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Dorothy Day

Spiritual Writings

Selected with an Introduction by
Robert Ellsberg

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Preface

Dorothy Day's granddaughter, Kate Hennessy, has said that to have known Dorothy is to spend the rest of your life wondering what hit you. That is certainly the case for me. It is nearly fifty years since our first encounter, when, in 1975 at the age of nineteen, I took a leave from college, intending to spend a few months at the Catholic Worker. As it turned out, that short stay stretched into five years. I had only been at St. Joseph House a few months when Dorothy asked me to serve as managing editor of the newspaper, a task for which I had no evident qualifications.

Nevertheless, one of the first things I learned about Dorothy was her ability to recognize and encourage people's gifts and possibilities—possibilities, I should say, that weren't at all evident to ourselves. And so, in ways I could not have foreseen, she set me on the course of my life, much of it spent trying to understand what had hit me, and to share her story with the world.

Most of what I have come to understand about Dorothy Day has come from editing her writings, of which this volume is the sixth. I began to work on the first of these, *By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*, soon after her death in 1980. Most recently I edited her *On Pilgrimage* columns from the 1960s and 1970s. But without a doubt I learned the most about her from the opportunity

to edit her diaries and selected letters, *The Duty of Delight*, and *All the Way to Heaven.* From these volumes I learned in particular about the spirituality that was expressed in the ordinary events and encounters of her daily life.

Many people associate Dorothy Day with dramatic actions on the public stage—walking on picket lines; refusing to take shelter during compulsory civil defense drills during the 1950s; standing beside young men who were burning their draft cards during the Vietnam War; or being arrested at the age of seventy-five, while picketing with striking farmworkers in California.

From that final arrest, many are familiar with the famous photograph by Bob Fitch that shows her calmly sitting on a portable stool, offset by the outline of two burly, and well-armed police officers. It was that iconic image of "contemplation in action," as much as anything, that first attracted me to the Worker.

Of course, we also associate Dorothy with the daily work of the Catholic Worker—putting out a newspaper, living among the poor, practicing the works of mercy: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, comforting the sorrowful and afflicted.

But reading and editing her diaries showed me that those activities were only the public face of a life that was mostly spent—as it is for all great souls, as well as the rest of us—in very ordinary and undramatic activities. And it was especially in that realm of ordinary daily life that she expressed her spirituality, and found her path to holiness.

Now, through her writings, and particularly the *Spiritual Writings* collected here, anyone can know Dorothy in this way. But still there are things about her that I think you could only know from spending time with her.

For one thing: her intense curiosity and interest in life.

Part of this came from the habits of a journalist, accustomed to carrying around a notebook to jot down facts and details about the places she went and the people she met. She never seemed bored or jaded. She was endlessly fascinated by other people—where they came from, what they had read, what they cared about. "What's your favorite novel by Dostoevsky?" she might ask. I think I told her *The Brothers Karamazov*—a book I had not actually read, though I was happy to learn that she agreed with me.

She had a great spirit of adventure. Always she seemed ready for something new, whether starting a house of hospitality for women, or standing up to the IRS when they took her to task for refusing to pay federal income taxes for war. When an exasperated IRS agent asked her to estimate how much she owed in taxes, she replied, "Why don't you tell me what you think I owe, and then I just won't pay it."

Regardless of how old she became, there was always a youthfulness to her. She loved the idealism and energy of young people, and what she called their "instinct for the heroic." She urged us to "aim for the impossible," noting that if we lowered our goal, we would also diminish our effort. Yet she was understanding of our mistakes and foibles. The memory of her own youthful struggles made her particularly sensitive to the searching and sufferings of youth.

She herself was always ready to be inspired and renewed. In her diary, she wrote, "No matter how old I get . . . no matter how feeble, short of breath, incapable of walking more than a few blocks . . . 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."

For Dorothy, all of life was a school of charity and gratitude. Exercising the "duty of delight," she always seemed to

look past the surface of things to another wider dimension. "There is desperate suffering with no prospect of relief," she wrote. "But we would be contributing to the misery and desperation of the world if we failed to rejoice in the sun, the moon, and the stars, in the rivers which surround this island on which we live, in the cool breezes of the bay, in what food we have and in the benefactors God sends us."

