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Dorothy Day, Servant of God and of the Poor, Benedictine Oblate (1897-1980)

By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

DOROTHY DAY'S LETTERS AND DIARIES

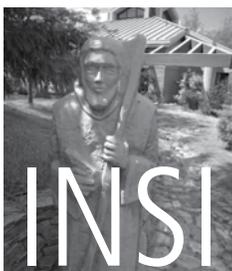
DOROTHY DAY'S CAUSE FOR CANONIZATION WAS INTRODUCED BY CARDINAL JOHN O'CONNOR WITH THE APPROVAL OF THE HOLY SEE IN 2000, TWENTY YEARS AFTER HER DEATH. FROM THAT MOMENT SHE HAD THE TITLE "SERVANT OF GOD," given to those on the first stage toward canonization. She might be a bit ambivalent about this, since she said once, "Don't call me a saint. I don't want to be dismissed so easily." She has had some other titles as well. She is, some think, the most important American Catholic ever. She was also a Benedictine Oblate. The article that follows—longer than most in the *Desert Chronicle*—identifies some of Dorothy Day's fundamental principles, and suggests questions they raise for us now thirty years after her death.

Recently, we have been treated to editions by Robert Ellsberg and Marquette University Press of her diaries and letters, both of which she asked to be kept unpublished for

twenty-five years after her death: *The Duty of Delight: The Diaries of Dorothy Day and All the Way to Heaven: Selected Letters*. These new publications do not fundamentally change the picture presented in earlier writings by and about her, especially her own telling of the story of her conversion, *The Long Loneliness*, and her regular columns in *The Catholic Worker*, the newspaper published by the New York Catholic Worker communities. What the diaries and letters do show is the day-to-day, human reality of her life. Reading the diaries and letters is rather like the shock that can happen to a young monk, after his initial fervor wears off and the routine of the monastery and the rough edges of his all-too-imperfect fellow monks become inescapably obvious.

Dorothy was going to entitle a book she never finished, *The Duty of Delight*, a phrase from Ruskin, and "All the way to heaven is heaven" is a saying she liked to quote from St. Catherine of Siena. Another of her favorite sayings, from Dostoevski, was "The world will be saved by beauty." From a superficial point of view, Dorothy's life seems to have been much more duty than delight,

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From the Prior's Pulpit

WORKING THE WORKSHOPS

EVERY YEAR, I TRY TO GET IN AT LEAST ONE "WORKSHOP" ON SOME ASPECT OF RELIGIOUS LIFE. THIS YEAR, I HAVE ALREADY PARTICIPATED IN TWO WORKSHOPS: ONE IN TUCSON WITH THE CONFERENCE OF MAJOR SUPERIORS OF MEN (CMSM) AND THE OTHER AT ST. JOSEPH'S ABBEY, LOUISIANA, FOR THE MAJOR SUPERIORS OF THE BENEDICTINE ORDER IN THIS PART OF THE WORLD. BOTH OCCASIONS PROVED TO BE INSIGHTFUL AND "WORTHY OF ATTENTION".



Tucson, AZ: Conference of Major Superiors of Men

The main presenter in the Tucson conference, Jan. 27-31, was a religious Sister of Mercy and author, Janet Ruffing, R.S.M., Professor Emerita of Spirituality and Spiritual Direction at Fordham University where she directed the spiritual direction program from 1986 until her arrival at Yale Divinity School in the spring of 2010. Her first presentation invited "us men" (the conferees) to steep ourselves in the desert's primordial environment of saguaro cacti and open spaces alternating with rocky crags, and then to perceive what we needed to learn as leaders of religious communities beset with the multiple problems that are magnified by the lack of vocations and the aging of community members. In the wilderness, one can be free of a problem-centered mindset so as to acquire a sense of belonging to and of transcending the world while communing with the Creator. The matter of communion with God through



Sr. Janet Ruffing, R.S.M

nature is hardly revolutionary to us westerners. However, many of the conferees were "big city folk" for whom unpaved wilderness might prove bewildering (pun intended).

In her subsequent presentations, Sister Janet focused on the on-going debate regarding the proper interpretation of Vatican Council II. Faced with the fact that ex-Catholics now constitute the largest "non-Catholic religious denomination" in America,

religious leaders and communities need to ask themselves, "How well does our religious life serve our chosen ministries, and how well do our chosen ministries serve our religious life?" It is meaningfulness of life and work that will attract vocations.

