HISTORY

Dorothy Day: The Improbable Life of a Possible Saint

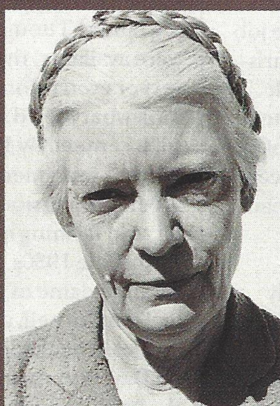
Day (center) demonstrates against World War I in 1917. She opposed every war in her lifetime, which alienated the public in the '40s

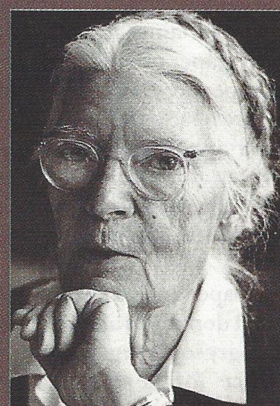
Washington, D.C., December 8, 1932: After completing her reporting assignment—the Hunger March from New York to Washington, D.C., demanding relief and jobs—a woman ducked into a chapel. It was the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, and, kneeling in the dark under the low vaulted ceiling, she began to pray. This 35-year-old journalist and single mother was at a crossroads. She had spent her youth among communists and bohemians, crusading for the downtrodden and seeking her purpose in the world. Now a Catholic convert, she still felt helpless to change anything. "There I offered up a special prayer," Dorothy Day would later write, "a prayer which came with tears and with anguish, that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor." **By Miranda Spencer**

TIME LINE

1916

1940


1958


1969

In less than 24 hours, her prayer would be answered—by a homeless man who'd charmed his way into her Lower East Side apartment. Out of nothing, the two would start *The Catholic Worker*, a newspaper that gave a voice to the millions displaced by the Depression and that initiated a social-reform movement that gave food, clothing, and shelter to anyone who asked. Along the way, Day's rebel spirit and unswerving religious faith would produce articles and activism that would brand her a heretic and a traitor, land her in jail, and isolate her from her biggest supporters. Yet by the end of her life, both New York's archbishop and Mother Teresa would call her saintly.

The disheveled man on her doorstep was Peter Maurin, a sort of freelance Catholic scholar and street preacher sent to her by a mutual friend. Born a French peasant, his studies and life as an itinerant laborer had led him to conclude it was time to realign society with traditional Catholic teachings—specifically, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount about love, selflessness, and our common humanity. At the core of his vision was "personalism," the belief that we, not the government, are our brothers' keepers. He convinced the likeminded Dorothy to help him start a newspaper that would spread the ideas they shared.

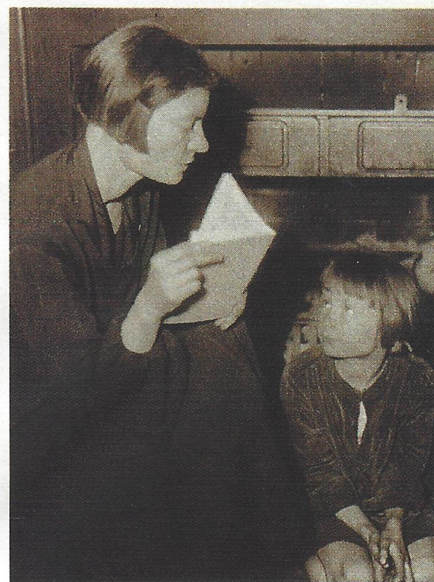
As they planned the first issue, Maurin taught Dorothy more about the Church, the lives and works of the saints, and assigned her books to read. With a little Providence and a lot of pluck (like scraping up printing fees by skipping the gas bill), they wrote and published an eight-page tabloid from Dorothy's kitchen. *The Catholic Worker* debuted on May 1, 1933, at a labor rally in Union Square. Its price: a penny, "so cheap that anyone could afford to buy it." Sold on street corners and through subscriptions, the paper soon attracted an avid readership. In a time of uncertainty (13 million were jobless), the paper offered a unique Christian perspective on current events. It wasn't preachy in the usual way. Notes Day biographer Jim Forest: "Much of [it] was written as if it were a letter between friends." By year's end, circulation had jumped to 100,000; by 1938, it was 160,000.

