

“Dorothy Day’s accomplishments were as vast as a continent; to grasp them requires a guide. Let it be Patrick Jordan, who dwelt with Day and their fellow Catholic Workers in the mystery of poverty. No one is better than Jordan at explaining the moral principles that woke Day up in the morning and led her to do battle with the world. He takes the reader into the adventure of Day’s spiritual life, her jailings in the cause of peace, and the crossroads moment when she decided that, from then on, she would give of her soul and substance to the ‘wretched of the earth.’ And how she calls us to do the same.”

—Jim O’Grady, New York Public Radio
Author of *Dorothy Day: With Love for the Poor*

“In Patrick Jordan’s portrait, an inspiring authentic Dorothy Day springs to life. The energetic-but-searching young journalist finds her adult vocation as a joyful prophet. In the author’s view, Dorothy’s faith is both a gift and hard-won, the result, for example, of living with the poor, nonviolent resistance and protest against injustice. Jordan’s privileged position as a close friend, neighbor and co-worker of Dorothy for twelve years becomes a boon to every reader of this clear and uncommonly mature reflection.”

—Karen Sue Smith, former Editorial Director, *America*

“I love this book. It makes me feel as if I really knew Dorothy Day in her lifetime, as Patrick Jordan did. With his perceptive observations and deep knowledge of her writings, he captures Day in all her inspiring, saintly contradictions. He tells a story that is at once witty and precise, moving and concise. It will appeal not only to those who know of Day and want to reflect further, but to those yet to discover her and the great meaning her life holds for us today.”

—Paul Moses, author of *The Saint and the Sultan: The Crusades, Islam and Francis of Assisi’s Mission of Peace*

Dorothy Day

Love in Action

Patrick Jordan



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For Kathleen: *Deo Gratias*

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Preface

As part of the People of God series, *Love in Action* is an introduction to Dorothy Day, one of the most challenging, inspiring, and interesting women of our time. It is not a traditional biography but a set of reflections and recollections by someone who had the good fortune to meet and work with her during her final dozen years.

My wife Kathleen and I met at the Catholic Worker in New York City in 1969, where we worked at St. Joseph House and helped edit the *Catholic Worker* paper. From 1977 on, we lived on Staten Island in what was known as the Spanish Camp, across the path from Dorothy's beach bungalow. There we often shared conversations, meals, and drives with Dorothy and her guests.

There is no finer way to understand Dorothy Day than to reflect on her witness—her love in action—and to encounter her challenging, prophetic, beautiful, and disarming words. This book relies heavily on both as well as on the recollections of others. Dorothy was indeed salt for the earth, a light for our days.

A personal note: I have been helped with this project by countless individuals—friends, authors, and coworkers, the living and the deceased—over the years. They include family, teachers, professional colleagues, and those who have

challenged and continue to inspire me by their “thoughts, words, and deeds.” To each one of you, I hope my debt is evident in these pages. Be assured that any limitations or mistakes herein are mine alone.

(NB: In keeping with the era in which she lived, Dorothy Day’s writings and utterances often made use of male pronouns, masculine references to God, and the term “man.” But as she noted in her June 1972 “On Pilgrimage” column in the *Catholic Worker*, “When I write ‘men,’ I mean people.”)

Introduction

It is impossible to do justice to a person's life in a short book—any person's—particularly when that individual has led a long, interesting, singular, and perhaps historic life. Should the person defy most established categories of success or even sanctity, the difficulty intensifies. Such is certainly the case with Dorothy Day (1897–1980), the twentieth-century American radical, journalist, and Catholic convert. In 1933 she and Peter Maurin (1877–1949) founded the Catholic Worker Movement, a radical pacifist undertaking for social reconstruction that has only continued to branch out and grow since her death.

Dorothy Day used to say she “wanted to wear out, not rust out,” and while the last few years of her life were confined largely to Maryhouse, a Catholic Worker community for homeless women she had established in New York City, her presence was felt in every aspect of the movement's work—serving the poor on a daily basis and publishing a radical pacifist Catholic newspaper.

This reflection will convey a glimpse of what was singular about Dorothy Day, while not losing sight of her humanity. She was delightfully down-to-earth and a pleasure to be with—most of the time. As Stanley Vishnewski, a lifelong

2 *Dorothy Day*

Catholic Worker who died a year before Dorothy, observed with a characteristic twinkle in his eye, “once you got to know Dorothy Day, she was just like any other crabby old lady”—a fact that made her all the more human and appealing.

When my wife and I lived and worked at the Catholic Worker, just off the Bowery in New York City, Dorothy was in her seventies. I take it from others who knew her longer and earlier in her life that her seventies and eighties were a rather mellow period. Still, the 1960s and ’70s were far from uninteresting times, and the challenges Dorothy faced—leading the Catholic Worker community, editing its newspaper, and being at times a controversial public figure in the antiwar, civil rights, and unionization movements of the day—demanded resilience, attention, and an uncommon wisdom. Added to this, she traveled almost incessantly during those years—from Indiana to India, Denver to Moscow, Detroit to Dar es Salaam—and corresponded tirelessly with family, friends, and readers. Picketing with farm workers who were trying to organize, at the age of seventy-five she was arrested and thrown into a California penal colony. Yet, for all that, when at home at St. Joseph House, she seemed totally present and at ease. You could walk into her room on the third-floor women’s dorm at seven in the morning and find her in robe and slippers—her long, white hair not yet braided—as she shuffled into the kitchenette to prepare her morning coffee.

