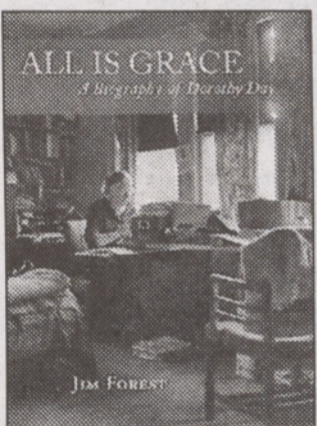


Hard-hitting woman

Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement

BY JOE MARTIN
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST



All is Grace - A biography of Dorothy Day, by Jim Forrest

Author Jim Forest knew Dorothy Day. In the early '60s he edited "The Catholic Worker" paper, which has never sold for more than a penny a copy since its first edition was handed out in Union Square in New York City on May 1, 1933. "All Is Grace" is Forest's elegant homage to Day, the Catholic Worker movement she co-founded and the many remarkable people who were part of her eventful life. Her approach inspires the founding principles behind several grassroots organizations in Portland, including Street Roots, Sisters of the Road and Blanchet House. She was 83 when she died in 1980. The book is splendidly enhanced by a terrific array of photographs and artwork.

Day was an unlikely convert to Catholicism. Her childhood home was not a particularly religious one, although she had been baptized in the Episcopal Church. As a young woman she was immersed in the leftist politics of early-20th-century America. She had been arrested a few times — once at a suffragette protest in Washington, D.C.,

and again in Chicago when a Red Squad descended upon her rooming house, which was connected with the Industrial Workers of the World, the Wobblies.

Day wrote for periodicals such as "The Call" and "The Masses." She conducted an interview with Leon Trotsky shortly before he returned to Russia where, with other Bolsheviks, he precipitated a revolution. Her politics were steeped in the bohemianism of the day. She had friendships with early labor leader Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (memorialized in songwriter Joe Hill's "The Rebel Girl") author Malcolm Cowley and playwright Eugene O'Neill.

A persistent, burgeoning, spiritual yearning within Day's innermost being became unshakable. In 1926, her common-law relationship with Forster Batterham resulted in the birth of Day's only child, Tamar. "No human creature could receive or contain so vast a flood of love and joy as I often felt after the birth of my child. With this came the need to worship, to adore."

In 1927 Day was baptized in the Roman Catholic Church. Her turn to a spiritual faith

did not in any way diminish her abiding commitment to justice for the poor and fairness for common workers. If anything it strengthened her resolve to confront the forces of brute exploitation and injustice. She pondered what might transpire if her church engaged in the challenging work of social justice rather than primarily in works of charity. "How I longed to make a synthesis reconciling body and soul, this world and the next," Day wrote.

She and Batterham parted ways. Forest writes: "The five years following Dorothy's entrance into the Catholic Church centered on her search to find something that didn't yet exist: a way of supporting herself and Tamar through work that linked her religious faith, her commitment to social justice, and her vocation as a writer. It was a journey in the dark."

In 1932 Day had her first meeting with Peter Maurin, a Frenchman, fellow Catholic and hobo philosopher. He helped her synthesize her spiritual and political beliefs into a profound outlook that would embody activism, living in community, voluntary poverty, direct service to the poor and a prayerful adherence to the Christian Gospels. After introducing himself, Maurin said, "George Schuster, editor of Commonweal, told me to look you up. Also, a red-haired Irish Communist in Union Square told me to see you. He says we think alike." It was an auspicious meeting that would lead to a long collaboration and give birth to The Catholic Worker.

The history of The Catholic Worker presents a colorful panoply of Christian anarchism and personalism in action. In 1955, Day, fellow Catholic Workers and pacifist friends defied New York's statewide air raid drill, requiring all citizens to get off the street as sirens supposedly announced an imminent nuclear attack. They were arrested. Protests continued during successive drills until finally in 1960 no more drills were initiated. In July 1963, the Catholic Worker organized the first protest against the United States' involvement in Vietnam.

Day was a devout Catholic and practiced her faith with the same intensity she brought to her political activities and writing. She prayed for the sick and for those who had committed suicide, because she contended that it is never too late to ask for God's mercy. Forest writes: "It seemed to me Dorothy prayed as if lives depended on it, and no doubt some did. The physician Robert Coles of Harvard Medical School credited Dorothy's prayers with the miraculous cure of his wife. She had been dying of cancer but — to the astonishment of her physicians — recovered."

It has been said that Marxism and socialism were far too moderate for Day. Mike Gold had joined the American Communist Party in 1919. He would become the editor of the party's The Daily Worker. He and the young Day were affectionate friends and she had once suggested that they might marry. Gold declined and would later admit his reason: "Because she was too radical."

In 1997, her granddaughter, Kate Hennessy, wrote of Day: "On the one hand, she has given so many of us a home, physically and spiritually; on the other, she has shaken our very foundations." Jim Forest concludes his book saying, "I am one of the many whose foundations were shaken. I am still wondering what hit me." Read this lovely volume and take an exhilarating journey with an extraordinary woman.

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