The paper and its mission quickly attracted donations and volunteers. Cold and hungry souls began showing up at the "office" for the soup that now boiled nonstop. The Catholic Workers opened the first "houses of hospitality" in some dilapidated buildings, feeding hundreds daily with donated food and day-old produce. The guests (needy visitors) and staff (volunteers) lived together as one big family. Though prayers and services were available, there was no effort to convert or even reform anyone. Soon, visitors took what they'd seen and started other such centers. By 1936, more than 30 Worker settlements dotted the nation. Weekly discussion groups were also created, and farming communes sprung up. By the late 1930s, Dorothy Day was a "grande dame of good works," according to Tom Cornell, a longtime Worker volunteer. That image was soon tested.

Day, who chose to live and die among the poor, came from a middle-class Protestant family in which God was rarely mentioned. Born November 8, 1897, in Brooklyn, she was the third of five children of a resourceful mother, Grace Satterlee Day, and a remote father, sportswriter John Day. From an early age, Dorothy kept a diary, which demonstrated a poetic bent and a questing, spiritual nature. The impressionable girl learned firsthand the pain of poverty—and the value of charity—after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. (The family had moved there when her father took a job writing racetrack news.) The tremors destroyed the newspaper plant, plunging them into poverty. Still, her mother opened their home to worse-off neighbors.

The Days then tried their luck in Chicago, where Dorothy spent her free time devouring great books. She was especially taken by Dickens and Dosto-

Dorothy and her sister, Della, circa 1910



With her daughter, Tamar, in 1932

Day (center) had been divorced, undergone an abortion, and was constantly criticizing the Catholic Church, but that didn't stop Mother Teresa (right) from calling her "saintly"

Saint Dorothy?

During her life, Dorothy Day was compared to a saint for her unswerving religious faith and devotion to the poor. And now, the first steps have been taken to canonize her literally. If the process is successful, she will be only the fourth American so honored.

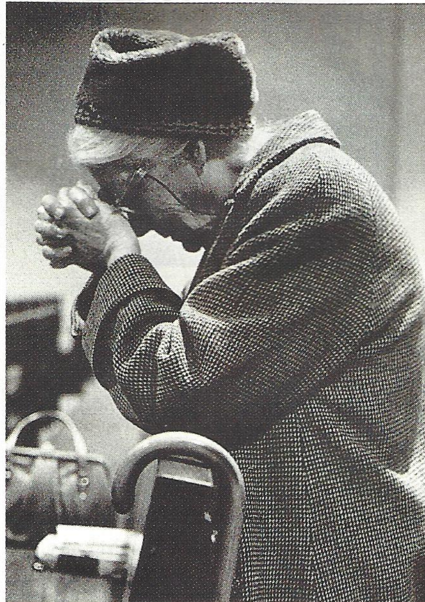
In 1983, the Claretians, a Catholic religious order in Chicago, began a campaign to beatify Day, publishing articles about her and circulating testimonials and letters by the hundreds that detailed and praised her life, character, and deeds. In 1997, they sent this documentation to John Cardinal O'Connor of New York (who, as the bishop of the parish in which Day died, is empowered to open the required investigation of the candidate for sainthood). In November 1997, in a sermon celebrating the 100th anniversary of Dorothy's birth, the cardinal himself unofficially proposed canonizing her. Describing her strong influence on his own life, he asked, "Why does the church have saints? To encourage others to follow in [their] footsteps." He declared, "If any woman ever loved God and her neighbor, it was Dorothy Day."

Despite such support in high places, not everyone likes the idea of Saint Dorothy. Conservative columnist William F. Buckley, for example, has described her as "slovenly, reckless, intellectually chaotic [and] anti-Catholic." Some are shocked at the idea of exalting someone who had frequently criticized the Church and America's values, "lived in sin" with a man, and had an abortion. And even Catholic Workers and some members of Dorothy's family feel that bestowing sainthood is irrelevant at best, squandering time and money that the Church might better devote to the poor.

Perhaps the biggest opponent was Dorothy herself. She famously lamented, "Don't call me a saint. I don't want to be dismissed so easily." Legend has it that when someone asked her, "Miss Day, do you have visions?" she snorted, "Oh s—!" **M. S.**

evsky, with their sweeping stories and philosophical themes. One book in particular fascinated Dorothy: the Bible. "All my life," she later wrote, "I have been haunted by God." Alternately reassured and terrified by the idea of the supernatural, she had already begun to pray and sing hymns, and joined an Episcopalian congregation at age 10.

All in a Day's work: Dorothy finds time to instruct her grandchildren, 1958



Taking a moment for herself at a New York City Mass, 1969

Day protests the Vietnam War, 1965

Dorothy Day Quotes

"Once we begin not to worry what kind of house we are living in, what kind of clothes we are wearing, we have time, which is priceless, to remember we are our brother's keeper."

