

From Union Square to Rome Chapter 1 - Why

% Dorothy Day

1938, Chapter 1, pp. 1- 17.

Summary: Considers the difficult task of reflecting on her life and recounting her path to conversion. Some markers along her way included praying the Psalms, reading Dostoyvsky's and Mauriac's novels, and seeing the love of the poor found among those who don't consciously accept Christ. Links her suffering with others to Christ's within His Mystical Body. (DDLW #201).

It is difficult for me to dip back into the past, yet it is a job that must be done, and it hangs over my head like a cloud. St. Peter said that we must give a reason for the faith that is in us, and I am trying to give you those reasons.

This is not an autobiography. I am a woman forty years old and I am not trying to set down the story of my life. Please keep that in mind as you read. While it is true that often horror for one's sins turns one to God, what I want to bring out in this book is a succession of events that led me to His feet, glimpses of Him that I received through many years which made me feel the vital need of Him and of religion. I will try to trace for you the steps by which I came to accept the faith that I believe was always in my heart. For this reason, most of the time I will speak of the good I encountered even amid surroundings and people who tried to reject God.

The mark of the atheist is the deliberate rejection of God. And since you do not reject God or deliberately embrace evil, then you are not an atheist. Because you doubt and deny in words what your heart and mind do not deny, you consider yourself an agnostic.

Though I felt the strong, irresistible attraction to good, yet there was also, at times, a deliberate choosing of evil. How far I was led to choose it, it is hard to say. How far professors, companions, and reading influenced my way of life does not matter now. The fact remains that there was much of deliberate choice in it. Most of the time it was "following the devices and desires of my own heart." Sometimes it was perhaps the Baudelairean idea of choosing "the downward path which leads to salvation." Sometimes it was of choice, of free will, though perhaps at the time I would have denied free will. And so, since it was deliberate, with recognition of its seriousness, it was grievous mortal sin and may the Lord

forgive me. It was the arrogance and suffering of youth. It was pathetic, little, and mean in its very excuse for itself.

Was this desire to be with the poor and the mean and abandoned not unmixed with a distorted desire to be with the dissipated? Mauriac tells of this subtle pride and hypocrisy: "There is a kind of hypocrisy which is worse than that of the Pharisees; it is to hide behind Christ's example in order to follow one's own lustful desires and to seek out the company of the dissolute."

I write these things now because sometimes when I am writing I am seized with fright at my presumption. I am afraid, too, of not telling the truth or of distorting the truth. I cannot guarantee that I do not for I am writing of the past. But my whole perspective has changed and when I look for causes of my conversion, sometimes it is one thing and sometimes it is another that stands out in my mind.

Much as we want to know ourselves, we do not really know ourselves. Do we really want to see ourselves as God sees us, or even as our fellow human beings see us? Could we bear it, weak as we are? You know that feeling of contentment in which we sometimes go about, clothed in it, as it were, like a garment, content with the world and with ourselves. We are ourselves and we would be no one else. We are glad that God made us as we are and we would not have had Him make us like anyone else. According to the weather, our state of health, we have moods of purely animal happiness and content. We do not want to be given that clear inward vision which discloses to us our most secret faults. In the Psalms there is that prayer, "Deliver me from my secret sins." We do not really know how much pride and self-love we have until someone whom we respect or****love suddenly turns against us. Then some sudden affront, some sudden offense we take, reveals to us in all its glaring distinctness our self-love, and we are ashamed.

There are some paragraphs about the Holy Trinity which I read not long ago that point out an analogy between the soul and God. The soul is always one. It knows itself and loves itself. "I am conscious of myself, and it is this *I* that is conscious of this *self*, the *I* that is objectified to itself, and knows itself in itself. But once more, whilst the principle that is the *I* is the principle that knows, the *myself* is the term that is known, and in virtue of this a distinction is established between *I* and *myself*, and this perception that I get of myself involves and implies a third term which is the *love of I for self*. Whence result three imperfect but irreducible elements, co-existent in the undivided unity of my soul, three that are blended into one without becoming confused; one that radiates out into three without subdividing itself. Now in God there is the same law of activity and fecundity, but in the supreme degree of power and perfection. . . . Although we are always capable of thinking and willing, we do not always exercise our faculties in practice, there are interruptions, moments when we feel powerless, when we are weary. A fly is sufficient to prevent a man thinking. In this we distinguish . . . and this is weakness . . . the capability to act and the action itself. In God this weakness does not exist. If we strive in vain to

put into our thoughts the best of ourselves, or better still, if we labor, without succeeding, to make ourselves wholly and entirely the objective of our thoughts, to objectify ourselves in our thoughts . . . the Divine Spirit succeeds where we fail.” (Landrieux, *Le Divin Méconnu*.)