Dorothy was both the most self-reflective and consistently self-aware person I have known. I think she was probably more demanding of herself than the most gifted psychologists or spiritual directors ought to be. In part, this was because she was steeped in great literature, classical and contemporary, was a constant reader of the psalms and sacred Scripture, and understood that nothing escapes God’s

sight—in fact, that God’s presence can be discovered anywhere, anytime.

A woman of passion and paradox, or as George Eliot described Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, “a sensuous force controlled by spiritual passion,” Dorothy claimed in her classic, spiritual autobiography, *The Long Loneliness* (1952), that it was her love for Forster Batterham—her common-law husband and the father of their daughter Tamar—that opened to her the depths, riches, and enjoyment of not only nature but the life of the spirit. In a glowing section of that book titled “Natural Happiness,” she describes everything she loved about Forster, including the sand between his toes when they climbed into bed together after a day on the Staten Island shoreline. She seemed to understand every aspect of human longing and the human condition. After her conversion, while always upholding the Catholic Church’s teaching on marriage, abortion, and artificial birth control, she never denied the difficulties associated with them. For her, conversion and acceptance of those teachings came at a tremendous cost: separation from her husband and a life of continence.

Being around Dorothy could be challenging—and the church’s sexual teaching was the least of it—for she was continually calling herself, others, society, and the church to task on a range of issues: war and peace, power, poverty, and material success. As an editor, she could be demanding of those who worked for her. Yet she was understanding and even apologetic if she overstepped in her criticisms. If she made a mistake in print or felt she had been unfair to someone in speech or action, she would typically acknowledge her failure.

There was a knowingness about her that stemmed from Dorothy’s long years as a journalist and her place in the

public arena. When you were with her, you had a sense there was little she had not seen or heard, either because of personal experience, work, or being associated with large and diverse groups. As a young woman, she had ministered to an acquaintance as he lay dying from a suicidal overdose and then concealed the evidence from the police. She told me she would bring an inebriated, shaking Eugene O'Neill to bed and get in to warm him up. When he propositioned her—asking if she would like to lose her virginity—she replied no.

When Dorothy did fall in love, losing her virginity was apparently not a grave moral concern. As she would say later, she flung her wild roses. When she recounted having had an abortion, she implied it was not uncommon in her circle at the time. Nonetheless, I sensed remorse, that her own awareness of sinfulness had reached an entirely different depth after her conversion. Despite confessing this deed, there remained in her a lifelong sense of its gravity. She was vulnerable to the reproaches of others on account of her wanton past, and at times was humiliated by those who relished throwing it up to her. As a young person, she had attempted suicide twice.¹ All these experiences, and the enduring sensitivity they brought her, led to an understanding of others and of human failure that could be liberating for them. In her presence you understood something of the profundity and limitlessness of God's forgiveness.

Dorothy had a sharp sense of irony, and it was occasionally writ large in her reporting and editorializing. Her sense of humor was not the jokey sort, but it included poking fun at herself and the pretensions of the Catholic Worker Movement. She liked to quote G. K. Chesterton that if something was worth doing, it was worth doing badly. She recalled that on one of her speaking trips, she was particularly tick-

led when an unexpectedly large group of undergraduates showed up for her talk “Saints and Heroes.” It had been mistakenly billed as “Saints and Eros.” Her daughter Tamar said she was a joyful person who always pointed out that the saints were joyful, and her laughter remained young and delightful to the end. Still, few photographs catch Dorothy laughing.

Dorothy seemed always happy to greet you—it went both ways—and could sit around a table for hours conversing with you or several others or a group, telling stories, going over the day’s mail and news, talking about the next issue of the paper, and wondering aloud how so-and-so was doing at Bellevue or the VA Hospital. It was as natural as chatting together on the road to Emmaus.

On the other hand, Dorothy would occasionally make sure she was not seated next to an individual whose idiosyncrasies or self-importance she found tiresome. Then she would ask to be seated with her right ear (her nearly deaf one) next to the person. (Frequently, forgetting which one was her bad ear, I’d get in trouble for shouting into her good one.) Dorothy wrote in *The Long Loneliness* that God gives us our temperaments, and that despite her pacifism, it was natural for her to “stand her ground.” Then she added that it was one thing to endure wrongs to oneself patiently, but that it was not right to patiently endure the wrongs done to others. As George Eliot observed of Miss Brooke, if she ever attained perfect meekness, “it would not be for lack of inward fire.”

Ruth Collins, whom Dorothy encouraged to go into the real estate world so that Ruth could assist housing cooperatives in the poorer areas of New York City, said that “Dorothy could be very crabby on occasion”—for example, when a contractor failed to show—“but then she wouldn’t think about it again.” In contrast, Ruth said, she herself

would still be mulling it over six months later. “Dorothy was so cheerful, so positive,” Ruth said. If there was a setback in a project, Dorothy would say, “We’ll just go ahead and do nothing; just go ahead and wait.”² It’s not the usual call to action you would expect from a fabled activist.

