

AN UNCOMMON SAINT: SOCIALISM AND DOROTHY DAY

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Introduction

In November of 2012, the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB) formally endorsed the cause of sainthood for Dorothy Day. Praised by those in the Church as a model for someone who can go on to live an extraordinary life despite a sinful beginning, Day stands as a prominent figure in the history of American Catholicism. The social democrat Michael Harrington referred to Day as, “the most important lay Catholic in the history of the United States.”¹ Receiving such glowing praise in this modern context suggests that the possible saint has had a profound influence on the current identity of American Catholicism.

While Day has a celebrated legacy of activism in the name of Catholic social teaching in today’s Church, at the most active points in her years as an advocate for the poor and working class, she was a lightning rod for controversy. A pacifist when it was considered un-American to be one, an anarchist in a time of intense political scrutiny and a converted communist, Day’s work was a source of unrest in the ranks of religious activists. Day formed the Catholic Worker movement around these political attitudes and simultaneously gave rise to a new faction in the application of Catholic political thought called the Catholic Left. While looked to today for its thoughtful application of the Church’s social teaching to American society, the Catholic Worker movement was initially met with hostility from both the left and right ends of the political spectrum. Although it faced opponents from within and outside of the U.S. Catholic Church’s leadership at its inception, the Catholic Left has survived today to become one of the more distinct niches within the faith.

¹ Rosalie Riegle, *Dorothy Day: Portraits by Those Who Knew Her*. (New York: Orbis, 2003), 7.

As a recent phenomenon only relevant in the last fifty years, the Catholic Left has given voice to a previously ignored faction of the American Catholic Church. Today this portion of the Church is well known for challenging Catholics to relate to the poor in the same spirit of radicalism as Day.² The rise of this movement has led historians to revisit the life of the woman who had such a profound impact on the formation of this new intellectual niche within the Church. Countless Catholic historians have revisited and reevaluated the now well-established life narrative of Day. Analysis of her life has centered on how her activism came to influence the U.S. Catholic social agenda of the 20th century, and the example she set for future left-leaning Catholics.

Different academic works on Day have focused on different aspects of the Left that she influenced. In *American Catholic Pacifism*, Anne Klejment and Nancy L. Roberts attribute the noticeable anti-Vietnam War activism on the part of Catholic clergy during the 1960's to the radical pacifism that Day displayed at the onset of World War II.³ Marquette University's collection of essays in the form of *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement* presents a balanced analysis of both the impact of Day's political thought as well as the actions she undertook on behalf of the Church from a variety of academic perspectives.⁴ Other works have taken into more careful consideration her reservations about the social climate of the Church following her conversion and the role those feelings played in the founding of her movement. These works focus on Day as someone who "brought to United States Catholicism a distinctive social conscience, rather than an ideology."⁵ Understanding this complex portrait suggests that scholars categorize Day as either a socialist saved by Catholicism or a radical informed by Catholic social teaching.

Having a historiography grounded in her actions as a faithful Catholic and having left a legacy within the Church marked by extraordinary attentiveness to living a Christian life, it is easy to forget the Dorothy Day who existed prior to her religious conversion in 1927. As a dues-paying member of a socialist group, as a student at the University of

² *Who Cares About the Saints?*, directed by James Martin (2012; Los Angeles, CA: Loyola Productions, 2004), DVD.

³ Anne Klejment and Nancy Roberts, *American Catholic Pacifism: The Influence of Dorothy Day on the Catholic Worker Movement*, (Westport, CN: Praeger, 1996).

⁴ William J. Thorn, Phillip M. Runkel and Susan Mountin, edit., *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement: Centenary Essays* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2001).

⁵ Klejment and Roberts, *American Catholic Pacifism*, 1.

Illinois, and as a writer for two socialist publications in New York City, Day is less remembered for the experiences that led her to Catholicism and how she became the founder of the Catholic Worker movement. However, it is exactly these experiences that came to form her Catholic political identity and made her and her movement a departure from the norm of the Church.

