

% Dorothy Day

1938, Chapter 12, pp. 143-151.

*Summary: Answers the question as to how she rejected Communism. In spite of Communism's good ideals and the faults of Christians, she repudiates Communism as a heresy and rejects its resort to violence in class struggle. (DDLW #212).*

You ask me how I came to reject Communism. First of all, let this be understood, that I was a Communist in sympathy but with reservations scarcely formulated. I accepted Marxism as an economic theory and if I had been pinned down as to whether or not I was an atheist, I would probably have argued as you do: "How can we believe in a God who permitted such suffering and injustice in the world?"

Always at the bottom of my heart was the desire to believe, sometimes so faint as to be barely perceptible, at other times very strong. But I distrusted myself, my own emotional reactions and my own instability.

I did not believe in private property. I wanted to work for a state of society in which each should "work according to his ability and receive according to his need." That is Marx's definition of Communism. I did not believe that greedy and unjust men could be converted. I believed rather in the inevitability of revolution.

The three fundamentals of Communist belief are: 1. There is no other world than this; our last end is death and the grave, not God. 2. The ideal state is a Communist state in which there is no individual ownership but communal ownership. 3. Since there is no other way of achieving this except by violent means, then we must use those violent means. It is a cause worth dying for.

Of course this analysis is oversimplified, but it will serve to show how easy it is for idealist young people, brought up without religion, to accept Communism. Paul Claudel says that youth demands the heroic. Someone else wrote once that he who is not a Socialist at the age of twenty has no heart, and he who is a Socialist at the age of thirty has no head.

I grieved at what I thought to be the necessity of subscribing to that first belief that our lives ended at the grave, but I thought it braver to accept it. I wholeheartedly subscribed to the other two fundamentals of Communism.

Now the creed to which I subscribe is like a battle cry, engraved on my heart—the *Credo* of the Holy Roman Catholic Church. Before, in those former times, I could say: "I shall sleep in the dust: and if thou seek me in the morning, I shall not be." (Job 7: 21.) Now I can say: "I know that my Redeemer liveth and in the last day I shall rise out of the earth. And I shall be clothed again with my skin, and in my flesh I shall see God. Whom I myself shall see and my eyes shall behold, and not another: this my hope is laid up in my bosom." (Job 19: 25-27.)

I had a conversation with John Spivak, the Communist writer, a few years ago and he said to me, "How can you believe? How can you believe in the

Immaculate Conception, in the Virgin birth, in the Resurrection?" I could only say that I believe in the Roman Catholic Church and all She teaches. I have accepted Her authority with my whole heart. At the same time I want to point out to you that we are taught to pray for final perseverance. We are taught that faith is a gift and sometimes I wonder why some have it and some do not. I feel my own unworthiness and can never be grateful enough to God for His gift of faith. St. Paul tells us that if we do not correspond to the graces we receive, they will be withdrawn. So I believe also that we should walk in fear, "work out our salvation in fear and trembling."

As for those two other tenets to which the Communists subscribe, I still believe that our social order must be changed, that it is not right for property to be concentrated in the hands of the few. But I believe now with St. Thomas Aquinas that a certain amount of property is necessary for a man to lead a good life. I believe that we should work to restore the communal aspects of Christianity as well as some measure of private property for all.

I still believe that revolution is inevitable, leaving out Divine Providence. But with the help of God and by resorting to His sacraments and accepting the leadership of Christ, I believe we can overcome revolution by a Christian revolution of our own, without the use of force.

I was part of the Communist movement in this country, inasmuch as I was a reporter, a writer. I was a member of the Socialist Party, later a member of the International Workers of the World, a member of many Communist affiliate organizations, but I was never a "signed up" member of the Communist party.

It is true now as it was true from the beginning that no one was a signed member unless he attended the weekly meetings of his unit and conformed to the discipline of the Party which was and is rigorous. Usually writers (and it is true today of those working on the *New Masses*, *The Daily Worker*, and many other communist publications) are not members of the party itself. One could be a member of an affiliate body and not a member of the political party. One could participate in the activities of the League for the Defense of Political Prisoners, the Anti-Imperialist League, for the Trade Union Unity League and many other organizations and still not be signed up as a member of the Party. There have always been so many affiliated and companion organizations started by the party that it is hard to keep track of them all. Today one can give all his time to the work of the Scottsboro Defense Committee, the League for Peace and Democracy, the League for Spanish Democracy, and not be listed as a Communist party member, but still be a Communist. These workers are quite distinct from the "fellow-travelers" who are often liberals or Communist sympathizers, outside the movement yet helping it.

Today millions throughout the world consider themselves Communists even though their work, their family duties, prevent them from becoming party members. I played a very small part in the Communist movement in this country, but a writer can achieve a reputation in a movement and yet cannot

say conscientiously that he does a great deal of work. That is, if he is honest. Because his name is signed to articles he may have a greater reputation than he deserves as a Communist.

Here is my attitude towards Communism now, after these many years. First of all, I consider it a heresy, a false doctrine but, as St. Augustine says, there is no false doctrine that does not contain certain elements of truth. I believe it is the failure of Christians which has brought about this heresy and that we will have to give an account for it.

