

# What Do The Simple Folk Do?

Dorothy Day

*The Catholic Worker*, May 1978, 5, 8.

*Summary: Tries to answer the question "How can we believe in a Transcendent God when the Immanent God seems so powerless within time, when demonic forces seem to be let loose?" Points to examples of transcendence in human experience: hope for happiness in intentional communities and love of neighbor, the word of God, miracles, bearing the suffering of others, martyrdom, and delight in loving God. (DDLW #587).*

(This talk was a contribution to a symposium on "Transcendence," sponsored by the Church Society for College Work in 1968. It was published five years ago in a CSCW journal, but appears in the CW for the first time. Eds. Note.)

You will recognize the words of one of the songs of the Broadway musical **Camelot**, which kept much of the beauty of the Arthurian legend, whereas the movie loses completely the charm of love, natural and supernatural. I use this title because I find too often the ideas of transcendence expressed on a cosmic scale rather than a human one, and in language which would need to be translated, or perhaps illuminated, just as ancient psalm books were illuminated by the monks throughout the Middle Ages and the earlier days of the Faith.

When my mother lay on her death bed, she said to me one day, "Do not pray that I live longer. I have been through two world wars, the San Francisco earthquake and the Florida hurricane, and I have had enough!" She had had two sons involved in the First World War and one in the Second, so she had known much human fear and misery. And in her life she had seen too, in the words of St. Paul, "All nature itself which travaileth and groaneth even unto now."

And yet, at the same time, on the very day she died, she sat up in bed, and, sipping a cup of tea, remarked on how comforting it was. She had taken up a little bouquet of violets, her favorite flower, and, holding it up to her face, smiled with happiness. Life was sweet, even in her last illness.

The Poor Peoples' March on Washington speaks to the world today of the "misery of the needy and the groaning of the poor," and we are living now in the midst of such tragedies that the mind is appalled: assassinations of national leaders; fear of "the fire next time," foretold at the time of the Flood; remembrance of the horrors we have already lived through in this short lifetime—the massacre of the Armenians in World War I; the ghastly and obscene holocaust of the Jews, God's chosen people (and God does not change) during the Second World War; and, more recently, and almost unnoticed in the press, the massacre of 800,000 suspected Communists in Indonesia. And today, the slaughter which is going on in Vietnam.

God made men and women to be happy. When I visited Cuba in 1962, that was the appealing slogan which I read on the billboards: "Children are born to be happy." Yet, how can we be happy today? How can we believe in a Transcendent God when the Immanent God seems so powerless within time, when demonic forces seem to be let loose? Certainly our God is a hidden God.

\* \* \*

Men and women have persisted in their hope for happiness. They have hoped against hope though all the evidence seemed to point to the fact that human nature could not be changed. Always they have tried to recover the lost Eden, and the history of our own country shows attempts to found communities, where people could live together in that happiness which God seemed to have planned for us. Charles Dickens writes about one such community on the Mississippi in **Martin Chuzzlewitt**, and Dostoyevsky refers to a community in Illinois where two of the characters in **The Possessed** had gone to look for earthly happiness. Most of these references to community poke fun at the attempt, and Edmund Wilson's history of community in **To The Finland Station** is certainly not sympathetic. Martin Buber in his **Paths in Utopia** was the only modern writer who held out hope for a modern, voluntary community as a place where men and women could live in love and in the happiness which God intended for them.

St. Teresa said that you can only show your love for God by your love for your neighbor, for your brother and sister. Francois Mauriac, the novelist, and Jacques Maritain, the philosopher, said that when you were working for truth and justice you were working for Christ, even though you denied Him.

But how to love? That is the question.

All men are brothers, yes, but how to love your brother or sister when they are sunk in ugliness, foulness and degradation, so that all the senses are affronted? How to love when the adversary shows a face to you of implacable hatred, or just cold loathing?

