significance of her “cause” rests not just in her own example of holiness but in the way she held up the vocation of holiness as the common calling for all Christians. 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.

She lived out her own vocation in the Catholic Worker movement. But she set an example for all Christians, especially lay people, reminding us that the gospel is meant to be lived, and challenging us to find our own unique way of living out and bearing witness to it in our daily lives.

3 Ibid., 166.
5 Ibid., 14.
6 The Duty of Delight, 174.
7 All the Way to Heaven, 259.
8 Ibid., 397.
9 The Duty of Delight, 310.
10 Ibid., 509.
DOROTHY DAY’S THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX: AD MAJOREM DEI GLORIAM

Andrei Antokhin

Without any doubt Dorothy Day (1897-1980) was one of the most important representatives of Catholic progressive thinking in 20th century America. The founder of the Catholic Worker, she devoted a colossal amount of her personal energy to fighting against various social ills. With all that, Dorothy Day was also a passionate Catholic. Quite an important part of her religious life was her interest in Christian mystics. In this paper, I will explore Dorothy Day’s relation to Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897). In particular, I will pay special attention to how Thérèse of Lisieux’s approach to life, which she describes as the little way, influenced Dorothy Day’s spiritual and social development. This paper will bring into focus the specific nature of a profound admiration that Dorothy Day had for the saint.

Before I proceed to the analysis of Thérèse of Lisieux’s influence on Dorothy Day, let me say a few words first about how I personally relate to both of these remarkable women. I hope this endeavor will allow us to see in a preliminary way what Thérèse of Lisieux and Dorothy Day have in common. Like Dorothy...
Day, I was extensively exposed to the Soviet ideology. For Dorothy Day this exposure was a matter of personal interest, for me this exposure was a fact of my life, since I was born and grew up in the Soviet Union. Like Dorothy Day, I came to accept certain parts of it and to reject some of its other (ugly) parts. Everyone knows what was so nightmarish about the Soviet Union and yet, when I came to the United States, I had a feeling that I emigrated to another nightmare: poor public education, poverty, lack of adequate health care, excessive wealth on a part of its most opulent members, unemployment, recurrent economic crises, racism, wars, and so on. I came to see that, after all, Karl Marx was an excellent diagnostician of current social and political problems. On other hand, as a Christian, I find the idea of a socialist revolution, with its radical consequences and its many innocent victims, to be unacceptable.

How did Dorothy Day figure out how to live a Catholic life and combine it with her social commitments? When, after giving birth to her child in 1925 and making a final conversion to Catholicism, she had a very hard time reconciling her desire for the necessity of social change with her new Christian fervor. Only after she met charismatic and “crazy” Peter Maurin she was able to find a properly Christian way of addressing social injustices. Dorothy Day realized that it is only through *agape*, the Christian notion of love of God and one's neighbor, we can hope to make this world a slightly better place. The concrete steps of *agape* that both Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin promoted may be summarized in a very succinct formula: social justice, yes; any kind of violence, no! And this is, in my opinion, the right formula.

When I first read Thérèse of Lisieux's *Story of a Soul* I was not very much impressed with it. Dorothy Day was not impressed with it either. I found it to be somewhat childish, annoying, and repetitious. I remember how I squirmed when I first read a following sentence from *Story of a Soul*: “You know, Mother, I have always wanted to be a saint.” Only after slowly reading Thérèse several times I realized that this is a work of deep beauty and subtle spirituality. Behind its surface naïveté and excessive sentimentality lie a very unique way of relating oneself to God that Thérèse of Lisieux designates as the little way. Even though something like the little way may sound like a very simple-minded view of things, it is not, in more than one respect. It is a gut-wrenching experience of God that engages one's personality on all levels of one's existence. Nothing, according to the little way is outside of God; everything is about God or even is God. The little way is the most delicate and nuanced way of dealing with God, when everything is metaphysically and ontologically grounded in God. Every encounter with another human, every small and seemingly insignificant event has meaning because it simply does. I would call this spirituality an ultra-condensed spirituality of life. Another breath-taking example of this ultra-condensed spirituality of life can be found in Augustine's *Confessions*, a passionately written self-hagiography that Thérèse of Lisieux most probably relied on to model the story of her life.

According to Thérèse, nothing is mundane for God. Our commitment to love of our neighbor is intricately interwoven with the idea that God is here with us in everything that we do (for better or for worse). This is a heavy and simultaneously light-hearted synthesis of vertical and horizontal dimensions of life and is the most appealing feature of Thérèse’s mysticism. This feature did not escape Dorothy Day’s notice whose own spirituality was informed by it: this mystical approach made her a better, more ethical and more loving human being.

While socially radical and progressive, Dorothy Day in many ways was a very traditionalist Catholic. She regularly attended mass and made regular confessions. She also had a special admiration for many Catholic Saints, many of whom were mystics. What, in particular, she admired about the saints was the fact that their lives were oriented passionately and exclusively to loving God and, in that, they inspired her to imitate them. She firmly believed that it was necessary to change the world to bring it closer to God, and since the saints already knew how to accomplish this, strategizing of one’s life in accordance with what they did was the way to go.

