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ROR <https://ror.org/0583g9182>

Dorothy Day and the Relational Character of Her Spirituality

DOI <https://doi.org/10.15633/pch.16106>

Abstract

This article examines the spirituality of Dorothy Day. It presents Day's deep relationship with God, her engagement in the ecclesial community, and her relationship to the world. Drawing on the rich spiritual tradition of the Church, Day experienced Christ in the Word of God and in the sacraments, but also in creation and, above all, in the other person. As a laywoman, a single mother, a model of piety, and a witness committed to peace, justice, life, and the works of mercy, she remains a significant source of inspiration for people today confronted with war, injustice, racism, abortion, and social, political, and economic change. The article employs source analysis and compares Day's spiritual experience with the theological tradition of Catholic spirituality.

Keywords

spirituality, Dorothy Day, Catholic Worker, laity

Dorothy Day (1897–1980) is among the best-known representatives of twentieth-century American Catholicism, above all as the co-founder, with Peter Maurin, of the Catholic Worker Movement. Although she is a widely recognized Servant of God in the United States, she remains little known in Polish spiritual theology. Only two books about her have so far been published in Poland. By contrast, in the United States, even during her lifetime, she was held in such esteem that scholars, clergy, and religious discussed her spirituality at symposia (Day 2011, 614).

Dorothy Day was aware of the difference between theoretical reflection on the spiritual life and its practical realization. In one of her articles, she expressed this difference as follows: “How delightful to read about the spiritual life and how hard to live it” (Day 1975c, 8). Nevertheless, Day’s constant concern for fidelity to the principles she professed justifies classifying her spirituality on the basis of both the concepts presented in her numerous publications and testimonies to her spiritual experience.

Since Dorothy Day exemplifies a profound lay spirituality, her experience may be examined through three fundamental relations that define the spiritual horizon of the layperson: in the transcendental dimension, openness to God; in the dimension of fraternal communion, participation in the life of the Church; and in the missionary dimension, the call to witness before the world to the love one has received. This is the perspective adopted in Pope John Paul II’s 1988 apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*: the first chapter concerns the dignity of the laity in the Church as mystery, the second their participation in the life of the Church as communion, and the third their co-responsibility in the Church as mission (García 2004, 119–120). From this same perspective, it is worth presenting the essence of Dorothy Day’s spiritual life in her relation to God, the Church, and the world.

1. A Deep Relationship with God

Dorothy Day’s spiritual biography begins with her birth into an American Protestant family. Her mother, Grace, was raised in the Episcopal Church, while her father, John, came from the Congregationalist tradition, although neither cultivated active membership in a religious community (Zagano 2003, 11). Even so, their daughter was taught the prayers and moral principles that shaped her conscience (Day 1961b, 10.15). Dorothy’s adolescence coincided with a crisis

of faith and an increasingly critical view of organized religious communities, which, in the judgment of the later Servant of God, had little social impact through the message of the Gospel (Day 1961b, 43–44). All the more striking, then, is the way she bound herself for the rest of her life to the Catholic Church as a result of the people she encountered, the beauty of the world, the wisdom of the books she read, the warmth of the Church community, and, above all, the action of God's grace (Day 2006, 1–2).

After the traumatic experience of abortion, Dorothy feared that she would not be able to become a mother. When it became clear that she was expecting a child with Forster Batterham, her heart was filled with a desire to believe and to thank God. She wanted, at all costs, to have her daughter baptized so that the child would not have to search, as Dorothy herself had, for direction in life (Forest 1986, 60–64). Her interest in Catholicism led to conflicts with Forster and eventually to the end of their relationship (Day 2011, 537).

On December 28, 1927, Dorothy Day was conditionally baptized in a church in Tottenville; a year later she received the sacrament of confirmation (Forest 1986, 68–69). Four years later, on the advice of her confessor, she began attending morning Mass daily and receiving Communion regularly (Day 1961b, 156–157). Dorothy regarded the sacrament of Confirmation in particular as a moment of grace that prepared her for the steady growth of her relationship with God and for the good fruits of her activity in the Catholic Worker movement (Day 1975d, 1.8). Throughout this journey, Dorothy was nourished by the sacraments. As Brigid O'Shea Merriman rightly notes, however, reading and meditating on the Bible also played an essential role in her spiritual life (Merriman 1994, 26–31).

