

ENTERTAINING

ANGELS
THE DOROTHY DAY STORY

A Film Guide by
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Discussion Guide for Entertaining Angels

“And the king will answer him, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

Matthew 25:40 (NRSV)

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Hebrews 13:1-2 (NRSV)

“We cannot love God unless we love each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of the bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship. We have all known the long loneliness; we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.

Dorothy Day, quote in
Fritz Eichenburg: Works of Mercy, p. 84

The American Experience has been blessed with some marvelous women who have reached out to the oppressed – Jane Adams and her Hull House, ministering to Chicago’s Poor; Donaldina Cameron rescuing Chinese women treated as slaves and sheltering and educating them at her San Francisco center; Eleanor Roosevelt speaking for the left-out amidst the corridors of power in Washington; Rosa Parks, Fanny Lou Hamer, and Coretta Scott King, speaking for voiceless blacks – but probably none of these have influenced more people to walk Christ’s lonely way of peace and justice than Dorothy Day. She not only provided food and shelter in her own home for the poor, visited them in jail (and even was imprisoned herself for them), but through her newspaper *The Catholic Worker* the hearts and consciences of thousands of people beyond New York City, so that they too became involved.

Producer Ellwood Kieser and writer John Wells faced a formidable task when they set out to make a film based on the life of this “saint of the streets.” Dorothy Day’s was a long and complex life, filled with a tremendous amount of activity and graced with many interesting and famous friends. She was a journalist and radical fellow traveler with socialists and communists. She wrote books, including a novel, and a screenplay for which she was enticed to Hollywood for a few months to develop scripts. She was part of virtually every protest movement of her time, including women’s suffrage, anti-nuclear demonstrations, civil rights marches and anti-Vietnam War protests. Born in 1897, her long life spanned some of the most tumultuous and important eras of social change of the century. *Entertaining Angels* offers a fine opportunity to reflect upon these and to discuss the call of Christ and our relationship to “the least of his brothers...”

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. We first see the young Dorothy marching with suffragettes during a rally for Woodrow Wilson. What are she and her fellow marchers demanding? What was the situation of women in American society of 1917? Which of society's dictates for women do we see Dorothy flaunting in the film? (Supporting herself outside the home; smoking; wearing her hair short several years before this became popular in the Flapper era; espousing radical ideas and demonstrating them publicly; flaunting authority, even the police, and later, the church; going to jail; free love; agreeing to an abortion; entering into a common-law marriage; having and raising a child as a single parent.)
2. What do you think of the scenes in the bars with the repartee of Dorothy and her bohemian friends? What do they believe in? What are they rebelling against? What is the inconsistency for which Moise reproaches them? How is Moise's lifestyle equally shallow? What do you know of Eugene O'Neill's plays?
3. In the street, Dorothy tells O'Neill, "I have something to give, but I don't know what it is – or to whom I'm supposed to give it! I want to live fully, to do something no one else has ever done before!" Have you felt that way? Was it such yearnings that led you to do what you are doing now? Or have you had to settle for less? When O'Neill comments about the meaninglessness of life, Dorothy responds, "I want more!" How is St. Augustine's famous prayer applicable to her: "Thou has made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee"?
4. In her autobiography, Dorothy states that O'Neill could quote entirely Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven," in which the poet describes himself as fleeing from a persistent, pursuing God. How is Dorothy's entrance into various romantic relationships a "flight" from the love of God, especially her affair with Forster? Her pursuit of a career in journalism and her taking up of radical causes? How does God pursue her in these things?
5. How widespread is Dorothy's opinion of the church: "Look, I know what Jesus says, and I say that's great. I see what the church does, and I say, 'No thanks'"? How is the church often its (or Jesus') own worst enemy? (In her autobiography, Dorothy quotes Romano Guardini as saying that "the church is the Cross on which Christ was crucified; one could not separate Christ from his Cross, and one must live in a state of permanent dissatisfaction with the church." [See pp. 149-150]. In the light of Dorothy's criticism, what responsibility does Paul's assertion place on Christians? Note that St. Paul tells the Corinthians that they are "our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all..." (Cor 3:2)
6. At their beach party, Forster, baiting Dorothy accuses the church of "sucking all the joy right out of life." What kind of "joys" is Forster talking about? Does the church offer other "joys" in exchange?

7. What do you think Dorothy means when she sits in church meditating and prays, “You really sneak up on a person, don’t you?” How did God sneak up on her? Has God “sneaked up” on you in some way? Compare this to C.S. Lewis’ famous statement in his autobiography *Surprised By Joy* that God is “unscrupulous” and “laying snares and traps” in open bibles and books, so that one has to be careful if one wants to remain an atheist.
8. Jesus declared that those who follow him must “take up the cross.” (Mt 10:38) What is Dorothy’s cross in baptizing her daughter and joining the church? Her love for Forster is great, but greater still is her love for her child—and for her God.
9. Have you known others who have been led by their child to take their spiritual life seriously? How is the sacrament of baptism sometimes the entrance into the church not only for the child, but for the parents as well?
10. Years later back in New York City, Dorothy is working on a story and is struck by the terrible plight of the victims of the Depression. After holding a despairing mother’s dead baby in her arms, Dorothy returns to the newspaper office and confesses to Mike, her editor, “I don’t know what to do.” How does God answer her in the arrival of Peter Maurin? From what you first see of him, does he seem like a likely leader or mentor? How has God come to you, or others, in unlikely people or ways?
11. Think about/discuss these capsule summaries of Peter’s philosophy:

“You know what’s wrong with the world? People who act don’t think, and people who think, don’t act.”

