

Hold Nothing Back

Hold Nothing Back

Writings by Dorothy Day

Edited by
Patrick Jordan

Foreword by
Kate Hennessy



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*In grateful memory
of three Catholic Worker exemplars:
Frank Donovan,
Ed Forand,
and Kassie Temple*

*Peter Maurin always says that it is the duty of the journalist to
make history as well as record it.*

—Dorothy Day

Commonweal, November 3, 1939

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Foreword

Dorothy Day was a prolific writer. This is a miracle in itself given the tasks she faced as cofounder—or “housekeeper” as she called herself—of the *Catholic Worker* and as mother and grandmother to both her own family and to all she gathered about her. Dorothy’s relationship with *Commonweal* magazine spanned from when she was in her early thirties and the single parent of a young girl to when, at the age of seventy-five, she was a grandmother, venerable leader, and potential saint. Already a successful journalist and novelist, her first *Commonweal* article was published four years before the beginning of the Catholic Worker Movement and her life in the public eye. *Commonweal* also played a crucial and serendipitous role in the formation of the Catholic Worker when its managing editor at the time, George Shuster, sent to Dorothy a French peasant with ideas for Catholic social justice. His name was Peter Maurin, and within months of their meeting Dorothy and Peter launched the *Catholic Worker* newspaper. During the early years of the movement, *Commonweal* was known to donate money at dire times, in addition to sending eminent scholars to speak at the Worker’s Friday night meetings. The circle of this relationship was completed, in a sense, when one of the Catholic Worker’s own, Patrick Jordan, became *Commonweal*’s managing editor.

The articles in this volume are a small representation of what Dorothy has written, but they contain glimpses of much of what inspired and compelled her. The writings that provide the greatest poignancy for me are those in which she describes her daughter (my mother) Tamar Teresa. These have allowed me to know more about my own mother and the deeply connected relationship that she and Dorothy maintained throughout their lives. Six articles center on Tamar (whom Dorothy refers to as Teresa). “Guadalupe” is an account of a pilgrimage as experienced by a four-year-old Tamar. “Bed” is a tale any parent would recognize of putting a child to bed. Nighttime discussions with my mother could run to the theological and philosophical, as well as issues of wealth and poverty. “Now We Are Home Again” contains one of my favorite quotes from my mother: “Flowers and grass and things are so beautiful they just hurt my feelings.” This one sentence provides a delightful intimation of the woman Tamar would come to be. I also recognize Dorothy’s habit of singing “All Ye Works of the Lord” to Tamar, which continued and grew in length as each of Tamar’s nine children were born.

In these early years, Dorothy provides a sense of what would, as I see it, come to be one of her greatest strengths as a writer—her weaving of the personal and familiar with both her interior life and explorations of a wider, deeper nature. What seems simple description in her writing often contains much of what lies beyond. An intimate portrait of Tamar also touches on the mysteriousness that a young child can contain. Visits to gardens not only include the names of flowers but elicit the names of Maxim Gorky and Charles Dickens. Within a portrayal of life on Staten Island, Dorothy writes of a reoccurring sense she experienced—beginning when she was a child and that would continue to her last years—of both the immensity of God and “glimpses of hell” without God.

There are many other aspects of my grandmother’s writing that I find nourishing and are represented in this collection. Her loving obituaries and portraits describe people my mother knew well. Her vivid and evocative sense of place—whether Mexico,

Staten Island, the Mott Street Catholic Worker house, or her New York City neighborhood—helps me to see elements of the sacred that may be found anywhere one looks. Her stories are sprinkled with sketches of friends and strangers of all backgrounds, of those in need of help, and of those for whom it is too late, and I am left feeling they were all members of her family—and what a mighty family it was! These are jewels of thought and observation, and they feel like blessings coming from her sharp-yet-loving eye.

