

Dorothy Day's Radical Hospitality

BY COLEMAN FANNIN

The influence of the Catholic Worker movement, founded during the Depression by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, is due to more than its aid to people in need or support for workers' unions. It has been a consistent witness that hospitality and nonviolence are at the heart of the gospel and are the basis for critiquing our culture.

The late Baptist scholar James McClendon observed that “the hope of ethics, both secular and religious, lies in the recovery of what may be called an ethics of character,” an ethics that understands that our selves are intimately related to our actions *and* our communities. “By recognizing that Christian beliefs are not so many ‘propositions’ to be catalogued or juggled like truth-functions in a computer, but are living convictions which give shape to actual lives and actual communities, we open ourselves to the possibility that the only relevant critical examination of Christian beliefs may be one which begins by attending to lived lives.”¹

We develop an authentic Christian ethics, McClendon reminded us, by investigating *witnesses*—those persons recognized by the Church as embodying the gospel in particular times and places. “Christian existence is both individual and social, both a journey of individual selves each uniquely qualified as a follower of Jesus and at the same time a journey together, a communal pilgrimage to realize the world newly disclosed in gospel light.” Further, this existence “is always missionary, possessed only to be imparted to others,” and for those who have crossed into the “unknown realm” of the Kingdom of God, what constitutes faithful witness in the old realm is “a Christian critique of its culture.” The United States is now a mission field

and the Church's *policy* of evangelism must be restated as a *problem*: "What ties cement the people of the journey to the old, broken peoplehood in which once they did and now in a new way still do have a part?" As McClendon contends, Dorothy Day (1897-1980), cofounder (with Peter Maurin) of the Catholic Worker movement, provides just such a witness.²

HOUSES OF HOSPITALITY

The publication of the first issue of the *Catholic Worker* in May 1933 was, on the surface, a minor event in the midst of the Depression, but the newspaper's office in New York's Bowery neighborhood quickly blossomed into a nationwide network of "houses of hospitality." By early 1938, the paper's circulation had grown to 190,000, around thirty houses were in operation, and Dorothy Day, the editor, had become the spokesperson for a movement.

The Catholic Worker houses – today there are nearly two-hundred of them, including several outside the United States – were diverse from the beginning and continue to be so. Each house is independent and requires no approval from the Catholic Church or any central organization.³ Still, they usually are started by men and women who are inspired by and seek to live up to Day's ideals. In the first issue she had announced the newspaper's purpose as "an attempt to popularize and make known the encyclicals of the Popes in regard to social justice and the program put forth by the Church for the 'reconstruction of the social order.'" As the movement grew, she broadened its purposes to include the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, especially "feeding, clothing and sheltering our brothers" and "indoctrinating," which included not only publishing the paper but engaging in what Peter Maurin termed "clarification of thought" – gatherings to study Scripture and theology. Most houses of hospitality adopt a similar approach and, following Day's emphasis on "a correlation between the material and the spiritual," place worship at the center of their life together.⁴

Catholic Workers volunteer part-time or full-time; some work for short periods, while others continue for many years. The houses of hospitality may receive income from members' other jobs or their own cottage industries, but almost all depend on donations (of food and clothing as well as money). Members practice a simple and communal form of life, at the heart of which is serving the marginalized people in the mostly urban areas where they are located.

The movement's endurance and influence within the Church, however, have been due to more than its aid to people in need or support for workers' unions. Dorothy Day was a consistent witness that welcoming the poor also requires pacifism. For this view she faced heavy criticism, and by late 1944 subscriptions had plummeted to 50,500 and only nine houses were still open. Yet precisely in this connection is her witness most applicable to Christian ethics, for it reveals that hospitality and nonviolence are at the heart of the gospel and are the basis for critiquing our culture.