“There is no sin in being rich. There is no sin in being poor. But there is a sin in having more than you need and not sharing with those who have less than they need...”

“We can always find God wherever we are. God is as close as the closest human being, especially the poor.”

What teachings of Christ support the last two statements?

12. As Dorothy takes their rent and utility money to pay for the first issue of the newspaper, Peter tells her to trust that the Lord will take care of them. A staff member quips, “What if the Lord is busy this month?” Dorothy responds, “Then we’re fools.” To which theologian Peter adds, “Fools for Christ.” What “foolish” things do you see Dorothy and Peter doing throughout the film? Look up 1 Corinthians 1:18-30 for the biblical basis for this.
13. The beautifully photographed scene in which Dorothy joins Peter in washing the feet reminds you of what biblical scene? How is Peter’s gift to the old man “foolish”?

14. The film shows some of Dorothy's mistakes as well as her saintly acts: the turning away of the two women because of no room; her brushing Eleanor aside when she was dealing with so many problems of the paper and the shelter; her failure to provide Tamar with all the attention the little girl needed. What does Dorothy learn from these failings? What mistakes have you made that have been hard lessons?
15. In the scene in which Dorothy goes to pick up Tamar at her friend's, Tamar asks to stay so she can have supper there. What does the expression on Dorothy's face convey to you? What are the filmmakers telling us about the toll on her relationship with her daughter caused by Dorothy's lifestyle? What sacrifices does ministry demand from the families of those who minister? Have you ever made it hard for someone to serve?
16. Reflect on the juxtaposition of these two scenes: Dorothy given a glowing introduction and a standing ovation by the audience, immediately followed by her scrubbing a toilet bowl. What does this reveal about her? Are you able to be of service in such lowly tasks, as well as those that draw attention and applause?
17. What do you think of how Dorothy handled the confrontation with the archbishop? Do you agree with Dorothy's wry comment, "If you feed the poor, you're a saint; if you ask why they are poor, you are a communist..."? How can dangerous labels diminish someone's ability to do good? What labels are currently used this way in this society? ("Christian right," "bleeding heart liberal," "environmental whacko," "pro-lifer.") Can you think of other leaders who have "embarrassed the church" by taking the gospel as seriously as Dorothy does?
18. When the CW staff is gathered for a group portrait, what does the music convey as Peter is brought into the group, and then wanders off? How do you feel about his sad fate, his inability to think because of the effects of his stroke? Reflecting upon his untimely stroke and death five years later, Dorothy says that, just as he had stripped himself throughout his life, now God has stripped and pruned him. (See pp. 274-276.) How can physical suffering prune us?
19. The revolt of the *Catholic Worker* staff is the dramatic climax of the film. Can you see their viewpoint? How rational or pragmatic is it? Are they able, at that point, to accept their role as fools for Christ? This precipitates a spiritual crisis for Dorothy: how is the church her Gethsemane? What do you think about the following lament of Dorothy's?

Where are you? Why don't you answer me? I need you! These brothers and sisters of yours, the ones you want me to love, let me tell you something. They smell! They have lice and tuberculosis! Am I to find you in them?—Well, you're ugly! You stink! You wet your pants! You vomit! How could anyone love you?

Are there people whom you find it difficult or impossible to love? Theologians call this kind of undeserved love "grace." How can Dorothy or we obtain this kind of love? What or who is the source?

20. How are Mike and Maggie God's strange way of answering Dorothy? Why is Mike an unlikely source of encouragement for Dorothy, at least according to conventional wisdom? When Maggie attacks Dorothy with the cane, does Dorothy at first remember the Sermon on the Mount? What has overtaken her? What stops her? What does she mean, "I can see the light in you"? When Dorothy declares her love for Maggie, what is the latter's reaction? How is this in keeping with the hymn which the older Dorothy quietly sings at the beginning and end of the film? How is her treatment of Maggie a catalyst for resolving the dispute with her staff?
21. What do you think of Dorothy's speech to her staff? Especially her words to Dan, "But I don't think God will judge us on how successful we are at changing the world. I do think he will judge us on how faithful we are"? What have you learned about faith in this film? Of service to others? Of love and grace? Of the need for others in the journey of faith? Where and how do you think you can put these insights to work in your life and in the church?

TWO BOOKS HELPFUL FOR THE LEADER:

THE LONG LONELINESS: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day, Harper & Row, reprint 1997.

Fritz Eichenberg: WORKS OF MERCY, Orbis Books, 1992. Great reproductions of many of the prints this fine artist donated to Dorothy's *Catholic Worker*, accompanied by quotations from her and others.

OTHER FILMS ON FAITH AND SOCIAL JUSTICE:

ROMERO, also a Paulist film. This is the story of the last four years of the martyred Archbishop of El Salvador. Rated PG

CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY, a powerful story of the reconciliation of a white and black South African father, following the deaths of their two sons. Rated PG

DEAD MAN WALKING, a true story of amazing grace through the ministry of a nun to a convicted rapist-killer. Rated R

THE MISSION, a film of grace and forgiveness in 18th century South America, and of two roads to martyrdom. Rated PG

MATEWAN, the story of the struggle against injustice of West Virginia coal miners, and of the way of non-violence versus retaliation. Rated RG-13

THE LONG WALK HOME, set amidst the Montgomery bus boycott, this is the story of the sacrifices of a courageous black maid and of her influence upon her white employer. Rater PG