

THE PROCOPIAN OBLATE

LOVE IS THE MEASURE

The Incarnational Spirituality of Dorothy Day

by Rosalie Riegler



Rosalie Riegler presented this article as a talk to the abbey oblates and monks on Sunday, January 12, 2014. The monks are proud to publish this article in memory of our most famous oblate.

As a peace activist during the Vietnam War, Rosalie Riegler met Dorothy Day. That brief meeting changed her life. After collecting and publishing an oral history of the Catholic Worker movement Day co-founded, Rosalie co-founded two Catholic Worker houses of hospitality in Saginaw, Michigan, and went on to write *Dorothy Day: Portraits of Those Who Knew Her*. She recently published two other oral histories of Catholic Worker and other nonviolent faith-based war resisters. Rosalie received her doctorate from the University of Michigan and taught English at Saginaw Valley State University for thirty-three years. A widow, she is the mother of four daughters and the grandmother of seven. She now lives in Evanston, Illinois, where she is active in St. Nicholas Parish.

Dorothy Day, an oblate of St. Procopius Abbey, was a deeply spiritual woman. Her spirituality sprang from a love of the world and a love for God in the world. It was also a spirituality fully synthesized with her life as a radical social activist. The basis for that synthesis is the Incarnation. Because God came into the world and into our history, she knew that all creation was holy—everything from the ailanthus tree that she saw struggling on the sidewalk to the sad and lonely alcoholic priests she cared for when no one else would.

Whatever she did for the poor, especially for the least and most unloved, Dorothy Day did for Christ. And it was all of a piece. Unlike some Catholics, Dorothy saw no separation between her spiritual life of prayer and her active life as a leader of a large and often unruly lay movement which lived in poverty with the people it served, resisted war, and addressed contemporary social problems. In the Catholic Worker movement she cofounded, her interior spirituality was able to coexist as one with her activism.

Born to a newspaper family on November 8, 1897, Dorothy's growing-up years were spent in Chicago, where she graduated from what is now Lincoln Park High School. She left the University of Illinois in Urbana after two years to make her living as a writer in New York. There she socialized with Eugene O'Neill and other progressive writers, and became known both for her writing and for her activism, with the first of several arrests for civil disobedience occurring in the cause of women's suffrage. But she was mysteriously drawn to Roman Catholicism and often found herself visiting the immigrant churches that dotted lower Manhattan. Even as a child, she had loved the psalms, a love she treasured until her death in 1980.¹ As Dorothy wrote in her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, it was reading the later novels of the Benedictine oblate Joris Karl Huysmans that helped her to feel that she, too, could be at home in the Catholic Church.²

After leading a chaotic life and publishing her only novel, a thinly disguised autobiography where she confessed to an abortion, Dorothy settled down and lived happily on Staten Island with a very human love, Forster Batterham. When their daughter Tamar Therese was born, Dorothy had the child baptized and soon afterwards became a Catholic herself. True to his anarchist principles, Forster wouldn't marry her, so she painfully severed the relationship and remained celibate for the rest of her life.

For several years Dorothy battered around, Tamar in tow, trying to figure out how to live out as a Catholic her passion for writing and for confronting social and economic injustices. She prayed fervently that God would send her a way, and He did, for she met Peter Maurin, a loquacious and well-schooled French peasant who introduced her to the social teachings of the Church, particularly through papal encyclicals. Together they started a newspaper on May Day of 1933, and before they knew it, a movement was born—the Catholic Worker—named after the newspaper. The movement flourishes ninety years later, and the website www.catholicworker.org documents 227 houses of hospitality, mostly in the U.S., but now on all continents but Asia. *The Catholic Worker* still sells for its original "penny a copy."

What a God-send Peter Maurin was! His three-point program was Benedictine-inspired. It called for informed social criticism, houses of hospitality for the homeless,

St. Benedict reminds us that monastic life is a share in the cross and sufferings of Christ.

and communal farms where the unemployed could learn a skill. With her luminous personality and ability to attract volunteers, Dorothy was able to translate his vision into the continuing practice of the Catholic Worker. "Pray and work" is the Benedictine motto and it was Peter's as well. (Whenever I see those two words together, I hear Dorothy's sage advice to spend even more time in prayer when the work appears to be overwhelming. Counter-intuitive in the way of the world, but deeply realistic in the world of God.)

