

RELIGION AND...

A Catholic Worker

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Dorothy Day was unique in the history of American Catholicism, both in the way she lived her religion (always theologically conservative) and in the way she blended it with American radicalism.

When Dorothy Day died this past November, she was nearly eighty-three. Her life spanned many significant events on which she took hard and controversial stands: on Franco's Spain, U.S. participation in public air-raid drills, Vietnam, the United Farm Workers, and many more issues in between. Her stress was always on bringing about a "social order in which it is easy for people to be good," and to do so by nonviolent means. Both by her example and her voluminous writings she influenced generations of Americans, many of whom were not Catholic. But those who accepted, or tried to accept, all of Dorothy's positions were few. Most of those who knew and admired her had reservations about some aspects of her work. For example, those who joined with her in supporting workers' strikes often had difficulty accepting her unyielding pacifism, and many pacifists were puzzled by her unswerving devotion to a Church that gave such scant attention to their cause.

Dorothy disturbed many who were drawn into the widening circles of her influence. She often said not all were fitted or chosen to follow her path, to become part of the family of the Catholic Worker—the movement of which she was the support, the sustenance, the informing principle. Those who knew her and the Catholic Worker would readily agree.

It is not easy to live a life of voluntary poverty among those whose poverty is not voluntary. The Catholic Worker houses in New York—where Dorothy lived—and others across the country always had a fair share of the socially disabled, the cast-offs of our society. Dorothy lived the life she preached, which rested on her belief that each man and woman was her brother and sister and each a reflection of Christ, who bade us to love one another. On this basis she frequently took a stand against state authorities and more than occasionally was thrown into jail.

While she lived—and increasingly as she grew older—some of her admirers refused to hear a word of criticism or reservation about her. I remember when, in the early '60s, one well-known journalist mixed into his general appreciation of Dorothy his judgment that she was illogical. Lo! thunder and hailstones from her most fierce supporters. But, in fact, she was not always logical nor, in small things, always consistent. She could and did change and was often her own critic. They do her less than justice who would make of her life one smooth, arching trajectory. It is only necessary to remember some of her early days to shatter that view.

Just out of college, Dorothy became a political radical, a novelist, a journalist—one in New York's literary and political avant-garde. Eugene O'Neill, Trotsky, Max Eastman, Hart Crane are only a few of the people who moved through her early life. A common-law marriage produced a daughter; her subsequent conversion to Catholicism prompted a separation from the man she loved and had lived with for years. Even after the Catholic Worker movement became a reality, the path was not always clear, and it was never long untroubled.

Yet there was a deep consistency underlying all that she did. She was always devoted to the poor and the destitute, always focused on nonviolence (although not everyone in the movement was a pacifist), and always loyal to the Catholic Church and its central tenets. Constant to her beliefs, she endured—seeking but not always finding the small victories—until her life added up to the marvelous triumph that it was. As the plain pine box bearing her remains was carried down the streets of New York's Lower East Side, there was a sadness, of course—that she had died, that those who loved her would see her no more. But it was nevertheless a joyful and triumphant affair.

The people who came to her funeral were a testimony to all those whose lives she had touched and changed; labor leaders and workers, intellectuals, churchmen, journalists, and poets—and the poor in whose cause she had worked with unremitting, unromantic devotion.

Everyone who knew the Catholic Worker has stories about Dorothy, the kinds of things that don't get reported. I remember the account a writer, an elegant Englishwoman, tells of going to visit the Catholic Worker house in New York. Seeing the floor grimy with dirt, she got bucket and water and proceeded to scrub it. She was at the job when Dorothy came in. "Oh, for heaven's sake, get up off your knees. It'll be dirty again in ten minutes."

The apparent casualness of the house made visitors wonder how the *Catholic Worker* newspaper was published each month, as it has been since 1933. No one in the house always got messages properly. One incident among many: Dorothy, who is living in the house, is given a message that someone called several days ago. No, can't remember the name, but since it was Italian, probably someone who lives in the neighborhood and will call back. Wait, here it is. The name was that of the writer Ignazio Silone, who had been in New York for two or three days and had wanted to see Dorothy. Too late, alas.

Though the Catholic Worker movement continues, Dorothy Day remains uninstitutionalized. Those who wish to emulate and to learn from her must, in their own way, try to cope with the issues that were her life's concern: poverty, nonviolence, and the love of one person for another.

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