

Dorothy Day and the Revolution of Love

John Dear | Apr. 15, 2008 On the Road to Peace

"We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever-widening circle will reach around the world," wrote Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement. On May 1, the Catholic Worker celebrates its 75th birthday, and to mark the occasion, Marquette University Press will publish Dorothy Day's diaries, *The Duty of Delight*. Meanwhile, a beautiful new DVD documentary, "Don't Call Me a Saint," has been released, offering rare interviews and footage of the heroic woman whose reach has indeed embraced the world.

Produced by Claudia Larson, "Don't Call Me a Saint" chronicles Dorothy's life -- her childhood in Chicago, her college years and the years as a Communist, and the years she wrote for *The Call* and *The Masses*. The movie takes in her marriage and divorce and the back-alley abortion, and her imprisonment for demonstrating with suffragettes outside the White House.

It tells of her later love for Forster Batterham and of her contemplative life on a Staten Island beach and of the joyful birth of her daughter Tamar (who died last month). Joyfully she had her daughter baptized, and took the sacrament herself. For this, the worldly agnostic Forster packed his bags and left in a huff.

Dorothy, a chronicler in her own right, wrote for *Commonweal* and *America* and for a spell polished scripts in Hollywood. She was in the employ for awhile, too, of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Then the French peasant-intellectual, Peter Maurin, entered her life. A momentous friendship. He was all vision and cogitation; and she all heart and decisive action. Seismic rumblings struck New York. The Catholic church in North America would never be the same.

On May 1, 1933, Dorothy launched *The Catholic Worker* newspaper. Circulation jumped by year's end to some 100,000 subscribers. Next to come were a soup kitchen, a farming commune, and a house for the homeless. She instituted Friday evening lectures, where topics never discussed in church circles were finally aired.

All of which goes on still, some 28 years after her death at age 83 on November 29, 1980. Today there are more than 185 Catholic Worker houses around the world. A new one just opened in Albuquerque, named Trinity House, a name meant to undo Robert Oppenheimer's larceny. He purloined "Trinity" to name the atomic test site.

"Poverty is a strange and elusive thing," Dorothy wrote. "I have tried to write about it, its joys and its sorrows, for 30 years now. I condemn poverty and I advocate it. Poverty is simple and complex at once; it is a social phenomenon and a personal matter."

The perplexed and curious often asked her, "How long do you let the poor stay." She invariably replied, "We let them stay forever. They live with us, they die with us, and we give them a Christian burial? They become members of the family. Or rather they always were members of the family. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ."

The unenlightened often asked her for a word of explanation. "Those who can't see Christ in the poor," she said, "are atheists indeed."

Some years ago I traveled to Marquette University and studied her papers in the archives. One letter, in particular, caught my eye. It was written in the 1970s, addressed to her lifelong friend Nina.

Everyone showered her with praise, she confided. But life in the New York shelter was hard. "At the moment, I'm sharing a room with several mentally ill women, and this is no joke." Her steadfast, selfless service came as hard as one might expect. But she remained faithful until the end.

Perhaps her greatest contribution was her skill in connecting issues. From charity, to justice for the poor, to disarmament and Gospel nonviolence. The billions wasted on war belonged to others -- to the hungry, the homeless, the sick, the ignorant, the unemployable.

Her lonely stand against war, I think, is utterly astonishing, especially given that few people then, and scarcely any Catholics -- and not one priest or bishop -- dared oppose war. But Dorothy said no -- from the Spanish Civil War to World War II, from Korea to Vietnam.

She made an impression. People abandoned her in droves, subscriptions plummeted, many ridiculed her. But she held to the Gospel, come what may "We Continue Our Christian Pacifist Stand" read her headline right after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. "We will print the words of Christ who is with us always, even to the ends of the world. 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.' Our manifesto is the Sermon on the Mount?. We will not participate in armed warfare or in making munitions, or by buying government bonds?."

Need it be added, she was one of the few to condemn the U.S. for unleashing atomic fury over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Dorothy Day was a danger to the status quo, and that's why she didn't want to be called a saint, and thereby "dismissed so easily." "Becoming a saint is the revolution," Dorothy once wrote. She was dangerous, a nonviolent revolutionary, in the footsteps of Jesus. "Once you give to God what is God's," she famously said, "there's nothing left for Caesar." And: "By our accepting the cross ? we unleash forces that help to overcome the evil in the world." Piquant words that don't go down easily.

Little need to wonder what Dorothy would say about our own dreadful times. She would vigorously denounce our insane misleaders, their \$3 trillion war on Iraq (according to Nobel prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz), their skirting laws against torture, their slashing social services, their forsaking the world's poor.

She would urge us to receive our sacraments and say our prayers. She would insist on our serving the poor and risking arrest. "Love is a great and holy force," she said, "and must be used as a spiritual weapon."

In the DVD you'll hear reflections from her late daughter, Tamar, as well as her friends and co-workers Eileen Egan, Robert Ellsberg, Daniel Berrigan, Pat Jordan, John Cort, Ade Bethune, Tom Cornell, Catherine Morris, Sr. Peter Claver and Karl Meyer.

Order a copy and show it in your churches and schools. It will inspire you to live the Gospel of love and peace right here and now. It will encourage you toward being a nonviolent revolutionary -- a mystic, a disciple, and yes, a saint -- just like her.

"Don't Call Me a Saint" can be ordered at: dorothydaydoc.com [1]. John will speak at the Call to Action conference in San Jose, Calif., April 26. This summer, Loyola Press will publish John's autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, and they've launched a new Web site about it, www.persistentpeace.com [2]. Later this fall, John will undertake a nationwide book tour. For further information, see: www.johndear.org [3].

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