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2016

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Recommended Citation

Runkel, Phillip M., "The Cause and the 'Chives: Curatorial Reflections" (2016). *Library Faculty Research and Publications*. 97.

https://epublications.marquette.edu/lib_fac/97

The Cause and the 'Chives: Curatorial Reflections

Phillip M. Runkel

Marquette University began its archival relationship with the Catholic Worker movement in March of 1962, following the receipt of six boxes of Dorothy Day's papers and records of the New York Catholic Worker community. This extraordinary acquisition was largely due to the initiative and collecting acumen of the director of libraries, William Ready. He had first contacted Day five years before (around the time that he was extending a similar invitation to J. R. R. Tolkien). However, she had already forged close ties to faculty members and alumni at Marquette in the decades since her first visit in the spring of 1935. With the CW movement less than two years old, journalism senior Nina Polcyn prevailed upon her dean, Jeremiah O'Sullivan, to invite Day to campus. In his thank you letter, written soon afterwards, he revealed the deep impression she had made on him and others in attendance. He concluded, "In all my life I have not come in contact with any person, with the exception of my father, who has meant so much in helping me formulate my ideas and determining the course of my thought and action."¹ Supported by O'Sullivan, Polcyn and other alumni of the journalism college founded Holy Family Catholic Worker House in downtown Milwaukee in 1937.

Today the Dorothy Day-Catholic Worker Collection comprises more than 300 boxes, including the personal papers of Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, and others involved in the movement; records of past and present Catholic Worker communities; photographs; audio and video recordings; and a wide variety of publications. It has been housed on the third floor of Raynor Library since the building's completion in 2003. Before then, archivists and collections were con-

1 Jeremiah O'Sullivan to Dorothy Day, May 20, 1935, Dorothy Day-Catholic Worker Collection, Series D-5, Box 5, Folder 1, Marquette University Archives.

signed to the basement of the original Memorial Library. This didn't appear to deter researchers, however. The DD-CW Collection had emerged as a "draw" by the early 1980s, thanks in large part to the efforts of historian and pioneering Catholic Worker scholar William Miller, who organized events to celebrate Day's eightieth birthday and commemorate the first anniversary of her death. In 1997, Marquette hosted a major conference of scholars and Catholic Workers to observe the centenary of Day's birth.

Most records are open to research use. The twenty-five-year seals Day placed on her diaries and family correspondence were lifted on November 29th, 2005. We marked this occasion with a premiere screening of the first full-length documentary on her life, by Claudia Larson. We then turned our attention to the publication of her diaries and selected letters by the Marquette University Press, securing the services of Robert Ellsberg as editor. Our most recent project was the cataloging and digitization of over 700 audio recordings related to the CW, including Dorothy Day's talks, Friday night meetings at the New York CW, and oral history interviews. We anticipate launching another digital records project in the near future.

In March of 2000 the Vatican approved the opening of Dorothy Day's cause, entitling her to be called a "Servant of God." The present stage, the "diocesan phase," entails:

1. Gathering together Day's published and unpublished writings.
2. Taking testimony from eyewitnesses—people who knew DD—concerning her exercise of the heroic virtues.

We provided 4,000 photocopies in 1984 to an MU graduate student employed by the Claretian order, which had begun to promote her canonization the year before. It is unclear if this will need to be replicated for the Dorothy Day Guild. Hundreds of oral history transcripts are on file here. Some of these may be consulted as well, particularly those of people who are deceased.

This "packaging" of Dorothy Day by the institutional church concerns many of her friends and followers. They fear that Day's piety and remorse over her early abortion will be emphasized to fashion her into "The Pro-Life Saint," at the expense of her legacy of social radicalism. Eventually, CW houses would be taken over by Catholic Social Services, and the remaining anarchist/pacifist disciples of Day would have to regroup under a new name.

The case for calling Dorothy Day a saint has been persuasively argued, though. In his address at our Centenary Conference, Jim Forest declared that she would "be the patron saint not only of homeless people and those who try to care for them but also of people who lose their temper." He noted that "the

record of who she was, what she was like and what she did is too complete and accessible for her to be hidden in wedding cake icing.”² Of course I hope he is right, though I’ve attempted to maintain my official neutrality in this debate.

My bonafides in this regard were called into question, however, by a small but persistent group of anti-canonization campaigners following the bishops’ vote in November 2012 to move the cause forward. If some Catholic Workers feel the process isn’t worthy of Day, as Kenneth Woodward noted in his authoritative work, *Making Saints*,³ these opponents find her unworthy of the process, harking back to much earlier diatribes that appeared in *Our Sunday Visitor* and *The Wanderer* and the hecklers who called her Moscow Mary. Letters from the 1960s retained by Day and now in the CW Archives attest to the suspicions some readers of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper harbored in the Cold War era. The vast majority of subscribers did not share these sentiments, of course.

The anti-sainthood bloggers’ bible is *The Catholic Worker Movement (1933–1980): A Critical Analysis*, authored by the English ultra-traditionalist Catholic writer Carol Byrne and published in 2010. It appears to have been based to a considerable extent on Day’s FBI file, though she also cites many of her writings. In a commentary posted on Tradition in Action’s website on 26 November 2012, titled “Irregularities in Dorothy Day’s Cause of Canonization,” Dr. Byrne conveniently provided a bullet-point list of eight major “impediments,” including “persistent disobedience” to the church hierarchy, “active support” for communists and their organizations, and “condoning violent revolution against the government.”

