



Complex World

Fighting Poverty and Injustice: Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement

Historical Context

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, as unemployment and poverty gripped the United States, journalist and activist Dorothy Day co-founded the Catholic Worker Movement with French-born philosopher Peter Maurin. Deeply influenced by her Catholic faith and her earlier involvement in socialist movements, Day believed that the Church should take a more active role in addressing the struggles of the poor and working class. In 1933, the same year Franklin D. Roosevelt launched the New Deal, Day and Maurin published the first issue of *The Catholic Worker*, a newspaper that sold for one cent and advocated for economic justice, pacifism, and workers' rights. The paper gained a wide readership, especially among the poor and marginalized, and soon sparked a larger movement rooted in direct action. The Catholic Worker Movement opened "houses of hospitality" across the country. These were community spaces where people experiencing homelessness and poverty could receive food, shelter, and care without judgment. These homes were grounded in the principles of personalism and voluntary poverty, emphasizing the dignity of every person and the moral obligation to live simply and share with others. Dorothy Day's movement also maintained a strong stance on nonviolence, opposing U.S. involvement in wars, including World War II and the Vietnam War. This position, along with her critique of capitalism and state power, often placed her at odds with political leaders and even members of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Worker Movement, still active today, remains one of the most enduring faith-based social justice movements in U.S. history. Dorothy Day's legacy is remembered not only for her service to the poor but for her unwavering commitment to living out her beliefs through action, compassion, and resistance.

Connection to Habit

The story of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement offers a powerful lens for engaging with the complexity of the world, both past and present. Day lived during a time of deep uncertainty that included economic collapse, rising fascism, global war, and she responded not with easy actions but with a commitment to care, conscience, and community. Her life reminds us that historical actors, like people today, faced immense challenges without knowing how things would turn out. The Catholic Worker Movement brought together multiple perspectives: faith, socialism, labor rights, and nonviolence, showing that moral clarity often requires navigating tension and contradiction. Studying Day's work helps students appreciate that social change does not happen in isolation or certainty. In applying this lens today, we are reminded to seek out diverse viewpoints, question dominant narratives, and recognize that the path forward often requires both moral courage and humility.

Discussion Questions

- What conditions during the Great Depression helped give rise to the Catholic Worker Movement?
- How did Dorothy Day's background in both socialism and Catholicism shape her response to poverty and injustice?
- Why was the *Catholic Worker* newspaper such a powerful tool during this period?
- How might Dorothy Day's approach to poverty have been viewed differently by political leaders, the Catholic Church, or other activists at the time?
- How does Dorothy Day's model of "houses of hospitality" compare to how communities address poverty and homelessness today?
- What lessons from the Catholic Worker Movement can we apply when facing modern issues like economic inequality, housing insecurity, or migrant justice?
- How can faith or ethical belief systems be a source of strength and resistance in the face of injustice?
- Dorothy Day often acted on her convictions even when they were unpopular or controversial. What does this tell us about making ethical choices in a complex world?

Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- [Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement Excerpts](#)
- [Jigsaw Reflection Sheet](#)
- Notebook or a sheet of paper
- Scissors

Assign students to "home groups" of four. Print, cut, and distribute the [Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement Excerpts](#) (each member of the home group should have a different excerpt). You can group them by theme if desired:

- Poverty & Compassion: Excerpts 1, 2, 3, 4
- Peace & Nonviolence: Excerpts 5, 6, 8
- Hope & Spiritual Vision: Excerpts 4, 7, 8

Step 1: Expert Groups [20–25 mins]

Then have students move into expert groups based on their assigned excerpt (i.e. all students reading Excerpt 1 sit together). In these groups, students read their excerpt together, and answer the following on a sheet of notebook paper.

Expert Group Questions:

1. What is Dorothy Day saying in this excerpt?
2. What issues or injustices is she addressing?
3. What values or beliefs does she express?
4. What emotions or tone do you notice?
5. How does this excerpt reflect complexity, sacrifice, or hope?

Each expert group prepares to summarize and explain the excerpt to their home group.

