THE SISTER KARAMAZOV:
DOROTHY DAY’S ENCOUNTER WITH DOSTOEVSKY’S NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the relationship between art and theology, arguing that literature plays a central role in the discipline. John Paul II gives voice to the importance of the arts in the life of the Church, and the influence of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel on Dorothy Day pays witness to the pope’s claim. Nicholas Boyle’s approach to literature as the “site” of theology is used to examine the imagery and discourse in The Brothers Karamazov as reflective of the Gospel story. Stanley Hauerwas’ approach to narrative theology is then applied to contextualize the novel in Dorothy’s life. Not only do encounters with Karamazov characters help guide her path to conversion, but Dostoevsky’s Incarnational vision of the Church takes shape in Dorothy’s daily practices and the formation of the Catholic Worker community. This exploration concludes with a look into the life and work of Fritz Eichenberg, who illustrated Dostoevsky’s novels as well as the Catholic Worker newspaper. Such a portrait enriches one’s understanding of Dostoevsky’s influence on Day and reaffirms John Paul’s claim that art is essential to the renewal of the Church.
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I. LITERATURE AND THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

At the turn of the millennium, Pope John Paul II approved the canonization process for Dorothy Day. Upon hearing the news, the editor of *U.S. Catholic*, Fr. Mark Brummel, C.M.F., wrote that perhaps Dorothy’s “greatest gift was pointing the 20th century American church in a new direction, to the vulnerable and voiceless among us.”\(^1\) Indeed Dorothy helped renew the Church in co-founding the Catholic Worker, a movement which today, a decade into the third millennium, has grown to over 185 communities worldwide. Stanley Vishnewski, a volunteer living in the very first community on Mott St. in Manhattan, described the Worker by telling of the daily encounters with these vulnerable and voiceless of society. Dorothy Day once described it by telling of an encounter with an artist. She revealed to a fellow volunteer, Vishnewski recalls, that “the only way he would ever understand the Catholic Worker was by reading Dostoevsky.”\(^2\) The work and witness worthy of canonization could not be grasped apart from literary art, for the journeys undertaken by Dostoevsky’s characters profoundly illumined Dorothy’s vocation. Though Day met the Russian author’s entire cast, no characters played a more important role in her life than those within the pages of *The Brothers Karamazov* [TBK].

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Months before he opened the canonization cause for Day, John Paul heralded the arts as genuine sources of theology that are essential in guiding the work of the Church. This thesis therefore presents TBK’s influence on Dorothy Day as an illustration of how literary art helps the reader perceive her own life as participating in the Gospel story, with the hope that the pope’s message will be heeded and artists will lead the Church as primary contributors to the field of theology. Though theology programs of American universities acknowledge the value of art in the discipline, literature and other media remain on the fringe of the curricula. Such marginalization was quite evident at the annual College Theology Society this past year. At the conclusion of the section entitled “Art, Literature and Theology,” a theology professor remarked that these papers were “fun” and that she wished she could devote further scholarship to film. The teaching and research commitments at her university, however, took precedence. Another presenter, currently pursuing a professorship in theology, regretted that his work on poetry was not helping his job search. While the CTS board acknowledged the presence of art within the discipline in making this section part of the convention, critical engagement of art and theology appears to be relegated to side projects that occasionally make for fun conference presentations. And yet a work of literature can prove essential to the formation of a woman who pointed the Church in a new direction and in doing so became both a saintly model of the Christian life and an intriguing figure of theological inquiry. Theology needs the arts, and in giving serious scholarly attention and a central role to literature and other media, the discipline can more fully fulfill its task of shaping and inspiring the work of the Church.
“The earth was without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” (Gen 1:2)

On Easter Sunday, 1999, John Paul II delivered a letter that began not with the Gospel account of the resurrection, but rather the Genesis story of creation. He evoked this primordial event in his message, *A Letter to Artists*, for he was calling upon the creative minds and hands of the world to participate in the Paschal Mystery. On the sacred feast celebrating Christ’s restoration of all humankind, the pope issued both a challenge and an inspiration for artists to continue to cultivate redemptive beauty and foster eternal truth through the creative processes of art. These artists, the pope believed, would be instrumental in leading the Church into the third millennium through their song, sculpture and story.

Though the letter begins with an appeal to the Creator, John Paul makes certain to distinguish the divine artist from the human artist: only God can create out of nothing, whereas the singer, sculptor and poet fashion matter already in existence. Yet the connection is rich, claims the pope, as exemplified in the close relationship between creator (*stwórca*) and craftsman (*twórca*) in the Polish language. Just as God the Creator looked upon the work of his hands and saw that it was good, so too the artists of the world are called to exercise their gifts in spreading this goodness. Through the creative process of art—“giving aesthetic form to ideas conceived in the mind”—the artist fashions matter that both attracts the observer and communicates a sense of virtue. “Beauty is the visible form of the good,” John Paul states, “just as the good is the

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metaphysical condition of beauty.” God found all that he made very good, and therefore quite beautiful. Artists aspire to share in this act, illuminating the mystery of the Creator by revealing the aesthetic dimension of his creation. As the pope claims, “In a very true sense, it can be said that beauty is the vocation bestowed on [the artist] by the Creator in the gift of artistic talent.”

No greater gift has been given or mystery contemplated than that of God Incarnate. The crowning moment of the Creator’s masterpiece occurs when the divine takes human form in Jesus Christ so that the world might be redeemed and its original goodness restored. The Gospel according to John illumines the fulfillment of God’s creative act in linking the Genesis story with the Incarnation through the use of the Greek term *Logos*. “In the beginning was the Word,” the evangelist recalls, and from this Word sprung the earth and sun, thus dawning the story of the Hebrew people. Generations later this same Word took human form in a manger, and wisemen from afar paid witness to the advent of Christianity. The synoptic Gospels recount these most glorious events, but it is John who personifies the Divine Artist’s creativity through his Son’s nativity. Additionally, in referencing God as *Logos*, John evokes a third dimension to the mystery of the Incarnation that illumines Christ’s presence in the world. In Hellenistic philosophy, *logos* describes the “ultimate intelligibility of reality,” and so by taking human form Christ not only unveils the face of God to humanity but he also reveals humanity to itself.

If art seeks to penetrate the depths of reality in this created world, then certainly this notion of *logos* provides the artist with a doorway into the mystery. Referencing

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7 Introduction to the Book of John, *The New American Bible.*
Fides et Ratio in his letter to artists, John Paul continues, “God became man in Jesus Christ, who thus becomes the central point of reference for an understanding of the enigma of human existence, the created world and God himself.”8 The Son of God is the Son of man, and the Word became flesh so that human beings may know their Creator and thus comprehend the meaning of their own created lives. Such a revelation continues from the epiphany in Judea to the cross on Golgotha. In his ministry Christ instructed his fellow disciples on the nature of God the Father and provided them with the perfect example of how they are to live in the world. He gave his friends ethical commands and then gave his life to redeem all of humanity, transforming the despair and finality of death into the hope of everlasting life. In becoming flesh the Logos transcended the human condition, and in the Paschal Mystery artists can find inspiration to lift the mundane to the heavens through their craft:

In so far as it seeks the beautiful, fruit of an imagination which rises above the everyday, art is by its nature a kind of appeal to the mystery. Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.9

Though Christ has already granted humanity eternal victory over sin, this truth remains obscure in a temporal world of inescapable suffering and death. And yet amidst this darkness, artists bring forth colors and melodies, shapes and sonnets, that reveal a reality of beauty and goodness deeply imbedded in the world—even in its most profane locations. In this light the pope speaks of “an ethic, even a spirituality of artistic service, which contributes in its way to the life and renewal of a people.”10 Thus art can serve as a passage from the ordinary into the mystery that is God’s creation and Christ’s saving

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8 Letter to Artists, §5: Fides et Ratio (September, 1998), §80 in italics (John Paul’s emphasis).
9 Ibid., §10.
10 Ibid., §4.
truth, and by unveiling the beautiful artists partake in the creative design to redeem humanity.

While John Paul challenges aspiring artists to fulfill their vocation, he also beckons the Church to continue to foster its centuries-old relationship with craftsmen and women. The relationship enjoys a fruitful reciprocity, for not only does the nature of art as a discipline strike at the very core of the Church’s message, but the rich Christian tradition serves as an inspiration to artists of all fields:

Every genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of man and of the world. It is therefore a wholly valid approach to the realm of faith, which gives human experience its ultimate meaning. That is why the Gospel fullness of truth was bound from the beginning to stir the interests of artists, who by their very nature are alert to every “epiphany” of the inner beauty of things.11

From the dawn of the early Church, biblical stories have sparked the imagination of architects, sculptors, and painters alike, and in turn these artists have directed their creative energies toward the revelation of the divine through aesthetic form. In elevating the awareness of those experiencing their craft, artists play a vital role in discovering new pathways to the sacred.

On the feast of the Epiphany, the Roman Catholic Church celebrates the divine manifestation of Jesus Christ—the fullest revelation of God’s mystery—as He is looked upon by earthly kings. In the Orthodox Church, however, the feast celebrates Christ’s baptism—the moment the Holy Spirit descends upon the Savior of the world. The pope calls upon artists to seek new epiphanies of the sublime, evoking not only the radiance of love emanating from the face of God, but also the movement of the Spirit inspiring all creative moments. As the Spirit swept over the primordial waters in the Genesis story and then descended upon the banks of the river Jordan, so too does it rove through the

11 Ibid., §6.
world today, infusing humanity with creative energies. In appealing to artists to continue to craft God’s work through the creative processes of their mind and hands, John Paul completes his Trinitarian portrayal of art in calling upon the breath of the Holy Spirit. His letter concludes, “May your art help to affirm that true beauty which, as a glimmer of the Spirit of God, will transfigure matter, opening the human soul to the sense of the eternal.” Such heavenly inspiration will guide artists as they help renew the Church in the third millennium, leading humanity to likewise rejoice in the goodness proclaimed by the Creator at the dawn of creation.

Opening Book and Soul

Dostoevsky and The Brothers Karamazov serve as a testimony to John Paul’s proclamation, for the artist and his story guided Dorothy Day’s search for God and later founding of the Catholic Worker, a movement fostering the renewal of the Church that continues to gain momentum in the 21st century. Recounting her arduous journey to the doors of the Church back in the 1930s, Dorothy alludes to a seemingly insignificant figure in TBK:

Do you remember that little story that Grushenka told in The Brothers Karamazov? Once upon a time there was a peasant woman and a very wicked woman she was. And she died and did not leave a single good deed behind. The devils caught her and plunged her into a lake of fire. So her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell God. ’She once pulled up an onion in her garden,’ said he, ’and gave it to a beggar woman.’ And God answered: ’You take that onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out…

Sometimes in thinking and wondering at God's goodness to me, I have thought that it was because I gave away an onion. Because I sincerely loved His poor, He taught me to know Him. And when I think of the little I ever did, I am filled with hope and love for all those others

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12 Ibid., §14.
devoted to the cause of social justice. Throughout her writings—including autobiographical books, daily journal entries, and columns in *The Catholic Worker* newspaper—Dorothy draws upon Dostoevsky’s story (at times quoting characters’ dialogue verbatim), in articulating her own narrative. Recalling the conversations between Karamazov characters and events unfolding in the novel, Dorothy illuminates her path from radical communist circles to baptism in the Catholic Church and then later the new direction toward which she would point the Church. Through small acts of compassion to the poor on the streets she met God, and through her encounter with characters in a work of fiction, including a wicked peasant, she found the words to convey these experiences of both the human and the divine.

