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Dorothy Day: Scholarship and Inspiration for Contemporary Students

Susan M. Mountin

1997 was the year of the Dorothy Day Centenary Conference at Marquette University during which I developed an interdisciplinary course on Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement. The course mysteriously hovered between the College of Journalism and the College of Arts and Sciences in the theology and history departments. Students taking the course were able to apply for credit in any of those disciplines. In fact the placement and ownership of the course that first offering was so mysterious that somehow I was not paid to teach it because no one department would take responsibility for it or figure out how to share the expense and we had a few dozen students registered for it. In the spirit of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin's call to voluntary poverty I adopted their model, sallied forth, and have been ever grateful for the opportunity to teach a course for nearly two decades which so captures the religious imagination and interest of students. But like many teachers I have honed the course and the process over the years, constantly reflecting on what and how to engage students in this important study whose results I now share with readers.

The following year the course landed permanently in Theology. Yet as a former Catholic journalist and as someone who began studying the Catholic Worker, I continued to teach the course from the perspective of many disciplines. There is history in the story and loads of it: the immigration movement in the United States; the Depression, the labor movement, a series of wars which provided fodder for the peace movement; the racial justice movement. The story is marked by hunger and homelessness, unemployment, racial and gender concerns, to name a few. For the journalist there is a treasure trove of analysis: advocacy journalism, personalist journalism, starting a newspaper, the plain and clear writing of Dorothy, Catholic Worker art and illustrations.

But the foundation is and always remains theological: Jesus in words and deeds, the teachings of the church, sacramentality, voluntary poverty, prayer, devotion to the saints, the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, Catholic Social Teaching, peace and conversion. The Catholic Worker story, the Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin story, is not only multi-disciplinary but it also provides intriguing windows for students to learn, research, study, and write about a time and a story that is countercultural, historical, and eerily prophetic. Seeing students as scholars of this captivating story and finding ways to facilitate and accompany them in the learning process is extremely gratifying. The topics readily allow for what AAC&U (the American Association of Colleges and Universities) has named as a “high impact practice” with a service/community based learning experience (it is required for the course) as the service becomes “a text” for the students who spend 15–18 hours in the course of the semester in placements that readily connect with course topics: shelters, meal programs, Milwaukee’s own Casa Maria Catholic Worker House, adult immigrant tutoring programs, the city and county jails are just a few. Regular inclusion of discussions and short writing assignments based on their service integrates the service learning with the rest of the course.

Most important it gives the next generation a model of Catholic living sorely needed today. A favorite oft repeated comment from students is “why has no one told us about these radical teachings of the Catholic Church? They are so cool.” or “I left the church in high school but I am coming back because of this class.” At least two students were inspired by Dorothy’s conversion and eventually landed in the campus ministry RCIA program.

I do say to them clearly at the start of the course that the course is not about their conversion. It is not about them agreeing with or believing everything they will read and study. But it is about wrestling with the ideas, beliefs, and values found in the commitments of Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, and Catholic teachings about social justice. It is also about curiosity and discovery since they as researchers have the chance to dig into, read, and dialogue with primary sources. For many of the students sadly much of their education has been found in text books and secondary sources. But Marquette is blessed with a huge Catholic Worker archive collection including personal papers from Dorothy, Peter, and other workers, and so our students benefit from actually physically reading letters and documents typed and/or written by Dorothy, which is a moving experience once they learn the basics of her life. Nearly twenty years after the centenary conference, the gift of technology (largely and vociferously debated at the Centenary conference as a way to promulgate and spread ideas of the Worker)

now makes many sources easily available on-line with a few strokes of the keyboard.

It is that scholarship I address today. How does a teacher get students excited about learning about something from a previous century occurring likely even before the birth of their grandparents? The methodology that works amazingly well is based on the experience of a student from about fifteen years ago who unwittingly taught me how to transform the course for optimum student interest. This student was active in hunger and homelessness volunteer work on campus especially in Midnight Run, a lunchtime meal program (originally run from 10 PM to midnight) out of a van offered by students daily for the unemployed, homeless, and underemployed guests and neighbors who frequent our downtown urban campus. She had her backpack stolen from the van while she was serving up soup. The experience raised all kinds of questions about “the deserving poor and about feeling violated and at risk in caring for the poor.”

After a long discussion fraught with tears, this 19-year-old questioned whether she could continue serving. Sometimes as a teacher one is blessed with moments of inspired grace. I suggested she take her questions to the archives and Dorothy Day’s writings and actions, knowing full well that Dorothy wrestled with some of the same questions. She not only did that but ended up writing an invented dialogue (a short play) between herself and Dorothy and on the day of her class presentation she had (with permission) engaged a friend and theatre student to come dressed in Dorothy-like clothing with her hair in braids pinned in a crown around her head to play the part of Dorothy. Seated at a table with cup of tea in hand, the student interviewed “Dorothy” asking dozens of questions about her fortitude and endurance in serving the poor for so long. The presentation was so strong that for the next several years the two students regularly presented their vignette to students working on hunger and homelessness issues through Campus Ministry and other campus venues.

