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Dorothy Day: A Saint to Transcend Partisan Politics

Despite attempts from both liberals and conservatives, Dorothy Day does not fit comfortably in either political camp.

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Thomas More, the statesman who would not compromise his faith at the behest of King Henry VIII, was elevated to sainthood during a time when Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini were rising to power. Now, as the United States seems to be locked in a red state/blue state quagmire, the Catholic Church may elevate to sainthood Dorothy Day, a servant of God who could not be pigeonholed as a liberal, conservative, Democrat, Republican, or libertarian, and chose to wear no other label than that of Christian.

Last month during their annual meeting, the United States Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) voted to support Dorothy Day's cause for sainthood. To steal a line from Peter Kreeft about his heroes Jesus and Socrates, Dorothy Day certainly has something to offend everyone.

Founding the Catholic Worker movement during the Great Depression, Day and her colleague Peter Maurin farmed, fed the poor, and published a newspaper to protest wars and the unjust treatment of workers. Although Day is widely accepted by the religious left because of her antiwar stance, as well as her dedication to civil rights, workers' rights, and the poor, Day has met with a cool reception from many on the right. A host of conservatives, from Rush Limbaugh's callers to Glenn Beck, to writers and commenters at conservative websites and blogs, have opined that Day was a Communist who flouted Church teachings. These conservatives never provide proof, but only make statements to the effect that she was trying to push the Church in a Communist direction.

This is a shame, as Day's life has a lot to offer the orthodox Catholic. "Dorothy Day constantly lived her life according to a 'higher obedience' that was not subject to political instrumentalization," said Dr. Chad C. Pecknold, assistant professor of historic and systematic theology at the Catholic University of America, and author of *Christianity and Politics: A Brief Guide to the History* (Cascade, 2010). "Advancing her cause—especially in the wake of the recent presidential election in which the Catholic vote was divided by a political calculus that her life rejects—is providential for the Church in America."

Tom Cornell, a deacon assigned to St. Mary's Parish in Marlboro, New York and co-manager of Peter Maurin Farm, served with Day at the Catholic Worker when he was a young man. In fact, he calls Day his matchmaker, as he and his wife, Monica, literally met over a Catholic Worker soup pot. He agrees that the bishops' push for Day's canonization is providential. "Dorothy is a bridge between the so-called left and the so-called right in a polarized church." He adds, "I don't think the labels are very helpful."

Robert Ellsberg, the publisher of Orbis Books and editor of *All the Way to Heaven: The Selected Letters of Dorothy Day*, knew Day the last five years of her life, and agrees that she is a bridge figure. "She is a symbol of common ground whose witness could bring together people," he said.

"She didn't just communicate with Catholics," Ellsberg added. "She was in touch with Protestants, Jews, and unbelievers, and trying to seek common ground."

Day continues to be something of an enigma to many. One of the widespread legends about Day is that she was a Communist, a bit of "history" that simply isn't true. Around the time of her conversion, she worked for the Anti-Imperialist League, which was a Communist front organization. According to Cornell, Day felt a lot of unease about this and talked to her confessor about it.

"He told her, 'You have a daughter to support—until you can find something else, keep working there,'" he said.

According to Cornell, when Day wrote later in life that she was an ex-Communist, she was referring to her time working for the Anti-Imperialist League.

Day was an obedient daughter of the Church when it came to her views on abortion and birth control, which might come as a surprise to some. Prior to her conversion, she had an abortion, which she regretted. In a television interview with Hubert Jessup, Day referred to abortion and contraception as "genocide," and lamented population control as a weapon used against the poor. On June 28, 1974, she was one of seven signatories to the *Catholic Peace Fellowship Statement on Abortion*, which read in part:

The January 22, 1973 Supreme Court decision on abortion deprives all unborn human beings of any protection whatever against incursions upon their right to life and has thus created a situation we find morally intolerable, and one which we feel obliged to

protest...

From the point of view of biological science the fetus is an individual human life. The social sciences may attempt to define “fully human” in a variety of ways, but their findings are inconclusive and, at best, tentative and certainly supply no basis for determining who is or who is not to enjoy the gift of life. No one has the right to choose life or death for another; to assume such power has always been recognized as the ultimate form of oppression.

Cornell confirmed that Dorothy was staunchly against birth control; Day’s own daughter, Tamar, had nine children. Cornell recounted that when Day’s sister, Della, told her she should tell Tamar about birth control, Day said, “If you ever mention that again, I won’t talk to you.”