Such a conversion is not exclusive to Day, for across the globe and decades earlier, Dostoevsky footed a path from socialist organizations in Russia to the Orthodox Church. Though Dostoevsky’s journey is not mirrored in his novel, many of the questions with which he struggled regarding the condition of the Russian people and the Church’s position in society are interjected and elaborated at length throughout his characters’ discussions. The biographies of Dostoevsky reveal that the novelist is concerned primarily with matters of morality in each of his works. As for *TBK*, Dostoevsky himself states that “the Church as a positive social ideal must show itself to be the central idea.” This concept of viewing the moral issues of society through the lens of the Church undergirds Dostoevsky’s story, and it finds a striking parallel in Dorothy Day’s worldview.

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Though Day’s references to Karamazov characters are scattered throughout her writings, she reveals that the novel did not offer merely a few profound lines to log in her memory, but rather played a significant role in the formation of her own character. Entering into the story, Day encounters a deeply theological world that she claims not only inspired her convictions in the Catholic faith, but also shaped her perspective on daily life at the Catholic Worker. This thesis will therefore present Day’s reading of *TBK* and its subsequent effect on her worldview as a twofold study of the necessity of the arts in theology. First, a critical analysis of Dostoevsky’s novel will reveal its theological substance in arguing that such a literary work speaks to the life of the Catholic Church as it reflects the truths contained in Scripture and thereby serves as a conduit of Tradition. Second, the importance of the arts in the study of theology will be demonstrated in examining how the novel provided one of the most influential 20th century theological thinkers, Dorothy Day, with both language and exemplars to more clearly articulate her convictions and more fully recognize her role as a participant in the Gospel story. Encountering *TBK* Dorothy found companions for the journey and continually borrowed from their tales in reflecting on her place in the world as journalist, activist, mother and worker *as vocation*—that is, a calling from God.

While John Paul II proclaims that artists indeed participate in the Paschal Mystery with their craft and in doing so serve as agents of renewal in the Church, the work of additional scholars demonstrates how this proclamation unfolds in the art of Dostoevsky and the life of Day. *TBK* as revelatory of the Gospel truths will be analyzed according to the approach of Nicholas Boyle, a literary historian at the University of Cambridge. In developing his claim that literature is a site of theology, Boyle examines the extent to
which novels contain imagery and discourse reflecting the ethical and doctrinal instruction found in Scripture. These measures are rather pertinent considering that the ethical struggles endured by Karamazov characters rest, according to the author, upon theological premises. Dostoevsky was deeply influenced by Orthodoxy and its teachings—the heart of which remains the passion of Christ—and such beliefs pulsate throughout his Russian tale. Identifying and expounding upon these themes will illustrate the novel’s religious content and illuminate its role in the life of Day, for in her worldview such matters of morality were ultimately theological.

After establishing literature as a site of theology, this study will examine Day’s encounter with the text through Stanley Hauerwas’ approach to narrative theology. Hauerwas’ use of story in situating oneself in the world will serve as the methodology exploring Day’s references to *TBK*. Such exploration will yield a closer approximation of how Day interpreted and re-appropriated the moral truths embodied by Karamazovs in her own historical context, and how this re-appropriation deepened her understanding of her daily engagements. Narrative is central to Hauerwas’ work because all of Revelation is a story, and to understand the Christian life is to recognize oneself as a character in this story that begins with the people of Israel and culminates in the passion of Christ.

Boyle unveils the image of God on the faces of fictional characters and Hauerwas demonstrates how these characters’ embodiment of Christian convictions plays a significant role in the life of the reader. Though their methodologies differ, the approaches of Boyle and Hauerwas serve to complement one another in demonstrating how literary art reveals the inner-reality of God’s creation and Christ’s saving truth as claimed by John Paul in his letter and discovered by Dorothy in *TBK*. The incarnational
representation of humanity in the story inspired Dorothy’s own writings, and the
Karamazov characters’ appeal to the Paschal Mystery acted as epiphanies amidst the
arduousness of daily life at the Worker. Entering into Dostoevsky’s novel, Dorothy Day
encountered humanity as the Body of Christ, broken yet wholly participating in God’s
salvific work. Emerging from the story, with three Russian brothers, an elderly monk
and a sack full of onions, Dorothy would renew the Catholic Church in America.

Reclaiming the Word in the Life of the Church

John Paul II’s call for a renewed relationship with artists echoes the Second
Vatican Council’s appeal to the Church to open its doors to the surrounding world. As
evidenced in Gaudium et Spes, the Synod sought to establish a relationship between the
magisterium and the surrounding cultures—men and women of every vocation—so that
all of creation might witness the truth of Christ as members of His one body. Before the
Council called upon the sharing of gifts between Church and culture, however, it
professed that in which this movement toward solidarity is rooted: Sacred Scripture. In
Dei Verbum, the “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” the Council traced the
spread of Scripture throughout the early Church and expounded its role as both a
revelation of the heavenly and a guide for the human. “This Gospel was to be the source
of all saving truth and moral discipline,”15 the Synod states, and so Christ commanded
the apostles to spread the good news amongst all people. And yet Christ’s summon does
not end with his first followers, but continues today as the Church instructs the faithful on
the biblical story and the teachings it imparts.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word became flesh, and it was then written down and later translated, so that people of all languages may read and partake in the relationship God shares with his creation:

In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them. And such is the force and power of the word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigor, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life.\(^{16}\)

The Father’s interaction with his children takes many forms, providing the Church its historical foundations, hymns of praise, ethical commands, and inspiration to continue the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. Its authors, guided by this same Spirit, endowed the Church with an immovable foundation and inexhaustible wellspring of wisdom that continues to guide its members today. And so in this age the Council reminds the faithful what the writer of Hebrews revealed long ago: “The Word of God is living and active.”\(^{17}\)

While the Council channeled much of its energy into liturgical renewal (where certainly the proclamation of Scripture plays a central role), it also reflected upon new avenues for theological scholarship. Here again, Scripture has much to offer. Though the Word is fully revealed in the Incarnation of Christ, the totality of God and the infinite beauty and goodness contained throughout his creation can never be fully grasped; the world is only completely intelligible to the Creator himself. And yet through the divine inspiration of Scripture, humanity finds words to articulate God’s self-revelation, insofar as it can be known. It is this recording, this “writtenness” that affirms the role of literature in both the foundation of the Church and its continual growth through the study of theology. Characteristic of the God from whom this Word emanates, Scripture is rich and diverse—in both content and form—as the Synod declares, “Truth is differently

\(^{16}\) Ibid., §21.

\(^{17}\) Ibid. Heb 4:12.
presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetical and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression.”18 Though the message is divine, and the writing inspired, the language recorded in Scripture remains human—a function of authorship and culture. In all of its complexity, the Bible invites scholars to explore these literary forms in delving into the mystery that is God, so the children of creation may know more fully what the Father wishes to tell them.

Not only does the Synod call attention to the importance of the “sacred page” for theology, but it also appeals to literature outside of the biblical canon. Both John Paul and the authors of Gaudium et Spes recognized the Spirit’s activity throughout all of creation, and so they promote a dialogue with the artists of the world in hopes of enriching the Church and thus humanity. The Council elaborates on various art forms, with specific reference to literature, as sources of contemplation and knowledge in their portrayal of life’s comedies and tragedies:

[Literature and art] seek to give expression to man’s nature, his problems and his experience in an effort to discover and perfect man himself and the world in which he lives; they try to discover his place in history and in the universe, to throw light on his suffering and his joy, his needs and potentialities, and to outline a happier destiny in store for him.”19

As the breath of the Spirit stirred the minds and hands of the biblical writers long ago, so too does it inspire the creative processes of artists, including authors, today. In its exploration of the human condition, literary art delves into the mystery of creation, and many of the stories that have surfaced retain the potential to enrich the life of the Church and its teachings. Such a relationship with artists pursuing their vocation today can therefore further the mission entrusted to the first disciples. Recalling this insight made

18 Ibid., §12.
by the Council, John Paul states, “Thus the knowledge of God will be made better known; the preaching of the Gospel will be rendered more intelligible to man’s mind and will appear more relevant to his situation.” In opening its doors to the surrounding culture, the Church need not solely send forth its members to instruct; it must also receive the creative talents already at work in the arts. This renewed dialogue will serve to cultivate the life and activity of the Word in the world today.

Literature as the Site of Theology

This conversation regarding the Word of God and the Church’s relationship with the world continues in Nicholas Boyle’s *Sacred and Secular Scriptures: A Catholic Approach to Literature*. Throughout this study, Boyle develops a methodology for reading secular literature not as Revelation, but as revelatory of the Scripture and Tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. By *secular* literature Boyle means non-biblical writing. He is specifically interested in great works of literature arising out of post-Reformation England and how, in a culture perceivably losing its centeredness in God, these works seek to reconcile the Church and the modern world. Unlike sacred Scripture, these secular texts cannot utter any divine command. They do, however, represent the world to which the divine command applies, and Boyle’s exploration of biblical themes throughout their pages seeks to portray these stories as articulations of this world “as the place in need of redemption, as the place that has received redemption, and as the place that our own lives are called to cooperate in redeeming.”

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Though not a trained theologian, Boyle’s work is highly theological. His literary criticism illuminates the sacramentality of the Church alive in the world – a world encountered by seacaptains, socialites, and, if one is willing to suspend his or her disbelief, hobbits. In seeking to demonstrate this sacramentality with designs of reclaiming the secular, Boyle introduces the scope of his project:

I would hope this study might give back to the word “Catholic” something of its original ecumenical meaning: if we can expand our minds enough to guess at the generous dimensions of our father’s house, we shall not be surprised to discover that we all have mansions in it.²²

Boyle’s approach is grounded in a particular faith, yet because this faith is Catholic, his aim encompasses the universal. By reading secular texts as an exercise in Catholic theology, individuals might begin to more fully understand God’s relation to the world and, as corollaries, the meaning of their own existence and vocation. And it is Boyle’s hope that after these books are returned to the shelf and the tasks for the day are complete, all persons may, much like the children of Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram, find rest in their respective quarters of the Father’s grand estate.

Perhaps fittingly, or at least necessarily, Boyle’s approach to regaining the ecumenical meaning of Catholicism crosses disciplines within the academy. His quest, however, is not an exercise in exploring history through English or grounding theology in philosophy. Rather, he seeks to recover the sacred word of the Church and make it more accessible to the surrounding cultures. The place where the ecclesial and the worldly interpenetrate and find meaning in its shared relationship, Boyle attempts to convey, is literature. He adopts this notion of “literature as the site of theology” from an article written by the theologian Marie-Dominique Chenu, O.P., following the Second Vatican

Council. The article, *La littérature comme ‘lieu’ de la théologie*, expounds the messages contained in both *Dei Verbum* and *Gaudium et Spes*, offering theologians a practical application of these insights. Chenu, depicted by Boyle as “an inspired mediator on the relation between the sacred and the secular, the church and the world, in what were for him clearly related fields of historical thinking and moral acting,” believed that for the Church to fruitfully enter the modern world, it had to return to its ancient instructor: Scripture. It is Scripture that shaped the communities and inspired the theologians of the early Church, and by recovering this word the Church can both strengthen its foundation and renew its relationship with the surrounding culture. To accomplish this task—to serve as a “divinely ordained mediation between human culture and divine truth” the Bible must be read, according to Chenu, as literature. What the Bible presents, unlike that of Catholic theology leading up to the Second Vatican Council, are not methods and arguments, but rather stories:

The Bible is a literature. God is revealed in it not through a system of ideas…but through a history, and through many stories, through men with individual faces and various destinies…since God did not think it robbery to become a writer, it is only just if men recognize him in this capacity and take the Bible as, formally, literature.

