

**DOROTHY DAY (1897 – 1980) – a woman who said ‘yes’ to life and God.  
Carmelite Conversation with Clare McArdle 5 October 2021**

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**Who is Dorothy Day and what can she say to us today?**

Pope Francis in his address to the US Congress in September 2015 cited her as one of four of America’s sons and daughters we can all learn from. The others were Abraham Lincoln, Luther King and Thomas Merton.

Because she lived her beliefs, I will set out a chronological view of her life, then I will focus on a few of her beliefs and actions which we can discuss to see how they might help inform our own lives.

# BIOGRAPHY

## SEARCHING (1897 -1925) ages 0 - 28

Born in Brooklyn, New York 1897 not far from the Brooklyn bridge; one of 5 children (3 brothers and a sister)

Brought up in a middle-class nominal Protestant family. Father was a sportswriter, mother a calm hard worker.

Family moved to California in 1903 – Day recounts going to Sunday school with her neighbour a Methodist and says she began to “experience real piety” (LLp 20). She found a bible and remembered a “sense of holiness in holding the book in my hands.” (quoted in Jim Forest p5)

1906 San Francisco earthquake, 7.9 magnitude, San Andreas Fault and resulted in 3000 deaths and major devastation. Their house was a shambles, ‘cracked from roof to ground” (LL p 21) All the neighbours and her mother worked to serve those made homeless. She was 8 years old at this time. But this sense of a community working together stayed with her.

1906-17 family settled in Chicago.

She went through a pious stage again through contact with neighbours and with the Episcopal church where she attended church every Sunday. Here she formed a love of the Psalms which lasted through her life.

She remembers, as a 15year old, being aware that the destitute were considered worthless and there was very little compassion being shown by people she saw as Christians. She wanted an abundant life for herself and everyone. But could not see it happening through organised religion. The churches, she saw were kind to the poor but did not open its doors to them. She didn’t “see anyone taking off his coat and giving it to the poor. I didn’t see anyone having a banquet and calling in the lame, the halt and the blind.” (Forest p 13)

This led her to joining the Socialist Party at University, to which she had won a scholarship. Age 16. She consciously worked at rejecting religion.

1917 the family moved to New York. Day went with them giving up university and getting a job as a journalist on a Socialist newspaper.

She became very familiar with poverty in New York and moved into a tenement that was cold, smelly and you could hear the vermin in the walls.

As a journalist she covered many riots and demonstrations which she said often grew out of some case of human misery e.g. eviction, starvation (LL p 61)

Moved in radical circles – communists and labour organisers. Involved in protests, strikes and suffrage. Met Trotsky, Jack Reed, Eugene O’Neill and Hart Crane. Friends recognised in Dorothy religious longings which evidenced itself in her seeking comfort in a church where people would be quietly at prayer.

1917 jailed (16 days) with a group suffragists.

1918 worked as a nurse during the time of the influenza epidemic and saw many poor people die.

Aged 20 she fell madly in love with a man who had no desire to marry and this experience led to an abortion. (See Forest pp 35-37)

Few months later she married an older, wealthier man on the rebound. He took her to London and Europe during which she wrote a thinly disguised autobiography *The eleventh virgin*.

After a year she returned to Chicago with the marriage over. Returned to writing for radical papers, lived in the poor quarters, arrested and jailed for being a prostitute (mistakenly) but it gave her a view as to how the marginal and labour are treated by the law and the press.

During 1922-23 lived in New Orleans until she received some money for the film rights of she won an award for an autobiography thinly disguised *The eleventh Virgin*. The film was never made.

Aged 27 she returned to New York and used the money to buy a beach house on Staten Island to write and study.

### **NATURAL HAPPINESS, (1925 – 1932) ages 28 - 35**

Loved and lived with Forster Battingham, biologist, anarchist and atheist at Staten Island. Battingham had a great affinity with the natural world to which he introduced Dorothy. He did not believe in religion or marriage or anything that curtailed one's freedom. But his love for Dorothy was real.

She became more convinced of the existence of God and began to go to mass on Sundays and found it peaceful even if she did not understand the liturgy.

1926 daughter Tamar Therese was born. The Therese was after Therese of Avila whose books Dorothy had been reading. She met a Catholic nun who organised for Tamar's baptism and encouraged Day to get baptised herself. Dorothy was 29 years old.

