

Dorothy Day, Welfare Reform and Personal Responsibility

Harry Murray

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which inaugurated 'Welfare Reform', raises a dilemma for admirers of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement. On the one hand, the 'Welfare Reformers' seem to have appropriated the language of Dorothy Day. The notion of personal responsibility, a mainstay of the Worker vocabulary, is incorporated into the very title of the Act. Further, the 'reform's' devolution of power from the federal to the state governments mirrors both Day's criticisms of 'Holy Mother State' and the Catholic principle of subsidiarity (which states that functions should be performed at the most local level of society feasible). The issue is not just one of language, however. The Worker has always advocated personal responsibility rather than government programs as the way to share our resources with our poor neighbors. In *The Long Loneliness*, Day reconstructed an early conversation with Peter Maurin about these issues:

'That is why people prefer going on relief, getting aid from the state', I told him. 'They prefer that to taking aid from their family. It isn't any too easy ... to be chided by your family for being a failure. People who are out of work are always considered failures. They prefer the large bounty of the great, impersonal mother, the state'.

But the fact remained, he always reminded me, no matter what people's preferences, that we are our brother's keeper, and the unit of society is the family; that we must have a sense of personal responsibility to take care of our own, and our neighbor, at a personal sacrifice ... 'It is not the function of the state to enter into these realms. Only in times of great crisis, like floods, hurricane, earthquake or drought, does

public authority come in. Charity is personal ...' He admitted we were in a crisis then, but he wanted none of state relief.¹

Thus, Worker advocacy of personal responsibility rather than welfare seems much like the position of Welfare Reform advocates. And yet, on the other hand, Workers accompany their guests to welfare offices, advocate for them, help them to procure government assistance. Mel Piehl summed up the paradox of the Worker position on welfare as follows:

On the matter of relief, the Workers constantly stressed the necessity of personal obligation to the poor, and of not abdicating responsibility to the state. But they recognized the inadequacy of private relief efforts and knew that government was the only answer for many.²

More importantly, the mean-spiritedness lurking beneath the glibly altruistic pronouncements of reform proponents is simply irreconcilable with the gentle personalism of the Worker movement.

Although the literature on Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement has grown tremendously over the past two decades, there has been little systematic analysis of Day's views on welfare. In part, this is because the Catholic Worker's primary response to poverty has been one of personalist hospitality—directly sharing food, clothing and shelter with those in need—rather than lobbying for government action.³ Many critics of the movement, including both academics and those who had worked within the movement, argue that Day's personalist approach renders her irrelevant to larger issues of social change. For example, Morton and Saltmarsh state that 'she refocused her activism from an emphasis on political and social change to a form of moral witness, and placed increasing emphasis on the problem of personal integrity—how to live out values such as hers in a

1. Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1952), pp. 179-80.

2. Mel Piehl, *Breaking Bread: The Catholic Worker and the Origin of Catholic Radicalism in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), p. 120.

3. Harry Murray, *Do Not Neglect Hospitality: The Catholic Worker and the Homeless* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), contrasts personalist hospitality with professional rehabilitation as approaches to poverty. Keith Morton and John Saltmarsh, 'Addams, Day, and Dewey: The Emergence of Community Service in American Culture', *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* (Fall 1997), pp. 137-49, contrast Day's 'radical hospitality' with Jane Addams' settlement house approach which helped to birth both professional social work and the non-profit sector and with John Dewey's emphasis on federal government action to correct the injustices of the capitalist system.

world that viewed them as signs of failure or weakness'.⁴ Others⁵ view Worker hospitality as a grassroots approach to social change, 'building the new society within the shell of the old', to quote the old Wobblie⁶ slogan adopted by Day for her own movement. Even here, however, the emphasis is on social change in the broadest sense—the 'Green Revolution' of Peter Maurin rather than piecemeal reform.⁷ A Catholic Worker critique of welfare is often lost within its more profound critique of the moral and spiritual vacuity of consumer capitalism.⁸

This essay attempts to shed some light on this dilemma through an examination of Day's early writings on welfare. It relies primarily on articles in *The Catholic Worker*, because they are more spontaneous than the retrospective accounts of her autobiographies. Since many of the articles were not signed, it is impossible to know for certain which were authored by Day, although it is likely that many of the anonymous articles were, in fact, authored by her.⁹

Day's views on welfare in the 1930s and 1940s are particularly relevant to the 1990s. *The Catholic Worker's* first issue was May 1933, in the

4. Morton and Saltmarsh, 'Addams, Day, and Dewey', p. 138. See Robert Coles, *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1987), pp. 92-94, for a similar critique by a student of Coles who had worked briefly at the Catholic Worker. Brendan O'Flaherty argues in response to Murray that the Catholic Worker probably has no policy implications 'since anarchists don't look for policies' (*Making Room: The Economics of Homelessness* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996], p. 28).

