# Dorothy Day

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The [Servant of God](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Servant_of_God" \o "Servant of God) **Dorothy Day** ([November 8](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/November_8), [1897](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1897) – [November 29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/November_29), [1980](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1980)) was an [American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States" \o "United States) [journalist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journalist) turned social activist, anarchist (she was an [Industrial Workers of the World](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_Workers_of_the_World" \o "Industrial Workers of the World) member), and devout member of the [Catholic Church](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church" \o "Catholic Church). She became known for her social justice campaigns in defense of the poor, forsaken, hungry and homeless. Alongside [Peter Maurin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Maurin" \o "Peter Maurin), she founded the [Catholic Worker Movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Worker_Movement" \o "Catholic Worker Movement) in [1933](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1933" \o "1933), espousing [nonviolence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nonviolence" \o "Nonviolence), and hospitality for the impoverished and downtrodden.

The movement started with the *[Catholic Worker](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Worker" \o "Catholic Worker)* [newspaper](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newspaper) that she and [Peter Maurin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Maurin" \o "Peter Maurin) founded to stake out a neutral, [pacifist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacifism" \o "Pacifism) position in the increasingly war-torn [1930s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1930s" \o "1930s).

Day later opened a "house of hospitality" in the [slums](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slum" \o "Slum) of [New York City](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_City" \o "New York City). The movement quickly spread to other cities in the [United States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States" \o "United States), and to [Canada](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canada" \o "Canada) and the [United Kingdom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom" \o "United Kingdom); more than 30 independent but affiliated CW communities had been founded by [1941](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1941" \o "1941). Well over 100 communities exist today, including several in [Australia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australia" \o "Australia), the United Kingdom, [Germany](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germany" \o "Germany), [The Netherlands](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Netherlands), the [Republic of Ireland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_Ireland" \o "Republic of Ireland), [Mexico](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexico), [New Zealand](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Zealand), and [Sweden](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sweden" \o "Sweden).

*Dorothy Day* (1890-1980)

By Colman McCarthy

NEW YORK --- The funeral procession of Dorothy Day, her body in a pinewood coffin, moved out of Maryhouse on Third Street on the way to a requiem mass at nativity Catholic Church, a half-block away. Someone wondered aloud why more of the poor were not present. The street, as mean as any in this cloister of harshness on the edge of the Bowery, was certainly not overflowing with homeless souls come to mourn the woman who had served them in a personal ministry for half a century. A few men and even fewer women--- blank-eyed, dressed in tatters --- stood in clusters, while others wandered down the street from the city shelter for derelicts, one of Manhattan’s unseen hellholes. But that was all. Most of the 800 people following the coffin were either old friends of Miss Day who live outside the neighborhood or members of the Catholic Worker community who run St. Joseph’s and Maryhouse, the two local shelters for the homeless.

Large numbers of the poor did not come, for a reason as obvious as the open sores on the face of a wino opposite Maryhouse: they are too busy trying to fight death themselves. To mark the passing of someone who loved them --- accepted them totally by living here, raising money for them through her newspaper, the *Catholic Worker ---* would, of course, make sense in the rational world of the comfortable, where public tribute to the deceased great and the seemingly great is the proper way of dealing with grief. But here on this street that is full of the homeless and jobless, death was not needed for grief. Hope gets buried every day.

If the turnout of the poor was not strong, there was also an almost total absence of Catholic officialdom. This was the genuine affront. Few of the faithful in this century were more committed than Dorothy Day to the church’s teachings, both in its social encyclicals --- on the distribution of wealth, the evils of the arms race --- and its calls to private spirituality. She was a daily communicant at mass, rising early to read the Bible and pray the rosary.

Dorothy Day used her faith as a buffer against burnout and despair. Fittingly, it will have to be taken on faith that her life of service made a difference. She issued no progress reports on neighborhood improvement, summoned no task forces on how to achieve greater efficiency on the daily soup line.

Nor did she ever run “follow-up-studies” on whether the derelicts of the Bowery renounced their drunken and quarrelsome ways. As her favorite saint, Theresa of Lisieux, taught, results don’t matter to the prayerful.

On the subject of results, Dorothy Day had a philosophy of divine patience: “We continue feeding our neighbors and clothing and sheltering them, and the more we do it the more we realize that the most important thing is to love. There are several families with us, destitute to an unbelievable extent, and there too, is nothing to do but love. What I mean is that there is no chance of rehabilitation --- no chance, so far as we see, of changing them, certainly no chance of adjusting them to this abominable world about them, and who wants them adjusted, anyway?”

That was from the June, 1946, issue of the *Catholic Worker* newspaper, a monthly that has been a voice of pacifism and justice since 1933. The jobless and homeless are so thick in the streets that “Holy Mother City,” as Miss Day called it, makes no pretense of even counting them.

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It may be just as well. Counters get in the way when there is soup to be made. Even worse, getting too close to the government means a trade-off that Miss Day resisted in words and action. “The state believes in war,” she said, “and, as pacifists and philosophical anarchists, we don’t.”

Because she served the poor for so long and with such tireless intensity, Dorothy Day had a national constituency of remarkable breadth. She was more than merely the conscience of the Left. Whether it was a young millionaire named John F. Kennedy who came to see her (in 1943) or one of the starving, she exuded authenticity.