Another misconception about Day involves her relationship to government in general. Contrary to Internet combox lore, she and Peter Maurin were no devotees of the state or state-sponsored welfare. According to her memoir about the Catholic Worker movement, *Loaves and Fishes*:

The city, the state—we have nicknamed them Holy Mother the City, Holy Mother the State—have taken on a large role in sheltering the homeless: But the ideal is for every family to have a Christ room, as the early fathers of the Church called it. The prophets of Israel certainly emphasized hospitality. It seems to me that in the future the family – the ideal family—will always try to care for one more. If every family that professed to follow Scriptural teaching, whether Jew, Protestant, or Catholic, were to do this, there would be no need for huge institutions, houses of dead storage where human beings waste away in loneliness and despair. *Responsibility must return to the parish with a hospice and a center for mutual aid, to the group, the family, to the individual.* (Emphasis added)

Loaves and Fishes is filled with examples of Day’s run-ins with the government and regulators, which made it difficult, if not in some cases nearly impossible, for her to serve the needs of the poor. Day did God’s work without help, and often with direct opposition, from the government.

While Day at times described herself as an “anarchist,” later in life she stated that should have used the word “personalism” to describe her beliefs instead. According to Cornell, Day saw personalism as a philosophy which acknowledges that people are not disconnected individuals in a war of all against all, as in the capitalist model; nor are they to be subsumed into a larger whole, as in the collectivist model. Rather, all are individuals formed in, by, and for community. Persons are never means to an end; they are ends in themselves, never to be violated in body, mind, or spirit.

Day did not believe there should be no government whatsoever. She believed, in accordance with the Catholic principle of subsidiarity, that problems should be solved at the smallest level first. The federal government should not do what can be effectively done by the state, nor the state what the county can do, nor the county what the town can do, and so on down to the family. According to Cornell, most

anarchists or personalists within the Catholic Worker movement support government siding with the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed from conception to natural death. An example of this would be if the government began protecting small farmers from big agricultural corporations who force them to use patented seeds, he said.

“She was always a realist: the state is never our savior,” said Dr. Jana Bennett, associate professor of theological ethics at the University of Dayton, and associate editor of the blog [Catholic Moral Theology](#). “She clearly worried when governments took over care of the poor, because that makes it into a faceless and nameless ‘charity.’”

“She believed it was up to us to help people who are poor or people who are addicts or people who don’t have homes,” said George Horton, who is a steering committee member of the Dorothy Day Guild and director of development of society and community for Catholic Charities for the Archdiocese of New York. “She defies left and right by pulling us back, and saying we, who are followers of Christ, have a duty to be concerned about the poor, wars, and injustice. She calls you back by reminding you of the Gospel and the Sermon on the Mount.”

In her essay “Was Dorothy Day a Libertarian?” Catholic writer Ellen Finnigan argued that Day may have been a proto-libertarian, because of her anti-government views. Nevertheless, Day was no defender of *laissez-faire* economics, as she embraced the teachings of social encyclicals like *Rerum Novarum*. She favored a middle way between capitalism and collectivism, which she, along with Pope Leo XIII, saw as equal but opposite enemies of private property. This middle way is called “distributism,” which could be described as a return to the economics of Christendom when the mass of people, rather than being dependent on the state or an employer, were independent farmers, businessmen, and professionals. The term distributism was coined by G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc.

Day defended private property and the Church’s teaching on the same. “Once we saw a cartoon in the *Saturday Evening Post* of a mother rebuking her child. ‘Don’t deface the wall, William, we own this house.’ In other words, what you own is taken care of. Property means responsibility. Property is proper to man,” **wrote Day**.

Day quotes Joseph T. Nolan:

Too long has idle talk made out Distributism as something medieval and myopic, as if four modern popes were somehow talking nonsense when they said: the law should favor widespread ownership (Leo XIII); land is the most natural form of property (Leo XIII and Pius XII); wages should enable a man to purchase land (Leo XIII and Pius XI); the family is most perfect when rooted in its own holdings (Pius XII); agriculture is the first and most important of all the arts (Pius VII); and the tiller of the soil still represents the natural order of things willed by God (Pius XII).

Nevertheless, “Day was just as suspicious of business...and very suspicious of industries and governments interacting,” said Bennett. “In her 1946 ‘The Church and Work’ she discusses the cotton industry, how industrialists and the US government seem to operate hand-in-hand to prevent people from being able to use cotton that is stored in warehouses. ‘Oh the efficiency of modern business which leads to war!’ Ultimately, it is war and violence, and its interrelationship with business and government, that is a large concern and that, for her, is definitely related both to the common good and to rightly following Jesus Christ.”

Ellsberg said Day combined a love for social justice and peace with a traditional style of worship and devotion to the teachings of the Church. “She felt popes said wonderful things about peace and justice, but didn’t feel the laity and hierarchy saw those as obligatory issues.”

