

Dorothy Day
Dorothy Day Holds Forth
1971

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In this interview with Jeff Dietrich and Susan Pollack, originally published in the December 1971 *Catholic Agitator*, Dorothy Day discusses her journey from socialism to anarchism and Catholicism, highlighting how her early readings of Jack London and Upton Sinclair influenced her political views. Day emphasizes the spiritual and practical aspects of anarchism, rooted in the belief that social change must start from the bottom up. She praises the anarchistic nature of the Catholic Church, where conscience is supreme, and shares her thoughts on the intersection of anarchism and Catholicism. Day recounts her collaboration with Peter Maurin in founding the Catholic Worker movement, focusing on the principles of hospitality, community, and voluntary poverty. She stresses the importance of living out one's beliefs through direct action and personal sacrifice, citing the influence of figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Cesar Chavez.

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CATHOLIC AGITATOR: I'd like first to ask you, are you an anarchist? And what does that mean to you in terms of your daily action?

DOROTHY DAY: Do you want me to go back into history? When I came from college, I was a socialist. I had joined the socialist party in Urbana Illinois and I wasn't much thrilled by it. I joined because I had read Jack London—his essays, *The Iron Heel*, and his description of the London slums. I also read Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. All of these made a deep impression on me. So when I was sixteen years old and in my first year of college, I joined the Socialist Party. But I found most of them "petty bourgeois." You know the kind. They were good people, butchers and bakers and candlestick makers—mostly of German descent—very settled family people. And it was very theoretical. It had no religious connotations, none of the religious enthusiasm for the poor that you've got shining through a great deal of radical literature.

Then there was the IWW moving in, which was the typically American movement. Eugene Debs was a man of Alsace-Lorraine background. A religious man, he received his inspiration from reading Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. That started him off because he

could have been a well-to-do bourgeois, comfortable man. But, here you have this whole American movement. The IWW has this motto: “An injury to one is an injury to all.” That appealed to me tremendously because I felt that we were all one body. I had read scripture, but I don’t think I’d ever really recognized that teaching of the “Mystical Body”—that we are all one body, we are all one.

AGITATOR: Was this more of a political than a spiritual outlook at this point?

DOROTHY: No, I think it was a spiritual outlook too. As a child I came across the Bible, but nobody in my family had anything to do with religion. I just felt a profound truth there that appealed to me. What I read in the Bible seemed to me to be very much a part of daily life. The idea that when the health of one member suffers, the health of the whole body is lowered is a teaching of Saint Paul which is timeless. So I joined the IWW. I felt that it was far nearer my whole philosophy and that basically it was an anarchist movement—though they wouldn’t call themselves anarchists.

AGITATOR: Would you be more specific about what it means to be an anarchist?

DOROTHY: The whole point of view of the anarchist is that everything must start from the bottom up, from men. It seems to me so human a philosophy.

Every Marxist group that I’ve known has had their theoreticians. The theoretician of the Marxist revolution in Cuba certainly wasn’t Castro. It was Don Carlos Rafaelo Rodriguez. He was the theoretician and very often people say he will take over. But I don’t believe it. I think that it’s a very good combination, the Catholic man working together with a man like that who has everything pretty well planned.

The Communists in Cuba didn’t assist Castro in his revolution. They weren’t on the side of the students. They didn’t do anything to help in the invasion or the long continuing struggle from Oriente province down. It wasn’t until Castro marched triumphantly

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into Cuba that you might say the whole thing grew into a Marxist revolution.

Castro wasn't a Marxist. He was a Catholic educated by the Christian Brothers and the Jesuits. But fundamentally I'm not talking about practicing Catholics, but rather about something which is inbred, that is a part of your country, your heritage, your life.

AGITATOR: Why did you become a Catholic?

DOROTHY: Because I felt it was the church of the poor, because I felt its continuity. I felt that no matter how corrupt or rotten it became it had this feeling for man. It had the mark of Jesus Christ on it, walking the roads of the country, gathering a few around. You see this pattern. You see this pattern in Castro, Che Guevara, and that's why they're so attractive to people. They work where they are. They begin at the bottom. And then, of course, they go off and become the bureaucratic state.

Written into the constitution of Russia is the withering away of the state. Eventually, there will be this withering away of the State. Why put it off in some far distant utopia? Why not begin right now and say that the state is the enemy. The state is the armed forces. The state is bound to be a tyrant, a dictatorship. A Dictatorship of the Proletariat becomes yet another dictatorship.

The anarchist philosophy is that the new social order is to be built up by groupings of men together in communities—whether in communities of work or communities of culture or communities of artists, but in communities. Martin Buber said there could be a “community of communities” rather than a state. They would be united in some way but without any governing body. It would be made up of unions, credit unions instead of banks, credit unions that would deal directly with the people. There would be no more lending at interest. There would be no more money lenders.