Moved by the struggles of the working class in the early 1920s, she formed her political attitudes in the mold of prominent American socialists of the time period. It is from this perspective that this paper breaks from the traditional historiography of Day and the Catholic Worker movement. Taking into consideration the Catholic political climate in the 1930's along with her personal writings and of those that knew her, this paper assesses how Day's initial political formation as a socialist affected her later work in the name of the Catholic faith. For the purposes of this paper, socialism and the left will be used interchangeably to refer to people who have identification with an economic system based on co-operative management of the means of production. As a person who began her life interest in social activism on the far left, Dorothy Day's distinct political identity as a Catholic was materially formed because of, not in spite of, her experiences with socialism prior to her religious conversion.

Day is Rising

Studying the lives of the saints gives context to how unlikely the rise of Dorothy Day to one of the most influential women lay Catholics in the history of the Church truly was. While many saints came from a background of intense spirituality, it was Day's secular background and later conversion to Catholicism that helped her to have such a large impact on the Church. Dorothy Day was born in 1897 in Brooklyn Heights, New York, into a family of journalists. When she was a young girl her family moved to the bay area in California so her father could cover horseracing as a sports reporter. As a teenager brought up in a family of non-practicing Episcopalians on the streets of Berkeley, Day found herself drawn to the writings of radicals such as Peter Kropotkin and Pierre-Joseph.⁶ It was this initial exposure to radical literature that drew her to secular philosophy; Day felt a calling to activism and developed an affinity for working among the poor.

⁶ Stephen J. Krupa, "Celebrating Dorothy Day," *America Magazine*, August 27, 2001, accessed December 5, 2013, <http://americamagazine.org/node/145405>.

After her family moved to a modest, six-room tenement in Chicago, Day began to develop her own love of writing and started to see herself as a member of the Left. As a child of a conservative-nativist father who especially despised Jews and Catholics, Day's first exposure to leftist activism came from her older brother Donald. It was his writing for *The Day Book* newspaper, a publication that ruthlessly exposed factory conditions in industrial Chicago, which first led Day to learn of Eugene Debs and the Industrial Workers of the World.⁷ Day officially came to identify with the left when she attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on scholarship in 1915. There she became a member of the University's socialist student organization and developed her writing abilities in an elite leftist writing club.⁸

Day's affinity towards writing and the newspaper industry enhanced her contribution to the Catholic Church after her conversion. After moving to New York City with her parents in 1917, she eventually found herself writing for the socialist newspaper *The Call* after a prolonged job search. *The Call* editor Chester Wright hired the young Day after she offered to live on five dollars a week in response to a trend among urban elites who mocked those on welfare by doing so.⁹ Her articles struck readers as both sarcastic and empathetic, emphasizing the struggles of the poor while disdaining the type of conditions that kept people from living a fulfilling life.

Although Day identified with the struggle of the poor, her style of writing transformed as she matured and began to separate herself from other leftist newspaper reporters. While appalled by the misery she witnessed on a daily basis in the neighborhoods of the poor immigrants she visited, she maintained a positive outlook that was unique to writers in socialist publications of the time.¹⁰ At the debut of her hunger squad series, Day wrote, "We hear an awful lot of barren statistics, but you never get the real thing."¹¹ For her it was not enough to be a reporter who chronicled the struggles of the poor, she also had to experience their hardship firsthand.

In a life filled with selfless activism, it was struggles in her personal life that led Day to convert to Catholicism. As a young woman living in New York City, Day was fully engaged in an active social life

⁷ Jim Forest, *All is Grace: A Biography of Dorothy Day* (New York: Orbis, 2011), 17-18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21-30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁰ Riegler, *Portraits of Those Who Knew Her*, 16-18.

