

DOROTHY DAY'S TRANSPOSITION OF THÉRÈSE'S "LITTLE WAY"

J. LEON HOOPER, S.J.

[Despite initial disdain, Dorothy Day (1897–1980) eventually published an extended study of Thérèse of Lisieux, declaring Thérèse's "little way" as the method par excellence of the social transformation practiced by Catholic Workers. To transpose convincingly the Little Way from an insular 19th-century French convent to the New York City streets of the Great Depression and World War II, Day had to (re)construct both Thérèse's interior life and her social loving. She did so in a distinctly Roman Catholic manner.]

THE CATHOLIC WORKER'S manner of living justly in contemporary American society was specified by Dorothy Day as a "little way." The expression was not original to Day. She first found it in the autobiographical writings of Thérèse of Lisieux, the late-19th-century mystic known as the "Little Flower." In its original setting, that is, within the life of an enclosed Carmelite nun, the "little way" embraced mostly the non-spectacular, routine living of 20 isolated religious sisters. Thérèse sought a way to God within daily human interactions—"interactions" that she accurately described as "ordinary." The application of Thérèse's term to Day's own world and activities required considerable effort and inventiveness. For Day and the Workers, the "little way" came to characterize a contemporary method for transcending in act the social sinfulness of, and brutal divisions within, national and international societies. In this study I trace Day's transposition of the term from its original cloistered setting to that of New York City at the height of the Great Depression and the Second World War.¹ I suggest that the tools and attitudes by which Day

J. LEON HOOPER, S.J., is Senior Research Fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center, Washington, D.C. He received his Ph.D. from Boston College. He specializes in the Lonergan cognitional theory background of John Courtney Murray's later social ethical arguments, as well as in the use of absolutist, sometimes mystical rhetorics in social definition and determination. An earlier study entitled "Theological Sources of John Courtney Murray's Ethics" appeared in *Theological Studies* 57 (1996).

¹ Day's treatment of Thérèse is currently available as Dorothy Day, *Therese* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate, 1979). Three recent studies of Day's appeal to Thérèse deserve mention: James Allaire, "Dorothy Day and Thérèse of Lisieux,"

effected the transposition betrays something distinctly “Catholic” at the core of her approach to social living.²

Before Day was capable even of distinguishing between Thérèse of Lisieux and Teresa of Avila,³ the Little Flower’s life and her “way” had been endorsed by Roman Catholics as a fitting path to God from within daily

Spiritual Life 43 (Winter 1997) 195–200; Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, “The Politics of the Little Way: Dorothy Day Reads Thérèse of Lisieux,” in *American Catholic Traditions: Resources for Renewal*, ed. Sandra Yocum Mize and William Portier, College Theology Society, 42 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997) 83–95; Peter Casarella, “Sisters in Doing the Truth: Dorothy Day and St. Thérèse of Lisieux,” *Communio* 24 (Fall 1997) 468–98. In my judgment the most helpful is Bauerschmidt’s suggestive study in which he attempts to define a “third way” through the thickets of contemporary political and economic forms. His work focuses more on Thérèse than on Day; he reads Day through recent readings of Thérèse. My own study focuses more on Day’s text and her own reading of Thérèse. This reading does not allow such a discrete and exclusionary “third way” analysis as Bauerschmidt desires, since Day endorses and “draws from” Thérèse many aspects of contemporary notion of human dignity absent from or ignored by most studies of Thérèse. Casarella comes close to tagging some of the foundational differences in notions of human dignity that normal “third way” analyses seldom acknowledge, particularly in his noting and disagreeing with some aspects of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s critique of Thérèse. Yet he does not exploit those disagreements for a fuller understanding of Day’s own approach to social goods and evils, of her approach to her God within contemporary society. I suggest a more corrective and expansive interpretation of Thérèse on Day’s part than do these three authors.

² This study is one portion of a larger project in which I seek out the common Catholicity of Dorothy Day and John Courtney Murray. For my definition of “Catholic” I rely in part on H. Richard Niebuhr’s Christ and Culture typologies, particularly his Christ Above Culture classification (see his *Christ and Culture* [New York: Harper and Row, 1951]). Key to my use of Niebuhr is a reading of the manners in which he handles affirmation and negation (of God and social goods) throughout his five types. The manner in which Day handles affirmation and negation is key to my own reading of her appropriation, correction, and development of Thérèse’s search for a God of human history. Within this text I cite, but do not develop, some recent studies on religiously based affirmation and negation that guide my reading of H. Richard Niebuhr and Day.

³ Day claimed she first became aware of Thérèse as she lay recuperating in Bellevue hospital after the birth of her daughter, Tamer Teresa (*Therese v*). Day had previously encountered Teresa of Avila in the writings of William James, and chose to name her daughter after that saint. A woman in the bed next to Day introduced her to the Little Flower. This introduction took place before Day broke her common-law marriage and joined the Catholic Church. We have a wealth of studies of Day and the Catholic Worker Movement. See Sandra Yocum Mize, “Unsentimental Hagiography: Studies on Dorothy Day and the Soul of American Catholicism,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 16 (1998) 36–57. My own reading of Day plays between four distinct and often contradictory readings of her and the Worker, namely William D. Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982); Jim Forest, *Love Is the Measure: A Biography of Dorothy Day* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1986); James T. Fisher, *The Catholic Counterculture in*

(bourgeois) living.⁴ The “way” also had been roundly criticized for encouraging purely passive images of female and lay sanctity, images that supported general magisterial opposition to working-class and feminist attempts to gain public voice, whether through independent labor organizing or grassroots movements for voting rights. That this “little way” appeared to leave unchallenged the killing structures of overly bureaucratic, “iron jacketed” capitalistic societies had also been noted. Speaking from within rather than from outside these concerns, the first reactions of Day the socialist to Lisieux and her “little way” were not kind. She complained:

