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# Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement: Is a Catholic Anarchy truly possible?

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## **Abstract**

Anarchy and religion are not often spoken about at the same time. In the instances where they are, it is to show how incompatible they might be. Yet, the approach of this research project is different. Through the study of an American journalist, social activist, anarchist, and devout Catholic Dorothy Day, we can see how Roman Catholicism cannot only coexist but also be in communion with anarchy. Anarchy is thought of as a free, disorderly, violent destruction of the state. The Catholic faith, on the other hand, is thought of as an unmoving, hierarchical, controlling system of faith. Yet, this paper argues that being an activist is a necessary condition to be a true Catholic and that Anarchy and Catholicism can exist in the same canon. Dorothy Day developed two main principles which then informed both her theological and political course of action: (1) Community is found through love and (2) A good revolution ought to be pacifistic. We can see how Anarchism and Roman Catholicism are uncontradictory ideals by looking into their applications of the following concepts: (1) Free-Will, (2) Activism, and (3) Love. Upon these principles, Day founded the Catholic Worker – a socialist newspaper, hospitality house and autonomous farm community – in the 1930s. Currently, the movement consists of 187 Catholic anarchist communities across the globe. This research will contemplate the idea of a Catholic Anarchist as not only possible but also uncontradictory.

**Keywords:** *Anarchy, Religion, Pacifism, Social Justice, Catholicism, Dorothy Day*

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## Introduction

Some anarchists – especially those influenced by figures like Mikhail Bakunin – believe that religion is a hierarchical, controlling, and restrictive institution which serves to reinforce state oppression.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, one should be non-religious. Emma Goldman believes the very idea of a higher being or first cause is an impediment to free will. Yet, this is not the case for Dorothy Day. She was both an active anarchist and devoted Catholic. Initially, Dorothy Day was solely a social activist and anarchist. In 1927, however, she converted to Catholicism. She did not, however, leave her political activism – or beliefs – behind. She instead, in 1933, founded “The Catholic Worker,” a newspaper which would encourage Catholic teachings in conjunction with social justice.

The fascinating thing about Day is that she has remained an anarchist even as a Catholic activist. Anarchists believe in horizontal relationships and reject hierarchical systems and positions of power.<sup>2</sup> The Catholic Church, on the other hand, is extremely hierarchical and considers itself the only true and holy Church. How can these two ideals go together? Has Day deliberately ignored these contradictions? Are they free of contradictions from the outset? Do the true dogmas of the Church transcend their hierarchy? Can the true Catholic Christian way of life be of Anarchist nature? Are Anarchism and Catholicism political theories or are they raw

<sup>1</sup> Bakunin, Mikhail. “God and the State.” The Anarchist Library, 1882.  
<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/mikhail-bakunin-god-and-the-state>.

<sup>2</sup> Wittel, Andreas. “What Is Anarchism All about?” The Conversation, March 18, 2021.  
<https://theconversation.com/what-is-anarchism-all-about-50373>.

guidelines as to how we ought to relate to one another? Can you really be a Catholic and an anarchist at the same time? These are the questions that emerge when thinking about Dorothy Day's religious and political convictions. Throughout this research paper, I will seek to contemplate the idea of a Catholic Anarchist being uncontradictory. I will also investigate how these ideas are put into practice today.

In light of understanding whether Catholicism and Anarchism are contradictory concepts, we must first understand the principles of America's most important Catholic anarchist, Dorothy Day. She went through life searching for that which could fill her void.<sup>3</sup> This void was caused for both political and religious reasons. Politically, she was a young journalist that carried herself along socialist and anarchist groups. As a radical journalist on *The Call*,<sup>4</sup> she wrote about labor movements, strikes, the Industrial Workers of the World, and socialists.<sup>5</sup> In her own right, her personal convictions thrived in the merging points of socialism, syndicalism, and anarchism.<sup>6</sup> She believed this as she saw the post-industrialization world further drive man away from the good and closer to inequality and oppression. Yet, she never felt fully home in her political convictions. As her political views were mix of many and she made a life for herself through capitalist employment, she did not feel she was a true good radical.<sup>7</sup> Religiously, it seemed as if she also struggled against an inner isolation. She had numerous encounters with various religions. Day felt a deep bond with God. Yet, she did not share beliefs with a specific religious community.