You never knew what advice Dorothy might come up with in response to a query or an observation. She seemed like the proverbial wisdom figure, bringing forth both the new and the old from her storehouse. You could always be sure, however, that whatever she said would be consistent with the gospels. Still, she was never simply a scriptural literalist, although she took the counsels of perfection to heart—the way she thought they were intended.

Dorothy may have had a deficient ear in older age, but she was a terribly good listener. Daniel Berrigan once remarked about “the ease of her attentiveness.” Frank Donovan, who was Dorothy’s devoted assistant during the last decade of her life, commented on how much information she could discover in a few minutes’ time—an aspect of her journalistic skill—without seeming in the least intrusive. She had a retentive memory, capacious interests reinforced by her reading, and an eye for beauty. Fritz Eichenberg, the famed engraver and illustrator, said she had an intense love of beauty that included art of any kind. She also had a nose for fragrances, an ear for music—from Brahms to Joan Baez—and an eye for nature. She liked to repeat a line from the play *The Master-Poisoner* that her poet friend Maxwell Bodenheim cowrote: “I know not ugliness. It is a mood which has forsaken me.”

If she spotted wild clover along a Staten Island roadside, she would have you stop the car, get out, and pick some. Then she would put it in the pillowcases in her bungalow—a practice, she said, she had learned from her mother.

Dorothy's mother came up in conversation often, usually coupled with some wise phrase or aphorism: "Dorothy bites off more than she can chew" or (when Dorothy or you had been subjected to someone's rash or critical judgment), "Never a lick amiss." In her autobiography Dorothy noted that there was little kissing in her family, only a "firm, austere kiss" from her mother each night. She was sure, she added, that this lack of expressive affection and her longing for it made her more intense, more sensual: "more conscious of the flesh which we constantly denied," creating in her a sense of conflict that "was to go on for years."

Dorothy could experience an acute sense of loneliness, and it was an important aspect of her awareness, from her earliest years. She and her older brothers used to play near the shore at Bath Beach, Brooklyn. From that stretch, facing the Atlantic, one can look southwest across the Verrazano Narrows and see Staten Island, which would come to play a significant role in her later life and conversion. But on one particular day in childhood, while playing alone, she had a sudden, acute sense of the vastness of the world and of the force of darkness. Only six years old at the time, the feeling was so strong she abandoned her play and ran home.

In *The Long Loneliness* Dorothy described another terrifying experience of being alone. It was during the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. She was eight, and her family was living in Oakland, California, where her father was working as a sports editor for a San Francisco paper. When the earthquake struck, he fetched Dorothy's two older brothers while their mother grabbed Dorothy's younger sister. Dorothy, the middle child, was left to fend for herself, in a brass bed that rolled back and forth across the floor. When she spoke of that sensation years later, it was as if it had just happened yesterday.

The same was true when she recounted another episode. It took place in 1905 in the cavernous St. Louis train station. For some reason, everyone else in the family seemed to disappear at one point, and Dorothy experienced a sense of frightening abandonment. She told this story to Kathleen and me many years later; it too seemed as if it had just happened. Even though she had many rich friendships, was the grandmother of nine and the founder of a large, widespread community, and was recognized in public and written about widely, in a very real sense she remained a singular, solitary figure.

Dorothy had a presence of mind that made you feel she was always “right there,” even in unlikely circumstances. Father Thomas Goekler, a Maryknoll priest who worked for years as a missionary in Honduras and Guatemala, told the story of literally knocking her down one day at the Tivoli farm. It was the late 1970s. He was charging up the stairs when she happened to be starting down. “I crashed into her full force,” he said, and “she went down like a ton of bricks.” The priest was appalled, he told the *Houston Catholic Worker*: “This icon who had barely survived a heart attack or two was literally flattened. With great aplomb, she got herself up and steadied herself on the railing. She was a step or two above me and our faces were about the same height. She quickly leaned over and kissed me and said, ‘A woman never stops falling in love.’ That was the last time we spoke.”³

Recalling her early, radical friend Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (1890–1964), Dorothy wrote that when you were with Flynn you experienced “the purpose of her life.”⁴ That could well be said of Dorothy herself. As the theologian and activist James Douglass noted, when you were with her “you had a real sense of grace in the way she looked at you, at people.”⁵ No one felt left out. Dorothy was there for *them*—for you.

As a result of this acceptance, you began to look at reality, your surroundings, and the people you lived with in a different light, and began to act a bit more nobly yourself. “The presence of a noble nature,” George Eliot observed, “changes the lights for us: we begin to see things again in their larger, quieter masses, and to believe that we too can be seen and judged in the wholeness of our character.”

This characteristic did not mean that Dorothy couldn’t be short, overbearing, or even cantankerous. Jim Forest, one of her biographers, told a reporter in 1973, “She’s not all sugar. She’s tough.”⁶ And this included her stubbornness and holding grudges. She could also be impatient. Ammon Hennacy, who came to the Worker in 1953 and stayed a decade, recalled that when “some men in the office would ask her what to do about something, she would get angry and tell them to use their sense; if they made a mistake, that was how she had to learn and they could also.” Perhaps her granddaughter Kate Hennessy has best captured her steel and the bracing aspects of her person: “She was fierce, dictatorial, controlling, judgmental, and often angry, and she knew it.”⁷