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I write in the very beginning of finding the Bible and the impression it made on me. I must have read it a good deal, for many passages remained with me through my earlier years to return and haunt me. Do you know the Psalms? They were what I read most when I was in jail in Occoquan. I read with a sense of coming back to something that I had lost. There was an echoing in my heart. And how can anyone who has known human sorrow and human joy fail to respond to these words?

“Out of the depths I have cried to thee, O Lord :
Lord, hear my voice. Let thy ears be attentive to the voice of my
supplication.
If thou, O Lord, wilt mark iniquities:
Lord, who shall stand it.
For with thee there is merciful forgiveness: and by reason of thy law,
I have waited for thee,
O Lord. My soul hath relied on his word: my soul hath hoped in the
Lord.
From the morning watch even until night, let Israel hope in the Lord.
Because with the Lord there is mercy; and with him plentiful re-
demption.
And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.”
“Hear, O Lord, my prayer: give ear to my supplication in thy truth:
hear me in thy justice.
And enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight no
man living shall be justified.
For the enemy hath persecuted my soul: he hath brought down my
life to the earth.
He hath made me to dwell in darkness as those that have been dead
of old:
And my spirit is in anguish within me: my heart within me is trou-
bled.
I remembered the days of old, I meditated on all thy works:
I meditated upon the works of thy hands.
I stretched forth my hands to thee: my soul is as earth without water
unto thee.
Hear me speedily O Lord; my spirit hath fainted away.
Turn not away thy face from me, lest I be like unto them that go
down into the pit.
Cause me to hear thy mercy in the morning; for in thee have I hoped.

Make the way known to me, wherein I should walk: for I have lifted
up my soul to thee.”

All through those weary first days in jail****when I was in solitary confinement, the only thoughts that brought comfort to my soul were those lines in the Psalms that expressed the terror and misery of man suddenly stricken and abandoned. Solitude and hunger and weariness of spirit—these sharpened my perceptions so that I suffered not only my own sorrow but the sorrows of those about me. I was no longer myself. I was man. I was no longer a young girl, part of a radical movement seeking justice for those oppressed, I was the oppressed. I was that drug addict, screaming and tossing in her cell, beating her head against the wall. I was that shoplifter who for rebellion was sentenced to solitary. I was that woman who had killed her children, who had murdered her lover.

The blackness of hell was all about me. The sorrows of the world encompassed me. I was like one gone down into the pit. Hope had forsaken me. I was that mother whose child had been raped and slain. I was the mother who had borne the monster who had done it. I was even that monster, feeling in my own heart every abomination.

As I read this over, it seems, indeed, over-emotional and an exaggerated statement of the reactions of a young woman in jail. But if you live for long in the slums of cities, if you are in constant contact with sins and suffering, it is indeed rarely that so overwhelming a realization comes upon one. It often has seemed to me that most people instinctively protect themselves from being touched too closely by the suffering of others. They turn from it, and they make this a habit. The tabloids with their presentation of crime testify to the repulsive truth that there is a secret excitement and pleasure in reading of the sufferings of others. One might say there is a surface sensation in the realization of the tragedy in the lives of others. But one who has accepted hardship and poverty as the way in life in which to walk, lays himself open to this susceptibility to the sufferings of others.

And yet if it were not the Holy Spirit that comforted me, how could I have been comforted, how could I have endured, how could I have lived in hope?

The Imitation of Christ is a book that followed me through my days. Again and again I came across copies of it and the reading of it brought me comfort. I felt in the background of my life a waiting force that would lift me up eventually.

I later became acquainted with the poem of Francis Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven*, and was moved by its power. Eugene O’Neill recited it first to me in the back room of a saloon on Sixth Avenue where the Provincetown players and playwrights used to gather after the performances.

“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him.”

Through all my daily life, in those I came in contact with, in the things I read and heard, I felt that sense of being followed, of being desired; a sense of hope and expectation.

Through those years I read all of Dostoyvsky’s novels and it was, as Berdyaev says, a profound spiritual experience. The scene in *Crime and Punishment* where the young prostitute reads from the New Testament to Raskolnikoff, sensing the sin more profound than her own, which weighed upon him; that story, *The Honest Thief*; those passages in *The Brothers Karamazov*; the sayings of Father Zossima, Mitya’s conversion in jail, the very legend of the Grand Inquisitor, all this helped to lead me on. The characters, Alyosha and the Idiot, testified to Christ in us. I was moved to the depths of my being by the reading of these books during my early twenties when I, too, was tasting the bitterness and the dregs of life and shuddered at its harshness and cruelty.