Step 2: Home Groups [20–25 mins]

- As students return to their home groups, distribute the [Jigsaw Reflection Sheet](#), while listening to their peers report back, students should use it to take notes.
- Each student take turns presenting:
 - A short summary of the excerpt
 - Key values/ideas/themes
 - How it connects to social justice, poverty, or peace

Step 3: Whole Class Debrief [15-20 mins]

Possible discussion questions:

- What surprised or challenged you across the excerpts?
- What do these excerpts reveal about how Dorothy Day viewed her role in the world?
- How does this source help us understand the values behind the Catholic Worker Movement?
- How did she respond to a world full of suffering, contradiction, and conflict?
- How might these writings help us think differently about how we address poverty or peace today?
- After hearing Dorothy Day in her own words, what do you think it means to fight for justice in a complex world?

Primary Sources

Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement Excerpts

Excerpt 1: “We will never stop having breadlines at Catholic Worker houses.... But I repeat: Breadlines are not enough, hospices are not enough. I know we will always have men on the road. But we need communities of work, land for the landless, true farming communes, cooperatives and credit unions. There is much that is wild, prophetic, and holy about our work—it is that which attracts the young who come to help us. But the heart hungers for that new social order wherein justice dwelleth.” (Catholic Worker, January 1972)

Excerpt 2: “It is hard ... to quote the Gospel to men with empty stomachs. It is hard to preach holy poverty to those who suffer perforce from poverty not only for themselves but for their loved ones. But we wish to assure our readers that most of the people who are writing for and putting out this paper have known poverty—hunger and heat and cold; some have slept in city lodging houses, in doorways, in public parks, have been in the wards of city hospitals; have walked the city with their feet upon the ground searching for work, or just walking because they had no shelter to go to.” (Catholic Worker, May 1934)

Excerpt 3: “Every morning I break my fast with the men in the breadline. Some of them speak to me. Many of them do not. But they know me and I know them. And there is a sense of comradeship there. We know each other in the breaking of bread.” (Diary entry, February 27, 1939)

Excerpt 4: “What we would like to do is change the world—make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended for them to do. And by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of workers, of the poor, of the destitute... we can, to a certain extent, change the world.” (Catholic Worker, May 1936)

Excerpt 5: “Now the whole world is turning to ‘force’ to conquer. Fascist and Communist alike believe that only by the shedding of blood can they achieve victory. Catholics, too, believe that suffering and the shedding of blood ‘must needs be,’ as Our Lord said to the disciples at Emmaus. But their teaching, their hard saying, is that they must be willing to shed every drop of their own blood, and not take the blood of their brothers. They are willing to die for their faith, believing that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.” (Catholic Worker, November 1936)

Primary Sources

Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement Excerpts cont.

Excerpt 6: “Next week we demonstrate again, stick our necks out, protest, say no, carry out into the street some of the Pope’s words ... such as ‘War is murder and suicide.’ (It would naturally follow from that that it is forbidden us.) We will be arrested again, in jail again, maybe for a day, maybe for a month, or six months. It is not easy. I just have to remember that I am visiting the prisoner, the last work of mercy and the hardest to perform. Do pray for us.” (Letter to Donald Powell, April 9, 1959)

Excerpt 7: “What we would like to do is change the world—make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended them to do. And to a certain extent, by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers, of the poor, of the destitute ... we can to a certain extent change the world; we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a harried world. We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever-widening circle will reach around the world. We repeat, there is nothing that we can do but love, and dear God— please enlarge our hearts to love each other, to love our neighbor, to love our enemy as well as our friend.” (Catholic Worker, June 1946)

Excerpt 8: “So many in these days have taken violent steps to gain the things of this world—war to achieve peace; coercion to achieve freedom; striving to gain what slips through the fingers. We might as well give up our great desires, at least our hopes of doing great things toward achieving them, right at the beginning. In a way it is like the paradox of the Gospel, of giving up one’s life in order to save it. That, in effect, is what we did when we went to jail. It was part of it. We were setting our faces against the world, against things as they are, the terrible injustice of our capitalist industrial system which lives by war and by preparing for war.... We made our gesture; we disobeyed a law.” (Catholic Worker, September 1957)

Jigsaw Reflection Sheet

Name: _____

Excerpt #	Key Message: What Issues Are Raised?	What Stands Out to You?
1		
2		
3		
4		

Jigsaw Reflection Sheet

Name: _____

Excerpt #	Key Message: What Issues Are Raised?	What Stands Out to You?
5		
6		
7		
8		