The idea of applying basic Christianity to social problems struck a chord in a nation still recovering from the Great Depression, and, through *The Catholic Worker*, the word spread rapidly throughout the country. Emanating from the first communities on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, houses of hospitality opened in Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, South Bend, Chicago, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other cities. People also started Catholic Worker farms which attempted—at first unsuccessfully—to live out Maurin's agrarian ideal. This aspect of Peter's Benedict-inspired plan is finally thriving, especially on the Catholic Worker farms which dot the Midwest. New Hope Catholic Worker Farm, outside of Dubuque, is exemplary in combining agriculture and scholarly critique.

What is this Catholic Worker or CW as it is often called? Simply defined, it's a loosely-knit movement of mostly Christian, mostly pacifist, men and women who live together in small communities and resist the ways of the world. Some Workers come and stay only a week; some come and stay a lifetime. Together they practice voluntary poverty, living with and serving in a personal way those who are poor, hungry, and homeless. While the communities are united through a network of newsletters and national and regional gatherings, there is probably more diversity than conformity between them.

CW houses are supported primarily by private donations, and anarchism and disenchantment with the state pervade the movement. From its founding in 1933 until today, it has attracted people who reject the militarism and materialism of contemporary society. Dorothy led the way in this rejecting of the world and thinking out of the box to solve social problems. For example, in an essay in *The Catholic Worker* in 1958, she wrote, more as musing than as a plan of action, that "the

Benedictine oblates amongst us would like to go to some of the Benedictine monasteries and become squatters on their vast tracts, and so induce them to start again the guest houses which are part of the rule of the order. They don't need all the land they have, and we have plenty of landless folk."³

The philosophy of personalism, which calls us to take personal responsibility for changing conditions instead of relying on the state or other institutions, enables Catholic Workers to work for social change while holding fast to the belief that "success, as the world judges it, is not the final criterion for judgment."⁴ Many Catholic Workers are active war resisters who spend time in prison and jail for their principled stance against war.⁵

Dorothy's relationship to the Church of her conversion was steady, loyal, and intense. When she became a Roman Catholic, she accepted the entire Church—doctrine, devotional practices, ecclesiastical structure—but went beyond the conventional passivity most clerics at the time expected from the laity and instead acted out of her own informed conscience to discover how to live as a lay Catholic. Both she and Peter Maurin learned from Benedictines. They were deeply influenced and often in correspondence and visits with Fr. Virgil Michel, O.S.B., of St. Johns Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. This great liturgist's introduction of a responsorial Mass and his revival of the Pauline doctrine of the Mystical Body spoke volumes to this single mother who wanted to live her Catholicism to the fullest.

In fact, Dom Virgil Michel's thought permeated much of Catholic intellectual life in the 1940s and 1950s. Liturgy was central and today, some Catholic Worker houses still say portions of the Hours. It's hard for post-Vatican II Catholics to understand the excitement lay Catholics felt in actively participating in daily Mass, receiving the Eucharist, and being told that we lay people were responsible for changing the world—in other words, for Catholic social action. An important and oft-neglected point about Dom Michel: He was not only a great liturgist, but a believer "that our responsibility for our neighbor flowed from the fact that we were all connected to one another, believer or not, in the Body of Christ and the Eucharist."⁶

For Dorothy, as for Dom Michel, the Mass was the fountainhead of social action and intimately connected with everything she did. It would grieve her that for some, the Mass has become

divorced from the social action which should flow from it. She never could understand Catholics who speak of their intimate prayer life but don't see how that such devotion must necessarily find fruit in practicing the works of mercy and resisting the culture of materialism and war. These issues that private Catholics see as politics, Dorothy saw as faith. She knew that action for peace and justice had to come from faith and be alive with faith.