¹¹ Dorothy Day, "A Modest Proposal in Hunger," *The Call*, December 3, 1916, 5, Dorothy Day Collection, Rayner Library, Marquette University Archives.

with her predominately male coworkers. Considered by men who worked with her to be an extremely beautiful woman, Day could also hold her own socially. Those who knew her well during this time said that she could “drink anyone under a table.”¹² Unfortunately for Day a string of unhealthy relationships eventually led to an abortion, a divorce, and a child born out of wedlock. In her last relationship that ended in the birth of her daughter, Tamar, it was the experience of having a child that drew her into a renewed spirituality.¹³ Having an unquenchable spiritual desire to be close to God again, she decided to convert to Catholicism in 1927.

Of all things that led to her conversion to Catholicism specifically, it was Day’s early exposure to Protestantism. Growing up in a nominally Episcopal family, she was exposed to the driving twentieth century Protestant belief in perfectionism. Movements such as prohibition were fueled by Protestant fervor and a belief that human evils could be corrected. Day’s experience on the streets of New York led her to fundamentally reject this “Social Gospel,” and instead embrace Catholicism.¹⁴ Those within the Church saw her conversion as an opportunity to trumpet the triumph of Catholic social teachings over Marxist philosophy, but according to Day, the reasons for her conversion were purely spiritual.¹⁵ Although it was spiritual fulfillment that initially drew Day to the Church, her legacy within her faith was her thoughtful application of the principles that initially caused her to identify as a socialist. It would not be until six years later that she rose to found the Catholic Worker movement and shake the U.S. Catholic Church community to its core.

Upon converting to Catholicism, Day finally achieved the spiritual fulfillment that had drawn her to immigrant churches while writing for *The Call* initially. This period in Day’s life was characterized by “a religious faith and a social conscience, but no community.”¹⁶ The inflection point in her faith experience came on a visit to Washington D.C. as a part of a rally to end hunger in the United States. It was there that Day reconnected with

¹² Martin, *Who Cares About the Saints?*.

¹³ June O’Connor, *The Moral Vision of Dorothy Day* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 54.

¹⁴ “An Introduction to the Life and Spirituality of Dorothy Day,” *The Catholic Worker Movement*, accessed November 26, 2013, <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/ddbiographytext.cfm?Number=3>.

¹⁵ June O’Connor, “Dorothy Day’s Christian Conversion.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 1 (1980): 18, accessed November 15, 2013, ISSN: 0384-9694.

¹⁶ Forest, *All is Grace*, 99.

her socialist friends, who were the primary political group present at the rally. Day, who had become disaffiliated with the movement in favor of a life of prayer, was ashamed that she was not a part of something that facilitated an active relationship with the poor. Shortly after she returned from this trip she met Peter Maurin, the man who co-founded the Catholic Worker movement with her. This friendship led her to eventually stand on the streets of Union Square on May 1st, 1933, handing out the first issue of *The Catholic Worker*.¹⁷

Catholics, Communists and the Catholic Worker

As Day was deciding to found a worker-focused Catholic publication, American Catholics were in the midst of reconciling their religion with socialism. In this specific period, many Americans, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, were becoming more receptive to the ideas of the Left. On May 1, 1933, the day *The Catholic Worker* debuted on the streets of New York, more than ten percent of people in the United States were unemployed. The nation as a whole was operating at less than half the industrial working capacity it had been laboring under only four years earlier.¹⁸ Under these circumstances in the early 1930's, Catholic intellectuals felt that the state of their Church in the United States was threatened by the seductive promises of the Left.

With her prior experiences with socialism, Day was in the unique position within the Catholic Church – possessing a deep understanding of both ends of the spiritual spectrum. This was significant given the perceived threat the Catholic Church saw in the Left. During the years following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles and the days leading up to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Catholics in the United States were undergoing a time of rapid change. Like the rest of the nation, they prospered in the boom of the 1920's and struggled at the crash. Their support for the New Deal cemented them as one of the key blocs of Roosevelt's Democratic coalition. On the other end of Roosevelt's broad coalition were groups of socialists and communists that also passionately pushed for New Deal reforms.¹⁹ As a consequence of the rise of New Deal politics, Catholics found themselves as strange bedfellows with leftist groups that philosophically wanted to do away with religious influences in the United States. The Left was in the midst of its golden age in terms of political involvement in the United States. Seeking to build a greater base

¹⁷ Ibid, 105-110.

