

Day by Day - June 1934

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Tales of young women struggling to find shelter and work in the midst of economic depression. (DDLW #278).

May 2. Although the Communists and socialists had their hundreds of thousands out in the streets yesterday, we feel that the CATHOLIC WORKER made its presence felt, too. Fifteen or more high school and college students, from Manhattan, Fordham, St. John's College, Cathedral College and from City College, distributed papers and leaflets in the streets all afternoon and in the evening up around Columbus Circle and Madison Square Garden.

The man who was selling the I.W.W. paper in Madison Square came up to get a copy from me and said, "I was a Catholic myself once – I'd like to see your paper," and people of all nationalities were anxious to get it.

One young woman came in this morning who said she had seen a copy in the square and wanted to find out about the House of Hospitality. She had been living down on the Bowery, paying 25 cents a night for a bed and, now her money was all gone and she had no place to go. She was telling me about her friend, who was also down and out, who went to take a room, or a bed up in Harlem, was seduced by a young Spanish American, and threw herself under a subway train a week later.

Her lips were trembling as she talked (it was only eight-thirty in the morning), so I invited her out to have a cup of coffee.

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Last week a colored woman who has been staying up at the Municipal Lodging House came in for a bite to eat. She looked in need of a shelter where she could stay in bed and rest for a few days instead of having to walk the streets from morning to night as the guests of the lodging house have to do.

So that evening I went up to talk to the girls at the Teresa Joseph co-operative to see if it would be all right with them to invite Mary to stay up there. After all, I did not want to run the risk of submitting her to insult on account of her skin – nor did I expect too much of the girls in the way of freedom from race prejudice, since I know very well that Catholics of means and better education are not free themselves from it.

I talked to the girls, reminding them how our Lord washed the feet of his disciples the night before he suffered and died for us, and told them how we all should serve each other, whether we are white, black or yellow. The girls were perfectly happy to welcome the new guest, and it was like a special birthday present for the paper to find this continuing of the co-operative spirit among them.

Mary took the paper up to Harlem to distribute for us yesterday, and all the other girls up at the house went to Mass or Communion to offer it up for our special May Day work. Margaret, despite her condition, for she is expecting a baby in six weeks, went on the subways yesterday, passing out papers from Times Square to Astoria and from Manhattan to Brooklyn. I was much touched and grateful at the help they all gave us.

An old Irishman of 73 came in this morning for his copies of the paper. He lives down in the Bowery and has a thirty dollar a month pension, from which he insisted on giving us a dollar. He also takes twenty-five copies of the paper to send out to his friends, and every morning at Mass, he says, he prays for us.

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A few weeks ago I went over to St. Zita's to see a sister there and the woman who answered the door took it for granted that I came to beg for shelter. The same morning I dropped into the armory on Fourteenth street, where lunches are being served to unemployed women, and there they again motioned me into the waiting room, thinking that I had come for food. These incidents are significant. After all my heels are not run down – my clothes were neat – I am sure I looked averagely comfortable and well cared for – and yet it was taken for granted that because I dropped into these places I needed help. It just shows how many girls, and women, who to the average eye, look as though they came from comfortable surroundings are really homeless and destitute.

You see them in the waiting rooms of all the department stores. To all appearances they are waiting to meet their friends, to go on a shopping tour – to a matinee, or to a nicely served lunch in the store restaurant. But in reality they are looking for work (you can see the worn newspapers they leave behind with the help wanted page well thumbed), and they have no place to go, no place to rest but in these public places – and no good hot lunch to look forward to. The stores are thronged with women buying dainty underwear which they could easily do without – compacts for a dollar, when the cosmetics in the five-and-ten are just as good – and mingling with these protected women and often indistinguishable from them, are these sad ones, these desolate ones, with no homes, no jobs, and never enough food in their stomachs.

"I often wonder what God **thinks of the scribes** and orators who thunder terrors at poor women for their desperate attempts at contraception and never *have* a word to say to the **Bank of England and the Treasury which have so obviously chosen birth-restriction as the solution for unemployment and are enforcing this policy on the poor by every means** in their power. . . . Indeed, our domination by money lenders is nowhere so disastrous, as **in the sphere**

of marriage and family life. The right to marry is a human right like the right to breathe and eat – equally the right to bring up a family. The family is the basic social unit, ordained as such by God Himself. Economic systems must be arranged to suit the family, and not *the family to economic conditions*. When Leo XIII demanded the living wage it was the family wage he meant. All this is ordinary Catholic teaching. For bringing up a family the first requisite is evidently an income. Under the savage economics of the past two years the children of the unemployed have been allowed two shillings per week.”

(Fr. Drinkwater in the *Sower*, a journal of Catholic education.)