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DOROTHY DAY: THE CONTEMPLATIVE CATHOLIC WORKER

Jessie Bazan

To say Dorothy Day was an active minister is an understatement. As co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, Dorothy produced a national newspaper, ran houses of hospitality and farming communes, and worked to receive every person she encountered as Christ.¹ She was a sought-after writer and advocate for human dignity and workers' rights. Dorothy *did* a lot for people experiencing poverty and marginalization. Her active ministry was well-documented. Dorothy had a contemplative spirit, too. It was an integral part of her being that has not received nearly the public attention, and yet, contemplation is what sustained this modern day saint.

To contemplate is to grow still with a purpose. Contemplation can be practiced alone or with other people. It can be practiced anywhere from a secluded hermitage to a soup kitchen. At the heart of contemplation is relationship with God. To contemplate is to listen intentionally to God's call and carefully consider how to respond. True contemplation leads to a transcendence of our finite human abilities. We grow in awareness of our mysterious, merciful God as we create the conditions to listen. God's voice echoes at the very core of our spirit. But it can be hard to hear at such depths in our noisy world. Contemplation, then, invites the individual to step away from – but not necessarily out of – the bustle of the world.² Such

retreat is particularly important for active ministers like Dorothy.

The radical work of the Gospel is both necessary and demanding. To feed the hungry and tend to the sick are not optional acts for followers of Christ. The thirsty need drink, the naked need clothes, the imprisoned need visiting. All of this action takes time. It takes energy and resources.³ Dorothy Day shows that the only way to embrace the active missionary work of the Gospel – and maintain some sanity along the way – is to be deeply committed to contemplative practices.

This paper first considers Irenaeus's insights on the finitude of human nature to further demonstrate the necessity of contemplation. It then explores Dorothy's engagement with three contemplative contexts: ritual prayer, reflective activities and spiritual companionship. The conclusion suggests how the intersection of contemplative and active practices enhances the relational nature of human beings.

Human beings cannot fulfill the demanding Gospel mission on our own. We are finite creatures, Irenaeus points out in chapters 38 and 39 of *Against Heresies*.⁴ Creation is an ongoing process. Human finitude and the fact that we are *becoming* as opposed to *already perfect* is part of God's plan. Precisely because we are created, we are immature and thus unable to live perfectly (38.2). The state of humanity is not an accident.⁵ God could have created human beings as perfect creatures from the start – but God did not do this. God created human beings in God's own image in that like God, we have control over ourselves (38.4). We are free. Human freedom is a generous gift from God. It gives human beings the agency to choose who we become, how we act and what we desire.⁶ Freedom is also an enormous responsibility. One only has to consider the brokenness and suffering of the world to know human beings constantly use our freedom in destructive ways. We sin. Humanity is slowly inching towards perfection, but we are not there yet. We need sustenance. Creation progresses as "the Father decided and commanded; the Son

molded and shaped; the Spirit nourished and developed” (38.3). Irenaeus is wise to note that God our creator is always present with us as we progress.

From the beginning, God’s “hand fashioned a foundation” in each individual. We are God’s precious “artifacts,” so we can and should rely on God for sustenance, Irenaeus suggests. Take comfort that “to create belongs to God’s goodness; to be created belongs to human nature.” He implores, “Retain your moisture, so that you do not harden and lose the imprint of [God’s] fingers.” By offering God a “soft and malleable heart,” human beings allow ourselves to be molded by God’s own hands and in the process, become “God’s perfect work” (39.2). Put another way, we become vessels of God’s grace.

Dorothy Day can be described in many ways: radical activist, devout Catholic, lover of the poor and certainly vessel of God’s grace. For years she worked on a “spiritual adventure” book with a fitting title: *All Is Grace*. Dorothy came to see the world through a lens of grace. Every cup of coffee shared in the food line, each moment of quiet prayer, all the times the loaves and fishes miracle came true in a hospitality house, and perhaps most especially, every person trapped in poverty, is a “channel of grace.”⁷ Dorothy recognized God’s grace in the world around her. It was God’s grace that sustained Dorothy throughout her active ministry. She experienced this grace within the more contemplative contexts of ritual prayer, reflective activities and spiritual companionship.

Make time for prayer, and God will return the favor.⁸ Dorothy found slowing down actually allowed her to give and receive *more*. She stood by the principle: “If we are rushed for time, sow time and we will reap time. Go to church and spend a quiet hour in prayer. You will have more time than ever and your work will get done.”⁹ Dorothy believed God is always ready to come to our assistance. We simply need to train our hearts to see it. The key for Dorothy was carving out intentional time to listen to God. Ritual prayer offered a reliable

framework from which to listen.