What kind of saint was this who felt she had to practice heroic charity in eating what was put in front of her, in taking medicine, enduring cold and heat, restraint, enduring the society of mediocre souls . . . , for whom a splash of dirty water from the careless washing of a nun next to her in the laundry was mentioned as “mortification” when the very root of the word meant death. . . .⁵

In the face of the Great Depression and the rise of European fascism, Thérèse’s “little way” did appear trivial. Even more, her way seemed to encourage passivity in response to death by starvation and violence, to discourage any action—much less heroic action—that was needed to reverse the decline unto death of the West. Day confessed to having found Joan of Arc and, of course, Teresa of Avila “much more to [her] taste.” She looked for “ways” that fit more closely with the social hope that first guided her to the labor movement, then to writing for Communist publications, and eventually to co-founding the Catholic Worker movement. Even Day’s mildly feminist sense of personal dignity bridled at the “sweet,” socially passive saint. She took her confessor’s recommendation that she

America 1933–1962 (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina, 1989) 1–100; and Robert Coles, *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1987). See Day’s own autobiography, *The Long Loneliness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952). Her scarce and unpublished works are also to be found in the Dorothy Day—Catholic Worker Collection in the Marquette University Archives. Especially some of Day’s earlier writings, her own amendments to her retreat notes, and correspondence with her retreat directors have been helpful in weaving through the biographical works I have cited. See below n. 23.

⁴ Thérèse’s move to encountering the foundationally true and beautiful within the “ordinary” fits within the Romanticism that Charles Taylor describes as a 19th-century anecdote to Enlightenment rationalism, well tempered, however, by petit bourgeois ethics (“The Affirmation of Ordinary Life,” in *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1989] 211–304). This move for union with God within the ordinary was also an extension of Jean Pierre de Caussade’s *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, trans. Kitty Muggeridge (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), itself well tempered by a contemporary notion of individual human dignity and moral agency.

⁵ Day, *Therese* viii.

read Thérèse's *Story of a Soul*⁶ as another example of "men, and priests too, [being] very insulting to women, handing out what they felt suited their intelligence; in other words, pious pap."⁷

Day and Thérèse were eventually reconciled. Day wrote a book on Thérèse (her most sustained, single non-biographical work) and claimed her as a "workers' saint." To move from her initial rejection of Thérèse, Day reconstructed the saint's own interior (Thérèse's own self-understanding) and expanded Thérèse's outward movements toward social transformation. Here I examine first Day's reconstruction (or creation) of Thérèse's sense of self, a reconstruction that Day needed if Thérèse was to be of any help to Catholic Workers. Then I trace Day's transposition of Thérèse's fragile attempts at social loving from the convent scullery into Worker soup kitchens and anti-war protests.

A SENSE OF THE REDEEMED SELF

Day's first adjustment, then, concerned Thérèse's sense of herself—a sense foundationally characterized by a strong contrast between the creature and the Creator—the thoroughly dependent creature before an omnipotent God. Stated in these terms, the contrast is theological, to which Day would not, and could not, object. Often conjoined to this theological contrast, however, are moral contrasts, two of which she found troublesome. The first moral contrast was constructed on strong condemnations of human depravity, the challenge of which led Day to a positive grounding for the redeemed self. The second moral contrast was based on parent/child metaphors, and challenged Day's notions of human moral agency. Both concern human dignity as understood within a theological anthropology.

⁶ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: The Story of a Soul*, 3rd. ed., ed. and trans. John Clarke, O.C.D. (Washington: ICS, 1996). Mary Frohlich's recent article outlines various interpretations of Thérèse's own work, situating Thérèse's personal "desolation" within postmodern readings of our current "cultural desolation" ("Desolation and Doctrine in Thérèse of Lisieux," *Theological Studies* 61 [2000] 261–79). Frohlich corrects several readings of Thérèse's own confrontation with her dying as a sheer negation of the self, highlighting the saint's increasing insistence on active loving in the midst of her final suffering (274–77). Frohlich leaves intact sheerly negative readings of contemporary culture. My own study of Day and of Day's reading of Thérèse challenges such negation of our current culture, a negation that seems so essential for some religious to find a redeeming God. Besides being an oversight of the good in contemporary culture, such readings of our "cultural desolation" might be, in the face of September 11, 2001, and its aftermath, a luxury that one can no longer afford.

⁷ Day, *Therese* vii.

The Depraved vs. the Loving Self

While Day's first objections to Thérèse's way rose from Thérèse's alleged indifference to social evil,⁸ several other Catholic critiques of Thérèse found dangerous, if not fatal, flaws within Thérèse's sense of self. At issue was Thérèse's awareness of personal sinfulness, particularly as highlighted and critiqued by Hans Urs von Balthasar. According to Day, Balthasar "writes that [Thérèse's] family had done extremely well in not blunting her fine and delicate sense of sin,"⁹ a sense that is necessary for the maintenance of a proper relationship to one's redeemer. While at first, Day seems to applaud the steps that Thérèse's parents took to nourish a "delicate sense of sin," she immediately qualifies the utility of this "delicate sense" in her treatment of another judgment by Balthasar. The situation under consideration was Thérèse's confessor's claim, addressed to Thérèse, that, in his judgment, she had never committed grievous, mortal sin. According to Day, ". . . Father von Balthasar complains that, due to this indiscreet remark of her confessor's, Therese lost that sense of sin which is so necessary if the Christian is to feel pity and responsibility."¹⁰

A strong sense of sinfulness, understood as personal worthlessness or even absolute depravity, is not, for Day, a sufficient, nor even a necessary, entry into Thérèse's "little way." (I explore later Day's positive foundation for "the way.") In fact, in the classic style of those who recently, explicitly encountered with Freud the ambiguous aspects of the censoring self, Day

⁸ Thérèse's autobiography does in fact begin with a consideration of salvation across social lines. See where she struggles with the apparent unevenness of God's redeeming power—great saints who greatly offended God, on the one hand, and "poor savages who died in great numbers without even having heard the name of God pronounced" (ibid. 14). In a way reminiscent of Julian of Norwich she resolves the apparent damnation of the "savages" by redescribing them as little "wild flowers" to whom God will lower God's self (ibid. 13–15). This manner of addressing, on such a cosmic scale, the problem of evil and God is lacking in the rest of Thérèse's autobiography. Here she uses these considerations of the fate of "savages" to set up her designation of herself as a "little flower" blessed by God, hinting at a link to those who are lost which occurs explicitly in her last writings.

