



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Dorothy Day's  
Radical Hospitality  
(*Hospitality*, pp. 37-45)

### What do you think?

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### Christian Reflection

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# Dorothy Day's Radical Hospitality

The Catholic Worker movement's influence is due to more than its aid to people in need or support for workers' unions. It has been a consistent witness that hospitality and nonviolence are at the heart of the gospel and the basis for critiquing our culture.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Romans 12:9-13

### Meditation†

We know that we constantly err through lack of charity and prayer, but with confidence in God we can start each morning anew with the words of the Psalmist, "Now I have begun."

So pray for us that we have the love and joy in service that go with all beginnings.

*Dorothy Day* (1897-1980)

### Reflection

Since "Christian beliefs are...living convictions which give shape to actual lives and actual communities," James McClendon has written, "the only relevant critical examination of Christian beliefs may be one which begins by attending to lived lives." We 'get the picture' of Christian hospitality as we see it lived out by a *witness*, a person who truly embodies the gospel. Dorothy Day was a witness in the twentieth century, McClendon believed.

Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, a street prophet, founded the *Catholic Worker* newspaper in New York's Bowery neighborhood during the Great Depression. In just five years its circulation was 190,000 and it had inspired some thirty "hospitality houses" to serve the poor, workers, and immigrant populations. The newspaper would "popularize and make known the encyclicals of the Popes in regard to social justice and the program put forth by the Church for the 'reconstruction of the social order,'" Day promised in its first issue. Through the hospitality houses the movement's purpose expanded to include the *corporal* works of mercy (to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, visit those in prison, and bury the dead) and *spiritual* works of mercy (to instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, comfort the sorrowful, bear wrongs patiently, forgive injuries, and pray for the living and the dead).

Two hundred Catholic Worker houses today offer a variety of social ministries, for "each house is independent and requires no approval from the Catholic Church or any central organization," notes Coleman Fannin. "Catholic Workers volunteer part-time or full-time; some work for short periods, while others continue for many years. The houses of hospitality may receive income from members' other jobs or their own cottage industries, but almost all depend on donations (of food and clothing as well as money). Members practice a simple and communal form of life, at the heart of which is serving the marginalized people in the mostly urban areas where they are located."

Beyond the variety of practical ministries that she inspired, Day charted a deeper understanding of Christian hospitality and



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its significance in modern culture. Marginalized people needed private property, economic cooperation, and community. Since Day believed that the true foundation of hospitality is the mystical body of Christ – the original unity of all persons that can be made visible and restored by the redeeming works of Christ through the Church – she integrated worship and spiritual practices (such as voluntary poverty and contemplative prayer) into the daily social ministry of the houses.

After studying Christ's Sermon on the Mount, she became a pacifist. "Day diagnosed the logic of 'total war' early on and posited the spiritual and corporal works of mercy as the only solution," says Fannin. The mystical body of Christ made Christian participation in warfare unthinkable. When others sympathized with her "sentimentality," Day replied: "This is a charge always leveled against pacifists. We are supposed to be afraid of the suffering, of the hardships of war. But let those who talk of softness, of sentimentality, come to live with us in cold, unheated houses in the slums. Let them come to live with the criminal, the unbalanced, the drunken, the degraded, the pervert."

### Study Questions

1. What do you find most attractive about Dorothy Day? What concerns you?
2. Are there advantages to emulating a twentieth-century Christian *witness*? Are there any dangers?
3. Explore the work of a Catholic Worker house near you. How could this *way* of practicing hospitality be adapted in a congregation?
4. Discuss the "mystical body of Christ." How did this theological concept help Day fathom the meaning of hospitality?

### Departing Hymn: "I Bind My Heart This Tide"

I bind my heart this tide  
to the Galilean's side,  
to the wounds of Calvary,  
to the Christ who died for me.

I bind my soul this day  
to the neighbor far away,  
and the stranger near at hand,  
in this town, and in this land.

I bind my heart in thrall  
to the God, the Lord of all,  
to the God, the poor one's friend,  
and the Christ whom he did send.

I bind myself to peace,  
to make strife and envy cease.  
God, knit thou sure the cord  
of my thralldom to my Lord!

Lauchlan M. Watt, *The Tryst, A Book of the Soul* (1907)  
Tune: UNION

† Dorothy Day, "House of Hospitality," *The Catholic Worker* (May 1939), 4. Quoted by permission from the Dorothy Day Library ([www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday](http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday)).