By the time I knew Dorothy, she possessed what I would describe as an established “natural authority.” It had been honed and proven over decades, and seemed to be taken for granted by the Catholic Worker community and others. When one possesses that kind of authority, it is bound to rankle some people, both in and outside “the family.” Thus over the years Dorothy was tagged with a number of pejorative epithets: “the anarch,” “the abbess,” “the autocratic pacifist,” “the queen,” “the supreme matriarch.” Occasionally, even reporters wishing to praise her slipped into such tropes. In 1973 a journalist for the *National Catholic Reporter* called her “the matriarch of the apostolate to the poor and the oppressed.”⁸

Once, while out west visiting Catholic Worker houses, Dorothy remarked in an interview that she had been traveling to “give succor” to some of the newer communities. When word of this got back to New York, several younger members of the house greeted her choice of words with derision. The Catholic Worker Movement being an anarchist shop of sorts, by the time Dorothy returned home someone had painted a floor-to-ceiling mural on the third-floor landing. It depicted an Egyptian fertility goddess with a thousand and one breasts, fully exposed. It wasn’t a bad representation of the deity, except for the head, which had been transformed into Dorothy’s, featuring braided hair and all. A caption was included, to the effect that the goddess was “giving succor” to her minions. Dorothy couldn’t have missed it—or its message. The mural stayed on the landing awhile and eventually was painted over. But in the end, it was the lack of a stormy response that was the real lesson.

Dorothy seldom capitulated. In 1937 when she had castigated Joe Ryan, the corrupt leader of the East Coast longshoremen, in a front-page broadside for his attempt to squelch the fledgling seamen’s strike, the Catholic Worker’s strike-support storefront window on Tenth Avenue was smashed with a paving stone. In the following issue of the paper, Dorothy answered: “We now have a new window—half the stone is used to bolster up our stove; and the other half is used to keep the bread knife sharp, as we are serving up to 150 loaves of bread daily.”⁹ Longtime Catholic Worker Marge Crowe Hughes once remarked that “Dorothy is not a saint. She’s a warrior.”

When Dorothy was jailed for the final time, her fellow inmates autographed her green prison smock, an act that pleased her greatly. “You know,” she told a guard, “I hope to take this jail dress out with me when I leave. I know it’s

against the regulations, but I'm going to do it." And she did. (It's now at the Catholic Worker Archives at Marquette University.)

Dorothy seemed a person at peace with herself. Early on, in 1917, Agnes Boulton, who later married Eugene O'Neill, sized up the young Dorothy this way: "I saw at once this girl was a personality, an unusual one."¹⁰ But that can hardly explain the eventual largeness of who Dorothy became or the peace that developed in her after many years of turmoil, wandering, and, as she would put it, "dying to self." By her later years, I sensed someone who loved life and happily wished to continue sharing it with others. Her writing often evinced a Pauline flavor. She could have written to readers of the *Catholic Worker* as Paul had to the Philippians in 4:4–7: "Rejoice in the Lord always. . . . Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

CHAPTER ONE

A Chronology

Dorothy Day's life story has been told often and well, probably nowhere better than in her autobiographical memoirs (*From Union Square to Rome*, *House of Hospitality*, *The Long Loneliness*, and *Loaves and Fishes*); her newspaper columns for the *Catholic Worker*; and her selected diaries and letters (*The Duty of Delight* and *All the Way to Heaven*). This book relies on these sources and others, quoting from them liberally in order to bring Dorothy's voice to the reader.

In person, Dorothy's speaking voice was young and could be lilting, even in her later years. While she often had serious matters to speak of, there was a liveliness and energy in her speech that conveyed not only her seriousness but also her wit, resolve, and sense of joy. You encountered something of the same qualities in her pale blue eyes. They were attentive, reflective, and could sometimes be on the verge of piercing; but they also had a twinkle and were not invasive.

To understand a person, it helps to have a sense of where he or she has traveled, not only interiorly, but vocationally and geographically. Following is a thumbnail sketch of Dorothy's peripatetic life.

Dorothy Day was “made in America.” She had grandparents who fought on both sides in the Civil War. She lived in all four quadrants of the United States: east, west, north, and south, and understood America’s people and its history.

She was born in 1897 on Pineapple Street in Brooklyn, New York, not far from the relatively new Brooklyn Bridge (opened in 1883). Brooklyn had not yet been incorporated into greater New York City. Today the area is known as Brooklyn Heights, a stone’s throw from Walt Whitman’s legendary Brooklyn crossing. (Later in life, Dorothy would come to know Hart Crane, the so-called poet of the bridge.) The delivery doctor was from nearby Montague Street, which half a century later would figure in the integration of American baseball when the legendary Jackie Robinson signed at the Brooklyn Dodgers’ headquarters there.

Dorothy’s father, John Day, was a sportswriter, and he and the family moved often. After a stay of several years in Bath Beach, Brooklyn, the family relocated to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1905. That move was the first of numerous cross-country trips Dorothy would make throughout her life.