Daily Mass was part of the rhythm of life for Dorothy. She writes poetically of the “little miracles” she encountered on the walk to church each morning. Dorothy noticed, “That splendid globe of sun, one street wide, frame at the foot of East Fourteenth Street in early-morning mists, that greeted me on my way out to Mass was a miracle that lifted up my heart.”¹⁰ The Eucharist became the source of renewal for Dorothy when she was baptized shortly after the birth of her daughter.¹¹ The body and blood of Christ nourished Dorothy in a real bodily way. She describes, “We often do not feel the action of the sun, but sitting before the Eucharist, in the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist warms and gives health to the spirit as the sun gives health to the body.”¹² Dorothy often journaled about thoughts that arose during Mass. Rich Eucharistic imagery of fellowship and communion seemed to evoke contemplation in Dorothy. Liturgy connected to life. In an entry dated August 6, 1937, Dorothy describes preparing for communion in a Syrian church in Easton, NY and wondering about the labor leaders of the Catholic Worker. What would it take for their hearts to turn to God? These leaders, while not professed Catholics, are following Catholic principles of social justice. She concludes, “The big fight is against violence more than it is against atheism.” The Mass was Dorothy’s safe space to contemplate her active ministry—and give praise to Christ who understood so well the struggle for justice.

Additionally, Dorothy prioritized time spent in meditation in the midst of her busy days. She wrote a rule for her life at the start of 1936 in which she committed to praying the liturgical office, doing a nightly examination and to practice gentleness and charity. She also pledged “around the middle of the day to take, even though it may be a snatch, fifteen minutes of absolute quiet, thinking about God and talking to God.”¹³ Dorothy believed so strongly in the importance of ritual prayer that she created this rule of life so, as she says,

she could “be more careful not to omit certain devotions that I had let myself off from on account of my irregular life and fatigue.” In this same journal entry, Dorothy writes of days spent working from 7:00 a.m. until midnight. Her bodily limitations – her human finitude – impeded her ability to be creative in prayer. She was exhausted. Ritual prayer then became all the more valuable during her active ministry. It offered preset ways to connect with God that did not further drain her energy. Jim Forest, a Catholic Worker and biographer of Dorothy, explains Dorothy’s reliance on prayer. He says, “Dorothy did everything Catholics thought they were supposed to do, but not just with a forward march discipline. She loved doing these things. Without her spiritual foundations, Dorothy insisted it would have been totally impossible. She’d have burned out in 20 minutes.”¹⁴ Mass and meditation are two contemplative practices that strongly supported Dorothy’s active ministry.

Writing is another contemplative activity that sustained Dorothy Day. She kept a journal for most of her life, explaining that “one’s memory is always faulty” and “keeping a diary helps clarify ideas.”¹⁵ Some entries offer profound insights, usually as Dorothy unpacks a Scripture verse. In an entry dated November 11, 1968, Dorothy writes, “We need to pray more ... We need to listen to the words of Jesus which the Holy Spirit will help us understand. On the one hand, Jesus had no place to lay his head ... But he taught. Jesus taught hospitality and love.” Most entries, however, chronicle the ordinary events of daily life. Dorothy often notes opinions on the daily Mass homily, feelings of tiredness or impressions of the natural world. Through the reflective activity of journaling, Dorothy grew in her awareness of God. Writing gave her space to wrestle with her role as a Catholic activist and name needs, both her own and those of the poor with whom she worked. She made meaning of her life with the tools of pen and paper.

Dorothy also wrote reflectively for a public audience. She

used her autobiography writing project as a space to reflect on her life and try to make sense of the world around her. The autobiography genre is a form of spiritual inquiry that gives a writer like Dorothy permission to be honest, vulnerable and creative with her own story. It is a space to explore more deeply the progression – and even regression – of her relationship with God.¹⁶ After her baptism, the social demands of the Catholic faith led Dorothy to an even greater commitment to serving the poor. This commitment to action grew through reflection. She writes candidly about feeling “little joy” the year she became Catholic and how membership in this church seemed to “put a barrier” between her and others.¹⁷ Why, then, did Dorothy’s faith continue to grow?

