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"To Hell With It" - Dorothy Day

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 5, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

We continue our series of considering Catholic identity today by looking at Dorothy Day. Monday, I set the tone for the week by recalling the response of Flannery O?Connor to a group of erudite Catholics who thought the Eucharist was a great symbol: ?Well, if it?s just a symbol, then to hell with it.? Then, I examined the counterfeit of faith known as civil religion. Yesterday, I looked at the Vatican new motu proprio regarding the Catholic identity of our charities and a different counterfeit form of Christianity, a reduction of the faith to a social justice ethic. Today, we examine Dorothy Day, to whom, assuredly, the adjective counterfeit has never been applied.

Robert Cole begins his short, brilliant biography of Dorothy Day by recalling the first time he met her. He went to the Catholic Worker House on Mott Street. He opened the door. Dorothy was sitting at the opposite end of the room with a distraught woman. In a flash, she signaled Cole to a chair near the door, and then returned to her conversation. The woman was severely intoxicated and quite hysterical and Dorothy was trying to calm her down. Just when it appeared that some measure of calm had been achieved, the woman would explode into a new fit of hysterics. This went on for several minutes until finally the woman was at some peace. Dorothy took her leave of the woman and approached Cole. She asked, ?Were you waiting to speak with one of us??

I first read that account several years back and, appropriately, it brought tears to my eyes. I still cannot tell that story now without my eyes welling up. Everything you need to know about why Dorothy Day was a saint is contained in that little word ?us.? She was incapable of dismissing the dignity of another human person, even for a second, even for someone who would not have cared. If Levinas is correct that our human conscience is more than a prod to do right and avoid wrong, if it is deeper, about the moral challenge of the face of another, Dorothy Day had a very finely tuned conscience. And it is that, not our works, that gains us heaven.

That ?us? shames all the rest of us who are not so saintly. It should make our souls tremble. She spoke of love as harsh and dreadful. No burlap banners in the sanctuary for her. She was the real deal.

I thought of that ?us? when I read this account of the canonization process in the New Yorker [1]. The author follows the typical narrative that has emerged, that it is somehow strange that this woman who is understood as a champion of the left has been embraced by the conservative Cardinal-Archbishop of New York. Of course, Dorothy was no ordinary leftie, and Cardinal Dolan is more complicated than the designation conservative suggests. It does not surprise me in the least that he is championing her cause because I think he grasps the power of that ?us.?

The article makes much of Dorothy?s radicalism, and surely she was radical. But, it does not see how Dorothy?s radicalism after her baptism was not ideological any longer because it was not rooted in an idea. It was rooted in an event, the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. It was rooted in the person of Jesus whom Dorothy worshipped each morning at Mass and throughout the day in the poor with whom she came into contact. It was rooted in the community of faith, the Church, where we encounter the risen Lord still. Dorothy

was not a conformist, she was a ?radical,? precisely because she so obviously, so tenaciously and so heroically conformed herself to Christ.

Everyone wants a piece of Dorothy. Thus it has ever been with the saints ? literally. We want their relics near us, we venerate those relics, we want to be close to them. Since the issue of Dorothy?s canonization caught the nation?s attention when Cardinal Dolan consulted with his brother bishops in Baltimore last month, both the Catholic Left and the Catholic Right claim her as one of their own.

A few thoughts for the Catholic Left to consider. Do you try and conform the Church it us, to our wishes and wants, or do you try and conform yourselves to Christ and the Church? Do you experience authority within the Church as liberating, which is exactly how Dorothy experienced it? Do you hold on to your solid, well-informed, liberal opinions more closely than the tradition of the Church? Do you reduce the faith to good works?

A few thoughts for the Catholic Right to consider. Do you recognize how counter-cultural Dorothy was? Do you let yourselves see what she saw, that one of the things that holds us back in our commitment to faith is this ?dirty, rotten system?? Do you equate the faith with moral probity and conventional values? Do you look at sinners and see someone to dismiss or person with a future, even with the potential for sanctity in their future? Do you love the poor and make that your criterion for evaluating your own economic decisions and that of your society?

Dorothy had gone to God by the time Pope Benedict delivered his famous Christmas address to the Curia in 2005, in which he confronted the ?hermeneutic of rupture? regarding Vatican II and proposed, instead, a ?hermeneutic of reform,? emphasizing both continuity and discontinuity. Dorothy?s life could have been the Holy Father?s Exhibit A. I am not a scholar of Dorothy?s life, but I have read many of her collected letters. I do not discern an enormous difference between Dorothy before the Council and Dorothy after the Council in those letters. Certainly, she did not need to wait to read about the ?people of God? in Lumen Gentium to recognize her baptismal call and its significance. She was certainly committed to social justice long before Gaudium et Spes was drafted. Robert Blair Kaiser has suggested that Vatican II ?changed everything.? I do not see that it changed Dorothy.

To everyone the question looms: Would we have said ?us? to Robert Cole? Here is the true radicalism of Dorothy Day. That may not be evident to a writer at the New Yorker. It may not be evident to those on the left or right who are trying to claim Dorothy as an adherent to their causes, rather than try and adhere their cause to Dorothy?s cause. It certainly is not evident to me when I am dismissive of others as I often am. But it is in that ?us? that we discern Dorothy?s radicalism, the radicalism of total abandonment to Jesus Christ, the radicalism of total commitment to the poor, the radicalism of total allegiance to his Church, in sum, the radicalism of sanctity.

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[1] http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2012/11/dorothy-day-a-saint-for-the-occupy-era.html