However, the world perceives the life of the celibate religious as meaningless and "counter-productive" (pun intended). The challenge, then, is in demonstrating that celibacy is meaningful in establishing a "direct relationship with God". This direct relationship is symbolically expressed in the religious person's making vows to God in contrast to the secular priest's making vows to his bishop.

The second presenter at the Tucson conference was Fr. Stephen Glodek, SM, who focused his talks on how a leader administrates well and how he can stay centered in his mission for evangelical life. Good religious leadership is found in and through humility, collaboration, mentoring, and personal support.

Without humility, a religious leader (or any leader) may become narcissistic and "driven by a sense of entitlement". We need only look at the present-day child abuse crisis in the Church to verify this statement. Our human nature has been blighted by Original Sin, that is, the desire "to be like God". In other words, hubris (pride). Consequently, we all need to "take time out" for self-examination through prayer and meditation, if we are to be open to God's guiding Spirit in our ministries. In functioning collaboratively, the leader will uncover unexpected talents in others and discover unforeseen opportunities for achieving appropriate goals.

The leader's role as a mentor is in providing "a safe space for learning" and, as any good teacher will do, he rejoices in the success of others. Moreover, a good mentor not only "mentors", but is also "mentored" through the good spiritual direction of others—especially by someone who has a different set of initials and letters after his or her name, but also has good knowledge of the leader's religious institute.

See "PRIOR'S PULPIT", cont on page 3



Covington, LA: Benedictine Superiors

The presentations to the Benedictine superiors meeting at St. Joseph’s Abbey in Louisiana, Feb. 10-14, were given by Metropolitan Jonah (Paffhausen) of the Orthodox Church in America, which has about one million members. The theme of the meeting was the theological expressions in religious icons. However, not much time was given to analyzing icons or to exploring iconography. Rather, the Metropolitan homed in on the historical context and theological developments that influenced the artistic expressions of Christian faith. Thus, for instance, some movements in the so-called iconoclastic controversies sometimes emphasized that no representations of God or Christ were appropriate or that the only appropriate image of the divine is the Eucharist. This had great influence in the western part of the Church in its emphasis on the Eucharist as shown in works of art and in such feast days as Corpus Christi with its Eucharistic processions through the streets of the village, town, or city.

The Orthodox Church in America (OCA) is an outreach of the Russian Orthodox Church rather than the Greek Orthodox Church. The OCA is not “in union with Rome”. Consequently, the meeting of Benedictine superiors this year had an ecumenical tone and purpose beyond the theme of iconography. Whether or not this meeting will bring further interaction between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church remains to be seen. However, Abbot Primate Notker Wolf, O.S.B., was present for the meeting and agreed to apprise Pope Benedict XVI of the ecumenical possibilities that this meeting could lead to here in the United States and elsewhere. This was a fitting conclusion to this year’s Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity, which is observed each year from January 18 (the “Chair of St. Peter”) to January 25 (the Conversion of St. Paul). Perhaps we can all contribute to church unity through prayers and penances during this season of Lent. •



Metropolitan Jonah Paffhausen

more of a hell than a heaven, more head lice than beauty. She repeated these phrases to herself to strengthen her faith that beauty and love were to be found even in rough neighborhoods in New York and the chaos of the Catholic Worker farms (her mentor and colleague, Peter Maurin called them “agronomic universities).” In these diaries and letters, she laments over the crazy and addicted people who lived at the Catholic Worker “houses of hospitality,” ransacked her room, wanted her to solve their quarrels, and infuriated their neighbors. In accord with another of her favorite quotations, from Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, the diaries and letters demonstrate that love in action “is a harsh and dreadful thing when compared to love in dreams.” And that of course is why Dorothy Day is “a servant of God”: her thinking and acting were love in action.

CATHOLIC WORKER PRINCIPLES

Catholic Faith and Practice

In reading the diaries and letters one is struck by how much Dorothy Day was a woman of principle. Contemporary culture seems to feel two ways about principle: we want people to be consistent, but we are also suspicious of people of strong principle, especially if their principles make us uncomfortable (then we call them ideologues or fanatics). Some of her principles, like her dedication to service of the poor, antedated her conversion to Catholicism, but from the founding of the Catholic Worker and her collaboration with Peter Maurin, they were all integrated into her faith and for the most part expressions of it. Her faith was that of a practicing, believing Catholic. She was very respectful of the hierarchy, even when they were critical or unsupportive of what she was doing or when she felt they were mistaken (e.g., Cardinal Spellman’s unqualified support of the U.S. Military or the money spent on a Eucharistic Congress held on the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima). She was not afraid to make her convictions known, but she managed to be forthright and respectful at the same time. Her Catholic faith also came into play during the 1960s and 1970s when she asked some Catholic Workers to leave the house because of their behavior. She later apologized for some of her harshness in the matter, but she maintained a clear sense of the acceptable scope of diversity among Catholic believers. Her attitude was that it was fine for people other than Catholics to join the Catholic Worker community, but she insisted that it was a Catholic community.