Byrne and others of her persuasion raised several of these points in comments on articles published online at this time. In response to negative evaluations by commenters on an article on the *National Catholic Register*’s site (“Bishops to Consider Sainthood Cause of Dorothy Day,” 13 November 2012), I posted the following:

As custodian of Dorothy Day’s papers for the past 50 years, the Marquette University Archives seeks to preserve all significant documentation of her actions and beliefs. Inquiries and visits are welcomed. It should be noted that Dorothy Day corre-

2 Jim Forest, “Dorothy Day: Saint and Troublemaker,” in *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement: Centenary Essays*, eds. William J. Thorn, Phillip M. Runkel, and Susan Mountin (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2001), 577.

3 Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn’t, and Why* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 32.

sponded with thousands of people. A few were Communists. But the vast majority were not—Mother Teresa, for example. [13 November 2012]

In response, minbee66 (publisher of the principle anti-canonization blog, *Dorothy Day Another Way*) stated that “Dorothy Day’s Communist correspondents and friends were people she was much more intimate with and interacted with more frequently than Mother Teresa,” citing Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Anna Louise Strong as examples (19 November 2012).

Vic Biorseth, proprietor of the *Thinking Catholic Strategic Center* website (now renamed the *Embattled Catholic American Thinker*) weighed in on Christmas Eve with a column lauding Carol Byrne as “a great illuminator of our day,” who had exposed that “monster” Dorothy Day as not only a traitor to her country [but] a traitor to her Church.” He had a ready rebuttal when I invited readers to visit the Archives and make up their own minds: “If you want to know the truth about a Marxist, don’t ask the Marxist. If you want to know the truth about a Marxist revolutionary organization, don’t go to the organization’s propaganda. You’re looking for truth in all the wrong places.”

At least one politician joined the anti-canonization campaign at this time. In a letter dated 7 January 2013 and published online by Tradition in Action, state senator Richard Black of Virginia wrote Pope Benedict to forcefully express his revulsion at the bishops’ support for Day’s cause, terming her a woman of “loathsome character,” one “whose views supported the violent extermination of Christians throughout the world.” In response I sent him the following email on January 18:

Dear Senator Black:

People are welcome to consult Dorothy Day’s papers in the Marquette University Archives and judge for themselves how “loathsome” she was. I’ve looked at thousands of letters to and from Day and her associates, as well as her diaries and manuscripts, in the course of processing her papers, and come to a very different conclusion. (I can assure you that no unflattering documents have been expunged from the record during the 35 years I have served as curator of the Dorothy Day-Catholic Worker Collection.) The FBI agents who compiled her dossier were relying on informants, who have been known to have had axes to grind or to have been just plain mistaken. While

some of her occasional references to Communist dictators may have been insufficiently critical, I am aware of no credible evidence that she supported their regimes, or remained a Marxist after her conversion in 1927. Dorothy Day was a pacifist, unalterably opposed to the “violent extermination” of anyone.

The senator didn't reply.

The next month, February 2013, Cliff Kincaid, director of the Accuracy in Media Center for Investigative Journalism, posted two pieces on his site *Religious Left Exposed*: “Carol Byrne Sets the Record Straight about Dorothy Day,” and “Pope's Possible Successor Promotes Marxist for Sainthood” (referring to Cardinal Timothy Dolan). In response, I ventured to “attest to the integrity of the scholars who have written on the movement,” observing that they had frequently based their works on extensive research in the Marquette University Archives. To Byrne, who replied on Kincaid's behalf (“Exchange over Dorothy Day's Marxist Views,” 28 February 2013), this suggested that I did not “think it worthwhile to consider any other view of Dorothy Day than those put forward by a minuscule band of her supporters who have done research in the Marquette Archives.” She characterized these students of the movement as “a special interest group who had already nailed their colors to the Catholic Worker flag.”

At the time she wrote this, more than 40 academic scholars unaffiliated with the Catholic Worker had produced books and unpublished dissertations on Day and the CW. Of these, roughly half based their studies on research in the Dorothy Day-Catholic Worker Collection. I wouldn't consider any to be outright hagiographers, and some were sharply critical in their approach. However, earning Dr. Byrne's seal of approval seems a daunting task indeed.

After several months of furious blogging on this issue, things have quieted down a bit, but the afore-mentioned minbee66 still frequently updates her site. Her post “How Objective Are Day's Potentially Confusing Advocates?” finds all the major writers on Day hopelessly biased, with the exception, of course, of Carol Byrne. While singling out former Catholic Workers, such as Robert Ellsberg and Jim Forest, she also dismisses scholars Mel Piehl and Nancy Roberts, noting that they “endorsed many of Day's beliefs.” I don't escape unscathed either, being accused among other things of “circular reasoning” in “testifying to the sincerity and accuracy of CW's attempts to interpret or disown some of Day's well-known statements, perhaps in an attempt to create a softer, gentler Dorothy Day.”

In the end, all we in the Archives can do is to try our best to preserve and

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help disseminate the documentary evidence of the “real” Dorothy Day for interpretation by her advocates, opponents, and those falling somewhere in between. I’d like to continue to play a part in this for as long as I can. I can’t wait to see how it all turns out!

Phil Runkel has served as an archivist at Marquette University since 1977. He is primarily responsible for Raynor Memorial Library’s Catholic social action holdings, including the Dorothy Day-Catholic Worker Collection.