SOLIDARITY AND THE MYSTICAL BODY

Although Dorothy Day was baptized into the Episcopal Church, art, books, and nature were her substitutes for religion. Long walks on the streets of Chicago convinced her that her life would be identified with the poor, and later she dropped out of college and went to work for the *Call*, a socialist paper in New York. However, Paul Elie notes, "Her comrades said she would never be a good Communist, because she was too religious—a character out of Dostoevsky, a woman haunted by God."⁵ Day could not shake her attraction to faith or to the poor and became mired in the loneliness that became the title of her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness* (1952). Indeed, her rebellions can be seen as an Augustinian search for God and for peace, as her early life was marked by conflict—work as a nurse during the Great War, arrests for protesting, loss of employment, a failed marriage, the suicide of a friend, her own attempted suicide, an abortion.

Day turned to Catholicism in part out of disillusionment with the impersonal nature of radical movements. While she was wary that the Catholic Church offered charity to the poor without challenging the social order that oppressed them, she also perceived that it was the church that welcomed the poor and the immigrant. The birth of Day's daughter, Tamar, overwhelmed her hesitation about joining the Catholic Church. Her ecclesial life was initially quite isolated, but her relationship with Tamar slowly reformed her understanding of solidarity with others, and although she knew little of its doctrine or social teaching, the Catholic Church's practices—especially the liturgy of the Mass—introduced her to its great tradition.

However, it was not until she met Peter Maurin, a fifty-five-year-old Catholic street prophet in New York City, that Day was able to reconcile her radical convictions about

the plight of the poor with the Roman Catholic tradition and to utilize its resources to transform those convictions. As McClendon has explained, for those who are not only hearers but doers, "Following has become not mere attentive perception, but life itself; now following is

called *discipleship*. Moreover, the Christian story being what it is, such active followers will follow *by the Christian rules for following*." Traditions endure because they maintain a continuity of orientation and conviction—a narrative that bears truth as it progresses to a shared end. Of course, traditions are not simply content; they require persons to live them out. That is, witnesses such as Day reshape their received traditions by enacting them.⁶

Most Catholic Worker houses of hospitality, following Dorothy Day's "correlation between the material and the spiritual," place worship at the center of their life together.

Peter Maurin's goal was "to make the encyclicals click." He had been particularly influenced by *Rerum Novarum* (1891), in which Leo XIII argued for the right to associate, earn a living wage, and hold property, and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), in which Pius XI called for changes in economic systems and challenged the laity to transform the social order. Maurin's plan for the Catholic Worker movement was a direct response to this challenge,

Maurin believed the "dynamite" of the gospel was obscured by the idea that natural aspirations to transform the social order, when pure and genuine, could be fulfilled without the supernatural life of Christ in the Church.

and under his direction Day came to believe that private property, economic cooperation, and community are essential pillars for peace and that their true foundation is the unity of persons in the mystical body of Christ.⁷

Day affirmed Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac's contention that Christianity should form not *leaders* but

saints. "The saint does not have to bring about great temporal achievements; he is one who succeeds in giving us at least a glimpse of eternity despite the thick opacity of time." Because evil is often overwhelming on the earthly plane, the only solution is to become oriented to the spiritual plane. Day understood that doing so means not to reject material existence but to "give up over and over again even the good things of this world to choose God."⁸ After attending the spiritual retreat of Father John Hugo in the 1940s—her "second conversion"—she took up the spiritual practices (such as contemplative prayer) that would sustain her for four more decades at the New York Catholic Worker house.