Being Catholic in a community of communists and anarchists could not have been easy. Not all people push through challenges. Many give up, feeling overwhelmed when life does not work out perfectly. Dorothy’s contemplative nature propelled her forward. It mattered that Dorothy took the time to ask hard questions. It mattered that she thought through the why’s and how’s of living out Catholic social teaching. Chronicling her life in writing enabled Dorothy to make connections between her actions and her prayers. For instance, Dorothy makes a crucial realization at the end of Part II of her autobiography. She writes about a prayer experience on Immaculate Conception in which she cried to God “that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor.”¹⁸ In the next paragraph, Dorothy notes a realization that despite being Catholic for three years, she did not personally know any Catholic laypeople. Very shortly thereafter, Dorothy sees her prayer answered when a French peasant named Pete Maurin walked into her apartment.¹⁹ Such connections made during reflective writing empowered Dorothy with the support and motivation to keep doing the tough work for justice.

In addition to writing both privately and for publication,

Dorothy found rejuvenation for her active life in the contemplative space on retreats. She viewed a retreat center as a place where people can come “to heed that command: ‘Be still and see that I am God.’” Human beings need that stillness. We need rest. We are finite creatures whose bodies and minds have limitations. To retreat, according to Dorothy, is to temporarily remove oneself from the burdens of everyday life in order to grow with God. She called a retreat “an oasis in the desert of this life.”²⁰ Dorothy continued, “[A retreat] is a place to develop spiritual resources, a place to think. It is a place of action, because we believe that spiritual action is the hardest of all – to praise and worship God, to thank Him, to petition Him for our brothers, to repent our sins and those of others. This is action, just as the taking of cities is action, as revolution is action, as the Corporal Works of Mercy are action.”²¹ Dorothy understood that true contemplation is not passive. It is a reflective way of acting upon God’s call. Ideally, the contemplative space provided on retreats rejuvenates ministers like Dorothy for their more overtly active works of justice.

Dorothy kept detailed notes of the insights she gleaned while on retreat and her process of retreating. She went into a week-long retreat in July 1943 and focused solely on listening. She writes, “With my ears, I prayed, in that I listened to the word of god, the story of the love of God.”²² Dorothy knew her vocation was to spend her time in city slums “agitating” those in power to care for those without.²³ To do this hard work well, Dorothy searched out Christian communities housed in retreat centers “in the midst of fields” or “atop a hill.” These were her get-away places to rest her tired body and soul.

Spiritual companionship was a third contemplative practice embraced by Dorothy Day. Popular concepts of contemplation often focus on individualized prayer and reflection. Relationship with another spiritual seeker can also be a context for contemplation.

This makes sense if we recall that relationship is at the heart of contemplation. To contemplate is to grow still with a purpose – a purpose of coming to know God more deeply. How do finite human beings come to know an infinite, radically-different God? The answer lies in the mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Through Christ, God entered fully into human nature while maintaining full divinity. Jesus did not perfect all human nature in that moment – human beings are still free and still use our freedom in sinful ways – however, Christ did transform human nature when he entered into it. He enabled people to become sharers in the divine life. Irenaeus describes human beings as God’s “artifacts” who are capable of being “molded” by God. (39.2) We have the capacity – and the call – to be the presence of God in the world in very real ways. To borrow a favorite image of Dorothy, human beings are called to be the Body of Christ.

Dorothy grew closer to Christ by drawing closer to members of his Body. She was drawn to the communal aspect of church from the beginning. Dorothy explains, “My very experience as a radical, my whole make-up, led me to want to associate myself with others, with the masses, in loving and praising God.”²⁴ Dorothy valued the spiritual companionship she found among people gathered for liturgy or retreats.²⁵ She greatly valued spiritual companionship with people experiencing poverty as well. Dorothy grew closer to God as she contemplated the real stories of real mothers and brothers facing life without a home or job or family. God is love, Dorothy believed. She writes to love is to grow through community, “through the heart-rending and soul-searching experiences, as well as the joyful ones, which we have in living together.”²⁶ Dorothy saw the people sleeping outside in the shadows of Catholic Worker buildings.²⁷ Her heart broke for her Italian neighbors too poor to make wine.²⁸ There are countless stories of Dorothy Day encountering the Body of Christ in people who are impoverished and marginalized. These were her

spiritual companions. Dorothy's contemplative encounters with members of Body drew her even closer to the head – Christ.

