Dear Friends,

Greetings from the Guild! Winter, in its stark beauty, is upon us. And faith, we’re told, is the seed beneath the snow. Even in these seemingly dark times.

It was another winter in another dark time, following America’s entrance into World War I, when Dorothy Day was caught unawares by her “first beginning and last end.” In the smoke-filled backroom of a Greenwich Village bar, listening to a boozily rendered recitation of “The Hound of Heaven,” intoned from memory by her companion/fellow wanderer, the aspiring playwright, Eugene O’Neill, she began to find “direction rather than drift.”

It led her in time to live but a short distance away, sheltering the homeless, speaking out against violence, and witnessing to a radical belief in a merciful God. At the time of her death in 1980, she was famously called by historian David O’Brien, “the most important, interesting, and influential figure in the history of American Catholicism.” Others simply called her a saint.

Dorothy conveyed, however, in conversations with psychiatrist/author Robert Coles that really she wanted to be considered, “a humble person of faith who tried her best to live in accordance with the biblical teachings she kept pondering,” particularly, “the Sermon on the Mount.” The Church views faith as a virtue and its heroic practice as one of the critical measures of sainthood. This winter’s newsletter is dedicated to its exploration.

Faith in the Catholic tradition “seeks understanding,” and we owe many thanks to this issue’s contributors for helping us do just that. Please be refreshed by Eric Martin’s keen insights in “Good Talk” (starting on p. 2). Kate Hennessy, the youngest of Dorothy Day’s grandchildren, shares, thanks to America magazine, an intimate, intergenerational portrait of faith (p. 16). Lawrence Cunningham, whose scholarship has always reflected his passions, offers a moving meditation, triggered in part by the Guild’s new prayer card (p. 7). And the work of the late June O’Connor helps illuminate the depth of Dorothy’s conversion experience (p. 12) even as Dorothy’s own personal reflections help trace the different paths constituting her faith’s long journey (p. 10).

The Guild continues on its journey of advancing the cause for canonization. Like any journey worth taking, it has encountered bumps and challenges (this past fall, for example, we bypassed publishing the newsletter because the coffers were low, accounting for this double issue now). But we remind ourselves that it’s always harder to round third base and come home than to round first. And we’re very close to home — in this case, the Vatican’s Congregation for Saints — completing the Inquiry’s diocesan phase and beginning the final, Roman one (please see “Dispatches!” on p. 5).

We remain confident that Dorothy Day — and the unique model of holiness she provides — will be recognized (canonized) in our time. The reasons for the hope within us? In part: you! Your long standing commitment, your prayers, your encouragement. Your generosity of spirit and your financial support. In short, your own faithfulness. We are immensely grateful for your continuing to remember our Loaves and Fishes Campaign (where no contribution is too small!). Or for your joining the Guild or renewing your annual membership (please see p. 19).

Dorothy believed that saints give us a glimpse of eternity, even through the fog of darkness. Let us brave together this New Year, forwarding her cause, sustained by her faith and theirs.

*The “Ichthus” image (“the sign of the fish”) was used by the early Christians as an easily recognizable symbol for Jesus. Dorothy Day’s saintliness, we pray, will become increasingly recognizable—easy for all to see.
GOOD TALK
with Eric Martin

(We’re very happy for the opportunity to enjoy this “good talk” with Eric Martin. Eric is co-editor of The Berrigan Letters and a doctoral student in theology at Fordham University where he teaches The Bible and Social Justice.)

When a friend who worked closely with Dorothy was asked what her greatest gift to us was, he immediately responded, “Faith.” The interviewer was taken aback, clearly expecting something else. Do you see her faith as foundational to all else?

Hmmm. Well, this might say more about me than Dorothy, but I see a constellation of interlocking traits at her foundation. Certainly faith is there, but the first thing I think of is her brazenness. Her faith was bold and uncompromising, and I see that as a continuation of the pre-conversion Dorothy who weathered fasting and fearful treatment in jail. I think that early Dorothy is a great gift too. She was already committed to the disenfranchised, the never-enfranchised. Her faith is unrecognizable without that, which is what makes Fritz Eichenberg’s Christ of the Breadlines such an apt image for the Catholic Worker. Her visions of Christ and the poor intermingled; they couldn’t be pulled apart. That haloed figure is Christ and at the same time the cold, huddled, hungry figures waiting in the dark for food.

I think too Dorothy’s endless curiosity fed her spiritual genius. She could take this from Abbé Pierre, that from St. Thérèse, something else from Dom Hélder Câmara and something from Marx, and join them in a synthesis with the Beatitudes and the present moment. She knew how to read the world fluently in conversation with the practical and theoretical wisdom she learned elsewhere. She downplayed her intelligence, but I think her faith is interwoven with a massive moral brilliance.

The language of faith is richly varied. Sometimes faith is cast as “belief” or “trust.” Or as “intellectual assent” or “living encounter.” Can you help us grasp, from a Catholic perspective, faith’s essential meaning?

Probably not! There are lots of different Catholic perspectives, so maybe it is best for me to simply offer an example. I used to chop vegetables with Art Laffin of the D.C. Catholic Worker. On Thursdays, we would make meals that were served to homeless people near the White House. I struggled with this. Obviously, it’s good to feed the hungry, but is it the “best” way to act justly? Wouldn’t revolutionizing food systems be more Christian? Once, I voiced my doubts to Art as he was pulling a huge tray of steaming rice out of the oven. He stared at it for a while, then smiled and said, “Isn’t it beautiful? It’s all right here, and it’s theirs. It couldn’t be more direct.”

I didn’t really know how that was an answer to my question. Art was
further along in faith than I was: that the works of mercy are inherently worthwhile. I think he taught what Dorothy knew, that the “little way” of St. Thérèse is a way of God’s. I can’t grasp faith’s essential meaning, but I think lived examples do more to get us there than propositions, and that Art’s teaching points us in one of many good directions.

**Often we think of faith as being more akin to possessing something than to practicing something. Dorothy doesn’t seem to have made such a distinction.**

She also didn’t seem interested in possessing much. I think she said it in the title of her column, “On Pilgrimage.” Faith is a journeying, an adventure, an on-the-way-ness. To where? We don’t get to see that directly. I think what Thomas Merton said of the Desert Fathers is also true of Dorothy. He said the point of their prayer laboratories was salvation. Again, I can only speak of how I perceive what Dorothy was up to, but I think she saw herself as exploring her way toward salvation, and not just for herself. She was in touch with the tradition from which Jon Sobrino would claim, “No salvation outside the poor.” The Catholic Worker strikes me as an organism, doing this through communal pilgrimage.

**Can you shed some light on the nature of faith vis-à-vis reason?**

Very little, so I think it’s good to defer to Dorothy here. One of my favorite lines from _The Long Loneliness_ is when she asks, “How can there be no God, when there are all of these beautiful things?” It’s sort of the opposite of those “problem of evil” arguments that say basically: (1) if an all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful God exists, God would not allow evil; (2) evil exists; (3) therefore, God doesn’t exist. Dorothy looked to beauty and turned the argument on its head: if there are beautiful things, then how can God not exist?

Dorothy was never – thanks be to God – a logician, but reason helped lead her to faith and she later used it to apply her faith. Philosophers like Martha Nussbaum have made clear that emotions are tied to reason, and I think Dorothy’s emotional response to having a baby (which played a large role in her conversion to Catholicism) had rational components to it. The questions she asked after Tamar’s birth helped pave the way to her faith life. She would constantly be reasoning out what a commitment to the Beatitudes and Matthew 25 meant for the social emergencies of her day.

I’ve always loved the story of Dorothy giving that big, fat diamond ring to a regular at the Worker. A staffer thought she was acting more or less irrationally, and her answer employed reason that hinged on an article of faith: “Do you suppose that God created diamonds only for the rich?” She wouldn’t cede the rational ground but she staked her reason on her faith. Stories like this are the spiritual equivalent of beholding Einstein’s work, and I think that has to do with her awareness of the value and limitations of reason, and how it relates to faith. As I said before, I think she doesn’t get enough credit for being a genius.

**As she eloquently voiced in her autobiography, _The Long Loneliness_, Dorothy came to believe that every soul has a natural tendency toward God.**

Still, she would pray with St. Augustine, “Help, Thou, my unbelief.” Mother Teresa (now St.) wrote of the absence of God in her life. Is doubt then as “natural” as faith?

Cornel West, a public intellectual I think Dorothy would appreciate, said it’s inherent to faith. “There has to be some serious doubt, otherwise faith becomes merely a dogmatic formula, an orthodoxy, a way of evading the complexity of life, rather than a way of engaging honestly with life.” I think Dorothy understood that better than most. The last time I taught _The Long Loneliness_ my students found it hilarious when Dorothy, questioning her newfound faith, criticized herself for feeling as contented as an unthinking cow. “Do I really believe? Whom am I praying to?” she asked herself. “Prayer with you is like the opiate of the people.” You can hear her grappling with doubt, churning over the Marxist critique of religion — which she was honest enough not to pretend didn’t exist — and testing it against the religious experiences she was having. It’s a wonderful testament to the fragility and struggle inherent in faith, which never fully conquers doubt.

I don’t know the direct answer to your question, but I think that faith implies doubt. Kierkegaard hammered this point. If there’s no doubt, there’s certainty, which destroys faith. It’s because there’s no objective knowledge — we

*(Good Talk, cont’d on p. 4)*
could all have it wrong about God! – that there is passion. (And Dorothy had plenty of passion.) Part of what makes the psalms so human is their yearning for something other than God’s hidden-ness. Like Mother Teresa, the psalmists wanted God to come be their light, to show God’s face. Dorothy knew such darkness, and I think that’s why she saw her life as a pilgrimage, a striving-to-wards. There’s a reason she didn’t call her autobiography I Have Arrived. 

Dorothy at times seemed to “will” her faith. “I wanted to believe, and I wanted my daughter to believe, and belonging to a Church could offer her a grace as priceless as faith in God.” Can you reflect a bit on the intersection between faith and will.

Sure. I know people who say they “want to believe in God,” but just can’t seem to make themselves do it. That suggests that we can’t just will our-selves into faith. A constant in most all the Christian traditions is that faith is born of God’s initiative, not ours. So we can start there.

But the will still seems to have a lot to do with it. Dorothy was an exceptionally strong-willed person, and one of the things I admire most about her was her will to say no. No to Cardinal Spellman when he under-paid striking gravediggers; no to the police when they harassed the United Farm Workers; no to the temptation to collapse the Gospels into a social program; no to official teachings on just war! Her faith was etched through much effort of will and stubbornness. It’s a needed antidote to the kind of bourgeois Christianity that predominated her time and arguably ours.

Pilate probably thought Jesus was hard-headed, and he was probably right. Jesus had many opportunities to avoid state execution but willed himself on. Faith-as-struggle, which implies a central role for the will, is in the genetic makeup of Christianity. I don’t know how else to read the story of Gethsemane, Jesus’ “trial,” the Cross, or even the twelve year-old Jesus evading his parents to remain in Jerusalem’s temple for three days. Try reading the letter of James without noticing the high value it places on the will.

But, this conception of the will gets complicated because it’s not just a me Day helped revive for the Catholic community the Biblical injunction to be peacemakers, “to beat swords into plowshares.”

willing but a We. Matthew has Jesus preaching that heaven is for those doing God’s will and John has Jesus saying he came to do God’s will rather than his own. Jonah basically told Ninevah that God would rain down calamity upon them if the city didn’t align itself with God’s will. From the Garden of Eden, through the prophets and the Gospels, right on to Paul, there’s a biblical call to avoid certain desires, to stifle the unbridled will and align it with God’s will. What does this mean exactly? The obliteration of the self?

Though Dorothy thought faith meant struggle and even suffering, her life doesn’t suggest annihilating the self or one’s will. I see in her much more of what Merton observed: that the saint is the one who is truly herself, who has found her real identity in relationship to and with God. I see Dorothy’s will coming from that divine “We” rather than an egocentric “I.” Her stubborn-ness was a holy emanation.

Dorothy’s “baby” brother John, whom she lovingly cared for and who later became a com-mitted Communist, once told me wistfully that he thought religion was like listening to Mozart. “Some people hear it; some don’t.” Is that why faith is referred to as a “gift” — a “theo-logically infused” virtue? And if so, how might we cultivate it in our lives?

I prefer John Coltrane to Mozart, and a line that sticks with me from his “Psalm” is, “Keep your eye on God.” Forget hearing. I hear a lot of talk about faith and see much less of it enfleshed. How do we cultivate faith in our lives? Live it! I don’t read Dorothy for her rhetorical flourishes but for her lived witness, which infuses all she has to say with a stamp of authority no mere human imprimatur could grant. We have more than enough that has been written or said about faith, and I can offer no novel thoughts on the subject. The saints do faith. They pray on their knees behind closed doors, but also with their feet, as Abraham Joshua Heschel said.

I think Dorothy knew what Coltrane was talking about. She kept her eye on God, and followed accordingly. She knew it meant moving herself into new spaces, as if on a hunt or chase. She went where the rich young man refused to go, with Jesus into uncomfortable, demanding spaces. This goes back to the will. Dorothy was willing. Is this will a gift? Yes and no. It is accepted and asserted, as far as I can tell. We’re at the heart of Mystery, of God-talk, and we can only bump

(Good Talk, cont’d on p. 18)
DISPATCHES!

We’re happy to announce the arrival of a new Dorothy Day prayer card, available in Spanish as well as in English. The card features a photographic portrait (designed to complement the beautifully rendered oil portrait by Geoffrey Gneughs on the original card). A revised intercessory prayer, inviting individual requests, is on the reverse side. (To view, see p. 9). Prayer cards may be ordered by writing the Guild at 1011 First Avenue, Seventh Floor, New York, NY 10022 or emailing dorothydayguild@archny.org. A donation, if at all possible, to help offset printing and handling costs would be very helpful; suggested amount is 15 cents/card.

We closed out 2018 with significant progress made towards completing the local archdiocesan inquiry. Thanks to a grant from the Archdiocese of New York, the Dorothy Day Archives at Marquette University is now 70% complete with the task of digitally scanning 36 boxes of Dorothy Day’s unpublished writings. Our theological censors have read through once/reviewed all of her published writings, and 62% of these 1,250 publications have been read by two censors. Our Historical Commission has begun a biographical sketch, and 25% of the diaries have been transcribed. With full funding and a strong team of volunteers, we hope to finish this part of the process by Labor Day, 2020.

Over forty volunteer transcribers are working with us to transcribe all 6,800 pages of Dorothy Day’s diaries. Some of these transcribers live in New York City, but most work from home throughout the United States and several foreign countries, including India, Portugal, Canada, and Australia! A few knew Dorothy, and all have been greatly inspired. One was baby-sat by Dorothy and has the childhood picture to prove it! We are grateful to all those who responded to our request for transcribers. If we double their number, we could ensure completion of diary and letter transcription by September, 2019. Please consider joining our group of volunteer transcribers — and inviting potentially interested friends — to help with this vitally important and, we’re told, gratifying task. Contact jkorgen@korgen.associates. Transcribers work with diary excerpts of 10-20 pages.

The response to our newly launched Loaves and Fishes Campaign to secure modest gifts from many donors has been strong: thank you! We are extending the Campaign through May in the sure hope (and need!) of growing the over $25,000 received to date. The goal is to raise $50,000. Every contribution, no matter the size, is meaningful and much appreciated. (Please see p. 19 for more information.)

(“The Vine and the Branches”—a metaphor for Christian discipleship and an apt image for the growing Guild—inspired the iconography in this column by Catholic Worker artist, Ade Bethune.)
In an interview with La Repubblica (October 1, 2013), Pope Francis wasted no words. “I believe in God, not in a Catholic God, there is no Catholic God, there is God….”

Less a mystery than this “not-Catholic God” but a mystery nonetheless: the Catholic Church. A sacred portal to that God for millennia. For Dorothy Day, a convert, the Church became her spiritual home, the only place on earth wide enough and deep enough to contain and nourish the fullness of her being.

But as we know, from the anguish of history and our own time, “Holy Mother Church” can be as much a stumbling block to faith as an entranceway. A scandal defiling even its own children.

Accordingly, over the centuries, some of her greatest saints have dedicated themselves to its reform. Francis of Assisi called on the medieval church to return to the simplicity of the Gospel. St. Anthony of Padua vigorously attacked abuses of power (“You there, with the mitre,” he addressed one visiting archbishop.) Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, leaders of the Carmelite movement, withstood the notorious Spanish Inquisition. The list goes on. As St. Paul assured the Romans, “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”

For other of her saints, faith propelled them outward: the brokenness of the world, the locus of their vocation. It’s their ranks that Dorothy would join, rooting and building on her already highly developed, pre-conversion vocation to the poor.

Sometimes, however, even Day’s co-religionists (let alone her old radical friends), in spite of their admiration for her work for justice, were confounded by her reluctance to address the sins of her Church. And they were mystified by her seeming acquiescence when the Archdiocese of New York’s then Auxiliary Bishop McIntyre, later Cardinal, at the request of Cardinal Spellman, paid a personal visit, suggesting she close the Catholic Worker down (or stop calling it “Catholic”). Shouldn’t she have cried foul and pointed a stern finger at the Church’s often falling short of the Gospel it preached?

But finger-wagging or name-calling was never Dorothy’s way. “If our dear, sweet cardinal, who is the vicar of Christ in New York City, told me to shut down the Catholic Worker, I would close it down immediately,” socialist Michael Harrington, than a young editor of the paper, reported her saying. Not that she was blind to the Church’s failings. Hardly, as her journals and diaries attest. Of the Church, she often liked to quote Jesuit theologian Romano Guardini’s haunting assessment, “The Church is the cross on which Christ is crucified.” But, like him, she would always add, “And you can’t separate Christ from His cross.”

Was it just her disposition that prevented her from being a more direct critic? Her long-forged personal identity as a social radical coupled with a disinterest in, even boredom with, institutional reform? Her gratitude to the Church she loved? Her understanding of and desire to be a faithful daughter?

A case, arguably, can be made for all. What Dorothy tells us was she knew herself to be a sinner (like Pope Francis who crisply introduced himself as a sinner, period). She saw her own sins first. The fact that the Church sins (how could it

(Saintly Matters, cont’d on p. 18)
Dorothy Day and Sainthood: A MEDITATION
— Lawrence S. Cunningham

Dorothy Day is now known in the Catholic tradition as a “Servant of God.” In due course, we hope and pray, she will be beatified and canonized. If she is “called to the altars,” to use the language of the tradition, it will mean that she can be venerated with a feast day and a liturgical office in the entire Church. In other words, she will be publicly recognized as one of those who see the face of God in heaven. While every person in heaven is a saint, only a select few are recognized and venerated in the liturgical life of the Church. Of course, each year we celebrate the Feast of All Saints.

If/when Dorothy Day is canonized, it will not mean that she is or was holier than she was when she drew her last breath in 1980. From the memories of her contemporaries, from her voluminous writings, from her record in multitudes of the memoirs of others we know a good deal about this complex woman. Canonization must not be allowed to sanitize this all-too-human person. She herself thought that calling her a saint was too dismissive. (It is well to remember Ambrose Bierce’s cynical observation that a saint is a “sinner edited and revised.”)

Canonization, however, is no mean thing. It is not an irrelevancy. The process provides the Church with an opportunity to do a wide variety of things: it serves as a reminder that in every age the Church produces people of heroic holiness. It underscores the fact that the Church is comprised not simply of who happens to be alive at a given time but is a vast community of those in Christ who belong to the entire Church — in heaven, earth, and on the purgatorial path. It allows us to join our praise with those “friends of God” in heaven, and permits us to ask them to intercede for us and for our needs before the throne of God. Finally, it gives us models for wildly divergent ways of following the One who says, “I am the way.”

Some decades ago, the late Karl Rahner wrote that the saints allow us to see how we might follow Christ in a new way. It is true that Saint Francis showed a new way of following Christ when compared to the monastic saints who came before him. As Chesterton once put it pithily, what Benedict stored, Francis scattered. It is likewise true that Saint Ignatius of Loyola (whom Rahner had in mind) developed a religious community aptly suited for the period of the Catholic reform of the sixteenth century. By contrast, some saints demonstrate that there are profound depths in the old teachings of Catholic spirituality. Mother Teresa of Calcutta was not a ground-breaking innovator; she simply chose to live with the poorest and serve them after the Gospel mandate to see Christ in every creature, to be like the Samaritan and bind up wounds. She did what saints did a millennium before: be selfless in serving others. She did it in a media age where she was noticed.

Which brings us back to Dorothy Day. The prayer card from the Guild I have before me singles out her life of prayer, voluntary poverty, works of mercy and witness to the justice and peace of the Gospel of Jesus. It goes on to hope that her life will inspire others to turn to Christ and see the face of God in the world’s poor, and

(Meditation, cont’d on p. 8)
to raise their voices for the justice of God’s kingdom. It then concludes with an invitation to ask for “favors” through Dorothy’s intercession. Such favors would include possible miracles needed to advance the canonization project. It is a beautiful prayer and strikes me as appropriate, in what it says about Dorothy and the significance of her life. I keep it on my desk as I write these lines.

Here, however, I should interject a few personal reflections — since Dorothy Day was my somewhat older contemporary. I met her some years back. I was a friend of the late William Miller, her biographer. He invited Day to campus, so I had the chance to hear her speak before a group of students and to spend an evening — an engaging one — at the Millers’ home. I was suitably awestruck, despite the fact Dorothy was unpretentious, soft spoken, perhaps a bit weary from travel, and there was no indication that she thought of herself as a celebrity. I cannot recall her talk, but I do quite vividly recall her persona. She was a strikingly beautiful older woman who wore a plain dress and sensible shoes. What most impressed me is that she came to town on a Greyhound bus, for she said that was the way the poor travelled.

Years later my oldest daughter graduated from Notre Dame and went to New York City to seek her fortune. She had a tiny apartment in what is known as “Alphabet City” on the Lower East Side. When we visited and walked through her neighborhood, I came to recognize some of the streets because Day had mentioned them in her “On Pilgrimage” column: Ludlow Street, Cherry Street, Mott Street, the Bowery. I discovered, quite accidentally, that Maryhouse was but a few blocks from Sarah’s apartment — just a quick walk beyond the clubhouse of the Hell’s Angels! The area is now being rapidly gentrified, and the streets are filled with as many hipsters now as recent immigrants. Still for me, it will always be the neighborhood of Dorothy Day (and Greenwich Village, close by, will always evoke her bohemian days. And recall her friendship with fellow convert and “beat” in his own time, Thomas Merton. Merton lived on Perry Street when he was a graduate student at Columbia University, the same street that can boast the little Episcopalian Church where Day’s parents were married.) Despite that brief meeting with Day and my nostalgia for the Lower East Side, my love for Dorothy comes mainly from reading her writings (I have read The Catholic Worker for about sixty years), and those written about her. I have loved her traditional sources of prayer: the office of the hours; her love for the Mass; her devotion to the saints and stories about them. I treasure the good art that she encouraged in her paper, and her love for beautiful music, and her capacity for literature. She read great fiction — Dickens and Dostoevsky among many others — as true spiritual reading. That is the traditional aspect of her
life; she was Catholic to the bone. Fully integrated with that, however, was her passion for social justice and her love for the poor. Both derived from the fact that there are so many poor. Here is not an odd way to put it: she fought for social justice precisely so there would be no more poor.

That might not be completed until the Kingdom of God is fully achieved, but between the now and the not-yet, we perform the works of mercy until there is no need for them.

If we honor Dorothy Day because of her holiness, it is not for some abstract holiness. Rather, it is a vivid form of Catholic holiness, embodied in a woman who was a political rebel, a sometime jailbird, an unmarried mother, a journalist and novelist, a lover of opera, and a voracious reader. When one thinks about Dorothy’s life, it is useful to think of the good householder described by Jesus in the Gospel who was able to “bring forth old things and new.” Out of the matrix of traditional Catholic spirituality, Dorothy exemplified a model of how to thirst for justice and find Christ in all.

Lest we think in terms of a saint as someone cast in plaster and suitable for a church niche, one cannot forget that Day’s life and work had a sharp prophetic edge. That life makes a mockery of our petty middle class satisfactions; our willingness to distinguish between the worthy and the unworthy poor;

(Meditation, cont’d on p. 18)

PRAYER FOR THE CANONIZATION OF SERVANT OF GOD DOROTHY DAY
God our Father,
Your servant Dorothy Day exemplified the Catholic faith by her life of prayer, voluntary poverty, works of mercy, and witness to the justice and peace of the Gospel of Jesus. May her life inspire your people to turn to Christ as their Savior, to see His face in the world’s poor and, to raise their voices for the justice of God’s kingdom.

