Women in History - Dorothy Day

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The mystery of poverty is that by sharing in it, making ourselves poor in giving to others, we increase our knowledge of and belief in love.—Dorothy Day

Comforting the Afflicted and Afflicting the Comfortable

Dorothy Day challenged generations of social and political orthodoxies. She was a pacifist, a champion of the rights of women, the poor, and the oppressed at a time when it was neither politically or fashionably correct. She believed in a social revolution that did not begin with government programs, but from the bottom up. She asked everyday people to open their hearts and embrace voluntary poverty.

Dorothy Day was born on November 8, 1897, in New York City, where she died 83 years later. She was born into a middle class family but was introduced to poverty when her journalist father lost his position after the San Francisco earthquake and the family moved to an impoverished area of Chicago. Even when the family regained financial stability, Dorothy remained interested in the plight of the poor. She attended the University of Illinois but left before graduating to become a journalist, joining a circle of social and literary radicals. An activist for the rights of women and workers, and a pacifist, her first stint in jail in 1917 was with a group of suffragettes for demonstrating at the White House for women’s voting rights. She was jailed four times from 1955 to 1959 for acts of civil disobedience, which entailed refusing to take shelter during civil defense drills in New York City. Her last visit to jail was in 1969 when, at the age of 76, she was arrested while protesting with the Universal Farm Workers in California.

Although she rejected religion in her youth because she did not see organized religion helping the poor, a common law marriage and the birth of her daughter Tamar led her to embrace the Catholic faith. In 1928 she became a Roman Catholic, a decision that meshed her religious beliefs with her political ideals. When she met Peter Maurin, an immigrant from rural France, her political ideals, religious beliefs, and journalism coalesced with his vision of a nonviolent revolution and eventually led to the founding of the Catholic Worker Movement.

The Catholic Worker Movement began in 1933 when in Dorothy’s words, “We were just sitting there talking and people moved in on us.” In
the early days the Movement included a monthly paper, *The Catholic Worker*, edited and published by Dorothy, hospices, or houses of hospitality, where the homeless could find bed and sustenance, and later farming communes where the urban poor could become self-sufficient. *The Catholic Worker*, which sold for a penny a copy, espoused Gospel based values, Catholic social radicalism, and non-violent revolution. By 1938 circulation of the paper had grown to 190,000. Dorothy’s rigid stance on pacifism, caused circulation to drop to 50,000 during World War II, but it regained circulation, hovering between 80,000 and 90,000 during the 1980s and 1990s.

Dorothy Day’s work endures today with more than 185 Catholic worker communities existing in 37 of the United States, 6 in 3 Canadian provinces, and 15 in 10 other countries. Followers of the Catholic Worker Movement remain committed to nonviolence, voluntary poverty, and hospitality for the homeless. True to the tradition established by Dorothy, they continue to protest injustice, war, racism, and violence. *The Catholic Worker* has a current circulation of 80,000. Dorothy Day’s written work includes 8 books, 340 articles written for journals and magazines, and more than 1,000 articles for *The Catholic Worker*.

Day’s life of voluntary poverty, her writings and actions on behalf of the poor, and her stance on pacifism have served as inspiration for people of many faiths. In her later years, Dorothy’s efforts were recognized when the Jesuit magazine, America (11/11/72), devoted an issue celebrating her accomplishments, and the University of Notre Dame presented her with its Laetare Medal thanking her for “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.”

References