Day wrote "No human creature could receive or contain so vast a flood of love and joy as I often felt after the birth of my child. With this came the need to worship to adore." (quoted in Forest p 47) Jordan comments that this period on Staten Island is where she discovered that the natural and the supernatural were not two distinct realms. "The natural often introduces the latter, after which life is forever altered". (Jordan p 19)

Forster Battingham remained steadfast in his refusal to marry and Day could no longer accept Forest's repudiation of her interests in religion and God. (LL p 144)

She made the most difficult decision and left Forster Battingham.  
1927 conditionally baptised in the Catholic Church.

But this brought no relief it was just a task she felt she had to do. Going to mass the following day she writes "I felt like a hypocrite as I got down on my knees, and shuddered at the thought of anyone seeing me." "Here I was, going over to the opposition, because the Church was lined up with property, with the wealthy, with capitalism, with all the forces of reaction." (quoted in Forest p 51)

She needed to make money to look after her daughter and travelled, for about 5 years. She worked as a script writer in California in 1929 just before the Stock Market Crash. In Mexico she lived amongst people for whom their Catholic faith was integral to life. She deeply loved Battingham and this was a period of grief and confusion. But also of comfort as she was discovering her faith. Merriman tells us that 5 years after leaving Forster, Dorothy recalled this time as having "been sick with the struggle to keep human love and love for God. It was not so much that she saw a dichotomy between the two but because she feared that in remaining with Forster, she would in the end lack the courage to follow her vocation as a Catholic." (Merriman 166)

Dorothy believed that it was through love of Forster that helped her find a deeper love for Christ. For her human love was a gift from God and this revealed the experience of being loved by God. (Merriman p 190) She noted that St Teresa of Avila (one of her influencers) said that we can measure our love for God by our love for our fellow human beings. (*From Union Square to Rome* p 162)

She went to Washington 1932 to cover the 'hunger' marches where people were demanding social legislation, unemployment insurance, old-age pension, relief for others and children and for work. As she watched the marchers she asked "...where was the Catholic leadership in the gathering of bands of men and women together, for the actual works of mercy that the comrades had always made part of their technique in reaching the workers?" (quoted in Merriman p 200)

After this demonstration she prayed that she would use her talents for her fellow workers, for the poor. (LL p 166)

At this stage, she realised that she did not know personally one Catholic layman. She had religious faith and a social conscience but no community. She felt useless "How little, how puny my work had been since becoming a Catholic, I thought. How self-centered, how ingrown, how lacking in sense of community!" (quoted in Forest p 55)

When she returned to New York from Washington she found in her home – Peter Maurin – the French peasant "whose spirit and ideas...will dominate the rest of my life." (LL p 166).

## **LOVE IS THE MEASURE (1932 -1949), ages 36 - 52**

Peter Maurin – her first impressions of him was that he talked in terms of ideas not personalities – never gossiped- and he stressed the importance of theory. He had a vision that all would stretch out to help each other and through that grow closer to God. He was steeped in the history of the Catholic Church and shared his knowledge with her. He had a Franciscan attitude toward both property and money. He had none of either and rejoiced in poverty. (Forest p 57)

They were both interested in social reconstruction based on non-violence and love. Peter told Dorothy Day that she was the person to work with him to implement his program of action namely:

- Round-table discussions
- Houses of hospitality
- Agronomic universities.

The paper *The Catholic Worker* was born in 1933 and sold for one cent a copy. The office was Day's kitchen in the apartment she shared with her brother and his wife. (The paper is still in publication and still for a nominal rate.) Dorothy was 35 or 36 at the time.

The paper was directed at changing the system for the poor, the dispossessed, the exploited. (LL p 204.

The paper attracted many volunteers to help with distribution, writing, printing etc. People gave donations to keep it going. Within a few months circulation rose to 75,000. (Forest p 62)

### **Hospitality**

Dorothy's apartment became a natural meeting place for anyone to come to talk. Day with the others took turns at cooking, cleaning, as well as being the editor and street seller. (LL p 185)

The need for hospitality grew, and bigger houses were sought. Within 3 years houses started in other cities and counties as a result of the early volunteers returning home and establishing houses of hospitality. One still operates in Brisbane, QLD.

