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DOROTHY DAY  
IN MY OWN WORDS

*Edited and Compiled  
by Phyllis Zagano*



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## *The Works of Mercy*

The early Christians started with the works of mercy and it was this technique which converted the world. They run in this wise: The corporal works—to feed the hungry; to give drink to the thirsty; to clothe the naked; to harbor the harborless; to ransom the captive; to visit the sick; to bury the dead.

The spiritual works are—to instruct the ignorant; to counsel the doubtful; to admonish sinners; to bear wrongs patiently; to forgive offense willingly; to comfort the afflicted; to pray for the living and the dead.

Not all of these works are within the reach of all—that is understood. But that we should take part in some of them is a matter of obligation, a “strict precept imposed both by the natural and Divine law.”

*THE CATHOLIC WORKER*, FEBRUARY 1935

## *No Place to Lay His Head*

*I*t is cheering to remember that Jesus Christ wandered this earth with no place to lay his head. The foxes have holes and the birds of the air their nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. And when we consider our fly-by-night existence, our uncertainty, we remember (with pride at sharing the honor) that the disciples supped by the seashore and wandered through cornfields picking the ears from the stalks wherewith to make their frugal meals.

THE CATHOLIC WORKER, MAY 1933

## *Minus a Meal?*

*“G*ermans to pare one meal a month to feed jobless” is another headline. Yesterday, while I wandered around town to view the parade, I was disheartened at the sight of so many women in the tea shops and luncheon places, spending so much money on so little, and eating so many unnecessary things when so many are going hungry. It wouldn’t hurt any of them to practice *agere contra* when they are tempted to indulge in an orgy of sweets. The Germans are going to pare one meal a month off their diet. Why can’t we go

them one better, or four better, and pare off one meal a week and give that money to charity? Or not even one meal, but one afternoon tea, which usually comes to fifty or sixty cents.

THE CATHOLIC WORKER, OCTOBER 1933

### *Families Fare Worse Than Pigs*

A deer gets trapped on a hillside and every effort is brought to bear to rescue him from his predicament. The newspapers carry daily features. Three little pigs are crowded into a too-small cage, the case is brought into court, the judge's findings in the case being that pigs should not be crowded the way subway riders are. And a family of eight children, mother, and father are crowded in three rooms and the consensus of opinion is that they're lucky to have that and why don't they practice birth control anyway.

THE CATHOLIC WORKER, NOVEMBER 1933

## *Neat But Still Needy*

A few weeks ago I went over to Saint Zita's to see a sister there and the woman who answered the door took it for granted that I came to beg for shelter. The same morning I dropped into the armory on Fourteenth Street, where lunches are being served to unemployed women, and there they again motioned me into the waiting room, thinking that I had come for food. These incidents are significant. After all my heels are not run down—my clothes were neat—I am [like the] girls, and women, who to the average eye, look as though they came from comfortable surroundings are really homeless and destitute.

You see them in the waiting rooms of all the department stores. To all appearances they are waiting to meet their friends, to go on a shopping tour—to a matinee, or to a nicely served lunch in the store restaurant. But in reality they are looking for work (you can see the worn newspapers they leave behind with the help-wanted page well thumbed), and they have no place to go, no place to rest but in these public places—and no good hot lunch to look forward to. The stores are thronged with women buying dainty underwear which they could easily do without—compacts for a dollar, when the cosmetics in the five-and-ten

are just as good—and mingling with these protected women and often indistinguishable from them are these sad ones, these desolate ones, with no homes, no jobs, and never enough food in their stomachs.

THE CATHOLIC WORKER, JUNE 1934

### *Saint Teresa of Ávila's Struggle With Sin*

Saint Teresa [of Ávila] struggled for twenty years, she said, to avoid the occasions of sin. To know what she was talking about, what she meant by sin, it is necessary to understand the situation she was in.

