

From Union Square to Rome

Dorothy Day

Chapter 11 - New Life

Summary: An account of her final conversion after the birth of her daughter Theresa. She describes the struggle and anguish she felt while preparing for her and Theresa's Baptism—knowing her decision would end her relationship with her agnostic husband. (DDLW #211).

My child was born in March at the end of a harsh winter. In December I had to come in from the country and take a little apartment in town. It was good to be there, close to friends, close to a church where I could stop and pray. I read the *Imitation of Christ* a great deal. I knew that I was going to have my child baptized a Catholic, cost what it may. I knew that I was not going to have her floundering through many years as I had done, doubting and hesitating, undisciplined and amoral. I felt it was the greatest thing I could do for a child. For myself, I prayed for the gift of faith. I was sure, yet not sure. I postponed the day of decision.

A woman does not want to be alone at such a time. Even the most hardened, the most irreverent, is awed by the stupendous fact of creation. No matter how cynically or casually the worldly may treat the birth of a child, it remains spiritually and physically a tremendous event. God pity the woman who does not feel the fear, the awe, and the joy of bringing a child into the world.

Becoming a Catholic would mean facing life alone, and I clung to family life. It was hard to contemplate giving up a mate in order that my child and I could become members of the Church. Fred would have nothing to do with religion or with me if I embraced it. So I waited.

Those last months of waiting I was too happy to know the unrest of indecision. I was waiting. The days were slow in passing, but week by week the time came nearer. I spent some time in writing, but in general I felt inactive, incapable of going to meetings, of seeing many people, of taking up the threads of my past life.

And then the little one was born, and with her birth the spring was upon us. My joy was so great that I sat up in bed in the hospital and wrote an article for the *New Masses* about my child, wanting to share my joy with the world. I was

glad to write it for a workers' magazine because it was a joy all women know no matter what their grief at poverty, unemployment, and class war.

The article so appealed to my Marxist friends that the account was reprinted all over the world in workers' papers. Diego Rivera, when I met him some four years afterward in Mexico, greeted me as the author of it. And Walt Carmen, who was at that time editor of the *New Masses*, said that it had been printed in Russian newspapers and that I had rubles awaiting me in Moscow.

There was a Catholic girl in the bed next to me in the ward. She was a young Italian, not more than twenty-two, and she had just had her third child. She had a very serious and very obscure heart condition which led every physician who examined her to declare that she should not have children, that death was certain if she did. But she had had three, and, day by day, doctors gathered around her bed to examine her and exclaim over the novelty of her heart disease and expostulate with her for bringing children into the world. Several times they stood there giving her information on birth control and she listened with her eyes cast down, not answering them. They assumed she was stupid and repeated in the simplest phrases their directions, speaking in phrases as they spoke to foreigners who cannot understand English. Then when they looked on her chart and saw she was a Catholic they expressed their impatience and went away.

"I just don't pay any attention," she told me. "God will take care of me. I know I have to be careful. We live on the first floor and I never walk up and down stairs, and my mother-in-law helps me all the time, so I'm all right."

She did not care much for reading, and lay there watching with interested eyes what went on in the ward, that small world in which we were so contentedly confined for ten days.

"What you going to name your baby?" she asked me. "Teresa? I have a medal of the Little Flower here—you can have it if you want it."

I told her I didn't believe in such things, and she didn't take it amiss. "If you like someone, you like to have something to remind you of them," she said, and I was ashamed and took the medal.

Due to an attack of grippe after I left the hospital, Teresa's baptism was postponed for a time. Not being a Catholic myself, and not having been baptized myself until I was twelve, I didn't know the anxiety of Catholic mothers, that feeling almost that the baby had not yet been born until it had been baptized.

When Teresa was six weeks old and I was still very weak, we went down to the country. It was April and though it was still cold, it was definitely spring.

Every morning while Teresa napped on the sunny porch, well swathed in soft woolen blankets, I went down to the beach and with the help of Smiddy brought up driftwood, enough to last until next morning. My husband was home only week-ends and then he chopped enough wood to last a few days. But when the wind was high and piercing it penetrated the house so that much wood was

needed, and it was a pleasure to tramp up and down the beach in the bright sun and collect wood which smelled of seaweed, brine, and tar. It was warmer outside than it was in the house, and on the porch Teresa was nicely sheltered. Sometimes in the afternoon I put her in her carriage and went out along the woods, watching, almost feeling the buds bursting through their warm coats. Song sparrows, woodpeckers, hawks, crows, robins, nuthatches, and of course laughing gulls made the air gay with their clamor. Starlings chattered all day in the branches of the old pine in front of the porch. We collected azalea buds, dogwood, sassafras, and apple tree branches to decorate the room. Best of all there were still skunk cabbages small enough to make a most decorative center piece, propped up with stones, gleaming mottled green, dark red and yellow. They were never so colorful as they were that year, and spring after spring since I have watched for them bursting up vigorously in marshy places. Skunk cabbages and the spring peeper mean that the winter is over and gone, and the voice of the swallow is heard in the land.