"We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community."

"The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us."

"Where are the saints to try to change the social order, not just to minister to the slaves but to do away with slavery?"

"Too much praise makes you feel you must be doing something terribly wrong."

(All of the above from *The Long Loneliness* by Dorothy Day, ©1952 by Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.)

Dorothy's reading material changed when her elder brother got a job with a labor newspaper, reporting on the kinds of social problems she knew only from her thick Russian novels. She was moved by Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, about horrendous conditions in the meat-packing industry, and decided to explore local slums for herself. The neighborhoods and their people inspired her: As she wrote in her 1952 autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, "[F]rom then on my life was to be linked to theirs, their interests were to be mine."

The stirrings of Dorothy's social conscience drew her away from religion and toward politics. At 16, she enrolled on scholarship at the University of Illinois but left after two years spent mostly outside class, reading radical writers, agitating with the Socialist Party, and eking out a living doing menial labor and writing for local papers.

She moved to New York and talked her way into a reporting job at the socialist newspaper *The Call*. Living in a tenement on the Lower East Side, she thrived in her new community of artists, reformers, and freethinkers. (Eugene O'Neill was a friend, and she once interviewed Leon Trotsky.) During this period, the defiant young woman drank heartily and took up her nearly lifelong habit of chain-smoking. Showing her legendary fiery temper, she quit her job one day after slapping a comrade for being too familiar.

(Continued on page 103)

Elie Wiesel *from page 70*

People of the past and people of the present. That's why I'm involved in so many human-rights activities. There are so many prisoners. People are starving and suffering and despairing.

"I look and see the swollen bellies and haunted eyes of the very young in Ethiopia, in Cambodia, in South America. I could have been that child. I was that child. I must make the gesture."

He has traveled the world to fight injustice. Boston University's Silber recalls how in 1984 he asked Wiesel to get involved with the Kissinger Commission, then investigating atrocities committed against the Miskito Indians of Nicaragua. "He immediately flew. . . down to Honduras, took a little plane to get as close as he could. Then they got in a dugout canoe to get to the Miskito Indians, met with them, and flew back to issue his report. Without stopping, he got on a plane to Paris to speak to French government officials who were planning on selling helicopter gunships to the Sandinistas. He told them what was going on, and Mitterrand canceled the helicopters. That's a good example of the way he becomes involved."

More recently, Wiesel took a three-day tour of refugee camps in Macedonia and Albania. While he has said he sees little hope of long-term reconciliation in the Balkans, he believes the Kosovars must return home. "They will start building, rebuilding," he told reporters. "It's psychologically important."

Wiesel and his wife Marion sponsor a series of symposia around the world called "Anatomy of Hate." In 1995, for example, he brought together leaders of groups locked in combat: Israelis and Palestinians; Catholics and Protestants from Northern Ireland; Serbs, Bosnians, Croats; whites and blacks from both Africa and the United States.

"He creates a neutral space where putative enemies can meet and begin to perceive and cherish their mutual humanity and lay the foundation for future friendships," Dr. Silber says.

Wiesel organizes these conferences because he feels "hate is destructive even as a concept. So I try to fight it. Anger I don't mind. Anger I have enough of. Anger is good; it can be [a] creative [force]. Good works of art can come out of anger. But nothing comes out of hate."

His monotone whisper rises only when he's asked if he's forgiven the Germans. "I don't forgive," he says sharply. "Who am I to forgive? No one authorized me to forgive!" But almost as quickly, that flash of emotion is gone.

"But I do think that the young people today deserve something better, something more, something other than my despair. What I am trying to say is *do not pass judgment on an entire people.* I do not believe in collective guilt. I have German students in my class who are so good, so pure, so committed, it's a pleasure looking at them, to see how they work. I can imagine the burden on them, being German," he observes.

There is nothing disingenuous about him when he says that. He is truly concerned about the burden on the children of his enemies. In fact, it isn't so much that he sees light where others see only darkness: He seeks light out, won't stop until he finds it, and that sustains him.

"I have to tell the whole story [of the Holocaust]," he says. "The whole story contains some sparks as well. There were people who didn't just stand by, who saved Jews during the war. There weren't many, but a few. There were good people everywhere, and I cling to the few. It's enough. It's a despairing need to find hope."

He's determined to pass on that hope in his writing. "After *Night,* in my books, if I do not find a way out [of despair], I do not publish it," he says. "I keep the manuscript until I find a way out."