# Dorothy Day's Radical Hospitality

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To review Dorothy Day's ministry through the *Catholic Worker* newspaper and hospitality houses.
2. To consider how the idea of "the mystical body of Christ" illuminates Christian hospitality.
3. To discuss how Worker houses can be a model for a congregation's Christian hospitality and social ministries.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Hospitality (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "I Bind My Heart This Tide" locate the familiar tune UNION in your church's hymnal or on the Web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Comment

"Today the whole world is in the midst of a revolution," Dorothy Day presciently wrote during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). "There must be a disarmament of the heart."

"We are not praying for victory for Franco in Spain, a victory won with the aid of...Mussolini who is opposing the Holy Father in his pronouncements on 'racism'; with the aid of Hitler who persecutes the church in Germany," she continued. "Nor are we praying for victory for the loyalists whose Anarchist, Communist and anti-God leaders are trying to destroy religion. We are praying for the Spanish people – all of them our brothers in Christ – all of them Temples of the Holy Ghost, all of them members or potential members of the Mystical Body of Christ. And we add daily to this prayer for peace: 'Lord, teach us to pray,' 'Lord I believe, help Thou my unbelief.' 'Lord, take away my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh.'" (Dorothy Day, "Explains CW Stand on Use of Force," *Catholic Worker* [September 1938], 1, 4, 7. Quoted by permission from the Dorothy Day Library at [www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/](http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/).)

Day's insight into the causes of war deep within the human heart was hard earned, through years of hospitality to the poor, the workers, and the immigrant population of New York.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for discernment as you prayerfully study the hospitality and non-violence of a twentieth-century disciple, Dorothy Day.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 12:9-13 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

## Reflection

In the previous study guide "Building a Place for Hospitality" – which examines the centuries-long trend of moving Christian hospitality from house-churches to hospitals and the like – Christine Pohl fears we are losing

“an important distinctive of the earliest Christian practice of hospitality” – its location “within the overlap of household and church, a place that was personal without being private.” “Because today we have many large-scale institutions that offer assistance without providing community,” she urges “followers of Jesus [to] be especially attentive to opportunities to reconnect hospitality and community in our homes, congregations, and social ministries.”

The Catholic Worker houses of hospitality, launched by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin during the Depression in the 1930s, are an inspiring alternative model of hospitality for Christians today. As volunteers live in community for a few years, they form a household that can serve the poor, workers, and immigrant populations. They also become a witness, through their ministries of education and writing, to other Christians.

As you review Dorothy Day’s ministry, her understanding of the mystical body of Christ, and her application of this idea to hospitality and pacifism, lead the group to mine her thought for insights that can help us “reconnect hospitality and community” today.

### **Study Questions**

1. Some members will identify with Dorothy Day’s long and indirect formation in discipleship: she was raised in a nominal Episcopalian home, became involved in social activism, and was drawn back to God through personal struggles, the birth of her daughter, experiences of worship, and the spiritual support of friends. Some will identify with some aspect of her mature ministry that combined education, spiritual direction, and social ministries: she founded a newspaper for Christian social thought, developed daily spiritual practices of prayer and worship, and started the hospitality-house movement. Her belief that private property, economic cooperation, and community are essential to peace will be welcomed by many. Her commitments to voluntary poverty and pacifism are very challenging, yet she saw these as integral to her ministry of hospitality.
2. We are formed in discipleship as we model our lives on “*witnesses*—those persons recognized by the Church as embodying the gospel in particular times and places,” Fannin reminds us. It can be difficult to learn from an ancient or medieval witness—“What would Augustine do about immigration?” or “What would Peter say about cloning?” are tough questions. Perhaps we can more easily discern the commitments and actions to emulate when the witness lives in our time and place, and struggles with problems and temptations we face. On the other hand, which recent Christian should we emulate? Our own political and cultural preferences can get in the way, and we do not have the benefit of many years of Christian reflection to sift the witnesses and explore their lives for insight.
3. See [www.catholicworker.org](http://www.catholicworker.org) for a list of Catholic Worker communities around the world. You might contact them directly for information or research their newsletters, newspapers, or Web pages. What social ministries do Catholic Worker houses offer in your city or state? Could your congregation sponsor a similar house-based ministry that combines short- or long-term communal living, worship, and study?
4. The Apostle Paul teaches that while all humans are united in Adam in death they are united in Christ to life (Romans 5:12-21), “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:22). How can we understand this in a way that honors people’s differences and preserves the distinctiveness of the Church as the *visible* Body of Christ? “Day followed Henri de Lubac’s view that the mystical body supposes a prior natural unity and that the Church’s mission is ‘to reveal to [persons] that pristine unity that they have lost, to restore and complete it.’ Thus the Church and the mystical body are neither the same nor separate. In this way the Church stands in solidarity with *all* persons.” In a sense, then, as we welcome strangers in Christ’s name we are recognizing and *remembering* the mystical body. We realize that we are united with all persons—even the marginalized and our enemies.

### **Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.