Romancing Lady Poverty Anew: Dorothy Day and The Franciscan Tradition[1]

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A rebellious adolescence struggling against the more conventional expectations of a prosperous middle-class family. Dreams of travel and adventure in a time of war and civil strife. An idolization of romantic love as the highest good one could attain. A religious crisis severing family and social relationships. A radical conversion to the gospel as the model for Christian existence. An unswerving loyalty to the Church which still recognized its all-too-human flaws. An embrace of poverty and non-violence as the supreme form of Christian witness in a world ruled by wealth and power. A new movement (of sometimes dubious orthodoxy) established on the margins of society to demonstrate the viability of the gospel as a way of life for all peoples. A posthumous struggle between the Church and followers over the founder's legacy precisely because of its powerful appeal. In sum, a life utterly defined by its time and place, yet transcending both. A remarkable life. A saint's life. An imitation of Christ.

Despite being separated by sex, culture, language, and over seven centuries of historical change, the lives of Francis of Assisi and Dorothy Day have remarkable similarities. Indeed, more than anyone else in the American Catholic experience, she came closest to recapturing the allure of poverty and solidarity with the poor that has made the Poverello the most beloved of all Christian saints. Given their affinity, it is more remarkable still that Day never formed any institutional connection to the Franciscan tradition, choosing instead to become a Benedictine Oblate. Nevertheless, she always maintained a special devotion for the Poor Man of Assisi and recognized the affinity between his religious charism and her own work with the poor. To better understand their relationship, this paper will explore: (1) the history of Day's discovery of and lifelong interest in Francis; (2) the influence of Francis' love of poverty on her spirituality and practice; and (3) the Franciscan sources of the radical pacifism she adopted as a way of living out the gospel. Through the mediation of Peter Maurin, Dorothy Day found in Francis a spiritual model and mentor who shaped both her understanding of the gospel and the tasks and structure of the Catholic Worker movement more profoundly than is often appreciated by her disciples or detractors.

I. Discovering Francis

In the summer of 1928, only months after her entry into the Church which ended a common-law marriage to Forster Batterham, Day first turned her attention to Francis through a reading of *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis.* As Brigid O'Shea Merriman writes, "the Christian classic provided Dorothy with a deeper appreciation for Francis than the synopsis she had already found in her *St. Andrew's Missal.* As with other works which she considered enriching, Dorothy reread *The Little Flowers* several times in subsequent years."[2] Indeed, over a half century later, the work recurs among the list of the books she read during the last two years of her life.[3] While not a primary or always historically reliable source of information about Francis, this work certainly gave the impressionable new Catholic a powerful portrait of what a literal embodiment of the gospel would look like, and helped lay the groundwork for the more thorough and mature encounter with Francis offered by Peter Maurin after their meeting in December 1932.

As part of his "education" of Day in the Catholic theological and social tradition, Maurin introduced her to Pius XI's 1926 encyclical on the septicentennial of Francis' death, *Rite Expiatis.* In the October 1944 *Catholic Worker,* Dorothy places this text alongside the prophets and the Fathers of the Church in importance for her development.[4] This encyclical

> provided Dorothy with a clear presentation of Francis' striking fidelity to Christ, remarking on him as a 'Second Christ,' a man whose spirit was identical with that of the gospel. *Rite Expiatis* painted a picture of a thirteenth century in need of Christian reform, a youthful Francis converted to embrace the gospel fully, whose natural inclination to help the needy was transformed by grace. The document [also] pointed out the saint's great love for poverty in imitation of Christ.[5]

In addition, the text discussed the Third Order which Francis founded for those in the world who wished to follow his call to sanctity, poverty, and (especially) non-violence—all three of which were to become pillars of the Catholic Worker ideal.