Do you remember that little story that Grushenka told in *The Brothers Karamazov*? “Once upon a time there was a peasant woman and a very wicked woman she was. And she died and did not leave a single good deed behind. The devils caught her and plunged her into a lake of fire. So her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell God. ‘She once pulled up an onion in her garden,’ said he, ‘and gave it to a beggar woman.’ And God answered: ‘You take that onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out. And if you pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise, but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is.’ The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her. ‘Come,’ said he, ‘catch hold, and I’ll pull you out. And he began cautiously pulling her out. He had just pulled her out, when the other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was being drawn out, began catching hold of her so as to be pulled out with her. But she was a very wicked woman and she began kicking them. ‘I’m to be pulled out, not you. It’s my onion, not yours.’ As soon as she said that, the onion broke. And the woman fell into the lake and she is burning there to this day. So the angel wept and went away.”

Sometimes in thinking and wondering at God’s goodness to me, I have thought that it was because I gave away an onion. Because I sincerely loved His poor, He taught me to know Him. And when I think of the little I ever did, I am filled with hope and love for all those others devoted to the cause of social justice.

“What glorious hope!” Mauriac writes. “There are all those who will discover that their neighbor is Jesus himself, although they belong to the mass of those who do not know Christ or who have forgotten Him. And nevertheless they will find themselves well loved. It is impossible for any one of those who has real charity in his heart not to serve Christ. Even some of those who think they hate Him, have consecrated their lives to Him; for Jesus is disguised and masked in the midst of men, hidden among the poor, among the sick, among prisoners,

among strangers. Many who serve Him officially have never known who He was, and many who do not even know His name, will hear on the last day the words that open to them the gates of joy. O Those children were I, and I those working men. I wept on the hospital bed. I was that murderer in his cell whom you consoled.”

But always the glimpses of God came most when I was alone. Objectors cannot say that it was fear of loneliness and solitude and pain that made me turn to Him. It was in those few years when I was alone and most happy that I found Him. I found Him at last through joy and thanksgiving, not through sorrow.

Yet how can I say that either? Better let it be said that I found Him through His poor, and in a moment of joy I turned to Him. I have said, sometimes flippantly, that the mass of bourgeois smug Christians who denied Christ in His poor made me turn to Communism, and that it was the Communists and working with them that made me turn to God.

Communism, says our Holy Father, can be likened to a heresy, and a heresy is a distortion of the truth. Many Christians have lost sight, to a great extent, of the communal aspect of Christianity, so the collective ideal is the result. They have failed to learn a philosophy of labor, have failed to see Christ in the worker. So in Russia, the worker, instead of Christ, has been exalted. They have the dictatorship of the proletariat maintained by one man, also a dictator. The proletariat as a class has come to be considered the Messiah, the deliverer.

A mystic may be called a man in love with God. Not one who loves God, but who is *in love with God*. And this mystical love, which is an exalted emotion, leads one to love the things of Christ. His footsteps are sacred. The steps of His passion and death are retraced down through the ages. Almost every time you step into a Church you see people making the Stations of the Cross. They meditate on the mysteries of His life, death, and resurrection, and by this they are retracing with love those early scenes and identifying themselves with the actors in those scenes.

When we suffer, we are told we suffer with Christ. We are “completing the sufferings of Christ.” We suffer His loneliness and fear in the garden when His friends slept. We are bowed down with Him under the weight of not only our own sins but the sins of each other, of the whole world. We are those who are sinned against and those who are sinning. We are identified with Him, one with Him. We are members of His Mystical Body.

Often there is a mystical element in the love of a radical worker for his brother, for his fellow worker. It extends to the scene of his sufferings, and those spots where he has suffered and died are hallowed. The names of places like Everett, Ludlow, Bisbee, South Chicago, Imperial Valley, Elaine, Arkansas, and all those other places where workers have suffered and died for their cause have become sacred to the worker. You know this feeling as does every other radical in the country. Through ignorance, perhaps, you do not acknowledge Christ’s name, yet, I believe you are trying to love Christ in His poor, in His persecuted ones.

Whenever men have laid down their lives for their fellows, they are doing it in a measure for Him. This I still firmly believe, even though you and others may not realize it.

“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these brethren, you have done it unto me.” Feeling this as strongly as I did, is it any wonder that I was led finally to the feet of Christ?

I do not mean at all that I went around in a state of exaltation or that any radical does. Love is a matter of the will. You know yourself how during a long strike the spirit falters, how hard it is for the leaders to keep up the morale of the men and to keep the fire of hope burning within them. They have a hard time sustaining this hope themselves. Saint Teresa says that there are three attributes of the soul: memory, understanding, and will. These very leaders by their understanding of the struggle, how victory is gained very often through defeat, how every little gain benefits the workers all over the country, through their memory of past struggles, are enabled to strengthen their wills to go on. It is only by exerting these faculties of the soul that one is enabled to love one’s fellow. And this strength comes from God. There can be no brotherhood without the Fatherhood of God.

