

Celebrating Women Witnesses

A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

On May Day 1933 Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin co-founded the Catholic Worker movement and newspaper in New York City. Since then Day's life of voluntary poverty, direct action on behalf of the worker and the poor, and absolute nonviolence and pacifism, have been a constant inspiration for both Christians and non-Christians. Without dismissing the importance of other leaders in the history of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, it is fair to say that Dorothy Day remains, at the dawn of the new millennium, the radical conscience of American Catholicism.

Popular interest in Dorothy Day has grown since her death on November 29, 1980. Such interest only increased when the Vatican announced on March 17, 2000 that it had approved starting the process for Day's canonization as a saint of the Roman Catholic Church. Scholars, too, have taken an interest in Dorothy Day. In addition to her own writings (eight books and several hundred articles), there are numerous critical studies of Day's life and of the Catholic Worker movement. (See References) These studies all point to a conspicuous entwined thread in the tapestry of Day's life, the unique combination of social activism and deep religious feeling. The dual passion of social justice and intimacy with God was present in Day's life from her early years.

Early Years and Young Woman

Dorothy Day was born in Brooklyn Heights, New York, on November 8, 1897 to Christian parents who did not practice their faith. The most religious of the seven member Day family (one sister and three brothers), young Dorothy typically went to church by herself. Day's religious involvement did not last beyond her Episcopalian

baptism at age twelve, however. The teen-aged Day, an inveterate reader, turned her attention away from religion to the social writings of anarchists and revolutionaries

like Pytor Kropotkin and Pierre Proudon, and the socially conscious novels of Charles Dickens, Jack London, and Upton Sinclair.

While at the University of Illinois at Urbana, the young leftist rejected religion outright and joined the Socialist Party.

Returning to New York City after just two years of college, Day joined the profession of her father and brothers. She wrote for the socialist publications the *Call* and the *Masses* and enjoyed the bohemian nightlife of Greenwich Village with her journalist friends. In 1917 Day journeyed to Washington, D.C., with a group of women to picket the White House with the suffragists. Enduring her first arrest for civil disobedience, Day survived the indignities of Occoquan Prison and a ten-day hunger strike. Though as a radical and lifelong anarchist she never voted, and so was not a suffra-

gist herself, Day joined the demonstration "to uphold the rights of political prisoners" (LL, 72).

With the suppression of the *Masses* by the government in 1917, Day began work as a nurses' aid during World War I. After an obsessive love affair with a womanizing newspaperman, Lionel Moise, and the abortion of their child, Day married literary promoter Barkeley Tobey "on the rebound" (Miller, 143). The mature love of Day's life was Forster Batterham, a biologist and anarchist with whom Day entered a common law marriage in 1924 after her divorce from Tobey.

DOROTHY DAY

Conscience of American Catholicism



Eileen Cantin Verbus

On Staten Island, where they shared life in an ocean cottage, Batterham opened up the beauties of nature to Day. He also fathered their child, Tamar Teresa, who was born in March 1926. Unlike many people, including many saints, who experience a conversion to God out of a sense of guilt or sorrow, Day turned to God in joy. "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 . . . It was because through a whole love, both physical and spiritual, I came to know God" (LL, 139 and 140). During these happy years Day began to pray daily and to attend Mass. Day's decision to have Tamar baptized, and her own entrance into the Catholic Church in December 1927, led to the demise of her relationship with Batterham, a confirmed atheist.

A Catholic Radical

The next five years of Day's life represent a transition and preparation for the work she would begin with Peter Maurin at the end of 1932. On her own as a single mother, Day worked at various jobs all the while living with the poor. On assignment in Washington, D.C. in December 1932 for the Catholic publications *Commonweal* and *America*, Day ached to join the Communist organized Hunger March and Farmer's Convention, not just to report on them. The dual passion of her life, social concern and deep love for God, could not, it seemed, be reconciled through Catholicism. Only the communists and socialists, atheists though they were, were doing anything about the plight of the poor.

Before leaving the capital, Day went to the National Shrine at the Catholic University of America and implored God that some way might open up for her to use what talents she possessed for her fellow workers and for the poor. Returning to her New York apartment, she was greeted by Peter Maurin, a wandering and learned French peasant, who had heard about her from the editor of *Commonweal*. Day always believed that Maurin had come to her in the last month of 1932 as an answer to her anguished prayer.

