

Dorothy Day's letters show heartache, faith

John Dear | Jan. 25, 2011 | On the Road to Peace

"I never expected much of the bishops," Dorothy Day wrote to Gordon Zahn in 1968.

"In all history, popes and bishops and abbots seem to have been blind and power-loving and greedy. I never expected leadership from them. It is the saints that keep appearing all through history who keep things going. What I do expect is the bread of life and down through the ages there is that continuity."

That's just one of the helpful insights in the first-ever collection of Dorothy Day's letters, [*All the Way to Heaven: The Selected Letters of Dorothy Day* \[1\]](#), edited by Robert Ellsberg. Following the recent publication of her diaries, these letters reveal more of Dorothy Day and her struggle to serve the impoverished and practice that "harsh and dreadful love" she often spoke about.

A few years ago, I spent a week reading through many of Day's original letters at her archives at Marquette University. Doubleday had asked me to write a book about her and I was doing research. Unfortunately, the project was never completed.

I remember being stunned by a letter -- included below -- to Day's old friend Nina Polcyn, written from the Catholic Worker House in New York when Dorothy was 82 -- just six months before her death.

"Living in a house of hospitality is no joke," Day wrote.

"I've tasted something of the hard life of Catholic Workers, but I was shocked by this confession. Right to the end, she was struggling with her life among the poor."

All the Way to Heaven chronicles that heroic life over six decades. Set against the backdrop of the Depression, World War II, the Cold War, Vatican II, Vietnam, and the daily struggles of life in the Catholic Worker, Dorothy's letters offer a deeper insight into her extraordinary journey -- as well as encouragement for our own journey to peace.

Here we read Day's private letters to her common law husband, Foster Batterham, who left her after the birth of their child and her own baptism. Over the years, Day describes: traveling the country to give talks; sharing her room with rats and homeless people; trying to pray; giving in to anger and bitterness; struggling to love; rejoicing in the Catholic Worker; and yearning to be with her daughter and many grandchildren.

Day writes to Thomas Merton, Cesar Chavez, Daniel Berrigan, Gordon Zahn, Ammon Hennacy, and Eunice Shriver, among others. But it was the cumulative effect of the entire collection which touched me most. By the end we have shared "a long loneliness" -- witnessed Day's heartache and compassion and delved deeply into her faith.

Dorothy really was a saint, precisely because she was faithful to the painful struggle for justice, service and disarmament -- that is, she was faithful to the God of peace.

I could write a long review, but I would rather let Dorothy herself speak. So I offer here below a few excerpts from her letters to give a flavor of her spirit, struggle, and fidelity.

I encourage everyone to get this important collection and study Dorothy Day's life. I promise, you will be challenged and encouraged to continue your own journey as servants of Christ in the poor and advocates for peace and justice.

Unless the seed falls to the ground and die, it remains alone; but if it dies, it brings forth much fruit. I don't expect any success in anything we are trying to do, either in getting out a paper, running houses of hospitality or farming groups, or retreat houses on the land. I expect that everything we do [will] be attended with human conflicts, and the suffering that goes with it, and that this suffering will water the seed to make it grow in the future. I expect that all our natural love for each other which is so warm and encouraging and so much a reward for this kind of work and living, will be killed, put to death painfully by gossip, intrigue, suspicion, distrust, etc., and that this painful dying to self and the longing for the love of others will be rewarded by a tremendous increase of supernatural love among us all. I expect the most dangerous of sins cropping up among us, whether of sensuality or pride it does not matter, but that the struggle will go on to such an extent that God will not let it hinder the work but that the work will go on, because that work is our suffering and our sanctification. So rejoice in failures, rejoice in suffering!

What are we trying to do? We are trying to get to heaven, all of us. We are trying to lead a good life. We are trying to talk about and write about the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, the social principles of the church, and it is most astounding, the things that happen when you start trying to live this way.

