

Features

Biographies study 'living mysteries' of two spiritual, political women

DOROTHY DAY: A RADICAL DEVOTION

By Robert Coles
Addison-Wesley, 182pp., \$17.95

SIMONE WEIL: A MODERN PILGRIMAGE

By Robert Coles
Addison-Wesley 179pp., \$17.95

By Dominic A. Aquila

"To be a witness," wrote Parisian Cardinal Emmanuel Celestin Suhard, "does not consist in engaging in propaganda or even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery" it means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist."

Such is the way Dorothy Day wanted her life described — as "a living mystery." Accordingly, child psychiatrist, professor and prolific author Robert Coles renders portraits of Dorothy Day and Simone Weil that place squarely and concretely before the reader of the mysteries of these two lives, mysteries driven by rigorous, unsentimental and relentless self-examination.

Of the two women, Dorothy Day is more familiar to American Catholics as the co-founder with Peter Maurin of the Catholic Worker. She started her adult life as a writer, giving her entre to the Bohemian intellectual circles of Greenwich Village during the 1920s. She would stay up all night with people like Eugene O'Neill and John Reed, thrashing out this literary point or that piece of Marxian doctrine. She had a great respect for the world of ideas and an appreciation for literature that carried her off to lost weekends of rapt reading. Her great affinity and respect for the poor transcended her friends' parlor room socialism, and her spiritual hunger could never be satisfied by their self-indulgent way of life.

After much wrangling, and over the protests of her Bohemian friends, Dorothy Day was baptized into the Catholic Church in December, 1927. Until she met Peter Maurin and founded the Catholic Worker in 1932, she struggled to reconcile her Marxist-inspired desire to work with the poor and her faith in the Catholic Church — a church which at that time was more comfortable with the wealthy than with the poor. Through her success in this effort, the Catholic Worker movement has for the last 55 years been a major influence on American Catholicism, especially through its example of respectful service to the poor.

Simone Weil, the French mystic, social critic, and influential philosopher, was born into a Jewish family in France on the eve of World War I. Like Dorothy Day, she loved the life of the mind and had a keen intellect, but her moral convictions would not allow her to hide behind the walls of the academy. In 1934, at the age of 25 and in poor health, she took a series of positions as a laborer in Paris "to see first hand how it is, all the time, for working-class people." After a year of this, her insufferable migraine headaches forced her to resign herself to the care of her parents.

Over the course of her late 20s, she moved gradually toward Catholicism, but even until her early death at the age of 34, she refused to be baptized into the Church. In the words of Dr. Coles, "she was a Roman Catholic in spirit, in faith." Yet unlike Day, she could never forgive the Church for its "long and sordid history" — the Inquisition and the debauched

Between the Lines

papacies of the Renaissance. Not that Day for her part didn't struggle with the Church's sinfulness. Coles points out that she was haunted by Father Romano Guardini's characterization of the Church as "the Cross on which Christ was crucified."

Coles' two portraits are companions inasmuch as these women are spiritual companions. Both embraced the sacramental life and traditions of Catholicism, while at the same time advocating radical political philosophies. Both hungered for the Lord and looked after the hungry. Both recognized "pride as the greatest sin" — a phrase which appears at least a dozen times through the two volumes — and tormented themselves over its commission. They loved the life of the mind, but like Plato, Emerson and Tolstoy, they insisted that intellect serve moral ends, that "character is higher than intellect."

Coles is ever mindful of the psychological reductionism that is characteristic of those in his profession. He examines the conversion of both women in detail and thoughtfully puts to rest all the tidy psychological explanations — anxiety, masochism, depression — that do violence to the mysterious yearnings of Day and Weil, to their "restless hearts." He understates the dramatic and spectacular nature of their conversions, showing how both conversions were consistent with earlier currents in the women's lives.

Coles, Day and Weil would likely agree that tidy and pat explanations of psychology and sociology rob our yearning souls of their vitality, of God's vitality. If life's mysteries are so easily explained, why should we continue our earthly pilgrimage toward God? St. Augustine knew about the danger of simplistic explanations, warning us that if we think we have God figured out, we haven't.

Dr. Coles has rendered clear and sensitive portraits of these women; yet both books are weak in their treatment of the women's politics. First, Coles overstates the separation of politics from their religious lives. This is surprising since Coles certainly would be the first to acknowledge the need for politics to be guided by morality. The politics of Day and Weil were driven by their religious sensibilities.

Second, he too quickly dismisses Dorothy Day's politics of personalism — the absolute celebration of the individual, not in isolation, but in community — as merely a reaction to the rapacious statisms of Stalin and Hitler. Personalism, however, continues to be a potent political force informing the outlook of Pope John Paul II.

Finally, Coles is a bit too sanguine about the social and cultural conditions of contemporary Western culture. To be sure, we do not face the monsters of Stalin or Hitler threatening the very destruction of society, but ours is a subtler threat. As Neil Postman wrote in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* today's threat is not that of Orwell's *1984* but of Huxley's *Brave New World*. Trivialization and sentimentality — the appeal to emotions without regard for one's reason — eat away at our souls as we stand laughing. But before we die we want to live so that God will respect us when we meet him.

Talk about a life examined, about "a living mystery!"

Diocesan Appointments



Bishop Matthew H. Clark has announced the following diocesan appointments:

Father Kevin E. McKenna, vice chancellor of the diocese, to doctoral studies in canon law at St. Paul's University, Ottawa, Canada, effective September 1, 1988.

Father Eugene R. Weis, pastor of St. Casimir, Elmira, to additional appointment as area priest youth director for the Elmira Catholic Youth Organization, replacing **Father James P. Collins** after 22 years of faithful service, effective January 1, 1988.

Sibley's exhibits lifesize creche

The Ward Gallery at Sibley's downtown Rochester branch is currently exhibiting "The Journey to Bethlehem," a lifesize replica of a 17th century European creche. The gallery, located on Sibley's fourth floor, is open during the store's regular hours. The exhibit will be on display through December 26.

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