¹⁸ Forest, *All is Grace*, 1.

¹⁹ Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2011), 169-176.

with which to acquire votes, leftists saw an opportunity to lure dissatisfied Catholics away from a faith that had taken on a distinctly conservative tone under the popular Father Charles Coughlin. Communists charged that the Church was not against capitalism, but rather favored a return to a “commodity economy born out of dying feudalism.”²⁰ The political threat that the Left posed to the viability of the American Catholic Church was real, causing Catholic leaders to see it as a threat that had to be aggressively dealt with.

The influence on New Deal politics by those on the left altered the way Catholics identified politically in the years after the start of the Great Depression. While Catholics supported the New Deal and by and large Roosevelt, their political identify was marked by a unique streak of conservatism, evident in the voices of commenting Bishops and other religious figures. Broad support for Spanish dictator Francisco Franco by American Catholics put them at odds with leftist movements that shared their economic sentiments. Furthermore, the U.S. Bishops’ stance on social issues was a constant source of friction between the two groups.²¹ The Catholics identified with the Left in terms of fiscal policy, but could not identify with the movement’s disdain for religious institutions.

While both movements had common economic goals, the gap in the theological perspectives of the two groups undermined their ability to work together. In the view of the committed communists, “only one conversion experience was legitimate in their eyes: to see the light of Marxism-Leninism.”²² This chasm in spirituality, in which secular philosophy mingled with faith, caused the two movements to become pitted against each other. Conservative and liberal Catholic commentators alike were committed to defeating a movement that threatened to pull immigrant Catholic laborers away from the Church. John Gilland Brunini wrote in his 1933 critique of communism that “Communist spellbinders

²⁰ Oakley Johnson, “Militant Phrases in ‘The Catholic Worker’ Hide Program of Fascism,” *The Call*, 2, August 18, 1934, Dorothy Day Collection, Rayner Library, Marquette University Archives.

²¹ Lisa Miller, “When Bishops Play Politics; A New Generation Gets Righteous,” *Newsweek Magazine* 11 (2010): 155, accessed December 9, 2013, ISSN: 0028-9604.

²² Kazin, *American Dreamers*, 156.

weave emotion into their arguments; they play on injustices and interests which can alone be served by self.”²³

The Catholic Worker represented a publication that was run unlike any other in its time. Part-news focused with one eye pointed towards social commentary, the paper was molded truly in the ideals of its founders. An editor under Day, Robert Steed noted, “Sometimes Dorothy didn’t like something in an article and she’d cut it out and print the rest, without asking anybody...it wasn’t run like an ordinary publication.”²⁴ While her immediate followers and staff may have seen Day as demanding, the activist was seen at large more as a determined advocate rather than an autocrat.

Generally, Catholic intellectual circles received the paper with enthusiasm. A previously unheard voice of the Church in the United States had been given a platform to express its views to a wide and captive audience. Furthermore, clerics within the Church were finally given a vehicle with which to inform their working-class parishioners of what Catholicism was doing to aid them in their struggle to gain power and respect in the work place. One supporter from the Knights of Columbus, a fraternal order of Catholics, declared shortly after its founding, “Its purpose is to fight Communism by fighting for social justice and by popularizing the Encyclicals of the Popes on the subject.”²⁵

