

2021

## Review of Dorothy Day: Dissenting Voice of the American Century

Susan Crawford Sullivan  
*College of the Holy Cross*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social\\_encounters](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters)



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Social Justice Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Crawford Sullivan, Susan (2021) "Review of Dorothy Day: Dissenting Voice of the American Century," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, 148-149.

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social\\_encounters/vol5/iss2/19](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol5/iss2/19)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Social Encounters by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csbsju.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csbsju.edu).

***Dorothy Day: Dissenting Voice of the American Century.* John Loughery and Blythe Randolph. New York, New York. Simon & Schuster, 2020, 436 pp., hardcover, \$30, ISBN 978-1982103491.**

Susan Crawford Sullivan  
College of the Holy Cross\*

In *Dorothy Day: Dissenting Voice of the American Century* John Loughery and Blythe Randolph provide a fascinating and detailed account into the life of this remarkable woman. In his 2015 address to the Joint Session of the United States Congress, Pope Francis named Dorothy Day as one of four historic Americans who “shaped fundamental values which will endure forever in the spirit of the American people.” About Dorothy Day Pope Francis noted, “In these times when social concerns are so important, I cannot fail to mention the Servant of God Dorothy Day, who founded the Catholic Worker Movement. Her social activism, her passion for justice and for the cause of the oppressed, were inspired by the Gospel, her faith, and the example of the saints.”

Dorothy Day (1897-1980), is best known as the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, which today provides almost 200 “houses of hospitality” that welcome and shelter the poor in cities across in the United States and in several other countries. Loughery and Randolph narrate her early life thoroughly, including her childhood moves, her difficult (and staunchly Republican) father, and the fact that her parents did not raise her with religion (although they allowed her to be baptized Episcopalian at age twelve). An avid reader from an early age, Dorothy Day attended the University of Illinois in Urbana for two years, where she became interested in radical politics. Dropping out after two years, she moved to New York City and began writing for a socialist newspaper and magazine.

Loughery and Randolph provide considerable detail on this bohemian period of Day’s life. Living in Greenwich Village, she socialized with writers, playwrights, poets, actors, and others, “people with different, urgent ideas about the world.” (p. 51) She moved in with a “passionate if abusive lover” (p. 77) by whom she became pregnant and had an abortion. During this turbulent period in her life, Loughery and Randolph describe attempted suicide and a short-lived marriage to another man but later show Dorothy finding contentment living in a common-law marriage in a bungalow at the beach on Staten Island in New York. Dorothy became pregnant and gave birth to her daughter Tamar in 1926, experiencing great joy in motherhood. She began catechesis with a Catholic nun as “she did not want her daughter to flounder through her early years as she had. She wanted Tamar to be baptized into the Catholic Church” (p. 110). Her baby was baptized and several months later, Dorothy herself became Catholic, ultimately leading to a split with her atheist lover.

In 1932, Dorothy met Peter Maurin, an eccentric Frenchman who wanted Dorothy to join him in starting a politically radical Catholic newspaper. The first issue of *The Catholic Worker* was published on May 1, 1933, covering topics such as child labor and racial discrimination. The Catholic Worker movement also saw Dorothy, Peter, and other volunteers opening a “house of

*Book Review:*  
*Dorothy Day: Dissenting Voice of the American Century*

hospitality” for men and women in need. Dorothy and Peter insisted that the people living in their homes were guests deserving of dignity, and that those who served them “should live with them, as one of them, in voluntary poverty” (p. 150). Loughery and Randolph’s biography vividly brings their readers into the many challenging situations faced by Dorothy and other volunteers. Dorothy and Peter also operated lively roundtable discussion evenings for intellectual and spiritual conversation, with guest speakers from nearby universities or social reform-minded clergy members. Dorothy attended daily Mass and encouraged other Catholic Workers to do so, merging her faith with social action.

Loughery and Randolph detail the growth of the Catholic Worker movement, with houses of hospitality opening in different cities and the newspaper’s circulation growing. At the same time, they highlight the difficulties Dorothy faced. Peter had envisioned a farm part of the movement, but the farm they opened in Easton, Pennsylvania was beset with challenges and closed eleven years later. Dorothy’s intense involvement with and travel for the Catholic Worker movement meant that Dorothy had less time for her daughter Tamar, who was growing up in the chaotic circumstances of a Catholic Worker house; Dorothy “knew that her own efforts in the life she had chosen in the Catholic Worker had cost them both dearly” (p. 223).

Loughery and Randolph provide a rich portrait of a complex woman. A devout Catholic who attended daily mass and “accepted Vatican teachings on all matters concerning sex, birth control and abortion” (p. 5), she often critiqued Catholic leaders for their lack of concern for the poor or their stance on war. Dorothy was a pacifist and opposed the draft and U.S. involvement in World War II. The Catholic Worker newspaper circulation steeply declined as a result of her firm pacifist stance, a stance that “split the movement.” (p. 213). Several of Dorothy’s multiple jailings stemmed from protest of the 1950s nuclear arms race.

The authors of this biography have done an admirable job in capturing Dorothy in her humanity and her complexity. Readers unfamiliar with Dorothy Day should be aware that this is a deeply researched and highly detailed book, but the portrait they will gain of this remarkable woman is well worth the time invested in reading.

\*Susan Crawford Sullivan is Professor and Chair, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts.