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Maine Voices: Catholic activist showed that real power lies in fighting for human dignity

Dorothy Day's philosophy is especially pertinent in a time when many laud Ayn Rand's anti-altruistic views.

By JANMARIE TOKER

"What we would like to do is change the world -- make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended them to do. And, by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers, the poor, of the destitute -- the rights of the worthy and the unworthy poor, in other words -- we can, to a certain extent, change the world; we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a harried world."

-- Dorothy Day, founder of The Catholic Worker and candidate for sainthood

TOPSHAM - President Obama's recent interview in Rolling Stone included a piece about what he thought about writer Ayn Rand and Republican vice-presidential candidate Rep. Paul Ryan's obsession with her work. In fact, over the past few years, through the rise of the tea party movement, we have heard a lot of adulation for Rand, who has become an inspiration to and ideal of sorts for the conservatives in our country.

Rand was an outspoken critic of government intervention and religion who believed solely in the power of the dollar. In fact, when she died, she had a 6-foot floral arrangement in the shape of a dollar sign by her casket.

She was not the only influential woman writer in the 20th century. In fact, there's another woman writer and risk-taker who was not only influential but also truly inspirational: Dorothy Day.

Even though they lived at the same time, their views couldn't be more different. While Rand spoke of the power of capitalism and against any form of altruism, Day spent her life serving and fighting for the poor and the humble.

This extraordinary woman, a prominent Catholic and current candidate for sainthood, espoused her religion's core teaching of pacifism, love for all and servitude to the poor. She strove to spread the word of the Catholic social doctrine -- of fighting for social justice and supporting workers.

Just when Rand was writing "Atlas Shrugged" and "The Fountainhead" to push forward the value of individuals dedicated solely to themselves, Day founded The Catholic Worker, a paper devoted to publicizing Catholic social teaching -- of supporting workers and serving those in need without judgment or qualification.

Day's support of unions, workers' rights and power for the people are long-held Catholic values. In fact, the Catholic Church played a prominent role in shaping America's labor movement.

Just as Rand spent her life preaching the philosophy of objectivism, Day spent her life living and sharing Catholic social teachings. From the day she founded The Catholic Worker in 1933 to the day she died in 1980, Day espoused justice for all, servitude to the poor, nonviolence, equality and pacifism.

As it lives on today, The Catholic Worker continues Day's work sharing the belief that everyone has the right to what is required to live a full and decent life, such as employment, health care and education. Her paper teaches us that workers have a right to earn a living wage in safe working conditions and form unions to protect themselves.

Dorothy Day was proposed for sainthood in 1983 and made a "Servant of God" (the first stage of canonization) by Pope John Paul II in 2000. She was proposed for sainthood because she dedicated her life to the poor, to the workers and to justice everywhere.

On Day's 75th birthday, the Jesuit magazine America devoted a special issue to her, singling her out as the individual who best exemplified "the aspiration and action of the American Catholic community during the past forty years."

While conservatives may hold up Ayn Rand as their leader -- many without even having read any of her books (especially those who may not know how strongly she spoke out against religion) -- the rest of us should take a look at some of the writings of Dorothy Day, which are still very relevant today.

She offers an alternative to the "you're on your own" mentality. And these days, as our state government fights unions, insults and criticizes workers in our state, and makes business a priority above people, we would all be well-served revisiting Dorothy Day's perspective.

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