



The Reckless Way of Love

Notes on Following Jesus

DOROTHY DAY

Introduction by D. L. Mayfield

The Reckless Way of Love

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Dorothy Day

Edited by Carolyn Kurtz



P L O U G H P U B L I S H I N G H O U S E

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Published by Plough Publishing House
Walden, New York
Robertsbridge, England
Elsmore, Australia
www.plough.com

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PRINT ISBN: 978-0-87486-792-3

EPUB ISBN: 978-0-87486-793-0

MOBI ISBN: 978-0-87486-794-7

PDF ISBN: 978-0-87486-795-4

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To the Reader

DOROTHY DAY'S passion for peace and social justice and her dedication to serving the poor are legendary, and her fame continues to grow. Despite her own protests, admirers have petitioned the Vatican to make her a saint. She was one of four people Pope Francis named as truly great Americans. Yet combing through Dorothy's books and articles and her private letters and journals, one discovers an underappreciated dimension of her life. Where did a conflicted young woman find the inner strength to answer the clear call she heard from God? And how did she go on to live such an active, selfless life for so many decades without losing heart or burning out? Unlike other collections, this little volume brings together Dorothy's thoughts on the life of discipleship, the reckless way of love to which Jesus calls his followers. Dorothy's dogged struggle to hold on to faith, her love for those hardest to love, and

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her rootedness in prayer can guide and encourage each of us in our own attempts to follow more faithfully in the way of Jesus.

The story of Dorothy Day's life has been told well elsewhere, so the briefest biographical sketch here will suffice. There's certainly no better place to start than her own books, *The Long Loneliness* and *Loaves and Fishes*.

Born in Brooklyn in 1897, Dorothy's early years were marked by dramatic twists and turns. There was journalism school, and then a taste of the bohemian Twenties, first in New York City, then Italy, then Hollywood, and finally Staten Island. These were whirlwind years, and left her reeling from a broken marriage, an abortion, and a series of unhappy relationships.

But there was also an unforgettable night in a Greenwich Village bar where her friend, the playwright Eugene O'Neill, recited "The Hound of Heaven" for her – a poem whose obscure but deep message, she later said, eventually brought about her conversion.

In 1926 Dorothy had a baby daughter, Tamar – an event that profoundly changed her. When leftist

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friends mocked her new interest in the Gospels, Dorothy told them that Jesus promised the new society of justice they were all looking for. If Christians tended to be hypocrites, that was not Jesus' fault. She was determined to give him a try.

In the years that followed, Dorothy did more than try. Shaken by the hopelessness of the unemployed millions during the Depression years, she dropped all ambitions of becoming a famous writer and spent the rest of her life serving the poor (in whose face she saw Jesus), spreading her views of nonviolence (she was imprisoned many times for acts of civil disobedience), and passionately reminding readers through her books and newspaper articles that Christ demanded more than tithes, hats, and flowers on Sunday.

As far as Dorothy could tell, he demanded the readiness to wash vegetables, cut bread, and clean up after hundreds of noisy, often ungrateful guests, day after day, year after year. This she did gladly at the New York Catholic Worker – a communal hospitality house for the unemployed and homeless that she founded with Peter Maurin in 1933.

When Dorothy Day died in 1980 in the cramped Lower East Side room she called home, she owned

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nothing but a creaking bed, a writing desk, an overflowing bookshelf, a teapot, and a radio. Yet her witness lives on. On a practical level, the work continues today in more than a hundred Catholic Worker houses across the United States and beyond. And as you will find in these pages, we are left with the enduring challenge of her no-nonsense attitude to faith: “The mystery of the poor is this: that they are Jesus, and whatever you do for them you do to him.”

Introduction

by D. L. Mayfield

I PICKED UP A BUTTON about a decade ago with a quote attributed to Dorothy Day on it: “If you have two coats, you have stolen one from the poor.” I loved this saying, loved the strength of conviction, the easy black-and-white application. I read more about Dorothy and became smitten. Her severe face and warm hands and intense sound bites were so soothing to my soul as I first read of her life and work and the Catholic Worker movement she helped start. I affixed that button to

D. L. Mayfield, author of Assimilate or Go Home: Notes from a Failed Missionary on Rediscovering Faith, lives with her husband and children in Portland, Oregon.

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the front of my one orange-plaid corduroy coat and tromped around my neighborhood during the cold, gray Portland winters, hoping others would read it and be changed. If I am honest, a part of me wanted others to know how radical I was, how I had eschewed the things of the world, how hard I was trying to follow Jesus.

