

THE PRECARIETY OF LOVE: DOROTHY DAY ON POVERTY

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“Before God we are all poor beggars seeking to take advantage of the divine profligacy.”



Dorothy Day, who founded the Catholic Worker movement in 1933 along with Peter Maurin, was praised by Pope Francis in his recent address before the Congress of the United States. In particular, he noted her singular devotion to the poor and passionate advocacy for social justice. And indeed, this was a central focus of her mission—a mission which continues today in the many Catholic Worker houses of hospitality and Catholic Worker farms. Nevertheless, if we were to leave our analysis of her legacy at that simple affirmation, we would run the risk of missing the genuinely Catholic theological moment that informed her thinking and actions, and reducing her to just one more philanthropic voice calling for aid to the poor. In fact, it is not in the slightest an exaggeration to say that, absent such a theological analysis, her actions on behalf of the poor cannot be understood even in their most rudimentary construal. For before all else, there is one salient fact about the life of Dorothy Day that must not be ignored:

Dorothy Day was a radical Catholic in the original meaning of the word “radical”; she was a Catholic who took the internal theo-logic of the faith to its roots and attempted to put it into action in prophetic ways. Thus, any attempt to bleach her life of its moorings in her deeply held Catholic faith is superficial at best, and mendacious at worst.

Furthermore, assuming that her charisma was genuine and that the movement she founded is thus worth saving and promoting, it is important that her life and thinking be narrated properly so that her vision can be appropriated in a manner that can guide the Catholic Worker movement into the future. Allow me to be blunt here: the modern Catholic Worker movement is in a bit of a crisis, with many Catholic Worker houses espousing largely secular/leftist political orientations with little attention paid to explicitly Catholic theological concerns. Indeed, my own involvement in the movement as the owner and operator of a small Catholic Worker farm has only increased my concern. The memory of Dorothy Day is certainly revered and honored within the movement, but a certain narration of her life has emerged wherein the radical edges of her Catholicism are blunted. This is not universally true to be sure, and there are promising rays of light here and there. But my observations, I think, are valid as a broad generalization. And on the other side of the aisle there are more traditional Catholics who, though admiring her devotion to the poor, seek to domesticate her and her theology by ignoring her trenchant theological critiques of capitalism, American exceptionalism, militarism, and religious legalism. Therefore, if the movement is to survive and indeed flourish as a specifically Catholic enterprise that reflects Dorothy Day’s full vision, there is a great need for a robust and unblinking retrieval of her theological commitments.

In what follows I offer some all-too-brief observations on her writings concerning the poor as well as the meaning and value of poverty. I make no claim to originality or completeness, but will allow Dorothy to speak plainly in her own words; I will add my own thoughts in a manner that, it is hoped, will merely highlight and foreground her central ideas. I will arrange her thoughts topically for the sake of clarity, bearing in mind that such classifications are a bit arbitrary. All quotes have been drawn from her regular column in the *New York Catholic Worker* newspaper, a paper she first printed and sold for a penny

on May 1, 1933, and which continues to this day to be printed and distributed at that same price.

1. PRECARIETY AND VOLUNTARY POVERTY

It is hard to write about poverty. We live in a slum neighborhood that is becoming ever more crowded. . . . [I]t is hard to write about poverty when a visitor tells you how he and his family all lived in a basement room and did sweatshop work to make ends meet.¹