The very fact that we put ourselves in these situations, I think, attests to our desire to love God and our neighbor. Searching for transcendence in community has resulted in the Catholic Worker houses of hospitality and our so-called farming communes. Actually, Peter Maurin, the founder of the Catholic Worker and a French peasant, liked to call them agronomic universities, and there have been many attempts throughout the country to get these small centers under way, most of them resulting in failure as far as one could judge. But no one who ever lived in one of them ever forgets this "golden period" of his or her life. It has always required an overwhelming **act of faith**. I believe because I wish to believe, "help Thou my unbelief." I love because I want to love, the deepest desire of my heart is for love, for union, for communion, for community.

How to keep such desires, such dreams?

Certainly, like Elias, who, after making valiant attempts to do what he considered the will of God, fled in fear, all courage drained from him, and lay down under a juniper tree and cried to God to make an end of his misery and despair.

The grace of hope, this consciousness that there is in every person, **that which is of God**, comes and goes, in a rhythm like that of the sea. The Spirit blows where it listeth, and we travel through deserts and much darkness and doubt. We can only make that act of faith, “Lord I believe, because I want to believe.” We must remember that faith, like love, is an act of the will, an act of preference. God speaks, He answers these cries in the darkness as He always did. He is incarnate today in the poor, in the bread we break together. We know Him and each other in the breaking of bread.

\* \* \*

Once I lived on Ludlow Street on the Lower East Side, where my back windows looked out on a yard with an ailanthus tree. Out in front were always trucks from the South piled high with crates of young cucumbers ready for pickling. The house was filled with Puerto Ricans, and the families in the front apartments kept spotlessly clean homes. I could see into their kitchens, because they had screen doors on the hall to have a cross current of air. What used to be four-room apartments, unheated, now had turned into two-room apartments at three or four times the rent. These people worked hard, earned a living for their families, or rather, scarcely a living wage, because those who worked in hospitals had to have their earnings supplemented by Welfare.

The transcendence in their lives was found in the Bibles they carried out at night on their way to meetings in the little store-front churches which abound everywhere in the slums, in Harlem, East and West, and in the Lower East Side, in Brooklyn and the Bronx.

In the word of God they found the nourishment their souls needed. They found the Word made flesh.

Closest to me are those fellow workers, those companions of ours (the very word companions means those who break bread together) who come to sit down at the Catholic Worker table. There is a little Polish man, who cannot speak English, who rents a pushcart each day and walks the streets, collecting cartons and paper boxes which he folds carefully and piles up until he has a veritable mountain before him and it is a wonder he can see to get through traffic. He earns enough money for his rent but eats with us, always with a little Gospel pamphlet before him. When there is a place next to him and I take it, he urges me to hasten with my meal so that I can read a psalm in English to him and he repeats the words with me.

He reminds me of a soldier I met in Cuba, who sat next to me in the station wagon which took a group of us on a tour through a big school for children in Oriente Province. I was not too interested in the pig farm which we were being shown, and stayed in the car to rest, and he remained with me. Like all Cubans, he carried a book on Marxism-Leninism, and when I asked to see it and tried to read the Spanish, he shared it with me, and we read together, much as I read with the Polish pushcart man.

Both these men have encountered experiences which transcended their ordinary lives and lifted them into another realm, where all things were possible, whether it was building a successful socialist country, 90 miles from a Goliath of a capitalist land, or a present heaven in the midst of a city slum within a capitalist society.

On at least four occasions, I have seen men reading the Gospel on the soupline, which started by itself at our door many years ago. The house was not big enough to hold the waiting men, so they formed a line and waited, in snow and rain, winter and summer. When I saw them reading in this way, I could only accept this as another incident of transcendence, and it was their destitution which they had transcended. They were poor men, not destitute men, when they were able to read in this way.

“Take and read,” St. Augustine heard a voice and it led to his conversion. His heaven was to understand, to know. Who has not been moved to tears by the scene between Raskolnikov and Sonya, the murderer and the prostitute, when she read to him from the Scriptures. There was the sense of the transcendent there, in this scene of squalor and despair.

\* \* \*

The transcendental is thought of often as manifesting itself in signs and wonders, prophecies and voices from the dead. There is evidence of it in the miracles which take place around us, miracles which are more common than we suppose, and which the Catholic Church is very hesitant to confirm without long investigation. There may well be more of them than we know, since most of us, if a miracle were performed for us in the way of healing, would prefer not to submit to long investigation. Most of us would be reluctant to report, or even perhaps to believe in the miraculous.