The depth of Day's relationship with God is attested by the highly developed theological virtues in her life. She believed in God and discovered His attributes by, for instance, observing creation. This experience was joined to a sense of mystery (Day 1961b, 128–129). For Day, faith also meant acceptance of the content of divine revelation as proclaimed by the Church. From her writings, one could reconstruct both the content and, in significant measure, the interpretation of the Catholic Creed (Day 2011, 567–568). Dorothy had great respect for papal teaching and often quoted papal documents, especially encyclicals (Day 2015, 205–206). Trust in God was also the foundation of hope in her life. One of her favourite spiritual texts was Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, in which Christ's words of consolation recur like a refrain: "All will be well" (Day 1947b, 1–2).

Above all, however, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement is known throughout the world for her cultivation of the virtue of love. In her life, love of God and love of neighbour were united in one virtue. She often repeated the conviction that it is impossible to love God, whom one cannot see, without loving one's neighbour, whom one can see, and the view that one loves God only as much as the person one loves least. No one has ever seen God; only by loving one's neighbour can one judge the degree of love for Him. In Day's view, this is because Christ identified Himself with the human person; therefore, the Christian must see and love Christ in his or her neighbour. We meet and love Christ in the "breaking of Bread" and our neighbour in the "breaking of bread" (Day 1999, 123–128).

The sustenance for the development of the theological virtues in Dorothy Day's life was prayer. For most of her Catholic life, Day prayed in church. Every morning, she spent two hours there in order to gain spiritual strength for the day, which she also ended with prayer in the shrine (Day 2010, 238). In principle, however, she emphasized the importance of private prayer at home and with the family. Her devotional practices included morning prayer before Mass, quiet afternoon conversation with God, the breviary, adoration of the Holy Eucharist, the rosary, reading spiritual books, practicing the presence of God, and an examination of conscience (Day 2011, 16–17). She practiced the classic forms of prayer: adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication (Day 1975b, 2.8).

Day experienced many vocal prayers meditatively. This was true not only of the rosary but also of the Stations of the Cross, which she prayed regularly (Day 2010, 165). It is worth adding that instruction in prayer, especially meditation, was intended primarily for retreats organized by the Catholic Worker Movement (Day 1961b, 238). Spiritual exercises that taught deeper prayer familiarized participants with the mystical tradition of the Church, especially the teaching of Saint John of the Cross. Although there are no sufficient grounds for speaking of Dorothy Day's mystical prayer in a strict sense, it remains worth noting that she did refer to the concept of the "dark night" in her writings (Day 1957a, 6.8).

Certainly, Day lived through many periods of spiritual dryness, when she could only say: "I believe; help my unbelief!" At times she forced herself to pray, while trying not to show sadness and discouragement to others (Day 2010, 491–492). There is, however, a particular aspect of Dorothy Day's spirituality which, connected with her sacramental view of all reality, made creation and especially other people an occasion for an experiential encounter with God (Day 1970, 39–45).

Her extensive reflections on the love of neighbour may be summarized in one sentence: “Yes, the nearest Catholic church is ten blocks away, but just the same, Christ is there, in the least of His children” (Day 1999, 221). Perceiving the value intended by God in the people one loves may, in a broad sense, be called an original form of neighbourly mysticism in Dorothy Day’s experience. In her view, a mystic is one who is in love with God; who does not forget that all people are actual or potential members of the Mystical Body of Christ; and who sees God and the great dignity received from him even in the most degraded persons (Day 2010, 155–156).

