

WHEN GOD IS SOUGHT SINCERELY: MARY WARD AND DOROTHY DAY

By MARTIN CHASE

WHEN DOROTHY DAY entitled her autobiography *The long loneliness*, she was alluding to a quotation from Mary Ward.¹ The theme of loneliness ('the loneliness', as Mary Ward called it) recurs throughout the writings of both women, a reflection of the social and spiritual circumstances of their lives. Both knew the loneliness of imprisonment, ridicule, ostracism and failure, but they experienced it as the loneliness of Gethsemane, a loneliness freely chosen and ultimately fulfilled in peace and joy.

Near the end of her life Dorothy Day wrote, 'I wonder how many people realize the loneliness of the convert. I don't know whether I conveyed that in my book *The long loneliness*. I wrote in my book about giving up a lover. But it also meant giving up a whole society of friends and fellow workers'.² The conversion to which she refers is not her decision to enter the Church, it is the 'second conversion' she felt all Catholics should go through, an experience which binds one with 'a more profound, a more mature love and obedience to the Church'.³ It is the conversion through which the mature Christian comes to understand a relationship with God and a vocation in life. Dorothy Day's second conversion happened five years after she became a Catholic: tired of searching, she visited the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception on 8 December 1932 and prayed 'that some way would be shown me, some way would be opened up for me to work for the poor and the oppressed'.⁴ The following day in New York she met Peter Maurin and together they founded The Catholic Worker, the movement to which she devoted the remaining fifty years of her life.

Mary Ward, too, had a second conversion preceded by five years of seeking. Like Dorothy Day, she was confident of her religious vocation but had difficulty bringing its particular nature into focus. From a series of false starts after her arrival in St Omer in 1606 she learned what she was not meant to be, but she had no positive inspiration until 1611, when almost in a flash she

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learned that she was to 'take the same of the Society'. This mystical enlightenment, which she said 'so changed the whole soul, that it was impossible for me to doubt',⁵ was the beginning of what would become the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary and a new life not only for Mary Ward but for thousands of women religious in the centuries following.

For both Mary Ward and Dorothy Day the second conversion was radical and irrevocable. Much more than a return to purer intention or an affirmation of a commitment made previously, it meant abandoning a way of life for something entirely new. When Mary Ward left the Poor Clare convent she gave up not only a life she loved and had longed for, but the friends she had gathered, her spiritual advisors, and not insignificantly, most of her dowry. Neither her friends nor the ecclesiastical authorities understood the vocation to which she was called: at best they considered it folly and at worst, a scandal. This was the beginning of the paradoxical loneliness with which Dorothy Day identified so clearly, to be ostracised as a failure at the most happy and grace-filled moment of one's life. Miss Day's experience was much the same. In the years before she founded *The Catholic Worker* she had been fulfilled and content in her work as a writer, in her idealistic communist friends, and especially in the peace and security of domestic life with her daughter. But, like Mary Ward, she answered the call to another way, a way which her comrades found beyond contempt and which the Church could not comprehend, much less approve. It made motherhood difficult and a normal family life impossible. And so she, too, knew the loneliness, but knew as well that she was responding to God's will for her.

The essence of the vocation these women answered was nothing new: it was the apostolic vocation which God revealed in the Incarnation and Jesus taught in the gospels, and which the saints have practised since the earliest times. It is based on the acknowledgment of Christ's continuing presence in the world. The recognition of Christ in our fellow human beings leads us to God when we love them, and the personal love of God we experience in prayer in turn impels us to seek and love him in our neighbour. The spiritual and corporeal realms are thus inextricably bound up in an unbroken circle, and contemplation cannot be separated from activity. Mary Ward was careful to distinguish this spirituality from the unitive way of monastics, 'whose holiness chiefly appears in that union with God which maketh them out of themselves'.⁶ She compared the divine love she experienced to 'fire, which will not let itself be shut up, for it is impossible to love God and not to labour to extend his honour'.⁷ For Dorothy Day, too, action

was the only possible response: 'The only way we have to show our love for God is by the love we have for our brother'.⁸ The ability to know Christ incarnate in his creatures is the key. Mary Ward resolved that 'always when the clock strikes' she would lift up her mind to God, 'reflecting briefly that every reasonable soul is made to his image',⁹ and Dorothy Day explained that she took in the homeless people of the Bowery,