Last fall, Boston University, where he teaches philosophy and literature, held a celebration to commemorate Wiesel's 70th birthday as well as his life and work. The famous came to honor him, but perhaps most telling were the tributes from students and former students, who spoke about his inspiration and his modesty.

"The simplicity of your heart bound us together," wrote one student. "From you I have learned to bear witness to the truth, so that the truth will not be silent."

The Nobel committee echoed those sentiments when it awarded him the 1986 peace prize, calling him "one of the most important spiritual leaders and guides in an age when violence, repression, and racism continue to characterize the world. Wiesel is a messenger to mankind: His message is one of peace, atonement, and human dignity."

The praise washes off quickly, before it has a chance to penetrate. "I am not a *tzaddik,*" he insists, using the Hebrew word for "righteous person." "A tzaddik is a just man. I'm just a student, a very good student. I would refuse [the title of tzaddik]. There is a tzaddik in every one of us, you as well as I."

His modesty is genuine. "Especially since the Nobel Prize, three, four, five invitations come in every day, requests to speak here, to march there, to sign this and that petition. I'm invited all over the world. It's not me. They're inviting the Nobel laureate. I know this very well.

"Nothing can be more gratifying than knowing that something you've done has moved people. But I prefer not to think about it. If you think about it, you take yourself too seriously."

How does he fight vanity? "That's very easy. I close my eyes and see myself from before. I see myself as a young student, or I see myself with my father.

"That is truth." •

Curt Schleier is a frequent contributor to this magazine.

Dorothy Day *from page 97*

As she pursued her writing, Dorothy was pierced with a "strong sense of evil, of the brokenness of this world," says Jane Sammon, a longtime Catholic Worker who traveled with Day in the United Kingdom in the early '70s. In November 1917, Day had gone to prison for the first time, after being arrested with some 40 other suffragists demonstrating in front of the White House. This harrowing experience confirmed the feeling she should help her fellow souls directly rather than as an observer. So in 1918, Dorothy began nurse's training at Brooklyn's King's County Hospital.

There she fell deeply and obsessively in love with an orderly named Lionel Moise. When he left her once, she was devastated (some have suggested she attempted suicide). He threatened to abandon her again if she became pregnant, and when she did, he convinced her to have an abortion—then left anyway. On the rebound, she briefly married Berkeley Tobey, a co-founder of the Literary Guild, and penned a thinly veiled autobiographical novel, *The Eleventh Virgin.*

After her divorce, the writer drifted; at one point, a friend commented, "She's too religious to be a communist." It was true. She was increasingly attracted to the Catholic Church—which, she liked to point out, was the church to which the masses of poor immigrants belonged. Eventually, she sold the film rights to her novel and bought a cottage on the rural eastern shore of Staten Island. There, she hoped to find peace.

The simple life was heaven for Dorothy. She wrote serial fiction and shared genuine love with her common-law husband, British biologist Forster Batterham, a confirmed atheist who revered nature but reviled mankind. Dorothy's own happiness, meanwhile, was leading her to pray almost constantly, say the

rosary, and surreptitiously attend church.

Her joy was complete when she discovered she was pregnant. When their daughter, Tamar Teresa, was born in March 1927, it sealed Dorothy's commitment to becoming a Catholic. She marveled, "No human creature could receive or contain so vast a flood of love...as I often felt after the birth of my child." She went ahead and had Tamar baptized a Catholic and began to study the catechism with a local nun. Fights with Batterham escalated, until one night she sent him away for good. The very next day, she too was baptized a Catholic.

Living her faith as a Worker, however, proved far from serene. Dorothy's days were often stressful. Besides cooking, sorting used clothes, and mopping floors, she was writing and mailing the latest monthly issue of the newspaper, of which she was editor. A pioneer of advocacy journalism, Day wrote prolifically, from muckraking investigative pieces to "On Pilgrimage," a long-running column that wove together personal reflections, biblical teachings, and current events.

In everything she did, she challenged the status quo. Sometimes that meant housing strikers and boycotting exploitative businesses. If it also meant breaking the law by staging a sit-in or resisting the draft, so be it. While devoted to the Catholic sacraments and liturgy, going to mass daily, she was also highly critical of the Church as an institution, claiming it didn't live up to its own teachings.

Most controversial was her unyielding pacifism. Day believed the commandment to "love thine enemies" was to be taken literally. She opposed every war in her lifetime, even World War II. Once, she wrote a column decrying Japanese internment camps; when President Truman bombed Hiroshima, she called it "demonic."