Dorothy Day was a fervent Catholic who loved the Church, which administered the sacraments that were of extraordinary importance to her (Forest 1986, 210). She regarded them as indispensable for living the faith. For her, love should be embodied and incarnated. This is why she loved the Church for recognizing the need to engage all the senses: through incense, icons, music, processions, food, and drink (Merriman 1994, 47–52). Day understood the sacraments as outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace (Day 1973, 2.7). For her, they were the source of the human person’s theosis (Day 1962b, 1–8). Appreciating the primary role of the sacraments in the spiritual life, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker also wrote about sacramentals. She regarded them as a form of preparation for the sacraments (Day 2011, 584).

2. Engagement in the Church Community

Dorothy Day learned about the Catholic Church from Peter Maurin, who inspired her with the idea of organizing the Catholic Worker Movement (Merriman 1994, 199–206). Priests, confessors, and spiritual directors had a major influence on her spiritual growth (Day 1963, 15–16). Nor should one underestimate the eminent figures of the Church with whom she formed friendships. In this respect, the following are especially notable: Thomas Merton, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Raïssa and Jacques Maritain, Sigrid Undset, Henri Nouwen, René Voillaume, Jean Daniélou, Padre Pio, Abbé Pierre, and Hildegard Goss-Mayr (Merriman 1994, 59–64).

It is also worth noting Day’s exceptional friendship with Catherine de Hueck Doherty, who influenced her understanding of lay spirituality (Pycior 2008, 43). In addition, Dorothy Day was influenced by almost all the most important spiritual schools. Strictly speaking, these schools constitute an organic synthesis

of the doctrine and life of the masters, transmitted, received, deepened, and integrated by their followers. Their formal and juridical expression is found in the great monastic rules, among which the Augustinian, Benedictine, Dominican, Franciscan, Carmelite, and Ignatian rules should be emphasized (Chmielewski 2002, 851).

In becoming Catholic, Dorothy Day sought not only a deep relationship with God but also a sense of community and a means of engaging in social reform (Merriman 1994, 20). In her view, worshiping God is difficult without ritual and without “flesh”; this is why she became a member of the Mystical Body of Christ (Day 1961b, 8). From then on, she wrote, the Church meant everything to her: it was Christ Himself on earth, her joy, delight, and consolation (Day 2010, 336). She shared Cardinal Newman’s view that “religion without the Church is as unnatural as life without food or dress.” She also frequently quoted Romano Guardini’s statement that “the Church is the Cross on which Christ was crucified, and Christ cannot be separated from His Cross” (Day 1948, 2.6).

In *Loaves and Fishes*, Dorothy Day professed: ‘Since I had been a Socialist in college, a Communist in the early twenties, and now a Catholic since 1927, I had a very definite point of view about poverty, unemployment, and my own vocation to try to do something about it all. I had no doubts about the Church. It was founded upon Saint Peter, that rock, who yet thrice denied his Master on the eve of His crucifixion. And Jesus had compared the Church to a net cast into the sea and hauled in, filled with fishes, both good and bad.’ Quoting one of her friends, Dorothy even went so far as to write about sharks (Day 1963, 8).

Day’s favourite image of the Church was that of the Mystical Body of Christ. For this reason, she especially celebrated the Feast of the Annunciation as the day of the Incarnation, on which the Son of God assumed humanity (Day 1962a, 1.6). Ever since Dorothy read Pius XII’s encyclical *Mystici corporis*, she did not see the Church otherwise than as the Mystical Body of Christ, of which all people are actual or potential members. She believed, therefore, that just as the weakness of one member causes sickness in the whole organism, so too members can benefit from one another’s merits.

Belief in the doctrine of the Mystical Body filled her with the conviction that her sufferings could alleviate the sufferings of her neighbour. The words of Charles Péguy remained etched in her memory: he was afraid to go to heaven alone, because God would first ask him where the others were (Day 2010, 517–518). Day developed this vision of the Church on the basis of Saint Paul’s

teaching, especially Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, where he writes about various tasks and functions in the Mystical Body (Day 2010, 202).

Particularly strong was Day's conviction regarding the potential belonging of all people to the one Body. As early as 1931, Day regarded protesters standing on the other side of the barricade during street clashes as members of the Mystical Body in need of instruction. She wrote that she fought against the forces of darkness, not against human beings (Day 2015, 183–184).