Sounds utopian, doesn't it? But you see the beginnings of it with the Cesar Chavez land movement and the work of Martin Luther King. It is the work of organizing the unorganized. These powerless people at the bottom are the ones with whom we must begin. They

must have the insight and the knowledge to work together and recognize that they are on the right track.

AGITATOR: Do you ever, as an anarchist, see any incompatibilities between anarchy and Catholicism?

DOROTHY: No, I think anarchy is natural to the Catholic. The Church is pretty anarchistic, you know. Who pays attention to the Pope or the Cardinals? Conscience is supreme, and that's why we print it on the front page of *The Catholic Worker*. The saying of Vatican II is above all, "Conscience is supreme."

AGITATOR: Sometimes you go to see bishops and members of the hierarchy in the Catholic Church. What do you talk to them about?

DOROTHY: We talk about the work. As Cardinal McIntyre said to me, looking at the paper: "I never studied anything like this in the seminary." I think you approach a bishop as a human being and a member of the human family. Consider that the first Pope, St. Peter, betrayed Christ three times. And this was right after he was given the message: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church." I don't think any of the translators have been able to get around that. Christ just chose someone who was weak and faulty.

But in the Gospels from the very beginning you find a spirit of non-violence and brotherhood which has gone straight down through the ages, through the Church. After Constantine it was compromised a great deal. But the early disciples did have enough outpouring of spirit to be non-violent, to lay down their lives. It's a fact of history to such an extent that nobody can explain it except by calling them a bunch of masochists. They were absolutely going to martyrdom until Peter's sword again came into the picture. So you get St. Bernard who wrote sublimely about the love of God and who is preaching the Crusade. These contradictions go on again until a St. Francis arises to counter them by going alone himself to the Sultan to make peace. And you get that same kind of folly today. Real folly ...

down the stairs. She went to visit an old woman who is a neighbor of ours and senile. And she found this woman covered with lice and lying in her own excrement. Instead of coming over to tell me this sad tale, she cleaned up the old woman herself. Then she came over and told me so that I could get in touch with the family. So she gave away an onion, a very large onion. And I'll forgive her anything now.

AGITATOR: Voluntary Poverty is an essential part of the Catholic Worker movement. Would you explain what Voluntary Poverty means?

DOROTHY: Voluntary Poverty isn't going around with some burlap bag around you and imitating the poor. It means being indifferent to the material, doing as Christ said. He went and sat down with the rich and Zacchaeus and publicans and sinners. Some can go further than others. Some have more capacity. Some proceed a few steps along the way. But Christ seemed to love all men. He desired all men to be saved. I think one of the things we must constantly keep in mind is: "If anybody takes your coat, give him your cloak too." "If anybody asks you to walk a mile, go two." "If anybody hits you on one cheek, turn the other." In other words, be close enough to people so that you are indifferent to the material. And also have faith. Just as the birds of the air are fed, we'll continue to be fed.

There is something so horrifying and so sad when people are living alone. That is why the old and lonely come to us.

Communities are made up of the unlovable as well as the lovable. Dostoevsky said that it's godlike to love man—even in his sin—merely because he's man. We're under the obligation to love—that's the commandment. The Oxford edition of the New Testament says: "A new commandment I give you that you love one another as I have loved you." But a newer translation written for high school students puts it succinctly: "I command you to love" There's enough hate in the world. I command you to love. And you have to make an effort.

I got one of the best directives from Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* in the story of Krushenka. Have you read it? Krushenka's a prostitute who's been thrown over my her Polish lover and lives with a rich merchant. Both the father and the son in the Karamazov family are in love with her. And she's generally considered a bad woman. But she says of herself: "I've given away an onion, perhaps I've given away an onion." She's referring to an old Russian legend about a woman who's thrown into Hell and cries out to her guardian angel to save her. The angel says: "Have you ever done one good deed in your whole life?" And she thinks awhile and says, "Well, I've given away an onion." So the guardian angel takes out a long green topped onion and holds it out to her and says: "Hold on, I'll pull you out of this lake of brimming fire." She grabs hold of the onion and then everybody else around her begins grabbing hold of her in order to be saved, too. And she kicks and screams and throws them off. So the onion breaks and she goes back into the lake of brimming fire. But she had given away an onion.

I often think of that with people we can't stand. One woman acts like a tyrant on our third floor. Behind my back she will try to get rid of all the young girls in the place. And she fights with the older women (but they're a match for her because they're used to fighting. So there is bedlam sometimes.) But I remember that once this woman gave away an onion whenever I feel like throwing her

AGITATOR: In the Church?