To relate the sacred to the human culture, a specific people in a particular time and place, God sent forth the Spirit to stir the creativity of the culture’s writers. The stories of shepherds and virgins, prophets and fishermen, took shape.

From this proposal by Chenu, Boyle develops his own hypothesis that if literature serves as a site of theology, then it must necessarily consist of various literary forms, including both sacred and secular texts. The divine emanates from sacred literature—

23 Ibid., 3.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 4.
“noninstrumental writing that enunciates the preoriginal command,” but its light of truth can be reflected through secular literature—“noninstrumental writing for the sake of pleasure.”27 While Scripture proceeds from the stwórca, the twóra participates in the creative act through literary art, illuminating revelation in form and content. Like Boyle, John Paul II also recognizes Chenu’s theological insights in his aforementioned letter, drawing upon the theologian’s view of literary art as “not only aesthetic representations, but genuine sources of theology.”28 Building upon this vision, Boyle seeks a profoundly Catholic approach to literature that seeks to expand the role of literary art as a vehicle of truth traversing all cultures. Boyle’s argument unfolds in a search for truth as mediated through stories, sacred and secular, paving a path for the Church in the world and lighting the way for society unto the steps of the cathedral:

Literature is the site of theology because literature, biblical and nonbiblical, is a place where sacred and secular meet. A Catholic can expect to find in the words of noncanonical and even non-Christian writings something, though not of course everything, of the moral and doctrinal instruction to be found in sacred Scripture, just as we expect the Bible to illuminate our contemporary lives.29

Literature, as theology, provides a key to opening the doors to a Catholic way of life through its depiction of characters’ convictions and interactions reflective of scriptural teachings and revelatory of the human spirit—a spirit sprung from the lips of the Creator, breathing life into author, protagonist and reader alike.

Boyle traces a series of arguments and claims by notable thinkers in an effort to develop a hermeneutic for reading literature from a Catholic approach. He initiates the discussion in asserting, “If we have correctly defined the nature of the Catholic reference of a work—the greater or lesser extent to which it embodies truth—that Catholic

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27 Boyle, 142.
28 Chenu, “La teologia nel XII secolo” (1992), 9, as quoted in Letter to Artists, §11.
29 Boyle, 7. As an example of non-Christian writings, Boyle references the pagan poets from which St. Paul draws to more clearly convey his message (Acts 17:28).
reference will prove to correspond to some fundamental feature of the work’s literary character and value.”\textsuperscript{30} These references are judged according to the greater or lesser extent they reflect not only the ethical commands contained in Scripture, but also the teachings established throughout the Church’s Tradition. As literature, the Bible exists as both a product of an author and an expression of a people—a culture out of which the language arises. Though particular in origin, its significance transcends time and space through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles at Pentecost, signifying that “Christianity speaks in as many tongues as world history provides.”\textsuperscript{31} Commissioned by Christ and guided by the Spirit, the early disciples set forth to proclaim the good news throughout the world and thus began the formation of the Church. Over the ages, the Church has not only spread the Word, but has offered critical interpretation and exegesis expounding the truths inherent in the biblical stories.

Such contributions guide Boyle’s approach to literature, and his methodology elucidates Church doctrine through the exploration of works that prove revelatory of creation. ”If we believe the teachings of the Catholic Church to be true statements about human life,” writes Boyle, “then we must necessarily expect literature that is true to life to reflect and corroborate them, whether or not it is written by Catholics.”\textsuperscript{32} A Catholic approach to literature insists one reads from the starting point of faith, and literature that is “true to life” necessarily tells something of what it means to be human—created by God, redeemed in Christ and animated with the Spirit:

What supreme works of secular literature reveal is...the permanent interaction of Law, judgment, and reconciliation which is the source of our existence insofar as it is open to us to know it. The revelation at the heart of secular literature is in the

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 50. Here Boyle draws on Hegel’s argument against historicism, which claims that an event in a particular culture could not have universal significance.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 139.
The supreme works today reflect the ancient story of Scripture in which a people are called forth to love its God and its neighbor, and though they struggle in a world wrought with sin and death, the promise of redemption remains unbroken.

For Boyle, the Word is key in approaching literature, both as the source of the Law and its fulfillment in Christ. Morality begins with God and takes form through language that is communicated in the very first utterance of the Genesis story. Literature, constructed by artists participating in that creative act, partakes in the proclamation of this Word. Boyle’s claim that “works of literature are made out of language, out of the original symbolic exercise of my preoriginal responsibility for my neighbor,”

unites cultures of every language under the covenant established by God, and therefore literature tells the universal story of human interaction in the world. Failures and triumphs are recorded and pathways of sin as well as roads to redemption are illuminated, for though the Word issues a command that is often transgressed, it ultimately forgives and reconciles all things in the moment it becomes flesh.

Though what gives the realities articulated in secular texts meaning and significance is not primarily their literary presentation but rather their relationship to the Word of God, the linguistic form of these stories serves as another valuable tool in Boyle’s analysis. In defining secular literature as non-purposive language for the sake of pleasure, Boyle contrasts such discourse with the manipulative or utilitarian use of daily exchanges and scientific language which inhibit one to experience the world as it appears. Genuine literature therefore does not (and cannot) issue forth an authoritative command.

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 133.
or seek to reconcile enemies; only God can provide such things. What it does communicate, however, is that the world “as is” is worthy of God’s redemptive love:

However appalling or dispiriting, however low or laughable, the life that is presented, sinful just as it is, serving no further purpose but just being there—life as it is for its Maker and Redeemer—is affirmed by the act of representation to be worth the labor and love and attention that go into showing it (by the artist) and the recognizing it (by the audience).35

For Boyle, as for the author, literature need not partake in purposive discourse or dictate a moral lesson to its reader. The author seeks transparency, for he or she has no claim on the world of the story—it remains, as the world does in reality, accessible to all people. The only conceivable purpose of secular literature is to provide pleasure, which it fulfills in portraying the human condition as worthy of God’s love. Authors participate in this love through their labor, thereby communicating moral truths in the fashioning of their works.

A Catholic approach to literature begins with the postulate that life matters, and this “mattering” originates in the Holy Spirit, whose breath stirs the minds and hearts of writers in the creative processes of their art. Through their work they participate in the divine, illuminating the Paschal Mystery that so truthfully conveys the suffering, death and resurrection through which all persons can partake in the life of Christ. Upon a cross can humanity find the justification of its being, for as Boyle notes, “Only as revelation that the world and existence matter eternally—matter so much that the God who made them died to restore them—is the phenomenon of literature possible.”36 Again, literature discloses meaning in this world insofar as the stories told relate to the source, savior, and animator that is the Triune God. Sacred texts contain Revelation, and secular texts can

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid. Boyle reverses Nietzsche’s claim: “Only as an aesthetic phenomenon is the world and existence eternally justified.”
prove revelatory of this supreme truth bound forever to the world that it both created and redeemed.

Though Boyle argues secular stories can be read as Bible, he reminds the reader these literary works can in no way be substituted for Bible. As modern being implies a secularity that is “forgetful of its origins in God,” so secular scriptures “become the limit case of sacred scripture, the word of God no longer as an address to us—as God’s reply to our prayer—but as the inarticulate groanings of the Spirit within us—as our prayer itself.” The Word does not originate from secular texts, but such literature serves as a potential vehicle for the culture to find its way back to God. The Church, led by the Spirit, must discern the presence of this same Spirit in the creative literary works of all cultures and serve as the mediator between sacred and secular texts. Such guidance and instruction will serve to illuminate the truth of the world and humanity as reflected in the settings and characters of stories today. Adopting Boyle’s methodology, the Church can indeed enter into a fruitful relationship with the modern world, opening its sacred doors to the surrounding secular culture in fulfillment of Chenu’s vision of literature as the site of theology.

Narrative Theology: Literature Forming Character

Nicholas Boyle offers an approach to exploring literature that aids the reader in critical analysis of and reflection on the religious truths revealed in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Though Dostoevsky is not one of the authors whose works are analyzed by Boyle, *TBK* makes for an appropriate case study. Like the English novels, the Russian classic can be read as a story in which the sacred seeks to reclaim the secular world. In

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fact, for this example, Boyle’s prescriptive reading lenses are required. Reading this story as Bible reveals the Gospel promise of redemption upon which rests the Karamazov world—the very promise by which the author prayed healing would come to his suffering Russia. Such a Catholic approach to literature illustrates God’s relationship with humanity as portrayed by Dostoevsky, and this methodology thereby helps one better understand what Dorothy Day encountered in her reading of TBK.

But this encounter did not end when Dorothy turned the final page. Rather, it continued in the daily interactions with the people around her as well as in the published columns and diary entries reflecting upon these interactions, for TBK illumined Dorothy’s perspective on her role in the world and the Church throughout her lifetime. While Boyle’s study guides one in looking into the story, the work of an additional scholar seeks to explain how the reader grows out of the story. Stanley Hauerwas details the narrative quality of human experience in incorporating the role of story for theological reflection. He examines the ethical life as the embodiment of religious convictions portrayed through characters and events that develop and unfold in story form, arguing that these accounts play a vital role in directing the reader’s moral compass in the world. Such insights further reveal Dorothy’s encounter with TBK and its role in shaping her own character as well as the vision of the Catholic Worker. In effect, this study continues from literature as the site of theology to narrative theology as the grounds for morality.

In the article From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics, Hauerwas and co-writer David Burrell demonstrate the inadequacy of existing scientific models of ethical decision making which lack the narrative element necessary for moral reflection and formation. In this modern scientific age, the story has been
abandoned by ethicists and moral theologians who focus on systematic approaches to ethical decision-making. Books have thus been relegated to bedtime reading—a brief escape from reality after a long day’s work. Authors and their works become fantasy—regardless of the genre—and the encounters the characters experience are disconnected from the world in which the reader lives. Consequently, the reader can become disconnected to his or her own story. Whereas Boyle states that when we enter the world of a text, it manifests “something to which we belong or in which we are rooted before we start the business of reasoning, verifying, using, and exploiting to which functional language is devoted,” Hauerwas warns against the quest for "impartial rationality” by scientific methods seeking to uproot the individual from such a world.

As Boyle approaches literature from the Catholic tradition, so Hauerwas approaches ethics within a framework he labels narrative. Hauerwas describes this term as a “crucial conceptual category for such matters as understanding issues of epistemology and methods of argument, depicting personal identity, and displaying the content of Christian convictions.” Though the category of narrative takes on multiple meanings—including the search for truth and virtue within a community or tradition—and appears at times interchangeable with story, this study will distinguish narrative as the form of human experience and story as a literary work, i.e., TBK. (Such a qualification, however, does not deny the overlap of the two categories. For example, Dostoevsky’s novel certainly relates a search for truth within a tradition, just as Day’s life experiences comprise her own story.) For Hauerwas, the revelation of God’s Word is a narrative, and thus theology must account for the character of lived experience as

39 ibid., 70. Boyle borrows this language from Ricoeur.
portrayed through the various peoples, places and events that intersect through history.

Yet the writings that capture these things are not merely reports of what happened, but accounts that explore the dynamics of human activity:

A story, thus, is a narrative account that binds events and agents together in an intelligible pattern. We do not tell stories simply because they provide us a more colorful way to say what can be said in a different way, but because there is no other way we can articulate the richness of intentional activity—that is, behavior that is purposeful but not necessary. For as any good novelist knows there is always more involved in any human action than can be said.”