⁹ Day, *Therese* 78.

¹⁰ Ibid. 81. Balthasar himself continues: "Judging from Thérèse's own attitude afterwards one might even suspect that what P. Pichon [her confessor] actually said was: had never been guilty of sin" (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Thérèse of Lisieux: The Story of a Mission*, trans. Donald Nicholl [New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954] 57–58). Balthasar finds a similar lack of a sense of sinfulness in St. Paul, and laments that Thérèse had to fight her way to a sense of her being a "little" saint at the end of her life, not the "great" saint or lover to which she had earlier confidently aspired. But even Thérèse's reduced state before her death was not little enough for him. "And so, even to the end, her self-surrender and abandonment smack to some extent of a stage performance" (ibid. 63). Immediately before her death, Thérèse asserted great, hardly subdued, social hopes for her mission and loving after her death.

could write that Thérèse “also suffered intensely from scruples and for so long that it was a neurosis, like the need to be forever washing one’s hands. She was tempted to vanity and wept, and then wept because she had wept.”¹¹ In a chapter dedicated to Thérèse’s “Mental Illness,” Day returns to Thérèse’s neurotic scrupulosity, examines further “Therese’s account of the nervous, neurotic state she was in for almost two years . . . at the departure of Pauline” [the first of her sisters to enter Carmel], and concludes that “[b]oth of these illnesses, scruples as well as the former mysterious ailment, would be considered today to be some form of mental or nervous breakdown.”¹² In a very modern, yet quaintly Catholic move, she recommends Thérèse as a patron saint for those who so suffer. “I am sure we should pray to St. Therese about those around us who are going through this suffering, these ‘nervous breakdowns,’ these delusions. If her ‘way’ is for all, surely we should recognize her experience, and her desire to help in this field, too.”¹³ Day, then, has associated any sense of moral “transcendence” that achieves its “higher” viewpoint through a starkly negative evaluation of the self with the category of “illness,” even “delusion,” not immediately with “sin.” Clearly a proper sense of self, even in relation to God, need not rely on Balthasar’s “sense of sin.”

Why did Day so emphatically step away from Balthasar’s endorsed sense of sinfulness—even to the point of partially reducing her model saint to a Freudian neurotic? It would appear that Day was trying to avoid within Thérèse any sharp dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural. Here we approach Day’s more positive theological grounding for a sense of self. Through her own “way” into the Church, Day encountered and clung to a deep link between her own interior drives and her experience of her God. At various points throughout her life, beginning with her 1938 apologia for her own conversion (addressed to her brother), Day insisted that the “natural” loves of her life, far from hindering her, in fact brought her to God. Neither social evil nor personal sinfulness (both of which she experienced intimately) suggested to her a path to God that she could follow. She insisted that “[i]t was human love that helped me to understand divine love. Human love at its best, unselfish, glowing, illuminating our days, gives us a glimpse of the love of God for man.”¹⁴ She expressly

¹¹ Day, *Therese* 82. Day adds “she did have the long attack of scruples which was enough to make her unlovable to those around her” (ibid. 88).

¹² Ibid. 100.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Dorothy Day, *From Union Square to Rome* (Silver Spring, Md.: Preservation of the Faith, 1938) 151. She continues: “Love is the best thing we can know in this life, but it must be sustained by an effort of the will. It is not just an emotion, a warm feeling of gratification. It must lie still and quiet, dull and smoldering, for periods. It grows through suffering and patience and compassion. We must suffer for those

mentioned the man who fathered her child,¹⁵ as well as her newly born daughter, as leading her directly to God. The presence of her newborn lifted her up to God.

Such a great feeling of happiness and joy filled me that I was hungry for someone to thank, to love, even to worship, for so great a good that had been bestowed upon me. That tiny child was not enough to contain my love, nor could the father, though my heart was warm with love for both.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, then, Day searched for similar continuities between “natural” loving and love of God in Thérèse’s own life. And she did find at least one, though again Day needed to work hard to get at it. Thérèse’s shying way from external contacts, even while living at home, offered few examples of human loving on which Day could construct her argument. Balthasar had already argued that Thérèse’s affection for her own sisters was less than heroic, which perhaps led Day to avoid linking these “natural” loves with divine love (and recall Thérèse’s “illness” at the departure of Pauline). At one point Day scanned through Thérèse’s known human contacts, leading her to suggest that Thérèse did know of the love of man and woman, since she most likely heard something of that love from a cousin, or from the women who came to consult with the sisters.¹⁷ Here too, though, the link is weak. Again Day mentions Thérèse’s love for her religious superior, but then backs away, suggesting that this love was not reciprocated and that the relationship was not entirely healthy.¹⁸

Day has more success examining Thérèse’s love for her father, though even here she stumbled on some difficulties. First, she strains to redeem Thérèse’s father (he does appear to have been virulently class-conscious, anti-Semitic, and less able than his wife at financially supporting the fam-

we love, we must endure their trials and their sufferings, we must even take upon ourselves the penalties due their sins. Thus we learn to understand the love of God for His creatures. Thus we understand the Crucifixion.”

¹⁵ “I had known Forster a long time before we contracted our common-law relationship, and I have always felt that it was life with him that brought me natural happiness, that brought me to God. His ardent love of creation brought me to the Creator of all things” (*The Long Loneliness* [New York: Harper and Row, 1952] 134).

¹⁶ Day, *Therese* vi. The two non-fictional autobiographical works (*From Union Square to Rome* and *The Long Loneliness*) contain several similar claims from her childhood. For example, after a description of several encounters as a ten-year old, she wrote “whenever I felt the beauty of the world in song or story, in the material universe around me, or glimpsed it in human love, I wanted to cry out with joy. The Psalms were an outlet for this enthusiasm of joy or grief—and I suppose my writing was also an outlet” (*Long Loneliness* 29).