Another important Benedictine influence was Dom Remberg Sorg with his theology of work. Brian Terrell, a Benedictine Oblate who is also a Catholic Worker farmer and resister in the tiny spot on the map called Maloy, Iowa, has written cogently of Sorg and other Benedictines in "Monastic Roots of the Catholic Worker Movement."⁷

Dorothy learned of St. Procopius Abbey shortly after the CW began, mentioning it in the paper in 1935 and making her first formal visit in 1940. She returned in 1954 and on April 26, 1955, became an oblate of the Abbey, a connection she cherished. Dorothy was particularly drawn to Chrysostom Tarasevitch, O.S.B., a monk who worked tirelessly for rapprochement between Roman Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox churches.⁸ Probably because of his influence, St. Procopius had taken up the Pope's call for religious orders to promote unity between Roman Catholicism and the Eastern Churches. Dorothy had an affinity for Eastern Rite liturgy and would participate in it wherever she could, both at St. Procopius and in New York.

She had always loved the Russian people and their great literature, and Russian spirituality added yet another dimension to her faith. Jim Forest recalls a time when she spoke at New York University. The Cold War was at its height and the media fanned the flames of fear, much as it does of the Muslim world today.

We went into this really smoke-filled room and somebody asked her, with great venom, "Miss Day, you talk about loving your enemy. Well, what would you do if the Russians invaded?"

Without any trouble at all, not annoyed or incensed or ready to cross swords, Dorothy just said, "I would open my arms and embrace them, like anyone else." A staggering response at the time.⁹



Dorothy, the Diamond, and the Weasel

There's a story about Dorothy that she often told herself, one that encapsulates many themes I find important in her spirituality: her Incarnational love for the beauty in the world, her love for the unlovable, and also her reliance on the concept of precarity, supported by the providence of God, who tells us to be as carefree as the lilies in the field. It's the diamond ring story, famous in Dorothy lore.

It seems one morning a well-dressed woman came into the Catholic Worker house. Walked up to Dorothy and said, "Miss Day, I have a little something I'd like to give you." It was a large diamond ring. Jim Forest, who lived at the New York Catholic Worker at the time, tells it like this:

Dorothy received the diamond ring with exactly the same appreciation she would have given to a crate of frozen frankfurters and put it into her pocket. An hour later, in comes "the Weasel." (Everybody at the Worker had a nickname. You rarely knew their real names.) Now the Weasel was in a permanent state of rage. Had a voice that could strip paint off the wall. She was the kind of person who makes you wonder if you're cut out for life in a house of hospitality.

Dorothy took the diamond ring out of her pocket and gave it to this woman. Later, someone [at the Worker] asked if it wouldn't have been better to sell the ring and pay the Weasel's rent or arrange for care for her retarded son. Or use it to pay the Worker's bills, or to give better food to those who came through the soup line.

Dorothy said, "She has her dignity. If she wants to sell the ring, she is free to do so and pay her rent. But if she wants to take a cruise to Bermuda, she can do that, too." And then she said, "Or she can wear the ring just like the woman who gave it to us. Do you suppose God made diamonds just for the rich?"¹⁸

She truly didn't see any difference between the Weasel and the woman who gave her the diamond ring. Even though we give lip service to equality, most of us think the world would be a better place if everyone not only looked like us, but acted more like us. Unlike many of us, Dorothy worried mostly about herself and how *she* should live.

Oblates today may wonder at Dorothy's long-distance affiliation with St. Procopius. She made her Act of Oblation, for instance, at Holy Innocents Parish in New York City. Oblation in those days seems to have been primarily for spiritual nourishment, not for the building of community one finds today. But one can have community while not "living with," and Dorothy certainly had that with St. Procopius. As she wrote in 1957, "I am a part of the Benedictine family all over the world and a member of the Benedictine community at Lisle."¹⁰

While the Catholicism Dorothy found through Peter and the Benedictines anticipated themes the contemporary Church embraces, she could also be critical of the church, particularly its materialism and support of our many wars. She wanted it to live up to the doctrines it preached and would quote Romano Guardini: "The Church is the cross upon which Christ is crucified."¹¹

Her voluntary poverty can be hard talk for both the hierarchical church and the laity. Even Catholic Worker houses have begun to soften it by calling for "living with simplicity." But Dorothy meant it. She counseled giving our goods away and living with very little, as the poor do. She wrote in *The Catholic Worker* of December, 1948, "Love of brother means voluntary poverty, stripping oneself....It also means nonparticipation in those comfort and luxuries which have been manufactured by the exploitation of others.... If our jobs do not contribute to the common good, we pray God for the grace to give them up.

