ON PILGRIMAGE

The Sixties

DOROTHY DAY

Edited by Robert Ellsberg

Maryknoll, New York 10545

INTRODUCTION

THE ADVENT OF THE SIXTIES, a decade associated with wide-scale political and cultural upheaval, was not heralded by remarkable signs and portents; 1960, after all, was the final year of the Eisenhower administration. And yet for those attuned to the signs of the times, there were possible rumblings on the horizon. In 1960 the first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, would be elected; in Rome, preparations were under way for the Second Vatican Council, convened by Pope John XXIII; in Cuba, the recent revolution was turning in an increasingly radical direction; in New York City, a thousand demonstrators refused to take shelter during the city's annual civil defense drill; and in Greensboro, North Carolina, four African-American college students sat-in at a "whites-only" lunch counter in Woolworths, thus signaling a new and decisive stage of the civil rights struggle. *Something was happening here.*

Dorothy Day, who was born in 1897, was herself in her sixties as this decade began. And yet, for a decade that would be marked by a rising tide of protest and calls for renewal, much of it driven by young people, she would prove to be unusually equipped to serve both as a witness and an engaged participant.

Day herself had come of age in a time of protest. At eighteen she had dropped out of college and found work in New York City writing for a series of muckraking and radical journals, including the Socialist *Call* and *The Masses*. Covering strikes, peace meetings, and food riots, she had written her articles "with the impatience of youth, hopeless of gradual change." She had protested the First World War, marched on picket lines, and gone to jail while protesting with suffragists in Washington, DC. In an anti-war meeting broken up by police, she had two of her ribs cracked by a policeman's club. Her friends were anarchists, Communists, and literary bohemians, and she shared with them the hope that a new world was arising within the shell of the old. "No one ever wanted to go to bed, no one ever

wanted to be alone," she recalled. Flouting the codes of bourgeois morality, she had engaged in a torrid love affair, ended up pregnant, and had an abortion. (Later on, as she considered the floundering rebellion of many young people in the Sixties, she could observe with some compassion, "Aside from drug addiction, I committed all the sins young people commit today.")

And yet there was always in Dorothy some hunger for the Absolute—for a meaning greater than the latest protest or rebellion. Many a morning, "after sitting all night in taverns or coming from balls over at Webster Hall," she found herself ducking into an early morning Mass at St. Joseph's Church on Sixth Avenue, attracted by the atmosphere of prayer and a glimpse of "the true and the beautiful." The turning point in her life came when she was living on Staten Island with a man she deeply loved and found that she was once again pregnant. In her joy, she felt a sense of gratitude so large that only God could receive it. She decided to have her child baptized as a Catholic, a step she eventually took in 1927, though it meant a wrenching separation from the father of her child, a dedicated anarchist and agnostic who would have nothing to do with marriage, whether by church or state.

And yet the passion for justice and the cause of the oppressed still burned within her. How would she reconcile this with her newfound faith? The answer came with her introduction in December 1932 to a Frenchman named Peter Maurin, a "peasant-philosopher" twenty years her senior, who encouraged her to start a newspaper to promote the radical social message of the Gospel. This was the start of *The Catholic Worker*—first a newspaper launched on May 1, 1933, and gradually a movement centered on "houses of hospitality" where lay Catholics, adopting "voluntary poverty," combined the works of mercy (feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless) with a radical critique of a system that gave rise to so much poverty and need. Drawing on Peter Maurin's "personalist" philosophy, the Catholic Workers set out not just to criticize the way things were but to embody the values and relationships they wished to see in a new society.

So once again, in another decade marked by protest and social upheaval—this time defined by the Depression—Dorothy found a way of responding to the issues of her day, now marked by massive unemployment and homelessness, labor struggles, and the rumblings of war in Spain and elsewhere. In the midst of this, *The Catholic Worker* enjoyed a huge leap in circulation, quickly reaching one hun-

dred thousand copies each month, while new houses of hospitality sprang up around the country. From her base of operations in New York City, Dorothy traveled the country, encouraging these new communities and lending her support and journalistic eye to labor struggles in fields, factories, and waterfronts. There turned out to be a wide and receptive audience for a Catholic paper that fearlessly addressed the burning issues of the day and beckoned toward a different kind of society.

