

VII. Dorothy Day and the Arts

Dorothy Day was known for her appreciation of the arts. The great Russian writers Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky were early inspirations and models for Day, and the famed American playwright Eugene O'Neill was a personal friend. Day herself was a novelist and playwright, as well as a journalist and activist. She notably recognized, nurtured, and provided a vehicle (through the *Catholic Worker* newspaper) for the visual talents of Ade Bethune and Fritz Eisenberg. Day's sacramental vision of the world asserted that God had made it both good and beautiful, and the arts helped to communicate that fundamental truth.

Questions to Consider:

1. Dorothy Day was particularly influenced by her reading of the great Russian novelists Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose work is often deeply religious. Can you think of literature that you have read which has influenced your own social consciousness or the direction of your faith commitment? Do you think that literature or art in general can support a sense of vocation or call? If so, what might this say regarding our choices about what we read and how what we consume - in terms of art, media, or ideas - shapes who we are?
2. What is your experience of art in relation to the church? Have you seen art used as a way of reflecting the teaching or ideals of the church? Or have you witnessed a strain between the church and the arts, with involvement in the arts seen as a secular (even sometimes dangerous) endeavor? In your experience, are there certain arts that are more or less welcome or more or less represented in the church?
3. Do you believe that God can speak through the arts, even when they appear to be wholly secular nature (as in the average Hollywood film)? Have you had such an experience of God speaking to you through a work of literature, a film, a play, a piece of music or some other art? When and under what circumstances did this happen?
4. Is there a particular work of art of any genre that you recommend (or would recommend) to others in terms of helping you connect to deeper levels of human experience or to God?
5. Do you think our society takes art - and by extension, entertainment - seriously enough in terms of how they shape us individually and as a culture? Can you think of examples of art or works of entertainment (a popular Hollywood film, for instance) that have significantly shaped our culture, values, or ways of thinking about a particular subject?

Related Quotes from Dorothy Day

*Ivan, in **The Brothers Karamazov**, protested that it was quite impossible to love man as he was, with his cruel instincts, his lust for power, his greed, his instincts of self-preservation. It was not a natural thing to think in terms of laying down one's life for one's fellows. In the same book however, Father Zossima spoke glowingly of that love for God which resulted in a love for one's brother. The story of his conversion to love is moving, and that book, with its picture of religion, had a lot to do with my later life. (**The Long Loneliness**, 87)*

*I loved the Psalms and learned many of them by heart. And the anthems filled me with joy. I had never heard anything so beautiful as the Benedicite and the Te Deum. (**The Long Loneliness**, 28)*

Related Quotes from Interviewees

ROBERT ELLSBERG

01:34:30

...she was a very moved by the way a book could open your eyes to social reality and maybe evoke some kind of response. You might live in a different way because of being exposed to a world of suffering or struggle or injustice.

CORNEL WEST

8:50 There's no doubt that I think Dostoevsky, like so many of us, blew Dorothy's mind. The candor for his wrestling with his own dark side. The wrestling with the problems of evil, of the absurdities of life...

PAUL ELIE

7:37 Dostoevsky and Tolstoy for her were two halves of the Slavic soul. //8:50 He [Dostoevsky] knew firsthand what it was to be down and out, to be a person who had to live by his wits. Tolstoy, a success in his own time, chose poverty and suffering late in life. He abandoned the life of the wealthy novelist to live among the poor. So he represented a model of voluntary poverty combined with the life of a writer.

KATE HENNESSY

24:57 [About Day's friendship with playwright Eugene O'Neill] I think one of the things about Eugene O'Neill was he was probably the very first Catholic that she came to know quite well.... And he did recite to her Francis Thompson's poem, "The Hound of Heaven." And she never forgot that.

PAUL ELIE

27:14 “The Hound Of Heaven” is a late Victorian poem, and the idea which became crucial to Dorothy Day’s subsequent sense of how God works was that you could run away from God, but God would be on your heels like a hound coming after you.

ROBERT ELLSBERG

01:56:50 She describes even in her wandering and restless years when she was hanging out with

Eugene O’Neill that she would sometimes leave this all-night saloon and then duck into early morning mass at St. Joseph’s Church in the Village, where working people would go to mass on their way to work. She said, there was the atmosphere of prayer and a kind of silence and quiet, but there was something there that these people, who had difficult and struggling lives, had access to some kind of foundation or moral center that gave some kind of deeper transcendent meaning to their existence. And I think that she felt a longing for that.

PAUL ELIE

01:22:15 Dorothy Day had a really strong sense of beauty and of the power of beauty and imagery to move people. Some people in her circumstances thought the glittering churches in relatively poor neighborhoods took money out of the pockets of the poor. She thought, ‘Nope, the poor deserve beauty no less than anybody else, and where they have access to

it is in churches, so make those churches really lovely’.

KATE HENNESSY

33:22 – My grandmother always loved art. Art, music, literature. And she was very clear from the beginning with the *Catholic Worker* paper that she wanted art within that paper. And people would show up at the door. Ade Bethune was still in high school when she showed up at the door at the *Catholic Worker*. And my grandmother said, “Please make art, I want pictures of the saints at work.” And that started Ade on her path of liturgical art for the rest of her life....And then, Fritz Eichenberg...came I think she met Fritz at a Quaker conference center. And immediately just took him in.