Dorothy Day's spirituality was truly immanent and Incarnational, a love of God as seen in creation, especially in those the world has forgotten. Jim Forest would often quote her as saying that "the real test of our love for God is the love we have for the most repulsive human being we know." But she also saw the goodness or "God-ness" in everything, whether it was in the haggard faces of women waiting in line for food, a fine linen handkerchief, or the scraggly beauty of a city weed. Frequently she repeated the line from Dostoevsky which reminds us that "the world will be saved by beauty."

Dorothy was a praying person and she had absolute faith in the power of prayer, even praying for suicides because she knew there is no time with God. One oft-quoted line of hers is "When you are left alone, pray."¹² Notice she did not say, "When you *are* alone," but "when you are *left* alone." For Dorothy was also a people person, loved to be "just sitting around talking," as she says in the Epilogue of *The Long Loneliness*. Her friends recount fondly what a wonderful private conversationalist she was.¹³

As a Catholic, Dorothy felt both the communion of saints and communion with saints, and was particularly devoted to some of them. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, St. Teresa of Avila and St. Francis of Assisi come to mind—all saints to whom she has been compared. She even wrote a book about St. Thérèse. Her devotion to the saints gives us an unusual story. Jim Forest remembers how startled he was to find, next to Dorothy's bed, a tiny statue of Joan of Arc, wearing armor. He asked her about it and Dorothy responded, "Well she wasn't canonized for being a soldier. She was canonized because she followed her conscience."

Renewal begins and has its source in the individual monk's faith in the grace of God to help him work out his vocation from day to day...



The more I think about it, the more I think that Dorothy admired St. Joan's armor as much as her conscience. And thought all of us should be willing to put our lives on the line, to fight for what we think is right. Use every resource at our disposal to do what needs to be done.¹⁴

The armor Jim Forest speaks of brings to mind what Dorothy and the Catholic Workers of the time called "The Great Retreat." She called it "food for the strong." These retreats strengthened her spirituality, especially during the hard times of World War II, when her pacifism was at odds with almost everyone, including many in the Catholic Worker movement itself. The retreats were loosely based on the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises and first developed by a Jesuit priest, Fr. Onesimus Lacouture of Montreal.

In 1941, she made the retreat with Fr. John Hugo, returning "exuberant and filled with joy," according to her friend Sr. Peter Claver.¹⁵ Dorothy encouraged, almost ordered, those who were in charge of CW houses to make the retreat but it was controversial, both within the movement and without because, on the surface, it seemed neo-Jansenistic. Fr. Hugo was called "a detacher" because he counseled detachment from material goods. Dorothy Gauchat tells us:

It was all very St. John of the Cross. For instance, Dorothy was a terrible chain smoker, but she gave herself completely to all the ideals that Father Hugo presented to us. Right then and there, cold turkey, she stopped smoking.

Gauchat continues:

At that retreat . . . we'd gather in the dining room, and these nuns made such beautiful meals. But people would sit down and not eat that food. To sacrifice it. And I still can see [Fr. Hugo] at the table saying, "Hey! That's not the message. If somebody puts a good steak in front of you, you don't say you can't eat it, you thank God. On the other hand, if having steaks every day and having all the extras and niceties in your life is your consuming drive, then you're on the wrong track."¹⁶

Julian Pleasants, who taught at Notre Dame and was one of the founders of Holy Family Catholic Worker in South Bend has perhaps the best description of the retreat and Dorothy's attraction to it:

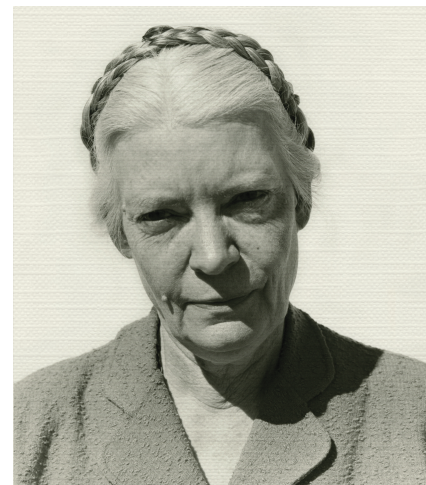
Dorothy said [the Catholic Workers] had to make a retreat. Said if we didn't make a retreat, we'd fall by the wayside. So I hitchhiked to Pennsylvania and we had an eight-day closed retreat—very impressive. The most important thing I got out of it was the necessity of daily meditation. Not the regular kind, but just saying, "What would Jesus do with what I have to do today?"