Now, years later, I have three coats: the orange-plaid corduroy still (even though the pockets have ripped), a raincoat (since I live in Oregon), and a longer, warm coat I bought for the three winters I spent in the Midwest. My Dorothy Day button now lives in a junk drawer, because I can't bear to wear it if it isn't true. Should I give one of my coats away? To whom should I give it? I live and work in a refugee and immigrant community; there are dozens of people I know who could use a coat. How do I pick? How do I navigate the enormity of the needs of the world, and my own response to them? I still don't know. And yet, even as I think these thoughts and feel like a failed radical, the words and life of Dorothy Day mean more to me than ever.

I take some comfort in knowing that Dorothy struggled with these same questions and contradictions

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throughout her life. Her feelings, I suspect, were complicated, since she was a unique and complex woman. She was driven, proud, dogmatic. She lived with fierce conviction in solidarity with the poor. She was also unsure, doubtful, and depressed from time to time due to the enormity of the suffering surrounding her. From a young age, Dorothy showed evidence of both her passion for justice and her quick mind. She was an activist, a sharp student, a curator of deep conversations. Her biographer, Robert Coles, noted that she was quick to dismiss her early life, preferring to talk instead of her conversion to Catholicism and how she met Peter Maurin, with whom she cofounded the Catholic Worker's newspaper and houses of hospitality. But the threads of her personality and strong convictions and engaging writing style were already all there, and her years of struggle and wandering no doubt contributed to her profound empathy for those who suffer.

Even in this collection of her writings you can find diverging thoughts – she writes of always hiding her sadness, and also of the importance of feeling the full force of emotions. These contradictions reassure me, reminding me that she is human like me, and invite me into her journey. Instead of holding her up

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as a saint to admire, these writings instead portray an ordinary person simply trying to walk the road of following Christ. In documenting this continual journey, Dorothy Day ended up talking constantly about struggle and cultural isolation. As she writes in her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, “We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.”

Community is a buzzword these days, primarily for people who don't quite understand how taxing true interdependence can be. As someone impatient with platitudes, I have always been drawn to Dorothy Day's kind of community. I was electrified by the way she wrote about the poor and the suffering and the proper response of the Christian (self-sacrificial love). And I was challenged by the example set by her houses of hospitality, where the homeless and desperate could stay and people could live and work side by side.

Robert Coles remembers how, the first time he met Dorothy, she was chatting with an intoxicated older woman. She looked up and saw Coles waiting and asked him, “Were you waiting to talk to one of us?” Already quite famous, she didn't assume Coles

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wanted to talk to her more than he might want to talk to her neighbor. With that simple question, Coles says, “she cut through layers of self-importance, a lifetime of bourgeois privilege, and scraped the hard bone of pride” (*Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion*, xviii). Dorothy Day had absorbed the beliefs of her beloved Christ so deeply that she truly lived as if everyone was of equal importance in a world that applauds hierarchy and prestige.

I am not Catholic, and yet Dorothy Day’s attitude to faith has impacted me greatly. I grew up in a conservative church that emphasized personal piety and correct doctrine, but at some point those no longer seemed sufficient as guidelines for life lived in community. Living and working with refugees, the challenges that the poor face soon overwhelmed me – they were the splash of cold water that woke me from my stupor. It was then that I discovered Dorothy Day’s books, and she became a guide into a wild new world of following Christ on a downwardly mobile path.

And oh, would I need some wisdom and guidance for that journey! For years I had been too busy “working for the Lord” to spend much time learning

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from others, especially others who were different from me. I'm a doer. I like to get my hands and feet in the mess of the world. This, I'll admit, is why the writings of Dorothy Day reached out and grabbed me initially. I identified with her iron will and the practical ways she strove to meet the real and tangible needs of those affected by poverty and war.

What made her such a radical? Was it the kerchief she wore in her hair? Her intense writing style? Her involvement in politics while refusing to be conscripted into any political party? Was it her lack of material possessions or her firm belief in the inherent dignity of all people? Or her commitment to the church despite her differences and disappointments? I thought it was a combination of all of these things when I first discovered Dorothy in my early twenties. Now, over a decade later, I have a different answer: her radicalness stems from the transformative love of Christ she experienced throughout her very long and sometimes very lonely life.