There was arbutus still buried under the leaves so that you had to look carefully for it like buried treasure. They were spring beauties and adder's tongue and dandelion greens. The year before I had been planting radishes on March first but this year gardening gave way to more delightful tasks.

Supper always was early and the baby comfortably tucked away before it was dark. Then, tired with all the activities that so rejoiced and filled my days, I sat in the dusk in a stupor of contentment. Outside, dozens of fleecy pink clouds were caught in the top of the hickory trees at the head of the bank and below them were whole fleets of lavender gondolas, then the deeper purple shadows of the Jersey shore. The three lighthouses stood out black against the silver water and there was not a wave, only a rippling, a scalloping along the yellow beach.

Soon the pink and rose clouds faded to a dingy smoke color, and those nearer the horizon changed to a purplish gray. The water remained silver with a peculiar surface glow which the sky did not have though they were the same color. Away off, miles away, through the bare trees on the point, the lights of a roadway flickered like candles.

The meadow before the house became a yellow deeper than the beach with a peculiar afterglow, and at the edge of the meadow, before the bank swept down to the sands, some dead weeds gallantly stood, goldenrod with the tufts still on it, sturdier sumac, and the tangle of wild grape and bayberry bushes. No life was showing on the bare branches of the honey locust trees, those trees so late in budding, but life was there, and life was there too in the room with me, throbbing silently.

And always, those deep moments of happiness gave way to a feeling of struggle, of a long silent fight to be gone through with. There had been the physical struggle, the mortal combat almost of giving birth to a child, and now there was coming the struggle for my own soul. I knew Teresa would be baptized, and I knew also the rending it would cause in human relations around me. I was to be

torn and agonized again, I knew, and I was all for putting off the hard day.

Then one afternoon as I wheeled her in her little carriage along the road which led down to St. Joseph's Home, a former estate of Charles Schwab, which had been given to the Sisters of Charity, I met a Sister who was on her way to visit a neighbor of mine.

That estate had been one of my stumbling blocks. I could never pass it without thinking of Schwab's career as head of the Bethlehem Steel Corporation, of his work in breaking the Homestead strike, of how he, to this day, refuses to recognize unions of workers in his Bethlehem Steel Corporation.

I could not but feel that his was tainted money which the Sisters had accepted. It was, I felt, money which belonged to the workers. He had defrauded the worker of a just wage. His sins cried to heaven for vengeance. He had ground the faces of the poor. "Let not the oil of the sinner fatten my head" (Psalms 140:5), I thought with the Psalmist. "He that offereth sacrifice of the goods of the poor, is as one that sacrificeth the son in the presence of his father." "He that sheddeth blood, and he that defauleth the labourer of his hire, are brothers." (Ecclesiasticus 34:24-27). The words of the son of Sirach went through my brain, wearying me. Yet strangely enough, in bitterness of soul these thoughts led me inevitably to the problem: how to have Teresa baptized.

That bitterness felt by so many in the radical labor movement towards what they call "organized religion" was mixed with the knowledge of the divinity of the Catholic Church. It was ever in my mind that human frailties and the sins and ignorances of those in high places throughout history only proved that the Church *must* be divine to have persisted through the centuries. I would not blame the Church for what I felt were the mistakes of churchmen.

I could only always console myself with Christ's words that the greatest enemies would be those of the "household."

I felt, too, that there were going to be many obstacles put in my path, and that this in a strange way was one of them.

That afternoon I was emboldened by a sense of compulsion to speak to the Sister who was hurrying by me, to ask her how to go about having a baby baptized. I had a warm feeling as I approached her, a feeling that whatever the errors of Charlie Schwab, Sister Aloysia had no part in them in her simplicity and poverty.

She was very matter-of-fact. She seemed to take things for granted, and was not surprised that a mother of a new baby would stop her in this casual fashion and ask her so stupendous a question. Of course a mother, no matter how heathen she might be, would want her baby to be sure of eternal life! She knew of me by reputation-indeed all the neighborhood knew that we and our friends were either Communist or Anarchist in sympathies. But those same dear Catholic neighbors who heard sermons excoriating "the fiendish and foul machinations of the Communists" (I have heard just such expressions used), were kindly people

who came to use our telephone and bring us a pie now and then, who played with us on the beach and offered us lifts to the village in their cars. Sister Aloysia, too, had no fear, only a neighborly interest in us all. Perhaps she had been praying for us these past two years as she swept past down the lane on a visit to some of the Catholics at the end of the road. Perhaps her work-worn hand was clutching that rosary which jingled at her side just a little more fervently and comfortingly.