When the Day family left California soon after the 1906 earthquake to resettle in Chicago (Dorothy’s father needed to find work elsewhere because the printing plant for the paper where he worked had been destroyed), Dorothy fell in love with that city: its sounds and smells, ethnic neighborhoods, and parks. The family changed addresses several times, and by the time she had reached the eighth grade, Dorothy had attended five schools. In *The Long Loneliness* she paints a vivid picture of Chicago. She and her younger sister, Della, would push their baby brother, John, around the city in a stroller, exploring its avenues, parks, and even its stockyards. The Day children would often spend long

hours at home, reading and entertaining themselves (all three of Dorothy's brothers would later become journalists). It was during this period that Dorothy first read Dostoyevsky, Jack London, Upton Sinclair, and Peter Kropotkin (the Russian "anarchist prince," living in exile in London, who had spoken in Chicago in 1901). All these authors had a profound effect on Dorothy and helped train her eye to focus on and understand the plight of workers, immigrants, and the poor.

In 1914 Dorothy matriculated at the University of Illinois in Urbana, aided in part by a scholarship for her proficiency in Latin. She spent only two years in college. She joined the Scribblers Club, wrote for the *Daily Illini* and the *Chicago Examiner*, and made crucial friendships with students who had radical and literary leanings. She seemed to take only those courses that interested her and eked out spending money by doing chores for professorial families. When her own family returned to New York in 1916, Dorothy was homesick for them and moved east as well.

At first Dorothy lived with her family, during which time she tried to find work as a journalist, despite the fact that her father was adamantly opposed to any woman setting foot in a newsroom. When she did land a modest job reporting for the socialist paper *The Call*, she immediately moved out and found a room in a boarding house on Manhattan's Lower East Side. In a real sense, she never returned home. In later years she would visit her mother, Grace, and her father, John, in Florida after they had relocated there, especially when Dorothy's daughter, Tamar, was a child. Following her father's death, she spent significant time with her mother on Long Island. She remained closest to her younger siblings, particularly her sister, Della. Her letters and diaries have many affectionate entries about Della (who worked for Margaret Sanger) and Della's family. During the years

my wife and I were at the Catholic Worker, Dorothy often repaired to Della's for R and R. Over many years, Della would provide Dorothy with money for personal necessities and items like dresses and shoes.

The story of Dorothy's time as a young writer in New York seems drawn from a radical storybook. She wrote for cutting-edge leftist journals, explored life in the city, and caroused. She lived for a time with a Jewish family in a tenement walk-up on Cherry Street and came to have a lifelong appreciation for Jews, Jewish tradition, and Jewish theology. She was a close friend of (and for a period in love with) Mike Gold, the Communist newspaper editor whose 1930 tale *Jews without Money* became a classic account of New York's Jewish immigrants. Years later, Dorothy would relate the story of how Gold had saved a small, white-frame public library in Huguenot, Staten Island, in the 1920s. He had gathered the signatures to keep it from being shuttered, and it was still operating in the late 1970s.

Dorothy was in her late teens when she began writing for *The Call*. In 1917 she left the paper because of a misunderstanding with other staff members and began working for the more literary leftist journal *The Masses*. There she learned the art of editing, magazine paste-up, managing other writers, and meeting publication deadlines. She worked with such eminences as Floyd Dell and Maxwell Bodenheim, both of whom willingly handed over greater responsibilities to her. But this was all short-circuited when the United States government suppressed the journal in the fall of 1917 for the editors' opposition to American entry into World War I. By then Dorothy had been involved in antiwar demonstrations with the Anti-Conscription League in New York and Baltimore. She later remarked that, though she associated with both Communists and Socialists at the time, her paci-

fism had made her question class struggle as the best means of achieving revolutionary change.

Out of work and just turned twenty, in November 1917 Dorothy joined women suffragists picketing the White House. She was arrested and jailed for eighteen days. Back in New York, she moved from the Lower East Side to Greenwich Village, where she became part of a literary scene that included Eugene O'Neill, John Dos Passos, Malcolm Cowley, Hart Crane, Claude McKay, and later Katherine Anne Porter. But in a relatively short time, she decided to leave the Village to attend nurses' training school at Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn. She and some of her other Greenwich Village friends had been accustomed to welcoming homeless people they encountered, and after the suicide of a young friend, Dorothy decided to undertake a more serious and purposeful life. She also found herself inexplicably dropping into churches.

World War I was still plodding on, but closer to home a deadly flu epidemic broke out. Working on the wards proved a clinical testing ground for Dorothy. By morning, the long hallways adjacent to the wards would be lined with cadavers. This experience, coupled with falling heedlessly in love with a reporter, Lionel Moise, led to a turning point in her life: quitting nursing school to live with him and, subsequently, having an abortion. When Moise left her as he had warned, Dorothy undertook a rebound marriage to Berkeley Tobey, an older man of some means from the Greenwich Village crowd. The two set off for Europe: London, Paris, and Capri. During their year abroad, Dorothy read widely and wrote what would be her only published novel, an autobiographical story called *The Eleventh Virgin*.

By the time Dorothy and her husband returned to the United States in 1921, their marriage had dissolved. She set out for Chicago in pursuit of her former lover, who had

moved there, and found work with *The Liberator*. Eventually she realized Moise was not going to return to her. It was during this time that she was arrested at a hostel run by the Industrial Workers of the World. She had gone there with a sick friend when, suddenly, the police broke in and charged her with prostitution. Her second experience in jail was far different from the first. This time she was jailed as a common criminal, not as a protester and the member of a high-minded, well-off group. Her second arrest opened a crucial door in her understanding, dramatically altering her perception of the American justice system and how it demeans those it snares.