Her favorite saints to imitate were: Francis of Assisi, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Avila, and Thérèse of Lisieux. We may notice that all of these saints were, in one way or another, mystics and we do not usually associate mystics with the socially active agenda. Yet, perhaps we should. Francis of Assisi, who with his emphasis on voluntary poverty, penance, manual labor and pacifism was for Dorothy Day a perfect example of the life of social (you might even call it socialist) involvement. Julian of Norwich, who emphasized God’s unconditional love as the God’s only soteriology (all that we can know about God is God’s love, as Julian discussed in her writings), provided Dorothy Day with an optimistic outlook on things that, to quote Julian herself, professed the idea that “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” From Catherine of Sienna, a saint obsessed with the blood of Christ (whose theology of redemption, in the words of B. McGinn, centers not on incarnation, or embodiment, of Christ, but on the Word’s “emblooding”), Dorothy Day learned about Christ as the Bridge between heaven and earth. She wanted to see Christ/the Bridge in every human person she encountered in her life, particularly in the poor.4 The love of Christ was inseparable for Dorothy Day from the love of one’s neighbor. She discerned the same principle of double love in the works of Teresa of Avila, whom she especially admired for her ability to combine mystical/contemplative prayer with active life. Deep down Dorothy Day most probably even believed that one needed to be a mystic to love one’s
neighbor fully, because only a mystic can speak of the overflowing of God’s love for all humanity. And then, of course, there was Thérèse of Lisieux, a little flower of the little way, the only saint to whom Dorothy Day dedicated the whole book. What was so special about this little flower and her little way that attracted so much of Dorothy Day’s attention and how did she come to embrace this seemingly uncomplicated view as the essence of Christian faith?

But to describe Thérèse of Lisieux’s view as uncomplicated is misleading. Nothing is uncomplicated about the mystics, even though they are just—the mystics, i.e. people who exhibit some kind of eccentricities, experience visions and starve themselves to death. Thérèse of Lisieux was born in 1873 into a very comfortable French bourgeoisie environment. Her family was pious and this fact significantly contributed to her religious development. As a young girl she read the story of Joan of Arc and the saint’s story inspired her to become a great saint herself. On March 9, 1888, after some initial difficulties, at fifteen years and three months, Thérèse entered the Carmelite convent at Lisieux. It is in the monastery Thérèse totally dedicates herself to the spirituality of the little way. In 1894 her sister Pauline, the monastery’s prioress at that time, ordered Thérèse to write down her memories of her early years. This would become the Story of a Soul. In 1896 Thérèse coughed blood, the first sign of tuberculosis that would take her life eighteen months later. She died a terribly painful death in 1897 and her last words were, while gazing at the crucifix: “Oh, I love him…My God, I love you!” She was canonized on May 17, 1925, by Pope Pius XI. In 1997 she was promoted to the status of the Doctor of Church.

Now, let me first quote Thérèse of Lisieux’s last conversation with her mother superior to give us an idea of what she meant by the little way. “It is the way of spiritual childhood, it’s the path of total abandonment and confidence. I would show them the little method I have found so perfectly successful and tell them there is but one thing to do on earth; to cast before Jesus the flowers of little sacrifices.” She is sort of everywhere in this statement in a mantric kind of way. And she is like this in all of her other efforts to define what she means by the little way. She definitely was not a systematic theologian. However, we can discern a certain systematic pattern at work in her life that governed her everyday behavior. If we believe in God we all know in a trivial and a priori way that everything in our lives depends on God. We are certainly familiar with this idea, but do we dwell on it and do we change our lives in any significant way, even if we manage to figure out its exact existential repercussions? In the first place, if everything depends on God, then I am essentially nothing and God is all. Thérèse eagerly accepted this premise: she viewed God as all, and herself as nothing, or little. In the second place, we must also acknowledge that whatever we experience from God, suffering, abuses, joy, anger, death, disease, are the acts of divine providence. But why do we have to experience what we have to experience and what exactly does God wants from us by giving us these experiences? According to Thérèse, we are given these experiences because God wants us to learn valuable lessons from whatever we get from God. The sisters humiliate Thérèse (a splash of dirty water from a careless nun). This is definitely a very unpleasant experience and assuredly not a big deal, but there is a lesson here for Thérèse: she needs to learn how to mortify herself in the eyes of God.

Clearly, for Thérèse, God is a wise and omniscient, even if somewhat ruthless and relentless, teacher, who knows best what to do with us in bringing us closer to God. There is another interesting aspect of this approach to life that is worthy of noticing. It is not just that we learn the lessons; we now try to live our lives according to these lessons. As a result of learning these lessons one becomes more humble, more modest, more loving, more patient, more willing to suffer for the sake of others, more discerning, more committed to God, more mystical, more prayerful and even more communal. These are what she calls the little actions. We develop, grow and mature as personalities living the little way. This is what we certainly witness when we read about Thérèse’s life in her impressive Story of a Soul. To recapitulate, the little way amounts to what might be called a triple hermeneutics of life: God is the source of every minute detail of our lives, there is always a specific lesson to be learned from what God does to us, and there is always a necessity to enrich our lives in accordance with these lessons.

This all seem to be to a certain extent self-apparent, but notice that something curious and unusual going on here. Thérèse knows what she experiences might be considered ugly and problematic and yet according to her at the same time it is not. It is as if her hermeneutics of suspicion changes, or rather fundamentally corrects, a common sense and accepted hermeneutics of the average everydayness. Suffering, humiliation, and even sickness bring Thérèse closer to God. There is something disturbingly unconventional about this. But why should everything be conventional? Death seems to be ugly, but not at all, in Thérèse’s eyes; it is actually beautiful. Yes, beautiful! There is something problematic about an innocent man who accepts his own execution without an iota of resistance, and yet there is something beautiful about that man hanging on the cross. In the eyes of others, it all might seem absurd, and even risky and absurd. Yes, it is absurd, and even risky and absurd, but this is what makes one’s faith real—without any paddling or sugar coating. Soren Kierkegaard described this kind of faith as an unconditional commitment to God on the strength of absurd. Kierkegaard, who never read Thérèse, might have totally understood what the saint was doing with her faith.