Take a factory where fifty per cent of the workers themselves content, do not care about their fellows. It is hard to inspire them with the idea of solidarity. Take those workers who despise their fellow-worker, the Negro, the Hungarian, the Italian, the Irish, where race hatreds and nationalist feelings persist. It is hard to overcome their stubborn resistance with patience and with love. That is why there is coercion, the beating of scabs and strikebreakers, the threats and the hatreds that grow up. That is why in labor struggles, unless there is a wise and patient leader, there is disunity, a rending of the Mystical Body.

Even the most unbelieving of labor leaders have understood the expediency of patience when I have talked to them. They realize that the use of force has lost more strikes than it has won them. They realize that when there is no violence in a strike, the employer through his armed guards and strikebreakers may try to introduce this violence. It has happened again and again in labor history.

What is hard to make the labor leader understand is that we must love even the employer, unjust though he may be, that we must try to overcome his resistance by non-violent resistance, by withdrawing labor, *i.e.*, by strikes and by boycott. These are non-violent means and most effective. We must try to educate him, to convert him. We must forgive him seventy times seven just as we forgive our fellow-worker and keep trying to bring him to a sense of solidarity.

This is the part labor does not seem to understand in this country or in any country. Class war does exist. We cannot deny it. It is there. Class lines are drawn even here in America where we have always flattered ourselves that the poor boy can become president, the messenger boy, the head of the corporation. The very fact of the necessity of national security laws, old age and unemployment insurance, acknowledges the existence of a proletariat class. The employer much

too often does not pay a wage sufficient for a man to care for his family in sickness and in health. The unskilled worker, who is in the majority, does not have enough to lay some by for his old age or enough to buy a home with or to buy his share in partnership. He has been too long exploited and ground down. The line has been fixed dividing the rich and the poor, the owner and the proletariat who are the unpropertied, the dispossessed.

And how to convert an employer who has evicted all his workers because they were on strike so that men, women, and children are forced to live in tents, who has called out armed guards as Rockefeller did in Ludlow, who shot into those tents and fired them so that twenty eight women and children were burnt to death? How to forgive such a man? How to convert him? This is the question the worker asks you in the bitterness of his soul? It is only through a Christ-like love that man can forgive.

Remember Vanzetti's last words before he died in the electric chair. "I wish to tell you I am an innocent man. I never committed any crime, but sometimes some sin. I wish to forgive some people for what they are now doing to me."

He said when he was sentenced: "If it had not been for these things, I might have lived out my life talking at street corners to scorning men. I might have died unmarked, unknown, a failure. Now we are not a failure. This is our career and our triumph. Never in our full life could we hope to do such work for tolerance, for justice, for man's understanding of man, as now we do by accident. Our words, our lives, our pains—nothing! The taking of our lives—lives of a good shoemaker and a poor fishpeddler—all! That last moment belongs to us. That agony is our triumph." He forgave those who had imprisoned him for years, who had hounded him to his death. You have read Mauriac. He was one of those of whom Mauriac was speaking when he said, "It is impossible for any one of those who has charity in his heart not to serve Christ. Even those who think they hate Him have consecrated their lives to Him."

It was from men such as these that I became convinced, little by little, of the necessity of religion and of God in my everyday life. I know now that the Catholic Church is the church of the poor, no matter what you say about the wealth of her priests and bishops. I have mentioned in these pages the few Catholics I met before my conversion, but daily I saw people coming from Mass. Never did I set foot in a Catholic church but that I saw people there at home with Him. First Fridays, novenas, and missions brought the masses thronging in and out of the Catholic churches. They were of all nationalities, of all classes, but most of all they were the poor. The very attacks made against the Church proved her Divinity to me. Nothing but a Divine institution could have survived the betrayal of Judas, the denial of Peter, the sins of many of those who professed her Faith, who were supposed to minister to her poor.

Christ is God or He is the world's greatest liar and imposter. How can you Communists who claim to revere Him as a working class leader fail to see this? And if Christ established His Church on earth with Peter as its rock, that faulty

one who denied him three times, who fled from Him when he was in trouble, then I, too, wanted a share in that tender compassionate love that is so great. Christ can forgive all sins and yearn over us no matter how far we fall.

How I ramble on! I do it partly to avoid getting on to the work of this book. It will, no doubt, be disjointed, perhaps incoherent, but I have promised to write it. It entails suffering, as I told you, to write it. I have to dig into myself to get it out. I have to inflict wounds on myself. I have, perhaps, to say things that were better left unsaid.

After all, the experiences that I have had are more or less universal. Suffering, sadness, repentance, love, we all have known these. They are easiest to bear when one remembers their universality, when we remember that we are all members or potential members of the Mystical Body of Christ.

However, one does not like to write about others, thus violating their privacy, especially others near and dear. So, in what follows I have tried to leave out as much as possible of other personalities, those of our own family and those with whom later I associated most intimately.

A conversion is a lonely experience. We do not know what is going on in the depths of the heart and soul of another. We scarcely know ourselves.