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Diaries shed light on unlikely would-be U.S. saint

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THE DUTY OF DELIGHT:

THE DIARIES OF DOROTHY DAY

Edited by Robert Ellsberg

Marquette University Press

669 pages, $42

It's a sunny Sunday in 1938, and Dorothy Day is feeling less than saintly. Flies swarm around piles of garbage as "hopeless human beings" -- the drunks and the insane who visit the Catholic Worker house in Pittsburgh for food and shelter -- surround and oppress her.

In her diary, Day laments her "great depression of spirits."

"Job is to hide it from others," Day writes, "to accept it as penance, reparation, and to pray constantly for an increase in my heart of the love of God and man."

Over the course of the 20th Century, few people practiced a love of the divine, and the divine in others, as assiduously as Day. The Catholic convert, who co-founded the Catholic Worker movement 75 years ago on May 1, 1933, made "works of mercy" -- feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and comforting the sick -- the center of her life.

For that, the Vatican named Day a "Servant of God" in 2000, placing her on the path to sainthood. She's been called "the most significant, interesting, and influential person in the history of American Catholicism," and been made the subject of numerous biographies, plays, documentaries, and a Hollywood film. Day herself wrote memoirs, a novel, and thousands of columns for the Catholic Worker newspaper.

But Day's personal journals, published this month, reveal the most complete view to date of the snares and hitches on her pilgrimage from Bohemian journalist to Catholic icon, say writers and movement veterans.

Titled "The Duty of Delight," the diaries span from 1934 to just days before Day's death in 1980, and offer a uniquely intimate look at a modern would-be saint grappling with the joys and struggles of everyday life.

"Given her place in the history of American Catholicism, the complete journals of Dorothy Day is bound to be a spiritual classic," said the Rev. James Martin, an editor at the Jesuit weekly America and the author of "My Life With the Saints."

"It shows how many plain, old human problems she had to face ... that holiness makes its home among humanity," added Martin.

As matriarch of the Catholic Worker movement, including its "houses of hospitality" scattered throughout the U.S., Day's problems abounded. Bed bugs bit, volunteers bickered and bill collectors threatened. As wars raged, fellow Catholics questioned the movement's unbending pacifism.

The journals reveal Day's determination to press on, following the "little way" of her heroine, St. Therese of Lisieux.

For nearly five decades, she rose at dawn to attend Mass, prayed the monastic hours, wrote anguished letters to God, examined her conscience and labored to "be gentle and charitable in thought, word and deed."

The journals also show Day's playful side, as she watches baseball, chases after grandchildren and laughs at her own foibles.

Robert Ellsberg, who knew Day toward the end of her life and edited the compilation of her diaries, said the "dailiness of this record" tells an important story.

"I think you come away with an even deeper appreciation for what it took for her to remain faithful to her vocation for all those decades," Ellsberg said.

Claudia Larson, creator of the 2006 documentary "Dorothy Day: Don't Call Me a Saint," also said she was awed by Day's quotidian heroism. "She couldn't show signs of weakness," Larson said, "because people came to her for strength."

The diaries are sure to replenish the store of "Dorothy stories" shared among the more than 185 Catholic Worker houses in the U.S., according to Dan McKanan, author of a book about the movement.

"Interest will be very strong," he said. "One thing that unites Workers across the spectrum is the enormous affection they have for Dorothy."

In many ways, Day is perhaps an unlikely candidate for sainthood. Before converting to Catholicism, she caroused with the likes of playwright Eugene O'Neill, committed every sin "aside from drug addiction" and had an abortion. Later, she chastised those who called her a saint.

But ultimately, the difference between a saint and a holy person, said writer Paul Elie, is that "a saint makes other people want to be like her." And by that criteria, Day is already among the elect, said Rosalie Riegle, a former Catholic Worker who has written a biography of Day and a history of the movement.

Day's diaries, "very clearly show an exemplary and contemporary Christian, one we can and should use to guide our own path," Riegle said. "I know I personally have been having more conversations with God since reading *The Duty of Delight*."'

Editor's interview

Listen to Robert Ellsberg talk with NCR's Tom Fox about Dorothy Day, the Catholic Worker and searching for holiness. It's 24 minute podcast: Learning from Dorothy Day [1].

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