HOUSE OF HOSPITALITY:

Dorothy Day and the Permanent Revolution

By EILEEN EGAN

'BECOMING a Catholic', Dorothy Day related, 'would mean facing life alone. I did not want to be alone. I did not want to give up a human love when it was dearest and tenderest'. Separating from Forster Batterham, the father of her child, who would have nothing to do with religion, was the first test of her acceptance of Jesus and the Church, but it was only part of the separation she would have to endure. The other separation was from the friends with whom she had shared the revolutionary ferment of New York's young writers and artists. Though she had never been a member of the communist party, Dorothy missed the exhilaration of the struggle to bring a new society to birth, a struggle that was the daily bread of her former companions to the left.

Five years a Catholic, Dorothy found herself in Washington, the nation's capital, to report on a communist-inspired hunger march, for *The Commonweal*, a lay catholic magazine. It was the height of the Great Depression, with millions of Americans workless and without resources or hope. After the march on 8 December 1932, Dorothy prayed with anguished tears in the crypt of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception 'that I might find something to do in the social order besides reporting conditions. I wanted to change them, not just report them, but I had lost faith in revolution. I wanted to love my enemy, whether capitalist or Communist'.

When she returned to New York she found awaiting her 'a short, stocky man in his early fifties, as ragged and rugged as any of the marchers I had left'. It was Peter Maurin. He came ready and equipped with plans for a non-violent revolution and was bursting with ideas on how to remake society. George Shuster, the editor of *The Commonweal* had sent him, since he had noted congruencies between Peter's and Dorothy's ideas.

Maurin's revolution was a personalist, communitarian one

grounded on three pillars which he described in his lapidary style as 'Cult, Culture and Cultivation'. Cult englobed the teachings of Jesus, the mass and Church rituals and 'the daily practice of the works of mercy'. Maurin believed in direct action for social change and, for him, the performance of the works of mercy across all barriers was the most direct action of all. Houses of Hospitality would be places where all the works of mercy, spiritual as well as corporal, could be practised. Culture was the wisdom of the ages, of the saints, martyrs, theologians, economists, philosophers, to be studied and discussed in 'Round Table Discussions'. From these discussions would come, to use Peter's favourite phrase, 'clarification of thought', so that perennial truths might be mined for guidance in modern living. Cultivation meant a return to, and respect for, the land, and for all work, especially crafts and manual work. This would call for Agronomic Universities where unemployed young people could learn the skills to live on the land. They would not only discover self-sufficiency but the means to help others. 'There is no unemployment on the land', Peter was fond of saying.

One idea of Peter's for spreading the green revolution was to publish a paper. This appealed to Dorothy as a writer and a member of a journalistic family. She discussed the practical aspects of it with Peter and found that he would not involve himself with such matters. So as soon as she had $57 she arranged for the printing of 2,500 copies of an eight-page paper. It had been edited in a tenement kitchen on New York's lower East Side and contained seven contributions from Peter, the phrased paragraphs similar to free verse that came to be known as 'Easy Essays'. Dorothy's burning love for the poor and voiceless lights up every page. With a searing, compassionate pen she describes the exploitation of black labour in the Mississippi by the U.S. War Department and the oppression of women in sweat shops and factories. The paper was off the presses by May Day, 1933, when Union Square, at 14th Street on the East Side, was thronged with over 50,000 people at the annual communist rally. Dorothy Day, with a few young men, moved about the crowd selling, for a penny a copy, or just handing out, a tabloid with a title similar to that of the communist *Daily Worker*. It was called *The Catholic Worker*.

Dorothy, according to Peter, was to be a latter-day St Catherine of Siena, who six hundred years earlier had tangled with reform of Church and society. Through the newspaper, talks and personal contacts, Dorothy was to be the spark that ignited the minds of the

bishops to embark on the programme of Houses of Hospitality, Agronomic Universities and the restatement of the message of Jesus in terms applicable to the monstrous social problems around them. Peter kept telling Dorothy and anyone who would listen that 'the truth has to be re-stated every twenty years'. Dorothy continued to listen, but the american Church, through its leaders, showed no sign of response.

Dorothy decided, with simplicity of heart, that Peter was to be her mentor. Two more disparate personalities could hardly be conjured up. At the time of her meeting with Peter Maurin, Dorothy was in her mid-thirties, with an illegitimate child and with a free, bohemian life behind her. Her middle-class family had followed no religious practice, and later Dorothy rejected belief altogether. As an atheist she committed herself to the socialist party as well as to a career as a journalist and writer of imaginative fiction. Peter, on the other hand, was the son of peasants from Languedoc in southern France and considered that he had found his vocation in life as a religious when he entered the Christian Brothers.