Maurin immediately proceeded to indoctrinate Day in the history and teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. He also shared with her his ideas for a radical form of Catholic life based on a "three-point program:" houses of hospitality where the works of mercy could be practiced daily; roundtable discussions for the clarification of thought; and, farming communes where workers and scholars would live and work together on the land (LF, 21-22). Maurin also encouraged Day to

publish a newspaper that would instruct readers in Roman Catholic social teaching and the rights of workers. Maurin's ideas provided Day with a model for radical Christian living and direct action. A synthesis of social justice and intimacy with God from within Catholicism now seemed possible.

Day's Absolute Nonviolence and Pacifism

Almost immediately Day and the writers of the *Catholic Worker* began to live in voluntary poverty and to take in the hungry and homeless. The charity, voluntary poverty, and communal life of the Catholic Worker community soon became admired by the wide readership of the newspaper. When Day declared in 1936 that she and the *Catholic Worker* were "pacifist" in response to the Spanish Civil War, however, she drew opposition from a majority of Catholics. Her pacifist stand during World War II resulted in a steep drop in subscriptions to the *Catholic Worker*. But Day would not be moved from the unshakable conviction that the followers of Christ could not kill their brothers and sisters.

Day's uncompromising stand on pacifism ("anti-warism") and absolute nonviolence (opposition to any use of force) through all the wars of the twentieth century represents a modern Catholic corollary to the absolute nonviolence and pacifism of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Her stand is stunning in its Roman Catholic context. Remarkably, Day followed neither the just war teaching of her recently chosen Church, nor the Marxist view she held during her pre-conversion leftist years supporting a violent overthrow of the capitalist owners of industry (FUSR, 144). Day's absolute nonviolence was grounded in her personal relationship with Jesus. "It is better to obey God than men," Day asserted, quoting St. Peter (Acts 5.29; OPS, 289). The origin and strength of Day's deep conviction about nonviolence, ultimately, came from her spirituality; that is, from her own lived experience of Jesus Christ.

When thousands of Roman Catholics demonstrated against the war in Vietnam in the 1960's and 70's, they stood on the shoulders of Dorothy Day who had begun using nonviolent tactics in the 1930's. Out of her leftist past, Day brought into modern Catholicism tactics of nonviolent resistance and direct action like the strike, the picket, the boycott, the nonpayment of federal taxes that support war, refusal to register for the draft, civil disobedience, and giving witness to Christ's commands

from jail (the last of Day's six or seven jail terms was in 1973 with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers). Day's mature adult Roman Catholic spirituality, thus, was shaped in important ways by the convictions and commitments of her early years as a leftist radical.

Day as Woman

Day's strong sense of herself as a woman and mother begs the question of Day's relation to contemporary feminist concerns. Day never became a public advocate of the women's movements of the twentieth century. There are affinities with feminist perspectives in her life work and actions, however. In her written words, Day often maintained the conventional gender roles of a patriarchal social order. Her rhetoric, though, did not match her actual work and life choices.

Certain references in her writings indicate that Day's

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 . . . It was because through a whole love, both physical and spiritual, I came to know God.

The Long Loneliness

language about women often conformed to the conventional patriarchal outlook of early 20th century America which assumed that women are different from and inferior to men. Day's actions and her life work, however, suggest a movement beyond this standard gender ideology. She was, after all, a professional woman, a journalist and editor, author, single working mother and grandmother, social critic and dissenter, and the leader of a religious movement in a male-led Church.

Still, Day did not join the feminist movement, nor did she see herself as a feminist. To the extent that the women's movement was initially the project of educated, middle-class, mostly white women, its calls for social reform would have been insufficiently radical for Day. By the time the feminist critique significantly expanded the women's movement beyond its limited class and racial origins, Day was already in the last years of her life.

Nevertheless, there are affinities with feminist perspectives in Day's life work and praxis. Six pro-feminist concerns reflected in Day's life are:

- the active participation of women in the work force and in the professions;
- support for working mothers;
- the importance of community;
- the intimate connection between diverse social problems like work, gender, class, race, and capitalism and war, as well as the deep connection between the physical and the spiritual;
- the attention to human experience as an essential component in the search for truth;
- and, finally, the disregard, in practice, for assigned gender roles in work.

At the *Catholic Worker* both men and women shared in the work of caring for the needy and publishing a newspaper.