THE PERSONALIST CENTER

Central to Maurin's diagnosis of the modern world was his belief that the "dynamite" of the gospel had been obscured by the idea that natural aspirations to transform the social order, when pure and genuine, could be fulfilled without the supernatural life of Christ in the Church. The Church's "spiritual" mission, however, "signified specific practices and a specific form of social life" (as expressed in the hospitality houses) that provided a social critique. While the *Catholic Worker* published notable scholars with this perspective, Michael Baxter notes, "it was Day who was able to articulate it in terms of specific practices that make up a supernaturalized life."⁹

Maurin taught Day to view voluntary poverty as a sign of compassion and a means to perform the works of mercy. For them it was a response to the gospel and thus distinct from destitution—the condition facing those served by Catholic Worker houses and created by physical disability, men-

tal illness, or lack of capital and education. Modern nation-states had lost any sense of transcendent purpose, social life was organized around production and profit rather than the development of persons, and Christians had turned to the government to solve social problems. Since a "Christian state" is not possible, they concluded, Christians are called to address the immediate needs of those who are suffering, and by living in community they can realize a bit of the Kingdom of God in the present.

Beneath Maurin's simple program was a sophisticated philosophy culled from several schools of thought. William Miller describes this philosophy as a series of "concentric circles in which the dynamism moved outward from the personalist center."¹⁰ Personalism had originated in France after World War I and been popularized by, among others, Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier, both committed Catholics. The personalists revolted against capitalism and socialism; their goal was to encourage free and active persons "to unite with others to create a society in which the structures, customs, and institutions are rooted in and revolve around the person as center." In short, they celebrated the dignity of the human person—created in the image of God, united with Jesus in the Incarnation, and (at least potentially) part of the mystical body. They taught that personal freedom requires "taking on responsibility for others" and (following Thomas Aquinas) that the common good has to do with persons, not the state.¹¹

Day fashioned Maurin's personalism into a critique of capitalism and socialism's shared method of using "the masses" to achieve an equally impersonal end, "the state." She advocated revolution not through slogans about solidarity but through the works of mercy and the sacraments. She rarely missed daily Mass, arguing that the Eucharist is "the one immediate step to be taken towards peace." "I can sit in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament and wrestle for that peace in the bitterness of my soul...and I can find many things in Scripture to console me, to change my heart from hatred to love of enemy."¹²

LOAVES AND FISHES

Day diagnosed the logic of "total war" early on and posited the spiritual and corporal works of mercy as the only solution. Father Hugo taught her that "weapons of the spirit" directly counter weapons of war, for "if peace is to rule human affairs, then peace must be waged with as much preparation, as much determination and as much sacrifice as the waging of war."¹³

Day's pacifism, which was guided by Christ's Sermon on the Mount, is an example of what John Howard Yoder has called "utopian pacifism"—the view that pacifist action, "if everyone did it, would bring a new order." This order is achieved "not by compromising with the present but by confessing a faith which makes the future real in symbolic ways today."¹⁴ Day understood that the Kingdom, though already present in real ways, is a work of God with a future supernatural fulfillment. And this fact frees the Catholic

Worker volunteer from attempting to build a utopia on earth—the quest that has had devastating consequences for humanity and undermined Christian efforts such as the Social Gospel movement.

In other words, the Worker's primary concern is faithfulness, not results, and one is able to focus on one action—one *person*—at a time. Yet such work often produces good results, if only "little by little" and through

Since a Catholic Worker's primary concern is faithfulness, not results, she can focus on one action—one person—at a time. Yet such work often produces results, if only "little by little" and through the grace of Christ.

the grace of Christ. "What we do is very little," Day admitted, "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."¹⁵

As early as 1940 Day objected that war tactics such as carpet-bombing and poison gas could not be defended as "just" or "loving." "Love is not the starving of whole populations. Love is not the bombardment of open cities. Love is not killing, it is the laying down of one's life for one's friend."¹⁶ William Cavanaugh explains, "While most saw the Mystical Body as that which united Christians in spirit above the battle lines which pitted Christians in Europe against one another, Dorothy interpreted the Mystical Body as that which made Christian participation in the conflict simply inconceivable."¹⁷

The wars of the twentieth century, during which many people abandoned nonviolence for "realism," crystallized Day's conviction that all war is social sin. While she was among the first to denounce anti-Semitism and fascism, she also argued that the Allies in World War II did not recognize the presence of Christ in their enemies or God's work in the midst of evil. She never retreated from the position that every citizen of the United States stood guilty before God for Hiroshima, Vietnam, and other atrocities. In other words, if we are united with all persons—the poor, our allies, *and* our enemies—in the mystical body of Christ, then solidarity with them implies that we share their sin.

