

Radiating Christ's Love: Father Vincent R. Capodanno, Maryknoll Missionary and Dorothy Day, Catholic Social Activist

The heroic story of Maryknoll missionary Father Vincent Robert Capodanno (1929-1967) offering an extraordinary Witness to Christ in his ministry as a chaplain to soldiers during the Vietnam War shares common ground with Dorothy Day (1897-1980) a radical lay Catholic who co-founded the *Catholic Worker Movement* in the United States in 1933. Father Capodanno and Dorothy Day are under review for sainthood by the Catholic Church. In the steps toward canonization both are declared as Servants of God at this time. The Church will be searching for testimonies of miracles. In the case of Father Capodanno, testimonies of cures attributable to intercessory prayers are being reported by fellow Marines and a Vietnamese nun claims to have recovered from the from advanced cancer without medical explanation (Taylor, 2013). On the day of Dorothy Day's funeral, a homeless man emerged from the crowd approached her coffin "staring at something he could only see...this was the kind of person Dorothy had loved" (O'Grady, 1993, p. 106). A miracle of healing also has been attributed to her. Dorothy Day devoted her life to the poor as editor of the newspaper *The Catholic Worker* and by her selfless giving in "houses of hospitality" (see Day, 1939) (HH).¹ Father Capodanno found himself working within the throes of the Vietnam War while Dorothy Day battled the war on poverty for forty years in New York City and beyond. It is expected that she will be remembered as "a saint for difficult people" and possibly a patron saint for the homeless and the forgotten person (Parker, 2017). Numerous labels apply to the roles that Dorothy Day played in her public life. She was a pacifist, an anarchist, a social activist, a journalist, a social reformer, a moralist, and a

Catholic convert, not to mention that she was also a mother, a grandmother, a bohemian, a mystic, and some might say a feminist as well (O'Connor, 1991). As a pacifist, she urged men not to register but to resist the draft. In fact, "when the Vietnam War erupted, Dorothy stood at the side of those who refused to "serve,' which is to say (as she would say) refused to kill" (Day, 1952, p. 25) (LL). If Dorothy Day's anti-war campaigns had become reality with changes in government policy, the Vietnam War would never have entered the pages of history and countless young lives would have been saved. Father Capodanno's destiny would have taken him elsewhere, perhaps in a less dramatic way.

It was the calling and choice of these two exceptional individuals to pursue their purpose and passion during challenging periods in history. In her lifetime, Dorothy Day lived through the Depression, World War 1, the Spanish Civil War World War II, the dawning of the nuclear arms race during the Cold War, and the Vietnam War, having been prosecuted for activities in all the wars mentioned. Father Vincent Capodanno encountered the tumultuous period of the 1960's which reverberated from the United States to the Southeast Asian country of Vietnam profoundly impacting his life and its duration. The question arises as to what motivated and sustained these two individuals to pursue their overwhelming ministries? Perhaps, the answer is their Christian and Catholic spiritual foundation which cultivated an interior life enabling them to work from the inside out to society and reaching out to their fellow human beings with compassion and within community. Both Father Capodanno and Dorothy Day engaged in corporal and spiritual works of mercy working with vulnerable populations. Father Capodanno attended to distressed, suffering, mourning, and dying soldiers with a concern for their temporal and eternal well-being while extending empathy to their families. His reason for

accepting the assignment in Vietnam was stated to a reporter in simple terms: “I joined the Chaplain Corps when the Vietnam War broke out because I think I am needed here as are many more chaplains. I am glad to help in the way I can” (Mode, 2000, p. 56). The matter-of-factness of this statement, however, carries much depth when understood in the context of the theological meaning given to the Christian Apostolate. Father Capodanno, who once was described by a parishioner as a “prince of a person –a very refined, quiet and extremely patriotic” (Mode, p. 63) was the chaplain attending to soldiers on the cutting edge of life and death. Dorothy Day worked with the impoverished and marginalized who were also on the cutting edge fighting for their bodily, material, and social survival. Father Daniel Berrigan, S.J., a sociologist and fellow pacifist, wrote the Introduction to The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day in which he identifies the many types of people in the ranks of the needy who sought help and support from the Catholic Worker Movement. He states:

In the meantime, Dorothy had written about defended, explained, the following: cotton pickers, braceros, prisoners and ex-prisoners, families of every condition, the unemployed, priests and nuns, scholars, Native Americans, monks, alcoholics, addicts, slum folks, auto workers, coal miners. Among others. She stood with them. In the current jargon, she had a “point of view.” (Day, 1952, p. 24) (LL).