<sup>3</sup> Day, Dorothy. Essay. In *The Long Loneliness: the Autobiography of the Legendary Catholic Social Activist Dorothy Day*. New York: HarperOne, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> *The New York Call* was a socialist newspaper.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 57

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 61

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 58

Day had been exposed to Catholicism years before her conversion. Though she was intrigued by the traditions and theology there was still a piece of it that did not make sense to her. She did not know how to find communion between dogma and action. She knew that one of the principles of the Christian faith was charity, but she felt as if she needed to do more. Even so good faith worked in redeeming social evils, it did little to avoid them in the first place.<sup>8</sup> Some of Days initial fascination towards the Catholic Church came because of her young admiration of saints. Yet, as her political and theological thought matured, she still questioned “where were the saints to try to change the social order, not just to minister to the slaves but to do away with slavery.”<sup>9</sup>

Day’s ideas – and conversion – developed until she finally found that which would fill her void: Community. Dorothy Day developed two main principles which would inform both her theological and political thought: (1) Community is found through love and (2) A good revolution ought to be pacifist. We can see how anarchism, community and Catholicism are non-contradictory by looking into the following concepts: (1) Free-Will, (2) Activism, and (3) Love.

### **Free-Will**

When working as a noun, Free-Will can be defined as “the power of acting without the constraint of necessity or fate; the ability to act at one's own discretion.”<sup>10</sup> This is one the most important principles for anarchist. Thinkers like Emma Goldman believed that free-will had to

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 45

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 45

<sup>10</sup> “Free-will” Oxford English Dictionary. Accessed December 10, 2020. <https://www.oed.com/>.

be both protected and encouraged in order to live a dignifying life. Free-Will is believed to be controlled by the coercive power of the state and its laws. Therefore, it is ceasing to be free. This is why Anarchist work to dismantle the state. Not only is the state evil and violent, but it is preventing us in developing our free human nature. Coincidentally, free-will is also one of the most important principles of Christianity.

Galatians 5:13 states “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free.”<sup>11</sup> It is a direct call to exert out free-will. This meaning, not only that we have the capacity of free-will but that we ought to exert that free will throughout our lives. Though the Bible is an accurate reflection of the Christian faith as whole, studying it alone does not provide an accurate reflection of the Catholic faith. Unlike, Christian sects which emerged after the Reformation,<sup>12</sup> the Catholic Church does not believe in the free interpretation of the Bible. In order to have an accurate representation of what the Catholic Church stands for, one must find interpretations from official Church documents. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* can be defined as the Catholic “rule book” where one can find the official teachings of the Catholic Church.

Free-will is also believed to be one of the most important values for the Catholic Church. Additionally, it is the main principle which dictates how we ought to relate with the people around us. *Section One: Man’s Vocation Life in the Spirit* states that:

The human person participates in the light and power of the divine Spirit. By his reason, he is capable of understanding the order of things established by the Creator. By free

<sup>11</sup> Gal 5:13, RSV–CE

<sup>12</sup> The Reformation was a 16<sup>th</sup> century theological and political movement to defy the Catholic Church. It was led by Martin Luther. Protestantism emerged from this movement.

will, he is capable of directing himself toward his true good. He finds his perfection in seeking and loving what is true and good.<sup>13</sup>

In view of the fact that man is a rational being, who is able to intellectually distinguish between good and evil, he gains free-will.