After Chicago it was back to New York and an assortment of jobs—clerking and retail—and then in 1923, another relocation, this time to the Deep South and New Orleans. There Dorothy lived near Jackson Square and the St. Louis Cathedral. Along the way, a friend had given her a rosary. In New Orleans, Dorothy found herself praying it without knowing how to use it. Working as a reporter for the *New Orleans Item*, she interviewed the prizefighter Jack Dempsey and went undercover to report on the livelihood of the city's so-called taxi dancers. When informed that movie rights had been sold for her just-released novel, netting her an unexpected windfall, Dorothy returned to New York. There she bought a small beach cottage near other friends on Staten Island. Unbeknown to her, this place would become the locus of some of her richest joys and sorrows.

The little cottage off Arbutus Lake, overlooking Raritan Bay, is lovingly described by Dorothy in *The Long Loneliness*. Her happiness there—embodied in her love for Forster Batterham and their daughter Tamar Teresa, born in March 1926—remained forever life affirming. Suddenly Dorothy discovered not only the beauty of human fulfillment, but a

consciousness that this was an entirely free gift and not of her making. This in turn unleashed an elemental sense of gratitude that turned her toward the only reality she thought could explain it: the source of all life and being itself. In a very real sense, Dorothy experienced unadulterated joy with Forster and Tamar on Staten Island, a characteristic sense she retained to the end of her days, including when life dealt her sorrow and separation, poverty and mistrust, blame, and a new sort of solitude. On Staten Island, she discovered that the natural and the supernatural were not two distinct realms. The natural often introduces the latter, after which life is forever altered. Somewhere, sometime, someplace, the beauty of a face, the touch of a hand, the expanse of a field, the color of light, or the revelation of a forest of constellations will leave one awestruck and acknowledging, if perhaps but for an instant, that there is more to life than what habitually occupies or addresses us.

The birth of her daughter, coupled with her love for Forster—before, during, and until the end of her life—proved to be Dorothy’s “stargate,” her breakthrough to wholeness. The effect was humanly expanding and created in her a deeper willingness to find God in the most unlikely of persons and situations.

When Forster could not come to terms with this new reality—he was not in favor of having Tamar baptized (for Dorothy, a crucial expression of her gratitude and her need to protect Tamar) or of having their own “marriage” solemnized (he accepted obedience to neither church nor state)—their days together were numbered. Dorothy did have Tamar christened that July and followed her into the Roman Catholic Church a year and a half later—not giving up on Forster until it was clear their positions on faith and marriage were unalterable and irreconcilable.

After that came five years in the desert for Dorothy. Many of her radical friends distanced themselves; Forster remained a sensual attraction, especially when he would visit; she had few Catholic friends, and those she did meet at the time, while devout, were not the sort to understand her plight or share her radical views. What ensued was single motherhood, another series of make-do jobs and moves, and the need to make sure Forster ponied up for Tamar's support—which he did. There was the loneliness and colorlessness of living amidst the Great Depression and the need to school herself in the catholicity of her newfound faith. The American Catholic Church was hardly a beacon of social or theological insight at the time. Still, she began writing for various Catholic journals, and this eventually led to a second breakthrough, meeting Peter Maurin in 1932. Thanks to George Shuster of *The Commonweal*, one of the journals she was writing for, Dorothy's introduction to Maurin permanently reset her life's trajectory. But in the five years prior to that, she and Tamar traveled widely—to Hollywood for Dorothy to pursue screen writing work, to Mexico, and finally back home to Florida and New York after Tamar had contracted malaria in Mexico.

In the fall of 1932, while sharing an apartment on East Fifteenth Street with her brother John and sister-in-law Tessa, Dorothy made a pilgrimage to the Shrine of the North American Martyrs in upstate New York. There she prayed for guidance. Nothing seemed to come of it immediately, but a few months later, she prayed again while on assignment to cover a series of demonstrations in Washington, DC. Franklin D. Roosevelt had just been elected president, but he would not be inaugurated until the following spring. Waves of marchers descended on Washington, calling for relief—for their farms, but also for those around their

kitchen tables. The Communists were particularly active in organizing these rallies, and Dorothy admired their dedication and determination.

As a reporter, Dorothy stood on the periphery, a necessary observer. But this “distancing” only heightened her sense of noninvolvement and her new coreligionists’ apparent lack of concern for the social situation. When she went to the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception to pray again for discernment and direction, she was struck at how much more in sync she felt with the protest marchers than with her fellow Catholics. Nonetheless, she prayed—and she prayed well. (Of all the things Dorothy taught young people who came to the Catholic Worker, it was the seriousness of her approach to prayer. When you saw her at Mass, alone in church, or praying in her room, you knew what total attention meant.) As she explained, God takes you at your word. If you ask something, you’d better be ready to respond with your whole being. God’s answer might come in a most unlikely guise—in Dorothy’s case, the itinerant, street-corner preacher and philosopher Peter Maurin, twenty years her senior. He showed up at her apartment the day after she returned from Washington. Why she ever allowed him admittance, or more remarkable, offered it to him again, has to be a matter of how seriously she took her prayer.