I pray that her holiness may be recognized by your Church and that you grant the following favor that I humbly ask through your intercession: (here mention your request).

I ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.
(From the very beginning, Dorothy and Peter stressed the importance of the daily practice of the “corporal” works of mercy. Feeding the hungry and the Catholic Worker are almost synonymous. But equal stock was placed on the practice of the “spiritual” works of mercy. For Dorothy, writing was part of that practice. In the excerpts below from From Union Square to Rome, she struggles to explain to her old Communist friends her decision to become a Catholic. It is written as a letter to her younger brother John, himself a dedicated party member.)

It is difficult for me to dip back into the past, yet it is a job that must be done and it hangs over my head like a cloud. St. Peter said that we must give a reason for the faith that is in us, and I am trying to give you those reasons.

…I am a woman forty years old…. What I want to bring out in this book is a succession of events that led me to his feet, glimpses of Him that I received through many years which made me feel the vital need of Him and of religion. I will try to trace for you the steps by which I came to accept the faith that I believe was always in my heart.

Though I felt the strong, irresistible attraction to good, yet there was also, at times, a deliberate choosing of evil. How far I was led to choose it it is hard to say. How far professors, companions, and reading influenced my way of life does not matter now. The fact remains that there was much of deliberate choice in it. Most of the time it was “following the devices and desires of my own heart.” Sometimes it was perhaps the Baudelairean idea of choosing “the downward path which leads to salvation.” Sometimes it was of choice, of free will, though perhaps at the time I would have denied free will….

May the Lord forgive me. It was the arrogance and suffering of youth. It was pathetic, little, and mean in its very excuse for itself.

( Editor’s note: since From Union Square to Rome is more an apologia than an autobiography, Day offers no detail; presumably she’s referring, in part, to an affair with a Hemingway-esque newspaper reporter that led to an abortion and a rebound marriage of a year’s duration).

Was this desire to be with the poor and the mean and abandoned not unmixed with a distorted desire to be with the dissipated?…..

I write these things now because sometimes when I am writing I am seized with fright at my presumption. I am afraid, too, of not telling the truth or of distorting the truth….But my whole perspective has changed and when I look for causes of my conversion, sometimes it is one thing and sometimes it is another that stands out in my mind.

…Do you know the Psalms? They were what I read most when I was in jail in Occoquan. I read with a sense of coming back to something that I had lost. There was an echoing in my heart. And how can anyone who has known human sorrow and human joy fail to respond to these words?

Out of the depth I have cried to thee, O Lord:

…Hear, O Lord, my prayer: give ear to my supplication in thy truth: hear me in thy justice. And enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight no man living shall be justified.

For the enemy hath persecuted my soul: he hath brought down my life to the earth.

He hath made me to dwell in darkness as those that have been dead of old:

And my spirit is in anguish within me: my heart within me is troubled.

…Hear me speedily O Lord; my spirit hath fainted away.

Turn not away thy face from me, lest I be like unto them that go down into the pit.

Cause me to hear thy mercy in the morning; for in thee have I hoped.

Make the way known to me, wherein I should walk: for I have lifted up my soul to thee.
All through those weary first days in jail when I was in solitary confinement, the only thoughts that brought comfort to my soul were those lines in the Psalms that expressed the terror and misery of man suddenly stricken and abandoned. Solitude and hunger and weariness of spirit — these sharpened my perceptions so that I suffered not only my own sorrow but the sorrows of those about me. I was no longer myself, I was man. I was no longer a young girl, part of a radical movement seeking justice for those oppressed, I was the oppressed. I was that drug addict, screaming and tossing in her cell, beating her head against the wall. I was that shoplifter who for rebellion was sentenced to solitary. I was that woman who had killed her children, who had murdered her lover.

As I read this over, it seems, indeed, over-emotional and an exaggerated statement of the reactions of a young woman in jail. And yet if it were not the Holy Spirit that comforted me, how could I have been comforted, how could I have endured, how could I have lived in hope?

…I felt in the background of my life a waiting force that would lift me up eventually.

I later became acquainted with the poem of Francis Thompson, “The Hound of Heaven,” and was moved by its power. Eugene O’Neill recited it first to me in the back room of a saloon on Sixth Avenue where the Provincetown players and playwrights used to gather after the performances.

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days,
I fled Him, down the arches of the year;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him.

Through all my daily life, in those I came in contact with, in the things I read and heard, I felt that sense of being followed, of being desired; a sense of hope and expectation.

…Do you remember that little story that Grushenka told in The Brothers Karamazov? “Once upon a time there was a peasant woman and a very wicked woman she was. And she died and did not leave a single good deed behind. The devils caught her and plunged her into a lake of fire. So her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell God. ‘She once pulled up an onion in her garden, said he, ‘and gave it to a beggar woman.’ And God answered, ‘You take that onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out. And if you pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise, but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is.’ The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her. ‘Come,’ said he, ‘catch hold, and I’ll pull you out.’ And he began cautiously pulling her out. He had just pulled her out, when the other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was being drawn out, began catching hold of her so as to be pulled out with her. But she was a very wicked woman and she began kicking them. ‘I’m to be pulled out, not you. It’s my onion, not yours.’ As soon as she said that, the onion broke. And the woman fell into the lake and she is burning there to this day. So the angel wept and went away.”

Sometimes in thinking and wondering at God’s goodness to me, I have thought that it was because I gave away an onion. Because I sincerely loved His poor, He taught me to know Him. And when I think of the little I ever did, I am filled with hope and love for all those others devoted to the cause of social justice.

But always the glimpses of God came most when I was alone. Objectors cannot say that it was fear of loneliness and solitude and pain that made me turn to Him. It was in those few years when I was alone and most happy that I found Him. I found Him at last through joy and thanksgiving, not through sorrow.

Yet how can I say that either? Better let it be said that I found Him through His poor, and in a moment of joy I turned to Him. I have said, sometimes flippantly, that the mass of bourgeois smug Christians who denied Christ in His poor made me turn to Communism, and that it was the Communists and working with them...
that made me turn to God.