Dorothy was an avid collector of picture postcards, and some of them adorned the walls of her room at Maryhouse. They included icons and works of art, but also images from nature: forests, the ocean, polar bears. Dorothy spent most of her life surrounded by actual images of poverty, including the hungry men and women who waited outside the Catholic Worker each morning for a bowl of soup. But one of her most distinctive qualities was her sensitivity to beauty.

She delighted in the beauty of church or the Saturday afternoon opera on the radio. Yet she also noticed beauty in places that others might overlook: in a piece of driftwood, in the sound of a tanker on the Hudson, an ailanthus tree somehow clinging to life in the midst of a slum, the sunlight on the windows of a neighboring tenement building. But she also had an eye for moral beauty: the sight of someone sharing bread with a neighbor (the literal meaning of "companionship"). And hardest of all, she could see beauty where others did not, in the features of Jesus under the disguise of the poor and downtrodden.

She frequently quoted Dostoevsky's famous line, "The world will be saved by beauty." I often puzzled over what that meant. Once, when I was fasting in a jail in Colorado, she sent me a postcard with an aerial photo of Cape Cod with the message, "I hope this card refreshes you and does not tantalize you." It occurred to me that Dorothy believed that beauty itself has a moral dimension. To direct our attention to beauty, or even the recollection of it, while sitting in a

slum or a jail cell or a hermitage, could inspire us to greater courage, hope, and love.

And that leads me to one last thing, which comes as a surprise to those who only know her through her dour expressions in photographs. That is how much fun it was to be with her. She had a tremendous sense of humor, and a girlish laugh.

John Cort, who joined the Catholic Worker soon after graduating from Harvard in the early 1930s, was drawn to the movement after witnessing how much fun Dorothy seemed to be having. Here was a woman who appeared to be pretty old (at the time she was in her mid-thirties) who seemed to be having the time of her life, and he wanted a share of that.

The Long Loneliness ends with a meditation in which she says "we were just sitting around talking" when everything happened—when Peter Maurin came in; when lines of people began to form; when someone said, "Let's all go and live on a farm." She says, "It was as casual as all that, I often think. It just came about. It just happened."

That is one of the things you had to experience for yourself, being around Dorothy: The unexpected things that could begin in a conversation as you just sat around talking; the way that history or your own life could suddenly take a turn as you were just sitting around the kitchen table over a cup of coffee or a bowl of soup.

It often seems that way for me, too, when I look back on my life. It just happened. And the talk, and the witness, and the daily acts of faith and love continued long after I had moved on. "You will know your vocation," Dorothy once said, "by the joy it gives you." It was not my vocation to remain serving soup at the Catholic Worker. But evidently it was my vocation to become an editor—in fact, incredibly enough, Dorothy Day's editor. And that has given me joy.

Introduction

On June 15, 1955, at the sound of a wailing siren signaling an imminent nuclear attack, the entire population of New York City obediently sought shelter in basements and subway stations, or, in the case of school children, under their desks. According to the authorities, this first in a series of annual "civil defense" drills was a "complete success." Well, almost. It was marred by a middle-aged, white-haired woman and twenty-six others who refused to play along with this war game. Rather than take shelter, Dorothy Day and her companions instead sat in City Hall Park, where they were arrested and later sentenced to jail. The judge who imposed bail likened the protesters to "murderers" who had contributed to the "utter destruction of these three million theoretically killed in our city."

Of course, "three million," the number of theoretical fatalities of a nuclear strike on New York City, would hardly have measured the potential devastation. Actual plans for nuclear war involved deaths in the hundreds of millions. As Dorothy Day saw it, the illusion that nuclear war was "survivable," and therefore "winnable," made such a monstrous war more likely. To participate in such an exercise for doomsday, she believed, was an act of blasphemy. And so she went to jail.

