



An Introduction to the Life and Spirituality of Dorothy Day

By James Allaire and Rosemary Broughton

Dorothy's Story

Childhood

Dorothy was born in Brooklyn, New York, on 8 November 1897 to Grace Satterlee Day, a New Yorker, and John Day, a Tennessean. Dorothy had three brothers, Donald, Sam, and John, and a sister, Della.

When Dorothy was six years old, her father, a sports writer, took a job in California and moved the family to Oakland. He lost his job when the 1906 San Francisco earthquake destroyed the newspaper plant. Dorothy's memories of the quake and of her mother and the neighbors helping the homeless remained stamped in her mind. The family then moved to Chicago where they lived for the next twelve years. Dorothy grew up in a conventional middle-class home. Nominally Protestant, the Days seldom attended church.

When Dorothy was ten, the rector of a nearby Episcopal church convinced Mrs. Day to enroll her sons in the choir. Dorothy started to attend church every Sunday. She loved the songs and she became baptized and confirmed. At sixteen, she won a scholarship and enrolled at the University of Illinois.

College: Searching in Earnest

During Dorothy's two years at the university, she established deep friendships, began her journalistic career, and developed a keen awareness of social conditions. While writing pieces for a local paper, she observed the gap between the lives of rich and poor people. Subsequently, she joined the Socialist Party at the university. At this time, Dorothy was poor herself, working odd jobs and living-in with families in exchange for doing laundry and child care.



The Searching Young Journalist

When Dorothy was eighteen, her family moved to New York. Dorothy followed and took her first job as a journalist with the *New York Call*, a socialist newspaper.

Dorothy's first jail experience occurred when she accompanied a group of women suffragists to the White House to protest the treatment of other suffragists in jail. While in jail, Dorothy joined a hunger strike and suffered great emotional despair. Dorothy asked for a Bible and took great comfort from the psalms that expressed her own sorrow and hope. After the hunger strike succeeded, she again turned away from religion. Even so, being jailed was a significant experience for Dorothy, one that moved her from observation to participation, from being a passionate idealist to action.

A Time of Drifting

During these years, Dorothy led a bohemian lifestyle that she later described as dissolute, wasted, full of sensation and sensuality. The suicide of one of her circle overwhelmed Dorothy

with the tragedy of life. Dorothy had relationships with several men. After becoming pregnant, she had an abortion when she feared that the man she loved would leave her; the man deserted her anyway. She traveled to Europe, then drifted to Chicago, New Orleans, and briefly, California as a would-be screenwriter. This whole period saw her drifting and searching. She had little to ground her spirituality, so at times she found herself dabbling in religious practices. In 1925 a friend persuaded her to buy a beach house on Staten Island where she could settle down to study and write.

Natural Happiness

Life in the bungalow on Staten Island was a period of intense happiness. She entered into a common-law marriage with Forster Battingham, a biologist whose political views Dorothy shared. Like her, he decried injustice and suffering. Life seemed idyllic: leisurely, simple, , a cluster of friends close by. Later she reflected: It was a peace, curiously enough, divided against itself. I was happy but my very happiness made me know that there was a greater happiness to be obtained from life than any I had ever known... it was at this time that I began consciously to pray more. (Long Loneliness, p. 116) She started regularly attending Sunday Mass. Dorothy's growing absorption in religion dismayed Forster. He saw religion as morbid escapism, and any talk about it immediately threw up a wall between them.

Tamar Teresa and Conversion

Dorothy had thought herself barren, but became pregnant. Forster opposed bringing children into the world, so this development only created more conflict between them. During her pregnancy, Dorothy decided she would have her child baptized. Belonging to a faith, she thought, would give her child the order lacking in her own life. She prayed for the gift of faith for herself: "I was sure, yet not sure. I postponed the day of decision." She knew that if she became a Catholic, Forster would leave: "It was hard to contemplate giving up a mate in order that my child and I could become members of the Church. Forster wanted nothing to do with religion or with me if I embraced it. So I waited" (Long Loneliness, pp. 136-137).

After Tamar Teresa's birth and baptism, the tension between Forster and Dorothy increased. Over the next months, he left her and the baby numerous times, but always returned. Dorothy took the final step that ended her life with Forster: She was conditionally baptized, since she had already been baptized in the Episcopal church.

Love Is the Measure

Peter Maurin

Dorothy always insisted that Peter Maurin, not she, started the Catholic Worker Movement. Dorothy admired Peter both for the ideas he taught her and for his personal example of voluntary poverty and deep faith.

The Catholic Worker Movement

On 1 May 1933, in the depths of the Great Depression, The Catholic Worker newspaper made its debut with a first issue of twenty-five hundred copies. They called the paper The "Catholic" Worker because at the time many Catholics were poor. The Catholic Worker succeeded immediately, and circulation jumped to 100,000 by the end of the first year. Bundles of the paper found their way into parishes and schools around the country. Soon volunteers arrived to help with the work. Donations of food, clothing, and money came in to support them. A community

grew quickly to feed the homeless and unemployed people who streamed to them, and the first house of hospitality opened. Some Catholic workers who came to New York went to other cities to form their own Catholic Worker houses. Within a few years thirty-three Catholic Worker houses and farms dotted the country.