DOROTHY: In the Church as a whole, like with Nevin Sayer, who was the head of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. When the US Marines were in Nicaragua in 1927 ... I worked for the Anti-Imperialist League then. Anyway, our dear friend Nevin went down there on donkey back, wandering around the mountains trying to find Sandino to bring about peace between him and the US. Now did you ever hear of anything more like a Don Quixote? And yet there's something about such folly that strikes the imagination. You don't forget it. It's like another St. Francis.

AGITATOR: Then you are hopeful when you go to see the bishops?

DOROTHY: Yes. After all, when I talk ... I've offended Cardinal McIntyre. But it makes me sick to see strong young men stamp on an old man. To me it's part of the war between children and their parents. I quote Dostoevsky in my book *Meditations*: "Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams." You have to tear out this heart of stone in order to get a heart of flesh. It's a terrible thing to love people. But we are supposed to love one another. It's a command. "I command you to love one another." How are you going to overcome wars unless you begin right where you are?

To me, Cardinal McIntire [sic] is like my old father who was a racist from Tennessee—born and brought up with this wonderful sense of superiority to the "nigger." He would say: "Of course, nothing is so cute as a little nigger baby. Baby mules and baby niggers are the cutest things on God's earth." We have to love our father just the same. I can remember my father sitting up with my sister who had terrible earaches and rocking and singing to her all night about the *Owl and the Pussycat*. I don't know ... You can't go ahead in righteous indignation and condemn. Who are we to go ahead in righteous indignation and condemn? Who are we to condemn anybody? "He who is without sin go fetch the first stone." You know they say Dorothy is an old traditionalist going around rattling her

rosary beads and I guess it's true. Incidentally, rosary beads were one of the few things they let me keep in jail.

AGITATOR: Would you talk briefly about how the Catholic Worker started with you and Peter Maurin?

DOROTHY: This will madden Women's Liberationists when I say that Peter Maurin was the one who was totally responsible for it all. He came around with these ideas of his that I accepted and that was all there was to it. I met him as a result of the things I had written. When he came to see me, he was a regular tramp living on the Bowery, a French peasant and a man of great knowledge, however. He had taught in Christian Brothers schools in France. He had a tremendous knowledge of movements all over Europe.

He laid down a very simple program—a kind of program that people would just laugh at. Foremost in this program was the necessity for the clarification of thought. I knew that Lenin had said there could be no revolution without a theory of revolution. And when Peter talked about clarification of thought, I thought this was what he was talking about. He said we needed discussions and meetings and a paper to bring things before the public. And he said we should sell it ourselves on the street. He used to have "Friday night meetings" every night of the week. He wore us out. He talked about Houses of Hospitality where there would be direct action of the works of mercy.

Round table discussions, Houses of Hospitality and farming communes—that was his solution. And you see them coming about. You see ideas that somehow or other are in the air—communes all across the country, young people trying themselves, testing themselves in various ways. I think it's all part of a world movement. Why should so many people find assent to what we write in the paper—and such a diverse group of people, too? It's something which is coming, which is evolving. I think that just as we're in the nuclear era we're also in an era of non-violence. It's undefeatable. And the evidences of non-violence are these great movements like

the Chavez movement. It makes its appeal. It seems impossible to buck the agribusiness. But I've seen this with my own eyes.

AGITATOR: How is the work you do in the city with the poor related to the work you do as a journalist?

DOROTHY: You can't write about things without doing them. You just have to live that same way. You start in with a table full of people and pretty soon you have a line and pretty soon you're living with some of them in a house. You do what you can. God forbid we should have great institutions. The thing is to have many small centers. The ideal is community.

AGITATOR: Does the *Catholic Worker* offer any sort of alternative existence to the poor other than a bowl of soup and a bed to sleep in at night?

DOROTHY: It offers them community too—although we fail every time. That's also life. How can you not fail? That's the human condition. I think that at the *Catholic Worker* we have high aims. But how much mingling is there, really, between the worker and the scholar? You get acquainted with some and they become very dear to you, like Hans and John Filligar. They become so much a part of the family that you get mad at them. There's so much you have to endure in community. It's like parents with their children. You just have to forgive them seventy times seven. There is nothing logical in all this. It's very hard to talk about. That's why I dread any kind of interviewing. Because, how can you express these tangible things that the Catholic Worker is doing? You can sit down and add up how many people we fed yesterday afternoon, how many people were served each morning at the jail, how many cups of coffee are distributed—that kind of turnstile routing. It's impossible to measure the real value of these things.

People, wherever they are, can make a community. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them." The sense is always that community is natural to people. Man is not meant to live alone. That's in the first or second chapter of Genesis.