5. Murray, *Hospitality*, pp. 253-59. Marc Ellis, 'Peter Maurin: To Bring the Social Order to Christ', in Patrick Coy (ed.), *A Revolution of the Heart: Essays on the Catholic Worker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), pp. 15-46. Larry Holben, *All The Way to Heaven: A Theological Reflection on Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin and the Catholic Worker* (Marion, SD: Rose Hill Books, 1997).

6. The Industrial Workers of the World, a Syndicalist Union founded in 1905.

7. Piehl gives an excellent account of the Worker's social vision in comparison with those of the Social Gospel Movement and New Deal Liberalism.

8. Perhaps one way to resolve the dilemma of whether the Worker is an attempt at social change is to recall that Day herself (e.g. in Coles, *Dorothy Day*, p. 97) asserted that their efforts made no sense unless one acknowledged a spiritual dimension to social life. Chapter 5, 'A Localist Politics', *Dorothy Day*, contains one of the most comprehensive descriptions of Day's later views on welfare and the New Deal.

9. In this essay, some unsigned articles are attributed to Dorothy Day either because they are columns (e.g. 'Day by Day' or 'Day after Day') known to be written by her, or on the basis of the internal content of the article itself or subsequent articles (e.g. 'Cake and Circuses'). If there is ambiguity about authorship, the article is listed as anonymous.

middle of the Great Depression, just two months after FDR assumed the Presidency and two years before the Social Security Act created the Aid to Dependent Children program which would be abolished by Bill Clinton in 1996. The early issues of the newspaper span the period during which the old state and local relief programs were transformed into a federally subsidized welfare system, a process reversed by the devolution of the current 'welfare reform'.¹⁰

Despite the enormous long-term impact of the Social Security Act, *The Catholic Worker* virtually ignored it, mentioning it only once prior to 1944. An extensive discussion of the new welfare system did not appear until February 1945—an elaboration of a rather controversial article Day had published just prior to the 1944 Presidential elections. Nonetheless, several themes can be gleaned from the *The Catholic Worker's* more limited comments on welfare during the Depression.

Perspectives during the Depression

Five themes permeate *The Catholic Worker's* comments on welfare during the 1930s.

First, *The Catholic Worker* contained harsh criticisms of the state and local home relief programs that preceded the New Deal, and supported federal efforts to raise relief standards. Day's criticisms of relief programs in the 1930s had little to do with the creation of 'dependency' or destroying work habits. Rather, *The Catholic Worker* criticized the inadequacy of the benefits and the degradation imposed on recipients. A 1933 article attributed to 'FP' noted that in Mississippi, 'families of five persons were being allowed as little as \$3.85 a month from relief funds' and supported Harry Hopkins' plan to distribute food, clothing and fuel through the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation.¹¹ Conditions had not improved by 1935:

Day after day for the last five years greater and greater numbers of destitute have been filing into the relief offices...

The applicants for State help must wait hours in dreary rooms before getting a chance to tell their stories to the workers who take care of new cases. The worker takes down the applicant's story and promises that a case investigator will call soon to see her wants.

10. Piehl, *Breaking Bread*, is the most comprehensive historical analysis of the development of the Catholic Worker's social vision. Chapter 5, in particular, provides a valuable context for Day's response to welfare within the New Deal.

11. FP, 'Families of Five Are Given \$3.85 a Month Relief: Hopkins' Plan Would Raise Figure to \$15, but Even This Is Inadequate, He Says', *The Catholic Worker* (November 1933), p. 2.

Soon? It usually means any period of time from a few days to a few weeks. Only the most desperate and insistent receive immediate help. The rest can only wait ... on empty stomachs ... in cold rooms, oft-times without light and gas for cooking.

What does the client get? A number of things; the grand sum of 21 cents per day per person; and a share in the Federal Relief Commodities. The F.R.C.'s are foods purchased by the government to raise the market price and distributed as far as they will go to the needy. They do not increase the standard diet very much. Rent, gas and electricity are usually furnished only when eviction by a shut-off is threatened.¹²

The quality of the aid also came under criticism:

In order to prevent interference with private trade, enough food is given to persons on the relief rolls 'to keep them alive and in reasonable health, but not what they would have under normal circumstances', says New York Welfare Commissioner Hodson...

