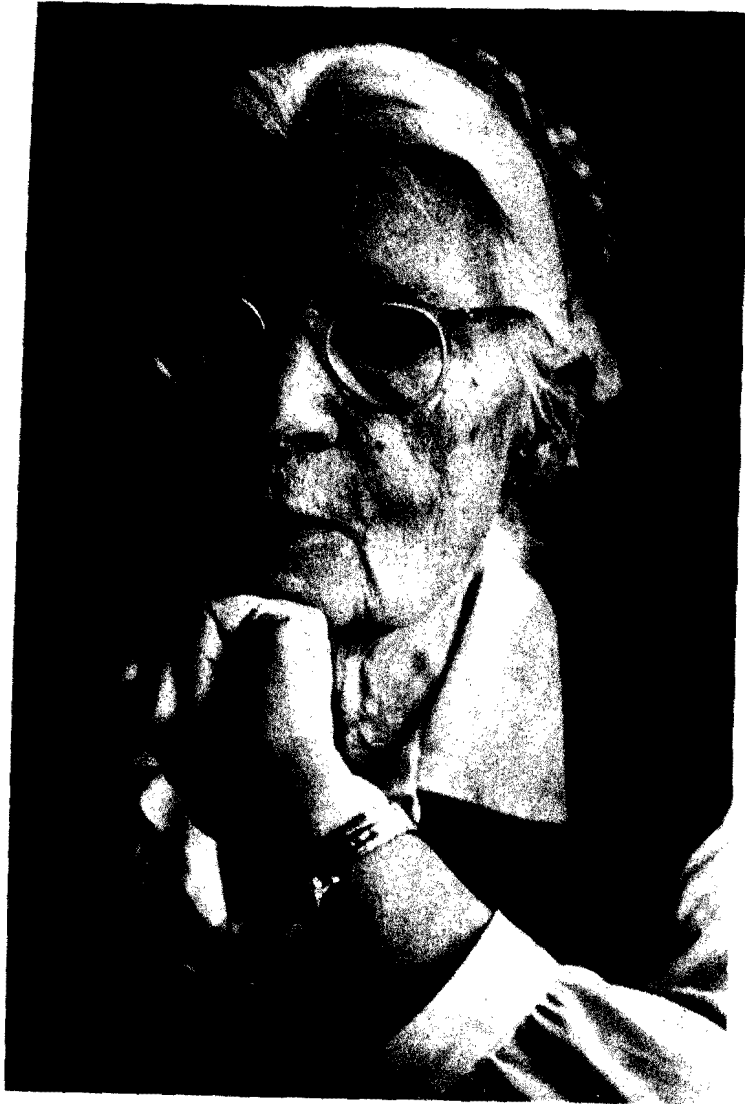


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By Little and By Little

THE SELECTED WRITINGS
OF DOROTHY DAY "

Edited and with an Introduction by

ROBERT ELLSBERG



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Poverty and Precarity

It is hard to write about poverty.

We live in a slum neighborhood. It is becoming ever more crowded with Puerto Ricans, those who have the lowest wages in the city, who do the hardest work, who are small and undernourished from generations of privation and exploitation.

It is hard to write about poverty when the backyard at Chrystie Street still has the furniture piled to one side that was put out on the street in an eviction in a next-door tenement.

How can we say to these people, "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven," when we are living comfortably in a warm house, sitting down to a good table, decently clothed? Maybe not so decently. I had occasion to visit the city shelter last month where homeless families are cared for. I sat there for a couple of hours, contemplating poverty and destitution—a family with two of the children asleep in the parents' arms and four others sprawling against them; another young couple, the mother pregnant. I made myself known to a young man in charge. (I did not want to appear to be spying on them when all I wanted to know was the latest on the apartment situation for homeless families.) He apologized for making me wait, explaining that he had thought I was one of the clients.

We need always to be thinking and writing about poverty, for if we are not among its victims its reality fades from us. We must talk about poverty, because people insulated by their own comfort lose sight of it. So many decent people come in to visit and tell us how their families were brought up in poverty, and how, through hard work and cooperation, they managed to educate all the children—even raise up priests and nuns to the Church. They contend that healthful habits and a stable family situation enable people to escape from the poverty class, no matter how mean the slum they may once have been forced to live in. So why can't everybody do it? No, these people don't know about the poor. Their conception of poverty is of something neat and well ordered as a nun's cell.

And maybe no one can be told; maybe they will have to experience it. Or maybe it is a grace which they must pray for. We usually get what we

pray for, and maybe we are afraid to pray for it. And yet I am convinced that it is the grace we most need in this age of crisis, this time when expenditures reach into the billions to defend "our American way of life." Maybe this defense itself will bring down upon us the poverty we are afraid to pray for.

I well remember our first efforts when we started publishing our paper. We had no office, no equipment but a typewriter which was pawned the first month. We wrote the paper on park benches and the kitchen table. In an effort to achieve a little of the destitution of our neighbors, we gave away our furniture and sat on boxes. But as fast as we gave things away people brought more. We gave blankets to needy families and when we started our first House of Hospitality people gathered together what blankets we needed. We gave away food and more food came in—exotic food, some of it: a haunch of venison from the Canadian Northwest, a can of oysters from Maryland, a container of honey from Illinois. Even now it comes in, a salmon from Seattle, flown across the continent; nothing is too good for the poor.