¹⁷ Day, *Therese* 134–35.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 129.

ily).¹⁹ Then, after a Thérésian description of tender touching between her and her father, Day apparently feels she must emphatically dismiss any suggestion that the love between Thérèse and her father was clinically depraved. She writes:

The perversion of the best is rottenness indeed, and people of this day have looked down into the depths, the black depths of perverse love, and realizing its horror have fled from love expressed in tenderness. And yet the desire for love is so strong, the desire for tenderness is so inherent that there is a frank and unashamed seeking after sex as an opportunity to enjoy this all too human need of tenderness.²⁰

Thérèse, Day insists, “never wrote anything that she had not experienced.”²¹ When she wrote of love, “she knew all aspects of love: love of mother, of father, and of family. Her love for her father enabled her to grow in her love of God her Father, an aspect of the Godhead that has been too much neglected. . . . The first part of Thérèse’s life was spent in illustrating to the world the tender love of a child for its father, the dependence, the trust of a creature for the Creator.”²²

On Thérèse’s affection for her father, then, Day stakes her claim that Thérèse rose from a natural love to divine love. It is the same person who loved her father and her God, with no sharp dichotomy between those loves. Day candidly treats Thérèse’s love for her father as sexual, as grounded in her body and through her body as providing a language for her love affair with God. In response to the erotic language of Thérèse’s description of her own first communion, Day argues,

[Thérèse’s] is the language of love, of course, and the only way to describe the love of God is in terms of the most intense human love, that between man and woman. . . . This love which makes all seem new is already described in the Old Testament as a wedding, and there has never been a greater song of love written than the Canticle of Canticles.²³

¹⁹ At the death of their mother, Thérèse and her sisters were made wards of their mother’s brother, not of their father. During the early years of Thérèse’s life in the Carmel, her father was mentally incapacitated to a point that required hospitalization. He spent his last year in the household and care of that same uncle. For Day’s description of Louis Martin’s last years, see *Therese* 136–39.

²⁰ Day, *Therese* 89.

²¹ *Ibid.* 134.

²² *Ibid.* In a study of Thérèse’s correspondence with Maurice Bellière (a young missionary priest), Patrick Ahern has correctly pointed out that Thérèse directed Maurice to approach Christ through those he loved rather than through his own chronic self-rejection (a recommendation symbolized in Thérèse’s insistence that Maurice reach for Christ’s arms, not his feet). Ahern understands this as Thérèse’s overcoming her own heavily Jansenistic upbringing. See Patrick V. Ahern, *Maurice and Thérèse: The Story of a Love* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) 135–43.

²³ Day, *Therese* 85. Day’s claims about her own and Thérèse’s attitudes toward their own sexuality have been challenged by studies on Day’s involvement in a retreat movement based on the methods of a French Canadian Jesuit, Onesimus

Thérèse's "raptures of love" led her to measure all her life (and, as we shall see, all of her death) by the norms of love. "Love was the measure by which she wished to be judged, and she sang of a merciful Father. Of a Father who loved his children to folly."²⁴ In a language that is very characteristic of even the early Day, Thérèse set as her own goal to "make Love to be loved."²⁵ Loving God was not enough. Thérèse, Day insists, sought to fall in love with God. She strove for the union of her own fully emotional, sexual person, passionately, with her Redeemer. And one aspect of the "ordinariness" of Thérèse's way, Day suggests, is that these "transports of love," "these joys," are open to all.²⁶ Ordinary human nature, sexual at its

Lacouture, whose retreat notes were mediated to Day by Father Pacificus Roy, then by Father John Hugo. Eventually all three priests were silenced, at the insistence of Fathers Joseph Clifford Fenton and Francis J. Connell of the Catholic University of America because of the trio's alleged Jansenism. For an apologetic reading of Day's "Jansenism," see Miller's *Dorothy Day* 335–41. For a study that revels in Day's alleged Jansenism, see Fisher, *The Catholic Counterculture* 55–65. Lacouture's retreat notes were filled with Jansenistic suspicion of the body. Day initially rejected those notes, unmediated as they were at that time by Roy and particularly by Hugo. Yet, it was the manner in which especially Hugo presented the retreat that eventually won Day over. In April, 1947, while Lacouture, Roy, and Hugo were under fire, Day published four pieces on human sexuality, none of which rejects sex. In fact, all of them move, perhaps precariously, toward full affirmations of a direct continuity between nuptial sexuality and union with God. The last of these articles is simply a republishing of Hugo's own defense of Lacouture. See her *On Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 136–146. Hugo is defending the "analogous" nature of nuptial and divine love. Moreover, Hugo argues that nuptial love, much more than paternal love, is the better analogue for the soul's union with God, since it more closely approaches the equal union of the human and divine in Christ Jesus, in which union, as John's Gospel insists, the saved participate. It was this notion of the analogous nature of nuptial love—a love that approaches equality with God—that drew the concentrated fire of Fenton and Connell. And it is also curious that, at this very time, both Connell and Fenton were going after John Courtney Murray for his affirmations of civil religious freedom and equality before the law, and before that for his recommendations that Catholics participate fully and equally with non-Catholics in post-war reconstruction. In no way does Day appear, at least in her choice and defense of retreat methods, to be defending a rejection of the body or a conception of sexuality as godless or especially dangerous. What she defended in the retreat movement was rather the affirmation of the near identity of sexual and divine knowledge. Day's own retreat notes, and particularly the annotations she added to those notes, betray a constant adjustment on her part of any rejections of human loving by those who directed the Catholic Worker retreats, as well as her correspondence with Hugo, Roy, and Lacouture. (I have promised Phillip M. Runkel, archivist of the Dorothy Day/Catholic Worker Collection at Marquette University, a full study of those annotations and corrections).

