

2021

Review of Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and the Greatest Commandment: Radical Love in Times of Crisis

Kate Dugan
Springfield College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters



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

Recommended Citation

Dugan, Kate (2021) "Review of Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and the Greatest Commandment: Radical Love in Times of Crisis," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, 150-152.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol5/iss2/20

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.

***Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and the Greatest Commandment: Radical Love in Times of Crisis.* Julie Leininger Pycior. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020, pp. xxix+233, paper, \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-8091-5515-6.**

Kate Dugan
Springfield College

Like many Catholics born in the 1980s, I first read Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton in college. Day's *The Long Loneliness* taught me how contemplation and action could both be possible, in the world, on the streets, with the poor. Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* showed me that questions and ideas were just as integral to Catholic identity as the sacraments and rituals that had been baked into my childhood. This pair spoke a kind of Catholic language that became—for me, as for countless others within and beyond Catholicism—a foundation of religious social thought in the twentieth century.

Julie Leininger Pycior has written an intimate look at these two giants of twentieth-century Catholicism. *Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and the Greatest Commandment: Radical Love in Times of Crisis* (Orbis, 2020) uses the written letters between Day and Merton throughout the 1960s as the ground for a story of Catholic peace work in this era. As she tracks their lives, writing, and ideas through the tumultuous decade, Pycior writes a biography of their friendship through the lens of their shared commitment to love the world. They are humanized here—these two humans are flawed and they disagree and they wrestle with how to be agents of love. But they do so, Pycior argues, “striv[ing] to root themselves in the great commandment of love” (p. 80). If other accounts of this era and these two figures have detailed the well-known events of their lives, this book sheds new light on the space shared between Day and Merton.

Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and the Greatest Commandment is a chronological account of the relationship between Day and Merton. Broken into eight chapters, the book begins at the start of their letter-writing, in the late 1950s and concludes with Merton's death in 1968. Each chapter examines how the letters addressed the pressing—and changing—issues of the decade. As she stitches together this biography of Catholic peace work through these letters, Pycior makes three key contributions to the academic landscape of what we know and how we understand both of these people, but also their context of the Catholic 60s and what it means to be leaders of the Catholic peace movement in those years.

One of the strengths of this book is that Pycior draws us into the layers of friendship that pervades of Merton and Day's correspondence. Friendship, here, is presented as both a spiritual and sustaining practice. She provides a personal, but also thought-provoking analysis of the inner worlds they shared. Pycior's descriptions make clear that the two were exchanging ideas and emotions. For example, the two were divided on the efficacy and wisdom of burning draft cards as a protest to the Vietnam War. Merton wrote a public statement in opposition, but in private, to Day, wrote a “tortuous explanation of this statement” and asked for her prayers as he “assured Day that he was with her in spirit as she faced opposition” (p. 89). Pycior summarizes Day's response as supportive, reassuring, and reminded him of two years before when he had prayed for a woman living at the Catholic Worker (p. 90).

Book Review:

Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and the Greatest Commandment: Radical Love in Times of Crisis

What this does, as I read Pycior, is make clear that their friendship has consequences in daily life, but also for the peace movement. This builds on Brenna Moore's (2015) argument that we consider "friendship" as an analytic category; that friendship is constitutive of religious sensibilities. Moore argues, and Pycior's book illustrates, that it is in relationships that religious actors cultivate their inner lives: "Without sustained attention to intimate relationships, we would miss a real understanding of their inner lives, and a huge...dimension of human experience" (p. 453). Pycior describes the thick network of friendship throughout this book: the prayers flying back and forth, the words and ideas exchanged, make not just a friendship, but cultivates their own religious sensibilities. Their letters—and the friendship created therein—is not a saccharine gloss, but a grounding force in both of their lives.

A second contribution of this book is a reminder of the clear-eyed, if complicated, relationship that both of these figures maintained with institutional Catholicism. Pycior's account makes it clear that Day and Merton did *Catholic* peace work. The two share a commitment to Benedictine practices—Merton as a vowed monastic, of course. But Pycior reminds readers that Day was a Benedictine oblate. The two are constantly praying for one another, asking prayers for the other, urging prayers for a cause.

It may be tempting, from the twenty-first century, to look back at Day and Merton and ignore the institutional commitments to Catholicism that each of them had. Even when Merton scoffs at the dictums of his hierarchy that limit his movements, Catholicism matters here. Pycior is careful to outline and caveat some of the blunter ways Day was committed to Catholicism—opposed to abortion, not open to LGBTQ relationships, skeptical of the turn to vernacular prayers. Pycior's text reminds readers of the very Catholic context of both of these people. Pycior carefully describes this not as a limitation, but as the language of their friendship and activism.

Finally, Pycior's book illustrates the ways that the peace movement of the 1960s was a movement of relationships, friendships, and intimate conversations. This is made perhaps most clear in the way she weaves Dan Berrigan in and out of this account. Certainly, as Pycior's account references, Berrigan was in regular written communication with both Merton and Day. But the way Pycior describes Berrigan's presence here is as a bit of a foil in the relationship between Merton and Day. He is at once a figure whose draft burning, for example, worry Day and Merton—but for different reasons. Pycior describes the ways Berrigan turned to Merton for spiritual guidance and to Day for practical partnership. Pycior argues that the theme that ties these networks together is love—passage. And while I would have loved a fuller description of how she understands love as analytic category, she is clear that it is love that roots this community. This network of Catholic peace activists was fluid and in regular conversation. It was anchored, perhaps, by Day and Merton. But Pycior paints a portrait of 1960s Catholic peace work that is deeply invested in these relationship—cultivated by prayers, conversations, and letters.

As Pycior writes in her *Coda*, the relevance of Merton and Day's friendship and their commitment to enacting a radical love has not diminished in the twenty-first century, even if some of the details

have been lost in collective Catholic memory. Drawing her decade-long biography-by-letters to close, she posits that “we will not be saved by starry-eyed optimism or clever cynicism” (p. 164). Instead, Merton and Day’s friendship stands as stalwart reminder of the gritty, hard work of the call to love one another.

References

Moore, Brenna, “Friendship and the Cultivation of Religious Sensibilities, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* June 2015, Vol. 83, No. 2, doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfu111), pp. 437-463.