Now Fr. Hugo said that the best thing to do with good things was to give them up. And I just didn't think that was Dorothy's attitude at all. She didn't want to give them up, she wanted to give them *away*—a totally different approach. Dorothy liked her good literature, her good music, and she never really felt obligated not to enjoy them. I think she got out of the retreat only the notion that you had to be *ready* to give them up.¹⁷

In this kind of detachment, she was very Benedictine and balanced. Part and parcel with this detachment is the CW concept of precarity so important to Dorothy. Jesus told his followers to carry little for the journey, to travel lightly, and to beg for their food. Dorothy, too, embraced a commitment to uncertainty and told stories time and time again of relying on God's providence and being rewarded. This vision of moving beyond a life of accumulation and fear of the future to a life which trusts that God will provide strikes at the heart of our acquisitive culture. "As long as she had money in the bank, she'd never put out an appeal," remembered Tom Cornell, unlike some charities which beg incessantly to build for the future.

It's easy to create one's own Dorothy because there were so many facets to her spirituality. Perhaps because I met her while working against the Vietnam war, my Dorothy is attracted to resisting the power of the state, and I must resist the temptation to remake her into a political figure. Many make her solely the feeder of the hungry, and in the process narrow and dilute her message. Dom Helder Camera's comment applies to Dorothy Day: "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a Communist."¹⁹

Dorothy believed, with other peacemakers like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., that in the era of total war, nonviolence was not just a moral but a practical imperative. She



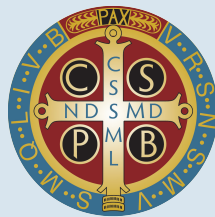
If you only read one book by or about Day, read her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*. When I first read it as a young woman, I saw it as a search for God. During the Vietnam War, I saw it politically because that's where my heart was at the time. When I re-read it today, with older eyes, I see a woman whose deep love is inexorably linked in both her beliefs and actions. Now, in reading *The Long Loneliness* it is this love that stands out—love for the people with whom and for whom she lived her life, love for her family and for Forster Batterham, the father of her child; most of all, love for God.

—Rosalie

proclaimed this message in season and out—regardless of public opinion, the threat of persecution, or the disapproval of fellow Christians. Jim O'Gara, once editor of *Commonweal*, told me:

Dorothy was not radical in the way that many people are in the church today, she was only at odds with Catholics who were not familiar with the encyclicals and other avenues of Catholic social thought. She read things that most people don't bother to read, so she was for an orthodox position. She was for a papal position. She may have differed from the majority of American Catholics, but she was completely orthodox.²⁰

She would be thrilled, of course, by our new Pope Francis, with his concern for the poor, critiques of free-market capitalism, and calls for world peace. What makes Dorothy Day's spirituality so special is this consistency in making the connections, in both feeding poor people and in questioning the social



Vocations Ministry

by Fr. James

priorities which cause so many to be poor. Thus Dorothy is beloved by most of the left, and either reviled or co-opted or worshiped by the right. It seems to have always been so. I recently read a reprint from one of her 1949 essays where she wrote, "Our actions are admired and praised but only as palliatives and poultices, and our efforts to do away with the State by nonviolent resistance and achieving a distributist economy are derided and decried." In both her writings and her actions, she consistently both subverted and transcended distinctions between liberal and conservative, between left and right. In fact, she would have thought such distinctions spurious. She was just doing what the New Testament told us all to do, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. Feed the poor, love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you.

Her actions and her words still speak to us. She didn't just give to the poor, she lived with them. She didn't just talk about how Jesus lives in everyone, she treated everyone as Jesus, even if he or she were drunk and smelly. She didn't ask for proof that people were poor but simply fed them, just as Jesus fed the multitudes. She loved the world and trusted that the God who became Incarnate because He loved the world would guide her. And He did.