Not for the sake of humanity. Not because it might be Christ who stays with us, comes to see us, takes up our time. Not because these people remind us of Christ . . . but because they *are* Christ, asking us to find room for him.¹⁰

It was Christ in human guise who called the two foundresses to conversion. When Dorothy Day met Peter Maurin she was working with the Communists to improve the lot of the poor and the unemployed, and she had begun to recognize Christ in their faces. She was searching for an understanding of their misery in the context of Christianity, and Peter gave it to her, along with a plan for its alleviation. When the 'quiet and continual communion with God' of the contemplative life failed to reveal God's will for Mary Ward, she went to England 'to do all the little I could for God, and the good of those there',¹¹ and through this active service she learned that she was to 'embrace the religious state and at the same time . . . the performance of those works of christian charity towards our neighbour, that cannot be undertaken in convents'.¹² As Mary Ward worked out a new model of religious life she came to regard the virtues of justice, verity, and freedom as essential to its success. Three hundred years later Dorothy Day made these same virtues the mainstay of her own life and The Catholic Worker apostolate.

In her early years as a political radical Dorothy Day worked for justice, but it was purely a social justice, concerned with vindication and rights, and the 'just' distribution of material wealth. Under the influence of Peter Maurin and christian teaching she began to understand justice, as Mary Ward had, in its broader biblical sense: 'a certain rightness measured by conformity to divine law'.¹³ Like Mary Ward, Dorothy Day was concerned with both the perfection of self and the salvation of neighbour;¹⁴ in the spirituality of both women this conformity to the divine applied as well to the individual soul at a microcosmic level, as to the world. In the spirit of what the twentieth century calls personalism, they sought to build the kingdom of God on earth by conforming themselves and those around them to the example of Christ in the gospel.

In her vision of the 'just soul' in 1615 Mary Ward was convinced of 'a clear and perfect estate to be had in this life' which was none other than the state of 'those in Paradise, before the first fall'.¹⁵ In other words, she believed that both her own soul and the whole world could be restored to the right relationship with God that had existed before the appearance of sin. Four years later during a Christmas meditation she experienced the vision again, and gained the insight that 'this state leads to inherited justice and conforms to Christ our Lord, as to a most perfect model of all virtues'.¹⁶ Dorothy Day shared this vision. Each year she restated in *The Catholic Worker* newspaper that the aims and purposes of the movement were 'to realize in the individual and society the expressed and implied teachings of Christ',¹⁷ and she believed that this could be achieved only by dying to self and putting on Christ. She also shared Mary Ward's confidence that primordial harmony can be restored here and now:

The vision is this. We are working for 'a new heaven and a new earth, wherein justice dwelleth'. We are trying to say with action, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. We are working for a christian social order . . . Even here, right now, we can have that new earth, wherein justice dwelleth!¹⁸

If the order of the world can be conformed to God's plan for it, so too can the human person. The theme of self-perfection dominates the writings of Mary Ward and Dorothy Day, and it often has been misunderstood. Even among their disciples there have been those who deprecate what seems to be a harshness and rigorism in their spirituality. Mary Ward doubtless would have agreed that love in action can be a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams, as Miss Day was fond of quoting, but perfectionism rooted in the love of God is not the same as perfectionism relying on the development of human potential. Their perfectionism had nothing to do with the attainment of goals or the self-reproachment and humiliation of failure. Rather, their aim was to co-operate with God in the completion of the work he has begun in each of his creatures. Neither Dorothy Day nor Mary Ward suggested that we draw up a set of standards and force ourselves to comply with them. Their way of perfection called for the gradual putting aside of self-will and allowing the soul to conform more and more to Christ until finally it could become one with him. It was the only way they knew of responding to love, because to love God is to want to be like him.