This is the love of God in its most ultimate, most courageous and most
intimate form. This is the love of God that abandons itself to God: do with me whatever you want to do with me and I’ll enjoy it and obey it. I would not call this way of dealing with life exactly little. It is rather enormous. It is this aspect of Thérèse of Lisieux’s life that Dorothy Day came greatly to admire. She, as I mentioned, initially had a very negative response the Story of a Soul: “I found it colorless, monotonous, too small in fact for my notice.” And yet later she warmed up to a little flower. She warmed up to her because of the Thérèse’s contemplative attitude towards life: “I cannot express the joy of my soul since these things are experienced but cannot be put into words.” Dorothy Day found in Thérèse of Lisieux a kindred spirit. Thérèse of Lisieux’s little way became for Dorothy Day her little way of living her life (or perhaps it always was). But we might say that this is not Dorothy Day that we are familiar with—an active, indefatigable, and even secular promoter of social justice. This side of Dorothy Day’s personality tends to be somewhat eclipsed by her active side, but her life is permeated with the episodes that testify to her viewing her life as in many ways analogous to Thérèse of Lisieux’s own little way.

“Today we are not contented with little achievements, with small beginnings. We should look to St. Thérèse, the Little Flower, to walk her little way, the way of love,” she wrote in House of Hospitality. Like Thérèse of Lisieux she knew that one couldn’t ignore God when God intervenes in one’s life. When Peter Maurin walked into her life in 1932, “short, stocky man in his mid fifties, as ragged and rugged as any of the marches I had left” he was an answer to her special prayer, “a prayer which came with tears and with anguish, that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor.” He provided her with the little ways of using her talents. She knew from the beginning that implementation of his program of medieval monastic ideals (Houses of hospitality, moving back to land, and establishment of “agronomic universities”) was a sheer impossibility. However, she embraced them.

These new ways of life are based on the fundamental Christian principle of agape or communal love. Thus, the unconditional surrender to these ways made it clear to her that it is only through a thorough and consistent unfolding of agape they can be adequately brought into fruition. She writes that Peter’s program “would become actual, given a people changed in heart and mind, so that they would observe the new commandment of love, or desired to.”

In this case, the little way is identical with nothing more, nothing less than the practice of agape itself.

While working for the Catholic Worker she came across different personalities, each giving her a chance to enrich her grasp of the little way. She did not simply practice the little way; she was interested in making others to become its practitioners. When Robert Coles met Dorothy Day for the first time he found her talking to a drunken woman. While waiting to speak with Dorothy Day, he soon became extremely impatient with the drunken woman and with how much attention she required. Dorothy Day finally noticed his presence, got up, came over to him and asked, “Are you waiting to talk to one of us?”

Here it was, in a single question, an introduction to the little way (how Dostoevskian this little episode is: if only all of us are saved we are saved). As Coles himself writes: “with those three words she had cut through layers of self-importance, a lifetime of bourgeois privilege, and scrape the hard bone of pride: ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.’” The drunken woman was lowly and despicable from the point of view of our superficial self-aggrandizement and superficial moralizing, but not in the eyes of Dorothy Day. To begin with, for Dorothy Day that woman was there because of God. She was there so that some meaningful reality might mystically come into being. This reality was the church, the mystical body of Christ: “One of us,” the church that comprises all of us, the poor, the rich, the Democrats, the Republicans, the Libertarians, George W. Bush, Obama, straight, gay and even the scholars. This little “usness” is what we must do if we are willing to dedicate ourselves to God. This little humbling ecclesial “usness” is our little way to God.

As I mentioned, Thérèse of Lisieux was the only Catholic Saint to whom Dorothy Day dedicated a whole book. From a strictly academic perspective this is a weak work, and Dorothy Day knew that, but then why did she want to write it? This is what she herself says: “My purpose in writing the book in the first place was to reach some of 65, 000 subscribers to the Catholic Worker, many of whom are not Catholic and not even ‘believers,’ to introduce them to a saint or our day…Also I wrote to overcome the sense of futility in Catholics, men, women, and youths, married and single, who feel hopeless and useless, less than dust, ineffectual, washed, powerless.” She wants to convey to these people that their little lives are huge and valuable in the eyes of God. God loves them, and God wants to make, through their little lives, a major impact on other people’s lives. They are not dust! Dorothy Day believed that Thérèse of Lisieux, a little Carmelite nun, was the saint that these people can imitate and pray to in the most desperate moments of their lives. “She was so much like the rest of us in her ordinariness. In her lifetime there are not miracles recounted, she was just good, good as the bread which the Normans bake in huge loaves, and which makes up a large part of their diet.” For Dorothy Day, Thérèse was the saint of the working class: “You [Thérèse] pray for the priests who have many to pray for them. But what about these 50, 000 seamen on strike? Who is praying for them? St. Peter, St. James and John were men of the sea. Pray for these seamen.”
Dorothy Day and Thérèse of Lisieux shared in common their commitment to the little way. They were both little flowers, one is wild and another is passionate and sentimental, growing in the world full of atrocities, injustices and sinful activity. And they both attempted to change this world. While Thérèse of Lisieux attempted to change this world by giving it an example of a most subdued yet profound sanctity, Dorothy Day focused on elimination of poverty, exploitation, wars, and other serious problems. The most fundamental guiding principle of their work was establishment of the kingdom of God, here on earth, and they both dedicated their lives to this goal.