Although many intellectuals in the time of the founding of *The Catholic Worker* saw it as the response of the faithful to a deceptive secular philosophy, what went ignored were the underlying motives of Day’s decision to cofound the paper. It is clear from the support that the publication received that those who promoted it saw it as a way to keep working class Catholics away from the seductive promises of the Left. Partisans from both the left and right ends of the Church political spectrum could support that initiative. Proposing an ideology to the working class that linked the dignity of human labor to spirituality, as *The Catholic Worker* did, provided Catholic commentators ammunition with which to fend off opponents. Looking closer at Day’s reflections, the influence of her experiences with socialism became more pronounced in the actions she took to fundamentally alter Catholic social action. Her prior exposure to

²³ John Gilland Brunini, “A Catholic Paper vs. Communism,” *The Commonweal*, pg. 96 November 24, 1933, Dorothy Day Collection, Rayner Library, Marquette University Archives.

²⁴ Riegle, *Portraits by Those Who Knew Her*, 16.

²⁵ Author Unknown, “The Thieves of Thunder,” *The Columbian*, pages unknown, October, 1933, Dorothy Day Collection, Rayner Library, Marquette University Archives.

leftist philosophies made her an agent of change within the Church, distinct from her peers in the faith.

Coughlin and Day

Paralleling the rise of the Catholic Worker movement among working Catholics and Church intellectuals was an anti-communist attitude buoyed by a political tsunami of radio broadcasts from a booming-voiced priest from Royal Oaks, Michigan. Father Charles Coughlin skyrocketed from a simple parish priest into the living rooms of Americans with a charisma unmatched in his time. Politically, Coughlin was neither a supporter of capitalism nor communism. While he supported a minimum wage in an era where support for it meant identification with the Left, he believed that “communism is nothing more than a candied pill of glorified ‘doleism.’”²⁶ The popularity of his broadcasts solidified an anti-communist attitude in the psyche of Catholics during the time. This feeling spilled over into all leftist philosophies and created a counter-reaction in the Church against a philosophy that looked poised to lure Catholics away from their faith during the 1930’s. Through his media juggernaut of radio broadcasts that were unparalleled in popularity, national speaking tours, and his own *Social Justice* monthly publication, the aptly nicknamed “Radio Priest” became a dominant social commentator in a time when Catholics were coming into their own as a political demographic.

Coughlin’s influence made him the guiding voice for Catholics in the political arena. Fairly or unfairly, historians today have looked back and compared his politics along with his style of media commentary to that of current social commentator Glenn Beck.²⁷ The historiography of Coughlin characterizes him as a propagandist, as someone who utilized hate and manipulation of the masses to achieve his political goals.²⁸ What is forgotten in this modern evaluation of the implications of his political stances is that at his peak popularity he came to command one of the most influential political lobbies in the nation. That Coughlin drew one-third of Americans for his weekly CBS radio broadcasts reveals his status as one of

²⁶ Charles Coughlin, “The National Union for Social Justice,” November 11, 1934, <http://www.ssa.gov/history/fcspeech.html>.

²⁷ Jim O’Grady, “Glenn Beck is Right to Fear Dorothy Day,” *Huffington Post*, April 1, 2010, accessed October 30, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-ogradys/glenn-beck-is-right-to-fe_b_522556.html.

²⁸ Alfred Lee and Elizabeth Lee, *The Fine Art of Propaganda: A Study of Father Coughlin’s Speeches* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), 26-47.

the most important political commentator of his time. Coughlin exemplifies the uniquely conservative mode Catholics identified with in this era. Juxtaposing the popularity of the views of the Coughlinites is useful to distinguish the uniqueness of the contribution of Day's Catholic Workers.