One of Dorothy's most cherished spiritual companions was the beloved Trappist monk, Thomas Merton.²⁹ These two powerhouse American Catholics penned letters to each other regularly. They traded resource books on John Cassian and early monastic life. They discussed current events. In December 1965, Merton ended his letter, "Let's hope and pray now that the message of the Constitution on the Church in the World will really get through to the Church, especially in the USA."³⁰ They also asked for prayers from the other and encouraged one another. Merton wrote to Dorothy, "Don't worry whether or not in every point you are perfectly right according to everybody's books: you are right before God as far as you can go and you are fighting for a truth that is clear enough and important enough. What more can anybody do?"³¹ He reminded Dorothy that God is always with her. Merton told Dorothy, "You are the richest woman in America spiritually, with such prayers behind you. The mighty prayers of the poor will embrace you with invincible strength and mercy and bear you in spite of everything into the Heart of God."³² The Word became flesh through their notes of encouragement. The contemplative practice of spiritual companionship gave Dorothy the relational support she needed in the midst of the busy and often thankless work of serving the poor.

Dorothy Day rooted herself in contemplative practices. As a result, she was able to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless and give rest to the weary without completely draining herself. The ministry of a Catholic Worker is no doubt exhausting. Duluth Catholic Worker Br. Cassian (Will) Hunter, OSB, describes it this way:

There is always something that needs to be done: a meal that needs cooked, a phone that needs answered, a guest who needs water; a toilet that needs plunged. There is a funeral that needs planned, a stove that needs replaced, a ceiling that

needs danced, a sidewalk that needs shoveled, dishes that need washed, a toilet that needs plunged (again), a system that needs turned upside down.³³

How, then, does stepping back and slowing down help when there is so much to *do*? The contemplative practices of ritual prayer, reflective activities and spiritual companionship freed Dorothy from the traps of everyday busyness. Through contemplation, God reminded Dorothy: slow down. Notice me. See me in the faces of those you serve. Hear me in the drive of your fellow Catholic Workers. Taste me in every cup of soup. Smell me in the crisp autumn air on your walk to Mass. Touch me in every hug and handshake and pat on the back. We should not act for the sake of acting. Active ministry is not the end itself – God is the *telos*. Contemplation turns the work back to God. It reminds active ministers like Dorothy that our incarnated God is alive in this world, calling us and helping us transcend our finite human abilities. Our bodies and souls would grow too weary alone. Working for justice is demanding. Dorothy rightly notes, “The poor will always be with us, Christ said that, and there will always be a need for our sharing, for stripping ourselves to help others. It will always be a lifetime job.”³⁴ The ongoing cycle of active ministry needs to be fed by contemplative practices. Such practices rightly order our work by returning us to relationship with God. This relationship is the source of ministry and goal of Christian life.

Notes

1 Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin founded the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933. It began as a newspaper movement with the goal of spreading Catholic Social Teaching, particularly about caring for the poor. Then, someone knocked on the door and needed something to eat, so the Catholic Workers put on a pot of soup. Soon, they established meal programs. Another person knocked on the door and needed a place to stay. From there, houses of hospitality sprang up. The radical, grassroots movement continues to be driven by the works of mercy. Today, there are 240 Catholic Worker communities who “remain committed to nonviolence, voluntary poverty, prayer and hospitality for the homeless, exiled, hungry and forsaken.” For more information, see “The Catholic Worker Movement,” Catholic Worker, accessed December 17, 2016, <http://www.catholicworker.org/>. There is a wealth of publications about the mission and experiences of the Catholic Worker. A few suggestions include: Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes: The Inspiring Story of the Catholic Worker Movement* (New York: Orbis, 1963) and Jim Forest, *All is Grace: A Biography of Dorothy Day* (New York: Orbis, 2011).

2 My definition of contemplation was influenced by Thomas Merton’s “What is Contemplation” in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New York: Burns and Oats, 1999. Merton’s close relationship with Dorothy Day is explored later in this paper.

3 To this end, Dorothy writes, “Social justice work keeps us busy. It’s easy to get overwhelmed by the need.” Dorothy Day, “Here and Now,” in *Dorothy Day: Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Ellis (New York: Orbis, 1983), 101.

4 Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” in *Theological Anthropology*, ed. Patout J. Burns (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 2.

5 Irenaeus was writing against Gnostic heretics who believed the body is bad and the material world is intrinsically evil.

6 John R. Sachs, *The Christian Vision of Humanity* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 28-29.

7 This phrase was used by Dych when he wrote, “Everything that is really human can be a ‘channel of grace,’ a finite meditation of our relationship to God.” William Dych, “Theology in a New Key,” in *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner’s Theology*, ed. Leo O’Donovan (New York:

Seabury Press, 1980), 14.