They knew that perfection is a slow and seemingly arduous

process, but more importantly they were utterly confident that because God desires it, humans *are* conformable to his image—and this more through his grace and assistance than any efforts of their own. Mary Ward wrote optimistically, 'Do not let the foolish world persuade thee that virtue is difficult, for the Eternal Truth says "My yoke is easy and my burden light"''.²⁰ Dorothy Day has a beautiful passage on the subject:

The love of God and man becomes the love of equals as the love of the bride and the bridegroom is the love of equals, and not the love of the sheep for the shepherd, or the servant for the master, or the child for the parent. We may stand at times in the relationship of servant, and at other times in that of child, as far as our feelings go and in our present state. But the relationship we hope to attain is that of the love of the Canticle of Canticles. If we cannot deny the *self* in us, kill the self-love, as he has commanded, and put on the Christ life, then God will do it for us.²¹

Miss Day repeatedly startled her readers with her cheerful assertions that sanctity is within the grasp of the most ordinary of us:

We are all called to be saints, St Paul says, and we might as well get over our bourgeois fear of the name. We might also get used to recognizing the fact that there is some of the saint in all of us. In as much as we are growing, putting off the old man and putting on Christ, there is some of the saint, the holy, the divine right there.²²

The ideal of perfection was more familiar in Mary Ward's age, but nevertheless her jesuit advisors (whose founder had emphasized perfection in his plan for the Society of Jesus) were taken aback at her suggestion that *women*, too, could become perfect if they so desired.²³

As the lives of the saints bear witness, conformity to Christ includes sharing his passion, and Mary Ward and Dorothy Day knew this well. In the early days of her Institute Mary Ward had her first intimations of 'the loneliness', the desire for suffering which Dorothy Day later experienced in her own life. She began to understand interiorly that she would actively participate in God's saving plan and that this participation would involve suffering. 'I saw it pleased God better that I should satisfy in this life', she wrote, '. . . and that perhaps I might find more difficulties and crosses in the passages of my life than I did imagine'.²⁴ Mary

Ward greeted this premonition in the spirit of Christ:

There occurred that I should bear *well* all such difficulties as might happen in the doing of his will . . . I then offered myself to suffer with love and gladness whatsoever trouble or contrariety should happen in my doing of his will . . . I left with a solid contentment, and, as I think, desirous to serve and suffer for God'.²⁷

Her willingness to suffer was due not only to her generosity but to her faith in the redemptive power of suffering. In 1624 after her disastrous audience with Urban VIII she wrote confidently to Winifred Wigmore, 'I think dear child, the trouble and long loneliness you heard me speak of is not far from me, which whensoever it is, happy success will follow'.²⁶

Dorothy Day likewise understood her suffering as a means to deeper union with Christ:

When we suffer, we are told that we suffer with Christ. We are 'completing the sufferings of Christ'. We suffer his loneliness and fear in the garden when his friends slept. We are bowed down with him under the weight of not only our own sins but the sins of each other, of the whole world.²⁷

She, too, rejoiced in what she believed to be the opportunity to expiate here and now, to contribute to the atonement as a co-worker of Christ:

The mystery of suffering has a different aspect under the New Covenant, since Christ died on the Cross and took on himself men's sins. Now St Paul teaches that we can fill up the sufferings of Christ, that we must share in the sufferings of the world to lessen them, to show our love for our brothers.²⁸

She urged her readers to consider the apostolic aspect of suffering: 'So let us rejoice in our own petty sufferings and thank God we have a little penance to offer . . . an act of love, a voluntary taking on oneself of some of the pain of the world, increases the courage and love and hope of all'.²⁹ The lives of Mary Ward and Dorothy Day were marked with great suffering, but nowhere do their writings betray regret or self-pity. Suffering is always cast in a positive light as a happy means of loving and serving God and neighbour.

Closely related to Mary Ward's concept of justice is the virtue she called verity or sincerity. It is no abstract idea of truth but rather the practical integrity that St Thomas called *veritas vitae*: 'Truth of life is the kind of truth by which something exists as true, not by which someone speaks what is true. Like everything else one's life is called true on the basis of its reaching its rule and norm, namely divine law; by measuring up to this a life has uprightness'.³⁰ Mary Ward put it succinctly when she said that 'we should be such as we appear, and appear such as we are'.³¹ Dorothy Day shared this passion for truth. Robert Ellsberg has written of her integrity in words which apply equally well to Mary Ward: 'it was not what Dorothy Day wrote that was extraordinary, nor even what she believed, but the fact that there was absolutely no distinction between what she believed, what she wrote, and the manner in which she lived'.³²