Like Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day believed that only prayer and the sacraments could sustain a life dedicated to serving the poor and homeless. In her diaries she often speaks of Eucharistic celebrations offered by priests for the Catholic Worker communities and of attending Mass at different churches. She also

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mentions praying *The Short Breviary* (a adaptation of the breviary or Liturgy of the Hours, which was published by the Liturgical Press at St. John’s Abbey), a book she cherished, and a book we used in the minor seminary at Mt. Angel, when I was student there. She liked to read and read with the eyes of faith so that a novel or history book became *lectio divina* for her.

PACIFISM

Pacifism was a bedrock principle of her life. She did not like violence in any form and refused to support World War II or take part in the Civil Defense drills that were part of the Cold War. Her pacifism during World War II cost the Catholic Worker a great deal of support, but pragmatic considerations did not override principle. Her pacifism expressed itself not in passivity but in non-violent resistance as taught and practiced by Mahatma Gandhi. For practicing such resistance, she spent time in jail on several occasions.

PERSONALISM AND ANARCHISM

Another principle of Dorothy Day’s philosophy, one that is hard to grasp in its nuances, is “Personalism.” Personalism was a philosophy championed in France by Emmanuel Mounier (1905–1950). The beginnings of Personalism were in the Depression and the rise of totalitarian states in the early 1930s. As Dorothy Day understood it (Peter Maurin seems to have introduced her to it) a person is not simply an individual member of society, a part of a larger whole. A person is God’s creation, endowed with freedom and responsibility. Although God is incomprehensible, God does work in human history. Mounier was a Christian “tragic optimist” at a time when any kind of optimism was hard to come by. The Houston Catholic Worker website quotes Mounier: “A personalist civilization is one whose structure and spirit are directed towards the development as persons of all the individuals constituting it. They have as their ultimate end to enable every individual to live as a person, that is, to exercise a maximum of initiative, responsibility, and spiritual life.”

Dorothy Day considered herself an anarchist, in part

because she was a personalist. The heart of her anarchism was a strong commitment to subsidiarity, of people taking responsibility for themselves and others at the local level. She did not want “holy mother the state” exercising paternalistic control over people’s lives. She wanted people to be allowed and empowered to use their God’s given talents constructively, not managed by welfare departments. As Margaret Pfeil, a theologian who helped found a Catholic Worker community where she lives, puts it, “Dorothy was a Christian anarchist. By that she meant that we Christians tend to foist upon the state things that we need to take responsibility for at the personal level and as Christian communities.” Dorothy’s suspicion of the state was not individualistic libertarianism, because she combined it with a deep and heroic commitment to helping those who found themselves in dire need. She devoted herself to caring for them and found the means to do so not through grants or government support, but through donations from people who admired what she was doing, people as diverse as W. H. Auden and the Trappist Abbot John Eudes Bamberger, wealthy Monsignors and poor working people.

CRITIQUE OF INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM; AGRARIANISM

In line with Personalism, Dorothy Day’s acceptance of industrialism and technology was guarded. Mounier wrote: “Technical progress serves men collectively in the same way as habit serves the individual. It is for man a powerful means of liberation provided he dominates it. What we therefore reproach our technical civilization with is not that it is inhuman in itself, but that it has not yet been humanized and that it has thus far served an inhuman system.” Dorothy, who loved Dickens, and whose comradeship with Marxists in her pre-conversion days had made her keenly aware of the human cost of industrial society, measured societal progress in terms of Peter Maurin’s goal to create “a society where it will be easier for people to be good.”

From Peter she learned respect for the benefits to people from living on the land, supporting themselves by the work of their hands. From him she learned that working on the land



LAZARUS HOUSE



Lazarus House



*Lazarus House
Mother Teresa*



Volunteer at Lazarus House

together helps people overcome the alienation from the earth and each other that is part of modern industrial and post-industrial civilization. She enjoyed her visits to her daughter Tamar's various rural residences, to the Catholic Worker farms, and worked hard in both settings, though one has the impression she remained a city girl.