One of the most striking characteristics of Day's writing on poverty is that her attitude is not simply "poverty is evil and must be eliminated." Her theological anthropology is such that she views our spiritual condition as sinful beggars before the divine mercy as our most appropriate posture. In some measure we must all strive to lead lives of poverty so that nothing stands between the divine gift and us. It is a straightforward idea drawn from the dominical admonition that you "cannot serve both God and mammon." As such, it differs little from the wisdom of the saints who all emphasized the same. Thus, the problem of the "poor" is more complex than a simple matter of lacking money. We will address this in more detail later. For now, however, we must note that Day did struggle with the fact that it is very difficult to counsel poverty, both internal and external, to people who literally have nothing and who suffer greatly from their inability to care properly for their families. But she is at pains, nevertheless, to point out that it is not the goal of human life to become wealthy or even comfortable on a material level, and that all human beings should strive to adopt a form of voluntary poverty that frees them from slavery to things. Such slavery, both internal and external, blinds us to God and to neighbor and is part of a fabric of lies contained in the logic of worldliness. Thus, any attempt to create a political program oriented toward making everyone affluent will inevitably degenerate into a tyranny of material necessity and the economics of mendacity that it requires.

1. "Poverty and Precarity," *The Catholic Worker* (May 1952), 2, 6 (hereafter cited as TCW). All essays and other supporting materials can be found on The Catholic Worker website: www.catholicworker.org.

“True poverty is rare,” a saintly priest writes to us from Martinique. “Nowadays (religious) communities are good, I am sure, but they are mistaken about poverty. They accept, admit on principle, poverty, but everything must be good and strong, buildings must be fireproof. Precarity is rejected everywhere, and precarity is an essential element of poverty. That has been forgotten. Here we want precarity in everything except the Church.”²

Here we are introduced to a term central to Day’s vision of voluntary poverty: precarity. Derived from the word “precarious,” precarity signifies an attitude of inward trust in God that is the very soul of true poverty. One can lack money but still possess a grasping and scheming mentality, riddled with jealousy and anxiety. True poverty manifests as a resolute rejection of the scheming and anxious soul, seeking to divest itself of all that creates within us a false sense of security through worldly acquisition. This might place us in a precarious situation where some kind of disaster is always threatening and which can weigh heavily on the soul as a constant fear. But this is where the soul that has attained true poverty is most free and joyful, trusting that whatever the Lord sends our way will be for our benefit.

I am reminded of a conversation I had recently with my wife, in which she pointed out that the biggest chunk of our monthly household budget goes to that strange modern reality called “insurance.” Even though our farm makes no money and we live on a very meager income, we continue to cling to these modern life rings, vesting an unfounded hope in them. As Day points out, true poverty, imbued with a spirit of precarity, is very rare:

We hold on to our books, our tools such as typewriters, our clothes, and instead of rejoicing when they are taken from us we lament. We protest at people taking time or privacy. We are holding on to these goods. . . . No it is not simple, this business of poverty.³

For Day, poverty, viewed as both the divestment of possessions and an internal attitude of precarity or trust in God, is a spiritual good and a blessing. And this is an attitude that one

2. TCW (May 1952), 2, 6.

3. *Ibid.*

also sees in most of the founders of the great religious orders. Even here, though, we see that such poverty is hard to sustain, as these very same religious orders eventually become corporately wealthy with real estate and other possessions and investments. And as soon as that happens, the constitutive role of precarity in constructing true religious poverty evaporates.

Over and over again in the history of the Church the saints have emphasized poverty. Every community which has been started has begun in poverty and in incredible hardships. . . . And the result has always been that the orders thrived, the foundations grew, property was extended till holdings and buildings were accumulated and although there was still individual poverty, there was corporate wealth. It is hard to keep poor.⁴

I once had a conversation with a very wealthy and devout Catholic woman. She said she wanted to be more like St. Francis of Assisi. I asked her if that meant she was giving all her possessions away. She looked at me quizzically and said immediately, "Of course not, but I am developing an inner attitude of detachment from them." Sadly, religious orders and the Church as a whole can also fall into this spiritual delusion. For Day, true poverty is only possible with precarity, and true precarity is only possible through actual divestment of possessions in a radical manner. On this point, she says, there can be no compromise. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Mt 6:21).

Theologically, therefore, it must be pointed out that for Dorothy Day, in order for the Catholic to live out the Beatitudes and the mandate given to us by our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount, we cannot live lives of material comfort. The universal call to holiness does not allow us the excuse that evangelical poverty is merely a "counsel" and not a commandment. Here we see Day in her most radical and prophetic element. Here we see why she makes many Christians uncomfortable. And perhaps she is wrong to blur the distinction between a commandment and a counsel. But perhaps too she is more correct than we care to admit. For just as with "just war theory," so too with the distinction between counsel and commandment: we all too often use

4. Ibid.

it, not as a proper theological tool for making judgments, but rather as an instrument of selfishness and self-deception. Though the states of life differ, the call to holiness is universal: all men are called to perfection. And this path of perfection includes poverty.⁵

2. VOLUNTARY POVERTY AND THE FAMILY

We must engage the social order so that a man may raise his family. And it is necessary that there be among us in the Catholic Worker movement those suffering families, to exemplify, to share in the poverty of the family today. . . . So our Catholic Worker families are living in poverty and suffering in the practice of their faith, not in a dream or an illusion.⁶

Dorothy Day was no romantic dreamer. She understood firsthand the suffering inflicted on families by the grinding poverty of the modern industrial world. As she points out in the same essay, it is fine for such families to accept aid from the government.

5. What form this poverty takes will of course differ in each state of life. Dorothy Day's views on voluntary poverty as an obligation of the Gospel even for lay people, is strikingly similar to those of Basil the Great. Basil viewed our obligation to take care of the poor as universal and not limited to the path of perfection followed by monks. But, he obviously also believed this path would vary depending on one's state of life, the demands and dignity of one's office, and the promotion of the genuine human goods of beauty and truth. For the married person with a family, what form this poverty should take depends upon the local economy. Basil taught that families should lead as simple a life as possible, and give away their surplus in a manner that helps distribute the goods of a society and of the earth in a manner that is "sustainable" for everyone. Thus, there should be no excess opulence or largesse for anyone so long as there are those in our midst who lack the basic necessities of life. Here he echoes John Chrysostom insofar as he roots the counsel for voluntary poverty in the deeper theological command to love your neighbor as yourself. Voluntary poverty is therefore not just a "private" ascetical practice, an individualistic "discipline," as one climbs the ladder of spiritual perfection in a quasi-Gnostic flight into pure interiority. And this is true even for the hermetic and cenobitic life, wherein the monk withdraws from the world in order to serve the world through prayer and penance. It is a social, communal, and ecclesial action rooted in the moral law of charity. See *On Social Justice: St. Basil the Great*, trans. C. Paul Schroeder, vol. 38, *Popular Patristics Series* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), 15–71.

6. "Poverty Is the Face of Christ," TCW (December 1952), 3, 6. All further quotes from Dorothy Day in this section are from this essay.

But, as she is also quick to point out, if one takes from Caesar then one must render unto Caesar. For this reason, she espoused a distributist economics where ownership of land frees the “proletariat” from the powerlessness of the factory job and the city. Thus she shared Peter Maurin’s vision of a “bottom-up” solution to poverty through the formation of communities of agrarian living where families could flourish. But wait, one might ask, is this not an example of a romantic dream? To think that would be to accept the inevitability and immutability of our current economic arrangement of oppression and “job slavery.” It would be to essentialize economic slavery as a constitutive feature of the human condition. There is a difference between trying to imagine a different and more liberating arrangement and a romantic fantasy. Dorothy Day was a radical and a revolutionary and like all such prophets, she understood that all revolutions begin with an idea, with a reimagining of human community. Small beginnings, from the grassroots, are also the only way to ensure that such revolutions do not morph into their own form of tyranny.