This volume also provides glimpses into how the Catholic Worker movement unfolded. Two months before the *Catholic Worker's* first issue was published, Dorothy writes of helping a newly poor family search for an apartment. As the Depression deepened, her writing begins to focus on the lives of the unemployed and underemployed. She witnesses these lives with detail and clarity, and then she imagines what could be with so little, beginning with willingness and commitment. From this we are brought into the early years of the Catholic Worker soup line and house of hospitality. In 1938, five years after her initial meeting with Peter Maurin, there appears within Dorothy's writings a deeper sense of maturity, and the phrases "works of mercy" and "voluntary poverty" drive much of her thoughts. She provides lessons on how to start a house of hospitality and warns of the danger of believing that if one can't do it right, one shouldn't do it at all. (She often quoted the phrase, "The best is the enemy of the good.") The essential tasks for Dorothy were to give it one's all and to have faith during those interminable tasks of cooking and cleaning while rarely having enough food or beds to go around. She also reminds us of the holy intimacy of sitting down to eat together.

Dorothy often concludes her instructions with a plea for help. She reveals something of the time she spent traveling around the country speaking publicly and appealing for funds, food, and volunteers. Only her daughter and those closest to her knew just how agonizing these talks were for her and how difficult it was for Tamar and Dorothy to be apart.

This collection is also, of course, a portrait of Dorothy's faith. The saints, whose company was vital to how she kept her strength and faith, were present in her thoughts from early on. A meditation on the Blessed Mother includes a discussion of the beginnings of her Catholicism as influenced by two communists and how, before her conversion, she learned to say the Rosary by reading a book. Dorothy also returns often to the theme of being on pilgrimage, and, like she did for so many things, she held a wide and embracing concept of what a pilgrimage could be—whether it was a bus ride through the Midwest, life at the Catholic Worker, or a visit to Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico.

By 1949, her voice displays a heroic sense of strength, vision, and power. Dorothy is now asking the hard questions. How far can one live in voluntary poverty while remaining able to do what needs to be done? How can one be Catholic in the face of the church's wealth and the luxury in which so many clerics live? What does it mean to go to jail, and why should one do it? And perhaps the most difficult of all—how does one continue the work despite an unrelenting sense of failure?

This series of snapshots covering a large portion of Dorothy's life concludes when, at the age of seventy-five, she is stripped of so much—her health, energy, and youthful enthusiasm—to reveal a profound state of gratitude. Dorothy Day has given us many gifts, and the gift I find among the most sustaining is how she compels me, in the most gentle of ways, to strengthen my sense of *gratitude*. I am not aware of which grandchild it was who wrote on Dorothy's birthday card "because you are very, very old." It could have been me, as the youngest grandchild, although I have no recollection of it. It would be gratifying to feel so included in this collection of her writings, but nonetheless I am truly grateful to witness, through these *Commonweal* articles, Dorothy's passage from the young mother of a single child to the spiritual grandmother of such a multitude.

Kate Hennessy

Preface

Dorothy Day (1897–1980) is considered one of the most interesting and prophetic American Catholics of the twentieth century, a fact alluded to by Pope Francis in his September 24, 2015, address to the US Congress. Born in Brooklyn to a non-churchgoing family of journalists, she combined a rugged, personal quest for authenticity with a lifetime of practical idealism. A convert to Catholicism at the age of thirty, she immediately cultivated a deep appreciation for Scripture, the life of prayer and the spirit, and the sacramental riches of the church. As an American Catholic laywoman, she wed her distinct writing craft, sense of history, and love of literature to serve the common good and to reform society.

In 1933, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin (1877–1949) launched the Catholic Worker Movement. Its aim was to bring the social implications of the gospel “to the man in the street” by living with the poor, practicing the works of mercy on a daily basis, and resisting war and participation in industrial society’s never-ending preparations for war. This distinctly lay undertaking ran counter to the thrust of much of American society and the church’s own self-preoccupations; it anticipated many of the emphases that would later emerge from the Second Vatican

Council (1962–1965). In fact, Dorothy Day was in Rome twice during the council. At its final session, she fasted and prayed for a strong condemnation of nuclear war and modern warfare’s indiscriminate slaughter of innocent noncombatants. The council strongly endorsed these points in its 1965 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (see especially chapter 5 of that document). Dorothy Day went to jail repeatedly to protest war and to call for just and nonviolent social change.