By 1937 in New York about four hundred unemployed men came daily for a Catholic Worker breakfast. (Merriman p 89)

Day was interested in changing the social system that created such injustices and responded to criticisms that by providing hospitality, she was maintaining the present order.

"..we consider the spiritual and corporal Works of Mercy and the following of Christ to be the best revolutionary technique and a means for changing the social order rather than perpetuating it. Did not

the thousands of monasteries, with their hospitality, change the entire social pattern of their day?" (CW 1940 quoted in Merriman p 89)

Spiritual acts of mercy, Day described as "instructing the ignorant, counselling the doubtful, rebuking the sinner, bearing wrongs, patiently forgiving all injuries, and praying for the living and the dead." (*Loaves and fishes* p xiii)

Day adopted voluntary poverty and many of the members of the Catholic Worker movement also did. Day stressed the communitarian aspect of the Catholic Worker movement and believed it was only through the group's sharing voluntary poverty together that members could have a truly enriched life (Merriman p 85)

Her description of some of the hospitality houses where she also lived with the workers:

"Many of the houses throughout the country are without central heating and have to be warmed by stoves in winter. There are back-yard toilets for some even now. The first Philadelphia house had to use water drawn from one spigot at the end of an alley, which served half a dozen other houses. It was lit with oil lamps. It was cold and damp and so unbelievably poverty-stricken that little children coming to see who were the young people meeting there exclaimed that this could not be a *Catholic* place: it was too poor. We must be Communists." (LL p 187)

Money was always a problem. They survived via donations, their own labour, her writings and talks. Dorothy had great faith in God to provide and money seemed to come just in time.

**Farms:** A number of farms were also established but they were problematic as there was always a lack of "skills, money and equipment; lack of leadership too is a factor" (LL p 234). Problems also arose through conflict, and for some families the desire for private ownership trumped a willingness for communal living.

**Retreat houses:** Retreats had been the province of priests and religious but in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century they were also extended to laypersons as an instrument for renewal in Catholic spirituality. (Merriman p 131) Retreats were seen as a means for personal growth in Christ and for attainment of both inner and outer peace. They were not without controversy amongst the hierarchy.

Day said she needed the retreats: "... I too must drink at these good springs so that I may not be an empty cistern and unable to help others". (LL p263)

### **Pacifism**

Day took a pacifist message from the gospels and advocated as such during the Spanish Civil War. In this she often went against the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and lost many subscriptions and support. In the Spanish Civil War, the Catholic hierarchy had rallied behind Franco who presented himself as defender of the Catholic faith. Before the Civil War the CW was printing 160,000 copies a month which went to barely 50,000 at the end of the war. (Forest p 73)

In 1939 WWII began. The CW maintained a pacifist stance whilst campaigning against fascism and anti-Semitism.

She was condemned by some Catholic bishops, a number of Catholic Worker staff and supporters left and subscriptions dropped. But Dorothy did not change her stance.

### **Writer**

In 1939 Day wrote a new autobiography *From Union Square to Rome*(1938) to explain her conversion. By this time, she was a well-known radical writer. She had many speaking engagements and a vast network of correspondents.

### **Mother**

Day also encountered many difficulties as a single mother, bringing up her precious daughter Tamar. Tamar had to share her mother with the Catholic Worker family. Day says her working day started with daily mass and often ended around mid-night. Some of the members regarded her as their

mother and sought her attention at the cost to Tamar. (LL p 237). Her times away from Tamar were a source of anguish and worry for Day. A journal entry in 1936:

“..the little time I have with her, being constantly on the go, having to leave her in the care of others, sending her away to school so that she can lead a regular life and not be subject to the moods and vagaries of the crowd of us! This is probably the cruellest hardship of all. She is happy, she does not feel torn constantly as I do. And then the doubt arises probably she too feels I am failing her...Never before have I had such a complete sense of failure, of utter misery.” (Quoted in forest p 78). At 16 Tamar insisted on marrying David Hennessy which she did at age 18. Day had 9 grandchildren.

1949 Peter Maurin dies

### **FINAL YEARS (1950 – 1980) ages 53 – 83**

The demands for hospitality continued unabated and Day felt she ought to be able to do more. The demands of her were great; she was like the mother of a very large family.