With the outbreak of World War II, all this would quickly change. While Dorothy's day-to-day work at the Catholic Worker continued, her pacifist convictions—so out of step with the sentiments of the time—quickly relegated her to a marginal place in the attention of the Church and the wider society. Circulation plummeted. Many houses closed. This was hardly affected by the war's end, which quickly transitioned to an era of prosperity (for some), patriotism, and anti-Communist zeal. To the extent that people were even aware of Dorothy Day, they tended to regard her, at best, as naïve, and at worst, as a dangerous subversive. (J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, added her name to an index of radicals to be detained in the event of a national emergency.)

Not that she made any effort to trim her message to the fashions of the times. Throughout the 1950s Dorothy continued to be a lonely voice crying out in the wilderness. She defended Communists and other radicals facing the repressive atmosphere of McCarthyism. She went south and was shot at while taking a turn on night-watch at an interracial Christian community in Georgia. In an annual protest against plans for nuclear war, she was repeatedly arrested for refusing to cooperate with compulsory civil defense drills. Through all this, she maintained her daily practice of the works of mercy, embracing voluntary poverty, bearing witness to the presence of Christ among the poor and dejected. And yet gradually, both in the Church and beyond, there were those who began to note her persistence with growing respect. Following the 1952 publication of her memoir, *The Long Loneliness*, Dwight Macdonald began a profile in *The New Yorker* with the line, "Many people think that Dorothy Day is a saint and that she will someday be canonized."

By the time the decade known as "the Sixties" was in full gear, it was not difficult for Dorothy to keep pace. She kept doing what she had always done—traveling the country, reporting on scenes of local struggle, living the Gospel without compromise, and, striving, in the

manner of St. Paul, to give reason for the hope that was in her. If she began to attract wider attention, it was not because of anything new that she had done, but because, in the words of the poet, "the times they were a-changin'."

Throughout the decade Dorothy's principal focus remained on daily life at the Catholic Worker. Though new houses and farms might come and go, the basic rhythm of life went on. She continued to travel throughout the country, largely by bus or car, and her monthly columns were often a chronicle of these travels. But now for the first time the range of her travels began to expand, most notably with her controversial pilgrimage to Cuba on the eve of the missile crisis of 1962.

She would travel three times to Rome, once on a pilgrimage to lend support to Pope John XXIII's peacemaking efforts; a second time, during Vatican II, to join a group of women fasting and praying that the Council Fathers would issue a strong condemnation of nuclear war (they did); and a third time to attend an international Congress of the Laity, where she was honored to receive Communion from the hands of Pope Paul VI. But there was plenty back home to occupy her attention. Traveling from one end of the country to the other, she filed reports about what she had seen and heard: local struggles for justice, farming communes, and experiments in gospel living. Her travels frequently took her south to report on the Black freedom struggle. Gladly, she supported the work of Cesar Chavez and the struggle of the United Farmworkers Union in California. And behind all this, there was the rising specter of war in Vietnam.

Members of the Catholic Worker in 1963 had been among the first to demonstrate against U.S. intervention in Vietnam, and as the war steadily escalated, young men from the Catholic Worker were among the first to burn their draft cards in protest. Dorothy publicly supported them, conscious that in doing so she too was violating the law. These protests were the precursor, later in the decade, to nonviolent raids on draft boards in Catonsville, Milwaukee, and elsewhere. While Dorothy had mixed feelings about such actions, she never wavered in her respect for those willing to sacrifice their freedom for the cause of peace. Already in 1961 she had written, "We are probably the only Catholic paper in existence where there are usually some members of the staff in jail."

But it will be clear to anyone reading these columns today that Dorothy's response to the world was not simply a matter of protest. Peter Maurin had always insisted that the Catholic Worker should not just *denounce* things as they were, but *announce* a better world founded on love, solidarity, and community. And so in Dorothy's columns, along with accounts of injustice and sorrow, there were also stories about people who were trying to care for their neighbors, to reject violence, and to live by different, life-affirming values.