On that clear spring day in 1955 it was more than twenty years since Dorothy Day had founded the Catholic

Worker—at first a newspaper, and then a movement consisting of "houses of hospitality" in New York City and poor neighborhoods across the country. In such communities the "works of mercy" (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless) were combined with a commitment to social justice and the vision of a new society based on values of generosity, compassion, and solidarity, rather than selfishness, greed, and fear.

There were many who had initially admired her work among the poor. Among the original subscribers to her newspaper, founded in the heart of the Depression, there were also plenty who sympathized with her critique of an economic system that produced such poverty and desperation. Yet few, in those early years, joined Day in her conviction that the way of Jesus was incompatible with any kind of killing—a most controversial stand, which she first proclaimed during the Spanish Civil War and then maintained, even more controversially, throughout World War II. But on the day of that first civil defense drill, the number of Catholics in New York City who agreed that preparation for nuclear war was a crime against God and humanity could evidently fit inside a single police wagon. And yet for Dorothy, it all went together. The Catholic Worker was an effort to live out the radical implications of the teaching of Christ: that what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters—whether feed them, shelter them, or bomb them—we do directly for him.

* * *

It might seem curious to begin this anthology of Dorothy Day's "Spiritual Writings" with an account of civil disobedience, rather than with her discipline of prayer, her veneration of the saints, or her devotion to the sacraments. All these things and more sustained her. (When traveling, she

noted, she was careful to bring her Bible, her missal, and a jar of instant coffee—all of them "essential.") Yet what caused Dorothy to stand out in her time, as it does still, is the way her spiritual life was expressed not only in her daily prayer but in her response to the needs of her neighbors, to the poor, and to the demands of history.

The case of this particular protest points to the potential stakes involved. To Dorothy, the specter of nuclear war was a modern dramatization of the biblical choice: "I call upon the heavens and the earth to witness today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life, so that you and your descendants might live" (Deut 30:19). If there is a future for humanity on this planet, it may be because the spiritual option embraced by Dorothy Day has become more commonplace.

The writings collected here, however, are a reminder that the activism and public witness for which she is best remembered were merely the more visible expression of the deep spiritual synthesis that guided her daily life. Much of that centered on the practice of her traditional Catholic faith: daily Mass, the rosary, recitation of the Psalms in morning and evening prayer, observance of the feasts and fasts of the liturgical calendar. She drew inspiration from the example of favorite saints, like Francis of Assisi, St. Benedict, and Teresa of Avila (a martyrology enlarged, in her case, by favorite peacemakers, novelists, and heroes of the labor movement). But it would be hard to describe Dorothy Day simply in terms of continuity with previous models of holiness. Like the great saints she revered, she also devised her own path.

That path was marked by a number of favorite maxims that appear throughout this book: "All the way to Heaven is heaven" (St. Catherine of Siena); "The world will be saved

by beauty" (Dostoevsky); "the sacrament of the present moment" (Jean-Pierre de Caussade); "the practice of the presence of God" (Brother Lawrence); "the Little Way" (St. Thérèse); "the duty of delight" (John Ruskin). Such phrases pointed to the deep significance of all the incidents, encounters, and circumstances of our daily life, when viewed in light of the gospel. Everyday life could be a school of love. Eternal life was rooted in the here and now. And the lessons mastered in small and intimate ways equipped her for larger, public challenges. Overall, she summed up her mission as a response to "the greatest challenge of the day": "How to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us?"

* * *

Dorothy's revolution of the heart was rooted in two primary stories. The first of these, of course, was the Gospel story of Jesus. Along with the Eucharist, the Gospel texts were the staple of her daily life: the parables, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus's encounters with the poor and sick, his conflicts with the religious and political authorities of his time, his passion and Resurrection. In these stories she did not encounter a figure from two thousand years ago, but a lens for reading the ordinary events of life, the news of the day, and her encounters with those in need. To be a Christian, she believed, was to live in a constant confrontation with the living Christ: "It is no use to say that we are born two thousand years too late to give room to Christ. Nor will those who live at the end of the world have been born too late. Christ is always with us, always asking for room in our hearts."