What We Can Learn From Dorothy Day

As with any great figure, Dorothy Day has much to teach us. First, like the faithful women who both stood underneath the cross of Christ and carried his message into the world, Day is a model of faithful, courageous, and prophetic discipleship. Never one to retreat, Day forcefully engaged in and responded to the tough issues in the twentieth-century Church and society. Second, Day's life demonstrates that there is no opposition in Catholicism between a passionate commitment to social justice and intimacy with God. Third, Day's life represents some important concerns of women (see above). Fourth, Day trusted in her own spirituality. Had she not been deeply convinced of her own experience of Christ, she never would have challenged the just war teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

Finally, Day completely trusted God's love for her and did not wallow in guilt over the mistakes of the past. She never disparaged her pre-conversion life experiences. Day's "non-Catholic," indeed non-Christian, early life experiences were a vital part of her mature adult spirituality. After her conversion to Catholicism, Day often commented on the ongoing influence of her leftist past by quoting St. Augustine: "The bottle always smells of the liquor it once held" (LF, 20). Thanks to Dorothy Day many Roman Catholics now know the power and, indeed, the religious use of tactics of nonviolent resistance and direct action in opposing injustice.

Dorothy Day References:

The *Catholic Worker* still appears nine times a year and sells for a penny a copy.

Among Day's eight books are: *From Union Square to Rome*, 1938 (FUSR in text); *Loaves and Fishes*, 1963 (LF in text); *On Pilgrimage: The Sixties*, 1972 (OPS in text); and the modern spiritual classic, *The Long Loneliness*, 1952 (LL in text).

On Day's life and work, see William Miller's biography, *Dorothy Day*, 1982; Nancy L. Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker*, 1984; June O'Connor, *The Moral Vision of Dorothy Day: A Feminist Perspective*; and Robert Ellsberg, ed., *The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*, 1983.

On the Catholic Worker movement, see Mel Piehl, *Breaking Bread: The Catholic Worker and the Origin of Catholic Radicalism in America*, 1982; and Patrick G. Coy, ed., *A Revolution of the Heart*, 1988.

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Eileen Cantlin Verbus

The feast day for Dorothy Day is celebrated on November 29. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that day or at another appropriate time.

In 2001, **FutureChurch** developed the original **Celebrating Women Witnesses** projects in creative partnership with Call To Action. Since that time hundreds of educational and prayer programs have been held in schools and churches throughout the U.S., Canada, Europe, Latin America, Malaysia and Africa. Currently FutureChurch is solely responsible for administering this very popular project. A specially designed **Teacher's Edition** is also available from FutureChurch which includes lesson plans and special projects geared to junior and senior high school students.

Send for our other organizing packets- **More! Celebrating Women Witnesses, Spanish Celebrando Mujeres Testigas, Women In Church Leadership, Future of Priestly Ministry, and Save Our Parish Communities** (\$10 donation each + \$2s/h)- or order online at www.futurechurch.org.

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A Prayer Service in Honor of Dorothy Day

The Conscience of American Catholicism

Opening Song: *God of Day and God of Darkness* (Text by Marty Haugen #493 Oregon Catholic Press [OCP] *Today's Missal Music* [TMM] 2001)

Call to Prayer: LEADER (*This would be an appropriate time for a female pastoral minister to preside, or perhaps one male and one female presider*).

Readings:

Reader 1: "We emphasize always the necessity of smallness. The ideal of course, would be that each Christian... should take in one of the homeless as an honored guest, remembering Christ's words: 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these ye have done it unto me.' The poor are more conscious of this obligation than those who are comfortably off. I know of any number of cases where families already overburdened and crowded, have taken in orphaned children, homeless aged, poor who were not members of their families but who were akin to them because they were fellow sufferers in this disordered world." (p.36. *Meditations* by Dorothy Day, Paulist Press, 1970)

Reader 2: "A long day full of difficulties. A priest called up and said he was sending over a young woman who had threatened to kill herself. She had already made one attempt, he said ...She was without work and without shelter, having been put out of her room early that morning. We talked to her, gave her breakfast, some clothes and sent her up to the House of Hospitality." (*Meditations* p. 24 All quotations from *Meditations* used with permission of Tamar Hennessey, daughter of Dorothy Day)

Response *Blest are they the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of God. Blest are they full of sorrow, they shall be consoled.*" (from "Blest Are They" by David Haas #565 in *Today's Missal Music*)

REFRAIN: *Rejoice and be glad, blessed are you, holy are you. Rejoice and be glad, yours is the kingdom of God.* (from "Blest Are They" by David Haas #565 in *Today's Missal Music* [TMM] 2001 Oregon Catholic Press [OCP])

