

# VINTAGE Saints & Sinners

Dorothy Day (1897-1980)

WHATEVER I had read as a child about the saints had thrilled me. I could see the nobility of giving one's life for the sick, the maimed, the leper. [But even as a child I asked] Why was so much done in remedying the evil instead of avoiding it in the first place?...Where were the saints to try to change the social order, not just to minister to the slaves, but to do away with slavery? in *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*, Shane Claiborne, ed. (Zondervan, 2010)

2 IT IS NO USE saying that we are born two thousand years too late to give room to Christ....Christ is always with us, always asking for room in our hearts. But now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that He speaks, with the eyes of store clerks, factory workers, and children that he gazes; with the hands of office workers, slum dwellers, and suburban housewives that He gives. It is with the feet of soldiers and tramps that He walks, and with the heart of anyone in need that He longs for shelter. And giving shelter or food to anyone who asks for it, or needs it, is giving it to Christ....

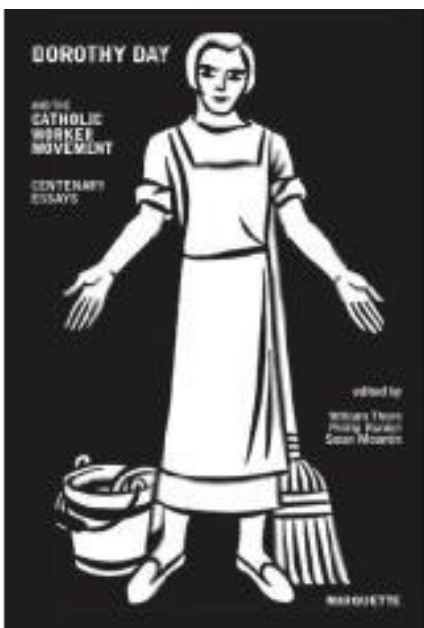
If we hadn't got Christ's own words for it, it would seem raving lunacy to believe that if I offer a bed and food and hospitality to some man or woman or child, I am replaying the part of Lazarus or Martha or Mary, and that my guest is Christ....In Christ's human life, there were always a few who made up for the neglect of the crowd. We can do it too, exactly as they did. We are not born too late. We do it by seeing Christ and serving Christ in friends and strangers, in everyone we come in contact with....Christ Himself said that a glass of water given to a beggar was given to Him. He made heaven hinge on the way we act toward Him in His disguise of commonplace, frail, ordinary humanity. *Room for Christ* from *The Catholic Worker*, 1945

3 WHAT WE WOULD LIKE to do is change the world—make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended them to do. And to a certain extent, by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers, of the poor, of the destitute...we can to a certain extent change the world; we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a hurried world. We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever widening circle will reach around the world.

In *Communication and Political Change*, Henner Barthel, ed., (Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 2004) 103.

We are not expecting Utopia here on this earth. But God meant things to be much easier than we have made them....We must keep repeating these things... Eternal life begins now.” Dorothy Day, *On Pilgrimage* (A&C Black, 1999) 177.

4 THE WORKS OF mercy are a wonderful stimulus to our growth in faith as well as in love. Our faith is taxed to the utmost and so grows through this strain put upon it. It is pruned again and again, and springs up bearing much fruit. For anyone starting to live literally the words of the Fathers of the Church, ‘the bread you retain belongs to the hungry, the dress you lock up is the property of the naked,’ ‘what is superfluous for one's need is to be regarded as plunder if one retains it for one's self,’ there is always a trial ahead. ‘Our faith, more precious than gold, must be tried as though by fire.’



Here is a letter we received today. 'I took a gentleman seemingly in need of spiritual and temporal guidance into my home on a Sunday afternoon. Let him have a nap on my bed, went through the want ads with him, made coffee and sandwiches for him, and when he left, I found my wallet had gone also.'

I can only say that the Saints would only bow their heads and not try to understand or judge. They received no thanks—well then, God had to repay them. They forebore to judge, and it was as though they took off their cloak besides their coat to give away. This is expecting heroic charity of course. But these things happen for our discouragement, for our testing. We are sowing the seed of love, and we are not living in the harvest time so that we can expect a crop.

We must love to the point of folly, and we are indeed fools, as our Lord Himself was who died for such a one as this. We lay down our lives too when we have performed so painfully thankless an act, because this correspondent of ours is poor in this world's goods. It is agony to go through such bitter experiences, because we all want to love, we desire with a great longing to love our fellows, and our hearts are often crushed at such rejections. But a Carmelite nun said to me last week, "It is the crushed heart which is the soft heart, the tender heart," and maybe it is one way to become meek and humble of heart like Jesus.... It is by the works of mercy that we shall be judged. Dorothy Day, *The Scandal of the Works of Mercy, The Commonwealth*, November 4, 1949

5 Today we are not content with little achievements, with small beginnings. We should look to Saint Teresa, the Little Flower, to walk her little way, her way of love. We should look to... those people who on their own account were greatly daring in what they wished to do for God. 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. It shows too much conceit to trust to ourselves, to be discouraged at what we ourselves can accomplish. It is lacking in faith in God to be discouraged. After all, we are going to proceed with His help. We offer Him what we are going to do. If He wishes it to prosper, it will. We must depend solely on Him. Work as though everything depended on ourselves, and pray as though everything depended on God, as Saint Ignatius says...

I suppose it is a grace not to be able to have time to take or derive satisfaction in the work we are doing. In what time I have my impulse is to self-criticism and examination of conscience, and I am constantly humiliated at my own imperfections and at my halting progress....But I do know how small I am and how little I can do and I beg you, Lord, to help me, for I cannot help myself.

From *House of Hospitality in Little By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*, edited by Robert Ellsberg (New York: Knopf, 1983) p64

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“**Don't call me a saint** -- I don't want to be dismissed that easily.”

“**I really only love God** as much as I love the person I love the least.”

“I have long since come to believe that **people never mean half of what they say**, and that it is best to disregard their talk and judge only their actions.”

“**The true atheist** is the one who denies God's image in the 'least of these.’”

“**The only way to live in any true security** is to live so close to the bottom that when you fall you do not have far to drop, you do not have much to lose.”

“**Love in action** is harsh and dreadful when compared to love in dreams.”

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