“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these brethren, you have done it unto me.” Feeling this as strongly as I did, is it any wonder that I was led finally to the feet of Christ?

I do not mean at all that I went around in a state of exaltation or that any radical does. Love is a matter of the will. You know yourself how during a long strike the spirit falters, how hard it is for the leaders to keep up the morale of the men and to keep the fire of hope burning within them. They have a hard time sustaining this hope themselves. St. Teresa says that there are three attributes of the soul: memory, understanding, and will. These very leaders by their understanding of the struggle, how victory is gained very often through defeat, how every little gain benefits the workers all over the country, through their memory of past struggles, are enabled to strengthen their wills to go on. It is only by exerting these faculties of the soul that one is enabled to love one’s fellow. And this strength comes from God. There can be no brotherhood without the Fatherhood of God.

On Pilgrimage

(Perhaps no image holds more sway over our popular understanding of Christian conversion than that of St. Paul being thrown from his horse, dramatically thrust to the ground. Certainly it captures the radical impact of conversion, the about face it causes. But it also suggests that conversion is a one-time, singular event as opposed to a more developmental sequence, an arc of experiences — and, for Dorothy Day, experiences lived over a lifetime. She was always “on pilgrimage,” the title of her column in The Catholic Worker.

June O’Connor, the late professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Riverside, and author of The Moral Vision of Dorothy Day, found an illuminating lens for understanding Dorothy Day’s conversion experience in Walter Conn’s seminal study, Christian Conversion. Conn, professor emeritus of Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova University, talks about the affective, cognitive, moral and religious dimensions of conversion. What follows is excerpted/edited from an article O’Connor published in 1990, “Dorothy Day’s Christian Conversion” [complete text available online].

O’Connor affirms conversion as a process that effects a profound change, what Conn (and Bernard Lonergan before him) describes as a basic transformation of a person’s way of seeing, feeling, valuing, understanding, and relating. She relates how Dorothy herself tried to understand the multiple inspirations and meanings of her conversion, visiting and revisiting the events that became symbolic in her memory, going far back into childhood.

One early memory is the sense of joy she felt at the age of eight, when, after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, neighbors reached out to help one another.
What I remember most clearly about the earthquake was the human warmth and kindliness of everyone afterward. Mother and all our neighbors were busy from morning to night cooking hot meals. They gave away every extra garment they possessed. They stripped themselves to the bone in giving, forgetful of the morrow. While the crisis lasted, people loved each other. They realized their own helplessness while nature “travaileth and groaneth.” It was as though they were united in Christian solidarity.

Another formative childhood memory was of a neighbor woman, Mrs. Barrett. Bursting into the Barrett apartment, looking for her friend and playmate Kathryn, Dorothy found Mrs. Barrett in the act of prayer.

In the front bedroom, Mrs. Barrett was on her knees, saying her prayers. She turned to tell me that Kathryn and the children had all gone to the store and went on praying. And I felt a warm burst of love toward Mrs. Barrett that I have never forgotten, a feeling of gratitude and happiness that still warms my heart when I remember her. She had God, and there was beauty and joy in her life.

This moment became an enduring symbol of mystery and meaning.

All through my life what she was doing remained with me. And though I became oppressed with the problem of poverty and injustice, though I groaned at the hideous sordidness of man’s lot, though there were years when I clung to the philosophy of economic determinism as an explanation of man’s fate, still there were moments when in the midst of misery and class strife, life was shot through with glory. Mrs. Barrett in her sordid little tenement flat finished her dishes at ten o’clock in the morning and got down on her knees and prayed to God.

But it was her adult love for Forster Batterham, Dorothy writes, that finally brought her to God for good, nature that brought her to faith.

It was human love that helped me to understand divine love. I was grateful for life, and living with Forster made me appreciate it and even reverence it still more. He had introduced me to so much that was beautiful and good that I felt that I had owed to him too this renewed interest in the things of the spirit.

This, together with her awe at “the stupendous fact of creation” in childbirth, “spiritually and physically a tremendous event,” moves Dorothy to worship.

Forster had made the physical world come alive for me and had awakened in my heart a flood of gratitude. The final object of this love and gratitude was God. No human creature could receive or contain so vast a flood of love and joy as I felt after the birth of my child. With this came the need to worship, to adore.

Dorothy’s deeply felt human love coupled with her feeling of being “in love with the masses” were the doors that opened a recognition of and receptivity to God, enabling, in
Conn’s terms, her “affective” conversion. Affective conversion elicits a “radical reorientation of our passionate desires from obsessions with self-needs to concern for the needs of others.”

The affective dimension of Day’s adult conversion in turn makes possible a “cognitive” conversion. Not, Conn stresses, to be understood in an intellectualist way. In fact, he sees cognitive conversion as affective at its very core. For the depth of feeling is so great that it often gives shape to a person’s whole sense of purpose and direction. Ideas were powerfully important to Dorothy Day, and ideas that could be translated into action appealed in a special way. How, she wondered and prayed, could she use best her talents on behalf of the poor?

Enter Peter Maurin and the birth of the Catholic Worker. It was Peter who supplied her with a historically and theologically informed vision of her newly embraced faith tradition which she then made her own. Her once Communist sympathies would be modified by the social encyclicals. Together with the thought of Thomas Aquinas, Jacques Maritain, Hilaire Belloc, G.K. Chesterton, Eric Gill, Vincent McNabb, and others, they would in time become regular reading for Day. Captivated by Maurin’s vision, partly because it called on and affirmed her own already well-formed interests in the plight of the poor, Dorothy then found — and created — her “vocation.” Her partnership with Maurin freed her to use her journalistic talents on behalf of her two great loves: God and the poor.

But if cognitive conversion fosters insight which allows one to forge new, life-transforming, directions, Conn believes that only a deeper, critical “moral” conversion affords the full moral autonomy essential to decision-making. Simply put, moral conversion is the choice, based on a realization of the difference between “value” and “what’s good for me,” of value over personal satisfaction.

Given Dorothy’s intense and intentionally directed moral sensibilities that mark her entire adult life, O’Connor finds the moral dimension of her conversion particularly illuminating. Dorothy brought to her conversion an unconventional morality that was shaped not only by an early interest in a Communist workers’ revolution but also an attraction to a philosophical anarchism that sustained itself throughout her life. Part of the anarchist ethic lies in not waiting to be asked, not waiting to be ordered, not waiting for permission. One should notice and respond, see a need and meet it. One must notice, decide, and act; one must not rely on governments, organizations, or institutions to dictate or direct one’s judgments and actions.