So too does human action involve more than can be explained by principle or theory, and therefore Hauerwas claims ethicists should shift their focus from applied methods of “impartial rationality” to lived experiences within a narrative context. Such a context reflects the “arbitrary and contingent nature of the agent’s beliefs, dispositions, and character” and is therefore more appropriately suited to explore the complexity of the moral life.

How stories shape one’s perception of reality and thus one’s sense of being in the world speaks to the relationship between art and morality, a relationship Hauerwas deems “tricky” in his attempt to elucidate such matters:

Let’s suppose that through reading the novel you gained the skill to articulate a haunting insight that you had intuitively known but had not been able to state with clarity, e.g., no one can love without causing pain. Now as so often happens when we finish a good novel, we want to share the novel and the insight with someone else, but somehow the insight sounds platitudinous separated from the novel itself…So in order to rescue the insight you try to tell the novel to your companion, but that doesn’t work either because there is no way in the telling you can capture the subtlety of description.

The power of the novel lies in its ability to portray the web of intricacies that shape the development of a character—much like the intricacies that, not coincidentally, guide the

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41 Hauerwas, Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1977), 76.
43 Truthfulness and Tragedy, 77
contingent thoughts and actions of persons in the non-fiction world. Such portrayals seek to convey what Hauerwas calls the *irreducible particular*—“that which cannot be other than it is and thus cannot be accounted for by any other.” This particular marks the fundamental characteristic of narrative theology, for Hauerwas uses story in arguing against systems of universal moral reasoning that uproot the truths of Christianity from their particular context. Like the insights that cannot be captured apart from the novel, so these religious truths are more fully grasped when rooted in the history of God’s work with a specific people.

At first glance this focus on the particular perhaps appears in opposition to Boyle’s claim that literature proves revelatory of *universal* truths. But these truths are universal, Boyle claims, only because they are rooted in the Creator of all things. In portraying particular worlds and the human activity that stirs throughout them, authors of secular literature can provide universal insights reflective of the truthful account of humanity’s relationship with God conveyed through sacred literature, i.e., the Bible. Referring to these secular stories as “analogues of revelation,”44 Boyle necessarily implies the particularity of God’s work that cannot be reduced to a concept but only reflected by other particular stories. It is precisely this condition that enables the human condition to be illuminated, and Boyle illustrates such a claim in his example of exploring a particular world—albeit a small island—whereby “a light in which life as a whole presents itself to us, for which the name, the only name, is *The Tempest*.”45 Whether crafted by Shakespeare or Dickens or Dostoevsky, these literary worlds are

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44 Boyle, 127.
45 Ibid.
likewise irreducible, and therefore Boyle’s attempt to bridge sacred and secular scriptures by way of analogy can serve to complement Hauerwas’ own narrative approach.

Story as an Articulation of Religious Conviction

As a Christian theologian, Hauerwas examines the ethical life in the light of religious conviction. As noted above, the reason narrative plays a primary role in the ethical life is that God is revealed to the world through a story—the story of a covenant made with the people of Israel, and the fulfillment of this covenant in Jesus Christ—which not only conveys a truthful way of living but also calls the reader to participate in such a life. Such a story illuminates the human condition inasmuch as it reveals the God in whose image and likeness humanity is created. Thus, contends Hauerwas, the “Gospel is a story that gives you a way of being in the world.” It is the story of Jesus Christ embodying unconditional love in this world, the suffering that this love entails, and the courage to move forward. For Christians, morality finds its rightful guide in Christ, and the ethical life flows from the stories of disciples and saints who, throughout history, have cast aside their nets and taken up the cross.

While Boyle adopts Chenu’s claim for literature as the site of theology, Hauerwas refers to story as the grammar of theological reflection. Exploring the human condition, stories communicate moral insights that arise out of the interactions between characters, and these insights enable the reader to better articulate his or her own experience—that is, to begin to see, to listen, and to understand. And through this articulation, this clearer perception of one’s relationship with the world and humanity, one begins to probe the

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46 Truthfulness and Tragedy, 73 (my emphasis).
47 An allusion to Mt. 13:13 (“This is why I speak to them in parables,” Christ replies, “because they look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand.”)
mystery that is God. “Thus,” contends Hauerwas, “if we are to learn to speak of God we must learn to speak of him in stories.” A commandment can neither love nor be loved, and so God reveals himself through the Incarnation—a revelation that embodies the narrative quality of human experience. Stories, not unlike the parables told long ago, give us the language to reflect upon this revelation in portraying the human interactions that are themselves reflective of Christ’s encounter with the world.

Stories speak of God by imparting knowledge of the world, helping the reader to situate him or herself in it and thereby develop a keener perception of the events and actions that unfold. While characters are not created for imitation—that is, as prototypes for ethical decision-making—their engagements in a fictitious world can help one grasp the realities of his or her own experiences. Hauerwas and Burrell identify this paradigmatic importance of narrative as they state, “In allowing ourselves to adopt and be adopted by a particular story, we are in fact assuming a set of practices which will shape the ways we relate to our world.” Stories not only give us the language to speak of God, but they portray a world that, if we are willing to enter into, can affect the way we engage our present reality.

Central to these stories are the characters and the relationships formed among them, and the interactions that take place offer insight into the moral life. Human action involves far more than any verbal expression or physical movement, and so Hauerwas claims we must rely on narratives in attempting “to make intelligible the muddle of things we have done in order to have a self.” While ethicists may be concerned with acting (such as a response to a moral dilemma), Hauerwas views the ethical life as being—how

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48 *Truthfulness and Tragedy*, 79.
49 “From System to Story,” 186.
50 *Truthfulness and Tragedy*, 76.
an agent develops a way of life. A character is not placed in a narrative context and presented with a situation whereupon he or she makes a choice (for better or for worse) to teach *the moral of the story*. Rather, the narrative context arises out of a character’s set of practices acquired throughout his or her particular journey, and the connections he or she makes with surrounding people and places retain a significance that shapes the character as the plot unfolds. Narrative is therefore essential to understanding the self as it accounts for the individual’s development through these experiences.

**Tragic Stories**

Though these encounters take many forms, including the cultivation of friendships or the confrontation with an antagonist, such connections often fail to reveal the depths of the Christian life. The stories that best enable one to understand his or her being in the world, according to Hauerwas, are those that render human activity meaningful through the light of religious conviction. The element of the story necessary for this revelation is *moral tragedy*. It is the form the Gospel takes, and therefore the narrative component he identifies as most fully shaping a truthful life:

> We do not wish to face the truth that we live in a world where honesty and faithfulness do not always lead to good results and consequences, but sometimes to tragic choices. It is only when we admit this and learn to embody it in our lives that we can begin to understand why Christian ethics is not basically an ethics of principle, but rather a story of a God who is found most vividly in the past and continuing history of Israel and in the form of the Cross.\(^{51}\)

This sense of the tragic—*how meaning transcends power*\(^{52}\)—serves as a central theme of narrative directing the reader in his or her pursuit of the Christian life. Ethics as an objective rationality cannot account for the tragic that inevitably faces individuals.

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\(^{51}\) *Ibid.*, 70.
\(^{52}\) “From System to Story,” 185.
seeking to follow the teachings of the Gospel. Not only did Christ reject the three
temptations offered by Satan in the wilderness, but he also refused to summon the legion of angels to destroy Roman forces and rescue him from crucifixion. He remained obedient to his Father’s command and in doing so placed tragedy at the center of the moral life. The King of Glory took the form of a slave, perfected the virtues and was crowned with thorns, stood for justice and was hanged on a cross between two thieves. And yet still this death brought new life, transcending worldly power and transforming the human experience of suffering in this world. The tragic character of Christian ethics—the reality of sacrificial love and suffering embodied by Christ in the story of the Paschal Mystery—therefore, can only be reflected through stories whose characters enter into this mystery in their own particular context.

Boyle also investigates this notion of tragedy, albeit as a literary genre, and his own theological groundwork resonates with Hauerwas’ claim. One can read secular scriptures as a window into the sacred to the extent that the text reveals a truthful account of the human condition as portrayed in the biblical stories. Even secular literature that takes the form of tragedy serves as pleasurable reading for its audience, for, as Boyle notes, such pleasure stems from “the consolation that is the sharing of grief and horror.”53 The audience does not find joy in the tragic fall itself, but rather in sharing “the pain of knowing the truth about our shared condition.”54 Such stories possess the capacity to penetrate the reader’s soul as they relate the brokenness and finiteness of this world—a place in which even the most valiant of heroes fall. But again, this dark reality is not only illuminated but also transcended by the Gospel account of Christ’s passion.

53 Boyle, 130.
54 Ibid.
“The great tragedies…,” Boyle relates, “furnish us with a hint or foretaste of the one great Christian truth: God, the source of all existence, suffers too, and therefore we can trust that in and beyond the suffering there lies redemption.”\textsuperscript{55} Tragic stories offer a deeper understanding of theological convictions in their portrayal of the human condition as inescapable from suffering, despite, and at times a result of, one’s best attempt to live virtuously. And with this pain and suffering comes the desire to be made whole again (or perhaps the realization that suffering is a part of being whole)—a reality promised and fulfilled in Christ’s redemptive act.

**Toward Vocation**

The command to live faithfully which God plants in the heart of Israel becomes a way of life perfectly modeled as the Word becomes flesh in Jesus Christ. The biblical narrative for Boyle, like Hauerwas, plays a prominent role in the ethical formation of Christians not as a set of guidelines, but as the concrete embodiment of a love practiced and a suffering endured:

We hear the call of the “ought” not as simple, and with the innocence of the Old Covenant, but as complex, modulated now by the sorrow of loss and the joy of restoration, and as the voice of experience, the experience of a particular moment when a death changed the ethical history of the world and the New Covenant was inaugurated.\textsuperscript{56}

The commandment to love one another now includes the addendum—\textit{as I have loved you}.\textsuperscript{57} Christ serves not merely as an example of the divine call, but a person who enters into an intimate relationship with each person baptized in his name. In this sacrament one embraces the Messiah and in doing so offers his or her life as a witness to the truth he

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 130-131.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 91.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 90.
embodied. For the Christian, this testimony marks the moral life. For the artist, the human condition as being worthy of God’s love makes the world worth representing, and writing such stories helps deepen the reader’s understanding of this reality.

Though Nicholas Boyle views literary texts as revelatory of universal truths while Stanley Hauerwas uses narrative to account for the particularity of Christian convictions, both of their methodologies rest on the biblical story as the foundation for narratives that impart knowledge and guide the self in the vocational life. Boyle’s exploration of literature as the site of theology attempts, from a Catholic approach, to answer Hauerwas’ crucial question of narrative theology: which stories best enable us to speak of [God] and of our relation to him truthfully? 58

For Dorothy Day, The Brothers Karamazov became one of these stories. While this chapter introduces the argument for literature to be read as theology and Christian convictions to be understood in their narrative context, Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate these claims in the art of Dostoevsky and the life of Day. Chapter 2 explores the imagery and discourse of the Karamazov characters as reflective of the Gospel story, and it provides a portrait of these characters’ creator as well. Knowing Dostoevsky’s experiences deepens one’s understanding of the realities depicted in the novel, for the suffering and redemption embodied in his characters arose from his encounters with a people heavily burdened by Russian life. Chapter 3 applies the narrative approach in contextualizing the novel in Dorothy’s life by tracing her journey and identifying the various encounters with Karamazov characters that play out in her daily engagements and help guide her path to the Church. Chapter 4 revisits Boyle and Hauerwas’ respective approaches in light of Dostoevsky’s Incarnational vision of the Church as manifested in

58 Truthfulness and Tragedy, 79.
“T.B.K.” and carried forth in the practices of Dorothy and the Catholic Worker community. That a vision portrayed through fictional characters could help frame Dorothy Day’s understanding of her life and work as participating in the Gospel story, testifies to John Paul II’s Easter proclamation that artists illuminate the Paschal Mystery and their art serves to renew the Church.
II. DOSTOEVSKY’S VISION AND *THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV*

Recounting the day she stopped in a second-hand bookstore and stumbled across Dostoevsky’s *The Insulted and the Injured*—a book that she had already read but purchased anyway and started reading again that night, Dorothy relates the story and the revelation she discovered within its pages:

> It is the story of a young author—it might be Dostoevsky himself—of the success of his first book, and of how he read it aloud to his foster father. The father said, “It’s a simple little story, but it wrings your heart. What’s happening all around you grows easier to understand and to remember, and you learn that the most down-trodden, humblest man is a man, too, and a brother.” I thought as I read those words, “That is why I write.”

