

February 5, 2011 5th Sunday of the Year (A).

Rev. Joseph T. Nolan

The alert listener will notice that this reading from Isaiah is soon to come up again; indeed, it appears with every Lenten season. Why repeat it? Why not? In Lent it reminds us that our fasting should overflow and endow our charity. In this interim time—and Lent is a long way off - it illustrates even before Jesus the teaching of the Master that good works show forth the divine goodness and the light in the darkness.

When we look for examples of Christians who have actually done these things, we find them all around us, running food banks, emergency hotlines for rescue, shelters for the homeless, and so on. Pine Street Inn not only rescues the homeless but is now engaged, with the city's help, in finding them places to live on their own. And the bulletin today tells you of the day shelter for so many people suffering from the cold. They are the witness we need—and need multiplied. One of the really heroic examples that constantly returns to mind is that of Dorothy Day, cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement. She continues to serve us even though she is now at home with God. She serves as a goad, a sting to conscience, and a model or ideal of how the gospels are carried out in life by actual people. So much has been written about her—biographies, articles, and Ph.D. and Masters' theses—that we look for a fresh insight. We find it in a brief account by Rosemary Haughton in her book *The Catholic Thing*. She sums up with clarity what Dorothy wrote of herself in her partial autobiography, *The Long Loneliness* and what anyone familiar with the Catholic Worker would know. First, she began her young adult life as a journalist, not interested in religion. As Haughton writes, "Like some of the others, she rejected

Christianity as hypocritical, and devoted her considerable talents to socialism. But she hadn't the temperament that is satisfied with denouncing social evils, or even working to change things politically. She discovered in herself the need to identify with the poor.”

This is an important point, worth dwelling upon. There *are* those who should work within structures—especially politics—to do precisely what the prophet calls for: feed the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless. There are a half million lawyers in America, and yet the law schools continue to pack them in. The graduates from Catholic law schools might well consider careers in public advocacy, a vocation to justice (and insuring justice for the poor). But back to Dorothy Day. She represents the other approach, a more personalist one, which shares the life of the poor and the oppressed. There are repulsive aspects to poverty, such as smells, cockroaches, bad food, cold, and unstylish clothes (just to mention a few). Haughton says that Dorothy felt the need to overcome this distance just as Francis Bernadone felt impelled to swap his silken garments with a beggar, and on another occasion to embrace a leper with all his sores. Dorothy began to live among the poor, in a cold tenement flat. She was a journalist, not a Christian, she was concerned about social issues, especially the struggle of labor, and baffled that Christians did not share that concern. When she became a Catholic, which seems to have been a sheer gift of grace following upon the birth of her child, Haughton says of her, “She had no illusions of Catholics in general, and the hierarchy in particular towards social problems.” (Some will immediately say, all that has changed now. Yes, it has, to some extent. There *are* heroic bishops who live among the poor and refuse the signs of pomp and power. There are others who do not, who still reign from the episcopal palace. Not our own, by the way). But part of

Dorothy's genius was to accept and live within a church made up of human beings which nonetheless proclaimed the living word. She could draw strength from the Communion of Saints—and sinners. “A whole body of articulate thought about social issues, poverty and want, love, death and resurrection was available to her, to give the force of centuries to the power of her own inward conviction.” And she read – read everything.

Shouldn't this be a clue to all of us in the search for a living faith? We need to find the strength and wisdom, the goodness and holiness that persist in the church, as well as the proclamation of the gospel. We need it even more if we have been scandalized by the institutional church on too many occasions. We need to drink from the well that has living water. We need to walk in the footsteps, or at least read and ponder the lives of people we rightly call saints, both past and present. They have power to move us. They lived within this community of faith and enabled it to give witness, to be a light in the darkness.

On my office door is an enlarged photograph of Dorothy Day and myself. It was taken after a Mass I had offered at a convent in Los Angeles, and Dorothy was there, the guests of wonderful lay Catholics. I treasure the picture but also the three times I met her. First, as a graduate student from here, just a visitor at the Catholic Worker house in New York City. Then I came by, years later, in a handsome naval officer's uniform. Again she made me welcome – remember, she was a confirmed pacifist. The third time was when the FBI, at that time my employer, assigned me to New York City, and I promptly looked up their file on the Catholic Worker. I knew they would have one because any group that tried to follow what Isaiah and the gospel tell

you today - feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, try to set right the enormous lack of balance or equity in our society - well, they would be reported as communists or socialists or at least subversive. I found the file and it was marked closed – no evidence of subversion. So then I visited her again – actually to take to lunch one of their lovely young workers. Dorothy looked at me and said with a small smile – remember, now, Navy, government, FBI – “you really are a creature of the state!” She was teasing – or perhaps not.

There s one more piece of the picture in Isaiah-Jesus-feeding the hungry, rescuing the poor. It came about because, in all the years I taught an in-depth course in Catholicism at BC, the midterm test in one semester was Dorothy’s famed autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*. It so moved one of my students that she wrote me a letter at the end of the year to say she was going to join the Catholic Worker in New York. She is still there. Ten-twelve years. She makes me glad of my own vocation – teacher as well as priest. But there is a calling we all have as Jesus people – Christians. Isaiah described it: “Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless, clothe the naked and do not turn your back on your own.” And he concluded, “If you bestow your bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted, then light shall rise for you in the darkness, and the gloom shall become like midday.”.