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Living in Dorothy's Room

Joshua J. McElwee | Sep. 30, 2009 NCR Today

As I?ve mentioned before on this site, I am a Lasallian volunteer living at the Holy Family Catholic Worker House in Kansas City, Missouri.

Living in the house can be an overwhelming affair. With so many people coming in and out on a daily basis it is often hard for me to find time for myself.

Luckily, I do have a retreat of sorts on the second floor of the house: my room. No, my room is not quiet. It does not have mythical properties that block out the hustle and bustle of all the people I see on a daily basis.

But it does have a history which I have found nourishing in times when it all seems to be too much.

Three decades ago Dorothy Day stayed in the room during a visit to the house.

Dedicated to a life of nonviolence and solidarity with the impoverished, Day had opened the first Catholic Worker house with Peter Maurin in New York City in 1933. Wishing to live out the works of mercy they opened their doors and offered food, company and a kind ear to those that stopped.

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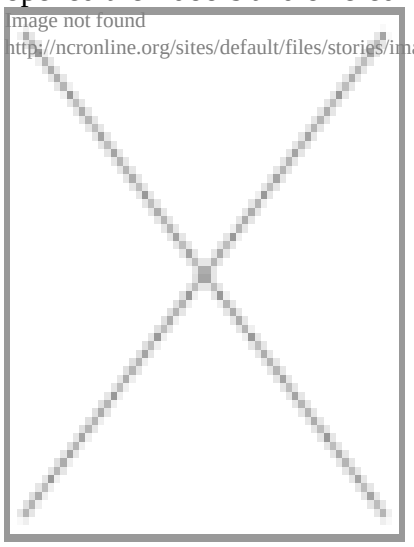

Inspired by Peter and Dorothy?s example, Catholic Worker houses began to spring up across the country. Ours was one of the many in which workers wished to live the Good News as best they could. Day came to see our then-new house and the ever growing fruits of her labor.

Walking into my room on particularly busy days at the house, I find a sense of solace in knowing that Dorothy once occupied the same space. It?s almost as if the very walls of the room evoke her memory and spirit after all these years.

Sometimes I sit in the room and think about how fortunate it is that I am living here.

Five years ago I had never heard of Dorothy - or her movement. Nor could I have imagined dedicating myself to her way of voluntary poverty. I am now confronted with some of the same trials of overwork and exhaustion she experienced for fifty years.

Sometimes sitting in my room I can vividly imagine her presence. I think of her at the desk against the window, perhaps writing in her journal. I think of her resting after a long day, preparing for the same routine again once the sun rises.

In such moments I find such support in this special connection. The room, meanwhile, is a constant reminder that she and others have done what I am doing ? and they persevered. It is also evidence of the presence of the communion of saints.

In some way Dorothy is here, with us, watching over our work, and helping us in the hard times.

Oh, yes, the noise and all that hustle and bustle still bother me at times. But who could ask for a better place of spiritual retreat?

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