It was only when Dorothy joyfully realized that she was to have a child that she turned to God and ultimately to the Catholic Church which she saw as staying close to the people. Peter left the brothers and eventually migrated to Canada and finally to the United States. He never gave details of the religious experience that moved him to adopt the franciscan way of voluntary poverty. He lived from day to day sharing his convictions with anyone who would listen. The bond between these two people was a search for a synthesis between the teachings of Jesus and the way his followers should live. Together they founded a movement that has influenced the american Catholic Church so profoundly that after *The Catholic Worker* it was never the same Church again.

From the small printing on 1 May 1933, *The Catholic Worker* leapt to a circulation of 100,000 within three years, and in another year, to 150,000. It evoked a resonance among the young, who came to volunteer their work and talents. Before long, the movement had been given a headquarters abutting New York's Chinatown, in a five-story tenement with two store fronts, and in the rear, another small house. There was room in the buildings for the 'throwaway people' of the depression years, near despair from the feeling of uselessness, of being without work. The bread line, serving hot coffee and soup and bread, grew long. Appeals brought in funds, often not until sizeable debts had been built up. The vision as

expressed by Dorothy animated those who joined the movement. She said,

> To see Christ in others, loving the Christ you see in others. . . . We felt a respect for the poor and destitute, as those nearest to God, as those chosen by Christ for his compassion. Christ lived among men. The great mystery of the Incarnation, which meant that God became man so that man might become God, was a joy that made us want to kiss the earth in worship, because his feet once trod that same earth.

The volunteers who stayed were the ones who could feel that same joy, or glimpse it often enough to make up for all the other experiences of life at *The Catholic Worker.*

Peter began to urge Dorothy to start a farming commune. In the end, she gave in to the one who had given her a way of life. The first was a house with an acre for a garden on Staten Island, the second, a run-down farm of twenty-eight acres in Easton, Pennsylvania. At Easton was inaugurated 'The Retreat', led by Father John Hugo, among others. It emphasized the supernatural to such an extent that Dorothy felt it was like hearing the gospel for the first time. While it gave her great strength, it had a disturbing effect on those whose catholic education had inclined them to scrupulosity. In any case, the week-long Retreat, in which the retreatants maintained silence, was given for many groups. From the accounts carried in *The Catholic Worker*, volunteers throughout the land were inspired to start farming communes, often as adjuncts to the city Houses of Hospitality.

Without any conscious plan, many of the Farming Communes developed over the years into Houses of Hospitality on the land, where the 'knights of the road' could be given temporary shelter on their journey and where city people could come for a simple holiday. Some people came to visit and could not be budged. *The Catholic Worker* farms were not always tranquil places. Yet year after year, Dorothy concentrated more and more on the need for community. There was a mystery in how she managed to keep the community spirit alive across the factions, overlooking the bickering, moving the polarized to less die-hard positions. She knew that in the movement were those whose bitterness was a cry out of the pit of loneliness, a cry for love. 'We have all known the long loneliness', she wrote, 'and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community'.

As long as *The Catholic Worker* took the gospel literally in accepting Jesus as the hungry one, the homeless one, the sick and even deranged one, it met little opposition. Carrying out what Peter and Dorothy always called the corporate works of mercy (a description less often used in these times), they set people's hearts afire. There was some incomprehension and even opposition when they involved themselves in the rather more controversial spiritual works of mercy, in particular, instructing the ignorant. Peter felt that the Church was protecting all of society, in particular the powerless, when it forbade the taking of interest. Many of his two hundred odd 'Easy Essays' dealt with the evils loosed on society by the legalization of usury. Peter's interpretation of the gospel, that whatever we have in surplus belongs not in investment but in meeting the needs of the poor, constituted a christian doctrine of property so radical that many believing Catholics were dismayed.

Opposition to *The Catholic Worker* was catalysed by its stand on war. *The Catholic Worker* came out for pacifism and for a neutral stand on the Spanish Civil War. The paper opposed the killing on both Franco's and the loyalists' sides and lost half of its subscribers. The paper had been climbing to a peak circulation of 150,000 and fell back to about 75,000. An even harder test came with the outbreak of the Second World War. From its founding, *The Catholic Worker* had carried articles exposing totalitarianism and anti-semitism. After the entry of the United States into World War II, on 7 December 1941, Dorothy went to the Church of the Transfiguration on Mott Street and prayed, 'Lord God, merciful God, our Father, shall we keep silent or shall we speak? And if we speak, what shall we say?'