DISARMAMENT OF THE HEART

How does a Catholic Worker's experience reinforce this understanding of the mystical body of Christ and prepare the Worker for heroic pacifism? "We know that men are but dust, but we know too that they are little less

than the angels. We know them to be capable of high heroism, of sacrifice, of endurance," Day observed. "They respond to this call in wartime. But the call is never made to them to oppose violence *with non-resistance*, a strengthening of the will, an increase in love and faith. We make this call, and we feel we have a right to make this call by the very circumstances of our lives. We know the sufferings which people are already able to endure."¹⁸

Worker life is certainly unromantic, but the lesson it teaches is not that one achieves holiness through a certain amount of suffering. Rather, it is that voluntary poverty and nonviolence reveal interconnectedness with one's "neighbors," including one's enemies. Worker life is an attempt to understand the precariousness of the life of the poor and, by extension, the dependence of all persons on the grace of God; thus it discourages pretense and encourages humility. Many residents recount stories of aggressive, even armed, visitors and the effectiveness of nonviolent responses. Day chronicled these experiences, offering not only Catholic Workers but saints such as Thérèse of Lisieux and Francis of Assisi as models. "If we had any possessions, we should need weapons and laws to defend them," Francis had declared, and Day noted that relinquishing material security allows one to relinquish the state's protection, for "the only way to live in any true security is to live so close to the bottom that when you fall you do not have far to drop, you do not have much to lose."¹⁹

Further, Workers are unable to ignore the ill effects of our economic and political systems. Instead of merely acquiescing to these systems, Workers are trained and supported in resisting them. As Patrick Coy explains, "The experience of living in a Catholic Worker house in solidarity with the poor softens the aversions many people have to presuming to know a 'truth,' and to speaking that truth to the world through nonviolent action."²⁰ Workers also learn to resist ecclesial missteps and abuses. Although she was a loyal and orthodox servant of the Catholic Church, Day recognized that its structures at times blinded it to the realities of those in its care. When priests failed to address poverty, she urged them to study Thérèse's "little way" – "the only alternative to the mass approach of the State."²¹ She also criticized clergy who unquestioningly supported American military endeavors.

Above all, Day saw clearly that to choose the supernatural requires *training* of the human self.

We must prepare now for martyrdom – otherwise we will not be ready. Who of us if he were attacked now would not react quickly and humanly against such attack? Would we love our brother who strikes us? Of all at *The Catholic Worker* how many would not instinctively defend himself with any forceful means in his power? We must prepare. We must prepare now. There must be a disarmament of the heart.²²

CONCLUSION

The witness of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement is a hard word for us to hear. While Day noted that voluntary poverty is not the calling of every Christian, all of us can learn to alter our consumer habits, help the poor, and strengthen our communities. In doing so, we will see that nonviolence follows from hospitality and be drawn into a form of life with different presuppositions and goals from those of the modern world.

We can also learn from the organization of the Worker houses, which maintain a diversity of opinion and action precisely because they are connected to a visible body that transcends state boundaries. That is, the Catholic Worker movement endures *because it is Catholic*. Its local and lay radicalism is possible because members are formed by a received tradition, even while they also are re-forming that tradition.

The Catholic Worker consistently undermines our accepted notions of economics, politics, and the Christian life with another vision of the common good – modeled on the gospel – that does not isolate Christians from the world, but allows us to engage the world in a more faithful way.

NOTES

1 James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1974), 14, 30-31, 37-38.

2 James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, volume 3, *Witness* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 20. McClendon includes a chapter on Day in *Systematic Theology*, volume 1, *Ethics*, second edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002).

3 For a list of Catholic Worker communities, see www.catholicworker.org/communities/commmlistall.cfm (accessed August 28, 2007).