It is important to note the distinction, however, between free-will and doing whatever we want. Free-will is there, because we are able to identify the good and therefore choose to do the good. Though we have the capacity to choose evil, it is still not what we ought to do. Nevertheless, does choosing the good really count if we are forced to do it? Are laws intended to guide our collective moral... the real contradictions between the State and human nature? Free-will is also highly cardinal in the Catholic Church given that it is considered a divine manifestation of God. This is, yet again, clearly stated in the Catechism: "By virtue of his soul and his spiritual powers of intellect and will, man is endowed with freedom, an "outstanding manifestation of the divine image."<sup>14</sup>

Traditionally, when we talk about free-will we mean the free-will of the individual. The individual's intellectual capacity to choose between right or wrong, pleasure or suffering, Sin or God. Nevertheless, this individual does not exist alone in a bubble. It lives within a society. Though one may have the intellectual capacity to have free-will, is that freedom really there if the State limit's ability to exert it at its full capacity? Because exerting our free-will is not only our duty but also a manifestation of God's divine image, Catholics Anarchist believe that

<sup>13</sup> Catholic Church. "Man's Vocation Life in the Spirit" *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

rejecting the state and its laws are the only true way to live life as we should. The freedom of every individual must be embraced.<sup>15</sup>

## **Activism**

It is important to remember that Day's catholic anarchist theology is rooted in her vocation for social justice work. From her work as a journalist to her founding of the Catholic Worker Movement, Dorothy Day always portrayed the spirit of an activist. She saw injustice unfold before her eyes as what was once called the great industrial revolution actually plunged man further into suffering. She dedicated her life's work, in helping combat against the social evils which tainted our human existence. Anarchists believe that the state is a violent institution which only product is the further development of evil into the world. Therefore, it is the Anarchists duty to go against this. This activist way of thinking is also supported by the Catholic Church's thinking:

Man, enticed by the Evil One, abused his freedom at the very beginning of history. He succumbed to temptation and did what was evil. He still desires the good, but his nature bears the wound of original sin. He is now inclined to evil and subject to error: Man is divided in himself. As a result, the whole life of men, both individual and social, shows itself to be a struggle, and a dramatic one, between good and evil, between light and darkness.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Damico, Linda H. *The Anarchist Dimension of Liberation Theology*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Catholic Church. "Man's Vocation Life in the Spirt" Catechism of the Catholic Church. 2nd ed. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012.



Man's social life is also a fight between good and evil. It is a constant struggle which the human endures. Therefore, we must admit that we are inclined to error and fight against it, both in our individual and social life. This is why calling out the evil around us, both for Dorothy Day and the Catholic Church is so important. It must call out injustice, evil, and work against it. To be an activist is a necessary condition to be a true Catholic.

## **Love**

Anarchists are thought to fight against the state and its injustices by doing so with the state's own techniques: violence. Some believe in violence if it is to be used for the defeating of the state. The idea of violence as a means was popularly encouraged amongst many Anarchist figures.<sup>17</sup> This is where Day's Catholic Anarchy differs. One of Day's main principles was that the good revolution ought to be pacifist. Yet, a pacifist revolution cannot happen if it is not through the basis of love. This is Day's grounding principle and the one that links her the most to the Catholic faith.

The 1<sup>st</sup> commandment of the Christian faith is to love only one God. The 2<sup>nd</sup> one is that one should love thy neighbor as yourself. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that "There is no other commandment greater than these."<sup>18</sup> It is out of love that we can genuinely do good things for one another. It is out of love that we can be willing to and care for each other. It is only out of love can we foster a genuine community where we work for one another.

<sup>17</sup> Willis, Clyde E. Emma Goldman. Accessed December 10, 2020. <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1267/emma-goldman>.

<sup>18</sup> Catholic Church. "The Ten Commandments" *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012.

Day believed that without love, we would not be able to honestly help one another. This was because in order to help one another and build a community, there needed to be sacrifice. However, with sacrifice it is not always joys which prevails but a necessary suffering. Love “grows through suffering and patience and compassion. We must suffer for those we love; we must endure their trials and their sufferings; we must even take upon ourselves the penalties due their sins.”<sup>19</sup> It was only through this suffering for the good of the beloved that one could understand Jesus’ crucifixion. By understanding, we could get closer to God and one another. By understanding this, brotherly love between humans would be actualized.