These words were carried in the January 1942 issue of *The Catholic Worker* under the headline: 'Our country passes from undeclared to declared war: We continue our pacifist stand'. Dorothy asserted,

> We will print the words of Christ who is with us always even to the end of the world. . . . 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you'. Our Manifesto is the Sermon on the Mount, which means that we will try to be peacemakers. Speaking for many of our conscientious objectors, we will not participate in armed warfare or by making munitions, or by buying government bonds to prosecute the war effort or in urging others to these efforts.

Dorothy's bold stand was followed by bold action. Along with Joseph Zarella, a conscientious objector, she journeyed to

Washington to testify before a Congressional Committee on behalf of civilian alternative service for lay Catholics who objected to war service and refused to take life. For the Catholics, like Gordon Zahn, who managed to receive the status of C.O. from their draft boards, Dorothy Day helped organize two camps where they could perform civilian service. Among those whose minds were opened to christian non-violence, by Dorothy Day, is the present writer. For the millions of american Catholics who fought in the Second World War, pacifism was seen as a passive stance in the face of evil. Dorothy Day, more than any american Catholic, showed that pacifism is not passivity, but a day-in-day-out struggle against evils by non-violent means, by accepting suffering rather than inflicting it on others.

Dorothy Day never hesitated to go to jail for justice and human rights, as well as for opposition to war and preparation for war. During the 1950s, she refused to take cover when the siren blew for Air Raid Drills. She agreed with Ammon Hennacy, the 'one-man revolution' and *Catholic Worker* editor, that the Civilian Defense Drills were exercises in 'psychologizing' for war. Dorothy's reports of her experiences in the Women's House of Detention helped alert readers to conditions in prison as well as to the larger issue of how they were being prepared for war. In the summer of her 75th year, she travelled to California to stand by the side of César Chavez when he and thousands of supporters refused to obey unconstitutional injunctions against picketing. She spent twelve days in jail to give her witness to the non-violent struggle of Chavez, who has been called the Gandhi of the Grapes.

With hostilities in Vietnam, the 1960s saw a rise in anti-war sentiment. *The Catholic Worker* movement supported the many efforts for peace, including The Catholic Peace Fellowship and Pax, the american branch of the english movement founded by Eric Gill and others. It was in the 1960s that her international travels for peace began and the writer journeyed with her on most of them. In 1963, as a sponsor of Pax, she agreed to talk at the Spode House Conference in England on 'Peace through Reconciliation'. The knowledge of her interest in Kropotkin's anarchism had preceded her, and a packed house greeted her when she spoke at an anarchist meeting in London. Peter had once told a questioner that he was an anarchist but that he preferred the word personalist. Dorothy defended her fidelity to the term because she wanted, not a quiet word like personalism, but a flaming word that would prod people

awake. By sending people to Kropotkin, they were both telling people that they had to rethink their world. A possible model for remaking it would be to begin with voluntary, decentralized efforts, communes of producers linked by free contract. They wanted to empower, against all Caesars, people who too easily lapsed into passivity and helplessness.

When war and peace was to be debated at the final session of the Vatican Council, we decided that the place to be was Rome in the autumn of 1965. We prepared for the session by assembling a special issue of *The Catholic Worker* entitled 'The Council and the Bomb'. Dorothy asked me to edit and write the editorial for the issue, which included the most recent formulation of the Vatican Council Fathers on war and peace. Articles and letters urged the bishops of the world to speak out clearly on modern war. With funds from friends of *The Catholic Worker* and Pax, we were able, during the summer of 1965, to airmail *The Catholic Worker* to every bishop in the world. It was probably the first time that lay people had gone directly to the teaching Church on a world scale.

In Rome, Dorothy engaged in a ten-day fast with women of a dozen nations. While Dorothy fasted, agonized as much from the aroma of morning coffee that she was denying herself as from aching bones, I went from Council Father to Council Father with *The Catholic Worker* and a peace formulation from Pax. When the Fathers of the Council voted on the peace section of 'The Church in the Modern World', condemning indiscriminate warfare, supporting conscientious objection, linking arms expenditures with the unmet needs of the poor, and even pointing to gospel non-violence as a possible position for Catholics, we rejoiced.