[O]ut in Toledo, the jobless complained that the canned meat given to them by the relief office was bad, and their children had been made ill by it. The local authorities tried it on mice, with such dire results that they immediately reported to Washington, from whence the meat came, that it was, indeed, *very* bad. The U.S. Department of Agriculture then re-tested the meat, this time on cats. The cats ate the meat and lived, so Toledo was ordered to continue using it on relief families. Moreover, the Federal investigators who visited the children made sick by the meat found that it really wasn't the meat, so much as the fact that the children were undernourished anyway. So why blame the relief?¹³

The Catholic Worker also charged that the advocacy of birth control by relief officials was a form of eugenics:

Now that the PWA has failed to make any appreciable dent in the number on government doles, the next step seems to be to see that such 'social undesirables' at least don't reproduce their kind ... In at least one of the [New York] city Board of Health Pre-Natal Clinics, patients are ordered by the doctor in charge to present themselves at a birth control clinic, the address of which is given to them on a slip of paper ... to be sure that they will not again have to present themselves as city maternity cases!

So that now, not content with a system which makes it impossible for large numbers of people to support children, our government attempts to make it impossible even for them to have children—and calls it a 'welfare plan'.¹⁴

12. Thomas Berry, 'Relief', *The Catholic Worker* (June 1935), p. 6.

13. Anonymous, 'Just Enough Food for Life, Says "Welfare" Man', *The Catholic Worker* (January 1935), p. 5.

14. Anonymous, 'Relief and Birth Control', *The Catholic Worker* (January 1935), p. 3.

The Catholic Worker criticized the many ways in which welfare degraded its clients. Articles by Herman Hergenhahn and Ben Joe Labray vividly denounced the way men were treated at New York City's Municipal Lodging House.¹⁵ Day quoted Louis Ward, who bemoaned the fact that the poor are made to sit 'for endless hours on the benches of some welfare agency to be subjected to a third degree on their personal lives, treated as crooks and investigated to the point of criminal punishment'.¹⁶ Day viewed welfare's demand for documentation as humiliating in itself, expressing a viewpoint that we might do well to reflect upon in our contemporary culture of identification and surveillance:

One poor fellow came in from jail where he had been for ninety days for fighting with his boss who had fired him off a WPA job. He was getting back to work again, a blacksmith's job, and while he was talking to us he was showing us papers, cards, documents of all kinds in his pockets. And we thought, Here we are becoming a country where it is necessary to have 'papers'. A man must show where he lived, where he worked. He must identify himself. He must show, even, that he was born. Europe is used to regulations and registerings and everybody must have papers of one kind or another, but we were free up to this time of the bureaucracy of the old countries ...¹⁷

Secondly, Day's critique of welfare occurred within the context of her critique of capitalism. This theme was revealed most vividly in a 1938 article in which Day traced the roots of violence to the degradation of persons by the welfare system and by corporations:

During the month of February a desperate relief client ended his own life and another ended the life of the official entrusted with the care of the poor. 'Nothing can excuse their acts', we can hear from some enlightened and horrified watchers of the class war that is waged all around us. We won't disagree, it isn't in our hearts to argue the matter. But we can understand the agony that led to these acts.

In Hoboken ... a hard-bitten Overseer of the Poor, holding on to the standards of former years, did what he thought to be his duty. Hoboken was always a prosperous city. ... And among the hard working German

15. Herman Hergenhahn, 'Municipal Lodging House No "House of Hospitality"', *The Catholic Worker* (1 May 1934), p. 6; Herman Hergenhahn, 'Municipal Lodging House No "House of Hospitality" (Continued)', *The Catholic Worker* (1 June 1934), p. 5; Ben Joe Labray, 'Ben Joe Labray', *The Catholic Worker* (July 1940), p. 3.

16. Anonymous, 'Catholic Worker Ideas on Hospitality', *The Catholic Worker* (May 1940), p. 10.

17. Dorothy Day, 'Day After Day', *The Catholic Worker* (April 1938), p. 4.

population, poverty was considered a result of shiftlessness. ... So the Overseer of the Poor had the distasteful job of dealing with a class considered as pariah... Joseph Scutellero, was a carpenter. Victim of the failings of a vicious capitalist system, he had seen his family sink lower and lower. He had once been prosperous. ... But now, he had to listen to Harry Barck [the Overseer] tell him when he complained that his lights were about to be turned off, 'Use candles'. It was as nothing to the Overseer. It was the climax of everything to the carpenter. He lunged forward with a sharp weapon, and the Overseer was a victim of the capitalist system. The remark was a casual one, probably did not even express the Overseer's real feelings, but Scutellero saw in it years of privation for his family, scores of humiliating episodes of the same character, days of hunger and nights of worryful waking, the hundreds of little things that finally lead to unpremeditated but unfortunate results.¹⁸

After telling of a Brooklyn Edison employee who committed suicide after being fired for union activity, she concluded:

We hesitate to pass judgment on poor Harry Barck. Poor, miserable, uninformed individual, he acted because he knew no better. He was not essentially bad. But we do pass judgment upon Brooklyn Edison Company. The corporation IS essentially evil. It is organized for the purpose it accomplished in killing Michael O'Sullivan. And the men who run it are not the poor, ward-healing wretches like Barck; they are educated, efficient business men. Some of them, we are sorry to say, are Catholics.¹⁹

Thirdly, Day called for personal responsibility in helping the poor, particularly those who fell through government 'safety nets'.

