

An Apostolate of Friendship

Review of

Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and the Greatest Commandment:

Radical Love in Times of Crisis

By Julie Leininger Pycior

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Reviewed by **Paul Pynkoski**

Julie Leininger Pycior opens her Prologue to *Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and the Greatest Commandment* with the words: “It’s the middle of the night, and you’re lying in bed, stewing. Here you are, in your comfortable suburban home, even as you consider yourself a follower of someone who said, ‘Sell all you have and give it to the poor’” (xi). She reflects briefly on the witness of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, their commitment to the love of God and of others, and then offers, “As I lay awake that night in the 1990s – on Christmas Eve, as it happened – the question of how to live out the Greatest Commandment very much hung in the air” (xiii). We may, she suggests, studiously avoid the implications of the commandment to love others, but being confronted with the concrete witness of figures like Day and Merton to Christ’s radical call can provoke creative tension.

The second half of her title, *Radical Love in Times of Crisis*, is at the heart of Pycior’s exploration. She is not concerned about loving when it is easy; her concern is the concrete shape loving action takes when confronted by those who are unlike ourselves, those with whom we are in conflict or regard as enemies. Pycior tells of how Dorothy Day’s prayerful and respectful approach to a conflict with Cardinal Spellman shaped her own response in a difficult situation. When she learned the politically conservative Cardinal Timothy Dolan was to give the commencement address at her liberal arts college, she feared he could be divisive. Using Day’s letter to Spellman as a template, she wrote in advance to Dolan and respectfully suggested that he encourage the students with an appeal to the witness to love found in the lives of Merton and Day. She ended her letter with best wishes for his success and a commitment to pray for him. He thanked her, and followed her advice. Pycior and Dolan remain on different sides of the political divide, but they also remain in dialogue due to the way she reached out to him.

Midway through her concluding Coda, Pycior returns to the season of Christmas, offering us a glimpse of an experience that took place in her meditation group after reading the Christmas gospel. This time she emphasizes not loving action, but how the mystery of prayer can bind us together in love as we navigate life’s challenges. Inserting her investigation of the Merton–Day friendship

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between her disclosure of these events signals to the reader that this is far more than an historical study. It is the fruit of personal struggle, research and meditation over two decades.

Professor Emerita of History at Manhattan College, Pycior has written two books on twentieth-century American history, has contributed to the Huffington Post and has been an historical consultant for Public Television. She made a significant contribution to Merton studies previously with her investigation of how Friendship House, and the friendship of Dorothy Day with Catherine de Hueck Doherty, influenced the young Thomas Merton (see *Merton Annual* 13). She brings her historian's eye to the Merton/Day relationship, carefully providing context to their decade of interaction. She does so in a manner that breathes life into the friendship as it unfolds through the tumult of the sixties, refusing hagiography in favor of exploring both the joys and the conflicts in their interactions.

Pycior reminds us that Day and Merton never met. Their relationship had its beginning in the late 1950s with an exchange of letters. Their initial correspondence gave evidence of a deep respect. Day expressed appreciation for his spiritual writings; Merton responded by saying how touched he was by her witness for peace. The letters become a point of departure on which Pycior builds her examination of their relationship, though the letters themselves are not given detailed analysis. She takes a phrase or a sentence, and uses it to contrast their circumstances, or to provide context. Day's "We are all intensely grateful to you for all your writings" (1) leads to examining the gap between the two: Day in the apparent chaos of a Catholic Worker community and Merton in a contemplative monastery; Day under scrutiny of the FBI and Catholic bishops, and Merton praised by the Catholic press and corresponding with the intellectuals of the era. What united them was a commitment to a life of prayer and to finding concrete ways of living out the call to love and mercy.

She follows their friendship through the crises of the nineteen sixties. The peace movement gets extended attention, but she also examines the tensions brought on by the civil rights movement and the sexual revolution. She weaves their mutual friendships with Daniel Berrigan, Jim Forest, James Douglass and others into her work, along with Merton's and Day's literary and artistic interests, their struggles with representatives of the Catholic hierarchy, and the challenges of liturgical renewal, providing for us a full and rich picture.

Pycior draws our attention to small things that illustrate the respect and affection Day and Merton had for each other: Merton donates excess toothpaste to the Catholic Worker community; Day offers Merton an extra copy of the writings of John Cassian; Merton composes a poem in Day's honor after she is arrested. She notes their shared physical suffering – Merton's spinal surgery and bursitis, and Day's knee arthritis and cardiac problems. She explores for us the ways in which they each struggled with celibacy. In doing so, she shows us not the relationship of two Catholic icons, but rather the friendship of two deeply human characters.

Pycior demonstrates that the peace movement, to which both were so deeply committed, was also the biggest challenge to their friendship. Merton was initially critical of draft card burning; Day publicly supported it. When Catholic Worker Roger Laporte committed suicide by self-immolation to protest the Vietnam war, Merton reacted by sending a tersely worded telegram to Day that left her feeling like he held her responsible for what happened. He also wrote to Jim Forest, who was leading the Catholic Peace Fellowship, asking that his name be removed as a sponsor. Day's response to Merton implied he had betrayed her, yet she ended it by asking for his continued prayers. Merton

ultimately remained a sponsor, and, in his response to Day, asked for her prayers and assured her he was with her in spirit.

They were at odds on Jim Forest's divorce and remarriage. This time it was Day who threatened to remove herself as a sponsor of the Catholic Peace Fellowship due to what she saw as a departure from Catholic teaching, allowing romantic love to take precedence over love of God. Yet when she wrote to Forest objecting to his situation, she ended by offering her love to him and his fiancée. Merton, on the other hand, stressed the role of conscience, and was concerned that the work of the Catholic Peace Fellowship would suffer if Forest were asked to resign. In the end, Day continued as a sponsor.

Merton, publicly and privately, expressed constant gratitude for Day's visible witness to loving the "least of these" on the streets of New York. On several occasions he wrote to Day about his intentions to leave the Abbey of Gethsemani for another place or another order. Each time she responded not by arguing but by insisting on the value of the prayer, solitude and stability that gave depth to his writing. Pycior notes that Merton and Day rarely closed their correspondence without asking for prayers. These were not empty requests; rather, they brought to each other their need for guidance to discern and follow the will of God, and for the humility and strength to continue in love.

Through Merton's and Day's struggles with the conflicts of the nineteen sixties, and via the tensions in their friendship, Pycior demonstrates for us an approach to love that, though imperfect, emerges through the mystery of prayer, helping navigate conflict and difference in a manner that heals rather than divides. She offers us an opportunity to reflect deeply on the witness and writing of Day and Merton and challenges us, through them, to be deeply rooted in prayer and in love as we seek our own way through the turbulence of our times.