I want to conclude my presentation with another beautiful quote from Dorothy Day that perfectly demonstrates the core of Thérèse of Lisieux’s spirituality and perfectly applies to Dorothy Day herself: “What did she do? She practiced the presence of God and she did all things—all the little things that make up our daily life and contract with others—for His honor and glory.”

Yes, for His honor and glory. Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam!

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2 As a Russian Orthodox Christian, unfortunately, I did not find any Eastern Orthodox saints among her favorites, with a notable exception of the Virgin Mary, known as Theotokos or Mother God among the Orthodox Christians (see, for instance, Brigid O’Shea Merriman, Searching for Christ: The Spirituality of Dorothy Day [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press], 73), but she greatly admired Chekov, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky—three giants of Russian literature, among whom Tolstoy and his novel Resurrection were especially important to her (Ibid., 25-73).


5 Dorothy Day, By Little and By Little (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 200.


7 Thérèse of Lisieux, Story of a Soul, 191.


10 Ibid., 166.

11 Ibid., 171.


13 Ibid.
In Cloudsplitter, Russell Banks’ monumental novel about the abolitionist John Brown, an important scene that establishes the Brown family’s commitment to abolishing slavery occurs when the family assembles to read from a text of slave testimony. As son Owen relates to a presumptive biographer of his father: “There is a particular, important book in our life as a family…. The book is called American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses.” Owen proceeds to describe how his father would initiate reading from the text and pass it around so that everyone in the family could read, reflect, and comment on a portion, suggesting to the biographer that she should read the book “so that you will have a more exact idea of how it was for us.”

In preparing themselves for their public roles as citizens actively engaged in the abolition of slavery, the Brown family practiced a personal form of ethical education advanced by Frederick Douglass in his first autobiography where he...
challenged readers to awaken to the experience of slavery in the most available way possible: "To understand it one must needs experience it; or imagine himself in similar circumstances."7

Dorothy Day advanced a similar form of empathetic reading in 1963 when she wrote Loaves and Fishes to chronicle the Catholic Worker movement and to present "the faces of poverty," to the reading public.4 Her writing in Loaves and Fishes, and other works, moreover, is intimately connected to her reading habits. An avid reader who knew "the importance of a printed story,"5 Day links both when she describes rediscovering the power of a Dostoevsky favorite. The empathetic grammar she acquired as a reader she practiced as a writer, recalling how "simply a little story" can "wring your heart… and you learn that the most downtrodden, humblest man is a man, too, and a brother. I thought as I read those words, "That is why I write."6 For Dorothy Day, literature was both a mirror reflecting reality, and a lamp guiding her towards a life of service.

When Loaves and Fishes appeared, Thomas Merton observed: "Every American Christian should read Dorothy Day's Loaves and Fishes, because it explodes the comfortable myth that we have practically solved the 'problem of poverty' in our affluent society. . . . I hope that those who read her book will be moved by it to serious thought and to some practical action… this is a serious book about matters of life and death, not only for a few people, or for a certain class of people, but for everybody."7 Stanley Vishnewski, one of her biographers, confirms Day's power as a writer to elicit the effect Merton predicted. Describing his first encounter with her writing in The Catholic Worker, he claims: "What I read there on those pages was an intimation of a glorious world to come. To me the words in the paper were an initiation and a challenge to do something…."8

Just as the Brown family ritual of reading about slavery called for a moral response that the family took up (and not always in the pacifist ways practiced by Day), so too was Dorothy Day's actual immersion in the world of God's most vulnerable inspired, in part, by her reading. Day practiced a life of writing and activism supported by the examples of great books she read many times. Biographer Elie describes her as "restless, hungry for the direct experience of life," a restlessness Day herself attributes to reading: "Maybe if I stayed away from books more this restlessness would pass," she told a friend. "I am reading Dostoevski and last night I stayed up late and this morning I had to get up early and I feel that my soul is like lead."9 Forbidden by her father to leave the house alone, she would read day and night: "Dostoevsky, Jack London, Frank Norris, Upton Sinclair, the 'revolutionist' Peter Kropotkin, The Imitation of Christ."10

An early and lifelong reader, Day devoured everything she could acquire, from classic novels to detective stories and in later years she got her novel fix watching Masterpiece Theatre. In a 1942 Catholic Worker essay, Day cites Peter Maurin's advice to study history through Bible history and the history of the church in order to acquire "a philosophy of history, a perspective." During this period of her life, Day identifies other essential perspectives: "My library, as I travel, is made up of missal, Bible, short breviary, the life of Janet Erskine Stuart, her travels and letters, and the last number of Land and Home, Monsignor Ligutti's rural life journal.71

Yet it is novelists who captivated her mind and cultivated her heart and whom she mentions repeatedly as influences. Sharing an aesthetic that is grounded in moral inquiry, her "great loves,"12 include: George Orwell, Charles Dickens, Upton Sinclair, Jack London, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Anton Chekov, Ignacio Silone, and Leo Tolstoy.13 Day's early choice of material was largely determined by the books that her father John Day, a writer and journalist, allowed in their home. John Day considered the classics the only suitable reading material. Day's imagination grew incrementally as she devoured the works of fiction that were available at home but which also opened her eyes to the world of poverty and to the people who fought to survive despite extreme poverty.14 Later during early adulthood her reading expanded and included the work of friends like Eugene O'Neill, whom she admired for his capacity "as a writer to explore and bring to light those tragic deeps of life, the terror of man's fate."15

From among her favorite works, I chose Upton Sinclair's The Jungle to illustrate the influence of her reading. Day's empathetic imagination became explicit after she read The Jungle (1906). When she read this novel, her family lived in Chicago, the setting for Sinclair's novel. While it dealt with the harsh realities of the meat-packing and processing business, Day was captivated by the stories of the characters. After she began to read The Jungle, she changed her previous direction for walking her baby brother to encompass the poor district on the West Side.16 Upton Sinclair had walked the streets of Chicago and used the event of a Lithuanian wedding celebration that he had witnessed as the opening scene of his novel. Day reversed the process when she read The Jungle by picturing its characters as persons she encountered who were living and working in Chicago's poor neighborhoods. Day wanted to see first-hand the conditions of life for those who were poor.

