

Dorothy Day's 'quiet revolution of the heart' lives on

By Teresa A. Parsons

The late Dorothy M. Day would most likely agree with those who balk at the idea of her beatification.

Imagine proposing sainthood to this woman who shunned honors and awards and who was uncompromising enough to profess her belief in pacifism even in the face of World War II. If the way she lived was any indication, Day would be appalled at the heroic status her life is assuming. And some of the people in Rochester who live the Catholic Worker philosophy believe beatification would in some ways diminish her intense humanity.

"Saints can be dismissed as different, perfect," said Mike Afflick, director of St. Joseph's House of Hospitality. "If we keep her on a regular-person basis, we have some common ground."

"She was a very unassuming woman," reported Liz Bearsto, a member of the Catholic Worker community at Bethany House. She once met Day in New York City and recalled that when she came into a room, she simply sat in the back as if she was nobody special.

Afflick recalled a similar experience. The first and only time he met her, Day had just thrown someone out of a house of hospitality in New York City. "Sometimes you kick Christ out the door," he admitted.

"We need to go beyond hero worship and begin to worship who it is that worked through Dorothy Day," concluded Marion Carracino, another Bethany House resident.

On November 29, the fifth anniversary of Day's death, she is probably more widely known than ever before.

In part, that may be due to a number of new and re-released books on her life and the history of the Catholic Worker. But it can also be attributed to what a Bethany House resident termed the ripple effect of the Catholic Worker houses of hospitality and communities around the country.

Catholic Worker communities have in common the basic tenets of a philosophy Dorothy Day and her mentor, Peter Maurin, began in the 1930s. They sought to bring Catholicism together with social activism, interpreting the gospel message through their dedication to pacifism, voluntary poverty and individual responsibility.

They organized houses of hospitality and farms to serve the poor and to serve one another as centers of study and Catholic Worker community life. In May, 1933, Maurin and Day published the first edition of "The Catholic Worker" a bimonthly newspaper that continues to spread their message today.

Day's intense desire to live for higher values may someday lead her to sainthood, but it began far from any organized religion.

As a child growing up in Chicago, she observed the miserable lives of working class people around her. As a young woman, she looked for the solution to their plight, not in religion, but in socialism. It seemed to her then that organized religion allied itself with the wealthy class of oppressors by making the poor content with their lot.

While she rejected religion, Day struggled for women's right to vote, for unions' rights and against war while working as a journalist for socialist newspapers.

She felt increasingly drawn to Catholicism, but it was the birth of her daughter, Tamar, that prompted her to act. She had Tamar baptized and later became a Catholic herself. In the process, she lost her common-law husband, who was adamantly opposed to organized religion.

Until her death in 1980, Day traveled, wrote and demonstrated to promote the gospel message in the world. One of her stops, in 1933, was in Rochester. As a result of her visit, three study groups began to meet, forming the basis of the communities that continue today.

The Catholic Worker communities at Bethany House and St. Joseph's House of Hospitality provide homeless men and women with food, shelter and loving friendship. But the people who live in these communities agree that they are not called to serve only the poor. A tremendous variety of people from all backgrounds and income levels cross their thresholds. And ironically, the people most in need are not always the ones who are homeless.

"We're also here so that the people who have, have the opportunity to give," Afflick said. "We're privileged to be here to see the joy of that happening regularly. New steps are being taken all the time — little miracles."

"You come here expecting to serve others," added Mark Scibilia-Carver of St. Joseph's. "But you find that more often you are served."

At both houses, "community" includes not only the people who live there, but also volunteers, neighbors, former residents and all those who support their efforts with donations, prayers and encouragement.

"We want this to be a home that everyone feels welcome and accepted in," Bearsto explained. "An important part of our work — if you can call it that — is that we do it together."

The men and women welcomed at Bethany House and St. Joseph's are those who are rejected by society because they may be mentally ill, chemically addicted or physically unattractive. But those superficial impressions can conceal tremendous gifts of kindness, gentleness and hospitality, Bethany House's Donna Ecker said. Those gifts are demonstrated in many ways — from a hug or a kiss freely offered to remembering a newcomer's name.

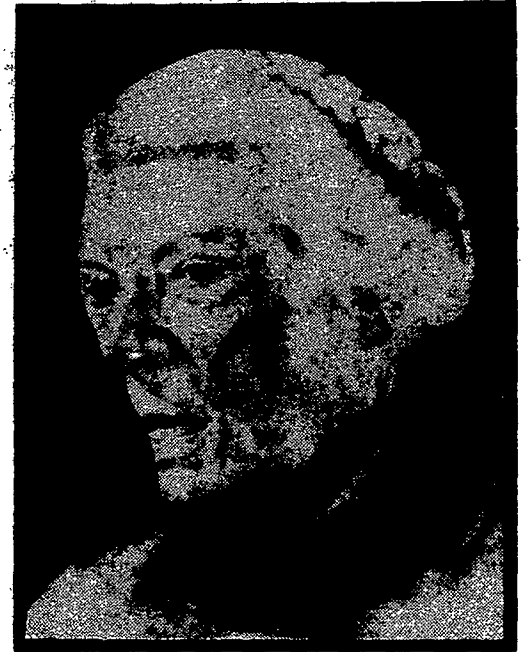
"That's one of the biggest frustrations of the house," Ecker said. "No matter how much you may feel that you want to give, they give much more. It's wonderful how they take care of and nurture each other."