[T]he ideal is personal responsibility. When we succeed in persuading our readers to take the homeless into their homes, having a Christ room in the house as St. Jerome said, then we will be known as Christians because of the way we love one another.²⁰

Day held up the Mormon system of relief as an example, declaring, 'Mormons are personalists!'²¹ She applauded the fact that their approach involved voluntary work by those in need and was run by the Church with no government aid.

18. Anonymous, 'Killing and Suicide Mark Poverty Scene: Victim of Poor Relief System Kills; Bklyn Edison is Murderer of Workingman', *The Catholic Worker* (March 1938), p. 2.

19. Anonymous, 'Killing and Suicide', p. 7.

20. Dorothy Day, 'Of Finances and Personal Initiative: Day after Day', *The Catholic Worker* (February 1938), p. 2.

21. Anonymous, 'Mormons Relieve Brothers without State Assistance: Teach Catholics Lesson in Personalist Way to Help Poor', *The Catholic Worker* (November 1936), p. 2.

Mormons have taken the lead from Catholics in caring for their needy. The Church of the Latter Day Saints has met the crisis in a manner which ought to shame our so-called Catholic charitable organizations ...

In every state unemployed men and women were set to work sewing, farming, canning, repairing shoes and clothing, collecting furniture and gifts from church members and non-members.

All work was voluntary. No money was paid. To each man and woman a work certificate was given. When a worker needs anything he presents his certificate to the Bishop of his ward and he is given what he and his family need...

... And it was accomplished without calling in state aid.

We suggest that our Catholic laymen cull a few pages from the record of the Church of Latter Day Saints.²²

Letting government take care of the poor was not enough, as Mary Sheehan argued in a 1935 article:

Most of us feel that we have done our duty when we refer the unfortunate to the S.A. or the Municipal Flop House. According to the signs in the subway, anybody doing so is a good citizen; at least, that is the interpretation you get from reading these signs. ... Let's stop criticizing 'the enemy' for a change and get busy and do some constructive work instead.²³

Across the country, Catholic Workers assumed personal responsibility. One instance was the response of the Milwaukee Worker when relief to transients was halted in the winter of 1937. After the cutoff of Federal and state aid, the police began a systematic round-up of 'non-resident unemployed, locking up those with criminal records and compelling the others to leave town'. In response:

The Catholic Worker group started on a three-fold program to bring relief to these men: Increasing feeding and housing facilities at Holy Family House; presenting personal protests to government relief agencies for abandonment of the transient unemployed; and informing the general public of the true relief situation.

The day following the closing of relief bureaus and the opening of the police campaign, the bread line at Holy Family House increased from 10 to 30 and has been increasing daily since that time. Men were housed temporarily in cheap hotels until necessary provisions were provided for sleeping at Holy Family House.²⁴

22. Anonymous, 'Mormons Relieve Brothers', p. 2.

23. Mary Sheehan, 'Catholic Women and the Homeless', *The Catholic Worker* (March 1935), p. 8.

24. Anonymous, 'Poor Flock to Milwaukee C.W.', *The Catholic Worker* (December 1937), p. 2.

Exercising personal responsibility could lead to conflict with the state, as happened in Milwaukee:

A police raid was made on the house and sixteen men were taken into custody. This was the boldest step yet taken by the Milwaukee police, who pursue a policy that violates the human dignity and rights of the unemployed worker ...

The officers forced their way into the house without a warrant in the name of organized might. All of the men held were released within twenty-four hours when an attorney pressed the police and threatened legal action.

The 'bum' is a 'bum' to the smug citizens of this fair city. The transient is another kind of being seemingly less than human.²⁵

The New York Catholic Worker also ran afoul of governmental bureaucracy in its quest for personal responsibility:

We are always having fresh occasion to make the point of personal responsibility, much to the amazement of our hearers who often doubt our sanity when we start expounding. It was the Health Department last month. We protested their right to come into our home at 115 Mott Street and snoop around our kitchen. We were not running a restaurant or a lodging house, we explained. We were a group of individuals exercising personal responsibility in caring for those who came to us. They were not strangers, we pointed out, since we regarded them as brothers in Christ.²⁶