We were in Rome again in 1967 for the Congress of the Laity and took part in workshops on peace and violence. Dorothy was one of two Americans (the other being an astronaut) chosen to receive communion from the hands of Pope Paul VI. In 1970, we were invited to Australia. Australia had troops in Vietnam and Dorothy was to be the main speaker at an anti-Vietnam Moratorium gathering in the Town Hall of Sydney.

We had been given round-the-world tickets and were able to stop off at Hong Kong, India, Tanzania, Italy, and finally England. In Calcutta's Dum Dum airport, Mother Teresa came out to meet us, garlanding us with the traditional necklace of fresh flowers. Dorothy was invited to address the novices of the Missionaries of Charity. The vision of both women was identical, that of seeing Jesus in all

human creatures, but more particularly in the 'distressing disguise' of dirt, disease, destitution and homelessness. As Dorothy told the novices of the other dimension, social activism, I saw their eyes widen as she recounted the many times she had chosen to go to jail. They understood going to prison for truth and liberation, as Gandhi had done; now they were hearing it in a specifically christian context, that of the work of mercy of visiting the prisoner by entering prison. When Dorothy had finished, Mother Teresa took the black cross with the corpus of Christ, as worn by the Missionaries of Charity on their *saris*, and pinned it on Dorothy's left shoulder. I know of no other case in which Mother Teresa gave the crucifix of her congregation to a lay person.

In Delhi we stood in bright sunlight at the Rajghat, the cremation place of Gandhi. We read the Gandhi Talisman, 'Recall the face of the poorest and most helpless man whom you may have seen and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he be able to gain anything by it?'

It is important to stress some of the qualities that helped Dorothy launch and keep alive so significant a movement. Though Peter Maurin died in 1949, Dorothy always pointed to him as the spirit and founder of the movement. Yet it was she who was the luminous centre of it and it was she who held it firm on its most radical position, gospel non-violence.

Dorothy possessed, beyond every other person I have encountered in my life, except Mother Teresa of Calcutta, a rock-like faith in the Providence of God. That quality made it possible for her, at seventy-five, to embark on the single most taxing of all the enterprises of *The Catholic Worker*, Maryhouse, the home for New York's homeless, 'shopping-bag' women.

A second key to Dorothy's character was her sense of gratitude for everything, from the greatest to the littlest. She once said that on her tomb, she would like only the words, *Deo Gratias*, Thanks be to God. She thanked God for all that had happened to her of good, but first of all for the gift of faith which had brought to her her greatest happiness. Instead of any lingering sense of loss over a lost love, she thanked God for Forster Batterham. It was with him she had found the natural happiness that had led her towards God. She would thank God for the most ordinary things. I recall that when we stopped for fish and chips in London, she thanked God for the delicious meal, commenting enthusiastically on how fresh and hot they were.

Dorothy was, before all and beyond all, a woman of prayer. When we travelled, Dorothy, as a morning person awakened early and would be reading and meditating on the psalms when I made my appearance at a later hour. In spare moments, she would dip into some *lectio divina* that she habitually carried with her in addition to the daily missal and the short breviary. She would often discuss the implications of her readings, and her 'On Pilgrimage' columns were alight with golden nuggets from St Teresa of Avila, St Thérèse of Lisieux, St Francis of Assisi or Julian of Norwich. In darkest times, she would recall Julian's hope-filled reminder that all would be well, for the worst had already happened, namely, the Fall and that Christ had remedied that 'happy fault'. It could have been nothing less than her life of prayer and closeness to the sacraments that gave her the incredible strength needed to undergo the attacks and humiliations that beset her and the movement.

The mass was the centre of her life. 'We know him in the breaking of the bread', she said, 'and we know each other in the breaking of the bread, and we are not alone any more. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship'. In her last days, she was grateful that the Eucharist could be reserved in the little chapel in Maryhouse, and that communion could be brought to her when her worn-out heart would no longer carry her down to mass. Her heart never ceased to reach out in love for the suffering. On the afternoon of 29 November 1980, she talked to me on the telephone of the sufferings of the earthquake victims of southern Italy. She had seen on the television screen how the survivors were trying to keep themselves alive in the snows of the mountainous regions. Her voice became strong with compassion when she asked what was being done for them. When I explained that medicaments, food and large supplies of blankets were going in by air, she was relieved and said that blankets could be used to make tents.