Dorothy Day found disagreement with merely dispensing charity. She opted for so-called “voluntary poverty,” a total involvement whereby she immersed herself in the reality of the poor by living with them in community – eating and dressing as they did, and experiencing their hardships. She wrote about voluntary poverty in her article “Without Poverty We Are Powerless” explaining that it was “the deliberate and intentional life choice of sharing whatever one had with those who had nothing” (O’Connor, 1991, p. 84; see also Day,

1948, pp. 2, 7) (CW). Day makes the poignant statement that “while our brothers suffer from lack of necessities, we will refuse to enjoy comforts” (Day, pp. 2, 7) (CW). In a similar way, Father Capodanno practiced voluntary poverty with a constant eating, living and sleeping in the same conditions as the soldiers who typically were “eighteen or nineteen years old, and just out of high school” (Mode, 2000, p. 76). In solidarity with these young men, Father Capodanno had his own tent and wore a flak, taking on the identity and lifestyle of a “Grunt Marine” but remaining at his very core a priest. Dorothy Day once said that if you have two coats, it is one too many, and the second coat should be given to a poor person. She would be pleased to hear that “on one occasion I [Major Fitzgerald] witnessed Father Capodanno remove his rain suit and give it to a wounded Marine. For the remainder of the operation he was without suitable rain clothing” (Mode, p. 95).

Father Capodanno and Dorothy Day were responding to the human casualties found in an imperfect world either on mean city streets or in distant battlefields, aligning their mission of healing with God’s mission of transformation and salvation to the extent that joining in God’s mission might cost someone’s life. In the name of justice, peace, freedom, and love, Dorothy Day pursued the strategy of radical action in protests, demonstrations, and acts of civil disobedience for which she faced arrests and imprisonments. As one example, she was arrested in California during a strike by the United Farm Workers, led by Cesar Chavez in 1973. Dorothy Day was sensitive to the oppression Black people faced due to racism. In a visit to the South, she nearly faced death by gunshot blast while in reading the Bible in her car. She did escape injury but in another instance, she was the victim of a gunshot wound while participating in an anti-segregation rally at a southern church (see O’Grady, 1993 p. 101). In

contrast to the violence found in communities at large, Dorothy Day fostered a culture of caring within the Catholic Worker Movement “loving people, one by one” (O’Grady, p. 88). It was the same approach Father Capodanno employed by extending loving care one soldier at a time. To be precise, both of these missionaries became channels for Christ’s love as they were witness to the face of Christ in the poor and wounded. In his last temporal act, Father Capodanno was at the side of one soldier, a choice and a circumstance which sent him into eternal rest. The nurturing, care giving, compassion, and loving attention given by Dorothy Day and Father Capodanno to people in distress was an expression of their expertise in what Dorothy Day called the “art of human contacts” (Day, 1939, pp.237-238) (HH). Dorothy Day’s work was motherly, relational, and communal leading her to speak of her “far-flung” family (Day, 1963 . p. 138) (LF). In this sense, she has much in common with Jane Addams, social reformer and applied sociologist, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 for her leadership in the settlement house movement. Father Capodanno shared in a ministry with Saint Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa) in that both took responsibility for enabling the forsaken to experience a dignified and blessed death. In his pastoral work with the grunt Marines, Father Capodanno offered a priestly, fatherly, and brotherly presence, depending on their needs, he was there for them. Father Vincent emerged as an outstanding communicator. He is remembered as someone who was easy to talk to, willing to listen, had a good sense of humor, and showed a very good understanding of people. On nightly visits, “in quiet whispers, the men told the chaplain their needs and desires, and shared the news of home-front joys and sorrows. Father Vincent’s mere presence was the most comforting factor of all” (Mode, 2000, p. 122).

The priest and the social reformer were persons of faith growing in holiness through their ministries. Among his comrades in Vietnam, Father Capodanno was known for praying into the long hours of the night. His seminary formation and spiritual preparation for discipleship were influenced by the book Radiating Christ: An Appeal to Militant Catholics, written by the French Jesuit, Raoul Plus, S.J. Father Capodanno received this book as a graduation gift from the Maryknoll General Superior. The fundamental message is that “an intense interior life is absolutely necessary for any truly apostolic activity” (Raoul, 1936/1998, p. 50). This intimacy or union with God is essential to spiritual deepening enabling the apostle to radiate the light and image of Christ, symbolically expressed in this prayer: “Lord, make me like crystal so that thy light may shine through me” (see Raoul, p.68). Raoul discusses the spiritual journey in terms of stages which are parallel to the mysteries of Christ’s descent, incarnation, renunciation, and burial. It has been noted that “each of these four stages can be seen unfolding during the remaining seven and a half years of Father Vincent’s life” (Mode, 2000, p. 37). As Father Capodanno grew in Christ, he saw Christ in others with a concern for the saving of souls, especially when he offered the sacraments of Reconciliation (Confession) and Anointing of the Sick (Extreme Unction). He poured Christ’s love walking alongside men in combat carrying the Cross of war with them. The Cross brings with it sacrifice and a ‘suffering with,’ prerequisites for the apostolate. Raoul believes that “you cannot be a savior unless you are “another Christ,” unless you are to some extent at any rate, crucified as Christ was” (Raoul, p. 99). The radical witness to Christ shone forth in Chaplain Father Capodanno’s last heroic act of supreme sacrifice.