No one working with *The Catholic Worker* gets a salary, so our readers feel called upon to give and help us keep the work going. And then we experience a poverty of another kind, a poverty of reputation. It is said often and with some scorn, "Why don't they get jobs and help the poor that way? Why are they living off others, begging?"

I can only explain to such critics that it would complicate things to give a salary to Roger for his work of fourteen hours a day in the kitchen, clothes room, and office; to pay Jane a salary for running the women's house and Beth and Annabelle for giving out clothes, for making stencils all day and helping with the sick and the poor, and then have them all turn the money right back in to support the work. Or to make it more complicated, they might all go out and get jobs, and bring the money home to pay their board and room and the salaries of others to run the house. It is simpler just to be poor. It is simpler to beg. The main thing is not to hold on to anything.

But the tragedy is that we do, we all do hold on—to our books, our tools, such as typewriters, our clothes; and instead of rejoicing when they are taken from us we lament. We protest when people take our time or privacy. We are holding on to these "goods" too.

Occasionally, as we start thinking of poverty—often after reading the life of such a saint as Benedict Joseph Labre—we dream of going out on our own, living with the destitute, sleeping on park benches or in the city shelter, living in churches, sitting before the Blessed Sacrament as we see

so many doing from the Municipal Lodging House around the corner. And when such thoughts come on warm spring days when the children are playing in the park, and it is good to be out on the city streets, we know that we are only deceiving ourselves, for we are only dreaming of a form of luxury. What we want is the warm sun, and rest, and time to think and read, and freedom from the people who press in on us from early morning until late at night. No, it is not simple, this business of poverty.

"Precarity," or precariousness, is an essential element in true voluntary poverty, a saintly priest from Martinique has written us. "True poverty is rare," he writes. "Nowadays religious communities are good, I am sure, but they are mistaken about poverty. They accept, admit, poverty on principle, but everything must be good and strong, buildings must be fireproof. Precarity is everywhere rejected, and precarity is an essential element of poverty. This has been forgotten. Here in our monastery we want precarity in everything except the church. These last days our refectory was near collapsing. We have put several supplementary beams in place and thus it will last maybe two or three years more. Someday it will fall on our heads and that will be funny. Precarity enables us better to help the poor. When a community is always building, enlarging, and embellishing, there is nothing left over for the poor. We have no right to do so as long as there are slums and breadlines somewhere."

Over and over again in the history of the Church the saints have emphasized poverty. Every religious community, begun in poverty and incredible hardship, but with a joyful acceptance of hardship by the rank-and-file priests, brothers, monks, or nuns who gave their youth and energy to good works, soon began to "thrive." Property was extended until holdings and buildings accumulated; and although there was still individual poverty in the community, there was corporate wealth. It is hard to remain poor.

One way to keep poor is not to accept money which is the result of defrauding the poor. Here is a story of St. Ignatius of Sardinia, a Capuchin recently canonized. Ignatius used to go out from his monastery with a sack to beg from the people of the town, but he would never go to a merchant who had built up his fortune by defrauding the poor. Franchino, the rich man, fumed every time the saint passed his door. His concern, however, was not the loss of the opportunity to give alms, but fear of public opinion. He complained at the friary, whereupon the Father Guardian ordered St. Ignatius to beg from the merchant the next time he went out.

"Very well," said Ignatius obediently. "If you wish it, Father, I will go, but I would not have the Capuchins dine on the blood of the poor."

The merchant received Ignatius with great flattery and gave him gener-

ous alms, asking him to come again in the future. But hardly had Ignatius left the house with his sack on his shoulder when drops of blood began oozing from the sack. They trickled down on Franchino's doorstep and ran down through the street to the monastery. Everywhere Ignatius went, a trickle of blood followed him. When he arrived at the friary, he laid the sack at the Father Guardian's feet. "What is this?" gasped the Guardian. "This," St. Ignatius said, "is the blood of the poor."

This story appeared in the last column written by a great Catholic layman, a worker for social justice, F. P. Kenkel, editor of *Social Justice Review* in St. Louis (and always a friend of Peter Maurin's).

Mr. Kenkel's last comment was that the universal crisis in the world today was created by love of money. "The Far East and the Near East [and he might have said all Africa and Latin America also] together constitute a great sack from which blood is oozing. The flow will not stop as long as our interests in those people are dominated largely by financial and economic considerations."

Voluntary poverty, Peter Maurin would say, is the answer. Through voluntary poverty we will have the means to help our brothers. We cannot even see our brothers in need without first stripping ourselves. It is the only way we have of showing our love.

May 1952

Little by Little

Poverty is a strange and elusive thing. I have tried to write about it, its joys and its sorrows, for twenty years now; I could probably write about it for another twenty years without conveying what I feel about it as well as I would like. I condemn poverty and I advocate it; poverty is simple and complex at once; it is a social phenomenon and a personal matter. It is a paradox.