She went to jail 4 times between 1955 – 1959 for acts of civil disobedience including for publicly non complying with “duck and cover” air-raid drills in NY city. (Hennessy p196) She remained a pacifist and was vocal in her condemnation of the escalation of fear being fuelled by the government during the Cold War.

1950 +McCarthy era in America and the search for the enemy within was a major political theme. Day was often accused of being a communist. She wrote of her debt to Communists in their concern for the poor.

1952 her book *The long loneliness* published and acclaimed.

In 1955, Day became a professed Benedictine oblate. She had been interested for a long time on the relationship of work and prayer and communal living in the Benedictine monastic tradition.

She was involved in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, was a correspondent with Tomas Merton and published his poetry and essays in the Catholic Worker and worked with the Berrigan Brothers. She was shot at while visiting the Koinonia community (a Christian agricultural community of black and white) (Forest p 103)

This was the time of the pontificate of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council and the time of the Marxist revolt in Cuba.

In 1963 she was part of a pilgrimage of Women for Peace to Rome. She had lived to hear the Pope urge everyone to work for peace; that with modern weapons it was irrational to think war could be considered a fit means to restore violated rights.

She made two more trips to Rome: once in 1965 as part of a community of women urging peace and again in 1967 when she was 70 as an honoured guest for the International Congress of the Laity.

She was very involved in the anti-Vietnam protests. She challenged the American bishops for their support of the war. Cardinal Spellman visited American troops in Vietnam and told them they were engaged in a struggle for civilization. Dorothy wondered if “these princes of the Church” are not blinded to Christ’s presence in the “the enemy” because of their terror of the enemy. (Forest p 118)

“We are all one, all one body, Chinese, Russians, Vietnamese, and He had *commanded* us to love one another. (Forest p 119)

IN 1970 she suffered from shortness of breath and was diagnosed with water on in her lungs, hardening of the arteries and an enlarged heart. The fatigue caused by this condition meant she had to cancel a number of speaking engagements and realised she needed to relinquish the role of active leadership within the Catholic Worker movement. (Merriman p 208)

Later in 1970 she undertook an extensive trip that included Australia, India, Tanzania, Hong Kong, Rome and England. She met Mother Teresa. In 1971 she travelled to Eastern Europe and Russia

Imprisoned for the last time age 76 protesting for justice for farm workers in California.

In 1975 Dorothy announced her retirement from day-to-day responsibilities. She continued to write for the CW.

She lived her last years on a Catholic Worker community for homeless women in New York.

Died in 1980, aged 83, with her daughter Tamar present.

2000 the Holy See recognised the cause for the beatification of Dorothy Day giving her the title “servant of God”.

### **Testimonies by some who worked with her**

Jim Forest, one of the Catholic Workers, commented that the photos of Dorothy present a somewhat bleak personality but nothing could be further from the truth. It was so easy to be in her company, she made each person feel special and welcomed. She was a great story teller and a great listener. When she was absent she left a hole that no one could fill. She was an example of active love. (Forest p 152)

Patrick Jordan and his wife knew Dorothy in her 70s when they worked in the Catholic Worker in New York city. He says Dorothy “was the most self-reflective and consistently self-aware person I have known.” (Jordan p 2). She was more demanding of herself than of others. She could be crabby but about something but it would never stay with her. She was a pleasure to with and no one felt left out in her presence. She loved beauty – natural, music, art and was a great reader. She exuded a natural authority and this did rankle with some people and she was tagged with descriptors like “the abbess” “the queen”, “the anarch” “the supreme matriarch”. (Jordan p 9) Dorothy was a person at peace with herself and even in her later years there was a “liveliness and energy in her speech that conveyed not only her seriousness but also her wit, resolve, and sense of joy.” (Jordan p 13)

# WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM HER TODAY?

## Mystical body of Christ

In a letter February 1934:

“We have been trying from the start of our work to link up the liturgy with the Church’s social doctrine, realizing that the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ is at the root of both...”  
(Merriman p 77)

“For the total Christian, the goad of duty is not needed – always prodding one to perform this or that good deed. Is it not a duty to help Christ, it is a privilege.” We give hospitality to those needing it “not for the sake of humanity. Not because it might be Christ who stays with us, comes to see us, takes up our time. Not because these people remind us of Christ,...but because they *are* Christ, asking us to find room for Him, exactly as He did at the first Christmas.” ( Quoted in Ellsberg p 97 Room for Christ December 1945).