Perhaps one of Dorothy Day’s most telling personal traits, however, was her approachability. There was in her an unmistakable appreciation of others—a sense of enjoyment of them and of her own immediate family. She conveyed a sense of gratitude toward others that had the effect of making one feel welcome and valued. Her daily bread and sustenance, throughout a grueling life shared with the poor, was her practice of what Peter Maurin called “the primacy of the spiritual.” It is hoped that this short book, gleaned from some of her writings for *Commonweal* magazine from between 1930 and 1973, will not only introduce readers to her writing but also to the rich spiritual foundations that were the basis of all she wrote and did. Dorothy Day’s insight and spiritual wisdom only deepened with her years, nourished as they were by her daily spiritual reading, participation at Mass, prayers, sacrifices, and sufferings.

Unlike some writers on the spiritual life, Dorothy Day was neither a professional theologian nor a trained confessor. What is unique and inspiring in her writing is a candid, lay perspective on the daily and historical situations that she examines and addresses. She repeatedly draws herself and her readers back to the heart of the gospels: to their challenge and the grace they provide for assessing life’s immediate situations. She writes about life as a pilgrimage, one that for her included: raising a small child as a single parent; leading a disparate, challenging lay movement; and traveling to the far corners of the country and beyond, often on crowded buses, in order to cover breaking stories and write about them. Then there are her struggles to pay

the bills and to keep up with her growing family, all the while continuing to protest the exploitation of workers and minorities and to witness for peace. Clearly, one of her lasting legacies is that she wrote in such a way as to inspire and encourage her readers. Like the poor widow in Luke 21:1-4, she held nothing back. We must go and do likewise. Dorothy Day can help us learn how: one day—each day—at a time.

Patrick Jordan

Guadalupe

1

“Today,” I announced to four-year-old Teresa, “we will go out to see Our Lady of Guadalupe.”

“A pil’mage?” Teresa asked hopefully. Pilgrimages to her whether in New York, California or Mexico, mean very delightful bus rides, and in general a spirit of festivity. “I will bring Mary flowers.” She always speaks of our Blessed Mother in a most familiar way. And forthwith, she began to strip heliotrope blooms from the plant which blooms in my French doorway, looking out over the roofs of Mexico City.

I put a stop to this depredation, telling her that we would buy flowers from a little boy in the market, but she stubbornly clung to a few, too short-stemmed blossoms.

Teresa is at a very precious age, the age when the apocryphal stories tell us that Saint Anne introduced the Blessed Virgin to the temple. The little girl Mary danced up the steps, the story says, and I remember it often when Teresa is inclined to be full of antics in church.

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Busses are always crowded, but more exciting than street cars. We got in at the Zocalo, in front of the cathedral, and within a few blocks, two sheep got in too, or rather were pushed in, for their feet were tied together, and they lay on the floor of the bus at our feet, surveying us patiently. In front of the driver's seat hung a picture of Saint Christopher, and beneath the picture a little vase suspended for flowers. We were reassured by the presence of the Saint, for the bus careened madly around corners, past other busses, narrowly escaping pedestrians, urged on by the shouts of the conductor at every corner, "*Vamonos,*" and by a vigorous slap of his hand on the tin sides of the camion.

The conductor is a gentleman beneath his rags. He gets out of the bus to help old ladies on. He lifts off the babies and children. He holds the market baskets for the women going home from their shopping. At one time, he had three gayly bedecked baskets, full of flowers, tomatoes, squash, one with a rabbit and still another with a live chicken, and in spite of his armful, he managed to collect the fares and help people on and off.

Teresa's enthusiasm was infectious. She squealed loudly at the spectacle of the lambs, the chicken and the rabbit. She wanted to know why there wasn't a pig.