Soon readers, even other Catholic Workers, became alienated. The paper's circulation plummeted, volunteers dropped out (some to join the Army), and 15 hospitality houses were closed. Day was now "utterly isolated," recalls Cornell. But, he notes, "She was one of the first to protest Hitler" in editorials and by picketing the German embassy.

Day's responsibilities often conflicted with her personal life. There was never enough time to tend to her daughter, who spent much of her youth in boarding school. This made Dorothy feel "a complete sense of failure, of utter misery," as she once wrote. Though Tamar married and moved away at 18, she and Dorothy remained emotionally close, and Day often visited her nine grandchildren. Voluntarily celibate, Dorothy also missed romantic love. (She and Batterham stayed in touch; toward the end of his life, she nursed him—and his new "wife"—through illnesses.)

As the country's mood shifted, Day gained more public support. She and the Workers spearheaded opposition to the civil-defense drills of the McCarthy era, sitting on park benches when air-raid sirens sounded. She was jailed three times, once for a month, but with each "duck and cover" exercise, more and more people joined the sit-ins. By the '60s, she had countless companions in her active opposition to the Vietnam War and nuclear-arms race, and in her nonviolent work on behalf of civil rights.

Well into her 70s, Dorothy continued her pilgrimages. She took a world tour that included then-Soviet Russia, home of her favorite writers. In India, she visited Mother Teresa, who bestowed upon her the Missionaries of Charity cross. And she was jailed one last time, for picketing on behalf of union farm workers in California.

In late summer 1976, Day suffered a heart attack and became a semi-invalid but continued to write and worship from her bed. When she quietly passed away on November 29, 1980, Tamar was by her side.

When asked about the fate of *The Catholic Worker*, Day once predicted, "If God wants it to survive, it will." It has: Some 140 Catholic Worker settlement houses and farms in America and abroad soldier on with works of mercy. The bimonthly newspaper, circulation 90,000, is published out of Maryhouse, a settlement house on New York's Lower East Side. It still costs a penny—so cheap anyone can afford to buy it.

Miranda Spencer is an associate editor of this magazine.

Japan *from page 75*

dead. Tokyo had been burned to the ground. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were devastated. And yet many in the government still refused to give up. It was then, finally, that Hirohito broke the precedent of imperial silence. In a quavering voice, defying all advice to the contrary, and to the great relief of his subjects, he announced Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945. World War II was at its end.

Three months later, Hirohito renounced his role as a living god. A new constitution was then written, allowing the monarchy to continue, in a secular role, in Japan's new democracy. The emperor's quarter-billion-dollar fortune was swept into the government's coffers.

The Everyday Life of a Retired God

Now, the shy, introspective emperor took to making ceremonial visits, even painfully attending the occasional factory opening as Japan's postwar economy boomed. His delighted subjects, now able to view his bespectacled face and to understand what he said—he began speaking modern Japanese—were amazed to find him delightfully avuncular.

In reality, however, Hirohito was never so happy as when he could wear an old sweater and beat-up hat and rummage around his science lab, conducting experiments in marine biology and writing several highly regarded books on his great area of expertise, the jellyfish.

Hirohito was the last of the great World War II figures to die, succumbing to cancer in 1989. He had lived long enough to see his country move from bitter defeat to economic victory. And he had managed to save the imperial family in a time of massive global change. Upon his death, his oldest son, Akihito, then 55, assumed the throne.

A Different Sort of Life

Each generation learns from the last, and so Hirohito, who resented his bitter childhood, gave Akihito far more freedom than he himself had ever enjoyed. The child was still sent away to be raised by courtiers at age 3, but he was also allowed to see his parents more regularly than Hirohito had.

In accordance with Hirohito's wishes, Akihito was assigned an American tutor—a Quaker named Elizabeth Gray Vining—who lived in the Imperial Palace and taught the future emperor English. She called her young student Jimmy, railed against the fact that he had only one interest (fish), and introduced him to the wider world of learning. "Jimmy" became much more extroverted as a result of his contact with Mrs. Vining. He was permitted to attend college, studying politics and economics at Tokyo's Gakushuin University for two years. These were major steps forward. Even so, when asked as a teenager if he ever wished he could be an ordinary boy, Akihito replied: "I don't know. I've never been an ordinary boy."

There was something else extraordinary about Akihito. He was the first member of the imperial dynasty ever allowed to marry a commoner. Fearing the heavy hand of the Imperial Household, women were not exactly lining up for the job.

Undaunted, the powers that be went to work, seeking a suitable candidate. One was chosen: Michiko Shoda, daughter of the chairman of a major flour-