Three hours later, at 5.30 p.m., as the old ecclesiastical year was dying, and the vigil mass for the First Sunday of Advent was beginning in the Church of the Nativity around the corner from Maryhouse, Dorothy Day died. To her wake at Maryhouse came an unending stream of people, people of all religions and of none. Some came to pray, some only to stand by the bier of the poor woman lying in an unpainted pine coffin. Round her hair was the blue cotton scarf she had worn in life and on her body was her usual cheap cotton dress.

The more public memorial, a mass at St Patrick's Cathedral, took place two months after Dorothy's death. Terence Cardinal Cooke, with twenty-five priests, concelebrated it. The Cardinal pointed out in his homily that Dorothy Day had been called upon to make 'a voluntary and complete surrender of human love to divine love'. The drama which had followed Dorothy in life, did not desert her in death. Facing the Cardinal, in the first pew of the Cathedral, was a man of 86, alert, straight-backed and wearing thick-lensed glasses. He was the 'human love' in person, Forster Batterham, still faithful to anarchism and atheism, the man whom Dorothy had given up over half a century earlier. Next to him was the daughter of the union, Tamar Teresa Hennessy, with three of her nine children.

Will *The Catholic Worker* survive? is the question raised on many sides. Is it surviving? is a frequent question since Dorothy Day's presence has been removed from it. First, the answer to the second question. Maryhouse and St Joseph's House, and the forty odd *Catholic Worker* houses and rural communities are continuing. On the very day of Dorothy's death, Michael Kirwan was opening a House of Hospitality in Washington D.C., and exactly a year later, a Maryhouse was started for the homeless women of the nation's capital. New houses, some only supplying food and others hospitality, have opened their doors in four other cities. There is a never-ending cry for a greater number of full-time volunteers, but somehow the work goes on. About half a dozen houses have their own newspapers. All deal with the challenge of awakening consciences to moral issues relating to the world community as well as to local and national communities.

The Friday evening meetings, started in 1933, are still held in the New York house, the locus being the auditorium of Maryhouse. Daniel Berrigan called them 'the longest-lasting, free, floating university in New York or anywhere'. They still attract speakers like Daniel Berrigan himself, Daniel Ellsberg and Danilo Dolci, as they had in the past drawn such speakers as Jacques Maritain, Frank Sheed and Lanza del Vasto. *The Catholic Worker*, still printing serious contributions from unknown and well-known writers, and free graphics from such renowned artists as Fritz Eichenberg, goes around the world in over 100,000 copies.

The question of the movement's survival had already been answered for many, including the writer. Aside from other indications, the year of the American Bicentennial had proved that *The Catholic Worker* revolution had influenced the Catholic Church in an

irreversible way. Even if *The Catholic Worker* houses would fade from the scene, *The Catholic Worker* witness would live. The Church marked 1976, the bicentennial of the nation's birth, by holding two religious gatherings, the International Eucharistic Congress that brought masses of people to Philadelphia in August, and the 'Call to Action Conference' on 'Liberty and Justice for all' that brought thousands of representative delegates to Detroit in November.

Dorothy Day received an ovation from 8,000 people when she spoke at the Eucharistic Congress, sharing the platform with Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Dom Helder Camara of Brazil. The date was 6 August, the anniversary of Hiroshima. No day in history could have given more support to the message of the woman who spoke the words of the Gospel in urging Christians to be peacemakers rather than war-makers, and in urging all human beings to be tender with their kind. A few months later, at the 'Call to Action Conference', it became unmistakably clear how deeply the revolution of *The Catholic Worker* had taken hold of the american Catholic Church. Its 'Humankind' statement called for Catholics to lead the way in resisting the production and use of nuclear weapons and in peace education. *The Catholic Worker* movement was singled out for mention as a model.

Dorothy has said, 'It is a permanent revolution, this *Catholic Worker* movement'. Describing the kind of revolution she meant, she stated:

> The greatest challenge of the day is how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us. When we begin to take the lowest place, to wash the feet of others, to love our brothers with that burning love, that passion, which led to the Cross, then we can truly say, 'Now I have begun'.

Such a revolution had nothing to do with the taking of power, with the myth that a change of power relationships would remedy the ills that afflict this or that segment of humanity. Hers was the revolution of love, a revolution that so often drew back from the suffering of the Cross to which it might lead. She knew, along with other spiritual leaders, that as the spiritual life is a series of new beginnings, so the revolution of the heart is never a final one, but one that is continually being renewed.