"I'll sing a little song—all about a little pig riding on a burro, and all the little pigs have dirty faces—and that is Mexico."

No one could understand her song but the passengers laughed with her and the man next to us said, "*Muy contento,*" and asked us where we were going.

Though the busses race along at a delirious speed, they are not impolitely hasty. If the driver sees anyone a block away indicating by gestures that he would like to come aboard, he stops to wait, and takes out a little top, which spins in the air, a "jo-jo" it is called, and which all the men and children are playing with at this time in Mexico City. But not the women. They have no time to play. They go to market and to Mass. They are always washing clothes. When they have nothing else to do, they are fanning the charcoal fires in order that the men and the children may eat.

Guadalupe is only a few miles from the center of the city, not as far as the Bronx is from lower Broadway. It takes only twenty minutes to get there. Though Christmas and Epiphany are passed, it is always a holiday at this shrine of the patroness of Mexico. December 12 is Guadalupe Day but the pilgrimages are not confined to the holiday season. Throughout the year tens of thousands of devout natives with their *padres*, come from distant cities in special trains to worship at their Virgin's shrine. As our Lady of Lourdes revealed herself to the poor peasant girl, so did our Lady again reveal herself to the poor peasant Juan Diego, filling his *tilma* with roses that he might convince the bishop—it was so long ago that it was the first bishop of Mexico—that his story of her appearance was indeed true. When he dropped the roses out at the feet of the bishop, his *tilma* was imprinted with a glorious picture of the Virgin, which is just as bright and glowing to this day as all the bright prints and reproductions which hang in every home, in every shop and market and place of business.

In front of the cathedral where the picture is enshrined are many booths where rosaries, candles and pictures are sold. On one side is a huge covered market which spills out into the streets for blocks around. On the other side there is a park where a Ferris wheel and merry-go-round accompany with their clamorous music the prayers of the faithful in the church. And in the back, there is the hill of Tepeyac where the Aztecs lived before the Spanish conquest. Now the hill is surmounted by a cemetery and on the top is a lovely little chapel which looks out over the entire city of Mexico, surrounded by the mountains, of which the greatest are the *Mujer Blanca* and *Popocatepetl*, crowned with dazzling snow. Nestling close to this small church are many little adobe houses, built on the side of the hill.

After Teresa had blessed herself with holy water, and made her rather lopsided genuflection, she skipped out of the church again that she might lean over the low walls and peer into doorways at the chickens, pigs, lambs and pigeons, not to speak of cats and dogs which shared the houses and gardens.

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"These are all Mary's babies," she said. "The little pigs and the chickens and the boys and the girls. And these are all little baby houses, and that," pointing to the church, "is the mama house."

It had been a hard climb up the slippery cobbled steps of the little hill, and we were glad to sit there for a while on one of the terraces looking down on the pueblo of Guadalupe. On a pilgrimage the devout Mexicans will climb that hill on their knees, but on ordinary days like this they content themselves with a lesser penance. When they enter the cathedral at the foot of the hill, they advance on their knees all the length of the church to the altar, holding aloft a lighted candle in their hands. Many mothers have bundles on their backs as well as babies in their arms as they humbly pay their respects to the Mother of God.

When we descended the steps on the other side of the hill, there was still the holy spring to visit which is sheltered by a chapel domed with glazed tile. The spring boils up in the bottom of the walled-in well, and Teresa leaned over it fascinated. Attendants brought up water in copper buckets and poured out jugs full for the Mexicans and Indians who surround it at all times of the day, in order that they may drink.

"And oh, the tiniest baby church!" Teresa shouted, looking across the street where the littlest and humblest of chapels has been erected in honor of Juan Diego. There is room for only eight or ten people in it and it is the width of its doors which always stand open. Teresa had to say one of her tiny prayers here, "about you and me," she explained, and then she was ready for the bus again.

"And now, no more churches today," she sighed, surfeited as even the great saint for whom she was named confessed her weak flesh at times to be—"but a lollypop and peanuts instead."