²⁴ *Ibid.* 135.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 166.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 109.

core, is open to union with God, can be caught up and redeemed in our dealing with God.²⁷

This complex link between natural and divine loving allowed Day to challenge Balthasar's insistence on a sense of personal sinfulness as the bedrock of grace. Day does admit that "[Thérèse's] realization of the *capacity* of each one of us for sin must have been enormous." However, she denies Balthasar's starting point for that sense. Why was Thérèse aware of the "capacity" for sinfulness? Not because of an overpoweringly negative sense of her own self. Rather, her sense of the "capacity" for sinfulness rested in her capacity for loving. Here we encounter the centrality of loving and, particularly, of "being in love," in Day's theological anthropology.²⁸ For Day's Thérèse, the capacity for loving, and being in love is the condition for the possibility of grasping both the distance between human and divine love and the effective nearness of God. A sense of dependence on God's redemptive power is in direct, not inverse, proportion to "being in love with Love." That which is redemptive in Thérèse's sense of human sinfulness, in her uneasiness with life outside the Carmel, her longing for union with God and for, as we shall see, the redemption of non-believing souls, emerged out of her own positive desire to love God. The self that desires so intently to love God knows something of God's operative presence in its own soul. It also knows something of the action that God's presence makes possible, and of the awfulness of that action unfulfilled.

The Dependent vs. the Mature Self

So far, then, Day argues that Thérèse moved toward God, integrally and boldly, from her natural loves. Even this move, though, appears to have been too bold for some. After noting with approval that Thérèse's "desire to love was boundless" and citing Thérèse's exuberant "I want to love Him

²⁷ In a slightly defensive description of her turning from Forster (the father of her child), Day wrote: "I had known enough of love to know that a good healthy family life was as near to heaven as one could get in this life. There was another sample of heaven, of the enjoyment of God. The very sexual act itself was used again and again in Scripture as a figure of the beatific vision. It was not because I was tired of sex, satiated, disillusioned, that I turned to God. Radical friends used to insinuate this. It was because through a whole love both physical and spiritual, I came to know God" (*The Long Loneliness* 140).

²⁸ She writes "A mystic may be called a man in love with God. Not one who loves God, but who is *in love with God*. And this mystical love, which is an exalted emotion, leads one to love the things of Christ. His footsteps are sacred" (*Union Square* 11; italics in original). The language of falling into and being in love punctuate all Day's autobiographical writings, including her novel *The Eleventh Virgin* (New York: Boni, 1924).

so! . . . To love Him more than He has ever been loved!,"²⁹ Day again takes on another critical but unnamed priest³⁰ who judged such aspirations to be unfitting.

When [Thérèse] expressed herself in this way to one of the priests who came to give the annual retreat to the Sisters, he rebuked her for presumption and told her just to attend to her duties, avoid her usual faults, and not try to be so ambitious.³¹

Thérèse might have been a little flower, but she was not wilting.

Nor was Day. If she could find parallels between her and Thérèse's moves from creature to Creator within an apparently unlimited (or expanding) desire for God, she could also find parallels between their sense of self, as demonstrated in two further links that Day finds/constructs between them. The first is their similar senses of personal certitude, the second their assertiveness, both of which have something to say about the self, discussed in this section, and about moving toward social action in the next.

How self-consciously dependent and childlike was the Little Flower? Day describes both Thérèse's and her own conversions as having resulted in a relatively permanent sense of confidence based on her conviction of God's gracious self-giving. After Thérèse recognized the limits of her own father's love, Day claims, she "knew with a certainty that is heaven itself, or a foretaste of heaven, that she had been taught the secret, the 'science of love.'"³² Similarly, after a description of her own (Day's) uncertainty regarding her own conversion to Catholicism ("I had no sense of peace, no joy, no conviction even that what I was doing was right"³³), Day continues:

A year later my confirmation was indeed joyful and Pentecost never passes without a renewed sense of happiness and thanksgiving. It was only then that the feeling of uncertainty finally left me, never again to return, praise God!

Again this sense of certainty, which is "heaven itself, or a foretaste of heaven," suggests a strong sense of personal dignity, grounded as it is on a sense of God's enduring love for the self. For a socialist who in fact "hated myself for being weak and vacillating" this internal, quite personal certitude indicated to her a newfound maturity with her Lord. And, as noted, Day found a similar maturity in young Thérèse.

How does a mature woman act in the world, confident that she is directed toward, and loved by, her God? Here Day must move toward Thérèse the actor, not Thérèse the passive child, nor even Thérèse the

²⁹ *Therese* 130.

³⁰ Apparently a—and perhaps the—Jesuit contribution to Thérèse's sanctification.

³¹ *Therese* 130–31.

³² *Ibid.* 154.

³³ *From Union Square* 141.

passive lover. And she finds the key to Thérèse's "active" life in a curious place, namely, in Thérèse's disobedience or, more exactly, in the only two disobedient acts that could possibly be ascribed to Thérèse. The first revolved around the execution of a murderer named Pranzini.³⁴ Apparently Thérèse's father did not allow his daughters to read the daily paper. Nonetheless, Thérèse heard of the vicious multiple murders that eventually led Pranzini to the guillotine. In what appears to be her first clear breakout from her immediate family concerns, Thérèse set for herself the goal of praying for Pranzini's conversion. Up until the day of his execution he had consistently and vehemently refused any attempts at religious reconciliation. So Thérèse prayed, and looked for a sign that God was answering her prayers. On the day after Pranzini's execution, she secretly—and disobediently—searched her father's newspaper, finding there a report that the defiant Pranzini had in fact, as he walked to the block, grabbed a priest's crucifix and kissed it three times. As I will point out later, this incident suggested to Thérèse (or at least to Day) a "practice" of social concern that would be key to Day's appreciation/redemption of this young saint. For the moment, though, Day notes, almost with glee, that an independent young woman defied a direct command.