And so Day imagines a common life where married men with families have available jobs and a form of labor that is enlivening and filled with dignity. She further asserts that the Catholic Worker movement must be a place where such “space” is created for families who seek to live the evangelical counsels while still having the basic material needs of life. met “A man needs a certain amount of goods to lead a good life,” Thomas Aquinas wrote. Indeed, and Day does not espouse a form of life that is characterized by familial destitution. Nevertheless, the evangelical counsels are for everyone, not just the spiritual elites in monasteries, and Christian families have a moral responsibility to lead a life of utter simplicity, in solidarity with their suffering neighbors. This does, of course, entail precarity, which is not, therefore, just for individuals or religious orders, but for families as well. She writes: “But ours is happiness, ours is joy, for Christ comes to us each day, not only at Christmas, but each time we look into the face of our brother who is poor.” And that is an admonition for families as well. She concludes: “When a man got married, then it was up to him to be on his own, support his own wife and children, and go on performing the works of mercy, according to his ability, with a Christ room in the house, the meal set out for the needy guest, the clothes passed on.”

Finally, work must involve, to the extent possible for families, a disengagement from the current form of militaristic government. When we work at wage-earning jobs in our current industrial system, taxes on the fruits of labor support the military industrial complex. Therefore, to the extent it is possible, we must all seek to minimize such support. It is essential to find an alternative to the tyranny of the machine, one that can serve as an answer “to the depression which will come about once we stop this mad race for armaments, once men begin to lay down their arms and refuse to kill, once young men refuse to be inducted, once older men refuse to build up their prosperity on the blood of their brothers.”

3. VOLUNTARY POVERTY AND VULNERABILITY

Over and over again we are given the chance to reexamine our position—are we ready to relinquish what we have, not just to the poor to share with them what we have, but to the poor who rise in revolution to take what they have been deprived of for so long? Are we ready too, to have the drunken poor, the insane poor, and what more horrible deprivation than this, to have one’s interior senses, the memory, the understanding, and the will, impoverished to the extent that one is no longer rational—are we ready to be robbed in this way? Do we really welcome poverty as liberating?⁷

Anyone who has had serious dealings with the poor will doubtless be able to tell story after story that can be loosely labeled under the rubric “stories of the ungrateful and scheming poor.” Poverty that is not voluntarily embraced, that is something unwanted (caused by the vagaries of personal failure and/or social injustice), can create tremendous resentment and not a little dishonesty. The poor will often steal from each other and from their benefactors. They will lie and fabricate intricate tales of woe in order to solicit yet another free meal, or a new winter coat, or some other item that can be sold on the streets. From my days of working in a soup kitchen in my youth, I recall developing an unhealthy admiration for the sheer ingenuity of such fabrica-

7. “On Pilgrimage,” TCW (February 1964), 1, 2, 6.

tions. That was until one day when I gave a man twenty dollars, thinking that his story of anguish was true, only to have him pin me against a wall and demand more, which I dutifully handed over. Thus does one realize that working with the poor renders oneself vulnerable, not just to lies and manipulation, but to physical assault as well. There is nothing romantic about involuntary poverty and its chief consequence seems to be a robust descent into vice, both moral and intellectual.

Dorothy Day was well aware of this fact of involuntary poverty, which only underscored for her that for those who choose poverty out of solidarity with the poor, there will always be an element of vulnerability that is inevitable and that also must be embraced as part of the sufferings of that state of life. Voluntary poverty, embraced out of service to the poor, perfects us precisely in divesting us. And it divests us not just of our material possessions, but also of our “personal rights vis-à-vis those ‘others’ who would take advantage of us.” How often have you had acquaintances tell you, when confronted by a beggar on the street, “Don’t give him a dime, he will just use it for booze.” And probably, more often than not, they will be right. Or, to give another example, my wife spins wool from our sheep here on the farm, and she then knits winter caps to give to the homeless in New York. But she was recently told by someone who works with the poor on those streets that she should not do that anymore since the recipients will often just sell the hats, or worse, throw them away or lose them in a day. Stories like this—stories of the poor taking advantage of benefaction for the sake of vice, or merely displaying the ingratitude and carelessness of the jaded soul—can be multiplied endlessly.