“All our life is bound up with other people; for almost all of us happiness and unhappiness are conditioned by our relationship with other people. What a simplification of life it would be if we forced ourselves to see that everywhere we go is Christ, wearing out socks we have to darn, eating the food we have to cook, laughing with us, walking with us, silent with us, sleeping with us... He [Christ] made heaven hinge on the way we act towards Him in his disguise of commonplace, frail and ordinary human beings. “ (“Room for Christ CW 1945 quoted in Merriman p 91)

In 1936 Day gives this justification for supporting union strikes etc. and to differentiate their approach from that of the Communists:

“Let us be honest and confess that it is the social order which we wish to change. The workers are never going to be satisfied, no matter how much pay they get, no matter what their hours are. ....

The popes have hit the nail on the head. “Religion teaches the rich man and the employer that their work people are not their slaves; that they must respect in every man his dignity as a man and as a Christian; that labor is an honorable employment: and that it is shameful and inhuman to treat men like chattels to make money by, or to look upon them merely as so much muscle or physical power.”....

We are not losing sight of the fact that our end is spiritual. We are not losing sight of the fact that these better conditions of labor are means to an end...

We reiterate the slogan of the old I.W.W.: “An injury to one is an injury to all.” St Paul says, “When the health of one member of the Mystical Body suffers, the health of the whole body is lowered.”  
(Quoted in Ellsberg *By little and by little* p 242)

## Creating a community

Day often referred to the Catholic Worker as a family and a community. (Merriman p 84) Given all the problems encountered with the sort of communal living on the farms and in the houses of hospitality, Day admitted in 1956 that their vision of community was still not clear. (Merriman p 85) Her ideal was that the community hold all things in common like the early Christian communities. Her solution to these problems was to deepen our “own interior life and pray for understanding” (quoted in Merriman p 85)

## Acting – working as followers of Christ

### *Role of the laity*

In a 1963 address in England, Day addressed relationships between the Church and the CW as an example of the liberty that there is in the church. “the layman should go ahead and quit being

dependent and priest-ridden” (Jordan p 67) “We must have the courage to form our conscience and follow it, regardless of the point of view of cardinal or bishop”. In addressing social problems, Day believed that we had to build new institutions, to find new ways of dealing with social problems and not to be afraid of making mistakes. For the “truth is the truth and proceeds from the Holy Spirit, and so we follow it wherever we find it.”

### ***Patience***

When we have spiritual reading at meals, when we have the rosary at night, when we have study groups, forums, when we go out to distribute literature at meetings, or sell it on street corners, Christ is there with us. What we do is very little. But it is like the little boy with a few loaves and fishes. Christ took that little and increased it. He will do the rest. What we do is so little we may seem to be constantly failing. But so did He fail. He met with apparent failure on the Cross. But unless the seed fall into the earth and die, there is no harvest.

And why must we see results? Our work is to sow. Another generation will be reaping the harvest. “ (1940 quoted in Ellsberg *little by little* p 92)

### ***Hospitality***

“All Christians are called to be hospitable. But it is more than serving a meal or filling a bed, opening our door – it is to open ourselves, our hearts, to the needs of others. Hospitality is not just shelter, but the quality of welcome behind it. “ (CW 1978 as quoted in Merriman p 92)

In *Loaves and fishes*, Day observes that the same sort of people that go to the municipal lodging houses also go to them but people commented on how much violence there was at the municipal lodges and the many times ambulances would come to take away the injured. She noted that in the 30 years their houses had no violence. The occasional drunks “who get disorderly and rowdy, broken windows, an occasional blow struck” (L&f p 213) She thought it was the understanding and friendliness that helped create a sense of order and peace in their home.