Wherever she turned, Dorothy saw Christ up on his cross. One of her rules of life was to seek the face of Christ in the poor. She found him there, and in so many other places. Christ was the person in line for

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soup and bread; Christ was the drunk woman having the same conversation over and over again; Christ was the enemy combatant; Christ was the priest she disagreed with; Christ was the young person begging for spiritual direction; Christ was in every reader she wrote for, including me, including you.

Dorothy Day's eyes were first opened to the inequalities of our world when she saw the long lines of people waiting for bread during the Great Depression. Mine were opened the day I realized my refugee neighbors had only been given eight months of assistance by the government and were now expected to be assimilated as fully-functioning members of society. For non-literate, tribal, rural, Muslim Africans plopped down in the middle of Portland, this was ludicrous at best and heartbreaking in reality. I was nineteen years old and dove headfirst into helping these refugee families navigate life in America. I moved into their community and tried to hitch my life to theirs. I ran homework clubs and art classes and English classes. I asked churches and friends and family members to get involved. But life moved on. Volunteers stopped showing up. People weren't as grateful as I had hoped they would be. Countless hours in waiting rooms and, on hold, trying

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to navigate bureaucracies did not feel exactly radical. I tried to help everyone as best as I could, but I was failing miserably.

“She is one of our many failures,” writes Dorothy Day in a letter to a friend, referencing a woman who left the house of hospitality, most likely to more drink and chaos. Life in community with broken people will always include such disappointments. But they can be met with resilience, and with a faith in the eternal significance of a life lived with the suffering. Such a life will never be easy or tidy; the work is endless and will always stretch on before us.

So how do we go forward? If I am honest, at first I was a bit impatient with this short book of Dorothy Day’s writings. “Where is the work?” I thought. “Where are all the inspiring stories of her interactions with the poor, the causes of equality that she championed, her countercultural lifestyle choices?” I was, and remain, hungry to hear stories of God’s kingdom coming at the margins of society; I want first-person accounts of the glories and heartbreaks at the frontlines. But here in this volume we find someone who at first blush does not seem all that radical. Instead, Dorothy Day is a woman who reads the Scripture

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constantly, prays, goes to church, partakes in the sacraments, bakes bread and mops floors, writes letters to her friends. She seems very pious, very devout. She comes across as a borderline mystic, sometimes even a bit ethereal, someone who uses religious imagery constantly.

But we know how entrenched her life was in the lives of the very people Jesus said would be blessed – the poor, the sick, the sad, the oppressed – and her spiritual reflections reflect that reality. They spring up from a place of love, not distance. Dorothy Day was not just a radical at the frontlines, writing screeds and organizing protests (although she did all that too). She was a woman bound to daily service in community, deeply committed to rhythms of prayer, reflection, and solitude. She was someone who wanted to live for Christ her entire life, and so she dedicated hers to growing in awareness and understanding of the love of Jesus.

It still astonishes me that it can be this simple and yet so hard to obey. The love of Christ is everything. Not the work, not the needs, not the good intentions. It is entering into the wound of love of Christ on the cross, and being transformed by it. Dorothy writes: “How can we ever give up thinking and longing for

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love, talking of it, preparing ourselves for it, reading of it, studying about it? It is really a great faith in love that never dies.” Her “work” was her relationship with Christ.

This should cause us to question ourselves. Why am I exhausted by mothering small children while trying to create places of welcome in my neighborhood? Why have so many of my friends who have worked hard to bring justice into the world also faltered, their light dimmed after a few short years? How many other would-be disciples could say the same? What is it we truly want for this one life we are given? A frustrated life of service where we drag ourselves along by the bootstraps? Or a sustainable life that is constantly renewed by the inexhaustible love of Christ and our connection to him?

In these pages, Dorothy Day invites us into the latter. She calls on us to lay down our burdens and instead link arms with other Christ-followers throughout the centuries. The famous images show her fierce and strong and often alone, but in reality she was connected to a great number of saints – through her books and her prayers and her interactions with

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her neighbors. Here she found the strength to move forward until the very last moment. She did not view herself as an individual, or a radical, or a prophet; she was one of a great many people whom Christ loved. And like a gorgeous, broken vessel, she was filled with that love day after day and spilled it out wherever she went.

Even now the cares of the world weigh on me. The suffering of people is real and devastating, especially for immigrants, refugees, people of color, and those who are not valued as productive citizens. I am surrounded by these people, and here I sit with three coats hanging up in my closet, wondering at what I am to do.

