

Women of the Church Study

Dorothy Day

Dorothy Day is called “the most important, interesting, and influential figure in the history of Catholicism” by historian David O’Brien. In his address to Congress in 2015, Pope Francis singled out and praised Day, citing her importance as a journalist whose conversion propelled her...to advocate for the poor. Often considered controversial in her time, Day is now in the canonization process.

Dorothy Day was born in 1897. Much of her life work occurred during the “century of conflict” where the political and social challenges of the 20th century had a major impact on Christianity. Day grew up in a conventional middle class home. Although her family seldom attended church, as a child she was interested in religion and reading the Bible. She later began attending an Episcopal church. Day also avidly read the classics and much socially conscious literature.

She began a career in journalism at the University of Illinois. While in college Day observed the disparity between the lives of the rich and the poor; she subsequently joined the Socialist Party at the university. At this time she rejected organized religion because she perceived it did nothing to relieve the plight of those who were desperate; she did not see Christians living out the call of the Gospel. Day often wrote for radical newspapers. She was arrested multiple times for civil disobedience as she advocated for justice among the needy around her. Day left the university and moved to New York City where she worked as a journalist on socialist newspapers, participated in protest movements, and developed friendships with many famous artists and writers. During this time, she also experienced failed love affairs, a marriage, a suicide attempt, and an abortion. Later, Day shared a home with her common law husband for several years; they had a daughter in 1926. After the birth of her daughter, Tamar, Day turned back to her Christian faith and converted to Catholicism, admiring the Catholic Church as the “Church of the poor”. Her decision to embrace the Catholic faith led to the end of her common law marriage and rejection by many of her friends and associates.

A few years after becoming Catholic, Day met Peter Maurin, a former Christian Brother who modeled his life after St. Francis. Maurin shared many of Day’s political beliefs and together they started the Catholic Worker publication as a forum to promote their action plan for the poor, which included hospitality houses and farming communes. This Catholic Worker movement was built on the premise that the Christian faith is relational—built on loving God and people.

Day struggled to find her role as a Catholic. She was described as not always a “comfortable companion” but a “wise, caring and challenging one”. Day confronted the Church when she felt it departed from the Gospel principles. Her writings always focused the light of the Gospel on human conscience.

Day knew that service must be driven by a deep devotion to Christ. Her spirituality was marked by “a love of Scripture, solidarity with the poor, personalism, prophetic witness, peacemaking, a sacramental sense and gratitude.” Day died in 1980. So many people attended her funeral in New York City that many in attendance had to stand outside on the sidewalk.

References: <http://dorothydayguild.org/about-her-life/brief-biography/>
<https://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/dd-biography.html>
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/09/24/pope>

Reflections

Dorothy Day has a number of famous quotes. One of them is: “Love casts out fear, but we have to get over the fear in order to get close enough to love them.” What does this quote mean to you on a personal level? What does it mean to you on a faith level?

Another of her quotes is: “Food for the body is not enough. There must be food for the soul.” What does this quote say to you? What does it imply about being a follower of Jesus?

Although Dorothy Day is in the process of being canonized as a saint, there were times in her life when she did not seem to exemplify “sainthood”. Like Mary Magdalene, Dorothy’s conversion experience transformed her on the inside and dramatically changed her lifestyle on the outside. In this process, she had to give up things and relationships which had been very important to her and she was ostracized by others. What do you think convicted Dorothy so strongly? Have you had any experiences where your faith beliefs led you to some significant or dramatic changes in your everyday life?

Dorothy had strong convictions which led her to advocate and “fight” for justice and peace. Her beliefs and actions resulted in charges of civil disobedience, as well as dissonance with the Church at times. She seemed to be very conscious of the “big picture” and was willing to do whatever it took to actively live out the Gospel. She adamantly sought meet the needs of all people, especially the poor, or those being treated unfairly. (Her approach definitely contrasted with that of St. Rita!) What do you think about the way Dorothy approached the call to live out the Gospel? In what ways can you approach this call in your life? Would your approach be similar or different from Dorothy’s?

Dorothy Day did not set out to be a saint. In fact, she said, “Don’t call me a saint. I don’t want to be dismissed so easily.” Although her action plan was very different from the pious pursuits of some of the saints, her dedication to her faith and spiritual practices was very prominent. How do you perceive Dorothy balancing her strong social activism and dominant actions with her Catholic faith and spirituality? Have you found this challenging in your own life? What can you learn from the life of Dorothy Day?