Even though moral conversion, Conn explains, can be a conversion to a conventional morality that is “essentially uncritical, locating authority in absolutely given social values,” the moral conversion he respects is growth into an unconventional or “post-conventional” morality wherein one relativizes conventional values and discovers the final criterion of value in one’s own critical judgment.

Influenced by Marxist values during her college years, Dorothy dropped religion. Years later, when she found herself praying, she felt embarrassed, reminding herself that prayer was the opiate of the people. Yet a persistent desire to pray — out of happiness and gratitude, she noted, not out of sorrow — led her to trust this instinct to pray. Eventually, she came to trust her experience of prayer over its Marxist repudiation, allowing its spontaneous expression and natural development. This in turn moved her toward a desire for baptism for Tamar and herself and with that desire came a feeling of tornness, a wrenching, as she realized this would end her family relationship with an unsympathetic Forster. When the time for her baptism finally arrived, she participated out of sheer conviction, without any sense of joy, consolation, or peace.
tic about the Catholic school system with its seeming preoccupations with fund-raising and building projects. She urged city pastors to open up houses of hospitality within the parish community and not merely refer the destitute to Catholic Worker houses. She argued for the voluntary poverty she lived. She accepted without question persons of every religious persuasion and of no religious inclination long before ecumenism became a part of the American Catholic landscape.

The turning point in Day’s conversion process was effected by her love of Forster and the birth of Tamar. Her growing awareness of God in the midst of these loves produced an immediate conflict. Her intimate relationship with Forster was now threatened and approaching an end. But O’Connor stresses that Dorothy’s struggle cannot be reduced to the non-legal or non-sacramental status of their union. Her conflict, as she experienced it and articulates it, was far more basic, namely, Forster’s repudiation of her interests in religion and in God. These commitments offended his atheistic sensibilities, and she finally ended the relationship when her health began to break from the tension.

The struggle she endured about this love was not with her church or its moral precepts, O’Connor asserts, but with her own sense of realism about the relationship. The relationship could not continue as it was because the one thing that mattered most to Dorothy now was abhorrent to the man she loved. Religion angered and alienated Forster: Dorothy not only knew it, she felt its pain and power to render their relationship of intimacy impossible. Using Conn’s terms, this was no “borrowed” morality. Day appears to have been working out an authentic personal morality based on her changing interpretations, newly emerging commitments, and realistic judgments.

Dorothy’s conversion rendered her alone, without the mate with whom she was much in love. Yet in spite of membership in her new community, she felt alone in the church as well. She had been impressed with the large masses of poor, largely immigrant people, who filled the city churches when she went to Mass. But a radical anarchist Catholic was surely a rarity. She felt very much alone as a believer, and this was surely compounded by a sense of aloneness endemic to being a working single parent of a young child.

Because of her chosen entry into the Roman Catholic Church, one understandably may wonder how the Christian version of this anarchist relates to the structure of the church. What are her feelings about, and what is her stance toward this more authoritative, hierarchical body?

Dorothy Day was seemingly uncritical when it came to theological and doctrinal matters.

Without even looking into the claims of the Catholic Church, I was willing to admit that for me she was the one true Church. She had come down through the centuries since the time of Peter, and far from being dead, she held the allegiance of the masses of people in all the cities where I had lived. They poured in and out of her doors on Sundays and holy days, for novenas and missions. What if they were compelled to come in by the law of the Church…. They obeyed that law. They were given a chance to show their preference…. It may have been an unthinking, unquestioning faith, and yet the chance certainly came, again and again.

Yet as this passage also indicates, Dorothy had her own criteria for credibility. The church’s age and continuity through history together with the affection and loyalty of the urban immigrant masses she observed in many cities throughout the country moved her to pay attention to this church, to appropriate it and make it her own. She held no great esteem for personal autonomy as distinct from or in competition with external authority. She trusted the masses more than she trusted the single individual self. Her judgments were formed reflectively and deliberately.

(On Pilgrimage, cont’d on p. 18)
by Kate Hennessy

(Like her grandmother, Kate Hennessy is a writer. She is the author of the widely acclaimed book, The World Will Be Saved by Beauty: An Intimate Portrait of My Grandmother, published in 2017. We thank America Media for permission to reprint this article, “Under the Gaze of Dorothy Day: Living with My Grandmother’s Faith,” originally published on May 8, 2017.)

My grandmother, Dorothy Day, believed that to lose one’s faith was the greatest sadness. My mother, Tamar, Dorothy’s only child, believed to her dying day that she had lost her own faith. What can I make of these two interwoven strands of the most influential women in my life? How do I understand my own sense of faith? Do I have faith?

I have often felt that I needed a new vocabulary that speaks to my condition, as the Quakers would say. In fact, I often do not understand what people mean when they talk about “my faith”; they seem to speak a secret language that can feel more punishing than uplifting, more like a proclamation than a way of being. Is there some mysterious transformation that happens inside us when we make a proclamation of faith that I am not seeing?

Growing up with Dorothy and the Catholic Worker as part of my family, I picked up quite a tangle of odd phrases while lingering around the grownups: voluntary and involuntary poverty, Christian anarchism, pacifism, the works of mercy, houses of hospitality, the primacy of conscience. I made what I could of them, growing into them with each passing stage from childhood to young adulthood and now middle age, having interior arguments along the way.

Voluntary poverty was for many years a bone I chewed on as I felt the burden of being raised in involuntary poverty, though this was not so easy to define. At one level, my mother chose a life of voluntary poverty, and it came naturally to her. She did not need much in the way of material goods other than her gardens and tools, her looms and spinning wheels, her kitchen and her books. But as a single mother of nine, she spent years worrying about whether she could put enough food on the table or celebrate Christmas or fix the car or keep the house warm and the water pipes from freezing in the brutal Vermont winters.

But nothing from my upbringing engendered the same weighty feeling and confusion that the basic question of faith did.