Telling is her account of praying the rosary while waiting for the lights to change at an intersection: 'The recitation was more or less automatic, when suddenly like a bright light, like a joyful thought, the words Our Father pierced my heart. To all those who were about me, to all the passersby (...) I was akin, for we were all children of a common Father, all creatures of one Creator, and Catholic or Protestant, Jew or Christian, Communist or non-Communist, were bound together by this tie. We cannot escape the recognition of the fact that we are all brothers. Whether or not a man believes in Jesus Christ, His incarnation, His life here with us, His crucifixion and resurrection; whether or not a man believes in God, the fact remains that we are all the children of one Father' (Day 2015, 202–205).

From this flowed her respect for every person, her engagement in inter-religious dialogue, and her ecumenical efforts. This does not change the fact that the co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement was an ardent Catholic, wholeheartedly accepting the teaching and hierarchical structure of the Church. She saw Catholicism as least entangled with nationalism, as gathering the most impoverished, and, above all, as dispensing the sacraments that were so important to her (Forest 1986, 210).

Dorothy Day prayed for perseverance in the Church, the nourishing Mother. Since, for her, the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ began in the Incarnate Word, who took His body from Mary, she repeated that if we love Jesus in His humanity we must also love His Mother (Day 1965b, 3.7). Dorothy Day was fascinated by the saints of the Church (Day 2020, 7–13). For the convert, November was the month of remembering the dead as well as canonized and noncanonized saints; in her view, the latter were undoubtedly far more numerous (Day 1966b, 2.7).

Dorothy Day read daily about the patron saint of the day in Donald Attwater's *Dictionary of Saints* (Day 2010, 482). At times she was critical of Lives of the Saints literature because, in her opinion, it was written as if the saints had not lived in this world. It was chiefly from their own writings that their true image

emerged for her (Merriman 1994, 173–174). The saints sustained her faith in the Church. She was never embittered by Holy Mother Church, but only by its human element. When she complained about the conduct of some representatives of Catholicism, she would add thanks to God that there are also saints in the Church. She saw many unknown saints in the workers' movement, people who suffered and died in the pursuit of justice for their fellow human beings. She claimed that in the history of the Church there had been many corrupt popes and bishops, but the saints reminded her of the primacy of the spiritual: 'No matter how corrupt the Church may become, it carries within it the seeds of its own regeneration.' In writing this, Dorothy had chiefly the sacraments in mind (Day 2010, 491–492).

Dorothy Day loved the Church, and from the moment of her conversion the Church became her "new home," to the extent that one cannot comprehend her life and work without understanding her profound love for it. She loved the Church so much that she considered herself free to criticize the human side of this institution. Her criticism chiefly concerned the lack of concern for the poor (Zwick and Zwick 1999, 13–14).

Telling is her affectionate description of her parish church, an Italian community led by the Salesians in New York. She wrote that the Church there was what it should be: the centre of the community. 'Every morning at the seven and eight o'clock masses which are sung there is a goodly gathering of people, not just devout old ladies and men, but many young ones, too. Before and after mass there is always a priest hearing confessions. Every evening from five o'clock on to past nine, people are dropping in, before supper, on their way home from market, from work, from play on the streets — everyone is living on the streets these hot days. There is a crowd at the recitation of the rosary and Benediction.'

There is also a camp, where the children are sent for a few weeks in the summer (Day 1934, 4). Significant were her discussions with Ammon Hennacy in defence of the Church, which, as she wrote, was everything to her (Day 2010, 235–236). Because of Hennacy's sharp criticism of the conduct of the Church hierarchy toward the Catholic Worker, the Servant of God, while emphasizing the primacy of conscience, asserted that nothing could ever distance her from the Church, regardless of what bishops or popes might say and no matter how mistaken she considered them to be. In a situation of conflict with ecclesiastical authority, she would rather suspend her work, keep silent, and wait, because the spiritual weapons of prayer and suffering helped the cause more than protest and rebellion. God writes straight with crooked lines, and arrogance and

pride could harm the work even more than hostile statements by the hierarchy. On that occasion she reminded Ammon that, traditionally, all reform in the Church comes from below, from the masses — that is, from ordinary people (Day 2010, 242–243).