To perform the works of mercy becomes a dangerous practice. Our Baltimore House was closed as a public nuisance because we took in blacks as well as whites. The [staff] were arrested and thrown in jail overnight and accused of running a disorderly house?. It is a good thing to live from day to day and from hour to hour. (Jan. 1948)

We still hold that nonviolent resistance is the only sane solution, and that we have to continue to make our voice heard until we are finally silenced--and even then, in jail or concentration camp, to express ourselves. If there are not some who still hold this ideal, still speak in terms of the counsels of perfection, the ideal will be lost. I do not see why we must accept the inevitability of war. It was only in the last century that slavery was done away with here in this country, and I suppose that everybody thought it was something to be accepted. If we are working towards peace, we must look with hope that in a future generation, we will do away with war. You know how with great suffering and great prayer we are trying to hold up these ideas. (May 3, 1940)

We will print the words of Christ who is with us always, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who persecute you." We are at war, a declared war with Japan, Germany and Italy. But still we can repeat Christ's words each day, holding them close in our hearts, and each month printing them in the paper. In times past, Europe has been a battlefield. But let us remember St. Francis, who spoke of peace. We will quote our Pope, our saints, our priests. We will go on printing the articles which remind us today that we are all called to be saints, that we are other Christs, reminding us of the priesthood of the laity. We are still pacifists.

Our manifesto is the Sermon on the Mount, which means that we will try to be peacemakers. Speaking for many of our conscientious objectors, we will not participate in armed warfare or in making weapons... We will try daily, hourly, to pray for an end to the war. Let us add that unless we combine this prayer with almsgiving, in giving to the least of God's children, and fasting in order that we may help feed the hungry, and penance in recognition of our share in the guilty, our prayer may become empty words. (To all Catholic Worker houses, Dec. 1941)

If we could only learn that the important thing is love, and that we will be judged on love--to keep on loving, and showing that love, and expressing that love, over and over, whether we feel it or not, seventy times seven, to mothers-in-law, to husbands, to children--and to be oblivious of insult, or hurt, or injury--not to see them, not to hear them. It is a hard, hard doctrine. I guess we get what we need in the way of discipline. God can change things in a twinkling of an eye. We have got to pray, to read the Gospel, to get to frequent communion, and not judge, not do anything, but love, love, love. A bitter lesson. (Feb. 11, 1958)

The older I get, the more I meet people, the more convinced I am that we must only work on ourselves, to grow in grace. The only thing we can do about people is to love them, to find things to love in them? Next week we demonstrate again, stick our necks out, protest, say no, carry out into the street some of the Pope's words, such as "War is murder and suicide." We will be arrested again, in jail again, maybe for a day, maybe for a month or six months. It is not easy. I just have to remember that I am visiting the prisoner, the last work of mercy and the hardest to perform. (April 9, 1959)

The great work to be done is to change public opinion, to indoctrinate, to set small groups to work here and there in different cities who will live a life of sacrifice, typifying the Catholic idea of personal responsibility. Numbers and organizations are not important. We are just beginning after all. But one person can do a tremendous amount of boring through from within, in the office, factory, neighborhood, parish and among daily acquaintances and associates. (1935)

You sounded so discouraged and you know as well as I do that discouragement is a temptation of the devil. Why should we try to see results? It is enough to keep on in the face of what looks to be defeat. We certainly have enough examples in the lives of the saints to help us. Not to speak of that greatest of failures (to the eyes of the world) of Christ on the cross. Why look for response? After all, we can only do what lies in our power and leave all the rest to God, and God will attend to it. You do not know yourself what you are doing, how far-reaching your influence is? God often lets us start doing one thing and many of the results we accomplish are incalculably far-reaching, splendid in their own way, but quite different from what we expected. Let us think only in terms of our own selves and God, and not worry about anyone else.