I now begin every first class by passing out index cards. On one side I ask each student to write what it means to them to “put on Christ.” I acknowledge to them that in the class are believers and non-believers, Christians and others of a variety of religious practices. I have had Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, as well as agnostics and atheists take the class. With the pervasiveness of Christianity in U.S. culture I ask each of them to articulate what that might mean “to put on Christ” regardless of their own vantage point. On the other side of the index card I ask them to write a short paragraph about a social justice concern in the world today, here and now, that they are most concerned about and what about that issue they are most curious about in the form of a question or questions.

Challenges in Day Scholarship

Questions about war and peace, the economy, race, AIDS, gender, ecclesiology, spirituality, faith and doubts, poverty, protests, health care, immigration, the elderly, the homeless who wander our campus inevitably are raised.

These questions become the starting point of a private tutoring conversation when I meet with them individually outside the classroom (the class is usually 30–40 students) to help them prepare for the research they will engage in as they read pages of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper, Dorothy's columns and books, and other sources. From that conversation they hone in on significant research questions they then take to their archival and library research. The assignment is relatively plagiarism-proof because they must articulate their own personal questions and then proceed. A month later they have written a paper and present their questions and their discovery to the class in short presentations.

One class is actually held at the archives (to take the scariness out of it insofar as some of our students have never crossed the threshold of the library much less the archives!) and Marquette's expert archivist Phil Runkel explains the history of the collection. He also gives an overview of what is there and how to request the documents, and we teach them basic etiquette and practices required in the archives. I make a point of telling the students that if they want to impress their other faculty members and improve their grades overall on papers, checking the archival collection on a wide range of topics is not a bad way to go when appropriate. At the same time I challenge them to read more deeply and broadly and find something I did not know about the CW story. They rise to the occasion and I am amazed at how willing they are to read far beyond the required texts. Phil puts out copies of the *Worker* for them to read over the decades. Much of the collection is now digitized and more and more resources are available on line every month although I want them to touch the actual editions since we have access to them.

Every student is required to read the inaugural May 1, 1933 edition (also now on line) and then groups are assigned to read issues from particular decades, drawing comparisons between Catholic Worker foci and topics and what they know of history. Most of them get pretty excited as they see convergence, but they also come to realize that the worker movement and the ideas of Peter and Dorothy are countercultural and challenge convention. They also discover a history of the Catholic Church and theology and practices that often surprises them. Students often proclaim they "did not know research could be so much fun!"

The service-learning component also challenged and changes students.

When students react to the “required” nature of the service learning I point out that the service becomes a living textbook providing experiential knowledge and a kind of sensate knowledge not easily acquired solely from reading. From the beginning I teach them Ignatian means of paying attention to the experience, using their senses. Their first short assignment after visiting their service learning site is to write what they see, smell, hear, taste, and feel. Imagine students who grew up in a comfortable suburb. Walking into a men’s shelter in the city housing 80 men a night, they will write about the smell of urine, alcohol, dirt, sweat, stale coffee, etc. They will see disheveled and tired men. They will feel a blast of heat, hear showers in the distance, and see men shuffling in the upstairs dorm. Repeating the exercise toward the end of the semester their observational powers focus on individuals they have met and the stories of the people they have heard often with poignant chronicles of bad choices or luck. They write about what they have learned from these seemingly destitute individuals and how they see friendships they have made with people they used to hold in contempt.

Their experience and the experiences of Dorothy and the Catholic Workers converge. At the same time they begin to understand Dorothy’s comment from Archbishop Helder Camera often attributed to her: “If you feed people you are a saint, if you ask why they are hungry you are a communist.” (It is uncertain as to the origin of that comment since both get credit for it.) They start to ask, “why are people hungry in this city in the neighborhood and in the world?”

Rigorous scholarship of Catholic Social Teaching accompanies the service learning and the students read *Rerum Novarum*, *Centesimus Annus*, *A Place at the Table*, as well as other Bishops’ letters on immigration and hunger and poverty. These pronouncements are often a surprise to all the students who usually have not been privy to the breadth and depth of the church’s teaching about contemporary issues. In another paper they integrate their service experience and particularly what they are learning about the populations they are serving with with the teachings of the church. That is powerful medicine for young people who thought the church was irrelevant.

Tapping into the depth of the Catholic Worker story and the spirituality of Dorothy Day—particularly in the curious juxtaposition of her deep piety with her commitment to justice—opens a world of inquiry for 18–22 year olds. Ideally this story makes them more curious, helps them to connect other aspects of their college curriculum with theology, and spurs them to listen and learn in a different way. It is grace in action.

Susan M. Mountin directs Manresa for Faculty at Marquette University, an initiative designed to focus on exploring and deepening the role of faculty in a Jesuit Catholic institution. As of January 2015 she also directs a Lilly Endowment Inc. funded program "Pastoral Leadership in a Cultural Context" for early career ecumenical Christian pastors. She has been a Catholic newspaper and magazine editor, free-lance writer, and campus minister. She was formerly associate editor at the *Milwaukee Catholic Herald* and *U.S. Catholic*. She served in Campus Ministry at Marquette for 25 years and for eight additional years directed another Lilly funded initiative in the Manresa Project: A Program for the Theological Exploration of Vocation. She teaches courses on *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement*, *Ignatian Spirituality*, *Social Justice/Social Activism*, and *Christian Discipleship* and often directs Ignatian-styled retreats for church groups and parish councils.