She felt my liking and I was warmed by her interest. She took me under her protection immediately. She did not make little of my difficulties, nor did she think for a minute that they were insurmountable. There was a hard row to hoe in front of us, was her attitude, but we could get through it. She would hang on to that long, formidable-looking rosary of hers, hang on to it like an anchor, and together we would ride out the gale of opposition and controversy. All we had to do was depend on prayer.

And as for practical details, we would just go ahead as though it were very simple. Did I have any Catholic relatives?

Yes, there was cousin Grace. She was married and she and her husband could be reached, though I had not seen them nor any relatives for years.

All right then, she herself, Sister Aloysia, would get in touch with the parish priest in Tottenville, a young man, very obliging. He had been coming down to offer up Mass at the Home and she could see him after breakfast the next morning.

Somehow or other, with the irregularities of her parents not being Catholic, Teresa's baptism did not take place until late June. Sister Aloysia in her anxiety that all should go well dropped in every day to see if I were persisting in my determination. She also was quite frank in her anxiety for the baby's welfare. One morning she came rushing up on the porch- "She's not dead yet?" she wanted to know, and then praised God that the baby was living and also struggling towards her baptism. Sister was sure that the powers of darkness were struggling hard for my little one- "He's greedy for souls," she said, meaning the devil, and in this case I had more confidence and hope than she because I assured her Christ must be even more so. Anyway, Teresa thrived lustily and was beginning to throw back her head and crow and gurgle, competing with the birds to make the morning joyful.

"Don't be afraid of this old black crow," Sister used to tell her as she bent over her crib. And Teresa used to open her mouth in a toothless smile, embellished by a delightful dimple which she has since lost.

But Sister Aloysia did not neglect me in her anxiety for the baby. "You must be a Catholic yourself," she kept telling me. She had no reticences. She speculated rather volubly at times on the various reasons why she thought I was holding back. She brought me pious literature to read, saccharine stories of the saints, emasculated lives of saints young and old, back numbers of pious magazines.

William James, agnostic as he was, was more help. He introduced me to St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. And I already had St. Augustine and the *Imitation* and the Bible from which I derived strength and comfort. But isolated as I was in the country, knowing no Catholics except my neighbors who seldom read anything except newspapers and secular magazines, there was not much chance of being introduced to the good literature of the present day. Chesterton's paradoxes wearied me. Belloc's histories I enjoyed but they did not inspire me. I was in a state of dull content-I was not in a state to be mentally stimulated. I was too happy with my child. What faith I had I held on to stubbornly. The need of patience emphasized in the writings of the saints consoled me on the slow road I was traveling. I would put all my affairs in the hands of God and wait.

Three times a week Sister Aloysia came to give me a catechism lesson which I dutifully tried to learn. But she insisted that I recite word for word, with the repetition of the question that was in the book. If I had not learned my lesson she rebuked me. "And you think you are intelligent!" she would say witheringly. "What is the definition of grace,-actual grace and sanctifying grace? My fourth-grade pupils know more than you do."

I hadn't a doubt but that they did. I struggled on day by day, learning without question. I was in that agreeable and lethargic and almost bovine state of mind, filled with an animal content, not wishing to inquire into or question the dogmas I was learning. I made up my mind to accept what I did not understand, trusting light to come, as it sometimes did, in a blinding flash of exultation and realization. She criticized my housekeeping. "Here you sit at your typewriter at ten o'clock and none of your dishes done yet. Supper and breakfast dishes besides . . . And why don't you calcimine your ceiling? It's all dirty from woodsmoke."

She used to bring me vegetables from the garden of the Home, and I used to give her fish and clams. Once I gave her stamps and a dollar to send a present to a little niece and she was touchingly grateful. It made me suddenly realize that in spite of Charlie Schwab and his estate, the Sisters lived in complete poverty, owning nothing, holding all things in common.

She never came into the house directly but used to peer in the window or back door with a sepulchral whisper, "Is he here?" as though it were the devil himself she were inquiring after. And if Fred were there, he used to slam out of the other door to show his displeasure, greeting her through clenched teeth. I didn't blame him, nor did I blame her. She would probably have regarded any husband so, no matter how Catholic, how exemplary. She knew little of the world of men.

Finally the great day arrived and was a thing of the past. Teresa was baptized, she had become a member of the Mystical Body of Christ. I didn't know anything of the Mystical Body or I might have felt disturbed at being separated from her.