In Day's recounting, Thérèse's second disobedience occurred when she, her father, and several local clergy traveled to Rome, the highlight of which was a group audience with Pope Leo XIII.³⁵ Some of the accompanying clergy had previously denied the 15-year old Thérèse's request that she be allowed to enter the Carmel, insisting that she wait another six years. During the papal audience, in the presence of these clergy and contrary to their expressed wishes, she directly spoke with the Pope, repeatedly asking for the permission that her traveling companions had denied.³⁶

Day's reaction to these two accounts is curious. Concerning the second she speculates that Thérèse was caught between the permissions granted by her father and the proscriptions of the church hierarchy, and chose rightly to obey her family. More tellingly and more helpfully, though, she continues:

This is the second time in her life that Therese confesses to what is generally

³⁴ Ibid. 120. For Thérèse's description of the event, see her *Autobiography* 99–100.

³⁵ Day, *Therese* 118–19. Also Thérèse's *Autobiography* 134–36.

³⁶ Day suggests that, in her dealing with the clergy of her pilgrimage group, Thérèse acquired a strong sense of clergy sinfulness, from which she committed herself to a life-long mission of praying for priests (*Therese* 122). She does not predicate this sinfulness of Thérèse.

regarded by those in religion as “the sin of disobedience.” But there is no question in her mind of sinning. There is only the conviction of the primacy of conscience.³⁷

Here Day does not spell out what she means by the “primacy of conscience,” nor any notions of individual human dignity or divine empowerment that might support this primacy. She does call each disobedience, approvingly, “an exercise in her [Thérèse’s] own judgment,” and once again questions a pious critique of Thérèse. “It would have been more perfect if she had been obedient,” it has been said. “She should have mortified her interior sense of judgment, her understanding and her will, and merely prayed that obstacles would be overcome for her, so that she could enter Carmel.” Rather, Day asserts:

Therese was eminently a child of common sense. She would use her reason as far as it would take her, and then live by faith, abandoning herself to divine providence. She would work as though all depended on herself, and then pray as though all depended on God, as St. Ignatius advised.³⁸

Obviously Day did not agree with the assessment that Thérèse “sinned” or showed imperfection in her disobedience. In fact, in her exercise of what might be called her sense of individual human dignity, she participated in, and contributed to, God’s redemptive action in late-19th-century France. In her acting, not in sheer passivity, she effectively worked toward the fulfillment of God’s specific will.

What sort of woman is Thérèse, or at least Day’s construction of Thérèse? Bluntly Day presents her as psychologically sick, sharing many of the typical kinks that can emerge from within an overly protected, bourgeois environment. Yet the saint that Day finds usable as a model for the Catholic Worker is not a person overburdened by a sense of personal weakness or sinfulness, nor even currently relieved of an overburdening sense of past sinfulness. Day’s Thérèse is a young woman who has some appreciation of her own capacities for loving and a confident willingness to hope big in continuity with those capacities. Behind the obvious kinks, Day’s Thérèse is remarkably modern, at least regarding her own sense of self and sense of dignity, and sense of active responsibility. The foundation for this “little way” is a recognizably modern human person. But the activity required of the “little way” still remains rather medieval, rather enclosed. Lisieux’s Thérèse needs to be transposed as a social actor onto the streets of 20th-century New York.

SOCIALIZING THE WAY

So far, then, we have both Day and Thérèse moving from positive notions of the self to profound appreciations of God (and back again), and

³⁷ Ibid. 120.

³⁸ Ibid.

from “natural” loves of creatures to love of the divine. Moreover, such moves from the natural or particular to the supernatural do not entail a leaving behind, a negation, of the good that is naturally encountered. More properly, the moves from one to the other is best understood as a sublation, that is, as a higher existence incorporating while preserving the lower.³⁹ Such a “way” presumes and anticipates that the human person in principle can integrally love neighbor and God, that human nature is constituted within its own God-given drives by an openness to God. Even the capacity to know evil as evil depends on knowing and responding to the good in love. Thus Day with Thérèse insists on a positive grounding of the way.

As yet, though, this “way” can remain socially passive, rendering the believer/lover simply submissive to whatever authorities might dominate civic and religious living. To move from appreciation of the natural to the divine speaks yet only of an interior, even individualistic, movement of the heart, not of a movement into the world that challenges the social expectations and structures of that world. To move toward social action, Day had to link her own social concerns with those of Thérèse and, in the process, transform the range and strength of Thérèse’s own social loving. She had to find a socially active agency even in Thérèse’s enclosed living.

Now, still within the structure of rising from love of the particular to love of God, Day did significantly differ from Thérèse in one central focus. Whereas for Thérèse the larger world was a godless object to be feared, for Day the working classes, as individuals and as social units, offered a base, similar to her daughter and her common-law husband, for her heart’s reaching out to the divine. She repeatedly insisted that what induced her to enter the Catholic Church was, simply, the fact that workers intently walked in and out of Roman Catholic churches. “It was the Irish of New England, the Italians, the Hungarians, the Lithuanians, the Poles, it was the great mass of the poor, the workers, who were the Catholics in this country, and this fact in itself drew me to the Church.”⁴⁰ From a natural good she

³⁹ Helpful here is Michael A. Sell’s notion of mystical “unsaying,” that is, the negation of the limits of finite good, in contrast to the negation of the finite good itself. In “unsaying” rather than absolutely negating finite goods, a notion of the good can be carried meaningfully into postnegation discourse, requiring however the speaker to play loose with the principle of contradiction, since the boundaries (spatial and temporal) through which contradictions can be formulated and adjudicated have been rendered unstable. As Sells claims, it is “not illogical” that unresolvable contradictions arise when the human mind tries to grasp the divine (*Mystical Languages of Unsaying* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994] 21). It is this possibility of positive content carried through mystical negation that I would identify as distinctly “Catholic,” consistent with H. R. Niebuhr’s more societal notion of the Catholic. I judge this manner of negating to be most typical of Dorothy Day, John Courtney Murray, and even Thérèse.

⁴⁰ *The Long Loneliness* 107.

again moved to God, in a way that included the natural in the divine. The love of God eventually sublates, takes up and supports, her love of workers as a people.