Like the journalist that she would later become, she asked herself: who, what, why where, and when. As she walked, Day was practicing empathetic imagining—developing the characters, hearing their voices, sensing how they lived their daily lives. Day used all her senses as she read Sinclair and walked through poor neighborhoods he described. "Though my only experience of the destitute was in books… the very fact that The Jungle was about Chicago where I lived, whose streets I walked" formed the basis for her knowledge of the plight
of the poor and of workers and "made me feel that from then on my life was to be linked to theirs, their interests were to be mine. I had received a call, a vocation, a direction in my life."17

The Jungle also introduced Day to social theory and systemic institutional problems beyond the immediate poverty of suffering people. The trials of the protagonist, Jurgis, provided an example of the need for labor protection. In The Jungle Day read of stockyards and meat packing plants that, organized for profit, valued speed over worker safety and exposed workers to horrible conditions that made them vulnerable to injury, loss of income, and worse. The novel also offered a solution in the main character, Jurgis's embrace of socialism. Sinclair's view of socialism presents it as more than a system of thought; socialism literally saves Jurgis's life, just as Day's Christian version of socialism would save many lives years later.

Another author Day read was Jack London who also often captured the realism of poverty in his novels. In one particular novel she admired, Martin Eden, we see not just the social conditions that demanded her attention, but the response of a character who shares much with Day herself. Martin Eden is also an autodidact who educated himself as Day did: by reading in the public library. Martin Eden is also like Day in that he tried to make his living as a writer. Although the work of journalists was held in low regard, he possessed an appreciation for beauty as well as a desire to expose injustice. Also like Day he was determined to write about life as he knew it in "its foulness as well as its fairness, its greatness in spite of the slime that infested it."18

It was the Russian novelists, however, who opened her eyes not only to poverty but also to God. Other books she read in her little house on Staten Island during her pregnancy pointed her in the direction of the church: William James's Varieties of Religious Experience, and The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis, Augustinian monk and contemporary of Luther. Yet as described by one of her biographers, the Russian writers to whom she was drawn each struggled with God and put the story into his books, urging readers to carry on the struggle in their own lives. Day read them and accepted the challenge.19 Day writes: "Both Dostoevski and Tolstoi made me cling to a faith in God, and yet I could not endure feeling an alien in it. I felt that my faith had nothing in common with that of the Christians around me..."20 and eventually the "profound spiritual experience," of reading all of Dostoevsky's novels moved her to appreciate God as she saw God in "the young prostitute" in Crime and Punishment who "reads from the New Testament to Raskolnikov, sensing sin more profound than her own."21

Day's connection between reading and discovering God becomes explicit when in an interview later in life, after describing books as her friends and companions and her only possessions, she goes further and describes them as sustenance—both actual and metaphysical: "When I've read a passage from Bread and Wine, or Homage to Catalonia, I think of so many people who can't read at all—what they've missed....I wish I could spend the rest of my life with those people, giving them the bread and wine that is Bread and Wine."22

Poetry, not just narrative, was part of Day's reading repertoire. In From Union Square to Rome, Day describes the comfort literature brings her in jail as she recalls not just the impact of predictable lines from the Psalms but also her encounter with a poem that had a profound effect on her. The Hound of Heaven, "that magnificent poem of Francis Thompson," Day describes as "one of those poems that awakens the soul, recalls to it the fact that God is its destiny."23 The poem was written by a Catholic convert and although antiquated to us now its conceit appealed to Day: that God snaps like a hound at the heels of the would be believer who will be able to outrun the hound of heaven only so long.

In House of Hospitality Day mentions reading often and includes several interesting choices to illustrate what she acquired from her study of books. She mentions encountering a biography of Lenin to explain his transition from revolutionary to dictator as a kind of cautionary tale. She even describes reading papal encyclicals on the subway, admiring them as "the best kind of spiritual reading because they are directed to us now, at the present time, for our present needs." Day especially admired an encyclical of St. Francis De Sales for the story he tells of his heroic use of language against heresy and in support of holy texts.24

In Catholic Worker essays Day describes reading at a more sophisticated and academic level, expanding not just her repertoire of texts but also dignifying her readers by offering them challenging compositions that help bring comfort and spiritual direction, and which encouraged the masses to benefit from reading as she had done. Among those whose influence she cites are several nineteenth century European intellectuals, including Leon Bloy (1846-1971), a French novelist, critic, and fervent Catholic convert who preached spiritual revival through suffering and poverty;25 Baron Von Hugel (1852-1925), a nineteenth century German Catholic convert and Christian apologist from whom she took advice about living to "have interests on different levels to relieve the tension in our lives;"26 and Charles Peguy, a nineteenth century French poet and essayist and devout, if non-practicing, Catholic whom Day especially admired27 because of his use of the parable of the prodigal son to establish God's character as being on the side of the poor.

