News



Peace activist Martha Hennessy spoke July 19 at the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis. Her grandmother, Catholic Worker co-founder Dorothy Day, spoke at the 41st International Eucharistic Congress in 1976 in Philadelphia. (Brian Fraga)



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Almost 48 years after her final public appearance, Dorothy Day once again spoke to a eucharistic congress.

Only this time, the words that reflected the eucharistic underpinnings of Day's uncompromising pacifism were spoken through her granddaughter, Martha Hennessy.

"We needed her words. Her voice is so full of authority, integrity and beauty," said Hennessy, a peace activist and member of the Catholic Worker movement that her famous grandmother co-founded with the French social activist Peter Maurin in 1933.

Hennessy, a retired occupational therapist who lives in Vermont and still volunteers at the Maryhouse Catholic Worker community in Manhattan's Lower East Side, spoke July 19 during a morning "impact session" at the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis. The five-day gathering in Indianapolis is presented by the U.S. Catholic bishops, who hope the event will spur a spiritual revival in the church.

> '[Dorothy Day's] voice is really critical for the U.S. Catholic Church right now.'
> —Martha Hennessy
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Hennessy told National Catholic Reporter that congress organizers twice denied her requests to speak at the congress, but that they invited her after other Catholic media outlets reported that she was not being allowed to participate at the event. Hennessy said she had wanted to attend the congress since first hearing about it a year ago.

"I was happy that Dorothy was being respected and not omitted," Hennessy said. "Her voice is really critical for the U.S. Catholic Church right now."

Speaking for less than 10 minutes, Hennessy dedicated a significant portion of her speech to quotes and excerpts from Day's books, speeches, presentations and articles. Patrick Jordan, a family friend and former editor at Commonweal who wrote a book about Day, helped Hennessy to select the quotes.

"I don't go into these things unilaterally. I'm part of a beloved community, so I ask for help," Hennessy told NCR after her presentation.

One excerpt that Jordan selected for Hennessy's presentation consisted of several paragraphs from the speech that Day presented at the 41st International Eucharistic Congress, which was held in 1976 in Philadelphia.

Invited by then-Philadelphia Archbishop Cardinal John Krol to participate on a panel about the Eucharist and women's responses to "the hungers of the human family," Day focused most of her remarks against war.

"Our creator gave us life, and the Eucharist to sustain our life. But we have the world instruments of death of inconceivable magnitude," Day said on Aug. 6, 1976. Day noted in her speech that that date marked the 31st anniversary of the United State's atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan.

"No one in charge of the Eucharistic Congress had remembered what August 6th means in the minds of all who are dedicated to the work of peace," Day said in what would be her final public address before her death in 1980.

Day's speech — in which she also criticized congress organizers for scheduling a Mass for the military on the same day — challenged listeners then and now, said Hennessy. She added that  some of her grandmother's quotes were "hard sayings."



Priests hear confessions early July 19 in the Indiana Convention Center during the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis. The five-day event ends July 21. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

Recounting her grandmother's life, Hennessy told the audience that the Catholic Worker movement "took the Sermon on the Mount and Catholic social teaching literally" by feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless.

"As a 3-year-old sitting on the lap of Dorothy, my granny, I received my first awareness of the presence of God, held in her voice and in her heartbeat, when my ear was pressed to her chest," Hennessy said.

Day's devotion to the Eucharist, Hennessy added, "stays with us as we continue to practice corporal and spiritual works of mercy as Jesus gave of himself to us."

Hennessy, who shares her grandmother's Eucharistic piety as a daily communicant, told the audience of several hundred people: "Upon receiving the Eucharist daily, Dorothy knelt in silence for 20 minutes, to allow herself to absorb the presence of

God within her before returning to her work."

To further illustrate Day's devotion to the Eucharist, Hennessy's speech included a quote from one of Day's columns in 1962 in The Catholic Worker newspaper: "My joy is constantly renewed as I receive our Lord at Mass."

Organizers hope for spiritual revival with US bishops' National Eucharistic Congress

Writing in September 1962 about the Second Vatican Council, Day said: "Our need to worship, to praise, to give thanksgiving makes us return to the Mass daily. The Mass begins our day. It is our food and drink, our delight, our refreshment, our courage, our light."

Hours after her talk, Hennessy accompanied about 20 Catholic Workers at a picnic they held in a park near Lucas Oil Stadium, the site of the congress' evening revival sessions. Hennessy said she found the Catholic Worker community to be "a university unto itself."

"It's a lifelong school of learning," she said. "It has so much rich material to study, to look at, to draw from, to reiterate and to re-present. It's amazing."

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