- 1 Dorothy Day. *The Long Loneliness*. San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1952, 1981, 29.
- 2 Ibid, 107.
- 3 "Workers of the World Unite." *The Catholic Worker*, May, 1958, 1,3.
- 4 "Aims and Means of the Catholic Worker." www.catholicworker.org/aimsandmeans.cfm
- 5 See Rosalie G. Riegler, *Doing Time for Peace: Resistance, Family, and Community* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2012) and *Crossing the Line: Nonviolent Resisters Speak Out for Peace*, (Wipf and Stock, 2013.)
- 6 Mark Zwick. *Houston Catholic Worker*. Vol. XX, No. 1, Jan.-Feb. 2000.
- 7 *The Catholic Worker* (December 1999), 8.
- 8 Pope Benedict XV and Pope Pius XI.
- 9 Riegler, *Dorothy Day*, 87
- 10 *The Catholic Worker* (April 1957), 6.
- 11 Ibid, 93.
- 12 Loc. Cit.
- 13 Riegler, *Dorothy Day*, especially Chapters 4 and 5.
- 14 Ibid, 82.
- 15 Ibid, 83.
- 16 Ibid, 85.
- 17 Ibid, 84-85.
- 18 Ibid, 145-46.
- 19 Helder, *The Gift: A Life that Marked the Course of the Church in Brazil*, 53
- 20 Riegler, *Voices from the Catholic Worker*, 80.

Along with **Abbot Austin**, I attended in early December, 2013, a National Religious Vocation Conference workshop entitled "Men Religious Moving Forward in Hope" at St. Meinrad Archabbey, St. Meinrad, Indiana. As intended, the talks and the sharing generated a variety of thoughts, some of them circling around the comment of one speaker that, historically, religious orders have served as "the Church's conscience."

Many images came to mind. Francis Xavier, picturing himself making the rounds of European universities, screaming out like a madman to the complacent scholars that, while they engaged in idle disputation, souls were being lost all over the world. Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa, witnessing in deeds, and in words if necessary, to service and poverty, at least implicitly challenging us all to think. Our own oblate of St. Procopius, Dorothy Day, who served the poor.

All of which led me next to wonder, in what way has—does—the Benedictine order serve as "the Church's conscience?" How did Benedict himself? The life that Benedict modeled, the life to which his disciples responded, was one of withdrawal from the


world's hustle and bustle. Society might indeed be improved by the schools and other enterprises that monasteries would establish, but the Benedictine style has ever been far more one of providing stable foundations for charitable impulses than one of pointing fingers at injustice. No doubt exceptions exist, but exceptions they are. So how does Benedictine life serve as "the Church's conscience"?

Ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus. That in all things God may be glorified. That in every part of life God is seen as present, and God comes first. God first. Not as a pious motto or aspiration, but as an organizing principle. That is what St. Benedict does in his *Rule*, and that is what he challenges every Christian conscience to consider. From how and when we pray, to the motivation for the work we do, to the sort of food and even the quantity of food that we eat, to the manner in which material objects are to be received and treated, and to many more facets of life,



Benedict provides a fundamental organizing principle, one with the potential to challenge many a conscience: *God first*.

You are welcome to write or call me at: vocations@procopius.org or (630) 829-9279.

 FIND US ON FACEBOOK
Fr. James Flint, O.S.B.

ABBAY PRAYER & WORSHIP

The monks invite you to join them for morning and evening prayer, especially solemn vespers on Sundays. These are the usual Mass times, please call the abbey switchboard at (630) 969-6410 or visit www.procopius.webs.com to confirm Saturday or Solemnity times or any other schedules.

Worship will be in the abbey church, unless noted (LC) indicating the Lady Chapel.

Monday thru Saturday

- Lauds (LC) 6:25 a.m.
- The Conventual Mass 7:00 a.m.
- Mid-day Prayer (LC) 12:00 noon
- Vespers (LC) 7:00 p.m.
- Compline (LC) 7:00 p.m.

Sunday

- Lauds (LC) 6:25 a.m.
- The Conventual Mass 11:00 a.m.
- Solemn Vespers (LC) 5:00 p.m.
- Compline (LC) 7:00 p.m.