Although they are sometimes perceived as grim, humorless and even bordering on fanatical, Catholic Workers don't believe those are valid labels — at least not unequivocally.

"It's getting so rare to see someone living outside the mainstream of American life, that I can see how we could be viewed with some wonder," Afflick said. "But we're not really different from everybody else ... we see this as the ordinary work of Catholic Christian people. We've just made it the central part of our lives."

He added that Dorothy Day didn't envision the Catholic Worker philosophy as appealing to only a select few. For instance, Day believed that every parish and every home ought to incorporate a "Christ Room," an area set aside for offering hospitality.

"For her, it didn't stop with one house of hospitality," Marion Carracino noted. "To die and be seen as a success because of a certain number of houses of hospitality and farms was probably very painful to her."



Carracino agreed to being called obsessive and even fanatical as long as the words were meant in the sense of being driven by the force of the Holy Spirit.

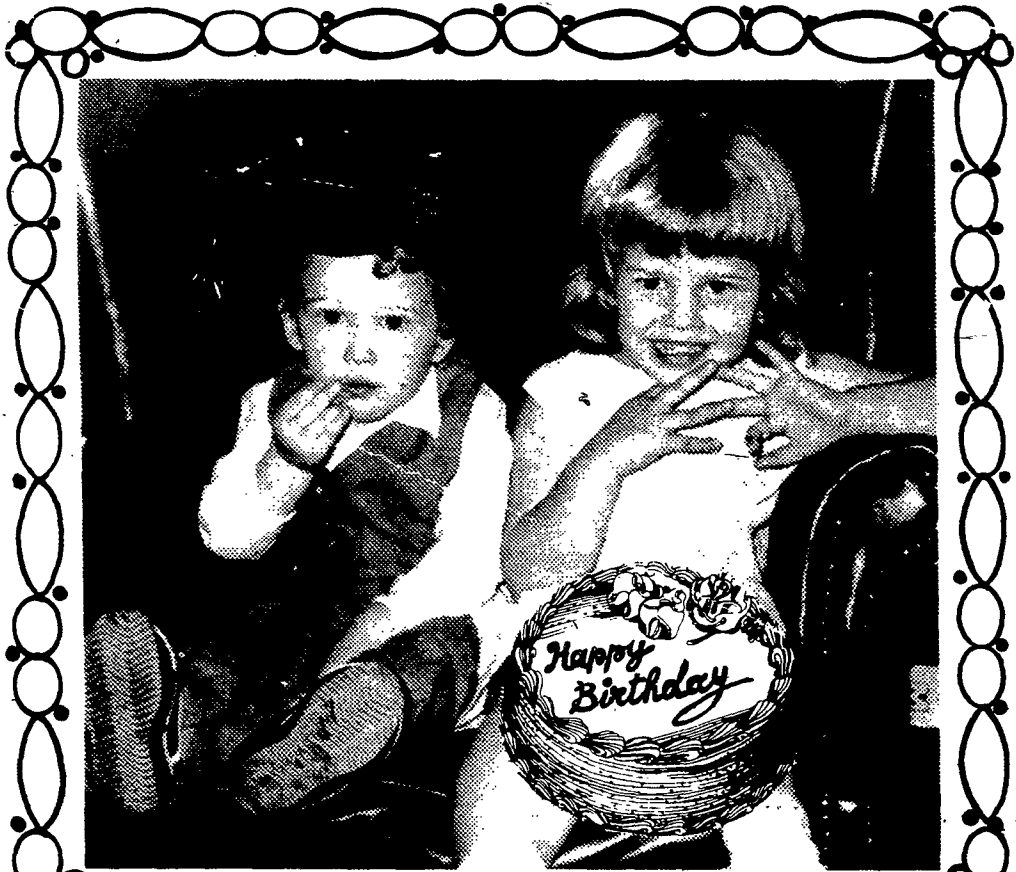
She likened her response to the biblical image of being fools for Christ. "We are all called to be driven in different ways," she added. "We may be judged as fanatics, but we don't want to flip the coin and judge others."

"But without a sense of humor," Ecker added, "you'd burn out very quickly."

As Dorothy Day opened herself to love each of the people she encountered, she experienced more and more of the suffering of those people — a kind of terminal compassion she bore joyfully.

"The more you love, the more difficult it is to bring that smile out sometimes," Marion said. "It's our challenge to be hopeful in the face of the pain of these women ... and to know that what you can do is very little."

Being what Dorothy Day was is not the main focus of life at Bethany House or St. Joseph's. "It's an important ideal to strive for, but not the be-all," Ecker said. "What's most important is that we do what God wants us to do, whatever that might be."



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