Maurin could hardly have chosen a better text to inspire a young convert like Day, whose social sympathies and spiritual ambitions so closely mirrored those of Francis. Pius XI described

the social conditions in the thirteenth century when, neglecting the needs of the poor, many men

> allowed themselves to be overcome by egotism and greed for possessions and were driven by an insatiable desire for riches. These men, regardless of the laws which had been promulgated in many places against vice, ostentatiously paraded their riches in a wild orgy of clothes, banquets, and feasts of every kind. They looked on poverty and the poor as something vile. They abhorred from the depths of their souls the lepers—leprosy was then very widespread—and neglected these outcasts completely in their segregation from society. What is worse, this greed for wealth and pleasure was not even absent . . . from those [clergy] who should have most scrupulously guarded themselves from such sin. The custom, too, was prevalent of monopolizing wealth and piling up large fortunes. These fortunes were often acquired in divers and sinful manners, sometimes by the violent extortion of money and other times by usury.[6]

Reading this in New York City during the depths of the Great Depression, Day could not have missed its contemporary significance, or have avoided being deeply moved by it.

Day completed her knowledge of Francis over the next several years with several classic works on the saint. Foremost among these was Johannes Jörgensen's seminal biography *St. Francis of Assisi*, one of the first serious Catholic contributions to modern Franciscan scholarship. O'Shea Merriman writes that "her general knowledge of events in Francis' life, her appreciation of Francis' loving respect and compassion for the individual person, quotations from his Testament and Canticle of Brother Sun, all point to the Jörgensen biography as her major source."[7] It was hardly the sole source, though: references to Father Cuthbert's *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, G. K. Chesterton's *St. Francis of Assisi*, and (several decades later) Leonard von Matt's *Pictorial Life of St. Francis* show her continued interest in the saint throughout her life. Moreover, her fellow Catholic Worker Stanley Vishnewski was "a Third Order Franciscan, although he does not attend the meetings, and has a large collection of books on St. Francis."[8]

Given her knowledge of Francis and her obvious sympathy with his ideals, why did Day not herself become a Third Order

Franciscan, rather than (as eventually happened) a Benedictine Oblate of St. Procopius Abbey in Lisle, Illinois? According to O'Shea Merriman,

> At least two possibilities suggest themselves. While Maurin had great respect for Francis, he was more attracted to the Benedictine tradition; it is likely that his preference influenced Dorothy. Second, none of Dorothy's writings of this decade [the 1930s] reveal that she had made the acquaintance of any single Franciscan or Franciscan group of the stature of Virgil Michel and the Collegeville Abbey [with whom she had formed a friendship. Nevertheless, . . .] she remained interested in the Franciscan charism to the end of her days."[9]

This influence sometimes expressed itself in surprising ways: "Once, while preparing for the opening of a retreat, she found herself randomly opening the Bible three times in conscious imitation of Francis of Assisi, a saint whom she greatly admired and whose life of voluntary poverty and peacemaking she strove to emulate."[10] And while she never pretended to a scholarly understanding of the historical Francis or to an explicitly Franciscan spirituality, Day's journey in the Catholic faith was accompanied from beginning to end by the Poverello, who exercised a subtle but profound influence over her life.

II. Romancing Lady Poverty: Peter as Francis *Redivivus*

If Peter Maurin was the decisive influence in her life as a Catholic, the one who first revealed to her that solidarity with the poor was an essential element of the Christian life, it is certainly significant that Day in turn always spoke of Peter in Franciscan terms. Her first biographer, William Miller, quotes Day as saying: "Peter was always getting back to Saint Francis of Assisi, who was most truly the 'gentle personalist.' In his poverty, rich; in renouncing all, possessing all; generous, giving out of the fullness of his heart, sewing generously and reaping generously, humble and asking when in need, possessing freedom and all joy."[11] Indeed, the identification of Peter and Francis is sometimes even more explicit for Day. Mel Piehl writes:

> Because he advocated and lived a life of absolute poverty and generosity based on Catholic ideals, Maurin

> expressed perfectly Day's most deeply held beliefs about religion and society. His humble appearance and open-hearted simplicity brought to mind the saints she knew so well from her studies and suggested that sainthood was a present as well as a past reality. 'Peter was the poor man of his day,' she said. 'He was another St. Francis in modern times.'[12]

(Given her esteem for Maurin, it is difficult to know who is receiving the greater compliment from her, Peter or Francis.) In Peter, Dorothy experienced the Franciscan spirit in its purest form.