My criticism of Christians in the past, and it *still* holds good of too many of them, is that they in fact deny God and reject Him. "Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me" (Matt. 25: 40), Christ said, and today there are Christians who affront Christ in the Negro, in the poor Mexican, the Italian, yes and the Jew. Catholics believe that man is the temple of the Holy Ghost, that he is made to the image and likeness of God. We believe that of Jew and Gentile. We believe that all men are members or potential members of the Mystical Body of Christ and since there is no time with God, we must so consider each man whether he is atheist, Jew or Christian.

You ask do we really believe it, when we see our fellows herded like brutes in municipal lodging houses, tramping the streets and roads hungry, working at starvation wages or under an inhuman speed-up, living in filthy degrading conditions. Seeing many Christians denying Him, hating Him in the poor, is it any wonder a heresy has sprung up denying Him in word and deed?

The first commandment is that we should love the Lord our God. We can only show our love for God by our love for our fellows. "If any man say, I love God, and hateth his brother he is a liar. For he that loveth not his brother, whom he seeth, how can he love God, whom he seeth not?" (1 John 4: 20.)

For instance, there is the "scab," the strike-breaker, also a worker, and also of the poor and oppressed classes. Environment, slums, jails, bitter poverty, has played its part in developing viciousness and selfishness in him—granted. There are also good workers, honest men who have not been convinced of the justice of a strike, or of the fact that all arbitration has been used. Perhaps they are blind to the conditions of their fellows. They also are our brothers and can be educated but not by clubs. There are the small farmers, ground down by corporations, perverted by our industrial system, weighed down with mortgage debts, who in turn oppress the transient worker. It is not only the transient worker who needs education, who needs our love and compassion.

There are also those soldiers blindly driven by their leaders into battle against a foe they do not know. Propertyless, unemployed, just returned from one grueling war, sent out perhaps with the promise of land, of colonization, and finding themselves fighting again, their hatred aroused by hate-inspiring propaganda against the Communist. There may be not more than ten Communists in the regiment before them but they must kill all, the misleaders and those who are

misled. Kill off the Communist to keep Communism down? I do not believe a heresy will be stopped in this way. Heresies also seem to thrive on persecution.

I will not deny that often the Communist more truly loves his brother, the poor and oppressed, than many so-called Christians. But, when in word and deed the Communist incites brother to kill brother, one class to hate and destroy other classes, then I cannot feel that his love is true. He is loving his friend, but not his enemy, who is also his brother. There is no brotherhood of man there, and there can be none without the Fatherhood of God.

Men are being tortured today in Soviet Russia. They are being jailed, their wives and children are being tortured, they are being put to death. Is this brotherly love? No, I grew not to believe in the brotherly love of the Communist. Human nature being what it is, I can only believe that men are capable of much goodness, through Christ who took upon Himself our human nature and exalted it.

Man lays claim to dignity through the fact that he is the temple of the Holy Spirit and made to the image and likeness of God. Take that from him and he is worse than a brute, because man has the power to think.

And yet what had attracted me first to Marxism was its recognition of the dignity of man and the dignity of his labor. But Christ Himself was a worker. St. Joseph, His foster father, was a worker. A man who works with his hands as well as with his head is an integrated personality. He is a co-creator, taking the raw materials God provided and creating food, clothing and shelter and all manner of beautiful things.

But the Communist now exalts the proletariat, the propertyless, and maintains in Russia a dictatorship of the proletariat at the expense of all other classes. And that dictatorship is maintained by the few, ruthlessly by violence.

Communism is a good word, a Christian word originally, but to expect to achieve a state of society in which all is held in common, where the state will "wither away" through state socialism, maintained through a dictatorship of the proletariat, this is impossible for a reasonable person to believe.

It is only through religion that communism can be achieved, and has been achieved over and over again.

Communists like to quote St. Peter's statement, "Servants, obey your masters." They forget his exhortation to work for a new heaven and a new earth, wherein justice dwelleth. Admitted that the servants are the oppressed, they cannot achieve justice without practicing justice themselves. They must first be right before they can insist on right dealing from their masters. The servant is not greater than the master.

It was human love that helped me to understand divine love. Human love at its best, unselfish, glowing, illuminating our days, gives us a glimpse of the love of God for man. Love is the best thing we can know in this life, but it must

be sustained by an effort of the will. It is not just an emotion, a warm feeling of gratification. It must lie still and quiet, dull and smoldering, for periods. It 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. Thus we learn to understand the love of God for His creatures. Thus we understand the Crucifixion.

It is hard to explain. It is difficult to make myself clear. If St. Paul, to whom Christ Himself spoke, saw things as through a glass, darkly, how can I hope to make things clear to you? I have only tried to put down what I do understand, urging you again not to discredit Christianity because of the faults of Christians.

Perhaps you will not see my point at all as you read this, but I pray that you too will be led by the Holy Ghost from darkness into light. Even the little I see is light to me in the darkest of days and hours. And I could not breathe or live without that light which I have now—the light of Faith which has been given to me by a merciful God Who is the Light of the world.