Fourthly, Day called government, as well as persons, to exercise responsibility for the poor. Her account in *The Long Loneliness* of the 1932 march in DC that she attended shortly before meeting Peter Maurin indicates openness to government action:

The demands of the marchers were for social legislation, for unemployment insurance, for old-age pensions, for relief for mothers and children, for work ... The years have passed, and most of the legislation called for by those workers is on the books now. I wonder how many realize just how much they owe the hunger marchers ...²⁷

During the Depression, Day and her co-workers often helped persons who were being evicted and advocated for the dispossessed

25. Larry Heeney, 'Police Persecute Men in Milwaukee C.W. House', *The Catholic Worker* (May 1940), p. 8.

26. Dorothy Day, 'Of Finances and Personal Initiative: Day after Day', *The Catholic Worker* (February 1938), p. 2.

27. Day, *The Long Loneliness*, p. 166. See, however, Coles, *Dorothy Day*, p. 99 for a more critical retrospective account of her feelings about the New Deal.

with Home Relief officials.²⁸ The Catholic Workers even leafleted Home Relief workers, hoping to convert them to a more Christian approach:

A Communist demonstration being held in front of Home Relief headquarters in an Italian neighborhood, we got out a leaflet addressed to police, Home Relief workers and unemployed alike, bearing quotations from the early fathers and the Popes as to the distribution of created goods, and joining the unemployed in their appeal for more adequate food and clothing.²⁹

One incident shows how Day combined personal responsibility with a call for government responsibility. On a visit with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in Arkansas in February 1936, she witnessed appalling destitution at an encampment of homeless sharecroppers and immediately telegraphed Eleanor Roosevelt:

To the credit of Mrs. Roosevelt, be it said that she responded immediately. She did not take my word for it, but got in touch with the Governor of the State at once. Governor Futrell and his entourage immediately proceeded to the road encampment and looked over the situation. *And they found nothing wrong!* They reported to the press that the group comprised a happy-go-lucky colony who refused to work... They mentioned their investigation was the result of a 'Catholic woman's report to Mrs. Roosevelt'.³⁰

Fifthly, *The Catholic Worker* supported many aspects of the New Deal, particularly in its early days, although it was repeatedly critical of racial discrimination in its programs. In contrast to its virtual silence about the Social Security Act, *The Catholic Worker* ran numerous articles about the National Recovery Administration (which contained guarantees of rights for unions) during its brief existence. A 1933 article stated: 'we become more and more enthusiastic about the NRA'.³¹ Two years later, *The Catholic Worker* sadly announced the demise of the NRA, castigating the capitalists who celebrated its end:

The Communist Party and big business are jubilant over the finish of the NRA, and the question of the day is 'What next?' ... Eugene Grace, who heads the Steel Institute, attacked the Banking

28. Anonymous, 'Neighborhood Council Aids Eviction Victims', *The Catholic Worker* (October 1933), p. 8.

29. Dorothy Day, 'Day by Day', *The Catholic Worker* (May 1935), p. 3.

30. Dorothy Day, 'Masked Men Plough under Poor—Families Starve in Arkansas: Governor Sneers at Catholic Worker Criticism, but Public Opinion is Aroused', *The Catholic Worker* (April 1936), p. 2.

31. Anonymous, 'NRA', *The Catholic Worker* (September 1933), p. 6.

Bill, the Social Security Bill, the Guffey Coal Bill, and the 30-hour week bill. Mr. Grace received a \$1,600,000 bonus in 1929 ...

'It is about time we had a little old-fashioned economy, tha[t] we encouraged efficiency and thrift', he said. 'The steel industry has taken a vital interest in providing for the economic security of its employees'.

One of the editors of *THE CATHOLIC WORKER* passed through some of the steel towns in Pennsylvania ... and we would advise any of our readers passing that way to notice these homes of steel workers. Rows upon rows of black, begrimed houses, mud streets, hovels fit for animals.³²

Clearly, Day was not impressed by the claims of wealthy corporate executives that their free market approach benefited workers. Her attitude toward FDR and the New Deal prior to the war was shown in a 1939 open letter to the President criticizing his policy with respect to the European war:

It is a painful duty to criticize one whom we have learned to love for his sense of charity and whom we have learned to respect for the wonderful way in which he handled the internal affairs of our country during its most trying economic years.³³

Perspectives during World War II

Her attitude toward FDR appeared to change dramatically after the entrance of the US into World War II (perhaps also influenced by the far more conservative direction the New Deal had taken by the late 1930s). In the October, 1944 issue, just before the Presidential election, Day published an article entitled 'Cake and Circuses':

Everybody is talking about the election, so in the light of the folly of the cross, we would like to make our predictions. Roosevelt will be elected on the platform of Cake and Circuses. During the depression years the relief checks flowed in, and now during the war years, the government checks come regularly on the first of every month. The millions who are thus bought and paid for do not want any change. They are afraid of change. Mothers of six children cash their \$180 stipend every month and go on a binge of department-store buying, movies, cigarets [*sic*], candies, radio, and even sometimes a car. It's amazing how much you can get in the way of luxury if you just do without the necessities. And start to run up debts. Housing is lousy anyway—you can't rent or buy a decent place for love or money, so you might as well spend your money

32. Anonymous, 'Capital and Marxists Applaud as Supreme Court Kills New Deal; Strikes and Violence Imminent', *The Catholic Worker* (June 1935), p. 1.