It was so well-known that she lived among the poor --- shared their table, stood in their lines, endured the daily insecurity --- that the *Catholic Worker* became known as the one charity in which contributions truly did reach the poor. It is at St. Joseph’s House, 36 E. 1st, New York 10003.

“It is a strange vocation to love the destitute and dissolute,” Miss Day wrote a few years ago. But it is one that keeps attracting the young who come to the *Catholic Worker* as a place to brew the soup and clean the toilets, which is also the work of peacemakers. They are against military wars for sure, but their pacifism resists the violence of the economic wars. “We refuse to fight for a materialistic system that cripples so many of its citizens,” the *Catholic Worker* has been saying for half a century.

The only Catholic bishop of the church on hand was Terence Cardinal Cooke of New York. As the procession rounded the corner from Maryhouse and went on to the sidewalk leading to the church, the scarlet vestments of the cardinal came into view. The contrast was powerful. In a neighborhood of drab colors, where even the faces of the poor seem to be grayed with depression, the scarlet robes of the cardinal, his scarlet skullcap, had a touch of mock comedy to them; the vestments seemed almost the costume of a clown --- a clown who was lost in the saddest of landscapes.

A *Catholic Worker* priest, a young Dominican who works at Maryhouse and was to celebrate the mass, made the best of the situation. At the head of the procession, he shook hands with Cardinal Cooke. The cardinal took over and prayed aloud, commending the soul of “dear Dorothy” to the mercy of the Lord. While cameramen from the *Associated Press,* the *Daily News,* and the *Religious News Service* clicked away --- getting the coffin in the foreground --- the cardinal finished praying in two minutes.

It was just enough time for many in the processing to think beyond the cardinal’s brilliantly hued presence at the church door. Some recalled the pacifists from the *Catholic Worker* who have been standing for the past few months outside Cardinal Cooke’s offices uptown and in front of the splendid St. Patrick’s Cathedral. They have been leafleting the churchgoers on the immorality of the arms race and pleading with the unseen cardinal to issue a statement in favor of nuclear disarmament. In the most recent issue of the *Catholic Worker,* one of Dorothy Day’s writers said sharply about the vigil at St. Patrick’s last August: “We want to remember the victims of the (Hiroshima and Nagasaki) bombings, and to mourn the fact that the hierarchy of our archdiocese is so silent about nuclear disarmament, when statements from the Vatican Council, recent popes, and the U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference have been so clear in their condemnation of the arms race.”

Six grandchildren of Miss Day, carrying her coffin, nodded their thanks to the cardinal and

proceeded into the church. A moment later, John Shiel went up to Cardinal Cooke. Shiel, a short, half-toothless man who has been repeatedly jailed in peace protests, is something of a lay theologian who can quote every pope back to Boniface I on the subject of war and peace. A friend of Miss Day, he left Washington at 4 a.m. to be here for the mass.

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“Hello, John,” said His Eminence, who knew Shiel from his persistent lobbying for peace at the annual meetings of the hierarchy.

“Hello thee, Cardinal,” said Shiel. “When are you going to come out against nuclear weapons?”

His Eminence gave no answer, and shortly he was driven off in his limousine to “a previous commitment.” The day before, according to a *Catholic Worker* staff member, Cardinal Cooke’s secretary had phoned to request that the mass be held at 10 a.m., because it would then fit into the cardinal’s schedule and he could preside. But Miss Day’s daughter had already decided on 11 a.m. because that was when the soup kitchen was closed for the morning break between cleaning up after breakfast and getting ready for lunch. The cardinal’s presence would be missed, the secretary was told, but with all due respect, feeding the poor came first.

Inside the church, with its unpainted cement-block walls and water-marked ceiling, the breadth of Dorothy Day’s friendships was on view. In the pews were Cesar Chavez, Frank Sheed, Michael Harrington, Ed and Kathleen Guinan, Paul Moore, and Father Horace McKenna, the Jesuit who for decades has been serving the poor at his own soup kitchen in Washington.

In the back of the church, after the sermon, the undertaker, a friendly man, tall and properly somber-looking, was asked about the arrangements. “She was a lovely lady,” he said. “We’re doing this way below cost. The *Worker* gives us a lot of business, and besides, Miss Day is part of the community.”

The undertaker said that the archdiocese was picking up the tab of $380 for opening the grave at the cemetery. If the patron saint of irony were listening in, he or she would call out to the heavenly choir: “Stop the music.” During the archdiocese cemetery workers’ strike in the mid-1950’s, Dorothy Day was personally denounced by Cardinal Spellman for siding with the underpaid gravediggers.

After mass, a young *Catholic Worker* staff member, who was the candle-bearer at the head of the funeral procession, told the story of the candle – a thick white one, almost three feet tall. “We went around to neighborhood churches. We asked the sacristans for their old candle stubs that would be thrown out anyway. Then we melted them into this one large candle.” Another form of brightness was present – a thought from one of Dorothy Day’s books, printed on the bottom of the mass card: “We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.”

At about 12:30, some of the crowd drifted back to Maryhouse where lunch was being served. Pea soup was ladled from a 10-gallon kettle. Brown bread was on the table with milk, tea, and oranges: enough food for all.

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