3. Relationship to the World

The co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement became known in the world for her struggle against blatant social injustices: unemployment, racial discrimination, the exploitation of the poor by large corporations, and, especially, the exploitation of immigrants who were often deprived of trade union protection. She also protested against the tragic living conditions of workers, child labour, the use of poisonous insecticides, and the love of money, which she regarded as constituting the essence of the American way of life and as corrupting society and even the Church (Day 2010, 515–516). Day described with concern the lawlessness of the owners of great fortunes, exposed their ostensible philanthropy, and consistently refused to accept any assistance from them. In this context, she mentioned the names of great American business families: Carnegie, Ford, Rockefeller, and Morgan. Dorothy Day wrote that many who praise God and Our Lady do injustice to workers (Day 2011, 593).

According to Dorothy Day, love for people affected by injustice leads to action: picketing, speeches, shouting, and writing articles. In this respect, she mentions acts of mercy such as admonishing sinners, comforting the sorrowful, and instructing the ignorant. In her view, it is necessary to do this without violence: turning the other cheek, giving away one's coat, and going the "second mile" with one's neighbour (Matt. 5:38–42). Day was aware of the allegation made by communists that Christian belief in an eternal reward detracts from the pursuit of earthly justice. She quoted the words of a song repeated by critics: 'You'll get pie in the sky when you die,' admitting that such consolation had too often justified passivity. At the same time, she found in Christianity the stimulus for social change in the world, repeating after Mary the words of the Magnificat: 'He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones (...) the hungry he has filled with good things' (Luke 1:52–53) (Day 1952b, 1–2).

Dorothy Day's principal response to the social problems of her era was the organization, together with Peter Maurin, of the Catholic Worker Movement, which sought to establish a Christian social order. The central vision of the

movement was to work for ‘new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells’ (2 Pet. 3:13). The goal of the movement was to become a family comprising all social groups, races, and religions, although its leaders were always Catholic. The founders did not expect immediate and visible results; they defined their task as sowing while leaving the harvest to the next generation. The Catholic Worker Movement sought to create a community in which it would be easier for a person to be good. To that end, it implemented four principal works: the newspaper, round-table discussions, houses of hospitality for practicing the works of mercy — especially by distributing free meals through a breadline — and farming communes, called agronomic universities (Day 2011, 486–487).

The dignity, value, joy, and ascetic dimension of human labour were consistently emphasized in *The Catholic Worker* (Day 2010, 215). For Dorothy Day, it was important to welcome work not only as suffering ‘by the sweat of one’s brow’ and as an expression of penance for sins, but also as participation in God’s creative work through the development of the material creation of the universe. For her, work was a gift and a vocation that had to be explored. Day repeated Maurin’s conviction that every form of work should, in a certain sense, be an extension of the works of mercy, encompassing such areas as food, clothing, shelter, health, education, and recreation. Work serves to earn a living not only for oneself but also for those who suffer from involuntary destitution (Day 2011, 458).

In this respect, it is important to note Day’s constant emphasis on the opposition between the works of mercy and the works of war. From the 1930s to the 1980s, Day consistently repeated, in relation to every armed conflict, that war brings no good results and negates what Christ commanded his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:1–7, 28) and in the scene of the Last Judgment (Matt. 25:31–46). Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering those in need, engaging in nonviolent action, and working to address genuine human needs are the antithesis of destructive bombs that ravage food supplies, burn clothing with napalm, and leave buildings in ruins (Day 1975a, 3).