Day has also been criticized for butting heads with Church hierarchy. One often-repeated story is that Cardinal Spellman of the Archdiocese of New York told Day to remove the word “Catholic” from the *Catholic Worker*, and she refused. “Dorothy Day never disobeyed Cardinal Spellman or any other archbishop of New York,” said Cornell. “She explicitly stated, in my hearing, more than once, that if the CW were no longer welcome in the Archdiocese of New York she would close down the operation. She was a loyal and obedient daughter of the Church. She also told me that if we had to leave NY there was the Diocese of Brooklyn across the East River and the Diocese of Newark across the Hudson.”

Unlike today’s liberals and conservatives, Day had no grand illusions about what politics would accomplish. In an interview with the *Catholic Sentinel*, Cardinal Francis E. George recounted meeting Day when he was a young man, excited at the prospect of the US having its first Catholic president. “Young man,” she told George. “I believe Mr. Kennedy has chosen very badly. No serious Catholic would want to be president of the United States.”

“Both liberals and conservatives, in their own ways, are concerned about freedom of the individual, the one against the state, and the other against the Church,” said Bennett. “Day’s trying to move people to a much more communal, selfless vision where the individual isn’t ultimately who matters. God does.”

Horton, from New York’s Catholic Charities, said he thinks the problem is we tend to look at Day from our own ideological positions. “I think that can be a problem with people on the left and the right. Some people on the left can only see her social activism and pacifism. In some curious way, everyone wants to define her, but she wants everyone to go back to the Gospel and let it define us,” he said.

Pecknold agreed, saying, “When Mother Teresa was asked what should be done to promote world peace, she famously said ‘Go home and love your family.’ ... When you ask how Catholics can transcend the left/right paradigm, I want to say look to people like Mother Teresa and Dorothy Day. Instead of constantly thinking about Catholic identity through the lens of the national political stage, begin making life revolve

around your parish, and think about Catholic identity more through the liturgical calendar than through the election calendar. That's a good start."

Cornell added, "We need to look through the prism of our Lord Jesus Christ and his Gospel and conform ourselves to that before we conform ourselves to any ideal of America, or the Republican or Democrat Party. Archbishop Dolan said Day is the example of Christian discipleship we need at this time in our country. We need to learn when and how to say no to our government, how to avoid war, and how to achieve social justice." He went on to say that one of Day's legacies is that the Vatican has taken a position supporting unilateral disarmament, which was considered a radical view just a few years ago.

Ellsberg agreed that Day's legacy of peace has made its mark on the Catholic prelates. Cardinal John O'Connor, who initiated Day's cause for canonization in 2000, achieved the rank of rear admiral as a chaplain in the US Navy and had been a strong supporter of the Vietnam War. Later in life, he said he regretted supporting that war and strongly opposed the first Gulf War, as well as other American military actions.

"We tend to think of the heroic things she did: going to jail, picketing," said Ellsberg. "But she lived out her faith in ordinary ways—being more patient and forgiving to people around her. That is something everybody can relate to. Her favorite saint was Thérèse of Lisieux, and that kind of spirituality can be practiced by anybody every day."

Saints are often misunderstood during their own lives, and sometimes even after their deaths. St. Joan of Arc was seen as a traitor, her reputation only rehabilitated after her death. St. Francis of Assisi was often at odds with Church hierarchy and even today serves as the muse for many an agnostic environmentalist. St. Thomas More was honored by the Communist government with a bust commemorating his work *Utopia*. Jesus himself was accused of being a drunkard, a lunatic, and a blasphemer by the religious in his day.

Day's tendency to be hyperbolic has added to the confusion surrounding her life. In one of her more controversial essays, "We are UnAmerican: We are Catholics," she makes the startling claim that we should put our Catholicism ahead of our Americanism: "We are against war because it is contrary to the spirit of Jesus Christ, and *the only important thing is that we abide in His spirit. It is more important than being American, more important than being respectable, more important than obedience to the State.* It is the only thing that matters...*That it is better that the United States be liquidated than that she survive by war*" (emphasis added). Although she opposed Communism, she railed against the rabid anti-Communism that led to war.

"She loved her country," said Ellsberg. "But as a Catholic, she was opposed to the nationalism that put America first as an excuse for ordering everyone else around. She felt that as a Catholic, she had a loyalty to a wider, global community."

If Dorothy Day is declared a saint, she will force all of us to take inventory of where we stand when it comes to Christ. Does our party affiliation trump Christ? Does our patriotism? Are we looking at life with a truly Christian worldview, or one seen through the prism of red, white and blue, the GOP or the Democratic Party? After all, it wasn't Dorothy Day who originally said we cannot serve two masters.

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