St. Francis was "the little poor man" and none was more joyful than he; yet Francis began with tears, with fear and trembling, hiding in a cave from his irate father. He had expropriated some of his father's goods (which he considered his rightful inheritance) in order to repair a church and rectory where he meant to live. It was only later that he came to love Lady Poverty. He took it little by little; it seemed to grow on him. Perhaps kissing the

leper was the great step that freed him not only from fastidiousness and a fear of disease but from attachment to worldly goods as well.

Sometimes it takes but one step. We would like to think so. And yet the older I get, the more I see that life is made up of many steps, and they are very small affairs, not giant strides. I have "kissed a leper," not once but twice—consciously—and I cannot say I am much the better for it.

The first time was early one morning on the steps of Precious Blood Church. A woman with cancer of the face was begging (beggars are allowed only in the slums) and when I gave her money (no sacrifice on my part but merely passing on alms which someone had given me) she tried to kiss my hand. The only thing I could do was kiss her dirty old face with the gaping hole in it where an eye and a nose had been. It sounds like a heroic deed but it was not. One gets used to ugliness so quickly. What we avert our eyes from one day is easily borne the next when we have learned a little more about love. Nurses know this, and so do mothers.

Another time I was refusing a bed to a drunken prostitute with a huge, toothless, rouged mouth, a nightmare of a mouth. She had been raising a disturbance in the house. I kept remembering how St. Therese said that when you had to refuse anyone anything, you could at least do it so that the person went away a bit happier. I had to deny her a bed but when that woman asked me to kiss her, I did, and it was a loathsome thing, the way she did it. It was scarcely a mark of normal human affection.

We suffer these things and they fade from memory. But daily, hourly, to give up our own possessions and especially to subordinate our own impulses and wishes to others—these are hard, hard things; and I don't think they ever get any easier.

You can strip yourself, you can be stripped, but still you will reach out like an octopus to seek your own comfort, your untroubled time, your ease, your refreshment. It may mean books or music—the gratification of the inner senses—or it may mean food and drink, coffee and cigarettes. The one kind of giving up is not easier than the other.

How does property fit in? people ask. It was Eric Gill who said that property is "proper" to man. And St. Thomas Aquinas said that a certain amount of goods is necessary to lead a good life. Recent popes have written at length that justice, rather than charity, should be sought for the worker. Unions are still fighting for better wages and hours, and it is a futile fight with the price of living going up steadily. They are fighting for partial gains and every strike means sacrifice to make them, and still the situation in the long run is not bettered. There may be talk of better standards of living, every worker with his car and owning his own home, but still this comfort

depends on a wage, a boss, a war. Our whole modern economy is based on preparations for war, and that is one of the great modern arguments for poverty. If the comfort one has gained has resulted in the deaths of thousands in Korea and other parts of the world, then that comfort will have to be atoned for. The argument now is that there is no civilian population, that all are involved in the war (misnamed "defense") effort. If you work in a textile mill making cloth or in a factory making dungarees or blankets, your work is still tied up with war. If you raise food or irrigate the land to raise food you may be feeding troops or liberating others to serve as troops. If you ride a bus you are paying taxes. Whatever you buy is taxed, so that you are, in effect, helping to support the state's preparations for war exactly to the extent of your attachment to worldly things of whatever kind.

The merchant counting his profit in pennies, the millionaire with his efficiency experts, have learned how to amass wealth. By following their example—and profiting by the war boom—there is no necessity for anyone to be poor nowadays. So they say.

But the fact remains that every House of Hospitality is full. There is a breadline outside our door, every day, twice a day, two or three hundred strong. Families write us pitifully for help. This is not poverty; this is destitution.

In front of me as I write is Fritz Eichenberg's picture of St. Vincent de Paul. He holds a chubby child in his arms and a thin pale child is clinging to him. Yes, the poor are always going to be with us—Our Lord told us that—and there will always be a need for our sharing, for stripping ourselves to help others. It will always be a lifetime job.

But I am sure that God did not intend that there be so many poor. The class structure is of *our* making and by *our* consent, not His, and we must do what we can to change it. So we are urging revolutionary change.

So many sins against the poor cry out to high heaven! One of the most deadly sins is to deprive the laborer of his hire. There is another: to instill in him paltry desires so compulsive that he is willing to sell his liberty and his honor to satisfy them. We are all guilty of concupiscence, but newspapers, radios, television, and battalions of advertising men (woe to that generation!) deliberately stimulate our desires, the satisfaction of which so often means the degradation of the family.

Because of these factors of modern life, the only way we can write about poverty is in terms of ourselves, our own personal responsibility. The message we have been given is the Cross.

We have seen the depths of the faithlessness and stubbornness of the

human soul—we are surrounded by sin and failure—and it is a mark of our faith in Christ that we continue to hope, to write, to appeal and beg for help for our work. And we pray also for an increase in the love of poverty, which goes with love of our brothers and sisters.

April 1953