

II. Dorothy Day and the Poor

Dorothy Day may be best known for her engagement with the poor and activism on their behalf, which she saw as a mandate straight out of the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, and the social witness of the early church. But Day made a clear and emphatic distinction between charity (or the work of charitable organizations) and what she perceived as a matter of social and economic justice. If the poor were to be treated as equals with everyone else – as the Bible and Catholic Social Teaching instructed – then it followed that they had an equal claim to the resources of society. Sharing with the poor, and even living as they lived, was a matter of justice, not charity or even empathy. Thus, Day embraced voluntary poverty as a means of solidarity with the poor and an assertion of universal human dignity---which the poor possessed like everyone else.

Questions to Consider

1. Why did Dorothy Day focus particularly on engagement with the poor? Why did that become a central concern for her? As importantly, why did Day herself choose to live in poverty?
2. How did Dorothy Day understand the word hospitality? What did it mean for her in relationship to the poor? Does it mean the same for you?
3. Why was the idea of personal responsibility so important to Dorothy Day? Do you believe, as she did, that we are personally responsible for the welfare of others?
4. Why did Dorothy Day feel that, in order to best serve the poor, one must become poor oneself? Do you agree with this idea, or is it simply a heroic (and possibly dangerous) illusion?
5. Do you think of the church today (whether Roman Catholic or other) as being “the church of the poor,” as Dorothy Day envisioned it? If not, why? Is the church, as Dorothy Day suggested, too closely allied to an economic and political system such as capitalism?
6. Why was Dorothy Day opposed to the idea of charity as the only or primary response to poverty? Do you agree with her? Is there a distinction to be made between charity and service, or charity and justice? Review the Catholic Church’s teaching on the need for both charity and justice:

<http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/two-feet-of-love-in-action.cfm>).

Related Dorothy Day Quotes

*Going around and seeing such sights [of those in poverty] is not enough. . . . [T]o give what you have for relief, to pledge yourself to voluntary poverty for life so that you can share with your brothers is not enough. One must live with them, share with them their suffering too. Give up one's privacy, and mental and spiritual comforts as well as physical. (**The Long Loneliness**, 214)*

. . . I must say I first became Catholic because I felt the Catholic Church was the church of the poor and still think it is the church of the poor. I think it is the church of the immigrant populations that came over. . . . (Bill Moyers film interview, 26:20)

*I felt that the Church was the Church of the poor. That St. Patrick's had been built from the pennies of the servant girls. That it cared for the emigrant. It established hospitals, orphanages, day nurseries, houses of the Good Shepherd, homes for the aged. But at the same time, I felt that it did not set its face against a social order which made so much "charity," in the present sense of the word, necessary. I felt that "charity" was a word to choke over. Who wanted charity? And it was not just human pride, but a strong sense of man's dignity and worth, and what was due to him in justice, that made me resent rather than feel proud of so mighty a sum total of Catholic institutions. (**The Long Loneliness**, 150)*

*He [Peter Maurin] always reminded me that we are our brother's keeper and the unit of society is the family, that we must have a sense of personal responsibility to take care of our own, and our neighbor at a personal sacrifice. "That is the first principle," he always said. "It is not the function of the state to enter into these realms." (**The Long Loneliness** 179)*

*My very experience as a radical, my whole make-up, led me to want to associate myself with others, with the masses, in loving and praising God. (**The Long Loneliness**, 139)*

Related Interviewee Reflections

MARTIN SHEEN

21:05 she did not want people serving the poor as if they were doing them a favor. On the contrary, you want to be welcome in their presence, and you want them to feel human and equal and be merciful to you.

MARK MASSA

01:15:00 There's a big difference between Mother Theresa and Dorothy Day's understanding of the poor. I think Mother Theresa really did do this out of goodness and .

. . . felt that out of our charity and of the kind of selflessness we're called to . . . we should take care of the poor. . . . I think Dorothy Day had a very different vision. The thing with charity or altruism . . . she would say, 'These people have a claim on us. That it's not out of charity, it's out of justice.'

KATE HENNESSY

52:06 Voluntary poverty was an essential element of the work she was doing. And she believed in it, because she said, 'You cannot do this work coming from a position of being comfortable yourself.'

JOAN CHITTISTER

32:13 It is solidarity with those who have no other choice. Life itself has heaped poverty upon them and embedded them in the poverty that comes out of a society like this. And the second thing about voluntary poverty is that it frees you to use all of your resources for what we need resources for. . . .

PAUL ELIE

01:24:35 Dorothy Day chose the life of poverty. She embraced it. She treated poverty as a lover, the way Saint Francis of Assisi does in Dante's *Paradiso*.

JOAN CHITTISTER

36:38 . . . that whole notion of hospitality, that you are at the ready to take people into your own life, whatever that might mean. . . . It says that we have ten dollars, and it would cost us each fifty cents to eat today, so bring in twenty people, and we will all eat today.

MARK MASSA

23:16 This idea that every Christian has a personal responsibility to get involved in taking care of our brothers and sisters. . . . When someone comes to us and asks for help, we can't say, 'The state office is down the street,' or 'I can't give you these coupons, but I can send you to the right office.' She said that was the wrong response. . . . [T]he profound theological truth she saw was that we should do something for the other because that changes us.