Reporting on Dorothy Day and the Church: Past, Present, and Future

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From April 10 to April 12, 1939, St. Joseph’s House of Hospitality hosted a Colloquium on Social Catholicism at the Tannehill Street location in Pittsburgh’s Hill District. The topics discussed at the Colloquium were listed in The Pittsburgh Catholic of April 13, 1939: liturgy, Catholic sociology, voluntary poverty, anti-Semitism, peace, agrarianism, and labor. Members of the Catholic Worker Movement from across the United States and Canada and scholars involved in the Liturgical Reform movement attended the Colloquium in Pittsburgh.

From May 13 to 15, 2015, a gathering of followers of Dorothy Day addressed many topics and themes similar to those at the earlier Colloquium. The University of Saint Francis in Fort Wayne, Indiana, held a conference titled, Dorothy Day and the Church: Past, Present, and Future. As in the Colloquium held in Pittsburgh, Catholic Workers and scholars from the United States and Canada met and discussed the life and influence of the Servant of God Dorothy Day (1897-1980), the co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement and newspaper.

The conference was sponsored by Our Sunday Visitor Publishing and hosted by the University of Saint Francis, an institution established as Saint Francis College in Lafayette, Indiana in 1890 by the Sisters of St. Francis of Perpetual Adoration (Olpe, Germany). The college moved to its current Fort Wayne location in 1944 and continues to be staffed in part by the Sisters.

The conference took place days after the release of the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape study that reported that the Christian share of the U. S. population is declining and the decline among Roman Catholics is especially sharp. Joshua Brumfield of Catholic University of America presented one breakout session titled: The Dorothy Option? Dorothy, Benedict, and the Future of the Church. Some presenters mentioned the Pew report but Brumfield's presentation seemed to offer a solution. He referred to Peter Maurin’s famous essay from the first edition of the Catholic Worker newspaper titled “Blowing the Dynamite.” Maurin stated, “It is about time to blow the lid off so the Catholic Church may again become the dominant social dynamic force.” Brumfield’s suggestion was that the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy might be the wick to ignite this dynamite, especially in the upcoming Year of Mercy proposed by Pope Francis. This presentation of Mr. Brumfield was just a small example of the stimulating and inspiring exchanges that occurred at the conference.

The conference featured four breakout sessions, two each on Wednesday and Thursday. Each session provided attendees a choice of four, five or six rooms where one, two, or three papers were presented consecutively; hence, the approximate 200 attendees had a difficult choice of where to spend each session.

The breakout sessions totaling 42 presentations were loosely organized around themes such as Dorothy Day's spirituality, the history of the Catholic Worker, personalism, distributism, politics, liturgy, and tradition.

True to the spirit of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement, there was and continues to be a lot of discussion as to why Day herself would not want her canonization process to continue. Some Catholic Workers in attendance thought the process cost too much and that the efforts should be applied to more pressing issues in the Church and society.

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The Thursday, May 14 Mass was celebrated in Fort Wayne at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. In the Fort Wayne-South Bend diocese, the Feast of St. Matthias was celebrated while in the Pittsburgh diocese that day, the Feast of the Ascension was celebrated — hence Pittsburgh attendees “missed” the Ascension!

Thursday evening featured the plenary address of Archbishop Gomez, delivered at the USF Robert Goldstine Performing Arts Center in downtown Fort Wayne, and open to the public. Regarding the canonization process, the archbishop said, “I don’t know if Dorothy Day is a Saint, that is up to the Church to decide, but I do know that she makes me want to be a saint.”

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