DOROTHY DAY'S LEGACY

Dorothy Day left a tangible legacy. There are over 185 Catholic Worker Houses in the world, all but about twenty of them in the United States. In keeping with the anarchist and personalist inspiration that guided their founder, they are independent of the state, the Catholic Church, and each other. Beyond that, there are numerous organizations inspired by Dorothy and her vision for the Catholic Worker. Two of the latter are located in Boise: Corpus Christi House, a day shelter for the homeless, where several oblates volunteer, and two places established and maintained by Ellen Piper, an oblate: Thomas Merton House, a residence for women, and Lazarus House, an outreach center. Thousands of people have been welcomed to Catholic Worker Houses of Hospitality, and thousands of Catholics have learned to take the gospel seriously by living, serving, working, talking and writing in those same houses.

However, Dorothy Day's legacy may well be more in the questions she raises and the principles she espoused so wholeheartedly. Here are some things she makes one think about. (1) Absolute pacifism is a very controversial idea, but when one thinks about the wars that the United States has fought since World War

II, it is hard to see that much good came out of them, however grateful one is for the sacrifices people in the military made and are making. (2) Today some people think that the government is too big and needs to be trimmed back so that the markets can operate freely on their own principles and taxes can be drastically reduced. Others think that the government needs to remain big enough to provide a social safety network, regulate corporations, protect the environment, and use taxation to stop the growing disparity between rich and poor. Dorothy, I think, would say that the state should make it easier for people to support themselves and help each other, but that it should not paternalistically control every dimension of life. She certainly would not think that corporations are "persons," nor would she accept as inevitable the great disparity between rich and poor. She would invite us to question how much contemporary consumerist capitalism helps or hinders the good of persons. (3) Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin offer a vision of hospitable communities, who celebrate the Eucharist, pray the Liturgy of the Hours, and practice the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. In these communities those in need are cared for and welcomed by voluntarily poor Christians. In them people are involved in the growing and preparation of their own food in a place that is cultivated and nurturing. If we Christians could find a way to form more such communities, or, better, networks of such communities, would we not be transformed, or better transfigured into the likeness of Christ, as Dorothy Day was? •



THOMAS MERTON HOUSE



Thomas Merton House



*Thomas Merton House
Rabbit*



*'Agronomic University'
Thomas Merton House*



Thomas Merton House Station





Cultivation, Culture and Liturgy

Hubbard Vineyard Ranch Meadows

By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

UNITY, OREGON, JANUARY 2012

FOR MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS I HAVE BEEN SPENDING A MONTH OR MORE EACH YEAR IN THE SINGLEWIDE TRAILER/PARISH HALL NEXT TO ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH IN UNITY, OREGON. THESE visits satisfy a need I have for solitude and simplicity. They also put me back in touch with my native ground, the world of Eastern Oregon, of timber, sagebrush and cattle.

The people of St. Joseph's help each other; they have to because it is 40 or more miles to an electrician, a doctor, a gas station, or a grocery store. The church and hall receive their water through a system that seems in need of an exorcism. Its components are, from source to faucet, (1) a spring, which provides excellent water (2) that is piped through a large pipe, which some years ago became clogged by roots of an old willow tree, to (3) a well, where (3a) the pump, (3b) the pressure gauge and (3c) the pressure switch have all been gimpy this winter, from which water is pumped uphill for several hundred feet (4) through a small pipe that has both leaked and frozen at various times, to (5) an outdoor faucet, from which it sent to (6) pipes underneath the trailer, where the skirting and insulation have also been problems, to (7) a sink which over the years has twice flooded the entire trailer. More than ten people, ages 16 to 82 have helped to fix this winter's troubles, all of which now seem to be solved.

In the 25 years I have been coming here, Unity has



Hubbard Vineyard Beaver Dam

shrunk. The Post Office, the now very small school, St. Joseph's and the community church are the only institutions open this winter; there is no store or gas station. Ownership of ranches and farms is being consolidated, sometimes into the hands of absentee owners. Many buildings are abandoned; many ranches are for sale; the population is aging. The Forest Service office is now seasonal; the mill is long gone. It is the same story in many parts Eastern Oregon, and I saw a similar situation when I drove through farmland on state highways across the Midwest three years ago: every 50 or 100 miles was a town with a Wal-Mart and similar enterprises, and in between there were smaller towns that were dying.