A journalist who explored rather complex events and issues such as political revolutions, Dorothy Day roots her vocation as a writer in this *simple little story*. For Dorothy, responding to God’s call meant recognizing the dignity of even the lowliest of people and offering them compassion as a sister might offer a brother. The insight discovered by the father upon hearing the young author’s first story helped Dorothy articulate her vocation as a writer. In his final story, Dostoevsky created three more sons (and a much less sympathetic father), who offered Dorothy perspective on the struggles she experienced in her youth as well as the work to which she later committed herself at the Catholic Worker.

Completed in 1880, the year before Dostoevsky’s death, *The Brothers Karamazov* proved to be a culmination of creativity flowing from the experiences that both tortured

and inspired the author in his native Russia. Before examining the relationship between TBK and Day, one needs to examine the role the novel played for Dostoevsky and his own search for meaning. An exploration of his life experiences enables one to more fully comprehend the reality and depth of the human condition as portrayed by Karamazov characters. Additionally, tracing this narrative also allows one to gain an understanding of why the novel had a deep resonance with Dorothy’s journey, for there exists a rich parallel between Dostoevsky’s inspiration for writing and the reason for which Day proclaims she was writing. Though decades and oceans apart, both of these figures shunned the institutional faith in which they were raised and embraced a political ideology seeking to liberate the masses. They also shared indelible childhood experiences, however, in which a seed of faith was implanted and, in time, would grow into a most influential vision for the Church. Their pursuit of political ends enabled them to learn firsthand of the struggles endured by the vulnerable and voiceless, and in these experiences, including prison sentences, they had revelations that nurtured their faith and shaped their understanding of God and humanity. These rich parallels contributed to the profundity of TBK’s role in Dorothy’s life, for in this literary work the Russian author infused a lifetime of searching, suffering and yearning for redemption into the characters Dorothy would meet during her own trials.

A Portrait of the Young Dostoevsky

The question of God’s existence haunted Fyodor Dostoevsky his entire life, and if one looks at the people he encountered and the trials he endured this question becomes not so much a philosophical concept but rather a terrifying reality. Born in 1821 into a devoutly Christian family in Moscow, Dostoevsky’s early childhood included weekly
attendance at mass in the Orthodox Church and an annual pilgrimage to St. Serguis Trinity Monastery 60 miles outside of town. His parents raised their children in a modest household where education was a priority and religion permeated all facets of life. Though Dostoevsky memorized prayers and read the lives of the saints with great excitement, one of his earliest and most profound memories of the sacred happened during an encounter under rather profane circumstances. In his diary, Dostoevsky recalls playing in the forest not far from his house when he heard a voice cry out that a wolf was on the loose. Stricken by fear, he darted toward a peasant plowing a nearby field. Out of the “many gray hairs in his bushy flaxen beard” came a “motherly” smile from this elderly man, Marey, who stroked young Fyodor’s cheek with his blackened hand. The peasant comforted him and said, “Christ be with you, now, go.” Then, as the diary passage concludes, “He made the sign of the cross over me, and crossed himself as well.”60 This image of a worn and lowly serf offering fatherly compassion in the name of Christ remained an indelible memory to the young Dostoevsky, and it would play a significant role in shaping his beliefs regarding the Russian soul and vision of the Church.

Before these convictions fully blossomed, however, Dostoevsky sought a path that led him away from Orthodox religious practice, and it nearly cost his life. Alexander I’s accession to power as tsar of Russia in 1801 brought great enthusiasm amongst intellectuals seeking social improvements, including the abolition of serfdom. The emperor quickly redirected his plans for national reform toward conquering Napoleon’s forces in Europe, however, and after his military victories he subsequently repressed any

progressive ideas arising in Russia. Yet liberal thought remained strong amongst the aristocracy, and, upon the unexpected death of Alexander, a society known as the Decembrists staged an uprising during the coronation of the new tsar, Nicholas I. It failed, and the tsar sentenced the ringleaders to death and their followers to life imprisonment in Siberia. As Dostoevsky biographer Joseph Frank notes, “Nicholas thus provided the nascent Russian intelligentsia with its first candidates for the new martyrology that would soon replace the saints of the Orthodox Church.”\(^6^1\) Though Dostoevsky was but four years old at the time, it marked the beginning of a movement in which the aspiring author would later find himself fully immersed.

Two decades later another secret society, the Petrashevsky Circle, was exposed and its members arrested by this same Nicholas. Dostoevsky was 28, and his name was on the list. Receiving an education at the Military Engineering Academy in St. Petersburg—where his classmates called him “monk Fotií” because of his strict observance of Orthodox rites and long conversations with Father Poluektov over the priest’s lectures—Dostoevsky read the Gospels faithfully and prayed the *Hours of Devotions* regularly.\(^6^2\) He was being groomed in traditional Russian fashion as a stately officer and devout adherent of the Church. But his studies also included courses on Schiller, Hugo, and Dickens, to name a few, and the more he delved into these works the more his interests turned away from Russia and towards western Europe. In these writers he found a new Christian socialism that, though he believed reflected the central idea of Orthodoxy, would lead him into a position of opposition against the Russian Church.

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After three years of service in the army, Dostoevsky explored these ideas as he embarked on a writing career kick-started by the success of his first novel, *Poor Folk*. Though fiction, his novel critiqued the unfair social conditions for the all too prevalent lower classes in Russia, and this depiction was well received in the intellectual circles seeking social and political reform. One leader of such a circle was Vissarion Belinsky, and Dostoevsky soon became a regular attendee of his meetings. Through this society he also met the revolutionary Mikhail Petrashevsky, and though Dostoevsky never chose to partake in any forceful measures to overthrow the tsar, his participation in discussions regarding the abolition of serfdom, equal rights, and freedom of the press led to his conviction. These ringleaders were known radical atheists, and so what began as utopian ideas built upon socialist thought in *Poor Folk* soon turned into propaganda against the government and Church. When the Petrashevsky Circle was finally exposed, the primary accusation brought against Dostoevsky was his public reading of Belinsky’s letter to the revered Russian novelist Gogol, which included this critique against Orthodoxy:

That you [Gogol] base your teaching on the Orthodox Church, I can understand, it has always served as the prop of the knout and the servant of despotism; but why have you mixed Christ up in this? What in common have you found between Him and any church, least of all the Orthodox Church?63

While Belinsky regarded Christ as a “possible recruit to socialism”64 for the freedom and equality he preached, he believed Orthodoxy was but an oppressive force under the tsar’s reign. Furthermore, contrary to Gogol’s claim that the Russian people “are the most religious in the world,” Belinsky called them “profoundly atheistic” insofar as they

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63 *Seeds of Revolt*, 288.
64 Jones, 4.
practice a religion of mysticism and ritual void of any personal faith. While Dostoevsky—still in his twenties—fell under the influence of these radicals, the degree to which he adopted their stance against the Church has been the topic of debate amongst scholars. Nevertheless, his participation in this society and delivery of Belinsky’s letter was enough evidence for Nicholas I to convict Dostoevsky and impose the severest of punishments. The young author’s final sentence would be death.

On December 22, 1849, Dostoevsky and his fellow members of the Petrashevsky Circle were taken to the Semyonovsky Parade Ground. They were given the cross to kiss, swords were broken, and in groups of three they were marched to posts to which they were tied as they awaited execution. Dostoevsky was able to recall these events in a letter he wrote his brother later that evening, for at the moment death was descending upon them, the tsar’s messenger delivered a pardon to the prisoners. Instead, they were to be exiled in Siberia for eight years. And it was in this forsaken prison at Omsk—amidst the most corrupt of criminals—that Dostoevsky, ironically, would discover the soul of the Russian people and undergo the beginnings of a spiritual transformation that found its fullest artistic expression in The Brothers Karamazov.

When Did I See You in Prison?

Though Dostoevsky wrestled with his view of the Orthodox Church and its apparent indifference towards serfdom, he remained steadfast in his belief in the Gospel values and love for Christ. He now found himself contemplating this mystery more

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65 Seeds of Revolt, 288.
67 Dostoevsky’s sentence was reduced to four years imprisonment in exchange for six years of military service to follow.
frequently and intensely as the only reading material provided at Omsk was a copy of the New Testament. It must have been a source of solace from the loneliness he endured away from his friends and family as well as from the contempt he felt toward the filthy men surrounding him on the prison grounds. The more he interacted with his fellow inmates, however, the more he began to realize that even the lowly and broken, or rather precisely the lowly and broken, are the bearers of Russia’s soul. Mystery became reality as Dostoevsky encountered the Christ of the Gospels in the prisoners of Omsk,\textsuperscript{68} who, much like the peasant Marey years before, revealed to Dostoevsky a humble spirit and simple faith. Unlike his comrades in the utopian societies who immersed themselves in the pursuit of their own ideologies, these criminals professed sentiments that originated in their religious upbringing, however elementary. Though corrupt, they represented the common people of Russia, and as Dostoevsky’s friend and disciple Vladimir Soloviev notes, such criminals remained loyal to the country and faithful to the Church:

> Even the worst of the common people usually safeguard that which people of the intelligentsia lose: faith in God and consciousness of their sinfulness...Forgotten by the Church and oppressed by the State, these people believed in the Church and did not repudiate the State.\textsuperscript{69}

Despite their brokenness, or perhaps because of it, these people cultivated the Russian spirit humbled by sin and longing for redemption. Such a realization profoundly struck Dostoevsky the morning he attended Easter mass—celebrated inside the prison walls—with his fellow convicts. “When, with the chalice in his hands,” Dostoevsky recalls, “the priest read the words accept me, O Lord, even as the thief, almost all of them bowed down to the ground with the clanking of chains.”\textsuperscript{70} The dramatic sanctity marking this

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., xiii.
\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Mantle of the Prophet}, 9.
moment of brotherhood forever remained with Dostoevsky, and it was his hope that this same spirit would arise unshackled in a renewed Russia.

Though Dostoevsky recognized the folly of his participation in radical societies as he served out his sentence, his vision to uplift the peasant class of Russia started to materialize in the very punishment he received for such participation. In prison he read the Gospel stories and communed with repentant sinners. He met members of the Decembrists—the failed revolutionaries—and also their wives, who faithfully and selflessly followed their convicted husbands to the desolate outskirts of Siberia. Through these daily interactions he gained a deeper understanding of community and realized the faith of the Russian people is bound to the Savior, not any socio-political theory. Utopian thinkers like Belinsky were wrong, for, as Dostoevsky claimed, it was precisely in the common folk that Christian belief could be found:

I affirm that our people were enlightened a long time ago, by accepting Christ and His teachings. The people know everything… They learned in the churches where during centuries, they heard prayers and songs that are better than sermons…Their chief school of Christianity was the age of endless suffering endured in the course of history. They remained all alone with Christ the Comforter, whom they received then in their soul and saved them from despair.71

Before Siberia, Dostoevsky was influenced by the literary themes and social theories developed by eminent European writers and Russian thinkers of the day. When he returned to Russia as a free man ten years later and embarked on what more than a few critics agree are some of the greatest novels ever written, he emerged as an author morally and intellectually transformed by the lowliest of common people. These criminals manifested a spirituality at the heart of Russian culture: identification with the

humiliated and crucified Christ, and faith in His promise of redemption.\textsuperscript{72} Like the good thief, the repentant prisoners cried out for salvation, and upon hearing these voices Dostoevsky gained a deeper understanding of humanity’s intimate relationship with Christ.