The most striking parallel between Peter and Francis was their insistence on voluntary poverty as the foundation of the Christian life, without which the practice of the corporal works of mercy becomes impossible. Day recalls Peter saying that

> St. Francis of Assisi thought that to choose to be poor is as good as marrying the most beautiful girl in the world. Most of us seem to think that Lady Poverty is an ugly girl and not the beautiful girl St. Francis says she is. And because we think so, we refuse to feed the poor with our superfluous goods. Instead, we let the politicians feed the poor by going around like pickpockets robbing Peter to pay Paul.[13]

As Jim Forest describes their initial encounter in December 1932,

> By the time Dorothy met him, Peter had not only returned to the Catholic faith but has acquired an ascetic attitude toward both property and money: he had nearly none of either and, like Saint Francis of Assisi, rejoiced in poverty as if it were his bride. His poverty was his freedom. . . . Like Francis of Assisi and many other saints, Peter had been living on less rather than more for years and found it freeing rather than limiting.[14]

Marc H. Ellis points out that Peter's imitation of Francis—and, by extension, that of Day and the Catholic Worker movement in general—was not rooted in some romantic bohemianism but rather in a prophetic critique of modern society in light of the gospel:

> As a modern follower of Francis, Maurin was profoundly at odds with the times in which he lived. . . . As much as

> anything, Maurin's adoration of Franciscan poverty was designed to free him to preach the gospel and stand as a witness to a culture that prized affluence. His emphasis on faith and contemplation as the foundation for rebuilding the church in a time of crisis was basically Franciscan, as was his emphasis on obedience to the Catholic church, a theme he found crucial in Francis' ability to maintain his radicalism while avoiding sectarianism.[15]

But Ellis goes even further than this. In contrast to O'Shea Merriman, who emphasizes his Benedictine tendencies, Ellis sees in Maurin little less than a reappearance of the Spiritual Franciscans of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in offering a radical critique of the existing social and ecclesial order:

> Like others who had sought to emulate the saint from Assisi, Maurin saw Francis's poverty as eschatological. For Maurin, Francis's vision of life, when embodied in the person and the community, broke through the constraints of history and institutional forms, radically questioning the lethargy and 'givenness' of personal and social life. Francis thus represented the transformation that Maurin sought: a return by the person and the community to a total dependence on God. For Maurin, this included freeing the Catholic church and the Franciscan orders themselves from the bureaucratization that had diluted the radical demands of Jesus. Through Francis, Maurin wanted to move to the beginning and the end: the following of Jesus Christ.[16]

Whether or not Maurin would have described his philosophy in such stark terms, Ellis does firmly grasp the radical implications for our society of Peter's "Green Revolution."

At the same time, Peter also taught Dorothy the crucial distinction (so often obscured by the Christian tradition throughout history and even still today) between

> inflicted poverty and voluntary poverty; between being the victims and the champions of poverty. I prefer to call the one kind destitution, reserving the word poverty for what St. Francis called 'Lady Poverty.' We know the misery being poor can cause. St. Francis was 'the little poor

> man' and none was more joyful than he; yet Francis began with tears, in fear and trembling, hiding out in a cave from his irate father. . . . It was only later that he came to love Lady Poverty. Perhaps kissing the leper was the great step that freed him not only from fastidiousness and a fear of disease but from attachment to worldly goods as well.[17]

Day also learned, both from Peter and from hard personal experience, not to romanticize either poverty or the sometimes theatrical spirituality of the Poor Man of Assisi. With very sound theological instincts, Day recognized that conversion is for almost everyone a process, and not an event: "Sometimes, as in St. Francis' case, freedom from fastidiousness and detachment from worldly things, can be attained in only one step. We would like to think that this is often so. And yet the older I get the more I see that life is made up of many steps, and they are very small ones, not giant strides. I have 'kissed a leper' not once but twice—consciously—yet I cannot say I am much the better for it."[18]