Day's extraordinary ability to "marry the active with the contemplative"28
and her literary acuity are grounded in her theology. In a 1941 Catholic Worker essay, for example, Day makes a crucial distinction between the contemplative and active life by demonstrating a causal chain from writer to reader to action:

It is not love in the abstract that counts. Men have love for the brotherhood, the workers, the poor, the oppressed—but they have not loved man, they have not loved the least of these. They have not loved 'personally.' It is hard to love. It is the hardest thing in the world, naturally speaking. Have you ever read Tolstoy's Resurrection? He tells of political prisoners in a long prison train, enduring chains and persecution for their love of their brothers, ignoring those same brothers on the long trek to Siberia. It is never the brother right next to us, but brothers in the abstract that are easy to love. 27

Inspired, perhaps, by Maurin's introduction of a personalist theology to the Catholic Worker way of viewing the world, Day had a keen eye for character, whether in a book or in life, as illustrated in her sensitive reading of Tolstoy's protagonists and her own talent as a 'writer of conscience.' 28 In his investigation of her leadership style and why, with Maurin, she was so successful, Robert Coles latches on to a characterization that becomes emblematic of a personalist writer's approach to doing God's will. Day makes herself a minor character in the drama Coles is trying to write and instead insists on Maurin as the hero of their tale, describing him as a "needler," a person who is a leader by proxy. "It's about Peter, and what he did for us." Day tells Coles. "We've got to settle this business of pronouns before we go any further," she insists, invoking her writing chops to defend her analysis of the text of their movement. An astute reader and writer, Day claims: "I try to get us into the details; that's where the truth lies, every novelist knows." Day turns the metaphor of a needler into a pun: just as she and Maurin alerted others to a need and needled them with respect to that necessity, so too does a restless reader respond to the needling of a great book. 29

Sound life advice is often sound narrative advice. In addition to her sensitivity to character, by her own account Day attributed her effectiveness as a writer and a reformer to her careful use of language and tone, too. "It's not only what you say, but how you say it." 30 Further along in her interview with Coles, Day sets forth the principle, also derived from Maurin, that she practiced as a Catholic Worker but also as a writer: do what "wanted doing," she would say. Playing "literary critic," she makes a rare foray into bad taste by way of bad grammar but for reassuringly theological reasons. "Wanted doing," is how Peter Maurin described his work—he did what wanted doing. As a critical reader, Day realized years after Maurin died, that there was more to the expression than they had realized. "Now I can observe the passive voice. I can realize that he was, in two words, making a huge statement to us about what we believed, and also it was a way of getting around us. I mean: he was telling us that we are about something larger than ourselves, that there were things that 'wanted doing'—that God wanted them done." 31

Maurin used other passive voice constructions and while typically the language of cowards and politicians, when Coles asked Day about the repeated use of passive voice constructions she provides a theological, not a grammatical reply: "Here we're trying to be the Lord's servants—He uses us all the time; that's our faith. God is the active voice and humanity; we are trying to be his instruments, that kind of passivity." 32 Yet for Day passivity is never inaction, just as pacifism is not simply refusing to fight; both are choosing how to act, just as Day chose writers who would evoke from her an empathetic response to their experience.

In making a point to a confused journalist who doesn't appreciate the strength behind Day's beliefs, she returns to the principle established by the Brown family and practiced by the Catholic Worker: after being provoked by reading, experience what you read and then write about it, just as Dorothy made the journey from the novel The Jungle to the streets of the South Side of Chicago to the Lower East Side of New York and eventually to the book Loaves and Fishes. Day's attentive read of character led her to realize that the oblivious reporter who was trying to profile her "thought I was pretending to be a dreamy, mystical person who didn't know what she was doing, really… when all the while I know exactly what I was trying to do." Her frustration with his less than serious response to her profession of faith and the ways he cheapened her grace (as we Protestants might say) dissipated after she realized she couldn't find a way to communicate her faith in language. She implored him to interview her in context—to spend some time at the Catholic Worker, insisting that he see what "wanted doing." 33

Reading as doing is how Dorothy Day united a contemplative life with a life of action. Reading was also something that "wanted doing" and it followed a similar trajectory to her doing good works: Set up conditions of deprivation so there are no distractions. Empathetically engage the characters. Walk the streets of the setting. Sniff out the direction of the plot and then when the action has made you so restless for adventure you can't stand it, act: close the book and go out into the world, inspired to create and join a community of souls.

I'd like to conclude by naming one more book that was among those she loved and re-read throughout her life. It is also one of my favorite books. In a lovely coincidence Dorothy Day especially admired Dorthea Ladislaw of George Eliot's Middlemarch. 34 Both were strong, well-read women who chose love over...
money, tended to the poor, and wished not to be remembered as saints; rather they wished to be remembered like the countless guests Dorothy served in her Houses of Hospitality. Eliot describes Dorthea’s fate in these elegant concluding lines of the novel that illustrate the loaves and fishes effect of a life of a restless and empathetic reader:

“But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

2 Ibid.
6 Elie, The Life you Save, 344-5.
7 Ibid., 349.
9 Elie, The Life you Save, 14-5.
10 Ibid., 15.
11 Day, Meditations, 73.
12 Coles, Lives of Moral Leadership, 144.
13 Day appreciated so deeply power of novel tried she tried to suppress the distribution and reprinting of her only work of fiction, The Eleventh Virgin, published in 1924, which seems to have been written to exorcise her own demons following an abortion. Her anxiety persisted into the fifties when Caroline Gordon was about to publish The Malefactors, a novel that includes a character modeled after Day as “holy seductress with a blasphemous past.” Day was successful in persuading the author to change details about the character and to remove Gordon's dedication of the novel to Day (Elie, The Life you Save, 238).
15 Elie, The Life you Save, 280.
17 Ibid., 37.
19 Elie, The Life you Save, 16.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 17.
22 Ibid., 435.
23 Day, Meditations, 8-9.
24 Ibid., 28.
26 Ibid., 51.
27 Ibid., 50.
29 Day, Meditations, 78.
31 Ibid., 124.
32 Ibid., 128.
33 Ibid., 125.
34 Ibid., 128.
35 Ibid., 130.
36 Ibid., 134.
DOROTHY DAY’S
ACTIVE NONVIOLENCE

