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A Fierce Quest for Holiness

Brigid O'Shea Merriman. *Searching for Christ: The Spirituality of Dorothy Day*. Notre Dame, IN.: Notre Dame University Press, 1994.

by Steve Krupa, S. J.

In December 1980, just a few weeks after her death, the distinguished historian David J. O'Brien commented that Dorothy Day was "the most significant, interesting, and influential person in the history of American Catholicism."¹

Other admirers have gone even further referring to the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement as a "saint." During her lifetime Day's reply to someone's mention of her sanctity was characteristically direct: "Don't dismiss me so easily."² Day wanted to be taken seriously. Her own attraction to the saints was a matter of imitation not veneration. Day was as convinced of her own sinfulness as she was that all men and women are called to be saints. In spite of the exuberant claims made about her, it seems safe to say that Day, the insistent pacifist, social activist, personalist, writer and editor, single working-mother, grandmother, and apostle to the poor, remains the radical conscience of American Catholicism. Whether or not she will be made "a Church saint," Day has become already, in Daniel Berrigan's expression, "a people's saint."³

Brigid O'Shea Merriman offers a view of the intricate and refined spirituality of the "people's saint", providing an intellectual history of Day's spiritual development around selected themes. The book, part of the Notre Dame Studies in American Catholicism series, scrutinizes the impact of literature, monasticism, the mid-twentieth century retreat movement, saints, and friendship on Day's spirituality. While moving through Merriman's investigations, the reader senses in Day the work of a creative religious personality who was able to synthesize human relationships, great writing and ideas, and different facets of the Chris-

tian tradition while developing her own expression of the spiritual life. Merriman brings forth the sophistication and complexity of a woman whose spiritual practice seemed on the surface quite simple and direct. Day ate the food of the poor and wore their clothes, but when it came to the spiritual life she fed on the food of great thinkers and mystics. The mingling of intellectuals and artists with the unemployed and destitute in the Catholic Worker reflected the paradox, and the genius, of Day's own spirituality. The "people's saint," indeed, was a saint for a wide variety of people.

* * *

The first chapter of the book establishes the historical context for Day's life and spirituality. Merriman sets the stage for the inauguration of the Catholic Worker movement in 1933 by noting the triumph

of conservatism in the Roman Catholic Church in the first decades of the twentieth century. The condemnations of Americanism and Modernism meant both the rise of devotional Catholicism and the hibernation of serious social thought in the predominantly immigrant American Catholic Church. Merriman then shifts, rather abruptly, to an account of the life of Dorothy Day from her birth in November 1897 to her historic meeting with Peter Maurin in December 1932. In this biographical account Merriman addresses Day's family, her early religious intuitions, her love of beauty and her devotion to the masses, her love of men including Lionel Moise and Forster Batterham, her abortion, her marriage to Tobey Berkeley, her alleged suicide attempt(s), her various jail terms, her recurrent encounters with the Bible, and the role of reading in Dorothy's first thirty-five years.

Literature was, for Day, "an instrument through which her religious sensibilities were awakened and reawakened, and her awareness of social needs strengthened" (25). She found sustenance in books which she regarded as "food just as Christ the Word is also our food" (25). The Bible was a constant companion in Day's life and she read it daily. *The Imitation of Christ*, Augustine's *Confessions*, and the nineteenth-century works of the great Russian writers Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, all of which she initially discovered in her teen years, enriched Day's spirituality throughout her life. Merriman concludes the chapter on "literary influences" with a discus-



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sion of the impact on Day of the writings of the Christian personalists, Emmanuel Mounier, Jacques Maritain, and Paul Hanley Furfey.

Few Dorothy Day admirers are aware that Day was a professed Benedictine oblate. Merriman makes a strong case in the third chapter of *Searching for Christ* for the centrality of monasticism, and of the Benedictine charism in particular, in the growth and refinement of Day's spirituality and in daily life at the Catholic Worker. Developments in Day's own spiritual vision and practice resulting from her immersion in the Benedictine tradition became a part of the Catholic Worker program of action: a balance between work and prayer, hospitality, the centrality of Mass and worship, and life and prayer in common. By 1940, Merriman maintains, "life at the Catholic Worker had settled into a monklike pattern of alternation between work and prayer, sans the quiet orderliness of a traditional monastery" (97). Day became a fully professed secular oblate through the monks at St. Procopius Abbey in Lisle, Illinois, in 1955. However, it was St. John's Abbey in Minnesota, Merriman observes, that provided the Catholic Worker with its most significant Benedictine resource. Beginning in 1933, Day and the Catholic Worker movement benefitted from the work of the Collegeville monk Virgil Michel whose liturgical studies emphasized the connection between worship and social involvement.