They lived by the gospel precepts they believed, and the consequences were painful. When Miss Day remained firm in her pacifist position during the second world war, her financial backers withdrew support, the circulation of her paper dropped by two thirds, and Catholic Workers themselves abandoned the movement in such large numbers that it never really recovered. She grieved, but when she turned to the gospel she found only the precept to love our enemies, and to that she remained true. Mary Ward faced a similar crisis when she insisted that her Institute was to lead 'a mixed kind of life'. Had she been willing to compromise on the matter of enclosure she might have avoided suppression, but she was certain that they were called to follow 'such a life as we hold our Lord and Master to have taught his disciples'.³³

Although their vocation was radically counter-cultural, the integrity of both women led to an attitude of absolute fidelity to the Church. For them, conformity to Christ meant conformity with his temporal representatives as well as to the gospel. On the eve of her imprisonment and the suppression of her Institute Mary Ward composed a memorial to Urban VIII in hopes that he would change his mind. She carefully outlined the series of divine graces and revelations which had inspired and guided its foundation, and stated her confidence that it would 'remain in the Church of God until the end of the world'. But in her desire to be faithful to God's will, even to the denial of her own, she closed the letter with a gesture of submission:

By this short explanation, I claim not to prefer such lights or inspirations before the authority of Holy Church, nor my interior assurance before the judgment and decision of the Sovereign

Pontiff, but only in the present extremity in which I find myself obliged to do so, to lay all as it is before you, which having humbly set forth, if your Holiness commands me to desist from these practices, I will not fail to obey. May God in his mercy have no regard on this occasion to my unworthiness, but inspire your Holiness to do in it what will be most to the divine glory.³⁴

Dorothy Day displayed a similar spirit of trust in her often difficult relations with Cardinal Spellman. When readers, citing the obligation of conscience, objected to her statement that she would comply if Spellman asked her to stop publishing *The Catholic Worker*, she responded, 'My answer would be (and it is an easier one to make now that the Council has spoken so clearly) that my respect for Cardinal Spellman, and my faith that God will right all mistakes, mine, as well as his, would lead me to obey'.³⁵

Another aspect of the integrity of Mary Ward and Dorothy Day was their insistence on professing their faith in addition to performing the works of mercy. The greatest public opposition to Mary Ward's sisters was to their apostolate of 'the defence and propagation of the faith'. Their activities of instruction and counselling were considered inappropriate for women, and the Archpriest's allegation that they presumed 'to speak about spiritual things before grave men' and 'to hold exhortation in an assembly of Catholics' was a serious and dangerous charge.³⁶ Dorothy Day's evangelizing also met with resistance, not because she was a woman but because the liberal-agnostics who admired her social work found it embarrassing. But she made her position clear:

Together with the works of mercy, feeding, clothing, and sheltering our brothers, we must indoctrinate. We must 'give reason for the faith that is in us'. Otherwise our religion is an opiate, for ourselves alone, for our comfort or for our individual safety or indifferent custom . . . If we do not keep indoctrinating, we lose the vision. And if we lose the vision, we become merely philanthropists, doling out palliatives.³⁷

Both women were unconcerned with public approval, considering it much more important to be faithful to what they believed to be true. This uncompromising attitude contributed to the apparent failure of their foundations, but they had the personal satisfaction of having laboured with integrity. 'This is verity', Mary Ward wrote,

to do what we have to do well. Many think it nothing to do ordinary things. But for us it is. To do ordinary things well, to

keep our Constitutions, and all other things that be ordinary in every office or employment whatsoever it be. To do it well, this is for us, and this by God's grace will maintain fervour.

Dorothy Day agreed:

It is we ourselves that we have to think about, no one else. That is the way the saints worked. They paid attention to what they were doing, and if others were attracted to them by their enterprise, why, well and good. But they looked to themselves first of all. Do what comes to hand. Whatsoever thy hand finds to do, do it with all thy might. After all, God is with us.²⁹

The emphasis on the work at hand, with indifference to things beyond one's scope, is related to Mary Ward's third essential virtue, freedom. The freedom she sought was not liberty of movement or expression, but freedom of spirit, the freedom to refer everything to God. Or, as Dorothy Day put it, 'a spirit of detachment from all things, a sense of the primacy of the spiritual, which makes the rest easy'.⁴⁰ Such freedom flows from sincerity and justice, because the integrated conformity of one's interior and exterior life to the divine leads to trust, which in turn produces indifference.⁴² And conversely, growth in freedom enables one to recognize and choose the things which lead to God. It is essentially apostolic:

One is ready to do, or not to do, yet indifferently resigned to whatever happens; one seeth the danger of adverse things, but without fear, anxiety or trouble; a great confidence that God will do his will in conclusion . . . Being present to all, yet cleaving to nothing.