CONTACT, NV, EARLY FEBRUARY 2012

Ten years ago I joined a team of ranchers, government range and wildlife experts, and interested citizens in formulating and implementing an ecologically sound grazing plan for the Hubbard-Vineyard ranch, operated by Steve and Robin Boies. The aim is to work together to promote simultaneously the health and flourishing of the land, the wildlife that live on it, the people who come to hunt and fish there, and those who live and work on the ranch. In Wendell Berry's terms, our concern is an "oikos" (a "household" in the broadest sense, from which the words ecology, economy and ecumenism derive). Overtime, in spite of skepticism from some ranchers and litigation from opponents of ranching on public lands, we have coalesced into a community tied to each other and to a place that is indeed flourishing. The community we have formed and the place for which we care have become for us a sign of something deep and important; they are to the eyes of faith an expression of the presence of God, sacramentals, though we on the team do not have a common faith or language in which to express this presence.

BOISE AND JEROME, FEBRUARY 2012

There are two recent books about the history of Catholic involvement in rural America: David S. Bovée, *The Church and the Land: The National Catholic Rural Life Conference and American Society, 1923–2007* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), and Michael J. Woods, SJ, *Cultivating Soil and Soul: Twentieth-Century Catholic Agrarians*





Unity, Oregon

Embrace the Liturgical Movement (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009). Both books trace the efforts of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference to foster the faith, culture and farming practice of Catholics in the rural United States.

Bovée's book traces how the NCRLC shifted its emphasis from decade to decade as it sought to strengthen the faith of American Catholic farmers and to give them a voice. After World War II, the NCRLC expanded its mission to aid farmers overseas, and in more recent decades it has embraced environmental and food-quality issues. It has continued to promote the family farm, even as agriculture has become corporate and industrial, and the number of full-time farmers has declined to under 2% of the US population.

Cook's book studies the close bonds that grew up between the NCRLC and the liturgical movement, which sought to enhance people's participation in the Eucharist and other liturgical actions of the Church. The NCRLC "made liturgy the spiritual foundation of its social program for Catholic agrarians." It believed that many aspects of the liturgy—the bread and wine of Mass, the agricultural blessings in the Roman Ritual, the liturgical year's

alignment with nature's cycles, care for the soil, and rural arts and handcrafts—fostered a thoroughly "sacramental worldview that joined land, liturgy and life." It achieved considerable success in integrating "agrarian lives with the mysteries celebrated in the liturgy" (xiii). One reason for this success was that NCRLC efforts encompassed religion, culture, economy, health and environment. Its mission was also made easier by the religious, vocational and ethnic homogeneity of many rural communities.

The two biggest obstacles to the NCRLC's efforts, Woods concludes, were consumer capitalism and individualism, which in the end have led to the virtual disappearance of the family farm. He sees hope in the "New Agrarianism" of people like Wendell Berry, whose core concerns are the health of the land, of families, and of the relationships between people and places. The New Agrarians see eating as an agricultural, ethical, and sacramental act; they call for a culture that recognizes this. As such they share much in common with the NCRLC. For, as Cook writes, liturgy arises out of culture, uses its symbols, and it leads those who celebrate it to do deeds that are right and just and to create a public order based on justice and love.

In rural Bavaria in the fall, the sanctuaries of churches are decorated with elaborate cornucopias, displaying squash and other agricultural products. Perhaps the closest thing we have to that in America are display tables at the farmers' markets, which in a very small way are trying to create a culture where farmer and eater (not producer and consumer) are in communion. Somehow this effort to redefine cultivation and culture needs to be connected with liturgy (cult). This is a liturgical movement that has barely begun. •



Hubbard Vineyard Panorama



Coming Events

Square-foot Gardening Training (April 21, 2011) 9:00am - 4:30pm

Workshop is free; rooms and meals available for those who wish them

Pilgrimage to Northern Italy (May 16–May 31, 2012)

A few places still available

Road Scholar Programs at the Monastery *Commuters are welcome*

Ireland: History, Myth and Culture (June 4-10, 2012)

Windows into the Lives of Medieval People (July 2-8, 2012)

Ancient Rome: Life, History, Literature, Christianity (July 16-22, 2012)

Religion and the Settling of the West (July 23-29, 2012)

Quilting (August 8-14, 2012)

Hiking (August 27-September 2, 2012)

For further information, contact Fr. Hugh: 208-761-9389; hughf@idahomonks.org



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