Catholics do not generally ask for miracles. They leave the extraordinary in the hands of God. They are quite conscious that before prayer of petition there must be offered prayer of adoration and thanksgiving as their bounden duty to a Creator and to themselves. Spiritual graces, yes, they ask for these, but when it comes to asking for relief from pain and suffering, it is almost as though they thought, “Why should I refuse what is the common lot of humanity? Why should I ask to be spared when I see the suffering of the family next door?” Suffering borne with courage means to the devout mind a participating in the suffering of Christ and, if bravely endured, can lighten the sufferings of others. It is not a cult of suffering. It is an acceptance of the human condition.

There is an old expression used in the Church: the **victim soul**. We used to laugh at this expression, especially since the old German priest who visited us from his monastery in Minnesota spoke to us of those whom he called “wictim souls.” But we have not continued to laugh. I have known personally at least three priests who offered themselves literally, offered their lives for the souls in their charge. One was a young priest in a rural parish, where there had been a number of suicides of children. His heart was torn by the sufferings of these little ones, and torn too by what he considered an intimation of the hardened state of the souls of the materialistic, middle-class adults whom he served. He was stricken, not long after, with a tumor of the brain and died some months later. Another priest, whom we knew very well, and who stayed with us a year on one of our farms, was suddenly stricken with a loss of memory. He lost his mind, as the saying is. I was one of the few people he recognized, and when I visited him once at the hospital and found his face bruised from the attack of one of the other patients, I wept with him at what had happened and asked him, “Father, did

you ever offer yourself as a victim soul?” Suddenly, he looked at me and smiled. “We say so much to God which we do not mean,” he said, “But He takes us at our word.”

It would take too long to tell of other incidents where people have asked God to let them bear some of the sufferings of others to give them relief, scarcely realizing that with this request they are almost showing a lack of faith, because God has also given grace and courage to endure. I realize that I am using religious terminology (one might say religious jargon) which is unfamiliar and even slightly ridiculous to many. But I cannot use the words transcendence or immanence without relating them to God, the living God, the personal God in whom I believe.

There are evidences of martyrdoms too in our time. Perhaps not so much in the present, since facts are not yet known, but I can think of a number of martyrdoms which took place less than a hundred years ago.

“When the martyr suffers and dies, it is so truly Christ Who suffers and dies, that the suffering is transcended, and the risen Christ is revealed in the martyr’s very death,” writes Fr. Louis Bouyer in **Liturgical Piety**. He points out that the most remarkable fact about the death of early martyrs like St. Polycarp, St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Perpetua and St. Blandina is that the martyrs did not seem to suffer.

“The importance of the liturgical celebration itself implies a correlative importance in what we do, after the liturgical celebration, in daily living.” Certainly we can say that the worship offered by a Martin Luther King resulted in his great mission and in the courage with which he expected his own martyrdom.

These people worked on the plane of this world, but it was the spirit that animated the weak flesh. Henri de Lubac, S.J., whose **Drama of Atheist Humanism** was published in 1950, wrote:

“So long as we talk and argue and busy ourselves on the plane of the world, evil seems to grow stronger, it alone seems real. The thing is to enter upon another plane, to find that fourth dimension which represents the Kingdom of the Spirit. Then Freedom is Queen, then God triumphs, and man with Him.”

\* \* \*

Is suffering and death, and the strength to bear them, all there is in this struggle? This search for God would be a pretty grim affair if this were all, and transcendence too high a goal for simple folk.

Let us remember **other** elements too.

“What is it that I love when I love my God,” St. Augustine cried out in his **Confessions**. It is a certain light that I love and melody and fragrance and embrace that I love when I love my God—a light, melody, fragrance, food, embrace of the God-within, where for my soul, that shines which space does not contain; that sounds which time does not sweep away; that is fragrant which the breeze does not dispel, and that tastes sweet which, fed upon, is not

diminished, and that clings close which no satiety disparts—this is what I love when I love my God."

And Catherine of Siena assures us that "all the way to Heaven is Heaven, because He said, I am the Way."