4 Dorothy Day, "To Our Readers," *Catholic Worker* (May 1933), 4; "Aims and Purposes," *Catholic Worker* (February 1940), 7. These and other articles from the *Worker* are available online in the Dorothy Day Library at www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/ (accessed August 28, 2007). In the Christian tradition, the *corporal* works of mercy are to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, visit those in prison, and bury the dead. The *spiritual* works of mercy are to instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, comfort the sorrowful, bear wrongs patiently, forgive injuries, and pray for the living and the dead.

5 Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 17. As a girl, Day was inspired by Jack London's essays on class struggle and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (set in her native Chicago). Later she developed an attachment to the writings of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy. She never joined the Communist Party or studied Marxist theory.

6 McClendon, *Witness*, 356-357.

7 Regarding the controversial (at mid-century) image of the mystical body, Day followed Henri de Lubac's view that the mystical body supposes a prior natural unity and that the Church's mission is "to reveal to [persons] that pristine unity that they have lost, to restore and complete it." Thus the Church and the mystical body are neither the same nor separate. In this way the Church stands in solidarity with *all* persons. See Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, translated by Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sister Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988), 53.

8 Dorothy Day, *Selected Writings: By Little and By Little* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 102; *On Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 163.

9 Michael J. Baxter, "Blowing the Dynamite of the Church': Catholic Radicalism from a Catholic Radicalist Perspective," in *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement: Centenary Essays*, edited by William Thorn, Phillip Runkel, and Susan Mountin (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2001), 81-84, 86.

10 William D. Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1982), 378.

11 Thomas R. Rourke and Rosita A. Chazarreta Rourke, *A Theory of Personalism* (New York, NY: Lexington Books, 2005), 7-8, 10. Maritain occasionally visited the New York house of hospitality, and the Rourkes note that it was largely through the *Catholic Worker* that personalism became widely known in the United States. As Geoffrey Gneuchs explains, "According to Aquinas, we are most free then when we love, when we act for the good, because then we are acting in God, the source of our being and the one to whom we are called to return" ("Radical Orthodoxy: Dorothy Day's Challenge to Liberal America," in *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement*, 212).

12 Dorothy Day, "In Peace Is My Bitterness Most Bitter," *Catholic Worker* (January 1967), 1-2.

13 Mark Zwick and Louise Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement: Intellectual and Spiritual Origins* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 261-262.

14 John Howard Yoder, *Nevertheless: The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism*, revised edition (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 74-75.

15 Dorothy Day, "Aims and Purposes," 7.

16 Dorothy Day, "Why Do the Members of Christ Tear One Another?" *Catholic Worker* (February 1942), 1, 4, and 7.

17 William T. Cavanaugh, "Dorothy Day and the Mystical Body of Christ in the Second World War," in *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement*, 457.

18 Dorothy Day, "Wars Are Caused by Man's Loss of His Faith in Man," *Catholic Worker* (September 1940), 1-2.

19 Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 86. "Another Catholic newspaper says it sympathizes with our sentimentality," she observed. "This is a charge always leveled against pacifists. We are supposed to be afraid of the suffering, of the hardships of war. But let those who talk of softness, of sentimentality, come to live with us in cold, unheated houses in the slums. Let them come to live with the criminal, the unbalanced, the drunken, the degraded, the pervert" (Day, "Why Do the Members of Christ Tear One Another?").

20 Patrick G. Coy, "Beyond the Ballot Box: The Catholic Worker Movement and Non-violent Direct Action," in *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement*, 179.

21 Dorothy Day, "On Pilgrimage," *Catholic Worker* (December 1965), 1, 2, 7.

22 Dorothy Day, "Explains CW Stand on Use of Force," *Catholic Worker* (September 1938), 1, 4, 7.



COLEMAN FANNIN

is a doctoral candidate in theology at the University of Dayton in Dayton, Ohio.