Reader 1 "One day last summer, I saw a man sitting down by one of the piers, all alone. He sat on a log, and before him was a wooden box on which he had spread out on a paper his meager supper. He sat there and ate with some pretense of human dignity, and it was one of the saddest sights I have ever seen." (*Meditations*. p. 21)

Reader 2 "And speaking of food, Peter Maurin arrived in from the country after an absence of four weeks. Discussing economics, he displayed his grocery and newspaper bills for the month -- \$9.00. Peter is in favor of a big pot on the stove and a continual supply of vegetable soup, constantly renewed from day to day -- an idea shared by both Don Bosco and the I.W.W.'s. After supper we went out to pushcart market and bought a large pot for 79 cents, a ten quart one, and while the workers school is in session, we shall dine on soup." (*Meditations* p.25)

Response: *Blest are they the lowly ones, they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst, they shall have their fill.*
REFRAIN

Reader 1 "Within the Catholic worker, there has always been such emphasis placed on the works of mercy, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the harborless, that it has seemed to many of our intellectuals a top-heavy performance. There was early criticism that we were taking on "rotten lumber that would sink the ship." "Derelict" was the term used most often. As though Jesus did not come to live with the lost, to save the lost, to show them the way. His love was always shown most tenderly to the poor, the derelict, the prodigal son, so that he would leave the ninety-nine just ones to go after the one." (*Meditations* p. 68)

Reader 2: “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....It was because through a whole love, both physical and spiritual, I came to know God. (*The Long Loneliness* Harper San Francisco 1952, pp. 139, 140)

Response: *Blest are they who show mercy, mercy shall be theirs. Blest are they the pure of heart, they shall see God.*
REFRAIN

Reader 1 “All our talks about peace and the weapons of the spirit are meaningless unless we try in every way to embrace voluntary poverty and not work in any position, any job, that contributes to war, not to take any job whose pay comes from the fear of war, of the atom bomb. We must give up our place in this world, sacrifice children, family, wife, mother, and embrace poverty, and then we will be laying down life itself.” (*Meditations* p. 53)

Reader 2 “A German woman doctor, who spent a year in a concentration camp for refusing to sterilize epileptics said that one form of torture inflicted was to turn blinding lights into the cells so that the women could not sleep. This is to be keeping vigil with Christ. To keep vigil voluntarily is to be sharing his pain of the world, this agony of the Mystical Body. Insomnia may be keeping vigil. (*Meditations* p.91)

Response: *Blessed are they who seek peace they are the children of God. Blessed are they who suffer in faith, the Glory of God is theirs.* REFRAIN

Reader 1: “The demands of the marchers were for social legislation, for unemployment insurance, for old-age pensions, for relief for mothers and children, for work. I remember seeing one banner having to do with man’s dignity, his ownership of and responsibility for the means of production. The years have passed and most of the legislation called for by those workers is on the books now. I wonder how many realize just how much they owe the hunger marchers, who endured fast and cold, who were like the Son of Man when he said, “the foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.” (LL p. 166)

Reader 2: “When the demonstration was over and I had finished writing my story, I went to the national shrine at the Catholic University on the feast of the Immaculate Conception. There I offered up a 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.” (LL p. 166)

Response: *Blest are you who suffer hate all because of me. Rejoice and be glad, yours is the kingdom; shine for all to see.*
REFRAIN

Gospel: Matthew 25: 31-46

Shared Reflection (LEADER *may give very brief reflection as a prelude to sharing. Suggested discussion starter: “What does it mean in our city, country, world economy to practice justice so that workers receive a just wage, the hungry are fed and the poor are clothed? Allow 15 minutes for discussion. If it is a large group ask people to break into smaller groups of 5-6. Consider using Call to Action’s Focus on Sweatshops as a resource.(brochure included with this prayer service) At the end of the discussion invite each person to commit to one action in behalf of justice for the poor of our city, our world and write it down on papers you have provided.*

Prayers of Intercession: (*A sung response known to the group would be appropriate here*)

Offering. *While the basket is being passed sing Prayer of St. Francis (by Sebastian Temple # 537 in Today’s Missal) A collection for the local hunger center or peace and justice group may be taken. As the basket comes around, participants include their commitment papers.*

Anointing for mission (*have available oil or lotion for anointing on the forehead or hands*).

LEADER “Spirit of power, time and again throughout history you have anointed your servants, such as Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, sending them on mission: to speak your word to the poor, to heal the sick, to free captives -- always renewing the face of the earth. (LEADER extends hands over oil)

Come Spirit of the Living One. Bless this oil of anointing. Make it an oil of gladness and of healing, a lotion of strength and tenderness. We pray that by this anointing our hands and hearts might be strengthened for the work that lies ahead, that we might be compassionate to human need, tender and strong in our care for one another, genuine in our friendship, and faithful to the commitments we have made.