But I clutched her close to me and all that summer as I nursed her and bent over that tiny round face at my breast, I was filled with a deep happiness that

nothing could spoil. But the obstacles to my becoming a Catholic were there, shadows in the background of my life.

I had become convinced that I would become a Catholic, and yet I felt I was betraying the class to which I belonged, you my brother, the workers, the poor of the world, the class which Christ most loved and spent His life with. I wrote a few articles that summer for the *New Masses* but did no other work. My life was crowded because friends came and stayed with me, and some of them left their children. Two little boys, four and eight years old, joined the family for the summer and my days were full, caring for three children and cooking meals for from six to ten people three days a week.

Some few times I could get up to the village to Mass on Sunday, when I could leave the baby in trusted hands. But usually the gloom that descended on the household, the scarcely-voiced opposition, kept me from it. There were some feast days when I could slip off in the middle of the week and go to the little chapel on Charlie Schwab's grounds. There were "visits" I could make, unknown to others. I was committed, by the advice of a priest I consulted, to the plan of waiting, and trying to hold together the family. But I felt all along that when I took the irrevocable step it would mean that Teresa and I would be alone, and I did not want to be alone. I did not want to give up human love when it was dearest and tenderest.

During the month of August many of my friends, including my sister, went to Boston to picket in protest against the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, which was drawing near. They were all arrested again and again.

Throughout the nation and the world, the papers featured the struggle for the lives of these two men. Radicals from all over the country gathered in Boston and articles describing those last days were published, poems were written. It was an epic struggle, a grand tragedy. One felt a sense of impending doom. These men were Catholics, inasmuch as they were Italians. Catholics by tradition, but they had rejected the Church.

While enjoying the fresh breeze, the feel of salt water against the flesh, the keen delight of living, the knowledge that these men were soon to pass from this physical earth, were soon to become dust, without consciousness, struck me like a physical blow. They were here now; in a few days they would be no more. They had become figures beloved by the workers. Their letters, the warm moving story of their lives, had been told. Everyone knew Dante, Sacco's young son. Everyone suffered with the young wife who clung with bitter passion to her husband. And Vanzetti with his large view, his sense of peace at his fate, was even closer to us all.

The day they died, the papers had headlines as large as those which proclaimed the outbreak of war. All the nation mourned. All the nation, that is, that is made up of the poor, the worker, the trade unionist,—those who felt most keenly the sense of solidarity,—that very sense of solidarity which made me gradually

understand the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ whereby we are the members one of another.

Teresa's father was stricken over the tragedy. He had always been more an Anarchist than anything else in his philosophy. He did not eat for days. He sat around the house in a stupor of misery, sickened by the cruelty of life and of men. He had always taken refuge in nature as being more kindly, more beautiful and peaceful than the world of men. Now he could not even escape through nature, as he tried to escape so many problems in life.

During the time he was home he spent days and even nights out on the water fishing, so that for weeks I saw little of him. He stupefied himself in his passion for the water, sitting out on the bay in his boat. When he began to recover he submerged himself in maritime biology, collecting, reading only scientific books, and paying no attention to what went on around him. Only the baby interested him. She was his delight. Which made it, of course, the harder to contemplate the cruel blow I was going to strike him when I became a Catholic.

These pages are hard to write. The struggle was too personal. It was exceedingly difficult. The year passed and it was not until the following winter that the tension reached the breaking point. My health was bad, but a thorough examination at the Cornell clinic showed only nervous strain.

Finally with precipitation, with doubts on my part at my own unseemly haste, I made the resolution to bring an end to my hesitation and be baptized.

It was in December, 1927, a most miserable day, and the trip was long from the city down to Tottenville, Staten Island. All the way on the ferry through the foggy bay I felt grimly that I was being too precipitate. I had no sense of peace, no joy, no conviction even that what I was doing was right. It was just something that I had to do, a task to be gotten through. I doubted myself when I allowed myself to think. I hated myself for being weak and vacillating. A most consuming restlessness was upon me so that I walked around and around the deck of the ferry, almost groaning in anguish of spirit. Perhaps the devil was on the boat.

Sister Aloysia was there waiting for me, to be my godmother. I do not know whether I had any other godparent. Father Hyland, gently, with reserve, with matter-of-factness, heard my confession and baptized me,

I was a Catholic at last though at that moment I never felt less the joy and peace and consolation which I know from my own later experiences religion can bring.

A year later my confirmation was indeed joyful and Pentecost never passes without a renewed sense of happiness and thanksgiving. It was only then that the feeling of uncertainty finally left me, never again to return, praise God!