And then there was her own story, which she shared in two memoirs, *From Union Square to Rome* (1938) and *The*

Long Loneliness (1952). In both cases she was eager to relate the story of those events, encounters, and experiences in her early life that brought her to the knowledge of God. Chief among these was her engagement with the cause of the poor and the struggle for social justice. "Because I sincerely loved His poor, He taught me to know Him. And when I think of the little I ever did, I am filled with hope and love for all those others devoted to the cause of social justice."

But there were many other experiences along the way. She wrote about her childhood piety, and how, during her two years in college, this was supplanted by a new faith in the struggle for justice. She wrote about her work in New York as a journalist with left-wing newspapers and magazines, her arrest with suffragists in Washington, DC, and the dejection she experienced in her brief stints in jail. She wrote of late nights in saloons listening to Eugene O'Neill recite "The Hound of Heaven," and the impulse that often drove her, afterward, to sit at the back of St. Joseph's Church in Greenwich Village, "not knowing what was going on at the altar, but warmed and comforted by the lights and silence, the kneeling people, and the atmosphere of worship." She also referred to other experiences of "the tragic aspect of life in general," though she did not go into detail. As we now know, this included a desperate love affair that ended with her having an abortion and twice attempting to commit suicide. All this, of course, was before becoming a Catholic. Yet, from the perspective of her conversion, she came to believe that God had been present throughout this story, hovering over her life, in times of doubt and confusion as much as in joy and conviction.

In 2000 the Archdiocese of New York initiated Dorothy Day's cause for canonization, and she was named a Servant of God. Thus began a long process that may one

day result in her becoming known as St. Dorothy. If so, no doubt she will be a saint with an unusual backstory. Yet even the circumstances of her conversion are unique in the annals of the saints. This occurred while she was living on Staten Island with a man she deeply loved, Forster Batterham, and discovered that she was once again pregnant. This time, in her gratitude, she welcomed the new life within her, and found herself praying and wishing to have her child baptized—a step she eventually followed in 1927, at the age of thirty.

Later, quoting a character from Dostoevsky, she would write, "All my life I have been haunted by God." And yet there was seemingly nothing inevitable about her decision to become a Catholic. She had been raised in a nominally Protestant family in which "the name of God was never mentioned," and "to speak of the soul was to speak immodestly, uncovering what might better remain hidden." Her father, a sportswriter who later described Dorothy as "the nut of the family," believed that only "Irish cops and washerwomen" were Catholics. She was baptized in the Episcopal Church at the age of twelve, but put aside any religious impulses during her two years in college. "Religion, as it was practiced by those I encountered . . . had no vitality. It had nothing to do with everyday life; it was a matter of Sunday praying. Christ no longer walked the streets of this world. He was two thousand years dead and new prophets had risen up in His place." During her time working as a writer for the *New York Call* and the *Masses*, her friends were socialists, radicals, and literary Bohemians who regarded religion as "the opiate of the people." That opinion was shared, at the time of her conversion, by Forster, her "common-law husband," as she called him. So what accounted for her attraction to Catholicism?

Throughout her life she remembered her brief encounters with certain Catholics, like the mother of a childhood friend, whose faith, despite the hardship of their circumstances, seemed to offer a sense of wholeness and transcendence. In reading William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* she began to learn about people who inhabited a larger, spiritual world, and in the novels of Dostoevsky she was moved by stories of characters shaped by the gospel and their own experience of sin, suffering, and mercy. As she noted, "I was tired of following the devices and desires of my own heart, of doing what I wanted to do, what my desires told me I wanted to do, which always seemed to lead me astray."

She believed that the Catholic Church, for all its failures, was the church of the poor. She was attracted by its appeal to the senses: "The music speaking to the ear, the incense to the sense of smell, the appeal of color to the eye, stained glass, ikons and statues, the bread and wine to the taste, the touch of rich vestments and altar linens, the touch of holy water, oils, the sign of the cross, the beating of the breast."