The influence of these two prominent Catholic activists coincided very closely with one another. In 1933, the same year in which *The Catholic Worker* was founded, a poll found that 55% of Americans identified Coughlin as the most politically useful person in the United States, outside of the president.²⁹ While Coughlin and Day identified themselves on contrasting ends of the political spectrum, in many ways they held similar views. In a time when Day was setting up independent farming communities to help provide community for the rural poor, Coughlin was a heavy proponent of keeping small farmers at the forefront of New Deal policy. In addition, both were scrutinized by greater American society for questionable loyalties to the United States. Twice the FBI investigated Day because of her early ties to communism.³⁰ At the dawn of World War II, Coughlin found himself under fire from the National Lawyers Guild for, "appealing to those subject to service in the armed forces not to serve, justifying the Axis and 'New Order,' and creating defeatism."³¹

Where the two broke though, was the way in which Day and Coughlin's respective movements sought to gain followers. Many times the two groups found themselves face-to-face selling their respective papers outside of downtown Cathedrals after mass. In a 1976 interview with former Chicago Catholic Worker member Thomas J. Sullivan, there is evidence of a palpable tension between the two movements. Sullivan revealed that Catholic Workers viewed Coughlinites as "beneath us. They were a stupid, non-intellectual group of people, and here we were. We were on the front lines of the real radical movement."³² Catholic Workers

²⁹ Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 57.

³⁰ The first time this was done at the direction of J. Edgar Hoover, the next on behalf of Senator Joseph McCarthy's HUAC.

³¹ National Lawyers Guild, *The National Lawyers Guild Presents the Case for the Prosecution of "Social Justice" and Charles E. Coughlin Under the Espionage Act of 1917*, pg. 5, e-book, New York: Heleca Press, 1942. World Cat, <http://www.worldcat.org/title/national-lawyers-guild-presents-the-case-for-the-prosecution-of-social-justice-and-charles-e-coughlin-under-the-espionage-act-of-1917/oclc/812248484?referer=di&ht=edition>.

³² Thomas Sullivan, Unpublished interview with James and Joan O'Gara, manuscript, *America Magazine*, June 24, 1976, Dorothy Day Collection, Rayner Library, Marquette University Archives.

were more interested in recruiting politically active, slightly idealistic, young Catholics into the intellectual fabric of their movement. Coughlinites appealed much more to working class Catholics, who were receptive to the rhetoric of Coughlin.

While those who subscribed to and were active in the Catholic Worker movement saw Coughlinites as anti-intellectual, those who were readers of *Social Justice* saw Day's followers as soft on Communism. His anti-Semitic views and stiff opposition to communism created a political climate in the Church that was hostile to anyone remotely identifying with the Left. One of the earliest members of the *Catholic Worker* reflected that "the Church was in a very conservative period, and we were considered communists who were 'boring from within.' So we weren't acceptable in many places."³³ People such as Day, who had ties with those in the Left, were viewed with suspicion in Coughlin's horde of followers, leaving no room for anyone with a non-conservative political identity.

Turning Left

Understanding American Catholics and their most prominent voices in the formative years of Day's activism provides a contrast for better illuminating how her background as a socialist influenced how she understood her spirituality. Accounts of Day, most written by Catholics, focus on how her Catholic faith influenced her activism in the Church. However, the way in which her early activities as a writer for socialist publications in New York City and leftist activist influenced her political ideology receives little attention. Even in commenting on her autobiography, Day said, "I have never intended to write an autobiography, but wanted instead to tell of the things that brought me to God."³⁴ A closer examination of her early life suggests that while Day separated herself from the left through her affinity for religion, it was her early identification with socialism that had the greatest influence on her political beliefs.

It is clear in her biography that Day views her time in the socialist movement as sinful, but its influence in her politics after her conversion in 1927 is undeniable. Early in Day's pre-conversion years, it was well documented in her writings for socialist causes that she identified heavily with the struggles of the working class. Articles that she wrote for *The*

³³ Riegle, *Portraits by Those Who Knew Her*, 13.

³⁴ Thorn, Runkel and Mountin, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement*, 243.