Her own life was rooted in prayer, the sacraments, and reflection on scripture and the lives of the saints. Her radicalism was focused on an effort to know and follow Christ more faithfully, and to meet him especially among the poor. She did not shrink from the call for revolution, but it was ultimately a "revolution of the heart," a revolution "that must start with each one of us." She did not measure the value of her actions or the effectiveness of her words by the volume of her delivery, or the attention she commanded. Inspired by the spiritual teachings of her favorite saint, Therese of Lisieux, she celebrated the power of small means. Jesus fed a multitude with a few loaves and fishes. David slew the mighty Goliath with a handful of pebbles. Each of our actions, performed in faith, though representing no more than a pebble tossed into a pond, could send forth ripple that might transform the world.

And so while Dorothy's radical message found a wider audience in the decade of the Sixties, she was in certain ways out of sync with the general spirit of rebellion. She sympathized with young people in their quest for freedom and their questioning of authority. But she also warned against an impatience for results that could foster nihilism and despair. The spirit of the "counter-culture" found its way, like everything else, to the Catholic Worker, and Dorothy did her best to resist its encroachments: a spirit of self-indulgence, a kind of elitism that celebrated only what was new and youthful, clever and quick, at the expense of those couldn't keep up. And many young people, in rejecting the values of a corrupt society, also questioned the "relevance" of the works of mercy. They rejected the personalist revolution of Peter Maurin, and with this, too, the faith that had inspired Dorothy's own witness and was the motive of her life. In this light, in later years, she would not be among those radicals who looked back on the Sixties with unalloyed nostalgia.

Meanwhile, the spirit of change and renewal was not confined to the realm of politics and culture. The Sixties were also a time of enormous change in the Catholic Church, emanating in particular from the four sessions of the Second Vatican Council in Rome (1962–65). Dorothy followed these proceedings with keen interest, hoping especially that the Council Fathers would address the threat of nuclear war. During the last session of the Council in 1965, she traveled to Rome and joined a group of women fasting in support of this intention. A special issue of *The Catholic Worker,* focused on the subject of war and peace, was distributed to all of the assembled bishops. It subsequently came as a tremendous validation of these efforts when the final document, *Gaudium et Spes,* condemned the use of weapons aimed at the destruction of whole cities as a crime against God and humanity.

But the effects of the Council were soon felt in more intimate ways in every parish in the world—most obviously in the use of the vernacular in the liturgy. For some American Catholics, these changes, and the questioning of longstanding certainties, were a source of anxiety and foreboding. For others, however, the pace of change was not fast enough. For her part, Dorothy welcomed the Council's attention to themes she had promoted for many years: the new spirit of ecumenism, attention to the role of the laity, respect for religious freedom and the rights of conscience.

And yet she could not but be concerned that the spirit of renewal might prompt an uncritical retreat from devotions and practices that sustained her own faith: devotion to the saints and the Blessed Mother, the rosary, fasting and penance, the spirit of mystery and reverence, and above all the holiness of the Mass. She spoke with respect and reverence of the clergy and church authorities—even when she disagreed with them—and felt sorrow to see so many priests and members of religious orders abandoning their vocations. In a series of Advent meditations, she wrote about "holy obedience"—a virtue out of step with the tenor of the times, not to mention her own anarchist sympathies. Her gratitude for the gift of faith, she wrote, "is enough to bind me in holy obedience to Holy Mother Church and her commands." And yet those sentiments were constantly balanced by the theme of freedom and the necessity of obedience to one's conscience. And she accepted with humility that in an era of change the Holy Spirit might be blowing in ways beyond her own understanding.

A CENTRAL FEATURE of almost every issue of *The Catholic Worker* was Dorothy's column, "On Pilgrimage." A sometimes sprawling chronicle of people and places she had visited, part meditation, part editorial, and an account of daily life among the "insulted and injured," her column might fill half the pages of the paper. (The selections reprinted in this volume are invariably abridged.) As she wrote in one of her columns, "We must overflow in writing about all the things we have been talking about and living during the month. Writing is an act of community. It is a letter, it is comforting, consoling, helping, advising on our part, as well as asking it on yours. It is a part of our human association with each other. It is an expression of our love and concern for each other."