And though she had passed through many times of sorrow, her conversion was ultimately born not from sadness but from the experience of what she called "natural happiness": her love for Forster, her awakening to the beauty of nature, and the joy she felt in knowing that she was going to have a baby. Her happiness made her believe in a still greater happiness. She experienced a sense of gratitude so immense that only God could receive it.

And yet her daughter's baptism, followed later by her own entry to the church, did not provide an immediate sense of arrival. For one thing, it meant separation from Forster, who, as an atheist and anarchist, refused, in principle, to get married. At the same time, in becoming a Catholic, she felt

that she was betraying her comrades in the struggle for the poor and oppressed. If the church was the home of the poor, it also seemed all too often the defender of the status quo, a friend of the rich and powerful. Thus, she embarked on a lonely path for the next five years, supporting her daughter as a single mother, writing articles for the Catholic press, and pursuing work as she could find it (including a stint as a writer in Hollywood and a garden columnist on Staten Island), while searching for some higher purpose.

The turning point came in December 1932 when she traveled to Washington, DC, to write about a "hunger march" of the unemployed, organized by her former Communist friends. Why were Catholics not leading such a march, she wondered. Heading for the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, she offered a prayer that came "with tears and with anguish" that she might find her vocation—some way of using her talents in the service of the poor. And when she returned to New York she met Peter Maurin, an itinerant French apostle in search of a collaborator, whose personalist philosophy seemed an answer to her prayer.

This realization wasn't immediately obvious, as Maurin, with his thick French accent and shabby appearance, proceeded to lecture her about history, the problems of the industrial age, the dignity of work, and the monastic ideal of hospitality. Twenty years Dorothy's senior, Maurin had been raised in a peasant family in southern France. Educated by the Christian Brothers, he had imbibed the spirit of social Catholicism before immigrating to North America, where he tramped about in poverty, engaging in hard labor, while devising a "synthesis" in the area of Catholic social philosophy. Peter Maurin believed that the troubles facing the world came from substituting the bank account for the Sermon on the Mount as the ultimate standard of values. He

believed Christians should begin at once to live by gospel values, building "a new world within the shell of the old," a world "where it would be easier for people to be good."

It took a while for Dorothy to comprehend Maurin's vision and to see how it related to her own search. Yet, one of his suggestions immediately caught her attention: that she start a newspaper to promote the radical social message of the gospel. Almost immediately, she got to work. The result was the *Catholic Worker*, an eight-page tabloid composed on her kitchen table. The first issue, filled initially with stories about strikes, evictions, child labor, racial injustice, and Peter Maurin's own "Easy Essays," was launched at a May Day rally in Union Square in 1933. In her first editorial, she wrote:

> For those who are sitting on park benches in the warm spring sunlight. For those who are huddling in shelters trying to escape the rain. For those who are walking the streets in the all but futile search for work. For those who think that there is no hope for the future, no recognition of their plight—this little paper is addressed.
>
> It is printed to call their attention to the fact that the Catholic church has a social program—to let them know that there are men of God who are working not only for their spiritual but for their material welfare.

It is striking how quickly Dorothy's life had changed. Within a few months of her meeting Peter Maurin she had found not only a new work, but a new vitality and energy. It was as if her soul had been dry kindling, to which Peter Maurin applied a spark. As the editor of a newspaper and

the leader of a growing movement, she was suddenly thrust onto a public stage, confidently addressing bishops, labor priests, and union leaders. She had a voice and a message—one that drew particular authority from the fact that she was living it out.

Other lay Catholics quickly answered her call and gathered to join the work. Before long, they had implemented the second plank in Maurin's program, opening a "house of hospitality," where she and her fellow "Catholic Workers" would live among the poor, in voluntary poverty, practicing the works of mercy. Before meeting Maurin, Dorothy had been searching for a "synthesis" of her own: between the spiritual and the material, this world and the next. The solution to that synthesis, she came to realize, was in the radical implications of the Incarnation. God, in Jesus, had entered our flesh and our history. All of creation, the whole material world, was thereby hallowed. We could not separate the love of God from the love of our neighbors. Jesus said that what we did for the poor, we did directly for him. In effect, this teaching became the first spiritual foundation of the Catholic Worker, expressed not only in the works of mercy, but in work for justice and peace.