I just go straight ahead, doing the best I can with the very poor human material God sends us. Just look at the kind of disciples He chose for Himself, and how little they understood Him, how they wanted a temporal kingdom and thought all was lost until the Descent of the Holy Spirit enlightened them. Why should we expect to be anything else but unprofitable servants? We simply have to leave things in God's hands. Get hold of "Abandonment to Divine Providence" by Jean-Pierre de Caussade and comfort yourself with that. It's done more to help me these past years than any other spiritual writer. Spiritual reading is the oil that keeps the lamp

burning, as you know. (To Catherine de Hueck Doherty, Aug. 9, 1936)

I should think you would feel privileged and happy to be sharing in some of our Lord's sufferings and above all not surprised as though it were something entirely unexpected. What in the world do you expect? The very fact that there is all this obstruction and hindrance and trouble shows the work must be succeeding beyond your wildest hopes, otherwise the devil would not be putting so many hindrances in the way and trying to break down your moral. For that is surely what is being done? I would hold your head up through it all and if you are deprived of any work to do, abandon yourself completely to divine providence, try to keep to ordinary routine as much as possible, and leave things in God's hands to work out. (To Catherine de Hueck Doherty, Dec., 1936)

I was invited to speak at a meeting of Young Christian Workers last night and after I had finished talking like Jeremiah on racism and poverty and housing and industrialism and war, and had sat down, Father said, "And now what shall we do about that dance on Friday night?" and without further ado, everyone discussed whom to invite. It's no wonder Jeremiah was flung down into the slimy pit for his prophesying. That's what's going to happen to me. It won't be the government but our own. (May, 1942)

I do believe in a personal God. I have had too many prayers answered in a direct personal way. Also I believe in praying to the saints, our friends, for help. I believe in the resurrection of the body (a glorified body) and life everlasting. That is in the Creed. I'm going to pray to the Little Flower to send you a rose some time just to confound you, so that you will begin to think there is something in this personal business. They are as personal as you and I. Also our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God too, a most personal God, who fed the hungry, healed the sick and shared the fish on the sea shore with Peter. Keep on praying for me, my dear. (To Ammon Hennacy, July 19, 1950)

I cannot stress this enough--we must never forget our objective and that is "to build that kind of society where it is easier for people to be good." This is what Peter Maurin taught us. To follow the gospel teaching of the works of mercy. If your brother is hungry, feed him, shelter him. How can you show your love for God except by love for your brother and sister? The one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he hasn't seen? This is a beginning.

We want a society where men and women will have work as well as bread, where they can choose their vocations, and where every child will have a chance to develop their talents and capacities? Students need to read and study much to follow their calling in this great revolution. They need to study the works of Gandhi and Martin Luther King?. We need to make more of a heaven here, and have a long range view of a new social order wherein justice dwelleth, which is neither capitalist nor communist nor totalitarian in any way. How to accomplish it by nonviolence and not by warfare? (Feb. 7, 1969)

When I went to jail in the fifties for civil disobedience--and a few of us were arrested each year for six years--I felt glad as I entered my cell that now at last I could be really poor for a time, for a day, a week, or a month, that for no matter how small a time, I was at last sharing a little the misery of the poor. In a way it was true. I was stripped, prodded and searched for drugs, pushed from here to there, interminably, caged half the 24 hours like a

wild beast--yes, I had just enough of it to teach me to suffer more keenly for the rest of my life over the plight of the prisoner? I am convinced that prayer and austerity, prayer and self-sacrifice, prayer and fasting, prayer, vigils and marches, are the indispensable means. And love. All these means are useless unless animated by love. ?Love your enemies.? That is the hardest saying of all. (Feb. 1970)

I invite you to stay with these quotes, and other writings from Dorothy Day, to hear her message, notice what it stirs in you, ponder your reaction, and pray for a deepening of our own discipleship to Jesus.

To hear a new podcast interview with John Dear, go to www.jesusradicals.com. On Thursday, John will join the Creech 14 in the Las Vegas courthouse for the judge?s verdict. Next month, he will give a keynote speech at the annual Sabeel Conference in Bethlehem, Palestine/Israel (see: www.sabeel.org). His latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile?s *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services? ?Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,? go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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[1] http://www.amazon.com/All-Heaven-Selected-Letters-Dorothy/dp/0874620619/ref=pd_sxp_f_pt

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