Call between 1916-1918 touched on topics such as how working class New York City housewives would have to use cornmeal as substitutes for flours, dog food was the main diet of immigrant families, and how veterans of American wars struggled to make a decent living after returning from combat.³⁵ The topics of these articles and the way Day focused in on the struggles of the individual suggest that she was more concerned with the fundamental effects of the causes she was involved in rather than the ideological disputes that so many of her colleagues were caught up in. Seeing how her activism within the frame of the Church was so focused on the plight of the poor and marginalized, it is possible to infer that the seeds of this social concern were sowed through an early identification with socialism.

Although Day may have expressed her allegiance to the Left in ways different than other socialists, Day's interests and behaviors nevertheless point to an early ideological identification with the movement. A unique interest of Day's was her affinity for Russian writers, "[She] loved the Russian authors, particularly Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Chekhov."³⁶ It was Chekhov who concluded in his writings that man existed to work and serve his brothers. In an unpublished document on the philosophy of *The Catholic Worker*, Day stated that the philosophy of the movement was based around Personalism. Personalism, according to Day, meant, "that each man has an individual responsibility for the welfare of his less fortunate brother."³⁷ While Day came to enjoy Russian intellectuals through her experience in leftist movements, it is clear that this interest went on to affect her view of Catholic social teaching after her conversion. Recognizing the backdrop of these cultural figures in her activism helps to clarify with which themes she identified in her vision for social justice.

Further, it is her early relationships and work with the Left that helped drive her to activism within the Catholic Church. After the birth of her daughter and her conversion, Day distanced herself entirely from activism. In writing an account of Day's life, the biographer Rob Coles quoted Day as saying, "I remember the envy I felt toward my radical

³⁵ *Dorothy Day Newspaper Clippings*, newspaper, 1917-1918, box 3, folder 1, Dorothy Day Collection, Rayner Library, Marquette University Archives.

³⁶ Patrick Jordan, "The Gospel is Hard: A Friend Remembers Dorothy Day," *Commonweal* via *Pro Quest* 2 (2013): 11-14, accessed October 30, 2013, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/docview/1313400261?accountid=465>.

³⁷ Author Unknown, "Life of Ms. Dorothy Day," unpublished manuscript, 1938. Dorothy Day Collection, Rayner Library, Marquette University Archives.

atheist friends; they were fighting on behalf of the poor.”³⁸ While Catholic

commentators came to see the formation of *The Catholic Worker* and its corresponding movement as a response to communist attempts to lure Catholic laborers, Day saw it as a way to introduce a social consciousness into the Church. In this way, Day hoped to intertwine socialism with the Catholic activism of the period.

As she became more invested in the success of the activism done on behalf of the Catholic Worker movement, Day distanced herself from the teachings of communism. Her writings on leftist causes revealed an increasing affinity with Catholic social teaching. While critical of Fascism for political reasons in her years writing for *The Call*, she came to extend her dislike for the political philosophy because, “although Fascism pretends to recognize religion, in practice it does not.”³⁹ This distance though did not lessen her admiration for the passion of advocates for communism. Rather, Day sought to transfer some of the tactics she learned from her time in the socialist movement, and apply them to spreading the teachings of the Catholic Worker movement. In writing for *Queen’s Work* magazine on the qualities of communist propaganda versus Catholic activists, she came to note, “The communists not only distributed literature, but they followed up their distribution to find out the reaction. They had persistence in other words.”⁴⁰ In stressing the accessibility of Catholic social teaching, Day sought to emulate the way in which communists made their materials so widely available to the masses. Her application of lessons she learned while a member of the Left to her distinctly Catholic movement shows that the base of Day’s activism was formed through her political experiences prior to her conversion.

Having the benefit of time to look back and reflect on her own involvement with socialism, Day came to realize that the import of the movement that initially drew her interest. Upon reflection in 1933, she concluded that “it is when the Communists are good that they are dangerous.”⁴¹ Rather than meaning this as a criticism, an understanding of

³⁸ Robert Coles, *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion* (New York: Da Capo, 1989), 68.