* * *

Of course, by feeding a few hundred hungry people each morning she did not believe she could solve the problems of the Depression. Nor, years later, when she sat out the civil defense drills and went to jail, did she believe that such gestures would bring an end to war. But like Jesus, who spoke of the mysterious potential of a mustard seed, Dorothy believed in the power hidden in small and humble means. And this was a second, essential foundation of Dorothy's spirituality. In this she drew surprising lessons from her favorite saint, Thérèse of Lisieux.

At first glance there would appear to be little in common between these two women, Day, the activist, and Thérèse Martin, a Carmelite nun who died in 1897 (the year of Dorothy's birth) at the age of twenty-four in a small convent in Normandy.

St. Thérèse called her spiritual path the "Little Way." It consisted of performing all the small deeds and obligations of daily life in a spirit of love and in the presence of God. In this way, she believed, daily life could become an arena for holiness. You didn't have to be in a convent or face lions in the Roman Colosseum. Everyday life provided the means for sanctification. Furthermore, Thérèse believed strongly in the spiritual connections that bind all members of the Mystical Body of Christ. Thus, each sacrifice endured in love, each work of mercy, did not just advance one's own path to holiness—it might increase the balance of love in the world. As Dorothy wrote, "We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever-widening circle will reach around the world."

Dorothy's devotion to St. Thérèse was particularly ironic in light of her original impression. Upon first reading Thérèse's autobiography, which she received from a priest soon after her conversion, she found it "colorless, monotonous, too small in fact for my notice."

> What kind of a saint was this who felt that she had to practice heroic charity in eating what was put in front of her, in taking medicine, enduring cold and heat, enduring the society of mediocre souls, in following the strict regime of the convent of Carmelite nuns which she had joined at the age of fifteen?

And yet Dorothy would come to see in Thérèse not only a great saint, but one with a particular relevance to our times.

What accounted for her change of heart? The answer lay in her experience with the Catholic Worker. Through years of living among the poor and unwanted, "eating what was put in front of her," enduring not only cold and heat but also the sights and smells of squalor and the company of many wounded souls, she came to appreciate the power of Thérèse's Little Way.

Dorothy's diaries record the discipline of her spiritual life: daily Mass, the rosary, and meditation on Scripture. But above all they show a woman who held her everyday life against the standard of the gospel—measuring and testing her own capacity for love, forgiveness, and patience. She did not have a placid disposition. "I have a hard enough job to curb the anger in my own heart which I sometimes even wake up with, go to sleep with—a giant to strive with, an ugliness, a sorrow to me—a mighty struggle to love. As long as there is any resentment, bitterness, lack of love in my own heart I am powerless. God must help me."

In her daily examination of conscience she remembered acts of kindness or incidents that reminded her of God. But she also noted failures of charity: "At 1:00 a man and woman came bringing a drunken woman in and I was very harsh in not taking her. As Tom said, before dawn came, I had denied our Lord in her. I felt very guilty—more for my manner than for doing it, as we could not have all the other women in the house disturbed." The answer was love and more love. "Thinking gloomily of the sins and shortcomings of others," she writes, "it suddenly came to me to remember my own offenses, just as heinous as those of others. If I concern myself with my own sins and lament them, if I remember my own failures and lapses, I will not be resentful of others. This was most cheering and lifted the load of gloom

from my mind. It makes one unhappy to judge people and happy to love them."

The title of her diaries, *The Duty of Delight*, is taken from a phrase she often liked to repeat. It appears in the postscript to her autobiography, where she writes, "It is not easy always to be joyful, to keep in mind the duty of delight." This was another facet of Dorothy's spirituality. Anyone could feel delight when things were delightful. By the same token it was easy to love people who were lovable or who loved us in return. But the heart of the gospel, as she liked to quote St. John of the Cross, was this: "Where there is no love, put love, and you will draw love out." If we willed to love someone, if we willed to see Christ in them, we could do it. So she believed. That didn't mean it was any easier for her than for others. Yet it was the exercise of her faith in these small ways, the effort to live her daily life in the conscious presence of God, that equipped her for the extraordinary actions she performed on a wider stage.

