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Faith Today

A tough act to follow

By Mary Kenny
NC News Service

If the life of Catherine de Hueck Doherty were presented as a movie no one would believe it. Born into a wealthy Russian rural family in 1900, she was married to a Russian baron at 15. She served actively in World War I as a nurse, only to be forced to flee Russia during the 1917 revolution.

The young woman settled in Canada. There she went from poverty to financial success by the age of 30. She had joined a lecture circuit bringing culture and entertainment to rural America. Her lecture topic: herself, the Russian baroness, and her native land.

Actually, when she joined the circuit she was so poor she had nothing appropriate to wear. She made a gown from a black velvet funeral shroud.

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Despite — or because of — her early experiences, she was a woman of prayer. At the height of her financial success, she describes the voice of God "laughing and saying, 'You can't escape me, Catherine, you can't.'" She tried to ignore it but couldn't.

She responded by selling what she owned and moving into Toronto's slums. She planned to lead an obscure life, praying and serving the poor.

But the lone mission she envisioned was not to last. Others came to join her. Their work expanded into the first Friendship House, a storefront apostolate to the poor in Toronto during the Depression.

Mrs. Doherty went to New York City at the invitation of Jesuit Father John LaFarge. There she established a Friendship House in Harlem and spoke of racial justice — not a popular topic in some quarters, she recalls. Other Friendship Houses were opened in cities like Chicago and Portland, Ore.

It is not surprising that poverty became a theme in her writing. For her life was strongly influenc-

ed by an ongoing concern for social justice. In her books one finds much on the meaning of spiritual poverty and detachment.

In 1947 after many years in social action, Mrs. Doherty left the United States for Combermere, a Canadian village in central Ontario. As before, others came to join her. Madonna House was founded.

Mrs. Doherty is a woman who speaks sincerely and simply, going directly to the heart of things. One gets the sense she would dress the same, speak the same, whether meeting a prince or a pauper.

She often has written of life's contrasts. And she knows her subject well.

—A wealthy woman, she embraced poverty.

—A social activist, she struggled to balance this with silence and contemplation.

At Madonna House, the members form a community. They serve the many families and individuals who arrive there for spiritual direction, or on retreat, or to

Individuality. Community. Striking a balance between the two has been a favorite theme in the writings and life of one contemporary woman of prayer. Personal solitude and life as part of a community are not opposed; they complement each other, according to Catherine de Hueck Doherty.

spend some quiet time away from hectic schedules. The community carries out charitable services to the poor, as well.

Mrs. Doherty finds that forming a community is like forming a family. In both cases people try to create bonds of love.

To do so people must accept each other as they are, she believes. "You

must develop the ability to see the positive in each other...to see each other's talents and to... be glad about them."

But problems and difficulties are part of family life too. They can be viewed as causes of despair or as opportunities to grow, she believes.

To form a community, people need the courage to share their faults and weaknesses. Merely sharing a

roof and meals does not create a community of love, she believes.

How to find the point of balance between community life and personal solitude has been a favorite topic of Mrs. Doherty. From her Russian heritage, she introduced to America what is known as the "poustinia" — a little hermitage for reflection. Many Madonna House visitors spend some time in the little cabins set apart as "poustinias" there.

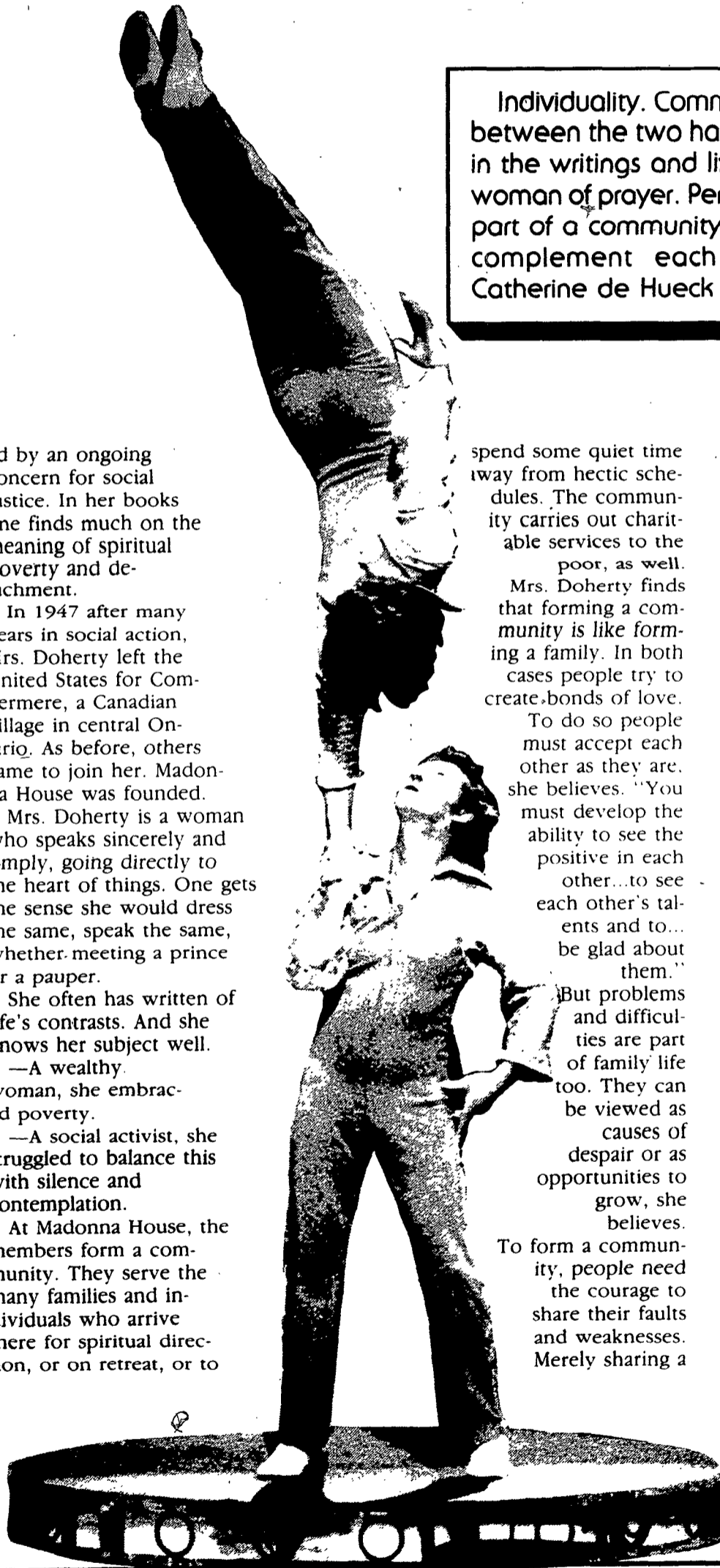
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But what of those who are necessarily immersed in the demands of the world and may never get to a Madonna House with its opportunities for solitude? In one of her observations — offered in her disarmingly simple and direct way — Mrs. Doherty points to the moments of silence every person experiences, while getting dressed, or lingering over a cup of coffee, or jogging along a quiet road.

Such moments, she writes, can be used by the Christian. And used they must be! For the person needs the order and tranquility that can grow out of these quiet times.

Concrete and practical, Mrs. Doherty speaks, not in theory, but from the various experiences of more than 80 years at trying to balance the ingredients of Christian life.

(Mrs. Kenny, with her husband Dr. James Kenny, writes a weekly syndicated column on family life.)



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