Maurin convinced Dorothy that she was the one to start a paper that would relate Catholic social teaching (an almost “secret” body of wisdom, seldom preached from the pulpit even today) to Depression-era America. Maurin called for houses of hospitality to welcome the poor and the stranger, and for farming communes to put the unemployed back to work, what he called “the Green Revolution.” The first issue of the *Catholic Worker* paper that they founded (May 1933) maxed out at twenty-five hundred copies, but within a year

and a half, this tabloid-sized monthly had reached a circulation of one hundred thousand. As Tamar would later put it succinctly, "It just took off." The historian Mel Piehl has noted that the *Catholic Worker* was the first significant expression of Catholic radicalism in the United States. Dorothy and Peter, it seems, had roused a sleeping giant, and at a penny a copy nearly everyone who wanted an issue of the paper could afford it.

Soon other people began showing up at Dorothy's door and joining the cause. They were activists as well as journalists, and they started taking on the power brokers—on picket lines, in print, and in housing court. In 1934 these Catholic Workers demonstrated at the German consulate against the anti-Semitic laws of the new Hitler regime. The following year they protested Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia—the movement and the paper's first foray into what would become the Catholic Worker's opposition to all wars. At the same time, people started showing up at the editorial office looking for food and shelter. At first hesitant, the staff soon felt compelled to respond, and thus evolved the movement's critical and perennial work of offering daily food, clothing, and hospitality to those in need.

Soon Dorothy was traveling the country to report for the paper and spread word of the Catholic Worker Movement's radical ideas of social reconstruction. In 1936 she incurred the wrath of the governor of Arkansas after she reported on the plight of tenant farmers in his state. He claimed she was a carpetbagger, a "Catholic woman" who, according to a Memphis newspaper, was making a fat salary "off the misery of the people."¹ That same year the *Catholic Worker* condemned the violence of both sides in the Spanish Civil War. This prophetic stance generated opposition from most main-line Catholics who supported Franco and his legions, and it

led to a sharp drop in the paper's circulation. Still, the editors continued undaunted in their pacifist critique. A year later, Dorothy traveled to Flint, Michigan, to offer support for locked-out workers at the Fisher Body Plant. They raised her up through an open window and cheered her. The governor of Michigan invited her to talk. In 1939 she brought readers' attention to the racism she had met in two northern cities, Washington, DC, and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Later that year she made her first "Lacouture" retreat, which was inspired by a French-Canadian Jesuit who wished to apply the teaching of the gospels and the spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola to the lives of twentieth-century people. For decades to come, the retreat was a hallmark of the Catholic Worker Movement. It deeply divided those who felt it was a rigorous but trustworthy means of spiritual growth and those who felt it bordered on a harsh, scrupulosity-inducing, and wrong-headed Jansenism.

In 1940 as the country readied for war, Dorothy testified before a congressional committee against reinstatement of conscription. The same year she wrote a commanding letter to all Catholic Worker affiliates, reminding them that pacifism was an integral, defining element of the movement, and that it would be better for those who, in conscience, could not adhere to this stance, to separate themselves voluntarily from the Catholic Worker. At the same time, she commended them and encouraged them to continue performing the works of mercy.

The day after Pearl Harbor, in a speech to the Liberal-Socialist Alliance in New York, she gave a ringing condemnation of all war. She called on men to resist the draft and women to resist false patriotism. She predicted that within a decade, weapons of mass destruction would be developed that would threaten human civilization. World War II, of course, changed

everything immediately—in families, the country, and globally. Some Catholic Workers were drafted; others volunteered for the war. Some served time as conscientious objectors and as draft refusers. The staff of the paper dwindled, as did its circulation. Initially Dorothy had thought the paper might be suppressed by the government, but it was not.

Still, Dorothy decided to take a leave of absence in 1943–44, ostensibly to be near Tamar who was in school on Long Island, but also to be near her widowed mother, who was then living on Long Island. Dorothy retreated to a convent where she observed a self-imposed, semi-monastic regimen. But she realized soon enough, as she had in nursing school, that hers was a very different vocation: to journalism and the active life. She returned to the *Catholic Worker* in March 1944, and for the rest of the war she championed the paper's pacifist stance. Her editorial response to the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki remains a searing condemnation of all modern warfare. While Dorothy would later become discouraged by her continuing personal failures and those of the Catholic Worker Movement to achieve Peter Maurin's vision of "a new heaven and a new earth," her own vocation was never again in question. For the rest of her life her prayer was for faithfulness, constancy, and perseverance.

It was during and after World War II that the retreat movement, especially as preached by Fr. John Hugo of Pittsburgh, became an even more central thrust of the *Catholic Worker*. Dorothy wanted the movement's farms to serve not only as Peter Maurin's "agronomic universities," but also as retreat centers. She even wrote to Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York in 1946, asking for money to start a *Catholic Worker* retreat center on Staten Island—to no avail. In the decades to come, the *Catholic Worker* farms (at Easton, Pennsylvania;

Newburgh, New York; and later Staten Island and Tivoli, New York) all offered periodic retreats, until the late 1960s.

In 1949, Peter Maurin died after years of steady decline. Dorothy was thereafter the singular head of what many derided as a quixotic movement—admired for its service to the poor, but judged unrealistic when it came to war and social reconstruction. That same year Dorothy and others took on Cardinal Spellman for firing archdiocesan cemetery workers who were trying to form a union. Next came the Korean War, the anticommunism of the McCarthy and Cold War eras, and the nuclear arms race. At a communist-inspired rally at Carnegie Hall in 1952, Dorothy spoke against the Smith and McCarran Acts, but did so pointedly as a religious believer. She later deplored the tactics of Senator Joseph McCarthy, but faulted herself for having failed to maintain a sense of public respect for him. “There is no room for contempt of others in the Christian life,” she wrote. “To criticize the social order is one thing, people another.”² She herself was put on a watch list by the FBI’s J. Edgar Hoover.