It was also Peter who impressed upon her the quote from the *Little Flowers* in which she found the secret meaning of the struggles and humiliations involved in the Catholic Worker movement, such as Peter's being mistaken for a Bowery bum: "We can only read over again the story of St. Francis, 'This then is perfect joy,' which we are reprinting in the CW."[19] As early as 1940, Day employed this quote to make sense of the human suffering caused by the economic hardships of the Great Depression, when unemployed men were resented and shunned by their own families: "To be hated and scorned by one's very own—this is poverty. This is perfect joy. The man of the family, out of work thru no fault of his own, scorned, heaped with recriminations by wife, children. It is part of the world's sorrow. Again due to their hard hearts, more than to poverty."[20] Francis' saying, "This then is perfect joy," recurs throughout Day's writings across the decades. Indeed, the daily suffering she encountered seems to have been bearable at times only because of the example of St. Francis and his unyielding emphasis on poverty, both material and spiritual, as forming the heart of the Christian life.

III. The Charism of Non-Violence

If Day's commitment to voluntary poverty as both a spiritual and a social practice can be traced (via Peter) to St. Francis, the

Poverello's influence does not end there. As Francis saw clearly in the thirteenth century, the logical conclusion of voluntary poverty, of total reliance upon God for one's needs, is a renunciation of all forms of violence. Whether allowing himself to be beaten and cast out into the cold when mistaken as a thief (therein discovering "perfect joy"), or voluntarily facing death before the Sultan to preach the gospel, or allowing himself to be stoned and mocked as a madman by the people of Assisi to obtain materials for rebuilding San Damiano, Francis modeled non-violence more effectively than perhaps any other saint in Christian history. In a feudal society ruled by force and permeated with violence, "Saint Francis of Assisi had embraced the pacifist way with remarkable impact; many thousands joined the lay order he founded, accepting an obligation neither to possess nor use deadly weapons."[21] But, as Day would have read in *Rite Expiatis*, even this demand for non-violence among Francis' followers was given the very un-Francis-like proviso, "except in defense of the Roman Church, of the Christian faith, and of one's own country, or with the consent of one's Minister."[22] As we shall see, Day and the Catholic Worker movement took Francis' injunction far more literally than did the universal Church. In any case, "the connection [Day] made between Francis' poverty and pacifism appeared to matter most to her: the topic runs as a thread through many of her writings."[23]

Once again, Peter here serves as a crucial intermediary between Dorothy and the Franciscan tradition. He "shared the joy and excitement of Francis in living the gospel in poverty and freedom. Like Francis, Peter gave up any ideas of power, domination or expediency as means to accomplish his goals, but rather inspired others with the idea of their vocation."[24] Almost a quarter-century before meeting Day, Maurin's pacifism may have led him to emigrate from France to Canada in 1909 to avoid conscription into the military.[25] His insistence on non-violence resonated immediately with Day, and the topic (as well as its Franciscan roots) formed part of the Catholic Worker message from the very beginning. Even during the Spanish Civil War, when almost all those on the left rallied to the Republican side against Franco and the fascists, "Maurin did not speak out, though he made it clear that his way was the Franciscan way, a way that excluded violence."[26] Rather, in issue after issue of the *Catholic Worker*, "Dorothy took frequent notice of the Franciscan contribution to peace, most directly through references to Francis and, in the

early years of the Catholic Worker, through reminders of the Secular Franciscans' contribution along the lines represented in *Rite Expiatis.*"[27]