But for Day none of that matters; if only for the sake of one person who will benefit from our alms, we should be willing to “waste” our time, energy, and resources on the scoundrels. Because the central psychological and moral dynamic of being taken advantage of is not that we feel an injustice has been committed and we are merely expressing a certain righteous anger “for the good of the sinners and their conversion of heart,” but rather, that we feel we have been “duped,” and we feel like “fools” and are angry because something “that is mine” has been taken from me. But as Day says in the quote above, we must be willing to call nothing “mine,” not even my very rationality and

memory and will. In death, *all* is divested except the inward core of a person as God sees it. And perhaps that is why God imposes our current manner of dying on us, because as sinners, the essence of all our sin is grasping acquisition. But before God there is no grasping, and before God we are all poor beggars seeking to take advantage of the divine profligacy.

The divine profligacy is an essential theological component of our own acceptance of vulnerability. For no one was ever more vulnerable than our Lord during his Passion. God opens himself to the wounds of our sin and holds nothing back in his identification with us. Christ descends into hell to retrieve what is lost. And what is lost? All of us are lost. All of us are in need of the wild and profligate love of God. “Wide is the gate to hell and many there are that take it.” How often do we quote this statement from our Lord as a self-justifying condemnation of those “others” who are going to hell? And yet, in reality, there is only one person whose possible inhabiting of hell ought to bother my mind: me.

In contrast to this parsimonious eschatological census taking, Dorothy Day points out that Christ taught us to forgive endlessly, which at the bare minimum means setting aside my pinched and parched soul’s concern with being “taken advantage of.” This fear, the fear that I am being a “sucker” if I “follow God’s rules” while every one of those other sinners gets a free pass, is a profound failure of faith, insofar as it is a faith that is blind to the fact that everything about my existence is a pure gift from God. We say that so often that it seems trite and cliché. We repeat it piously even as we connive to make sure that our own comfort comes first. But the truth is quite other: I am indeed “owed” precisely nothing. And nothing means nothing. Thus, the vulnerability of voluntary poverty in service to the poor is also a gift. In being so taken advantage of, I am now, in some small measure, imitating Christ, who descended into the ultimate vulnerability. Day concludes her reflection on such vulnerability: “‘Let nothing disturb thee, nothing affright thee,’ St. Theresa said, ‘all things are passing. God alone never changes.’ . . . Every day we have evidence of His warm, loving care for us. Since He has given us His Son—will He not give us also every good thing? All else that we need? We are rich indeed.”

4. POVERTY AND DESTITUTION

We may . . . clarify this notion of the destitute and the poor. The poor have some hope. They have not been so long in this condition that they see no way out. . . . The destitute, on the other hand, have nothing—physically, intellectually, or spiritually. You never see them reading a book or a newspaper as they wait on the breadline, or listening to music, or playing with an alley cat as they sit on a curb in the sun, or laughing, or telling stories.⁸

I began these reflections by focusing on the positive assessment that Day gave to voluntary poverty, which she views as both a spiritual necessity in order to move closer to God, and a moral necessity as we seek ways to aid our neighbor and to build a better form of communal living. But there is also a negative form of poverty, a poverty that crushes all hope and dehumanizes vast numbers of powerless people. This negative poverty Dorothy Day refers to as “destitution.”

Destitution in this sense is first and foremost characterized by a loss of hope in any sort of a better future. Once this hope is lost, the spirit is robbed of all motivation to seek a better life. A kind of suffocating cynicism infiltrates the soul and is often accompanied by drug abuse and other forms of self-destructive behavior. The destitute person is also, therefore, prone to acts of violence and vandalism as he acts out his hopeless cynicism. Thus, as Day makes clear, the chief result of destitution is a poverty of spirit that is far worse than any poverty of possessions. In this same essay she recounts numerous stories of people who are poor who come to the New York Catholic Worker house and maintain an attitude of cheerfulness and hope, despite their poverty. This contrasts with the destitute whose inner hopelessness manifests as a joyless nihilism.