33. The Editors, 'Open Letter to the President on Policy', *The Catholic Worker* (February 1939), p. 1.

and have a good time. Every radio, every magazine, every newspaper is anxious to tell you of all the things you need and can now obtain. 'If the war lasts another year... If my husband doesn't get another furlough and I don't have another baby next year, I can... And then on the other hand if I do, I'll get another twenty a month!' Untold wealth. It is no longer bread and circuses—it is cake and circuses.³⁴

Apparently the article aroused protest, at least to the extent that, in the February 1945 issue, she wrote a more detailed column ('More about Holy Poverty, Which Is Voluntary Poverty') in response to the letters she had received:

'Cake and Circuses', which I wrote for the October issue just before the election, called forth many protests. 'That you personally could have had part in it or sanctioned it, I cannot believe', one reader writes ...

'That mothers of six children can 'go on a binge of department store buying ... 'all on one hundred and eighty dollars a month, strikes me as ridiculous; certainly the six children and their mother will not live very long 'if they just do without the necessities' ... From the former heads of the A.M.A. (... the American Manufacturers' Association?) such matter would not seem strange, but it is almost unthinkable coming from a group concerned with the welfare of the poor and disadvantaged' ...

First of all, let me apologize for the brevity of the editorial ... We owe it to our kind and charitable readers to try to explain at greater length what in our stupidity, and presumption, we wrote so briefly.³⁵

Her response is worth quoting in detail, since it is one of the most systematic statements she ever made on welfare. She began by denouncing the Social Security Act both for destroying the sense of personal responsibility for the poor and for creating 'welfare dependency':

We believe that social security legislation, now hailed as a great victory for the poor and for the worker, is a great defeat for Christianity. It is an acceptance of Cain's statement, on the part of the employer. 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Since the employer can never be trusted to give a family wage, nor take care of the Worker as he takes care of his machine when it is idle, the state must enter in and compel help on his part. Of course, economists say that business cannot afford to act on Christian principles... In other words, business has made a mess of things, and the state has had to enter in to rescue the worker from starvation...

But we in our generation have more and more come to consider the state as bountiful Uncle Sam. 'Uncle Sam will take care of it all. The race question, the labor question, the unemployment question'. We will all

34. Dorothy Day, 'Cake and Circuses', *The Catholic Worker* (October 1944), p. 1.

35. Dorothy Day, 'More about Holy Poverty, Which Is Voluntary Poverty', *The Catholic Worker* (February 1945), pp. 1-2.

be registered and tabulated and employed or put on a dole, and shunted from clinic to birth control clinic.³⁶

She then moves into what begins as a critique of the 'culture of poverty', but evolves into a condemnation of consumerism:

Of course, it is the very circumstances of our lives that lead us to write as we do ... We live with the poor, we are of the poor. We know their virtues and their vices. We know their generousities and their extravagances. Their very generosity makes them extravagant and improvident.

Please do not think we are blaming the poor when we talk so frankly about their failings, which they, too, will acknowledge. They do not want people to be sentimental about them. They do not want people to idealize them ...

We are not being uncharitable to them when we talk about a binge of department store buying. Did I say that? What I meant was installment-plan buying. Who do we blame for such installment-plan buying, for the movies, cigarettes, radio, magazines, for all the trash, the wordless trash with which they try to comfort their poor hard lives. We do not blame them, God knows. We blame the advertising men, the household loan companies, the cheap stores, the radio, the movies.

The people are seduced, robbed, stupefied, drugged and demoralized daily. They are robbed just as surely as though those flat pocketbooks of those shabby mothers were pilfered of the pennies, dimes and nickels by sneak thieves.

The people say proudly, 'We got it coming to us. We pay taxes. This ain't charity. It's justice'. And they hug their sweets, their liquor, their movies, their radio, their dissipations to them, in a vain endeavor to find forgetfulness of the cold and ugliness, the leaking plumbing ... the ugly housing, the hideous job ...

Some of our readers wrote indignantly, 'Do you think \$180 is exorbitant for the government to pay? They should be paying much more. I do not see how they can live on that, prices being what they are'.