The Author’s Vision

This image of Christ humble and merciful, however, must not be thought of as the reflection of a Russian people characterized in an overly emotional or sympathetic state. Writing on the spirituality of the Russian Orthodox Church, Dorothy Day’s good friend Helene Iswolsky presents a rather serious picture of Christ as she states, “He is sad, austere, and He is also demanding. He is the Christ presented as He was in the days of the Fathers by St. Maxim the Confessor: for him, the merciful Christ is still the legislator, holding up to us the new commandment, “Love ye each other.”\textsuperscript{73} In Christ the people found refuge through which their suffering was transformed, and they offered one another comfort and consolation in these times of affliction. Believing that love for one’s neighbor was not merely an ethical command but rather the divine ideal toward which each should strive, the common folk held this teaching supreme. And yet their suffering seemed endless, not because this ideal was false and thus unattainable, but, contrarily, because the whole of Russia failed to recognize its veracity. What Dostoevsky discovered in the hearts of the peasants became the central insight of his vision, for, as scholars continue to convey in their analyses, he believed that the “truths of Russian Orthodox Christianity, with its emphasis on sobornost’ (togetherness or conciliarity) and

\textsuperscript{72} Gorodetzky, 8.
\textsuperscript{73} Helene Iswolsky, \textit{Christ in Russia: The History, Tradition, and Life of the Russian Church} (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1960), 144.
the image of Christ, offered the only possible salvation to a Russia, indeed a world, riven by what he called *obosoblenie* or fragmentation.”⁷⁴ This notion of solidarity in Russian Orthodoxy served as the foundation for Dostoevsky’s social ideal—the Church.

Though primarily concerned with his homeland, Dostoevsky applied this notion of *sobornost*’ as a universal goal for all of humanity to seek. Though the radical movements in Russia during the 1860s and 70s followed a different ethos than the societies in which Dostoevsky participated before his exile, they remained disconnected from the very people whose lot in society they were seeking to improve. These idealists, especially members of the young Populist movement, pursued such aims with good intentions, but their vision was misguided. As Dostoevsky notes, “This word of truth, for which youth is thirsting, it seeks God knows where [presumably in the social theories and political philosophies of the aristocracy]…and not in the people, in the land.”⁷⁵ Much like himself as a young adult immersed in such grand ideas, these radicals built their movement on a crumbling foundation. The strength of Russia lay in its people—its handmaids and ploughmen—and Dostoevsky believed solidarity could be achieved only if the seeds of renewal were planted on fertile ground. He therefore advocated a movement he labeled *pochvennichestvo* (“return to the soil”) that called for the reunification of the intelligentsia with the Russian people, and thus the acceptance of their Christian values and beliefs.⁷⁶ Such acceptance could only be authentic through a conversion of heart—abandoning ideologies and embracing the fundamental

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⁷⁴ Jones, x.
⁷⁵ *Mantle of the Prophet*, 378.
commandment of Christ. “The more faith, the more unity,” says Dostoevsky, “and if love is added, then all has been done.”

One of the Christian ideals that Dostoevsky embraced throughout his own conversion was that of human freedom. In the utopian societies, freedom, whether it be the abolition of serfdom or the rights of the press, was a tenet central to the various theories arising. What the intelligentsia failed to recognize, however, was that in implementing these ideas into their own program for the Russian state, they effectively restrained the freedom of the masses. While social revolutionaries developed plans for the Russian people to follow and formulated a vision of utopia where desires would be satiated by reason, Dostoevsky delved into the souls of the people desiring to express themselves and reflected this reality in characters who irrationally acted upon these desires to love, kill, laugh and weep. Again, the experience at Omsk deepened the author’s conception of freedom. The convicts with whom he associated revealed the “poignant hysterical craving for self-expression, the unconscious yearning for [one]self, the desire…to assert [a] crushed personality, a desire which suddenly takes possession of [someone] and reaches the pitch of fury, of spite, of mental aberration.”

Though imprisonment inhibited any outlets for this stirred craving, such suppression began long before in the desolate social conditions the common people were forced to endure. For Dostoevsky, reconciling this fundamental violation of human freedom was central to the reunification of Russia—an ideal he brought to task in The Brothers Karamazov.

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77 Soloviev, 9.
78 Mantle of the Prophet, 10. “Rational Egoism” arose amongst Russian intellectuals in the 1860s
79 Ibid., 8.
Exploring the Novel

“[T]hose passages from The Brother Karamazov: the sayings of Father Zosima, Mitya's conversion in jail, the very legend of the Grand Inquisitor,” recalls Dorothy Day, “all this helped to lead me on.”

Chronicling the early stages of her life’s journey in From Union Square to Rome, Dorothy writes of the helpful host of Dostoevsky characters that guided her path. Seeking a Christianity that took the call of Christ seriously, witnessing utmost despair in prison, and struggling over questions of freedom and community, Dorothy entered into the story of TBK and found companions who offered insights that ultimately strengthened her faith. Zosima, Mitya, the Inquisitor and rest of the Karamazov characters, shaped by the life events of their creator, probed the depths of the very realities Dorothy was experiencing and their search provided both light and hope to her own search for meaning amidst these challenges. While there is no substitute for reading TBK (recall Hauerwas’ example of the futility in trying to convey the insights of a story apart from telling the story itself), an overview of the novel follows in an attempt to capture the characters’ dialogue and interactions that proved so critical to Dorothy’s formation.

The story of TBK is essentially a story about the word, “from the incarnate Word of God to the emptiest banality.” The sacred meets the secular in this portrait of the human soul’s brokenness by sin and pursuit of sanctification, the lust for power and the power of forgiveness. In the prayers, arguments, conversations and courtroom pleas, the world of the ordinary becomes a battleground upon which the Karamazov family, accompanied by monks and devils alike, engages in a supernatural struggle. And in the

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80 Union Square to Rome, 8.
81 Introduction, TBK, xvii.
center of it all stands the “ignorant” Dostoevsky. As Boyle noted, the author of a story seeks transparency in portraying the world of the text as part of the world at large, upon neither of which the writer exercises any claim. In *TBK*, Dostoevsky successfully fulfills this task under the pretense of ignorance, telling the story through a narrator complete with mixed diction, wandering phrases, odd mannerisms and verbal tics. His characters likewise speak with a quirkiness that makes the story comedic in the midst of tragedy and entirely human as the drama unfolds.

Introducing the novel, acclaimed Russian translators Pevear and Volokhonsky proclaim, “The darkness in *TBK* is real darkness, the darkness of evil, not a product of the author’s state of mind. And the brightness—that is, the lightness—is also real. It is rooted in the word, the ambiguous expression of human freedom, not in any uplifting ideology.” The world belongs not to Dostoevsky, but rather serves as the stage upon which the characters freely engage in dialogue—a dialogue intensified by rage, calmed by tender affection, and accompanied by blood, booze, tears and laughter. Though the author succeeds in writing himself out of the story, the world of the text is indeed Dostoevsky’s Russia. The Karamazov brothers are the sons of Russia as much as they are the offspring of Fyodor Pavlovich, and Dostoevsky’s portrayal of them reflects the people and ideas he encountered in his homeland. Such a portrait, however, did not merely present Russian life as it appeared; rather, Dostoevsky took what he encountered and molded it into a vision for what Russian society could be—a “spiritual brotherhood”

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82 *Ibid.*, xv. For example, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky note the narrator’s evasive assertions (“One things, perhaps, is rather doubtless”), fused clichés (“the distant visitor”) and use of a particular word several times on a single page yet never to be mentioned again.

that embodies Christian truth. The author does not have a claim on the world of *TBK*, but Christ does, and the formative religious encounters with the holy as well as the sinful that Dostoevsky experienced throughout his life find creative expression in his characters’ dialogue. In writing *TBK*, Dostoevsky set out to give shape and form to his great hope that one day father and son, peasant and statesman, monk and murderer would unite in the social ideal he found no other word to call but *Church*. 

Through the spontaneous outbursts as well as the reflective exchanges of the three Karamazov brothers and their surrounding cast, Dostoevsky reveals the soul of the Russian people, in all of its madness, yearning for life. “The whole question of you Karamazovs,” remarks an angered family friend, “comes down to this: you’re sensualists, money-grubbers, and holy fools!” Indeed, Dmitri (Mitya) and Ivan, along with their father, Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, chase each other’s earnings and lovers while running from the devil and God alike. The youngest brother, Alexei (Alyosha), while not partaking in the debaucheries of his family members, displays perhaps the most holy foolishness of all, seeking to reconcile the actions of his depraved family with his seemingly naïve Christian ideals. Though not a gallant figure, Alyosha acts, according to Dostoevsky, as the novel’s hero. It is he, unlike the fleeting characters around him, whom the author claims “bears within himself the heart of the whole.” Leaving the monastery and entering into a society marked by corruption that has fully taken hold of his father and brothers, Alyosha suffers the sins of his family while remaining a beacon of Gospel light. Amidst the turmoil, including Ivan’s atheistic tirades and Mitya’s

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84 Soloviev, 12.
85 Soloviev, 11.
86 *TBK*, 80.
sentence in the murder of their father, Alyosha speaks the word of truth—a word of freedom, forgiveness, and redemption that will lead to the sobornost’ of the Russian people.

A Dysfunctional Family

The Karamazovs engage in their own reunion of sorts—one doomed from the start—as Mitya, an uneducated military service man, appears in town seeking to settle a dispute over inheritance with his land-owning father. Of the three sons, Mitya’s character most closely resembles that of Fyodor Pavlovich, a carousing old man regarded by his townspeople as one of the “most muddleheaded madcaps in our district.” This similarity in temperament, however, pits them against each other and makes any resolution to the conflict all but impossible. Ivan, already in town tending to affairs of his own (though in part to conspire with Mitya as later revealed), stands as a striking contrast to his older brother. While Mitya acts wildly irrational as a man held captive to his passions, Ivan seeks detachment from a world in an effort to test his philosophical theories from a more objective standpoint. Though an intellectual causing quite a stir with his recent publication on ecclesiastical courts, Ivan gets along rather well with his father who creates stirs of another kind with his drunken buffoonery. For the moment, Ivan grounds the old man in attempting to mediate the present conflict, and he accompanies his father to meet with Mitya at, of all places, the local monastery. These Karamazovs are, after all, holy fools!

At this monastery resides the youngest brother, Alyosha, who has been training as a novice for the last year. Upon receiving word that his family will be arriving in hopes

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88 TBK, 7.
of reconciling a dispute, his heart grows heavy out of fear of the embarrassment that his father and brothers might cause inside these sacred walls. He prays that they will not make a mockery of themselves and therefore his own name, especially in the presence of his master, Fr. Zosima, the elder revered throughout the land as a living saint. But Alyosha knows his family too well, and soon into the meeting the exchanges between father and son escalate into a vehement dispute over, not land, of course, but a woman. Mitya has forsaken his fiancée, Katerina Ivanovna, for this new woman, Grushenka, who just happens to be the object of his father’s affection as well. (Incidentally, the affairs summoning Ivan to town involve winning the hand of the woman for whom he has fallen—Katerina Ivanovna—thus fulfilling his own desires while simultaneously relieving his brother of such a burdensome relationship.) These passions rage inside the elder’s cell, leading to Mitya’s condemnation of his father as he shouts, “Why is such a man alive!”