### ***Practice***

“We must practice the presence of God. He said that when two or three are gathered together, there He is in the midst of them. He is with us in our kitchens, at our tables, on our breadlines, with our visitors, on our farms. When we pray for our material needs, it brings us close to His humanity. He, too, needed food and shelter, He, too, warmed His hands at a fire and lay down in a boat to sleep.” (1940 quoted in Ellsberg *little by little* p 92)

“It is surely a exercise of faith for us to see Christ in each other. But it is through such exercises that we grow, and the joy of our vocation assures us that we are on the right path.” (quoted in Jordan p 79)

In *From union square to Rome* (p 158) Day says “prayer is the exercise for the soul, just as bending and stretching is the exercise of the body.”

“It often has seemed to me that most people instinctively protect themselves from being touched too closely by the suffering of others. They turn from it, and they make this a habit. ..But one who has accepted hardship; and poverty as the way in life in which to walk, lays himself open to this susceptibility to the sufferings of others.”(In *From union square to Rome* p7)

### ***Voluntary poverty***

“By “voluntary poverty” Dorothy did not mean an idealization of misery and squalor. She was careful to distinguish between the dignity and freedom of voluntary poverty -the freedom that comes when there is nothing one fears to lose – and the bondage of destitution. The latter was the fruit of injustice and a sign of institutionalized sin. The poverty she espoused meant reducing the area given to self-interest, learning to locate the ultimate source of security elsewhere than in material values. To become poor was to become dependent on God and available to others, and to withdraw from the

spoils of exploitation, for as the church Fathers had frequently taught, all that we owned beyond our needs was stolen from those who were hungry.” (Ellsberg *By little and by little* p xxxv)

We need always to be thinking and writing about it, for if we are not among its victims its reality fades from us. We must talk about poverty because people insulated by their own comfort lose sight of it.” (1953 *Loaves and fishes* p 67)

### ***Evangelise***

Jordan writes of Day being the complete Catholic package: an incomparable instructor in church history, practice, devotion, and lore. She would instruct via conversations while working, telling stories, chatting around the dining table.

“Together with the Works of Mercy, feeding, clothing, and sheltering our brothers, we must indoctrinate. We must “give reason for the faith that is in us.” Otherwise we are scattered members of the Body of Christ, we are not “all members one of another.” Otherwise our religion is an opiate, for ourselves alone, for our comfort or for our individual safety or indifferent custom. ...

If we do not keep indoctrinating, we lose the vision. And if we lose the vision, we become merely philanthropists, doling out palliatives.” (quoted in Ellsberg *By little and by little* p 91)

### ***Prayer and contemplation***

Dorothy saw prayer and the Eucharist as the foundation stone for all their work.

“[the Mass brings] us into the closest of all contacts with our Lord Jesus Christ, enabling us literally to “put on Christ,” as St. Paul said, and to being to say with Him, “Now, not I live, but Jesus Christ in me.” With a strong consciousness of this, we remember too those lines, “without Me, ye can do nothing,” and” with Me you can do all things.” ... But the Mass begins our day, it is our food and drink, our delight, our refreshment, our courage, our light.” (CW 1962 as quoted in Merriman p 98)

Day considered that it is fear that precipitates violence. Overcoming fear was an essential challenge and lifelong process. She drew attention to scriptures. “Do not fear for I am with you” (Isa 43:5) “Do not be afraid little flock” (Luke 12:32) “Perfect love casts out fear” (1John 4:18)

Dorothy since “we live in a time of gigantic evil” it was hopeless to combat it “by any other means than that of sanctity.” (quoted in Jordan p 84) “To think of overcoming such evil by material means – by alleviations, by changes to the social order – all this is utterly hopeless”. “Scripture, on the one hand, and the Eucharist, the Word made flesh, on the other have in them the strength which no power on earth can withstand”. The Mass “is the most important work of the day” (quoted in Jordan p 84)

### **Possible questions for consideration.**

Day believed that where we foster love it would grow. Does that approach resonate?

Do I share Day’s view of daily worship especially the Eucharist? Do I consider it a matter of necessity or is it optional? How can it gain traction amongst the younger generations? Does the liturgy require different contextualising for today’s world?

Day’s evangelism is a matter of giving witness, explaining and justifying actions in the light of the gospel. How can we evangelise?

Can Day’s belief in the power and leadership of the laity provide us with some hope today for the future of the Church? What sort of laity led action are we aware of and which can be expanded?

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