

# Dorothy Day: Pacifist Prophet

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## ABSTRACT

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Dorothy Day (1897-1980), co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, was admired for her radical poverty but often severely criticized for her commitment to pacifism. Steeped in the Gospel and the witness of Jesus, she opposed all wars, including World War II, and every form of violence. This article traces the genesis of her commitment and the situations in which she lived it. She was a prophet: denouncing violence and war and announcing that the Gospel offered another way to resist evil and violence. Her witness is of vital importance to violent South Africa today.

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When Pope Francis visited the United States in 2015, he spoke of Dorothy Day together with Martin Luther King Jr. and Thomas Merton. The Pope and his speech writers did excellent research to include her. At her death in 1980, historian David O'Brien called her "the most influential, interesting, and significant figure" in the history of American Catholicism".<sup>1</sup>

This article presents some aspects of her early life, describes the origins of the Catholic Worker movement which she founded with Peter Maurin and analyses the theological foundations of her commitment to total pacifism. Her pacifism commitment which was and is a foundation stone of the Catholic Worker movement was lived out in the context of various wars and other forms of oppression until her death. Her commitment met much opposition. I name Dorothy Day as a "pacifist prophet" since she both announced the Gospel of peace and denounced violence.

## Biographical Background

Day was born in Brooklyn, New York, on 8 November 1897 to Grace Satterlee and John Day. She died on 30 November 1980 at Maryhouse in New York. She was the middle child of the five in the family, with two older brothers and a younger brother and sister. Her father was a sports writer and her mother managed the home. The family was living in San Francisco in 1906 when the catastrophic earthquake struck. She remembered all her life how her mother gave away every

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1. "Dorothy Day: A Saint for Our Times." <[http://www.uscatholic.org/dorothy\\_day](http://www.uscatholic.org/dorothy_day)>. [Accessed 10 June 2018].