The term "pilgrimage" was not chosen lightly, nor did it merely allude to her frequent travels. Jim Forest, a former *CW* editor, tied Dorothy's use of the word to the sense of John Bunyon's *Pilgrim's Progress:* it meant that "every day of one's life and all that happened along the way, planned or unexpected, were segments of a heavenward pilgrimage, so long as the guiding principle was to live the gospel and to discover Christ in those whom one encountered. Pilgrimage for Dorothy was a way of life, a mode of listening, an attitude that motivated choices, a discipline of being."

Her columns might include references to many of the great peacemakers and prophets of social justice. But they were just as likely to describe her encounters with her grandchildren, or with people who would leave no great mark on history—even those whom the world dismissed as expendable. Dorothy often liked to quote the line of St. Catherine of Siena: "All the way to Heaven is Heaven, because He said, 'I am the way.'" She invited her readers to join her on this journey, part of her ongoing effort to relate her faith to the needs and the signs of the times.

MANY PEOPLE OFTEN ASK: What would *Dorothy* be doing if she were alive today? The writings collected here may provide the best answer, since in many ways they reflect the issues of our own time. Once again, people are marching and demonstrating on behalf of peace and justice, confronting the widening gap between rich and poor, and contending, fifty years later, with the ongoing violence of systemic racism. New issues have arisen, including the desperate plight

of migrants and refugees, the threat of climate change, and the need to care for the earth.

She would be inspired by new prophets and witnesses who have arisen to meet these times. Looking at her fellow Catholics, she would take heart that many, particularly young people, understand that their faith entails engagement on behalf of peace, justice, and the needs of the poor. Even as she grew old, she retained a spirit of youthfulness and adventure, sharing with young people an "instinct for the heroic"; it would delight her to support their leadership in protests against gun violence, in defense of the earth, and for the cause of racial justice. She would now, as she did then, worry that they not burn themselves out, but steel themselves for the long journey, and seek and find the spiritual resources to sustain them.

Just as she suffered over the witness of bishops who seemed unable to distinguish between the Cross and the American flag, Dorothy always rejoiced to cite words from church leaders who supported the cause of peace and the needs of the poor. There would be no end to her rejoicing in the papacy of Pope Francis, whose very name—inspired by her beloved St. Francis of Assisi—implies an agenda and a mission for the church. Here she would see a pope who in many ways has embodied the synthesis she always promoted: who calls on the church to step out of itself to go to the margins, to touch the wounds of Christ; who speaks of his desire for a church "that is poor and for the poor"; who prayed at Hiroshima and denounced the existence of nuclear weapons as an expression of sin; who wept over the fate of refugees; who decried the "culture of indifference" that makes it impossible for us to recognize our brothers and sisters.

Dorothy did not live to see Pope Francis. But he saw her. In a speech he delivered before a joint session of Congress in 2015, Pope Francis cited Dorothy Day among a group of four "great" Americans, around whom he organized his talk, including Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., and her friend and fellow Catholic Thomas Merton. Specifically, of Dorothy, the pope said: "In these times when social concerns are so important I cannot fail to mention the Servant of God Dorothy Day, who founded the Catholic Worker movement. Her social activism, her passion for justice and for the cause of the oppressed, were inspired by the Gospel, her faith, and the example of the saints." Each of the figures he cited was animated by a dream—and he suggested that a "great" nation is one that takes

dreams like these seriously. Such figures, he said, help us "see and interpret reality in a new way."

Perhaps that also suggests a new way of interpreting the meaning of sainthood. It turns out that Dwight Macdonald was prescient in 1952 when he said that many people believed that one day Dorothy Day would be canonized. As a matter of fact, her cause for canonization was introduced in 2000, and so she currently has the official title of Servant of God.

Dorothy may have had no interest in being called a saint. But there is no doubt that she believed that sanctity or holiness is the calling of all Christians. This was not about being a perfect person or having a church named after her; it was simply a matter of responding to the call issued to all Christians, to put off the old person and put on Christ.

For Dorothy, the content of holiness was always the same; but its expression was shaped by the questions and challenges raised by our particular moment in history. That is what the writings in this volume document: one woman's journey, on pilgrimage, faithfully endeavoring to follow Christ in response to the hopes and fears, the joys and anguish posed by one particularly turbulent decade.

May these writings offer a roadmap for our own pilgrimage, in this decade, and in those to come.

Robert Ellsberg
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