Devotions

These devotions are taken from *The Reckless Way of Love: Notes on Following Jesus* by Dorothy Day, edited by Carolyn Kurtz. This volume “brings together Dorothy’s thoughts on the life of discipleship, the reckless way of love to which Jesus calls his followers. Dorothy’s dogged struggle to hold onto her faith, her love for those hardest to love, and her rootedness in prayer, can guide and encourage each of us in our own attempts to follow more faithfully in the way of Jesus”. Dorothy is known for her strong stand for social justice and her work with the poor and the oppressed. Her inner spirituality, as noted in the following expressions, provided her with the foundation for living out the Gospel in the world.

“One time I was traveling and far from home and lonely and I awoke in the night almost on the verge of weeping, with a sense of futility, of being unloved and unwanted. And suddenly the thought came to me of my importance as daughter of God, daughter of a king, and I felt the sureness of God’s love and at the same time a conviction, that one of the greatest injustices, if one can put it that way, which one can do to God, is to distrust his love, not realize his love. God so loved me that He gave his only begotten son, ‘If a mother will forget her children, never will I forget thee’. Such tenderness. And with such complete ingratitude, we forget the Father and his love! (Chapter 3--Take Heart) See *Psalms 27:14*

“Our greatest danger is not our sins, but our indifference. We must be in love with God. It is not so much to change what we are doing, but our intention, our motive. It is not sufficient that we refrain from insulting a person, we must love... When we say we love God with our whole heart, it means whole. We must love only God. And that sets up the triangle, God, the soul, the world. The wife wants the husband’s whole love. Suppose a husband pays no attention to his wife and we say ‘Well, he does not beat you, does he? You should be satisfied he does not kill you. What are you complaining about?’ It is the same with God. He is not just content that we are not in a state of mortal sin... We must do more than just stay in a state of grace”. (Chapter 6--Love the Lord Your God) See *Deuteronomy 6:5*

“I have been overcome with grief at times, and felt my heart like a stone in my breast, it was so heavy, and I have heard too that voice ‘Pray’. What can we do? We can pray. We can pray without ceasing, as St. Paul said. We can say with the apostles ‘Lord, teach me to pray’. We can say with St. Paul ‘Lord what wilt thou have me to do?’ (Acts 9:6). Will our Father give us a stone when we ask for bread? We remember Jesus’ words ‘I tell you solemnly once again, if two of you on earth agree to ask for anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three shall meet in my name, I will be with them’. (Matthew 18:19-20). There is another bit of Scripture which stands out in my mind these days. It is this ‘Where sin abounded, there did grace more abound’. (Romans 5:20). Resting in this promise, I am content. (Chapter 9--Lord Teach Me to Pray) See *1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*

Practical Applications/Activities

In her diary, Dorothy wrote the following passage: “What we would like to do is change the world—make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe and shelter themselves as God had intended them to do... we can work for the oasis, the little cells of joy and peace in a harried world.” (From Cruz 2004, *Saintly Women of Modern Times*).

--This week, let’s think about what we can do to change the world! What is one small step I can take to help

bring others joy and peace, whether this be by helping to meet a physical need or by “feeding the soul” as mentioned earlier in our study. Commit to trying this at least once, if not more!

Dorothy definitely stood up for what she believed, living out the Gospel in her actions. She is noted to have supported this with a very devout and active prayer life, frequently reading the Bible, attending Mass and praying the rosary.

--This week, let's look at our own spiritual lives and what we can do to grow and enrich them. Consider choosing one additional spiritual practice or discipline to regularly implement at least two or three times weekly. Journal your experiences with this and note if it leads you to any change or action.

The Corporal Works of Mercy are kind acts by which we help our neighbors with their material and physical needs. The Spiritual Works of Mercy are acts of compassion by which we help our neighbors with their emotional and spiritual needs. (Loyola Press) These seem pertinent to a person who has lived life as Dorothy Day did. Consider these, listed below, and see if they help give new thoughts or ideas for the above activities.

Corporal Works of Mercy: Spiritual Works of Mercy:

feed the hungry instruct

shelter the homeless advise

clothe the naked console

visit the sick and imprisoned comfort

bury the dead forgive

give alms to the poor bear wrongs patiently