Day's commitment to pacifism would face its supreme test after America's entry into the Second World War, and the division over it threatened the continued existence of the Catholic Worker movement during the war. Here, too, the figure of Francis is in the forefront of Day's mind as she struggled to remain faithful to the gospel of non-violence in a world totally engulfed in war. In the January 1942, one month after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the *Catholic Worker* carried on its front page an editorial entitled "Our Country Passes from Undeclared War to Declared War; We Continue Our Christian Pacifist Stand." It stated: "We are at war, a declared war, with Japan, Germany and Italy. But still we can repeat Christ's words, each day, holding them close in our hearts, each month printing them in the paper. In times past, Europe has been a battlefield. But let us remember St. Francis, who spoke of peace and we will remind our readers of him, too, so they will not forget."[28] If the appeal to the figure of Francis were not a sufficiently clear statement of the religious authority behind the paper's decidedly unpopular pacifist stance, the artwork accompanying the editorial removed all doubt: "In the center of the page was a graphic of St. Francis of Assisi with the words 'Peace Without Victory.'"[29]

At the same time, Day realized that even pacifism can become a weapon used to attack and discredit one's opponent, and to dehumanize them, if used improperly. Recognizing the complexity of the human situation and the supernatural demands made by the pacifist position, Day was wary of easy moralizing. Too many men in the Catholic Worker movement that she knew and respected had defected from her cause and enlisted during the war for Day to dismiss or belittle their moral struggles. That attitude, she clearly saw, is itself a form of violence. Instead, "Dorothy realized the consequences of her pacifism, and strove to exercise her understanding of the gospel tradition in such a way as not to appear to pass judgment on others. This she did in conscious imitation of Francis, as she strove to win them 'to another point of view, with love and with respect.'"[30] Even to those who could not share her pacifist convictions, Dorothy Day (like Francis on Crusade in Egypt some seven centuries earlier) offered at least a reminder of the possibility of non-violence as an alternative to those trapped in the violence of war.

Finally, like Francis before them, both Maurin and Day extended this strategy of non-violence to the Church, humbly submitting themselves to its authority and refusing to resort to attacks of any sort upon its leaders (even when they were deserving of censure by any natural standard). By doing so, Day and Maurin avoided the sectarian temptations that bedeviled Francis' thirteenth- and fourteenth-century followers (a pattern which the Catholic Worker movement has not been entirely spared). In her September 1964 column Day explicitly referenced Francis' submission to priests and bishops—their human failings notwithstanding—as a model for her own Catholic life. This attitude of disobedience and disrespect, she understood, was itself a form of spiritual violence against the Church. Indeed, "Day permitted no criticism of priests or bishops in her presence, immediately coming to their defense. She suppressed Peter Maurin's mild anti-clericalism from the Catholic Worker. She told Stanley Vishnewski that Catholics should emulate St. Francis of Assisi's attitude of respect and reverence toward the clergy."[31] However unpopular her pacifism may have been in mid-century American society, however unsavory her past, and however scandalous to middle-class sensibilities her political views, the Church reciprocated her loyalty precisely because of the obvious authenticity and sincerity of her convictions. Like Francis before Pope Innocent III, Dorothy Day could so fundamentally challenge the American Church only because she was an unquestionably loyal child of it. Mark and Louise Zwick have argued that "this bond with the Church allowed Francis and the Catholic Workers to maintain their radicalism in following the gospel without losing perspective or seeking self-aggrandizement. Their critique of the Church and the secular world was their very lives."[32]

Conclusion

Like Francis some seven centuries before her, Dorothy Day posed a fundamental challenge to the society in which she lived, presenting an alternative vision of community in which the gospel values of poverty and non-violence would supplant the worldly ones of wealth and power. This vision, in all its essentials, was that of the Poor Man of Assisi, whose example never ceased to inform and inspire Day in her apostolate. Day once wrote of Francis, "Men are usually of their time. St. Francis is timeless."[33] The same is true of his ideals, and no one in the history of the American Church more effectively embodied them than Day. In

the same way, and with much the same degrees of success and of failure, "Dorothy Day did for her era what St. Francis of Assisi did for his: recall a complacent Christianity to its radical roots."[34] As has been shown, though, in many respects Dorothy's accomplishment was only an adaptation and extension of the work Francis began seven hundred years earlier. Whether she thought of herself as a Franciscan in any formal sense, or whether the Church categorizes her as such, is largely irrelevant. O'Shea Merriman rightly concludes of Day, "From Francis, she imbibed continued lessons in poverty and peace and, inspired by his love for God and others, strove to promote justice and harmony among her contemporaries."[35] As such, Francis would certainly have seen Day as one of his own—as should we.

