

Sunday April 14, 2024

St. Thomas Church – Sunday Theology Talks

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“**Something Else Is Necessary**”: Dorothy Day’s Radical Social-Spiritual Vision”

- I. Christian faith is fundamentally an affirmation (*‘amen’*); but because human history is marked by sin, this *‘Yes’* contains a *‘No.’*
 - a. Consider Mary’s Magnificat (Lk 1:51-53):
 - i. “My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior” (Mary’s **‘Yes’** to God)
 - ii. “He has scattered the proud ... He has brought down the rulers from their thrones ... He has sent the rich away emptyhanded” (Mary’s **‘No’** to sinful social structures)
 - b. Christian faith therefore implies a **Christian social program**, a vision of what must be rejected in order for one’s *‘Yes’* to be credible and meaningful.

- II. **Dorothy Day** (1897-1980) was an American writer, activist, and organizer who helped establish the Catholic Worker movement. Her life indicates the radical social dimension of Christian faith.
 - a. Born to a middle-class family, rejected her bourgeois upbringing and moved to NYC where she moved in radical (Marxist, anarchist, bohemian) circles.
 - b. Converts to Catholicism in 1927, meets Peter Maurin in 1932, establishes Catholic Worker in 1933.
 - c. Catholic Worker movement associated with **four** main activities:
 - i. **Catholic Worker newspaper** – to explain and promote the social program of the Church, through Catholic Social Teaching, personalist philosophy, and spiritual reflections. An outlet for “propaganda,” protest, and education. Still published today.
 - ii. **Houses of Hospitality** – urban sites of radical hospitality where anyone can receive a meal, shelter, and community. Workers and “guests” live side-by-side in “voluntary poverty.” Loose organizational structure with minimal rules and hierarchy; different houses have different emphases. Now more than 180 Houses of Hospitality worldwide.
 - iii. **Roundtable Discussions** – usually run through CW Houses of Hospitality, they provided a platform for communal reading, debate, and organizing. Intended “to keep trained minds from becoming academic [and] to keep untrained minds from becoming superficial.”
 - iv. **Catholic Worker Farms** – self-reliant farming communities that lived off the land, outside the cities. Provided food to CW Houses of Hospitality in the cities, served as retreat centers, and rehabilitation centers for the sick. A few left today but proved more difficult to sustain.
 - d. Day’s life and her various charitable works all point to **three** fundamental principles:
 - i. **Voluntary poverty** as the basis of genuine solidarity – “descending” charity does not change underlying social structures; true transformation comes from recognizing that we are *all* in need of the same basic goods (food, shelter, community).
 - ii. **Personalism** – every person has invincible dignity; Christian charity is a face-to-face encounter; distinctions between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor are false and misleading.
 - iii. **Direct Action** – a new society must be “build within the shell of the old;” whether through feeding the hungry, protesting war, or publishing a paper, Christian faith means having an effect on the world.

- III. Day is now being considered for sainthood, but the world continues to change (Reagan years, internet & social media, increased concentration of extreme wealth, ongoing global wars, climate crisis, etc.) – what does a Christian social program look like today?