Now, while Day could claim that her own love of the working classes brought her to God, she could never make such a claim about Thérèse. The socially shy young woman shunned contact with most people outside her family; she never composed hymns of praise for God's presence and action among peoples (as best I know). The distance between the cofounder of the Catholic Worker Movement and the cloistered, tubercular sister appears immense. How could Thérèse's "little way" have any relevance for those who cleaned up after fights between their drunken "guests"? Here, again, Day had to transpose the saint who described a splash of scullery water as a mortification into the bread lines of the Great Depression. Day offered two ways by which she might link the Worker and the sister within a notion of social action. The first such link was provided by Thérèse herself. The second emerged out of Day's own reflections as she faced the limits of her own social action. In the process she fully socialized Thérèse's "little way," or socialized it as far as Day's own anarchism would allow.

First, then, Thérèse's contribution. As mentioned above, Day's treatment of Thérèse's first "disobedience" is important for a grasp of Day's notions of human dignity and agency. From the object of Thérèse's first disobedience, Day constructs a socially concerned (expressed through the power of prayer), even though enclosed, young woman coming into her own sense of self with her Lord. A further question can be asked. How far did Thérèse's concern for Pranzini lead her to distinctly social action? At first glance, not very far. From her 16th to 25th years, Thérèse remained safely ensconced within her convent walls. During the last six years of her life, she was increasingly disabled by tuberculosis, to the point that even the small actions of convent life became impossible. And yet, according to Day, Thérèse did reach out, as she had to Pranzini, to those in the world who "have lost the precious treasures of faith and hope and with them all joy that is pure and true."⁴¹ She offered up the physical and spiritual "blackness" that overcame her with the onset of tuberculosis for those who do not know and acknowledge God's love. She offered them as a prayer that non-believers might now, in this life, "experience Love." She understood herself as an agent that would "make Love be loved." In the divine "economy" of the Mystical Body, Thérèse's actions could and, as she herself had observed in the Pranzini conversion, did have social effect.

Yet Thérèse was not content to have her present sufferings aid simply the unbelievers of her own time. In something of the style of a Buddhist Bodhisattva, Thérèse, in the face of her own death and union with her

⁴¹ Thérèse, as cited by Day, *Therese* 161.

Savior, defines her redeeming mission as just beginning. “I will spend my heaven doing good upon the earth.”⁴² Again, in Thérèse’s words, “I will not be able to take rest until the end of the world, as long as there are souls to be saved.” And in a great act of faith, she claims:

God would not have given me the desire to do good upon earth after my death if He did not will to realize it; He would rather have given me the desire to rest in him.⁴³

As Day would have it, the saint who “willed to be as obscure as ‘a little grain of sand’ during her short life, . . . willed equally vigorously to be known when she died.”⁴⁴ Thérèse’s action for social transformation would be fully engaged after her death. Was Thérèse effective? Day is quick to point out that it was primarily the workers—those of ordinary lives of loving and suffering—that recognized the greatness of Thérèse’s little way. It was they who first insisted that Thérèse be canonized. It was ultimately her love for those “outside of Love,” and her willingness to suffer that they might “love Love,” that in fact did allow her to continue working, effec-

⁴² Ibid. 166. A direct citation from Thérèse.

⁴³ These several citations concerning an after-death general mission to the world come from final statements recorded by Thérèse’s natural and religious sisters. They present a problem of authenticity. As is broadly recognized, Thérèse’s sisters “purified” much of her *Autobiography* (which was eventually restored by the photocopied publication of the original manuscripts). However, Thérèse’s generalized wish to continue, and even expand, her work on earth (from a statement of July 17, 1897, recorded by Sister Agnes of Jesus [Pauline] and used by Day) does have several more particular parallels. For example, her July 8th wish to return to be with her sisters: “If, when I am in heaven, I can’t come and play little games with you on earth, I will go and cry in a little corner.” Of even more interest are wishes expressed in letters to a young priest. Importantly in her letter of July 13, 1897 to her missionary friend Maurice Bellière, she wrote “When my dear little brother leaves for Africa, I shall follow him not only in thought and in prayer; my soul will be with him forever and his faith will know very well how to discover the presence of a little sister whom Jesus gave him, to be a support to him, not for a mere two years but *until the last days of his life*” (Patrick Ahern, *Maurice & Thérèse* 153). The generalized wish to return to work on earth to which Day appeals does find a near parallel in *The Autobiography*’s “B Manuscript” (written in September 1896). Then and there Thérèse writes to Jesus: “Ah! In spite of my littleness, I would like to enlighten souls as did the *Prophets* and the *Doctors*. . . . But *O my Beloved*, one mission alone would not be sufficient for me, I would want to preach the Gospel on all the five continents simultaneously and even to the most remote isles. I would be a missionary, not for a few years only, but from the beginning of creation until the consummation of the world” (*Autobiography* 192–23; italics in original). It appears that Thérèse’s early expressions of loving service for Jesus Christ came together with her insistence as death approached that she would return to her sisters and to Maurice. Even at the end of her life she was not thinking “little.”

⁴⁴ Day, *Therese* 173.

tively, for the conversion and faith of modern men and women. Thérèse's social hopes, through her ongoing social agency within God's ongoing action within the world, is being brought to completion. At her death Day's Thérèse did not fall back in her Lord. She chose to, and continues to, participate in God's real-world action for justice and for the root of Day's notion of justice, namely, love.

There remains one last link that Day tried to forge between Thérèse's little way and the activities of the Catholic Worker, a potentially fruitful link that she in fact only partially exploited. By the mid-1950s Day and the Movement had covered considerable grounds. Having been born in the great social hope of Peter Maurin, that is, in the hope of agrarian universities that would gather in rich and poor, learned and ignorant, into islands of Christian cooperation that would in turn dismantle both capitalistic and totalitarian societies, Day and the Worker had to face the fact that their large social hopes seemed even more distant.