To this reproach Fyodor Pavlovich raises the accusation, “Do you hear, you monks, do you hear the parricide!” And the bickering continues. But while the father’s theatrics express a tone of mockery, Mitya’s contempt dwells deep within his being. Fr. Zosima, clearly perceiving this conflicted soul, abruptly silences the voices as he suddenly rises from his chair. He does not stand for more than a moment, however, for he steps toward Mitya and silently kneels before him, bowing to the ground. “Forgive me! Forgive me, all of you!” says the elder, and he bows to each of his guests.

Though foreshadowing the conviction of Mitya in the parricide case of Fyodor Pavlovich, the monk’s humble bow and plea for forgiveness illumine the role Alyosha plays as the novel’s hero. The young man stands, in part, as a reflection of Fr. Zosima,

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89 Ibid., 74.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid., 75.
for, according to the narrator, “An elder is one who takes your soul, your will into his
soul and into his will.” 92 Upon entering the monastery and making this act of self-
renunciation, Alyosha has effectively pledged his obedience to the elder. Yet such a vow
will lead him back into the world, for the wise Zosima realizes the novice’s presence is
much needed back home. After his family departs the monastery, the elder reveals this
necessary course for Alyosha to follow his brothers:

You will have to endure everything before you come back again.
And there will be much work to do. But I have no doubt of you,
that is why I am sending you. Christ is with you. Keep him, and
he will keep you. You will behold great sorrow, and in this sorrow
you will be happy. Here is a commandment for you: seek happiness
in sorrow. 93

The elder tells him to be near both Dmitri and Ivan, for perhaps only he can provide a
glimmer of redemptive light on their respective paths to ruin. There will be joy, but only
in suffering, and with these words Zosima sends Alyosha into the broken world of
Russian society.

Conversation with an Atheist

Throughout the story, as exemplified in his obedience to Zosima, the youngest
Karamazov retains such purity of heart and faithful devotion that the reader cannot help
but be drawn to his character. But perhaps the truly captivating figures in this story are
the older brothers, who, in their very cursing of God and rampant acts of self-indulgence,
also reflect the truths of the Christian story. Caught in the throes of life, Dmitri and Ivan
endure moral and psychological battles that elevate them to moments of ecstasy only to
leave them drowning in despair. Throughout these struggles and the worn, depraved state

92 Ibid., 27.
93 Ibid., 77.
in which they find themselves, the brothers bare their souls and in doing so reveal a dynamic portrait of the human condition. In their respective encounters with Alyosha, their yearning for self-expression finds an outlet, and the exchanges that ensue illumine both the nature of sin and suffering and the ideals of Christian virtue and redemption.

The most notable of these meetings between Karamazovs takes place shortly after the family gathering at the monastery when Alyosha stumbles past the Metropolis—the local tavern wherein Ivan awaits his older brother. Mitya does not show, however, and therefore Ivan takes the opportunity to get acquainted with his passing youngest brother. Ivan, a scholar who writes theological articles for the local paper, desires to share his profound insights regarding the divine with the devout Alyosha. Though Ivan writes these essays somewhat mockingly as he declares himself to be an atheist, he nevertheless contemplates issues concerning God and the world with utmost seriousness. For years he has wrestled with the problem of human suffering, especially that of innocent children, and his protestations arise not so much from a disbelief in God as they do a disgust in the created world. To hell with adults, Ivan exclaims, for they “ate the apple, and knew good and evil, and became as gods. And they still go on eating it. But little children have not eaten anything and are not yet guilty of anything.”94 He understands that with freedom comes the misuse of it, and one’s suffering often results from such sin. He has also witnessed these sinners find liberation through forgiveness and penance, and is all too familiar with the Christian notion of redemptive suffering. But what about the stories of young boys and girls being beaten and killed by these prideful adults? Not only did they commit no sin and therefore deserve no suffering, but they receive no consolation prize. He refuses to accept that eternal reward can be purchased with human suffering. “It is

94 Ibid., 237-238.
not worth one little tear of even that one tormented child,” he exclaims, “who beat her chest with her little fist and prayed to dear God in a stinking outhouse with her unredeemed tears. Not worth it, because her tears remained unredeemed.”95 There remains no joy to be found in this sorrow, no meaning in this suffering. Given the freedom to commit such evil acts, as well as the unrequited tears that remain, how can one profess the world to be good, much less entertain the prospect of universal solidarity?

When Alyosha answers his brother’s question with the crucifixion of Christ as the all-forgiving, all-reconciling act that redeems humanity, Ivan jumps at the chance to refute the simple faith of the novice. The older brother is cunning, and Alyosha’s response has given him the perfect lead-in to share his poem, for it is precisely Christ that is responsible for this broken world. Ivan’s The Grand Inquisitor takes Alyosha to 16th century Seville at the height of the Inquisition, where, amidst the executed and the onlookers, the Messiah appears in the streets. Healing a blind man and raising a child from the dead, he causes a great commotion amongst the people. But such acts draw a scowl from one man—the Cardinal Inquisitor—who hastens to arrest the very person in whose name the Inquisition proceeds. The old man has worked tirelessly to appease the people, and now that he has succeeded, he cannot afford to risk any upheaval caused by the reappearance of Christ and any new proclamations He might offer. Furthermore, Ivan continues, the Inquisitor reprimands Christ for allowing humanity to endure the torment caused by “free choice in the knowledge of good and evil.”96 The opportunity to give his followers peace and happiness was presented to Jesus in the wilderness when the devil

95 Ibid., 245. Based on an actual court case in Russia.
96 Ibid., 254.
offered him the three temptations. But Christ refused to succumb, and this refusal, the
Inquisitor claims, left humanity hungry, unlawful, and confused:

Instead of taking over men’s freedom, you increased it and forever
burdened the kingdom of the human soul with its torments…Yet is
this what was offered you? There are three powers, only three powers
on earth, capable of conquering and holding captive forever the con-
science of these feeble rebels, for their own happiness—these powers
are miracle, mystery, and authority. You rejected the first, the second,
and the third.97

With a single “yes,” Christ could have obtained earthly powers to control the masses and
provide them with the necessary means, physically and spiritually, to live in fellowship
with one another. He remained faithful to God, however, and in the offering of heavenly
bread—his body—came the promise of freedom. But, according to the aged official,
such an act means little when the people are starving for earthly bread, and this gift of
freedom has only resulted in waywardness and corruption. Christ could have prevented
such suffering, but he chose not to, and therefore he must be burned at the stake with the
other heretics. Ivan ends his poem with Christ’s only response to the Inquisitor.

“Suddenly,” Ivan tells Alyosha, “he approaches the old man in silence and gently kisses
him on his bloodless, ninety-year-old lips. That is the whole answer.”98

Daily bread and temporal power—that which the Inquisitor provides the masses—
also make up the crux of the socialist ideal, a theory with which Ivan also wrestles. But
alas, it’s just a poem. He recognizes the beauty in Christ and the ideal of human freedom,
but given the state of society and the suffering of the innocent, he cannot accept it. He
wants to, but cannot. Unable to reconcile belief in God with the brokenness of the world,
Ivan contends that there can be no God, and therefore no sin. “Everything is permitted,”

97 Ibid., 255.
98 Ibid., 262.
he confides in his brother, and such a proclamation echoes throughout the story as father and older brothers indulge in their “Karamazov baseness.”99 Throughout this meeting, Alyosha listens to Ivan with a patient heart, and though Ivan blasphemes the one to whom the novice has dedicated his life, Alyosha does not renounce him. Instead, like the imprisoned Christ, he bears his brother’s torment and silently offers him a farewell kiss. And one might suspect, similar to the effect on the Grand Inquisitor, this kiss burns in Ivan’s heart as he scurries down the street.

The Teachings of a Holy Man

Not only does Alyosha mirror Christ’s forgiving act in Ivan’s poem, but his gesture also takes a form similar to Zosima’s previous response at the family gathering inside the monastery. The young Karamazov inquires about this very act when he visits his elder shortly after meeting Ivan. With sorrow deep in his soul, from both his family’s tribulations as well as the failing health of the elder, Alyosha seeks countenance from his master. This sorrow, however, is not unexpected, for the elder had released his novice into the world precisely to bear such suffering. “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die,” Zosima quotes the Gospel to his novice, “it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.”100 Herein lies the path for Alyosha, for though he will endure much loss in the streets of Russia, his faithful testimony will transcend its worldly finiteness, and somewhere, perhaps even in a Karamazov heart, such witness will take root. “You will bless life,” the elder tells him, “and cause others to bless it.”101

99 Ibid., 263.
101 Ibid.
The dying monk takes this occasion to share his thoughts regarding not only Alyosha’s vocation, but also the pathway to redemption for all of Russia. His solemn bow in front of Mitya and the others lay at the base of this message. During the family meeting, Zosima was keenly aware of the future suffering awaiting the oldest brother, for, as he explains, he could see this terrible fate expressed in Mitya’s very eyes. He raised neither hand nor voice in hopes of changing the course of this condemned man. Rather, he committed an act of immeasurable power—a silent offer of forgiveness. This step, he tells Alyosha, must be taken for humanity to find redemption and enter into universal fellowship:

Each man [is] guilty before all and for all…And it is true that when people understand this thought, the Kingdom of Heaven will come to them, no longer in a dream but in reality…Until one has indeed become the brother of all, there will be no brotherhood.\footnote{Ibid., 303. These words, though recited by Zosima, are recalled from a conversation he shared with a “mysterious visitor” in his youth. The visitor speaks this message of brotherhood, but it is clear Zosima shares the same conviction.}

In stark contrast to Ivan’s Grand Inquisitor, Zosima offers a vision of the world centered upon the Christian ideal. The solidarity he preaches involves no coercion or surrender to temptation, but rather self-surrender. Far from any socialist utopia, this brotherhood takes the form of a communion freely entered into by individuals fully aware of their responsibility to one another. For Zosima, this freedom does not find expression in an unbridled conscience choosing between good and evil; rather it is exemplified in the virtues of the Russian monk. “Obedience, fasting, and prayer are laughed at, yet they alone constitute the way to real and true freedom,”\footnote{Ibid., 314.} he reveals to Alyosha. This conception of freedom is rooted in the image of Christ and the truth of God’s word which liberate the soul from selfish desire and direct it toward virtue. In this virtue one finds the
fullest expression of love and therefore the ultimate happiness. Everything, in fact, is not permitted. Such thinking and acting only enslaves human freedom in sin, but if each person can begin to realize his or her guilt before all and for all, and then offer a prayer of forgiveness, the soul will be freed and the people united. The Kingdom, then, will begin to materialize.

Alyosha listens intently as the elder offers these words of Christian truth, and the commandment that Zosima gave him after the disgraceful family meeting resounded in his heart. Though his sorrow would only increase after the death of his beloved elder and then the murder of his own father, he resolved to follow the words of Zosima and seek happiness in this very suffering. But he must not remain alone, for there remain Karamazovs in need of healing and a kingdom in need of builders. “A man must suddenly set an example,” Zosima says, “and draw the soul from its isolation for an act of brotherly communion, though it be with the rank of holy fool.” Soon Ivan would be engaged in a heated debate with the devil, and Mitya would find himself dually condemned—by the jury in his father’s murder case and by himself ridden with guilt.