What I tried to say was that that puny, insignificant \$180 which looms tremendous in the minds of the poor, was not enough for essentials. Could they rent a decent house to live in? Or could they buy a house? ...

Yes, the poor have been robbed of the good material things of life, and when they asked for bread, they have been given a stone. They have been robbed of a philosophy of labor ... They have been robbed of their skills and made tenders of the machine. They cannot cook; they have been given the can. They cannot spin or weave or sew—they are urged to go to Klein's and get a dress for four ninety-eight.

Bought and paid for? Yes, bought and paid for by their own most generous feelings of gratitude. Of course, they feel grateful to the good, kind government that takes care of them ... The government gives its

36. Day, 'More about Holy Poverty', p. 2.

paternal care and the people give their support to that particular governing body.³⁷

She then invoked two notions from the Social Encyclicals: subsidiarity and the family as the basic unit of society:

But who is to take care of them if the government does not? That is a question in a day when all are turning to the state, and when people are asking, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Certainly we all should know that it is not the province of the government to practice the works of mercy, or go in for insurance. Smaller bodies, decentralized groups, should be caring for all such needs.

The first unit of society is the family. The family should look after its own and, in addition, as the early fathers said, 'every home should have a Christ room in it, so that hospitality may be practiced' ... 'If your brother is hungry, it is your responsibility'.³⁸

Finally, she turned to the question of voluntary poverty:

The poor mother of six cannot reject the one hundred and eighty dollars. She cannot say, 'Keep your miserable, puny, insufficient \$180 which you give me in exchange for my husband'. She has poverty, involuntary poverty.

But we must reject it. We must keep on talking about voluntary poverty, and holy poverty, because it is only if we can consent to strip ourselves that we can put on Christ. It is only if we love poverty that we are going to have the means to help others. If we love poverty we will be free to give up a job, to speak when we feel it would be wrong to be silent ... We can only embrace voluntary poverty in the light of faith.³⁹

Day elaborated what she meant by embracing voluntary poverty in an article entitled 'Poverty and Pacifism'.

Poverty will result from our examining our conscience as to jobs... If these jobs do not contribute to the common good, we pray God for the grace to give them up. Have they to do with shelter, food, clothing? Have they to do with the works of mercy? Fr. Tompkins says that everyone should be able to place his job in the category of the works of mercy.

This would exclude jobs in advertising, which only increases people's useless desires. In insurance companies and banks, which are known to exploit the poor of this country and of others. Banks and insurance companies ... have dispossessed the poor. Loan and finance companies have further defrauded him. Movies, radio have further enslaved him. So that he has no time nor thought to give to his life, either of soul or

body. Whatever has contributed to his misery and degradation may be considered a bad job.

If we examine our conscience in this way we would soon be driven into manual labor, into humble work ...

Poverty means non-participation. It means what Peter calls regional living. This means fasting from tea, coffee, cocoa, grapefruit, pineapple, etc., from things not grown in the region in which one lives.

She described conditions on one farm she had seen and concluded 'We ought not to eat food produced under such conditions'.⁴⁰

Conclusions

Analysis of the response of *The Catholic Worker* to welfare during the Depression and World War II leads to two points which delineate the difference between Day's approach and that of 1990s 'welfare reformers'.

Most crucially, the *Catholic Worker* critique of welfare is couched within a profound critique of corporate capitalism, while 'Welfare Reform' leaves persons more at the mercy of corporations than ever. Not only does capitalism not provide enough jobs at decent wages, but many of the jobs it does provide are not true 'work', because they do not contribute to the Common Good and the service of others. Corporate capitalism contributes to societal problems by creating false needs in people, creating a consumerism which is the real cause of the behaviors often decried as welfare dependency.

Day argues that government welfare will undermine the responsibility of both the recipient and the employer—specifically that it seems to absolve the employer of the responsibility to pay a living wage to his or her employees.

Current welfare reform is based on an uncritical acceptance of the capitalist labor market. The focus is to move people from welfare to jobs with no challenge to the type of jobs the market provides, no challenge to greed, deindustrialization, union bashing, downsizing and globalization. Day's voluntary poverty was her ultimate repudiation of capitalism and consumerism.

Secondly, although both Day and the advocates of 'welfare reform' use the term 'personal responsibility', they mean different things by it.