8 A major aspect of Dorothy’s prayer life was asking God for help. She saw prayer as instrumental for receiving the resources necessary to run the Catholic Worker. It would not be a stretch to say the contemplative practices of Dorothy and other Catholic Workers kept the movement going. In a letter thanking donors, Dorothy wrote, “God is with us, the saints protect us. Each time we have asked for aid, the money was immediately forthcoming to pay each and every bill. True, this leaves nothing for the next printing paper. But God seems to intend us to depend solely on Him. We must live this lesson of dependence on Him as we preach in these pages. Economic security, something every reader and we ourselves would like to have, is not for us. We must live by faith, from day to day ...” Day, *Selected Writings*, 61.

9 Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (New York: Harpercollins, 1952), 252.
10 Day, *Selected Writings*, 59.

11 Dorothy’s baptism was a turning point in her life. She ultimately leaves her common law husband, Forester, because did not support her becoming Catholic. See Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 148 for more on her formation leading up to baptism.

12 Dorothy Day *All is Grace* manuscript, Series D-3, Box 4, Folder -, Dorothy Day Papers, Dorothy Day Catholic Worker Collection, Marquette University Library Special Collections & University Archives.

13 Dorothy Day Rule for Life 1936, Series D-4, Box 1, Folder 2, Dorothy Day Papers, Dorothy Day Catholic Worker Collection, Marquette University Library Special Collections & University Archives.

14 Marquette University, “Jim Forest on The Difference Network at Marquette University,” YouTube video, 7:37, posted May 10, 2011: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8L4Ut6F2m9s>.

15 Dorothy Day Personal Journal from January 3, 1968, Series D-4, Box 2, Folder 2-7, Dorothy Day Papers, Dorothy Day Catholic Worker Collection, Marquette University Library Special Collections & University Archives.

16 Michael Higgins, “In the burning heart shines a lamp: Autobiography as a Mode of Spiritual Inquiry,” *The Canadian Catholic Review* (May 1990), 164-169.

17 Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 151 & 162.

18 Ibid., 166.

19 Dorothy reflects further on her initial encounter with Maurin in *Loaves and Fishes*. She writes, “The appearance of Peter Maurin, I felt with deep conviction, was the result of my prayers. Just as the good God had used the farmer Habakkuk to bring the mess of food intended for the reapers to Daniel in the Lions’ den, so had God sent Peter to bring me the good intellectual food I needed to strengthen me to work for Him.” (13)

20 Dorothy Day *All is Grace* manuscript, Marquette University Archives.

21 Day, *Selected Writings*, 104.

22 Dorothy Day Retreat Notes 1943-1944, Series D-4, Box 8, Folders 3-13, Dorothy Day Papers, Dorothy Day Catholic Worker Collection, Marquette University Library Special Collections & University Archives.

23 Ibid.

24 Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 139.

25 See sections from Day, *The Long Loneliness* on “Community” (222-235), “Family” (235-243) and “Retreat” (243-263) for examples.

26 Day, *Loaves & Fishes*, 62.

27 Ibid., 70.

28 Day, *Selected Writings*, 55.

29 Dorothy also writes extensively of her relationship with Peter Maurin, who co-founded the Catholic Worker and had a profound impact on Dorothy’s life. She goes so far as to write about returning to New York as a young mother and finding “Peter the French peasant, whose spirit and ideas will dominate the rest of this book as they will dominate the rest of my life.” Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 166. Dorothy and Peter’s companionship is well-documented in *The Long Loneliness*, *Loaves and Fishes* and many other Catholic Worker publications. For the sake of space, this paper will explore the companionship of Dorothy and Thomas Merton. The written correspondence from Merton to Day is preserved in the Marquette University archives.

30 Thomas Merton letter to Dorothy Day – December 1965, Series D-1, Box 15, Folders 8, Dorothy Day Papers, Dorothy Day Catholic Worker Collection, Marquette University Library Special Collections & University Archives.

31 Thomas Merton letter to Dorothy Day – July 9, 1959, Series D-1, Box 15, Folders 8, Dorothy Day Papers, Dorothy Day Catholic Worker Collection, Marquette

University Library Special Collections & University Archives.

32 Thomas Merton letter to Dorothy Day – August 17, 1960, Series D-1, Box 15, Folders 8, Dorothy Day Papers, Dorothy Day Catholic Worker Collection, Marquette University Library Special Collections & University Archives.

33 Will Hunter, “The Road Ahead,” *Loaves and Fishes* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 3.

34 Day, *Selected Writings*, 111.