

DOROTHY DAY AND AUGUSTINE

THE STORIES BEHIND OUR VOCATION

QUESTIONS: Augustine and Dorothy Day represent two important stories within the Catholic intellectual tradition. These stories reveal their hesitations, ambitions, conflicts, anxieties, sacrifices, desires, gifts, loves, and joys in the concrete particulars of their lives. What do you think of their narratives? Are they both merely neurotic and unbalanced individuals, or do their stories represent the struggles and consolations of our own humanity? What do their stories tell us about the Catholic intellectual tradition? What do their stories tell us about our stories (both individual and institutional)?

INTRODUCTION TO DOROTHY DAY¹

Dorothy Day was the co-founder (Peter Maurin) of the Catholic Worker (1933), a social, religious, cultural, and political movement. Her case for canonization is currently being examined by the Vatican. A middle-class woman born to Protestant parents, Dorothy Day became a suffragette, a social and political writer, a Greenwich Village intellectual, and, founder, of a twentieth-century spiritual movement that established a network of hospitality houses across the land whose purpose is to feed the hungry and attend the poor, the vulnerable, the sick, and the needy in the spirit of Christian caring.

The Catholic Worker movement started with the *Catholic Worker* newspaper, created to stake out a neutral, pacifist, even anarchist position in the increasingly war-torn 1930s. This grew into a "house of hospitality" in the slums of New York City and then a series of farms for the poor to live together communally. The movement quickly spread to other cities in the United States, and to Canada and the United Kingdom; more than 30 independent but affiliated CW communities had been founded by 1941. Well over 100 communities exist today, including several in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, The Netherlands, the Republic of Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, and Sweden.

Her autobiography *The Long Loneliness* was published in 1952-3. Day's account of the Catholic Worker movement, *Loaves and Fishes*, was published in 1963. A popular movie called *Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story* was produced in 1996 about the life and struggles that Day endured. Day was portrayed by Moira Kelly and Maurin was portrayed by Martin Sheen, both known for their roles on *The West Wing* television series in the United States. The first full-length documentary about her, *Dorothy Day: Don't Call Me a Saint*, premiered at Marquette University, where her papers are housed, on November 29, 2005.

She uniquely integrated “a long-standing devotion to spiritual introspection, with the help of the Bible and a daily church attendance,” and a life long desire to address the injustices in society. Speaking to college students she once said “I’ve always worried about unfairness, injustice—going back to when I was your age, and was in college [at the

¹ Adapted from Robert Coles’ introduction to *The Long Loneliness*

University of Illinois, Urbana],” so she told one of the students, who had asked for a summing up, a connection between her life’s origins and its eventual outcome. She amplified in this manner: “When I was your age women couldn’t vote—and the poor could fall back on nothing but the charity of the rich. I remember as a girl asking my mother *why—why* things weren’t better for people, why a few owned so much and many had little or nothing. She kept on telling me that ‘there’s no accounting for injustice, it just *is.*’ I guess I’ve spent my life trying to ‘account’ for it, and trying to change things, just a little—and that is what I believe people like me ought try to do: we’ve been given a leg up in the world, so why not try to help others get a bit of a break, too!”

She hungered for answers to the big questions—how ought one live this life, where, in what manner, and for what purpose? She found answers to such a kind of self-addressed inquiry in novels and paintings, and, most of all, in Scripture, in the life of an itinerant preacher and healer who died on a cross, a thief on either side of Him, almost two thousand years ago in Roman-controlled Palestine. She drew inspiration from this century’s poor—descendants, she never forgot, of the humble folk Jesus attended, the insulted and humiliated whom her dear novelist and artist friends kept evoking.

In *The Long Loneliness*, she makes clear her passionate devotion to those who have not had the easiest time of it. She also makes clear how tirelessly she has given herself to her various loves—the love of literature and writing; the love of Jesus and His church; the love of the Hebrew prophets, whom I know she constantly attended in her well-thumbed Bible; the love of ordinary men and women whose empty stomachs she worked so hard to fill; and, not least, the constant love she experienced for what might be called “the things of this world,” the small gifts each morning or evening brings to us, even in a crowded, noisy city such as New York. In truth, Dorothy Day loved her fellow human creatures and the world they inhabited, as the good Lord had told her she should, and if there always had to be “the long loneliness” (an aspect of our “existential” situation) there were for her, most certainly, many soul mates to keep her company on her spiritual pilgrimage, and many who still hold her close, cherish her memory, and thank the good Lord for her presence among us.

THE LONG LONELINESS

DOROTHY DAY²

(EXCERPTS)

CONFESSION

When you go to confession on a Saturday night, you go into a warm, dimly lit vastness, with the smell of wax and incense in the air, the smell of burning candles, and if it is a hot summer night there is the sound of a great electric fan, and the noise of the streets coming in to emphasize the stillness. There is another sound too, besides that of the quiet movements of the people from pew to confession to altar rail; there is the sliding of the shutters of the little window between you and the priest in his “box.”

Some confessionals are large and roomy—plenty of space for the knees, and breathing space in the thick darkness that seems to pulse with your own heart. In some poor churches, many of the ledges are narrow and worn, so your knees almost slip off the kneeling bench, and your feet protrude outside the curtain which shields you from the others who are waiting. Some churches have netting, or screens, between you and priest and you can see the outline of his face inclined toward you, quiet, impersonal, patient. Some have a piece of material covering the screen, so you can see nothing. Some priests leave their lights on in their boxes so they can read their breviaries between confessions. The light does not bother you if that piece of material is there so you cannot see or be seen, but if it is only a grating so that he can see your face, it is embarrassing and you do not go back to that priest again.

Going to confession is hard—hard when you have sins to confess, hard when you haven’t, and you rack your brain for even the beginnings of sins against charity, chastity, sins of detraction, sloth or gluttony. You do not want to make too much of your constant imperfections and venial sins, but you want to drag them out to the light of day as the first step in getting rid of them. The just man falls seven times daily.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned,” is the way you begin. “I made my last confession a week ago, and since then...”

Properly, one should say the *Confiteor*, but the priest has no time for that, what with the long lines of penitents on a Saturday night, so you are supposed to say it outside the confessional as you kneel in a pew, or as you stand in line with others.

“I have sinned. These are my sins.” That is all you are supposed to tell; not the sins of others, or your own virtues, but only your ugly, gray, drab, monotonous sins.

² Excerpts from Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (New York: Harpers & Brothers Publishers, 1952). Used with permission.