In the writings of the co-founder of *The Catholic Worker*, one finds a striking literary reinterpretation of Christ’s words concerning the Last Judgment. In her rendition, God will say to the rich of this world: ‘Depart from me, accursed ones, into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you polluted the earth with your mines and your bombs and wars which starved the poor; I was thirsty, and you contaminated even the ocean and the waters of the earth with your hydrogen bombs; I was

a stranger, and you made agreements with former allies who now are enemies, to keep me in displaced persons' camps to this day, and daily you make more homeless; naked, and you make weapons and profits for the rich and the poor have not the clothes to cover them; I was sick and in prison, and my numbers ever increased' (Day 1957b, 1–2.8).

Elsewhere, Day writes, again with reference to the Last Judgment: 'Lord, when did we see you burned with napalm? Inasmuch as ye did it to one of these my littlest ones you did it unto me' (Day 1966a, 2.6.8). Dorothy frequently alluded to François Mauriac's thought that anyone who fights for justice and shows mercy to his or her neighbour acts for Christ, even if that person denies Him (Day 1954, 2.4).

Dorothy Day's entire social activity and her commitment to transforming the world ultimately had an apostolic purpose: that the world might come to know God revealed in Christ. The foundress of the Catholic Worker Movement had the impression that little evangelization of the faithful was taking place in the Church, as though the grace of the sacraments would do the rest by itself (Day 1964, 1.6.8). Meanwhile, the popes of her time continued to remind her of the necessity of going out into the world and winning it for the Church (Day 1947b, 1–2).

For this reason, Dorothy Day stressed the responsibility for others, of being 'my brother's keeper,' without which religion would become merely 'opium' for its followers. To this end, she echoed Charles Péguy's words that we cannot go to heaven alone, because otherwise God will first ask where the others are (Day 1940, 7). Her central thesis in this domain was that the masses will not be won for Christianity unless Christianity is lived (Day 1961a, 1–2.7).

This applied to everyone, but Day's postconciliar reflection on *aggiornamento* focused on the lay apostolate and required reading, study, listening, and learning in order to know God, love Him, and serve Him. In an obvious way, this was inseparable from love of neighbour (Day 1965a, 1.6). In Day's view, an essential feature of Christian personalism was respect for another person's freedom. She defined personalism as 'the realization of the dignity of the other fellow, of our obligations to him, the willingness to work with him on those elements of the Truth he has seized hold of, accepting his cooperation as far as he will give it, and the refusal to admit disappointment when he doesn't go as far as we think he might' (Day 1947c, 1).

This entailed avoiding the impression of judging others and instead winning them over to another point of view with love and respect. According to Day, Catholics should always be faithful to their conscience and preach the Gospel;

and the Gospel is that all people are brothers (Day 1964, 1.6.8). Showing the bond between freedom and love, she claimed that only supernatural love and sanctity can convert people to Christ and change the world for the better. No constraint, eloquence, fine writing, or great friendship has such power (Day 1952a, 6).

Conclusions

While presenting the three principal dimensions of Dorothy Day's spirituality, the preceding analysis also shows Dorothy Day's contribution to the community of the Church, chiefly through her role as co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement and as a lay leader seeking a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal, the material and the spiritual. Dorothy Day creatively developed the insights of the liturgical and retreat movements as well as Christian personalism, emphasizing the universal call to holiness addressed also to laypeople. She lived her secular character especially as a newspaper publisher and organiser of houses of hospitality and farms, enabling the practice of the works of mercy toward both soul and body. She longed to realise the love of God, knowing that its sign is love of neighbour. Drawing on the rich spiritual tradition of the Church, she experienced Christ in the Word of God and in the Sacraments, but also in creation and, above all, in the other person (Merriman 1994, 221–224). In all this, she was radical in the best sense of the word, for she wanted to reach the roots of things (Day 1944, 6–7). As a laywoman, a single mother, a model of piety, and a witness committed to peace, justice, life, and the works of mercy, she is an inspiration to people today who face war, injustice, racism, abortion, and social, political, and economic change (Dolan 2015, 8). In this sense, her spirituality is, on the one hand, deeply rooted in the Catholic tradition and, on the other, marked by an original emphasis on the need to discover God present in every person.

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