

Dorothy Day: Dissenting Voice of the American Century

John Loughery and Blythe Randolph

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This long and detailed biography celebrates a radical life lived in total commitment to the Gospels. It gives a vivid account of Day's journey to that of a political radical within the American Catholic Church, including many details of the early part of her life glossed over in the past to present a more sanitized version of her life.

In 1963 Thomas Merton wrote to Dorothy Day: 'If there was no *Catholic Worker* and such forms of witness I would never have joined the Catholic Church'. Like Merton, she was also a convert to Catholicism. She was born in 1897, the oldest of five children, and brought up in New York, San Francisco and Chicago. Her parents were nominally Christian and Dorothy was baptised at the age of 14 in an Episcopalian Church. She was described as a 'bookish' child, reading widely including the Bible. At 16 she gained a scholarship to Urbana University in Illinois but left after two years to try and pursue a career in New York journalism, first with the socialist newspaper *The Call* and then with the similarly left wing *The Masses*. During this time she became a Communist and immersed herself in Greenwich Village life, making the acquaintance of Eugene O'Neill and his circle. She went to Nursing School for a year and had an abortion, having ended an unhappy love affair. Shortly thereafter she married Berkeley Tobey, a Greenwich Village rogue and bon vivant.

She then travelled through the States and was impressed by the Catholics she met, one of whom gave her a rosary. In New Orleans she was a frequent visitor to St Joseph's Cathedral. Back in New York she met up with Forster Batterham with whom she had a child, Tamar (b. 1926). Unusually she managed to have Tamar Teresa baptised in a Catholic Church. She was herself received into the Catholic Church the following year.

In 1932 she met Peter Maurin, a French existentialist who lived on the streets. With him she founded the *Catholic Worker*, a bi-monthly newspaper which for one cent was soon selling over 100,000 copies, still for sale today at the original price. This brought in donations and invitations from all over the country. Maurin also inspired the Friday evening meetings called 'Clarification of Thought' which were led by distinguished speakers including Fr Virgil Michel, the Benedictine liturgist. Dorothy became a Benedictine Oblate. Maurin visited a house

she had taken which included a floor for women and another for men who had nowhere to go. This was in the New York of the Great Depression so there was no shortage of candidates. Catherine de Hueck Doherty who founded Friendship House in Brooklyn thought it was a 'madhouse'. Maurin was an anarchist whose ideals appealed to Dorothy. Her Catholicism was probably tinged with Jansenism. She was called, behind her back, 'The Abbess'. Other Houses of Hospitality were opened. Not surprisingly Tamar's education was neglected.

Despite her feeding the poor all was not well with the Church authorities, some of whom regarded her as 'an affront to her gender and her Church'. She was regularly in jail for her activism, from a suffragette protest in 1917 to supporting César Chávez in 1972. She refused to back Franco in the Spanish Civil War, opposed conscription for World War Two, practised civil disobedience during the Cold War by refusing to take part in fall out shelter drills and, worst of all, proved a complete pacifist when faced with the Vietnam War. In 1962 she went to Cuba to support Castro — and was congratulated by Merton. She went to Rome for the opening of the Second Vatican Council, returning via a Pax Christi conference in England. She was criticised by Merton when in 1965 Roger LaPorte, who described himself as 'a Catholic Worker', burned himself to death as an anti-Vietnam War protest. By this time a long decline in her health had started with congestive heart failure. She went on a world tour to Australia, India, Tanzania, Poland and spent five days in Russia during Brezhnev's detente. She later visited Ireland and the Simon Community in London.

Loughery and Randolph conclude that she was better known outside the United States than within it. When Pope Francis listed her amongst the four morally exemplary Americans most Americans would have had to hit the Google button. She was but one of many women of independent vision in the United States.

In 1952 she produced her own conversion story, *The Long Loneliness*. Other biographies followed. In 2006 a full length documentary, *Dorothy Day: Don't call me a saint*, was shown at the Tribeca Festival. In 2012 the US bishops unanimously supported her case for canonisation. Perusal of this book, which presents the most complete and rounded portrait of this remarkable Christian, will enable readers to make up their own mind upon the matter.

Willy Slavin is a priest of the Archdiocese of Glasgow who has retired to a hermitage with an iPad.