And yet even now, I know. I will pray for faith, and for love, and for peace. I will fight to carve out space in my life for Christ above all else, to be in community with him and the ones he loves. I still long to be like Dorothy Day, but not in the ways I used to. I don't want to be radical anymore; instead I long to be sustainable, to remain steadfast. I want to walk faithfully in the direction of my Lord, and I don't want to stop until my very last breath. As Dorothy writes, "Our arms are linked – we try to be neighbors of his, and to speak up for his principles. That's a lifetime's job."

A Way of Faith

If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, “Move from here to there” and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.

MATTHEW 17:20-21

I

Help My Unbelief

*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for
and assurance about what we do not see.*

H E B R E W S 11:1

I REMEMBER the first radio I had in the early twenties, constructed for me by Willy Green, a twelve-year-old, out of a cigar box, a crystal, a bit of wire, an aerial, and earphones. Manipulated properly, from my seashore bungalow in Staten Island, I could hear a presidential campaign, Saturday p.m. broadcasts, football, and, miracle of miracles, symphonic music. That little radio was a miracle box. I could not understand it. If *this* is possible, anything is. . . .

Help My Unbelief

So I could take on faith the truths of Christianity, the church, the sacraments. My heart swelled with gratitude.

Faith came to me just like that, and the need to adore.

I could not understand the mechanism of the little box with its crystal, set like a jewel to be touched by a bit of wire. It was a miracle to hear voices of people in conversation, a symphony orchestra playing Beethoven.

If I could not understand scientific truths, why should I worry about understanding spiritual truths of religion? I wanted to say yes, this is true.

THE CEREMONY OF BAPTISM is certainly impressive, with the priest beginning, “What dost thou ask of the church of God?” and the sponsor answering for the child, “Faith.”

It made me think of my days of struggle coming into the church, how I did not know whether or not I had faith or believed, or just wanted to believe. Things that I questioned I just put out of my mind then, and reconciled myself with the thought, “After all, why should I expect to understand everything? That would be heaven indeed.” I knew that if I waited to understand, if I waited to get rid of all my doubts, I would never be ready. So I went in all haste one December day right

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after Christmas and was baptized a Catholic. I did not think of it at the time – I understood so little that when I went to be baptized I asked for faith. But I knew that prayer, “Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24), and that comforted me.

I BELIEVED in Jesus Christ – that he is *real*, that he is the son of God, that he came here, that he entered history, and that he is still here, with us, all the time, through his church, through the sacraments of the church.

FAITH CAME before understanding. And faith is a gift of God. It cannot be imparted by any other person. I cannot give it to you. Only God.

YOU ARE CERTAINLY going through the sorrowful mysteries. But if you don't go through them to the glorious, you will be a hollow man, and considered an opportunist and a fraud. I am putting it as strong as I am able, and hate doing it, but to me the faith is the strongest thing in my life and I can never be grateful enough for the joy I have had for the gift of faith, my Catholicism.

Help My Unbelief

LIFE WOULD BE UTTERLY UNBEARABLE if we thought we were going nowhere, that we had nothing to look forward to. The greatest gift life can offer would be a faith in God and a hereafter. Why don't we have it? Perhaps like all gifts it must be struggled for. "God, I believe" (or rather, "I must believe or despair"). "Help thou my unbelief." "Take away my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh."

I wrote the above lines when I felt the urgent need for faith, but there were too many people passing through my life – too many activities – too much pleasure (not happiness).

FAITH, MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD, is a gift. We cannot give it to each other, but certainly we can pray God to give it to others. Péguy* wrote: "When we get to heaven, God is going to say to us, 'Where are the others?'"

We must not judge the church by the man, by the human element. I must pray for priests, pray for conversions, and I must not seem in my writing to be telling others what to do – but I must be speaking of

* Charles Pierre Péguy, 1873–1914, French poet and writer

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myself, for my own peace of soul. Not trying for conversions to the church, not proselytizing, but leaving things to God, who wills that all men be saved, and can give his divine life through any channel.

IT IS THE FIRST LETTER OF PETER, chapter I, which engrosses me, about belief in Jesus – in the power of his holy name. And my own joy and gratitude to him, and the whole problem of faith, which is so precious it must be tried as though by fire. I pray daily for my grandchildren, for my children, that God will draw them to himself, through Jesus, as he has promised. And you know I pray for you.

