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A remarkable Christian's life in her letters

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ALL THE WAY TO HEAVEN: THE SELECTED LETTERS OF DOROTHY DAY
Edited by Robert Ellsberg
Published by Marquette University Press, $35

For more than two-thirds of her life, Dorothy Day, cofounder of the Catholic Worker with Peter Maurin, was passionately in love. Alas, for her ever-troubled soul, she was in love simultaneously not with just one man but two.

The first was Forster Batterham, an anarchist whose anarchy, in editor Robert Ellsberg?s words, was that he did not believe in marriage. Batterham was father of Day?s daughter, Tamar. The other man was the central figure in the Gospels, Jesus Christ, forever, with her baptism, the inspiration for Day?s life work.

When these letters begin, however, just before Day turns 26, she is in love with being a journalist, free of male attachments, and being a new author. An early love letter is to Batterham. Four hundred pages and some 700 letters later, at age 83, one of her final loving letters is to the same man.

Not everyone enjoys reading collected letters, and not everyone should. Collections and selections of letters are intended to flesh out -- meaning give flesh and muscle and nerve endings to -- an existing knowledge of the person. Letters are the stage beyond biography and autobiography, diaries and writings, the final surrounding archival pieces of the life.

Ellsberg?s dutifully careful yet intermittently inspired selection, chosen not without humor, comes at an important moment in the aftermath of Dorothy Day?s life. She died in 1980. Even in the first decade of the 21st century, we are still at a point when those who knew this 19th-century-born woman can perhaps add a little to our knowledge of this remarkable Christian, simply because a letter here may jog something relevant out of a reader?s memory. A reader of a certain age, of course.

With an important selection such as this, how satisfying and reassuring to know its editor, Ellsberg, was so closely acquainted with his subject. For five years he was editor of the always-a-penny-a-copy *Catholic Worker* newspaper. A lifelong devotee of Day and the movement, Ellsberg has also edited her *Selected Writings* and diaries.

Now we once again are privy to the woman she was, the living, breathing, battling, sometimes disagreeable Dorothy whose love for Batterham bursts off the page like the fireworks scene in the 1955 movie ?Picnic.?

?Please write me, sweetheart, and I won?t tear the letter up as I did the last one (but I saved the pieces) because I was mad at you. I love you muchly? (April 3, 1925).

?My desire for you is a painful rather than pleasurable emotion. It is a ravishing hunger that makes me want you more than anything in the world? (September 1925).

The birth of her daughter, Tamar, Ellsberg reminds us, ?decisively turned her heart to God,? but not to the point Day?s conversion overrode her ambition to succeed as a writer.

On Labor Day 1926 -- she was baptized the following year -- she wrote to Llewellyn Jones, ?I?m still religious, reading my missal faithfully, pinning medals on the baby and going to Mass. When I go walking I mutter over my beads and feel my soul growing strong through exercise.?

Through these letters we join Day on that strengthening journey as, in missive after missive, painful step by painful step, that soul grew stronger and stronger, until it finally inspired an entire American Catholic church.

In 1929, Day was working in Hollywood, which ?broadens the fanny and narrows the mind,? and is ?ready to move on. It?s dead around here, only three writers left out of twenty-four.? That?s because the Wall Street crash that ushered in the Great Depression early impacted Hollywood.

Day moved all right, to Mexico City, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Florida and New York. She was looking for a combination of cheap living and the chance to earn an income.

It is 1932. Day?s focus, sharpened by the Great Depression, given a growing resolve by her deepening faith, doused in reality after being jailed during a Washington ?Hunger March,? provided direction through her meeting with Peter Maurin, is determinedly on a course. On May 1, 1933, the first issue of the Catholic Worker went on sale. That same year, the Bowery House of Hospitality opened. Day?s public life as we came to know it had begun.

My only contribution to the Day letters ?archive? -- 13 years after I met her -- dates to the U.S. Bicentennial, 1976. As *NCR* editor I asked Day to send ?a letter to America? on its birthday -- our July 4 issue.

She did. One word: ?Repent.?

Stay the course with this book. These letters are life-, work- and faith-affirming.

Well done, Robert Ellsberg.

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