

## V. Dorothy Day and The Catholic Worker Movement

The Catholic Worker Movement began on May 1, 1933, when Dorothy Day and her close colleague Peter Maurin began selling the first edition of the *Catholic Worker* newspaper in Union Square in New York City. Addressing the exploitation of labor, the plight of the poor, racism and anti-Semitism, peacemaking, and other issues, the *Catholic Worker* was intended to affirm the Church's concern for the marginalized. Within three years, over 150,000 copies of the paper – sold for a penny - were being distributed, and Catholic churches and seminaries were ordering it in bulk. Before long, the paper's ideals were put into action when the first Catholic Worker soup kitchens and houses of hospitality were established, soon followed by communal farms. Eventually, the movement's signature focus on hospitality and care for the marginalized would expand to include participation in public protests against war and nuclear weapons and demonstrations for workers' rights.

### Questions to Consider:

1. What do you see as the primary legacy of the Catholic Worker movement today? To what extent has the movement impacted wider society?
2. What was the essential role of the Catholic Worker houses of hospitality? Has that role changed over time?
3. What was the purpose of the Catholic Worker farm communities, such as Mary Farm? Was it a workable vision or a very naïve one? Do the Worker farms have anything to teach us today about economy, self-sufficiency, or ecology?
4. A fundamental idea behind the Worker movement in all its manifestations is that “we are our brother's keeper”---that, in essence, we are responsible to and for each other. Do you agree with this sort of thinking? Do you think it is reflected in much of contemporary American culture? Why or why not?
5. In the film, scholar Mark Massa asserts that “the profound theological truth [Dorothy] saw was that we should do something for the ‘other’ because that changes us.” Do you agree that one of the central effects of helping others is that we are changed in the process? Does that shift the focus away from the person being helped? Have you experienced this sort of transformation in your own work on behalf of others? If so, when and where? (If you are a student, your school may have a service hour requirement that involves just this sort of interaction.)
6. Why was Dorothy Day so opposed to the idea of charity? Do you agree with her? Is there a distinction to be made between charity and service, or charity and justice?
7. What role did Peter Maurin play in the founding of the Catholic Worker movement? In Dorothy Day's life? Is there someone in your life who has played a similar role for you---offering spiritual guidance and direction and suggesting an outlet for your

talents? If so, how have they influenced you? How important is it to have a spiritual role model or guide?

8. Review the major tenets of Roman Catholic Social Teaching. (You can do so at the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching.cfm>) How did the Catholic Worker movement come to embody these principles? In what ways did Dorothy Day's own life and work embody them? Are there aspects of these teachings that she or the movement did or do not embody? How might Day be a good model for a person attempting to live out these tenets?
9. In her memoirs and in interviews, Day suggested that many of the services the movement came to provide, such as the houses of hospitality, were the result of an almost spontaneous response to represented need. What is the advantage of this sort of flexibility and openness---of responding to need when you see it? And what are the disadvantages in terms of planning, support, and sustainability?
10. From its origins, the Catholic Worker movement has always been staunchly pacifist. Day and Worker colleagues were involved in many anti-war and anti-nuclear weapons protests and acts of civil disobedience from the 1940s to the 1970s (Day's death). Do you consider demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience appropriate? What sort of parameters would you draw around what acts of civil disobedience are or are not appropriate? Do you agree with those Catholics who accused Day and her fellow Workers of undermining war efforts and of not being patriotic (particularly during World War II)?

### **Related Dorothy Day Quotes**

*In the first issue of the paper we dealt with Negro labor, exploited as cheap labor by the War Department, We wrote of women and children in industry and the spread of unemployment.... The next issues were stories of textile strikes, farmer's strike in the Midwest, child labor and combating anti-Semitism... (The Long Loneliness, 205)*

*Many times we have been asked why we spoke of Catholic workers, and so named the paper. Of course it was not only because we who were in charge of the work, who edited the paper, were all Catholics but also because we wished to influence Catholics. They were our own, and we reacted sharply to the accusation that when it came to private morality the Catholics shone but when it came to social and political morality, they were often conscienceless. Also Catholics were the poor, and most of them had little ambition or hope of bettering their condition to the extent of achieving ownership of home or business, or further education for their children. They accepted things as they were with humility and looked for a better life to come. . . . (The Long Loneliness, 210)*

[On Peter Maurin's influence, central to founding the Catholic Worker movement.] *Peter made you feel a sense of mission as soon as you met him.... He always reminded me that we are our brother's keeper... that we must have a sense of personal responsibility to take care of our neighbor at a personal sacrifice. It is not the function of the state to enter into these realms. (The Long Loneliness, 171) He stressed the need for building a new society within the shell of the old – a society in which it was easier for people to be good. (The Long Loneliness, 179)*

*27:46 But we are living in these times of tremendous failure...of man's sense of responsibility to what he is doing. He relinquishes it to the state. He is not obedient to his own promptings of conscience... (from Bill Moyers film).*

*4:15 if your brother is hungry you feed him. You don't meet him at the door and say "go be thou filled" or wait for a few weeks and you will get a welfare check. You sit him down and feed him. And that is how the soup kitchen started. (from The Christophers program).*

*0:20 One day writing about hospitality in the paper...and this girl came in, it was during the Depression and she had nothing but a shopping bag with clothes in it. And she came and said "I understand you have a House of Hospitality. And I said "No, we have been writing about it. And she said, "Well, why do you write about it if you don't have one?" ...We went right out...we rented a seven-room apartment. We had our first house of Hospitality. (from RTE interview).*