

29th Sunday of the Year A October 16, 2011 – Fr. Gerald Haemmerle

This past week I was away, in Colorado, enjoying the scenery and relaxing, and catching up on my reading. I read a wonderful book entitled All is Grace, a biography of Dorothy Day. I am sure that many of you are familiar with her. Some have called her the most important American Catholic of the 20th century.

She was born in 1897, died in 1980, having lived 83 years. She was born in Brooklyn, the family moved to San Francisco, and she spent most of her growing up years in Chicago. As a young woman she moved to New York, where she spent most of the rest of her life. She was not raised in a religious home, but from her earliest years she had a hunger for God, and an attraction for the Catholic Church. She always had great compassion for the poor, the oppressed. For a while she dabbled with Communism, and Socialism, and Anarchism, but did not find a satisfactory answer in them. As a young woman her personal morality left much to be desired, she had several affairs, once had an abortion, which she regretted the rest of her life. She then had a child out of wedlock, and she saw this child as the greatest miracle God had given her, and it led to her conversion in the Catholic Church.

She met a remarkable man, Peter Maurin, and together in 1933 they began the Catholic Worker, a weekly newspaper that is about social justice and especially Catholic social justice. This paper is still published today. And to back up their words, they opened the Catholic Worker House, the first one in New York. Today there are 160 Worker Houses in the world. They provide food for the hungry and a home for anyone looking for a place, regardless of who they are.

In our gospel today we read, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” That passage meant something to Dorothy, and in a sense it describes her life, for she gave her life entirely to God. So many points could be made of her life, but I want to mention three of them that especially struck me.

First. After Dorothy grew older and became well known, many considered her a living saint. This always embarrassed her, for she knew about her sinful past, and was very aware of her many failings and shortcomings. But there was a more important reason. If we canonize someone who lives at the Catholic Worker House or in the convent or the monastery, that excuses us from making the gospel central in our lives. We think that only saints have to take the gospel, the Sermon on the Mount, seriously. The rest of us simply have to practice the faith, get to mass, baptize the children, obey the laws. Dorothy believed that every Catholic was called to believe in and follow the gospel, even the hard sayings of the gospel. We are all called to love others, regardless of how difficult others might be. We are called to be like Jesus. We are all called to holiness, to be saints.

Second. I think of her prayer life. Even before her conversion, she would stop in a church and simply sit in the presence of God. She was able to see God everywhere in all the ordinary things of life. But she developed the habit, the discipline of prayer. She went to daily mass and received the Eucharist every day for the last 50 years of her life. She prayed the rosary every day. She prayed the liturgy of the hours. She went to confession almost every week. She didn’t find prayer easy, she was easily distracted, but she still prayed every day. A beautiful statement. She said “death changes nothing. If we do not learn to enjoy God now, we never will. If we do not learn to praise Him and thank Him and rejoice in Him now, we never will.”

Third. Poverty. Dorothy voluntarily accepted poverty. She lived with the poorest of the poor the last 50 years of her life. She wore second hand clothes. What she did have she gave away to others who had less. She believed that all we have here on earth is on loan from God, and we need to share that with others. In line with our gospel today, she said “the less we have of Caesar’s, the less we have to render to Caesar.” We are not all called to live at a Catholic Worker House, I could never do that. Most of us have children and parents to take care of. But we are called to look at our priorities. Do we really need the newest toys and designer clothes and a bigger home? Is God really important in our lives? Do I try to live by the gospel message?

Dorothy Day gives us a wonderful example of what we are called to be.