Just as it is true that one can be rich in spirit even if one is poor in material possessions, likewise one can be destitute even if one has all of the basic material comforts of life. The modern world of industrial capitalism, with its hegemonic commodification of every social and personal good, is a powerful force for dehumanization as it destroys the very notion of “worth,” rob-

8. “Poverty and Destitution,” TCW (April 1966), 5, 8.

bing the soul of an authentic experience of transcendence, of the true, the good, and the beautiful. All around us is the ugliness of a pragmatic utility, the illusion of well-being through affluence, and the barbaric assault on human life itself. It is no exaggeration that modern capitalist economies, though arguably creating vast pockets of material comfort and even largesse, are, in reality, economies of destitution. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that for Day, there are vast pockets of destitution in the modern world—both the outward destitution of a destructive form of grinding poverty and the inward destitution of the modern soul, immersed in the banal ugliness and deadly barbarism of modern life.

Day was adamant, therefore, that the houses of hospitality and the worker farms should be places where the poor can nurture their souls as much as their bodies. Yes, the hungry must first be fed and the naked clothed, but the poor too need truth, goodness, and beauty. They too need holiness and relation to God. As she states, “The poor can live in such places (crowded tenements) and have some measure of comfort, but the destitute are dogged on every side by ill health, unemployment, accident, and hunger.” And why is this? Because their lives have been so robbed of hope that they no longer thirst for the good, no longer quest after the higher levels of human well-being, and very often no longer quest for God. In such cases, the Catholic Worker must quest after them, bringing the mercy and love of the crucified Lord, even if it is often met with disdain and rejection.

CONCLUSION

As I type these words, I look out the window of my farmhouse and gaze at my chickens, which are milling about the yard. I am filled with a certain hostility toward them at the moment since they have collectively decided, apparently, to stop laying eggs for a while. I do not know if chickens are capable of such corporate deliberation, but I have seen some evidence of it. Or so I think. And it makes me resent them for the amount of money I spend on their feed. Freeloaders.

Of course, this is irrational. It is also ungrateful since the telos of a chicken is certainly not to lay eggs for me. To be sure, they lay eggs, but they do so to please God and to praise his name

as they live out who and what they are. And so hostility toward them for simply being what they are as God made them is stupid. And I mean stupid in the theological sense, as in treating something as an instrument of my consumptive pleasure rather than as an epiphanic eruption of sacramental beauty. Of course, it is hard to talk or think like this as one experiences such things (though it seems I do), but this is what is going on. It is the reality.

For Day, voluntary poverty is the only true path to sanctity because it alone teaches us to see in all things the beauty and glory of God in their essence, and not to view things as possible tools for my well-being, even if it is allowed to me to use them. True and holy poverty allows us to be indifferent before the world in the sense of not viewing things first and foremost through the prism of my self-interest. It teaches us rather to view things, even and perhaps especially very simple things, in their essential beauty as manifestations of the profligacy of God's gift of existence. There is nothing that "belongs to me." There is nothing that is ultimately "mine" in an atomized and individualistic sense. The spirit of grasping acquisition is the spirit of the machine, of control, of violence, of domination, of ugliness. It is the instrumentalizing spirit of modernity where all is monetized and put into the service of consumptive excess. And such excess is then justified on economic grounds, which further legitimates the tools of war, now deemed necessary in order to protect what is justifiably "mine" and "ours." And war is the ultimate symptom of the destitution of our spirit.

The involuntary poor and the destitute cry out to us in their misery, but also in their ingratitude and in their scheming manipulations and lies. Because we too are filled with scheming and lies, just for different purposes. Furthermore, our corporate solidarity as human beings in Christ means that indifference to such people is not allowed to us. For as our Lord teaches, indifference to the poor and oppressed is indifference to him. And if there is one teaching of our Lord that could be said to be central to the thought of Dorothy Day, it is this one: to see my brother and sister in distress is to see the face of Christ. □

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