The twentieth-century retreat movement also had a significant influence on Day's spirituality. Encouraged by Pius XI's promotion of the Spiritual Exercises in the 1920's as a means of personal spiritual growth and social transformation, Day embraced the rigorous Ignatian retreat of the Canadian Jesuit Onesimus Lacouture. The retreat was designed to extend the benefits of the Ignatian tradition to the laity. Lacouture's rendering of the Exercises met with increasing opposition, however, and eventually was suppressed for its alleged Jansenism. Day, Merriman claims, benefitted immensely from the Lacouture retreat which she experienced many times from 1941-1976. Day found in the Lacouture movement a worthy ally in her longstanding search for heroic sanctity. Through the retreat movement Day met

Rev. John J. Hugo who directed her first retreat in 1941. Hugo subsequently contributed many articles to the *Catholic Worker*, including the "Weapons of the Spirit" series in the 1940's which offered theological support for Day's pacifism.

In the final chapter Merriman examines the influence on Day's spirituality of friends and spiritual guides. Saints, like the characters in the great novels she read, were as real to Day as her own friends. Among the many pacifist, mystic, and socially active saints from whose lives she derived inspiration, Day particularly benefitted, according to Merriman, from the spirituality of Francis of Assisi, Juliana

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of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, and Thérèse of Lisieux. The Carmelite diptych of Teresa and Thérèse is "a fitting symbol of Dorothy's entire spirituality," according to Merriman (194). Teresa's powerful and practical intellect, her active disposition, and her teaching on the relationship between deep love for Christ and personal action appealed to Day's temperament and spiritual idealism. On the other hand, the "Little Way" of Thérèse of Lisieux, with its emphasis on the lasting effect of small actions, eventually impressed Day as a fitting expression of the ordinary route to sanctity of the Catholic Worker vocation. Ever aware of the loneliness in life, Day considered herself blessed both by the lives of saints and personal friendships. Merriman's treatment of Day's post-conversion friendships with Peter Maurin, Nina Polcyn Moore, and Helene Iswolsky, added to the new

material on Day's friendship with Thomas Merton in a prior chapter, provides a glimpse into the role of friendship in the development of Day's spirituality.

* * *

Much has been written about Dorothy Day's life and work. *Searching for Christ* is one of the first books which goes to the heart of the matter by examining Day's spirituality. Overall, Merriman's study brings forth the contemplative dimension of Day's interior life, and the importance of Christian writers and the traditional charisms of the Catholic saints and religious orders in the refinement of Day's lay vocation. The Benedictine, Ignatian, Franciscan, and Carmelite charisms, among others, helped Day to hone her own expression of lay sanctity, as Merriman's chapters on monasticism, the retreat movement, and saints and friends illustrate.

In tackling major influences on Day's spirituality heretofore unexplored by Day scholars, Merriman provides advanced reading for Day admirers and mandatory reading for serious students of Dorothy Day. Merriman's critical analysis of the Lacouture retreat movement makes an outstanding contribution both to our understanding of Day and to the history of the retreat movement in North America. Her investigation of Benedictine monasticism, with its stress on manual labor and prayer, adds a religious dimension to Day's lifelong love of the working masses and her emphasis at the Catholic Worker on the corporal works of mercy. Educators, like Robert Coles, who have advocated the use of fiction in a variety of educational endeavors will find in Merriman's examination of the literary influences on Day's spirituality evidence of one whose life was affected profoundly by the books she read. Day's experience of the power of literature to teach and impart wisdom is an example of the transformative role of the arts in spirituality.

Altogether, *Searching for Christ* is a remarkable accomplishment. It is scholarly but accessible, amply documented, and includes abundant new material. Merriman has made skillful use of interviews, personal correspondence, and ar-

chival material in support of her work. She supplies names, dates, and locations lacking in the works of William Miller, Day's official biographer. Miller's important books on Day contain virtually no direct references. By contrast, Merriman provides detailed endnotes and an extensive bibliography. Moreover, Merriman corrects certain factual errors in Miller's writings on Day (eg. that Day was not born in Bath Beach, Brooklyn, but in Brooklyn Heights; 228, n. 5), particularly in the matter of the Lacouture retreat (273, n. 23). In an appendix Merriman presents her own ordering of the archival "All is Grace" manuscripts which comprise the

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fragmentary retreat notes of Day from 1943-1975. This effort establishes an historical record for Day's involvement with the Lacouture retreat. Merriman's book should be consulted, now, as the first authority in matters of Day chronology and the documentation of primary materials.