Stephen Zunes

Dorothy Day did not believe in a passive nonviolence, but an active nonviolence. She did not just oppose behavioral violence but also structural violence. Therefore, in her view, the role of a pacifist was not just to refrain from engaging in personal violence, but to disrupt and undermine structural violence. It was not simply to comfort the afflicted, but to afflict the comfortable. As she pointedly put it, “Don’t call me a saint. I don’t want to be dismissed so easily.”

Similarly, her pacifism was not sentimental, but assertive. It was not a liberal pacifism, in which an individual was simply expected to be nonviolent in a violent world, but to use nonviolence in a way that could transform the world away from both behavioral and structural violence. As William Thorn put it, the Catholic Worker movement she founded “became a voice for the powerless which challenged those who ignored or dismissed them—the wealthy, churches, government and employers.”

Her commitment to nonviolence was total: both personal and political. It was not just as a way of life for her personally, but for society as a whole. She was consistent in her pro-life position, opposing war and capital punishment as well as abortion and euthanasia. She was one of the first advocates of what Joseph

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Cardinal Bernardin would later refer to as the “Seamless Garment” approach to nonviolence.

Her participation in nonviolent direct action predates her conversion to Catholicism. In November 1917, she was among forty women arrested in front of the White House demonstrating in support of women’s suffrage. When imprisoned, they responded with a hunger strike until they were finally released through an order from President Woodrow Wilson.

Unlike many Catholic activists, Day was drawn to Catholicism through social justice work rather than the other way around. In addition to her personal spiritual journey, part of what drew her to the church was her recognition that, at a time when northern European Protestants dominated the country politically and economically, the Catholic Church was “the church of the immigrants, the church of the poor.”

The spiritual discipline of the church, in her view, provided hope and faith for a better world, an alternative to the angry, violent, and autocratic tendencies of some elements of the secular left. For example, Day traveled to Washington, DC in 1932 as a reporter for two Catholic publications to cover the Hunger March. While supporting many of the radical demands of the protesters, the fact that it was organized by Communists kept her on the sidelines and raised questions in her mind as to why the church wasn’t on the forefront of demands for economic justice, not only in that it left the movement for workers’ rights under the leadership of adherents to an ideology she recognized as secular, materialist, autocratic, and violent, but that support for the downtrodden and oppressed was a centerpiece of the Gospels.

Though her conflicts with the church hierarchy over the outspoken advocacy for labor and the poor were well-known, in many respects it was her pacifism that constituted a more serious challenge to the clerical establishment—still firmly committed in a broadly-defined doctrine of “just war”—and a challenge to the conscience of laity as well. Her pacifist commitment during the Spanish civil war alienated both those on the left who supported Republicans and many in the Catholic Church who supported the Falangists. Far more significant and controversial was her opposition to World War II. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Day announced that the Catholic Worker would not compromise its pacifist position and, in her words, “We will print the words of Christ who is with us always. Our manifesto is the Sermon on the Mount.” She urged young men to resist the draft, and argued that Catholics should oppose the war and refuse to buy war bonds. In the midst of war fever sweeping the country at that time—during which even a sizable majority of young Quaker men enlisted in the armed services—this principled Christian pacifism led to a major decline in support for the Catholic Worker movement and a decline in readership of their paper.

As horrific as Second World War might have been, preventing a Third World War, in which the very survival of the human race was a risk, became a priority for Day and her movement. Starting in 1955, the city of New York began requiring everyone to take part in an annual civil defense drill, in which millions of people would practice entering designated bomb shelters. Recognizing that such drills only reinforced the false notion that a nuclear war was winnable, the Catholic Worker community refused to participate. Stating that she would refuse to be drilled into fear, Day hung out with her Catholic Worker colleagues on benches in Central Park when everyone had been ordered to report to the shelters; she was arrested and jailed for five days. The following year, she was again arrested and jailed for thirty days. The next year, she was arrested yet again. That was the last time she was arrested for resisting civil defense drills, however, because—in subsequent years, largely as a result of her nonviolent witness—the numbers of resisters had grown into the thousands and authorities could only arrest a minority of them.

As the Vietnam War escalated in the mid-1960s, the Catholic hierarchy, sympathizing with Vietnamese Catholics who had struggled under Communist rule in North Vietnam, sided with the right-wing Catholic-led U.S.-backed dictatorship in the South, with New York’s Cardinal Francis Joseph Spellman dismissing concerns over the massive civilian casualties caused by American forces and declaring it a “war for civilization” and the National Council of Catholic Bishops declaring it a “just war” or “self-defense.” Day, however, emerged as an early and outspoken opponent of the war. In 1965, she took part in a ten-day fast in opposition to the war and the support provided by the church leadership and in support of the church taking a more pro-active stance for peace. While it not immediately alter the bishops’ pro-war position, they were forced to acknowledge for the first time that pacifism and conscientious objection were legitimate positions taken by people of faith. She spoke out in opposition to military conscription as contrary to church teaching and, given her belief that participation in war is effectively forbidden by Christ, stressed that conscientious objection was no less than a Christian duty. During this period, Day was among the small group of Catholics who founded the American branch of Pax Christi, the international Catholic peace movement. As Terrell observed, Day’s opposition to the Vietnam War and the nuclear arms race were not simply political positions, but “catechizing, evangelizing, spreading the Gospel.”