Controversy

The Catholic Worker Movement soon met resistance. Dorothy's opposition to war and her pacifist stand divided supporters for the movement. Schools canceled their subscriptions to *The Catholic Worker*. She was one of the few Catholic voices opposing World War II, basing her position on Christ's command in the Sermon on the Mount to love our enemies. After World War II, only eleven Catholic Worker houses still carried on.

In 1948 Dorothy spent an extended time with Tamar who had married and started her own family. As Tamar awaited the birth of her fourth child, the country air and her playful grandchildren delighted Dorothy.

The 1950s

The Catholic Worker had been arguing against the Atomic bomb since Hiroshima, and the subject was about to become a personal cause for Dorothy Day. In 1955, Dorothy, a group of Catholic Workers, and others led protests. Dorothy was jailed three times, once for a month. From this experience, Dorothy penned several strong articles about life in prison.



The 1960s

Since its beginnings in 1933, *The Catholic Worker* had carried articles about racism, the exploitation of black labor, and justice for minorities. When the civil rights movement gained momentum in the 1960s, other articles added a clear voice for equality and justice among people of all races. When Martin Luther King was killed, Dorothy wrote: Martin Luther King faced death daily and said a number of times that he knew he would be killed for the faith that was in him. The faith that men could live together as brothers. The faith in the Gospel teaching of nonviolence. The faith that man is capable of change, of growth, of growing in love. (Dorothy Day, *The Catholic Worker*, April 1968). Later, during the Vietnam war, Dorothy actively supported conscientious objectors and advocated only nonviolent protest.

Her Last Years

In 1970, at age seventy-three, Dorothy suffered from shortness of breath that came from water in her lungs, hardening of the arteries, and an enlarged heart. Medicine somewhat relieved the condition, but her heart was failing.

Traveling to India, Dorothy met Mother Teresa and spoke to the novice sisters about going to prison for the sake of the Gospels. In 1973, at age seventy-six, Dorothy joined Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers in California's San Joaquin Valley for a nonviolent demonstration against the Teamsters Union (IBT). She was arrested with other protesters and jailed for ten days. This was Dorothy's last imprisonment.

Her speech before the Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia on 6 August 1976 was her last. Dorothy spoke from the heart about her love of God, about the necessity of taking that love into all creation, and about the church that gave her the life of the Spirit. Shortly after this talk,

Dorothy suffered a heart attack. Virtually confined to bed, she wrote a few letters when her strength permitted. Her daughter and grandchildren made frequent visits. She died in the early evening of 29 November 1980 with Tamar at her side.



Dorothy's Spirituality

Dorothy Day's spirituality is marked by these characteristics:

Love of Scripture: Throughout her life, Dorothy received comfort and inspiration from the Bible, especially the Psalms, the Pauline writings, and the Gospels. They were part of her daily meditation. The example and teachings of Christ were at the heart of her spirituality.

Solidarity with the Poor: In the Catholic Worker community, Dorothy shared her daily energies with and on behalf of poor people. Her writings, direct practice of the works of mercy, and her own voluntary poverty bound her to poor, homeless, sick, and desperate people.

Personalism: Dorothy loved doing works of mercy because they allowed her to take direct and immediate action for her brothers and sisters in Christ and against the ills of society that robbed them of their life, freedom, and dignity. She wanted the fullness of life for herself and every person.

Prophetic Witness: By her public words and work, Dorothy sought to imitate Christ's witness against injustice, even when such witness seemed folly. Like Christ, she was critical of the powers and structures of injustice and endured ridicule and opposition for her witness.

Peacemaking: A steadfast pacifist, Dorothy opposed all wars and the use of force and violence to solve human problems. She practiced and promoted human dignity with the spiritual weapons of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, civil disobedience, and works of amendment.

A Sacramental Sense: Dorothy looked to sacramental celebrations, especially the Eucharist, for daily spiritual sustenance, and she saw the world, its people and all of nature, to be full of God's grandeur and love as well.

Gratitude: In good times and in bad, Dorothy had a keen sense of appreciation and learned to trust in the providence of God. Dorothy regularly expressed gratitude not only to God but to those around her and to The Catholic Worker's readers.

Dorothy for Today

Although Dorothy spurned the suggestion that she was a saint, she took seriously the importance of becoming one; saintly people could heal the ills of this world. Jesus took on humanity to show people how to be godly through acting justly, loving tenderly, and walking humbly.

Dorothy Day provides a model of the qualities of holiness: solidarity with and service to God's poor, promoting and being willing to suffer for justice, acting in charity, living in community, integrating faith and action through prayer, sacred ritual, and meditation. Dorothy Day may not always be a comfortable companion on the spiritual journey, but she will certainly be a wise, caring, and challenging one.

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Reflection Questions

1. What experiences of “broken-ness” did Dorothy Day go through in her life? How do you think this shaped her values and how she saw life? Use specific examples from her biography in explaining your answer.
2. What inspired her transformation from a life of drifting to one of service?
3. Choosing to baptize her daughter, Tamara, and to be baptized in the Catholic faith ultimately separated Dorothy from her husband. Do you think it is possible to stay together as family if both spouses have such opposing views about religion? Explain.
4. How role did the Catholic faith have in the way Dorothy lived her life personally and professionally? Give specific examples to support your answer.
5. Dorothy Day was a strong advocate for peace and non-violence, speaking out against several wars, including the Spanish Civil War, World War II, and the Vietnam War. Do you think peaceful solutions are always possible or do you believe there are some conditions where violence is necessary? Explain.