* * *

Still, a caveat is in order. The book does not live up to its subtitle. I raise this issue both to indicate the limits of Merriman's study and to suggest areas for further research. Merriman's study does not attempt to give an account of "The Spirituality of Dorothy Day," as such. It offers, rather, "selected religious influences" within Day's spirituality, as the author states in the book's Preface (viii). To come

closer to the claim of being a book on "The Spirituality of Dorothy Day," Merriman would have had to stick to the anthropological definitions of spirituality which she offers in the book's first pages. Instead, after designating Day's spirituality, correctly, as a "spiritual journey," a "quest," and a "search for God" (viii; and first half of book title), Merriman chooses to deal with "selected religious influences" which are Christian and mostly Roman Catholic. As a result, the author approaches Day's spirituality primarily as "an experience rooted in a particular community's history rather than as a dimension of human existence as such."⁴ This approach, I contend, is not adequate to the subject. As a consequence of choosing to deal only with the religious influences on Day's spirituality, Merriman fails to examine issues that were essential both to Day's "searching" and to her "spirituality."

An adequate presentation of Dorothy Day's spirituality must include its non-Christian as well as its Christian influences. Day's "search" included some thirty years without any serious focus on Christ and the teachings of the Church. What of the years when Day's "hunger for God" was not attached to Christian themes and ideals? What of the "bohemian influence" on Day's spirituality, with its human loves and losses, despair, communist friendships, and socialist inspiration? What about the influence of communist principles and tactics on Day's spiritual vision and practice? More importantly, what of the influence of Kropotkin, Proudhon, and Marx on Day's spirituality?

For Merriman the Catholic saints were Day's "spiritual guides." In view of Day's own metaphors for spirituality, I would argue that Kropotkin, Debs, Sacco and Vanzetti, and the Haymarket martyrs were also Day's "spiritual guides." Day's "quest for God" included a serious consideration in her pre-Catholic years of the lives and thinking of prominent nineteenth and twentieth-century radical American and European social theorists, anarchists, and writers. Proudhon, Marx, Debs, Sinclair, and, especially, Kropotkin were as vital to the foundations of Day's spirituality as the Christian personalists.⁵ They determined what Day looked for and found, and found lacking, in Roman Catholic Christianity.

A comprehensive treatment of "The Spirituality of Dorothy Day" will have to take into account the total life experience of its subject. Granted, the author's intention was to deal only with the "religious influences" within Day's spirituality. This she has done with great thoroughness and insight. Had Merriman included as a part of the "search" a serious treatment of the "pre-conversion influences" on Day's spirituality, however, she would have come closer to elucidating the terms of her book's title.

The "people's saint" lived a rich and varied life, and while "on pilgrimage" took roads that were neither Catholic nor Christian. After her conversion to Catholicism, Day frequently commented on the ongoing influence of her socialist past by quoting St. Augustine: "The bottle always smells of the liquor it once held."⁶

Notes

¹ See David J. O'Brien, "The Pilgrimage of Dorothy Day," *Commonweal* 107 (19 December 1980): 711.

² See Kenneth L. Woodward and Eloise Salholz, "The End of a Pilgrimage," *Newsweek* 74 (15 December 1980): 75.

³ See Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 35-36.

⁴ See Bernard McGinn, "The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline," *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 1: 2 (Fall 1993): 6. McGinn, here, is contrasting the "historical-contextual" with the "anthropological" approach to spirituality, although he does not consider these to be mutually exclusive. I doubt that Merriman consciously used any of the three approaches to spirituality that McGinn discusses in this article. Nevertheless, the result of confining Day's spirituality to "religious influences" points to the limitations of the "theological" and "historical-contextual" approaches to spirituality as described by McGinn.

⁵ See "Ex Libris: Dorothy Day," *Christian Century* 80 (13 March 1963): 337. Day listed eight books in response to the question: "What books did most to shape your vocational attitude and your philosophy of life?" Works by Mounier, Maritain, and Furfey were not listed. Kropotkin and Sinclair were on Day's list.

⁶ See Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1952), 181; and *Loaves and Fishes* (San Francisco: Harper and Row), 1963, 20.