In 1952 Dorothy’s *The Long Loneliness* was published. The following year a fire at the 223 Christie Street House in Manhattan resulted in the death of a resident. This led to Dorothy being declared a slum landlord, and she was fined by the court. The subsequent public outcry in her defense led to the judge rescinding his condemnation, but the Worker had to spend a huge sum to bring the house up to code. The poet W. H. Auden and others donated to the project, and it was completed, but only a few short years before the city condemned the property as part of a right-of-way order to build a new subway line. Finding new quarters for the soup line and the paper entailed years of expense and logistical strain. Several temporary moves resulted in added poverty and precariousness.

About this time, Ammon Hennacy joined the movement in New York. He had written for the paper for years and was a singular figure who never hesitated to describe himself as the “one-man revolution.” He literally had nothing to do with the state and its war preparations, except when it came to repeatedly doing time in one of its jails for acts of civil disobedience. In 1955 he, Dorothy, and a small group began protesting New York City’s annual mandatory nuclear defense drills, pointing out there would be no defense in the event of a nuclear attack. The group’s willingness to go to jail, year after year, led to increasing numbers of demonstrators and a coalescing of public awareness concerning the futility of such exercises. Eventually the city terminated the drills in the early 1960s.

In 1954 as the French were facing defeat at Dien Bien Phu, Dorothy alerted *Catholic Worker* readers that it would be foolhardy for the United States to get involved in Vietnam. This proved another prophetic but unheeded warning. On the home front in 1957, while standing vigil at Koinonia Partners, an integrated community in Americus, Georgia, Dorothy was shot at from a speeding car. Flannery O’Connor commented drolly that it seemed a “long way to come to get shot at.”³ But in a short time, many others would head south to protest racial injustice, some of whom would pay the ultimate price to achieve equality and integration under the law. Dorothy told Ruth Collins that “no good work is ever achieved without blood,” while acknowledging she had not yet “resisted unto blood” herself.

In 1958 and again in 1962, Dorothy traveled to Mexico, the latter time following a month-long reporting trip to Cuba. This Cuban trip was one of the most controversial of her career. Her positive dispatches about day-to-day life under Castro were uncommon for an American journalist.

But they were soon overshadowed by the geopolitical nuclear crisis that erupted weeks after her return.

The following spring, women activists from around the world, including Dorothy, made a pilgrimage to Rome to pray for peace. Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* had just been issued, and during his final public appearance he seems to have singled out these peace pilgrims. Dorothy returned to Rome again in 1965 for the final session of the Second Vatican Council. While there, she fasted and prayed for a strong conciliar condemnation of nuclear warfare and for the right of individuals to declare conscientious objection to wars. The council affirmed both of these positions.

When Dorothy returned to New York in November 1965, she was again thrown into the crucible. Almost immediately she was involved in an antiwar demonstration supporting young men who burned their selective service cards, among them several Catholic Workers. A few days later, Roger LaPorte, a young volunteer who had been associated briefly with the Catholic Worker and had attended the draft card rally, immolated himself outside United Nations headquarters. He did so, he said, in the hope of ending all wars. When he died two days later, Dorothy was blamed by some for the tragedy. She reached out to LaPorte's family and wrote movingly in her column about his misguided act. But she also wrote about how the young Catholic Workers had cared for LaPorte, and she concluded by drawing her readers' attention to the forgiving mercy of God.

In 1967 Dorothy returned to Rome. She was chosen to represent Americans at the Third World Congress on the Lay Apostolate and to receive Communion from Pope Paul VI. While in Italy she interviewed Ignazio Silone and visited Danilo Dolci, the Gandhi of Sicily. In 1970 she traveled around the world, touching down in Hong Kong before

traveling on to India, Australia, Tanzania, and England. The following year she journeyed to Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the Soviet Union. When she criticized a group of Soviet writers in Moscow for their failure to defend Alexander Solzhenitsyn, they got up and walked out. In 1973 she traveled to England and to Ireland.

The year before, the Nixon administration had threatened to close down the *Catholic Worker*, saying it had failed to pay income taxes totaling hundreds of thousands of dollars for the previous six years. After a public outcry, the government retreated; after all, there were no salaries to be taxed at the *Catholic Worker*. As Dorothy wrote in the paper at the time, "To resist is to survive."

In the 1960s Dorothy traveled multiple times across the United States to the West Coast. There she reported on Cesar Chavez and his United Farm Workers movement. When she visited again in 1973, she was arrested and jailed for the final time. On August 6, 1976, the anniversary of the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima, she spoke before the International Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia. There she called on the church and the nation to do penance for unleashing the bomb and for our country's continued wars and preparation for war. Not long afterwards, she suffered several heart attacks. In 1980 she was hospitalized for heart failure, but demanded that she be brought home to Maryhouse. She died there in the company of her daughter on November 29. It was the eve of Advent, and Dorothy had just turned eighty-three.