Dorothy Day was a woman of faith who grew to find delight in prayer and duty (see Day,

2011) (DD). She had a strong aesthetic sense appreciating spiritual peace and natural beauty. Her route to Catholicism, however, was circuitous, having been raised as an Episcopalian, and later taking an atheist perspective. She led a liberated life of affairs with men, was divorced, had a child out of wedlock, and even an abortion. Her conversion to Catholicism was inspired by the birth of her daughter Tamar Teresa. It was the culmination of a string of lifelong experiences which became stepping stones releasing her from a long loneliness. Catholicism became the foundation of her life and that of the Catholic Worker Movement. One of the pieces of the puzzle in this mysterious conversion was Dorothy Day's relationship with Sister Aloysia, an elderly Staten Island nun who prepared Dorothy for the baptism of her daughter and in the process served as a spiritual mentor preparing Dorothy to become a Catholic herself. This is how Dorothy Day summarizes her instruction from Sister Aloysia:

She gave me a catechism and brought me old copies of the *Messenger of The Sacred Heart*, a magazine which, along with the Kathleen Norris type of success story, had some good solid articles about the teachings of the Church. I read them all; I studied my catechism; I learned to pray the Rosary; I went to Mass in the chapel by the sea {St. Joseph's-by-the-Sea}; I walked the beach and I prayed; I read *Imitation of Christ*, and St. Augustine, and the New Testament (Day, 1952, pp. 170-71) (LL)

At the age of fifty-eight, Dorothy Day made a commitment to become a lay Benedictine Oblate in which she received further strength for a prayerful and service-oriented life. She immersed herself in the Benedictine goals *ora et labora*, pray and work coming to the realization that “prayer is a necessity to life as breathing” (Day, 2017, p. 45 (RWL); see St. Benedict Catholic Worker, 2016, para. 1). Catholic Workers followed the guiding rule that “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ...” the Rule of St Benedict 53.1

(O'Hagan, 2016, para.4). It is “that very solidarity which made me gradually understand the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ whereby we are the members one of another” (Day, 1952, p. 176) (LL). Dorothy Day came to discern the Mystical Body of Christ as the basis for a relationship with God and dignified, respectful relations among human persons.

Overall, Dorothy Day saw the world torn by class conflict and exploitative social institutions; she advocated an economic system of distributive capitalism. She and Peter Maurin, co-founders of the Catholic Worker Movement, shared a vision of a new social order – “the vision of a society where it is easier for men to be good” (Day, p. 214) (LL). The systemic focus of the Catholic Worker Movement was a grass-roots initiative which was grounded in active love, community, and social change, responding to the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (“Reconstruction of the Social Order”) written by Pope Pius XI and released on May 15, 1931, two years before the inception of the Catholic Worker Movement; It was led by a humble, daring, and courageous woman.

In the final analysis, Father Vincent Capodanno and Dorothy Day made a remarkable impression upon the world but did they find happiness during their lifetimes? Father Vincent shared with family and friends that he enjoyed and was energized by his ministry Dorothy Day found delight in duty (see Day, 2008) (DD). Perhaps, the answer is found in their ability to radiate Christ. Raoul (1936/1998) reveals a buried spiritual secret: “There you have the truth: approaching true joy means drawing near to God; to draw near to God is to draw near to true happiness” (p.80). The question remains as to whether or not they take their place in history as saints within the Catholic Church. Interestingly, Pope Francis has opened up a new pathway for sainthood which takes into account “an extreme act of charity” (Glatz, 2017, p. 1); that is

risking one's life in a heroic way and as a result dying prematurely. The Papal document entitled "Maiorem hac dilectionem," published July 11, 2017, is based on the Gospel according to St. John ((15:13): "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Glatz, p. 1). This new norm for sainthood will more than likely be evaluated in Father Capodanno's case. The traditional pathways to sainthood include living a life of Christian virtues, martyrdom for the faith, and strong devotion among the faithful to a holy man or woman. Undoubtedly, Dorothy Day's virtuous life based on the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" gives cause for the Catholic Church to seriously consider her advancement to sainthood. She disclosed her way of life in the following statement: "I am convinced that prayer and austerity, prayer and self-sacrifice, prayer and fasting, prayer and vigils, and prayer and marches are the indispensable means...And love" (Day, 2017, p. 36) (RWL).

The rungs in the process of attaining Catholic sainthood include moving from "Servant of God" (*Servus Dei*) to "Venerable" (*Venerabilis*) to Blessed (*Beatus or Beata*) and finally to "Saint" (*Sanctus or Sancta*). Father Vincent Capodanno and Dorothy Day are at the beginning of a long journey that will give those facing the battles and injustices of life more reason to pray and someone to pray to.

¹ Abbreviations to Dorothy Day's books and article found in textual citations are as follows:

House of Hospitality (HH), *The Catholic Worker* (CW), *The Long Loneliness* (LL), *Loaves and Fishes* (LF), *The Duty of Delight* (DD), *The Reckless Way of Love* (RWL)

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