Here too, the teaching of St. Thérèse came into play. In the 1950s, at the same time as her protests of the civil defense drills, she was actually writing a book about Thérèse, motivated, she said, by her desire to call attention to the "social implications" of Thérèse's teachings: the significance of all the little things we do—or fail to do. This included the protests we make: appearing foolish while standing on a street corner with a sign for peace, or handing out a leaflet, or going to jail for a few days. There was no calculating the potential effect of such gestures, no matter how apparently foolish and ineffective.

In the Gospels this principle was illustrated in the story of Jesus's multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Dorothy drew on that image for the title of one of her books. In *Loaves and Fishes*, she wrote,

> One of the greatest evils of the day . . . is [the] sense of futility. Young people say, "What good can one person do? What is the sense of our small effort?" They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time; we can be responsible only for the action of the present moment, but we can beg for an increase of love in our hearts that will vitalize and transform all our individual actions, and know that God will take them and multiply them, as Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes.

It may be that Dorothy's application of St. Thérèse's Little Way to the social arena is one of the most significant and at the same time underappreciated aspects of her spirituality. In a world in which everything is measured by numbers, metrics, return on investment—it is hard to appreciate that there is any other way of measuring value and success. But then how are we to understand Christ's message: that it is only if the seed falls into the ground and dies that it bears much fruit?

In a time when so many feel overwhelmed by the vast powers of this world, Dorothy Day bore witness to another power—the power disguised in what is apparently small and weak. Who can measure such power? As she noted, "We know that one impulse of grace is of infinitely more power than a cobalt bomb."

* * *

Through most of her life, Dorothy was regarded as a fairly marginal figure, far outside the mainstream of the church. As a result of her protests and work for peace she received a good deal of criticism. Some called her un-American. She was charged with being weak, irrelevant, and foolish. (In

reply, she stated, "We confess to being foolish, and wish that we were more so.") She was accused of being a secret Communist. In the 1950s, J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, placed her name on a list of dangerous radicals to be detained in the event of a national emergency.

And yet, by her later years the tide had definitely shifted. She was offered honorary degrees by Catholic universities, which she consistently refused. ("If you live long enough you are regarded as a venerable survivor.") In 1976 she was invited to speak, along with Mother Teresa, at the Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia. (Her speech, reprinted in this volume, shows that she used the occasion to call for atonement for the sin of Hiroshima.) *Time* magazine included her in a special issue on "Living Saints." She was, by this time, widely regarded as the "radical conscience" of the Catholic Church in America.

Upon her death on November 29, 1980, historian David O'Brien, writing in *Commonweal,* called her "the most important, interesting, and influential figure in the history of American Catholicism." At the time this was an audacious claim. It is hard to measure the significance of a life at such close range. And yet it was amazingly prescient. Over four decades since her death, this assessment seems not only plausible, but undoubtedly true. There have obviously been many other interesting and influential American Catholics in the last two hundred years. But it would be hard to think of another American Catholic who so radically recalled the church to its gospel origins, who so prophetically anticipated the renewal of Vatican II, and who prefigured the agenda most recently outlined by Pope Francis for the universal church.

As it turned out, this judgment received some confirmation from Pope Francis himself in his address to the U.S.

Congress in 2015. There, going beyond even the encomium of David O'Brien, he included Dorothy Day in the ranks of Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., and her friend Thomas Merton as one of the four "great Americans" around whom he organized his speech. "In these times when social concerns are so important," he said, "I cannot fail to mention the Servant of God Dorothy Day, who founded the Catholic Worker Movement. Her social activism, her passion for justice and for the cause of the oppressed were inspired by the Gospel, her faith, and the example of the saints."