Two faces of faith

When I was a teenager, I began visiting my grandmother at the Catholic Worker at Maryhouse on East Third Street in New York City. I would travel down by bus from Vermont during school breaks, leaving the hills and trees, the rhythm of the distinct seasons and a life on the farm that I never expected to leave, to enter the grit of New York City in the 1970s, when it was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.

I would be greeted at the double doors of glass and wrought iron by women who were sometimes delighted to see me, sometimes not, then walk up the stairs to that room on the second floor, my grandmother’s room, where she spent the last three years of her life.

Her failing health and loss of mobility became my gain as I was able to spend more time with her, a time of listening to her ruminate on her past, often laughing as she did so, or as she read letters from people around the world—a priest in Uruguay, a friend from Mississippi or a member of an ashram in India. Even as a 16-year-old I felt the pull of the magnet that was my grandmother. But I also began to feel a struggle within myself. I was drawn by the power and luminosity of her faith, but I was deeply loyal and more naturally bent toward my mother’s way of being: unadorned, unspoken and rooted in the natural world.

It was not until I read my grandmother’s diaries that I more clearly understood the pain Dorothy endured as she watched her daughter—the daughter whose birth led to...
Dorothy’s conversion — leave that very church. In 1965, Dorothy wrote: “I consider the loss of faith the greatest of disasters — the greatest unhappiness. How can one help grieving over friends and relatives. How necessary to pray without ceasing for them.”

I know she was speaking of us. She was so very careful to never impose this pain on me. She never once, that I can recall, suggested that I go to Mass, though when I did, it was so important to her that she would write of it in her diary. What delicacy, what respect she had for a teenager, I can now see.

But at 16 all I could feel was her penetrating and unnervingly direct gaze, a gaze well known by those who often found themselves pinned by it. (Tamar referred to it as “the Look,” which she had, too, though she was unaware of it.) Under that gaze, I felt I had no chance of experiencing anything of the nature and power of my grandmother. Under that gaze, I felt unworthy, particularly when she asked me after I graduated from high school, “Now, what are you going to do, Katy?” It is unfortunate that at that moment all I could see was what she had accomplished, not all those steps, whether deliberate or wildly inspired, she had taken to get there. But truthfully, for years, I wanted nothing to do with a church that could leave my mother feeling she had no place in it, that left her with a burden that seemed insupportable.

I believed for decades, as I think my mother also believed, that in the face of Dorothy’s faith anything less could only be felt as a lack of faith. The force of her faith was so strong and sure. How could Tamar have felt there was any other way for her to express her own? This tension was passed down to me, and I am learning how to untangle the strands on my own terms. Unlike Tamar, I was not raised in the church; and unlike Dorothy, I am slow and cautious in my approach to faith.

Ultimately, I believe that Tamar did not lose her faith and that I simply grew up with two outwardly different expressions of what that faith can mean. Dorothy provided the ritualistic expression of a deeply held faith she came to as an adult, and she lived a life that acted this out in an open and full-bodied way. Though a cradle Catholic, Tamar came to live a quiet faith, unadorned by ritual, and yet one that also imbued her daily life. Dorothy’s gestures were seen by many; Tamar’s were seen only by those who knew her intimately. My mother had an abiding belief in the goodness of life and of people, a keen sense, awareness and perceptivity of those — human, creatures or flora — we live with day to day. “Pay attention!” she would scold me. Pay attention to what is going on, both the joy and the suffering. Be with each other, be there, show up. Tamar’s was a faith that held at its heart the belief that with loving kindness, and perhaps good soil, we will all flourish.

Between mother and daughter
At a fundamental level, Dorothy believed she could see the face of God in those who are destroyed, rejected and forgotten by society, and Tamar believed we all are children of God. What clearer expressions of faith do I need? Entire treatises could be written on either statement. And so I came to understand that what lingered within me, this history of grandmother and mother, contained no divide, no conflict, no exile.

I have spent the past seven years writing about this relationship between mother and daughter, and many people have asked me what surprised me most during the process. Did I learn anything that I had not known? Dorothy and Tamar were both unusually direct and honest storytellers, so there were no great revelations. But there has been a surprise, and it lies within myself: a deepening sense of falling in love with the two of them not only for their profound love for each other but also for the pain that existed between them. And with this comes my own burgeoning sense of faith — even if I have yet to be able to define this. 🤔
in relation and response to a community of people she loved and trusted. And they were formed at no small cost.

Clearly, Day’s rediscovery of God involves affective, cognitive, and moral transformations. But is her Christian conversion also a “religious” conversion requiring, in Conn’s understanding, an arduous path: a life committed to the gospel call of loving service to the neighbor? Readily, he acknowledges its rarity.

He identifies religious conversion as a “special, extraordinary transformation of religious consciousness” through which a person who is religious becomes religious in a new way. While Christian conversion involves a turning from God to self in Christ, religious conversion is a transformation of that relationship. The perspective of the infinite becomes real. In the richly-imaged language of Lonergan, religious conversion is a falling-in-love with God that enables self-surrender without conditions, qualifications or reservations.

O’Connor concludes, using the prism of Conn’s definition, that Dorothy’s conversion is a religious conversion. It was not simply a new recognition of God, though it included that. It was more: a receptivity to God as a personal and creative being in her life and in relation to her other loves, so that her whole life was transformed, suffused with a sense of the presence of God. God was no longer an element in her consciousness. God was now the ground and all else the figure.

As her pilgrimage was nearing its end, Dorothy herself reflected that if she had she accomplished anything in her life, it was because she wasn’t afraid to talk about God. Her long journey of faith became a genuflection, a bow before God in gratitude, a bow before others in love.

— C.Z.

Dorothy’s spirit in varied ways today: people like Liz McAlister, Joanne Kennedy, Martha Hennessy, Ellen Grady, Sue Frankel-Streit, Megan Townsend, and so many others crafting new ways to sainthood in our midst. And more important, let’s learn to see the beatified we turn away from, for who they are, Dorothy knew them as God does. They might never be canonized, but she wouldn’t want them to be dismissed so easily anyway.

— Lawrence S. Cunningham is John A. O’Brien Professor of Theology (emeritus) at the University of Notre Dame.
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Ask that Dorothy Day be named a Saint

The life of Dorothy Day (1887-1980) embodies the powerful message of Pope Francis’s first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei* – “the light of faith is concretely placed at the service of justice…and peace.”

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*—Dorothy Day*