For Mary Ward and Dorothy Day this freedom had its cost. It meant choosing loneliness and poverty, and permitting a dying to self, 'by little and by little'. But accompanying the gradual dying was a corresponding transcendence, as self-will was replaced in the soul by the will of God, anxiety by confidence and joy. This is the clearest sign of their holiness, the ability to choose cheerfully the path of love and right, and to cling to it in the face of any obstacle. When Dorothy Day horrified most of her readers by urging that no resistance be made to the Cuban revolution, she explained her position with an articulate synopsis of her spirituality:

We reaffirm our belief in the ultimate victory of good over evil, of love over hatred, and we believe that the trials which beset us in

the world today are for the perfecting of our faith, which is more precious than gold.

'Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice you just and be jubilant all you upright of heart'.

Because 'all the way to heaven is heaven, for he has said, "I am the way"',⁴³

Mary Ward said it more concisely: 'When God is sought sincerely, the way to him is always open.'⁴⁴

NOTES

¹ Day, Dorothy: *The long loneliness: The autobiography of Dorothy Day* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1952), flyleaf.

² Day, Dorothy: 'A reminiscence at 75', *Commonweal*, 98 (1973), p 424.

³ Day, Dorothy: *By little and by little: the selected writings of Dorothy Day*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1983) [hereafter cited as *DD*], p 172.

⁴ *DD*, p 41.

⁵ Mary Ward, Letter to Nuncio Albergati [I.B.V.M. Archives, Nymphenburg].

⁶ Chambers, Mary Catherine Elizabeth: I.B.V.M.; *The life of Mary Ward*, ed. Henry James Coleridge, S.J. (London, Burns and Oates, vol 1, 1882, vol 2, 1885) [hereafter cited as *MW*], vol 1, p 346.

⁷ *MW*, vol 1, p 466. ⁸ *DD*, p 229. ⁹ *MW*, vol 1, p 360.

¹⁰ *DD*, p 97. ¹¹ Mary Ward, Letter to Nuncio Albergati.

¹² Mary Ward, *Ratio Instituti*, *MW*, vol 1, p 376.

¹³ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol 41, *virtues of justice in the human community*, ed. T. C. O'Brien (London, Blackfriars, 1972), 2a2ae.109,3 ad 3.

¹⁴ Mary Ward, *Ratio Instituti*, *MW*, vol 1, pp 376-377.

¹⁵ *MW*, vol 1, p 346. ¹⁶ *MW*, vol 1, p 434. ¹⁷ *DD*, p xvi.

¹⁸ *DD*, pp 91-92. ¹⁹ *MW*, vol 1, p 410.

²⁰ *The mind and maxims of Mary Ward*, ed. The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (London, Burns & Oates, 1959), p 49.

²¹ *DD*, p 227. ²² *DD*, pp 102-103. ²³ *MW*, vol 1, p 410.

²⁴ *MW*, vol 1, p 418. ²⁵ *MW*, vol 1, pp 418-419. ²⁶ *MW*, vol 2, p 138.

²⁷ Day, Dorothy: *From Union Square to Rome* (Silver Spring, MD, Preservation of the Faith Press, 1938), p 11.

²⁸ *DD*, p 203. ²⁹ *DD*, p 180.

³⁰ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae. 109, 2 ad 3.

³¹ *MW*, vol 1, p 347. ³² *DD*, p xv.

³³ Mary Ward, *Ratio Instituti*, *MW*, vol 1, p 376.

³⁴ *MW*, vol 2, p 331, cf pp 368 and 242.

³⁵ *DD*, p 334, cf p 172.

³⁶ *MW*, vol 2, p 185.

³⁷ *DD*, p 91.

³⁸ *MW*, vol 1, p 140.

³⁹ *DD*, p 64.

⁴⁰ *DD*, pp 113-114.

⁴¹ I.e., indifference in the ignatian sense, a turning away from self in order to attend to God's will.

⁴² *MW*, vol 1, p 396.

⁴³ *DD*, p 302.

⁴⁴ *MW*, vol 1, p 131.