In 2023 Pope Francis elaborated on his admiration for Dorothy Day in a foreword to a new edition of *From Union Square to Rome.* There he wrote that her life "exemplified what St. James said in his Letter: "Show me your faith without works and I by my works will show you my faith." The pope went on to reflect on her spirit of yearning and restlessness ("The Lord comforts restless hearts, not bourgeois souls who are content with things as they are"), her love for the church despite its evident failings, and her commitment to service, which must become political in overcoming injustice and safeguarding human dignity.

Doubtless she would have viewed all this attention with suspicion. As she often said, "Too much praise makes you feel that you must be doing something terribly wrong." In that light it is fair to wonder what she would have thought of efforts to declare her a saint.

For some, the answer is clear: "Don't call me a saint," she is famously quoted as saying. "I don't want to be dismissed that easily." Putting aside the fact that no actual saint would possibly say otherwise, there are still other reasons why this quote should not represent the last word on the subject.

No one took saints more seriously than Dorothy Day. For her, they were not idealized super-humans, but constant

companions and daily guides in the imitation of Christ. She relished the human details of their struggles to be faithful, realizing full well that in their own time they were often regarded as eccentrics or dangerous troublemakers.

Yet she was aware of the tendency to put saints on a pedestal, far above the usual standard of humanity. When people referred to her as a living saint, she supposed that they imagined that things came easily for her—living with the poor, going to jail—that would be unthinkable for ordinary people. If that is what it meant to be called a saint, she would have none of it.

For Dorothy, the challenge was not to be *called* a saint but to *be* a saint. She believed this was not only her own vocation but the calling of all Christians. "We might as well get over our bourgeois fear of the name," she wrote. "We might also get used to recognizing the fact that there is some of the saint in all of us. Inasmuch as we are growing, putting off the old man and putting on Christ, there is some of the saint, the holy, the divine right there."

At the same time, however, she believed in the need for a new model of holiness in our time. This intuition came to her even as a child. Recalling her first discovery of stories about saints, she described her admiration for their heroic ministry to the poor, the weak, and the infirm. But, already, there was another question in her mind: "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?*" It was a question she would answer with her own life.

For Dorothy, the calling to follow Christ was not something achieved in a single moment or all at once. Recalling the conversion of St. Francis, she noted, "Sometimes it takes but one step. We would like to think so. And yet the older

I get the more I see that life is made up of many steps, and they are very small affairs, not giant strides. I have 'kissed a leper,' not once but twice—consciously—and I cannot say I am much the better for it."

The spiritual life was a journey, or a "pilgrimage," in which the significance of events and our response was determined by their relation to our final destination. The pattern of discipleship was outlined by Jesus in the Beatitudes, and it is clear that these enumerated virtues were the pattern of Dorothy's life: Blessed are the poor in spirit; the meek; the merciful; those who mourn; the pure of heart; those who hunger for God's righteousness; the peacemakers; those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. One could write an essay on how Dorothy not only embraced each of these beatitudes but demonstrated their powerful social and counter-cultural meaning.

The relevance of Dorothy Day's life and witness is not likely to fade. Her great themes are no less urgent today: the quest for freedom, community, and peace; the sacredness of life; the dignity of the poor; the practice of mercy; the hope for "a new social order in which justice dwelleth."

To reflect on her life today, more than forty years after her death, brings to mind the words she wrote about her mentor Peter Maurin, words that could apply as well to herself. She noted that some people criticized Peter for having a holier-than-thou attitude. Well, Peter was "holier than thou," she said. "Holier than anyone we ever knew."

* * *

And what about those civil defense drills in the 1950s? Dorothy was arrested in successive annual drills and twice received sentences of thirty days. While lying in jail, during one of these experiences, a setting that might have given

rise to thoughts of the futility of such a small gesture in light of the massive resources of the war machine, she instead found herself "*thinking of war and peace, and the problem of human freedom, . . . and the apathy of great masses of people who believe that nothing can be done—when I thought of these things, I was all the more confirmed in my faith in the little way of St. Thérèse. We do the minute things that come to hand, we pray our prayers, and beg also for an increase of faith—and God will do the rest.*"

And perhaps her prayers were answered. In 1961 she was joined by two thousand other protesters who refused to cooperate. That turned out to be the end of the civil defense drills.