ALL: We pray that through the power of this compelling Spirit we might know the unity that is ours: sisters and brothers of a common family, sharing a single home on this, our earth, as children of one God. We ask your blessing as we anoint one another for the work of the gospel

LEADER: *Begins the anointing. Participants anoint each other while saying: "Be strengthened in the work of the Gospel"* (Ritual adapted from *More than Words* by Janet Schaffran CDP and Pat Kozak CSJ)

Commitment of Gathered Community (*All stand and respond*)

LEADER: Women and men, what will we bring to birth in the world of the new creation?

ALL: Wisdom and justice, peace and compassion, concern for all God's little ones, for the homeless and the destitute, the hungry, and all who bear the brunt of indifference and oppression.

LEADER: Men and Women, what will we bring to birth on the earth of the new creation?

ALL: A deep respect for our planet, its wind song and its water, its topsoil and its forests, and a oneness with the wilderness that is image of our soul.

LEADER: Women and Men, what will we bring to birth in the church of the new creation?

ALL: A total disdain for power that diminishes or destroys, divestment of wealth and status, a sharing of human resources based on mutuality and the sudden surprise of grace.

LEADER: Men and Women, what will we bring to birth in the hearts of the new creation?

ALL: An unbreakable bond in the Spirit that binds as one all sisters and brothers, transcending class, color, culture, religion, race, and gender, that treats no personal preference, no physical or spiritual difference as aberration or handicap.

LEADER: One has been born among us Who heralds such liberation Human liberation, Women and men's liberation, have taken flesh among us and in Spirit dwell with us.

ALL: Holy the woman who helped this happen. Blessed are we when we give birth to the Word made flesh in us. Amen. (MT Winter WomanWord, Crossroad, 1990 used with permission)

Closing Song: "*Anthem*" by Tim Conry (#550 in *Today's Missal Music*) or "*God Has Chosen Me*" by Bernadette Farrell (#439 in *Today's Missal Music* 2001)

Prayer service prepared by Christine Schenk csj

For **Celebrating Women Witnesses** a project developed by **FutureChurch** (info@futurechurch.org, 216-228-0869) in partnership with **Call to Action** (cta@cta-usa.org, 773-404-0004)

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Name _____

Dorothy Day: Conscience of American Catholicism

1. Find the following facts about Dorothy Day's life in the article:

- a. When and where was she born?
- b. How many brothers and sisters did she have?
- c. How old was she when she converted to Catholicism?
- d. How old she was when she was first arrested on charges of civil disobedience?
- c. How old was she when she was arrested for the last time?
- d. How old was she when she gave birth? What was the child's name?
- e. Who were the three men who were involved in her life as lovers and husbands?
1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____
- f. How old was she when she met Peter Maurin?
- g. How old was she when she died?

2. What were the two passions of Dorothy Day's life?

Why could she not (at first) reconcile these two passions as a newly converted Catholic?

3. What movement did Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin start? _____

Describe Peter Maurin's "three point program" of the movement.

- a.
- b.
- c.

4. What was the original purpose of the Catholic Worker newspaper?

5. What was the origin and strength of Dorothy Day's beliefs about non-violence?

6. Name at least six tactics that Dorothy Day used to address injustices.

- | | |
|----|----|
| 1. | 4. |
| 2. | 5. |
| 3. | 6. |

7. Why did Dorothy Day refuse to join the feminist movement as it existed in her time?

8. How did the birth of her child affect Dorothy Day spiritually?

9. Choose one of the six pro-feminist concerns reflected in Day's life. Which one is of greatest concern to you personally? Explain why you think it is important.

10. What does the life story and witness of Dorothy Day have to say to Catholics today?

11. Dorothy Day is called the "Conscience of American Catholicism". What do you think she would have to say about these contemporary issues? Choose one of these issues and write a brief statement about where Dorothy Day would stand on the issue today. Use information from the article to support your answer.

Abortion
Death Penalty
War

Welfare Laws
Women's roles in the Church
Violence in the media



*This worksheet was prepared by Janet Claussen as a part of FutureChurch's **Celebrating Women Witnesses Teacher's Edition**. To order the complete edition with 12 essays, prayer services and worksheets, go to www.futurechurch.org or call 216-228-0869 X5.*