

Bread for the Hungry

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Speaks of her experience with the poor, and her love of the Church and the Eucharist. Recalls that August 6th is the day to remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki and is critical of a nearby Mass for the military. Notes her family members involvement in wars and asks us to fast, like Ammon Hennacy, and to do penance and ask for forgiveness. (DDLW #258).

(This talk was delivered by Dorothy Day at the Eucharistic Congress on August 6th, where she was among those invited to respond to a paper entitled “Women and the Eucharist.” Meanwhile, in the Cathedral two miles away, a Mass was being said for the armed forces: this in spite of numerous protests at the insensitivity displayed in scheduling such a Mass for Hiroshima day. Several of us from the Catholic Worker were among those who vigiled and leafleted outside the Cathedral. Eds. Note.)

I suppose I am asked to contribute my thoughts on this subject because I am associated, in the minds of those who know the Catholic Worker, with breadlines, with hungry men and women, and all the destitute in our big cities where we have Catholic Worker Houses.

Long before our work started – I mean the work of publishing a paper, **The Catholic Worker**, and trying to literally do as Jesus said, “Feed the hungry,” I attended a Eucharistic celebration on the Lower East Side of New York. On Corpus Christi day every year, the Italians had processions on the Lower East Side. Streets were decorated as for a festa, altars were set up every few blocks, Benediction was given after holding up the Blessed Sacrament to the people. Instead of banners, colorful bedspreads of every color – red, cerise, blue, green, purple and gold – hung from the windows of the crowded tenements. The streets teemed with people; pushcarts sold delicacies – there was an abundance of food for body and soul.

The Catholic Worker daily soup line is also a celebration (of a kind). Our store-fronts are homelike places, banners and pictures abound; St. Joseph, and Our Lady of Guadalupe, Protectress of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers (who, though the harvesters of food, do not earn enough to feed their families adequately).

Hunger for Human Warmth

Two blocks away from St. Joseph House is the Municipal Lodging House where about a thousand men, three times a day, are fed. Many of those same men come to us in their hungers, which bread alone (or even the best meal) does not satisfy. They come to us for human warmth – to satisfy another kind of hunger.

I think we all share in Sister Angelita's expressed wish that, by what we say in this session, all of us here will grow in "their faith in, love for, and commitment to Jesus in the Eucharist, according to the purposes of this Congress."

But I would like to stress my own experience again. My conversion began many years ago, at a time when the material world around me began to speak in my heart of the love of God. There is a beautiful passage in St. Augustine, whose **Confessions** I read at this time. "What is it I love when I love Thee," it begins, and goes on to list all the material beauty and enjoyment to be found in the life of the senses. The sea, which surrounded us, rather, it was a bay leading out to sea, provided food, fish and shellfish in abundance, even the sea weeds, which a Japanese friend told me were part of the food of her people. Our garden grew vegetables; the fields berries, the trees fruits. Everything spoke to me of a Creator who satisfied all our hungers.

It was also the physical aspect of the Church which attracted me. Bread and wine, water (all water is made holy since Christ was baptized in the Jordan), incense, the sound of waves and wind, all nature cried out to me.

My love and gratitude to the Church have grown through the years. She was my mother and nourished me, and taught me.

She taught me the crowning love of the life of the Spirit. But she also taught me that "before we bring our gifts of service, of gratitude, to the altar, – if our brother have anything against us, we must hesitate to approach the altar to receive the Eucharist."

"Unless you do penance, you shall all perish." Penance comes before the Eucharist. Otherwise we partake of the Sacrament unworthily.

And here we are on August 6th, the day the first atomic bomb was dropped, which ended the Second World War. There had been holocausts before – massacres, after the First World War, of the Armenians, all but forgotten now, and the holocaust of the Jews, God's chosen people. When He came to earth as Man, He chose them. And He told us "All men are brothers," and that it was His will that all men be saved. Japanese, Jew, Armenian.

It is a fearful thought, that unless we do penance, we will perish.

Our Creator gave us life, and the Eucharist to sustain our life.

But we have the world instruments of **death** of inconceivable magnitude.

Today, we are celebrating – how strange to use such a word – a Mass for the military, the "armed forces." No-one in charge of the Eucharistic Congress had remembered what **August 6th** means in the minds of all who are dedicated to the work of peace.

Why not a Mass for the military on some other day? Antoine St. Exupery, a flyer in World War II and the author of **Wind, Sand and Stars**, tells of the feeling men at war have for each other – the sense of being united in a common cause, "a readiness to give all, **to lay down one's life.**" Such expressions are used in all sincerity.

And who does not love bands, and the discipline of marching men, and the banners!

I, myself, had grandparents who fought in the Civil War – on opposite sides, however, and animosities remained between families in my childhood. My two brothers were in the First World War and one in World War II, and my grandson was in our most recent war, when he was in the jungles in Vietnam, in the small bands who went out "to search and destroy."

Women, who were born to nourish, to bring forth life, not to destroy it, must do more than thank God we survived it.

I plead, in this short paper, that we will regard that military Mass, and all our Masses today, as an act of penance, begging God to forgive us. I am gratified for the opportunity given me at this Congress to express myself in this way. I thank God for the freedom of Holy Mother Church.

I must not forget Ammon Hennacy, who died in 1970, one of the old editors of **The Catholic Worker** who, since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, fasted from all food, solid or liquid, allowing himself only water, giving a day of this penance for every year since the bombs were dropped.

If he were with us today, he would be fasting over thirty days. The last years of his life he fasted, carrying a picket sign all day in the hot sun, in front of some Federal building, in whatever city he happened to be living. He died in Salt Lake City after a heart attack, which occurred during another picketing, protesting the execution of two young men in Utah. Ammon revered life.

Today, some of the young pacifists giving out leaflets here are fasting, as a personal act of penance for the sin of our country, which we love.