³⁹ *Dorothy Day Newspaper Clippings*, unpublished manuscript, 6, 1938, box 2, folder 3, Dorothy Day Collection, Rayner Library, Marquette University Archives.

⁴⁰ Dorothy Day, “An Ex-communist Writes on Communist Propaganda,” *Queen’s Work*, May 26, 1934, Dorothy Day Collection, Rayner Library, Marquette University Archives.

⁴¹ Dorothy Day, “The Diabolic Plot,” *America Magazine*, April 29, 1933, 82, Dorothy Day Collection, Rayner Library, Marquette University Archives.

the Catholic meaning of the term “good” reveals an extremely nuanced insight into how she viewed the appeal of communism to young members of the working class. As a Church, Catholic theological teaching holds that the nature of what is good is tied to an unmoving truth.⁴² For Day, to say that a communist is “good” suggests that he is advocating for something that is truly virtuous in her eyes. Therefore, in the context of this sentence, Day is suggesting that communists are truly capable of affecting social change when they are driven by virtue. Having this succinct view of the Left at this point in her career suggests that at even this time Day looked back on her initial draw to socialism as an experience that shaped her ability to bring about social change.

Day remained a divisive figure in Catholic activist circles. While she may have started out with some allegiance to socialism in her early political thought, she came to identify with an original form of anarchism. This philosophy was characterized by a belief that the state would be unnecessary if people were willing to transform their lives in a Christian fashion and help the poorest among them. Going from secular socialist, to left-leaning Catholic activist, and finally to Christian anarchist, demonstrates a fundamental maturation of the way she sought to apply her own charitable principles. Working with her in the 1950s, the future socialist Michael Harrington criticized Day’s philosophy, commenting that “she was for works of mercy...And if everybody did that you wouldn’t need a welfare state. Where she was wrong is, don’t hold your breath until everybody starts to lead that kind of life.”⁴³ Day also came under fire from other Catholics who described her way of thinking as, “slovenly reckless, intellectually chaotic, anti-Catholic”⁴⁴ Defenders of her came to note that this philosophy was similar to the famous early Catholic theologian St. Augustine, who in his book *City of God* comes to the conclusion that there are two kinds of cities. One in which people live for love of God, and the other in which people live for love of self.⁴⁵ It is this comparison between Augustinian philosophy and the way Day applied her political thought to action that cemented a positive legacy of hers within the modern Church.

Conclusion

⁴² Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965, Papal Archive, The Holy See, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁴³ Riegle, *Portraits by Those Who Knew Her*, 59.

⁴⁴ James W. Douglas, “Dorothy Day and the City of God,” *Social Justice Review*, May, 1961, 40-42, Dorothy Day Collection, Rayner Library, Marquette University Archives.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Day's political life reflects how her faith came to transform how she viewed the capabilities of her fellow human being. Identifying with socialists in her early life, she transferred the same fire and energy she had for helping the marginalized with her after her conversion to Catholicism. Her style of activism makes it possible to suggest that had Day been born a cradle Catholic, she may never have gone on to have the type of impact she did on the Church. For this reason, the story of Dorothy Day is less about a Catholic combating socialism through faith in action than it is about how seeds of the socialism came to influence the way Catholics in the United States applied Church social teaching.

Acknowledging that the same qualities that led Day to become a role model for lay Catholics everywhere were also the same ones that attracted her to socialism as a young adult allows for a more practical understanding of what motivated Day in relation to politics. As crucial as her initial exposure to leftist philosophy may have been to her political identity, her legacy is one marked by action rather than ideology. As a reporter for *The Call* to her decision to stay true to her pacifist principles in times of war, she always possessed a compassionate drive to help those less fortunate than her. Her own friend James W. Douglass came to reflect in 1961, "If everyone had Dorothy Day's political views it would certainly be disastrous for us all, unless we were all Dorothy Days."⁴⁶ Ultimately, for Day, it was about putting compassion into action, regardless of the political ideology she identified with.

⁴⁶ Ibid.