In the first place, the personal responsibility of 'Welfare Reformers' is imposed on the poor in a way that relieves the middle and upper classes of the personal responsibility Catholic Workers emphasize. In

37. Day, 'More about Holy Poverty', p. 2.

38. Day, 'More about Holy Poverty', p. 2.

39. Day, 'More about Holy Poverty', p. 2.

40. Dorothy Day, 'Poverty and Pacifism', *The Catholic Worker* (December 1944), pp. 1, 7.

'Welfare Reform', personal responsibility means being a good parent and getting a job. The Personal Responsibility Act emphasizes 'responsible fatherhood and motherhood' and 'male responsibility, including statutory rape culpability'.⁴¹ The National Governors Association (NGA) includes the responsibility to get a job as well:

States are sending a clear message about work and responsibility. The most pervasive message is that work is valuable and that all adults receiving assistance have an obligation to work in some capacity. States report that past assumptions about who can work are being overturned as individuals who were considered unemployable are going to work. States also are communicating strong messages about the importance of behaving responsibly, especially regarding forming families and meeting parental responsibilities related to child support, keeping children in school, and getting children immunized. In addition, states are lining up incentives, supports, and sanctions to reinforce these messages.⁴²

The personal responsibility of 'Welfare Reform' might better be termed 'individual responsibility'—the responsibility to provide for oneself and one's family, equivalent to the self-sufficiency of 'rugged individualism' condemned by the Worker. If the poor are held to this standard, then others have no personal responsibility to aid the poor.

For Day, the moral scope of personal responsibility extends beyond the family to include the stranger, to include all humanity. We are all brothers and sisters, all members of one body, and thus we are responsible for each other's welfare. Day's notion of personal responsibility resembles that of Pearl and Samuel Oliner, who describe personal responsibility as 'a willing assumption of personal obligation for others' welfare'.⁴³ In contrast, the 'Welfare Reform' vision of personal responsibility places all the responsibility on the poor, relieving the upper classes of the burden of personal responsibility which Day would lay upon them.

One 'welfare reformer' who came close to Day's meaning was Bill Clinton, who stated in his remarks on signing the 1996 Act:

41. Public Law 104-193, 104th Congress, 'Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996', 22 August 1996, Section 101: Findings.

42. National Governors Association, 'Nation's Governors Transform Welfare': contact Becky Fleischauser, www.nga.org/Releases/PR-212Feb98/Welfare.htm, 21 February 1998.

43. Pearl Oliner and Samuel Oliner, *Toward a Caring Society: Ideas into Action* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), pp. 84-97.

It's a personal responsibility of every American who ever criticized the welfare system to help the poor people now to move from welfare to work.⁴⁴

However, while Day affirmed a responsibility to perform work which benefits others, she never equated this with getting a job in the capitalist labor market. Care-full⁴⁵ raising of one's children, for example, is more truly work than many of the jobs available in the market.

The final difference is that, for 'Welfare Reformers', personal responsibility is something that can be achieved through incentives, penalties and contracts. The NGA stated:

To achieve an appropriate balance between supports and sanctions, many state welfare reform initiatives center on personal responsibility plans or contracts. These contracts identify the participants' responsibilities—such as seeking and accepting work, immunizing their children, or cooperating with child support enforcement—and the consequences of not fulfilling those responsibilities.⁴⁶

For example, North Carolina's Work First program conceives of personal responsibility as something that can be contracted for:

All welfare recipients must sign a personal responsibility contract detailing their plan for moving off welfare. They must commit to assuming responsibility for their families, such as making sure their children attend school regularly and get immunizations and health check-ups. If they don't sign, they won't get benefits. If they break the contract, their benefits will be cut.⁴⁷

For Day, personal responsibility is not something that can be contracted—one can achieve personal responsibility only if one is allowed the freedom to exercise personal responsibility. Reacting to a calculated system of rewards and punishments is the antithesis of personal responsibility because personal responsibility can develop only under conditions of freedom. Day's approach to fostering personal responsibility has much in common with the psychologies of

44. Bill Clinton, 'Remarks by the President at the Signing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act', 22 August 1996, White House Press Releases Data Base, White House Virtual Library, <http://library/whitehouse.org>.

45. This spelling is used to capture the sense of acts which are full of care, as employed by, among others, Nell Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

46. National Governors' Association, 'Governors' Bulletin, Online WEB Edition, 18 August Vol. 31, No. 17: 1: www.nga.org/Welfare/WelfareDocs/bul-970818.htm.

47. www.dhr.state.nc.us/DHR/docs/facts.htm, 11/20/97.

Alfie Kohn⁴⁸ and Edward Deci,⁴⁹ as opposed to the behaviorist and utilitarian approaches advanced by 'welfare reformers'.

In sum, the Catholic Worker calls for a Green Revolution, a non-violent transformation of heart and social structure, rather than a welfare reform which is based upon misconceptions of personal responsibility and which leaves the poor at the mercy of corporate capitalism. Day was not an apologist for welfare, but neither would she be an apologist for welfare reform as implemented in the 1990s.

48. Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

49. Edward Deci, *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).