### **Applied Catholic Anarchism**

It is important to note that this philosophical discussion is not for the sake of utopianism but also for a practical application towards reality. Free-will and our capacity to choose good is developed through reason. This meaning that we are only choosing the good – and truly knowing that we are – when we actively think about choosing it. If not, it seems forced upon us. So, we challenge it and fight against. Therefore, the sometimes called “utopian society” which all Anarchist want would be unattainable if it was not through voluntary association. People need to know that they are choosing the good in order not to resist it. In addition to the violent defense of the state whenever it is threatened by Anarchist thought, Day argues this fixation for violence is the main reason why the revolution still hasn’t been successful.<sup>20</sup> Since love comes

<sup>19</sup> Hankey, Wayne J. “Action and Evil, Jane Austen, Graham Greene, Dorothy Day, Conclusion: The Good Demands Suffering Willingly Endured.” For Action and Evil - St George’s Round Church, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Day, Dorothy. From Union Square to Rome. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006.

from God and his sacrifice, Day states that “it is only through religion that communism can be achieved.”<sup>21</sup> If one is not aware of the good being brought upon us, one will fight against it.

Imposed violent anarchy is then, therefore, a contradiction to one of the principles which claims to protect, free-will. The way in which Day managed to stick to her political convictions while also nurturing her religious beliefs was to voluntary association and pacifism. The way in which she managed to put this into practices was through *The Catholic Worker*:

“For Day nonviolence was a way of life. While Catholic Worker nonviolence included pacifism, or "antiwarism," its common exercise, Day emphasized, was through a life of voluntary poverty in community with the poorest members of society and the daily practice of the works of mercy.”<sup>22</sup>

Though the Catholic Worker started out as just a newspaper, it developed into something much greater. With the Catholic Worker there were two types of projects that took place. The first was a hospitality house right in New York City. It served the poor and the hungry during the peak of the Great Depression. The second project which took place was the Catholic Worker Farm. These farms were created on Peter Maurin’s idea of having a community which sustainably and holistically nourished the body, mind and soul. This was done through farming communities, given that he believed that a truly healthy culture needed to have what he called a proper regard for the soil.<sup>23</sup> There was no coercion towards anyone to join or stay in the

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Krupa, ST. "Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement: Centenary Essays" in Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement: Centenary Essays, ed. William J. Thorn, Phillip M. Runkel, and Susan Moutin (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2001), pp. 184-200

<sup>23</sup> Benevento, Maria. “Peter Maurin's Farm-Rooted Vision Gains Ground among Catholic Workers.” National Catholic Reporter, May 15, 2019.

Catholic Worker Movement. Rather, those wanted to voluntarily join for whatever time that be were welcomed with open arms.

In a synthesis of Dorothy Day's ideals. The Catholic Worker movement stands upon the following mission statement:

We believe in the brotherhood of man and the Fatherhood of God. This teaching, the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, involves today the issue of unions (where men call each other brothers); it involves the racial question; it involves cooperatives, credit unions, crafts; it involves Houses of Hospitality and Farming Communes. It is with all these means that we can live as though we believed indeed that we are all members one of another, knowing that when "the health of one member suffers, the health of the whole body is lowered..."<sup>24</sup>

Though the Farming Communes are sometimes regarded as a failure<sup>25</sup> the Catholic Worker Movement has undoubtedly survived. Today, we can find around 187 communities worldwide. In an anarchist spirit, though all Catholic Worker Communities share the same fundamental values as the ones taught by Dorothy Day, they operate as sovereign communities. There are no Catholic Worker headquarters. In what could seem like a turn of events, most Catholic Worker Communities in the United States currently exist in middle America, not the Northeast. Other countries with one or more Catholic Worker houses/farms include Australia, Canada,

<https://www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/peter-maurins-farm-rooted-vision-gains-ground-among-catholic-workers>.