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[1] Originally published in Lance Richey and Adam DeVille, ed., *Dorothy Day and the Church: Past, Present and Future. Proceedings of a Conference held at the University of Saint Francis, Fort Wayne, Indiana, May 13-15, 2015* (Solidarity Hall: Valparaiso, IN, 2016), 161-74.

[2] Brigid O'Shea Merriman, *Searching for Christ: The Spirituality of Dorothy Day* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 175.

[3] Jim Forest, *All is Grace: A Biography of Dorothy Day* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 294.

[4] Mark and Louise Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement: Intellectual and Spiritual Origins* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2005), 122.

[5] O'Shea Merriman, *Searching for Christ*, 176.

[6] *Rite Expiatis*, 8. See http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_30041926_rite-expiatis.html.

[7] O'Shea Merriman, *Searching for Christ*, 178.

[8] Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes* (intro. Robert Coles; Orbis, 2003 [orig. 1963]), 145.

[9] O'Shea Merriman, *Searching for Christ*, 177.

[10] Ibid., 26.

[11] William Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1984), 235.

[12] Mel Piehl, *Breaking Bread: The Catholic Worker and the Origin of Catholic Radicalism in America* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 65-66.

[13] Day, *Loaves and Fishes*, 48.

[14] Forest, *All is Grace*, 106, 114.

[15] Marc H. Ellis, "Peter Maurin: To Bring the Social Order to Christ," pp. 15-46 in Patrick Coy, ed., *Revolution of the Heart: Essays on the Catholic Worker* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988), 20, 19.

[16] Ibid., 21.

[17] Day, *Loaves and Fishes*, 82-83.

[18] Ibid., 83.

[19] Entry from March 11, 1959, in Day, *Duty of Delight*, 253.

[20] Entry from July 24, 1940 in ibid., 59.

[21] Forest, *All is Grace*, 153.

[22] *Rite Expiatis*, 34. With less persuasiveness, O'Shea Merriman claims that the Third Order's "refusal to bear arms is generally acknowledged as being instrumental in the breakdown of the feudal system" (*Searching for Christ*, 287 n. 11).

[23] Ibid., 178.

[24] Zwick, *Catholic Worker Movement*, 116.

[25] Dorothy Day and Francis Sicius, *Peter Maurin: Apostle to the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 5. The reason for his emigration is disputed.

[26] Eileen Egan, "Dorothy Day: Pilgrim of Peace, pp. 69-114 in *Revolution of the Heart*, 77.

[27] O'Shea Merriman, *Searching for Christ*, 177.

[28] "Our Country Passes from Undeclared War to Declared War; We Continue Our Christian Pacifist Stand," *Catholic Worker*, January 1942, 1.

[29] Egan, "Dorothy Day," 82. Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement maintained their pacifist stance after the war, protesting civil defense exercise in the 1950s and the Viet Nam War in the 1960s, though the immediate existential importance of these debates never matched the intensity of those conducted in the face of fascist agression.

[30] O'Shea Merriman, *Searching for Christ*, 179.

[31] Nancy L. Roberts, Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1985), 105.

[32] Zwick, *Catholic Worker Movement*, 117.

[33] Day, *Duty of Delight*, 186.

[34] Kenneth Woodward, *Newsweek*, quoted on the front cover of *Dorothy Day: Meditations*, selected and arranged by Stanley Vishnewski (New York: Newman Press, 1970; repr. Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1997), cited by Zwick, *Catholic Worker Movement*, 116-17.

[35] O'Shea Merriman, *Searching for Christ*, 219.