While challenging the pro-war stance of the Catholic hierarchy during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, she also challenges the rising
left-wing militancy within some sectors of the church, including those in Latin America and elsewhere who espoused armed revolution. Though inspired by the emergence of the theology of liberation, she rejected those within that movement who argued that behavioral violence was necessary to overcome structural violence. To Day, even the rationalization for property destruction and other militant tactics advocated by the Berrigan brothers and some other radical anti-war Catholics crossed a dangerous theological threshold that she could not support.

The structural violence of racial segregation inspired Day’s involvement in civil rights activism. This included developing a relationship with Koinonia Partners, an integrated Christian agricultural community in southwestern Georgia which had become targeted by the Ku Klux Klan. While taking part in a nighttime shift with a Quaker woman watching out for possible attacks on the community, she and a colleague were shot at, with the bullets barely missing their mark. The civil rights movement, rooted in the Christian pacifist tradition so passionately articulated by Martin Luther King and others, made Day a natural ally to the movement. It brought the use of nonviolent direct action and noncooperation with illegitimate authority, which she had long embraced, to an unprecedented level of popular understanding, began attracting a new generation of supporters of the Catholic Worker movement. In addition, the participation of Catholic clergy and laity, many of whom had been inspired by the Day’s work, raised awareness of the struggle among Northern Catholics.

Her support for workers’ rights, a cause which had inspired much of her earlier activism, became a focus of interest later in life as well, particularly with the emergence of the United Farmworkers under the leadership of Cesar Chavez. It was a movement, rooted among Mexican-American laborers, which explicitly embraced nonviolent action within a Catholic context. To an unprecedented degree, the organized church—including bishops and lay leaders—actively supported consumer boycotts and participated in protests. In 1973, at age 75 and in declining health, Day was arrested in California’s San Joaquin Valley at a UFW demonstration and jailed for ten days.

**Theological Base**

Day’s nonviolence challenged the false dichotomy between armed insurrections and acquiescence to oppression, an ethical framework for which, she would argue, came to us nearly 2000 years ago in the good news proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth. The message Jesus brought to the world was nonviolent, not just in what he articulated in the Sermon on the Mount, but through his entire life and teaching and in the way he faced his death. To Day, nonviolence was not just a means to the Kingdom of God, but the quality of the Kingdom of God.

She also recognized that the nonviolence Jesus taught did not mean nonresistance or allowing the oppressor to perpetrate evil unopposed. Jesus never forbade self-defense or allowing one’s neighbor to be oppressed. She recognized Christ’s teachings were a call for individuals and popular movements to struggle on behalf of justice for themselves and for their neighbors, but do so nonviolently. What is particularly profound about Dorothy Day’s nonviolence was her recognition that the poorest of the poor, the most oppressed, and the most down and out could refuse to be humiliated, could take the initiative, and turn the tables on their oppressors.

Historian Anne Klejment calls the Catholic Worker Movement the “cradle of Catholic pacifism in the United States” and Catholic peace activist and scholar Eileen Egan calls Day the “luminous center” of the Catholic peace movement in the United States. Dorothy Day’s principled commitment to nonviolence helped pave the way for the Catholic Church to take a stronger anti-war position than many thought possible when she was alive. Indeed, it begs the question: Were it not for Dorothy Day and the movement she founded, would the church have embraced the prophetic positions it later took against the nuclear arms race and US intervention in Central America, or its more recent stances against the two wars against Iraq?

Though the church still espouses just war theory in principle, in practice, church leaders have been forced to take the criteria more seriously and thereby make the threshold much harder to meet. And, while far from embracing her absolute pacifism, the church’s position on war today is in many ways closer to that of Dorothy Day than was the Catholic Church’s position during most of her lifetime. Similar strides have been made in the church’s embrace of labor rights and other social justice issues.

Today, the world is facing an even greater threat than war and poverty: the destruction of the environment, a direct result of overconsumption. Though rarely articulated in the language of the contemporary environmental movement, Dorothy Day nevertheless embraced a sense of stewardship for this planet. She advocated living simply long before it became fashionable. Indeed, this is where Dorothy Day’s nonviolence may have been radical and most prophetic: her recognition of the need to tread lightly on this Earth, not just to make sure there is more for others and insure environmental sustainability, but rejecting the idolatry of consumerism as necessary for one’s own spiritual growth. Her frequent visits to Tivoli Catholic Worker Farm underscored her connection to God’s creations in their natural environment. As Thorn noted, Day recognized the importance of faith which not only “actively reaches out...
to the poor, the hungry, the alienated,” but also those who are “blinded to the suffering by their own comfort.”9

As Thorn observed, “In her vision, the moral dimension was the foreground and the other aspects moved to the background of the individuals and situations she encountered. Where others first saw bums, alcoholism, failures, the shiftless, and the lazy, she saw the face of Christ. Where others saw patriotic self-defense, she saw the Mystical Body torn and shattered on the battlefield. Where others saw unruly and obnoxious strikers, she saw laborers and their families denied a living wage and labor stripped of its dignity.”10

3 Cited in Forest, “Servant of God.”
4 Ibid.
6 Brian Terrell, in Dorothy Day And The Catholic Worker Movement: Centenary Essays, eds. William J. Thorn, Phillip M. Runkel, and Susan Mountin (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 2001), 147.
9 Thorn, Runkel, and Mountin, Dorothy Day, 14.
10 Ibid., 15