She had entered the convent at the age of eighteen. The Carmelite convent was a large one, containing so many nuns that it was difficult to feed them all. It was the custom of the day to send unmarried daughters, widows, ladies who wished to retire from the world, to the convent and yet they did not retire from the world. There were a great many visitors. Saint Teresa herself said that one of the reasons so many visitors came was to bring food to the nuns, and they received their callers because there was so little food in the



convent that they needed to eke out their resources in that way. Later when Saint Teresa was making her foundations of the reformed Carmelites, she saw to it that her nuns had enough to eat.

Saint Teresa knew that she was far from leading the life she wished to lead when she entered the convent. She wished to give herself up wholly to God. She wished everything she did, every word she said, to tend to that end. But she was a gay creature. The story is that she went to be received in the convent in a bright red dress. She was full of vitality, life. She wished to live abundantly. The very qualities in her which urged her to give herself to God drew her to her fellows. She had an abundant love for them, an interest in them, and there was much time spent in conversations.

The more her life was involved with her fellows, the more she was drawn to them, the more she felt she was drawing away from God....

But Saint Teresa had so great a desire for perfection that any time engaged in idle talk (the most innocent idle talk) seemed to her to be deliberately stolen from God. She knew what she wanted, she knew that there was a better life for her, but she had a struggle to attain it.

She tells...how she was kept from prayer. "The

sadness I felt on entering the oratory was so great that it required all the courage I had to force myself in. They say of me that my courage is not slight, and it is known that God has given me a courage beyond that of a woman; but I have made a bad use of it.”

She told, too, of watching the hour glass, of how she was filled with distractions, of what a constant hard struggle it was to force herself to prayer and spiritual reading. And these struggles went on for twenty years!

“I wished to live,” she wrote, “but I saw clearly that I was not living, but rather wrestling with the shadow of death; there was no one to give me life, and I was not able to take it.”

The shadow of death she was talking of was the life she was leading, purposeless, disordered, a constant succumbing to second-best, to the less-than-perfect which she desired. But human nature will try to persuade us that the life of prayer is death, is a turning away from life.

AMERICA MAGAZINE, AUGUST 4, 1934

## *Letter to an Agnostic*

*A*s a convert I can say these things, knowing how many times I turned away, almost in disgust, from the idea of God and giving myself up to him.

I know the feeling of uneasiness, of weariness, the feeling of strain put upon the soul from driving it, instead of abandoning it to God. And how anyone can persist in the search for God without the assistance of the Church and the advice of her confessors, with the experience of generations behind them, I do not know.

The thing you do not understand is the elemental fact that our beginning and our last end is God. Once that fact is accepted, half the struggle is won. If we wish to go on struggling, not to be content with the minimum of virtue, of duty done, of “just getting by,” then we should account it a great honor that God has given us these desires, to serve him and to use ourselves completely in his service.

You do not see this, you do not believe it. Every now and then, when you think of religion in your busy life, you end by turning from it with aversion.

You are very young, scarcely twenty-one, and you have not yet really felt the need, the yearning toward God.

You have not been in such agony and misery that you turned to One whom you knew not and said: "God help me!" Or if you did, you were ashamed of doing it afterward, feeling it to be cowardice to turn in misery to a God in whom you did not believe.

I felt this despair when I lay in jail for fifteen days (after demonstrating for the rights of political prisoners), contemplating the fundamental misery of human existence, a misery which would remain even if social justice were achieved and a state of Utopia prevailed. For you cannot pace the floor of a barred cell, or lie on your back on a hard cot watching a gleam of sunlight travel slowly, oh, so slowly, across the room, without coming to the realization that until the heart and soul of man is changed, there is no hope of happiness for him....

You do not know how long I struggled. How I turned to God, and turned from him, again and again; I, too, felt that distaste, I, too, felt that religion had a morbid quality.

It is the struggle of the flesh against the spirit. It is the struggle of the natural man against that in him that is Divine.

AMERICA MAGAZINE, AUGUST 4, 1934