When we began the Catholic worker, we first thought of it as a headquarters for the paper, a place for round-table discussions, for learning crafts, for studying ways of building up a new social order. But God has made it much more than all this. He has made it a place for the poor. They come early in the morning from their beds in cheap flophouses, from the benches in the park across the street, from the holes and corners of the city. They are the most destitute, the most abandoned.⁴⁵

How does Day understand this falling from the great hope for social transformation to caring mostly for those who appear incapable of escape from our social margins? Certainly, she claims, God has led the Catholic Worker to reside with the poor and, even more, to recognize that the poor *are* Christ (with all the realism the "are" can muster).

When you love people, you see all the good in them, all the Christ in them. God sees Christ, His Son, in us. And so we should see Christ in others, *and nothing else*, and love them St John of the Cross said that where there is no love, put love and you would draw out love.⁴⁶

In a spirit of hospitality that advances well beyond simple kindness, and even beyond a sense of equality with the poor, Day grants to the poor the

⁴⁵ From a *Catholic Worker* essay [dated July-August 1953] entitled "The Pearl of Great Price," in *Dorothy Day, Selected Writings: By Little and By Little*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 112–14, at 112. Central to the Catholic Worker's distancing itself from labor was labor's settling into comfortable accommodation with management, something that Day deplored.

⁴⁶ *On Pilgrimage* 124. Michael Sells has suggested here a parallel to Day's realism to Eckhart's "hyperrealistic interpretation of Matthew's 'whatever you do. . . ' passage." In fact the manner in which Day constructs and appeals to such "realism" appears analogous to Eckhart's and Porete's application of the "insofar as" (*in quantum*) principle, a merging of the particular and the general, or the creature and the Creator.

privilege of being, somehow, the most clear presence of Christ in this world. And it is our response to the poor that determines and is the forum within which our faith in God's presence grows or dies. "When we meet people who deny Christ in his poor, we feel, 'here are atheists indeed.'" ⁴⁷

Yet, while a spirituality of hospitality religiously grounds a personal commitment to the Catholic Worker community and its practices, Day was still sensitive to her old socialist friends' accusation that feeding the dregs of society remained simply a cruel tokenism. "Our work is called futile, our stand of little worth or significance, having no influence, winning no converts, ineffective if not a form of treason. Or it is termed defeatism, appeasement, escapism."⁴⁸ How might she understand her actions that appear to have no socially redeeming effect? Day answers that such action is a "sacrament of the present moment—of the little way."⁴⁹ "Do we see results," she asks, "do these methods succeed? Can we trust in them? Just as surely as we believe in "the little way" of St. Thérèse, we believe and know that this is the only success" (even her sentence structure here is tortured).⁵⁰

In the face of blinding poverty, why be involved in the Catholic Worker Movement? In the face of murdering nations, why commit to non-violence? Why work at soup kitchens? Why talk with crazies as if they are sources of God's love and insight for ourselves and our world?⁵¹

When I lay in jail thinking of . . . war and peace, and the problem of human freedom, of jails, drug addiction, prostitution, and the apathy of great masses of people who believe that nothing can be done—when I thought of these things, I was all the more confirmed in my faith in the little way of St. Therese. We do the minute things that come to hand, we pray our prayers, and beg also for an increase of faith—and God will do the rest.⁵²

Ultimately Day falls back to a deep affirmation that God has "in principle" redeemed, and is currently working to redeem, human social existence. Her sources and vocabulary for that affirmation are less Thérèse and more Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Sienna.

⁴⁷ "Michael Martin, Porter," in *Selected Writings* 82.

⁴⁸ From "Inventory," [January 1951] in *Selected Writings* 105.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 104.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 105.

⁵¹ The best single example of Day's insistence that we treat even the insane as equals, as sources of God's insight and will, can be found in Robert Coles's description of his first meeting with Day (see "Preface" to his *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion* [Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1987] xviii). Coles describes having to wait while Day and a mentally troubled individual completed their conversation (ranting from one side), then being asked by Day with which of the two he wanted to speak. For at least one brief conversation, the individual was treated as a peer, as a worthy source of God's insight and love within our world.

⁵² "Politics and Principles—September 1957," in *Selected Writings* 285.

We repeat that we do see results from our personal experiences, and we proclaim our faith. Christ has died for us. Adam and Eve fell, and as Julian of Norwich wrote, the worst has already happened and been repaired. Christ continues to die in His martyrs all over the world, in His Mystical Body, and it is this dying, not the killing in wars, which will save the world.⁵³

In standing with those who suffer, we participate in God's action to redeem all human beings. In the very action of working, but also of praying, we work with that God of action. In these social processes, we move toward Heaven, because, as Day repeatedly voices with Catherine of Siena, "All the Way to heaven is Heaven, because He said I am the Way."⁵⁴ God is present in even, and perhaps especially, the ways that are little, the bread handed out to the incurably insane.

Day's version of the "little way," then, is grounded in a human person who is aware of God's personal election, as experienced in hopes for and realized abilities to love others, and particularly in the desire to love God to the fullness of one's personhood or, better yet, even beyond (yet in direct continuity with) the fullness of one's own personhood. Moreover, it is a way that participates in God's own redemption of God's creation. To get there, Day took a bourgeois, middle class woman (not a peasant), drew that woman into a self possession that might have appalled Thérèse's father (as it did Balthasar), and sent her out to transform her society into a community of believers in Love. Day is very clear on the goods that she considers worthy of the saint, and worthy of God. Some of those goods are in fact in continuity with the age in which Thérèse and Day lived. The degree to which Day had to "stretch" her material need not detain us here. We note that Day reached into human nature and redeemed all that she could, and reached across human societies in acts that participate in the Way of their creator. She is catholic in both the depth of the human person she understands to be lifted up to God, and catholic in the action for justice that she demands. And she is Catholic in the sense of the great tradition that affirms the dialectical compatibility of nature and grace, reason and revelation, history and eternity.

⁵³ "Inventory" 105.

⁵⁴ "Here and Now" in *Selected Writings* 104.