<sup>24</sup> Day, Dorothy. *Aims and Purposes. The Catholic Worker*. New York, NY: The Catholic Worker, 1940. <https://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/articles/182.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

Dominican Republic, Germany, Mexico, Philippines, Sweden, South Korea, The Netherlands, Uganda, and the United Kingdom.<sup>26</sup>

It is important to note, that these communities are not cult like communes which foster their utopian life while letting those in their surrounding suffer. The Catholic Worker has not encouraged the creation of cult like separationist but of communities which live to love and serve those around them. This is clearly seen in how some of these communities put into practice their original principles.

In the United States, two Iowa-based Catholic Workers have dedicated part of their work in protesting and actively delaying construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline.<sup>27</sup> They did so by going up and down the valves and sabotaging them from the inside. They gained inspiration from the Anti-Nuclear Plowshare movement, which used none-violent direct action to target nuclear warheads in military installations.<sup>28</sup> Though this might seem violent at first, the two workers assure that it was not. “It is our duty to act with responsibility and integrity, risking our own liberty for the sovereignty of us all. Some may view these actions as violent but

<sup>26</sup> “Communities Directory.” Catholic Worker Movement.

<https://www.catholicworker.org/communities/directory-picker.html>.

<sup>27</sup> The Dakota Access Pipeline is an oil pipeline that has gained resistance since the start of its construction. It contaminates water and land nearby. It also affects the natural habitat and migratory patterns of multiple species which are essential for environmental balance and First Nation’s consumption. Most importantly, the pipeline goes through multiple First Nation’s sacred land.

<sup>28</sup> democracynow. “Meet the Two Catholic Workers Who Secretly Sabotaged the Dakota Access Pipeline to Halt Construction.” YouTube. YouTube, July 28, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-Dip9svgz8>.

be not mistaken. We acted from our hearts and never threatened human life or personal property.”<sup>29</sup>

In London, another Catholic Worker Community has taken the local social issues into their own hands. They consider themselves “a community of hospitality and resistance in the world’s second imperial city.”<sup>30</sup> They especially provide services to asylum-seekers and refugees in need. They do this by having one hospitality house in the center of London and one Farm in Hertfordshire.<sup>31</sup> As part of their resistance efforts, they organize round-table discussion and protest for topics such as “war on terror”, arms trade, British nuclear weapons, and solidarity with migrants and refugees.<sup>32</sup> Like in Day’s original houses of hospitality, living and working in these communities is voluntary.

## Conclusion

Dorothy Day’s work is alive and well across the world. “Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the meek,’ but I could not be meek at the thought of injustice. I wanted a Lord who would scourge the moneychangers out of the temple, and I wanted to help all those who raised their hand against oppression.”<sup>33</sup> With time and patience, she learned that the Lord in which she believed in would not infringe on free will, but rather encourage us to do what’s good on our own for the

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> “Who Are We.” London Catholic Worker, n.d.  
<https://www.londoncatholicworker.org/wwwa.php>.

<sup>31</sup> “The Catholic Worker Farm.” The Catholic Worker Farm RSS, n.d.  
<http://thecatholicworkerfarm.org/>.

<sup>32</sup> “Who Are We,” London Catholic Worker

<sup>33</sup> Day, Dorothy. *The Long Loneliness: the Autobiography of the Legendary Catholic Social Activist Dorothy Day*. New York: HarperOne, 2017

sake of brotherly love. The ideas of free-will is imperative for the Catholic and the Anarchist. Moreover, Catholic theological ideas of evil, original sin, and love for they neighbor compliment anarchist ideals of activism for the oppressed and voluntary association rather than state government. Nevertheless, being an Anarchist that fully respects free-will – from the material world to the divine – comes with a cost: pacifism. It is only through love, without violence and coercion, can the revolution start as its seeps into our hearts. It is only through the slow revolution of the heart, can the fruits of it be honest and joyful...even in the face of suffering.

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