Mitya’s Trials

Though throughout the family bickering over property, women, and nearly all other matters, Mitya more than once expressed a desire to kill his father, truth be told no parricide occurred. Unless, of course, one confirms the rumor that Smerdyakov—the Karamazov lackey—is indeed the illegitimate son of Fyodor Pavlovich, then such a charge remains false. This man, not Mitya, took the old madcap’s life. But the evidence, if not the eldest son’s guilty demeanor, leads to the arrest of Dmitri Karamazov. Two

104 Ibid., 304.
months pass between the arrest and the trial, and during this time an unexpected transformation begins to take place. On the eve of the trial, Mitya eagerly awaits a visit from Alyosha, for he thirsts to speak of this change and pour forth his soul to his faithful little brother.

Though he maintains he did not commit murder, Mitya nonetheless remains guilt-ridden due to the malice he felt toward his father. The events that unfold lead to a period of reflection that profoundly affects Mitya, as he reveals to Alyosha, “Brother, in these past two months I’ve sensed a new man in me, a new man has arisen in me!”

Though Mitya demonstrates a bit of the theatrical that he undoubtedly inherited from his father, he nonetheless speaks as if a revelation really has occurred. Well aware that a conviction will confine him to a life in Siberia, he speaks of the chance at redemption amidst the lowliest of people and places. He continues his rapturous speech, “Even there, in the mines, underground, you can find a human heart in the convict and murderer standing next to you, and you can be close to him, because there, too, it’s possible to live, and love and suffer!”

His words reveal a mixture of triumph and torment, for even as he speaks of this conversion, he realizes tomorrow he will indeed stand guilty before all and never be seen again. Perhaps his saving grace stood right before him in that moment. With great fear Mitya asks his dear brother if he too held him guilty in the murder of their father, but of course the young novice does not. With Alyosha affirming his brother, the two embrace and Mitya declares, “You’ve strengthened me for tomorrow, God bless you! Well, go, love Ivan!”

105 Ibid., 591.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid., 597.
A Word on the Hero

Alyosha departs with a heavy heart, for although Mitya speaks of conversion, the younger brother cannot help but sense his present insecurity and the despair that will ensue the following morning. But “infinite compassion” also takes hold of him, for in the midst of Mitya’s personal strife and ecstatic revelation, his final words perhaps hint at this new man as he blesses Alyosha and commands him to go love their brother Ivan. And yet finding Ivan battling his own hallucinations in an intellectual debate with the devil, and then hearing of Mitya’s conviction and ensuing exile to Siberia, Alyosha cannot escape his great sorrow. He comforts a grieving Mitya in the days before the scheduled departure to the mines as he states, “You wanted to regenerate another man in yourself through suffering; I say just remember that other man always, all your life.”108 In the end, a new man is beginning to form in the hero himself.

Once a seemingly naïve novice who entered the monastery as “an ideal way out for his soul struggling from the darkness of worldly wickedness towards the light of love,”109 Alyosha now stands in the world as a man suffering the sins of his family and society. But he embraces the teachings of Zosima and keeps his faith in Christ. Now that light dwells within him, and he humbly serves as a beacon for the Russian people struggling in darkness. And through all of the sensuality, money-grubbing, and holy foolishness of the Karamazovs that has unfolded, the dream held at the beginning of the story remains within Alyosha:

In his heart there is the secret of renewal for all, the power that will finally establish the truth on earth, and all will be holy and will love one another, and there will be neither rich nor poor, neither exalted nor humiliated, but all will be like the children of God, and the true

108 Ibid., 763.
109 Ibid., 18.
kingdom of Christ will come.\textsuperscript{110}

Through suffering and forgiveness all will be redeemed, and at the table of fellowship there will be reserved seats for fathers and sons, doubting intellectuals and simple peasants, carousing men and conniving women.

This dream of Dostoevsky’s hero is the dream of the author himself—a vision of the human family reconciled in Christ. Such a picture reveals the Church, as the children of God, that Dostoevsky sought to convey as the social ideal guiding \textit{TBK}. It took a very broken family, a heinous murder and countless tears to articulate. Yet in the midst of this suffering, Alyosha stands as a beacon of light, and his secret shines forth from the walls of the monastery to the pubs and prisons of the Karamazov world. The author’s own narrative testifies to the Gospel truths revealed in this fictional account, for throughout his life Dostoevsky witnessed the Russian people who, in their very brokenness, were participating in the redemptive work of Christ. He encountered this reality in the worn peasant, Marey, who stroked his cheek and blessed his forehead as a young child as well as in the forsaken prisoners bowing to the cement floor during Easter mass. He reflected upon these encounters in reading the New Testament and conversing with his philosopher friends, and his search for redemption amidst suffering found ultimate expression in \textit{TBK}. Decades later and across the ocean, these interwoven stories—the Gospel, Dostoevsky’s biography, and \textit{TBK}—would pick up another thread in the life of Dorothy Day.

\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Ibid.,} 31. The narrator reveals that such was the dream in Alyosha’s heart, and that this secret of truth was also contained within Zosima.
III. DOROTHY DAY AND HER ENCOUNTER

Dostoevsky did not live to see his vision of a unified Russia materialize. Dying in 1880, the author said goodbye to a Russia still oppressed under the autocratic rule of the tsar. Yet in the ensuing decades, tension between the masses and the government continued to heat up, reaching its boiling point in the February Revolution of 1917. In this initial stage of the uprising that would ultimately result in Bolshevik rule, workers went on strike and together with radical intellectuals pressured Nicholas II and his family to abdicate the throne, which they conceded in the following weeks. Socialist thinkers vied for power as a liberal government began to take shape and along with it the promise of reform that would lead to the further liberation of the people.

The victories won by the revolutionaries were celebrated across the globe, particularly in America, where workers looked upon Russia as a model for their own fight to secure fair wages and improved working conditions. Numerous laborers and activists gathered for a rally at Madison Square Garden to celebrate the progress of human events that was likened, as one New York paper reported, to the “flowing of the river.”¹¹¹ Not surprising, this newspaper was the Call, the city’s socialist press sympathetic to the workers’ plight. On staff and contributing to this article was a young woman—uncommon in such a profession during this time—who, observing the excitement of events and the hope it brought workers nationwide, would later recall, “I

joined with those thousands in reliving the first days of the revolt in Russia. I felt the exultation, the joyous sense of the victory of the masses as they sang *Ei Euchnjem*, the worker’s hymn of Russia.”¹¹² The name of this reporter was Dorothy Day. She was nineteen, and anything but common.

Not unlike the Russian author, Dorothy found herself swept up by the political movement as a result of both her attraction to the freedom and equality its platforms professed as well as her repulsion to the hypocrisy she perceived in the Church for not actively pursuing these ideals. In time she would recognize the folly of the movement and start one of her own, renewing the Church as a community that practiced these ideals. Throughout this period of searching Dorothy discovered Dostoevsky, and his similar struggles as well as the radical Christian vision that emerged from them drew Dorothy deeply into *The Brothers Karamazov*. Tracing her life story is essential to the narrative approach, for it enables these encounters with the novel to be placed in their proper context and thereby more fully illumines the role of Dostoevsky’s art on Dorothy’s ever evolving understanding of God. Further, this biographical account reveals Dorothy as neither a social justice “type” nor merely a model of Christianity, but as a person living her own story—a story that over time becomes unraveled from the dream of the Russian revolution and entwined with the dream of Alyosha Karamazov.

**Upbringing**

Dorothy Day was born in Brooklyn in 1897, the third of five children in a nominally Episcopalian family. The wandering life Dorothy would lead began early as her father, a sportswriter in need of work, moved the family to Oakland shortly

afterwards and then Chicago a few years later. Though the Days did not formally practice their Christianity, they did not prohibit their children from engaging in it. Dorothy fondly remembers attending different services with her neighbors and experiencing a sense of inspiration in singing the psalms and reading about the saints. She also recollects the first time she held a Bible, which she discovered upon sneaking up to the attic one rainy Sunday afternoon. “I did not know then that the Word in the Book and Word in the flesh of Christ’s humanity were the same,” Dorothy recalls, “but I felt I was handling something holy.”113 She sung hymns kneeling before her bed at night and then endured nightmares of “a frightening impersonal God”114 while asleep. Whether in church, the attic, or bed, the young Dorothy experienced a vivid sense of the supernatural. She was a precocious youth indeed, and though these early experiences of the sacred remained with her throughout her life, she would later fill her hands and thoughts with books exploring the most profane of circumstances.

While Mr. and Mrs. Day displayed a laxity in their religious obligations, they certainly instilled within their children good moral conduct, as exemplified in the aftermath of the great 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Though her own house was severely damaged and possessions strewn about, Dorothy recalls spending time with her mother in giving food and clothing to the locals now left completely homeless. “I remember,” writes Dorothy, “the joy of doing good, of sharing whatever we had with others after the earthquake, an event which threw us out of our complacent happiness into a world of catastrophe.”115 Whether Dorothy felt more at home amongst the wreckage and the dispossessed than she did in her comfortable house at this age one can only

113 Ibid., 20.
114 Ibid., 21.
115 Ibid.
speculate, but this early encounter with such an environment left an indelible mark on the young girl and foreshadowed the work to which she would later commit her life.

The Days also stressed the importance of education, especially reading and writing. One fed the other as Dorothy’s exploration of classic works and social critiques opened her eyes to the surrounding unjust realities she would later cover as a reporter and journalist. At just 15 years of age, Day immersed herself in authors such as Upton Sinclair and Kropotkin, prompting her to contemplate the struggles of the immigrant families living in the tenement rows she passed during her strolls down Chicago’s Westside. The more she read and experienced the more she grew disenchanted with the pious church gatherings that professed their belief in Christ but lived their weeks as if the homeless and diseased were invisible. Her interest in social conditions and the literature that critiqued these unjust realities grew stronger during her college years spent at the University of Illinois at Urbana. Subsequently her interest in religion waned in proportion, leading her not to passively abandon it (such was not her character), but passionately denounce it:

Religion…had no vitality. It had nothing to do with everyday life; it was a matter of Sunday praying. Christ no longer walked the streets of this world, he was two thousand years dead and new prophets had risen up in his place.116

Indeed, “Big” Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn of the Industrial Workers of the World spoke in prophetic tones, and the anarchists executed for their participation in the Haymarket Riots were, according to Dorothy, “martyrs.”117 She discovered these figures in her books and contemplated their messages with her newly found radical friends.

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116 Miller, 34.
117 Ibid., 36.
The Young Radical

Taking her first job out of college with the *Call*, Dorothy pursued the struggles about which she had been reading as a reporter on the socialist activities underway in America. She covered protests, labor meetings, and strikes, amongst other events, in giving a voice to the struggling worker. In promoting socialist ideals she also denounced capitalist structures, as the “disparity between the classes and a critique of the present system formed the common thread in her reports.”118 Never one to remain an idle observer, Dorothy actively engaged in these struggles in accompanying students protesting conscription as well as a group of women suffragists marching on Capitol Hill. The latter trip ended in jail—the first of several prison experiences for Dorothy. While imprisoned she remained firm in her activist stance as a participant in a hunger strike, but internally Dorothy endured a broken spirit. She covered these stories to expose injustices incurred upon political prisoners, and now she was experiencing such brutal treatment herself. The physical bruises conveyed her defeated thoughts of securing a victory for the masses—the light of a once burgeoning hope now extinguished by a damp, dark prison cell:

I lost all feeling of my own identity. I reflected on the desolation of poverty, of destitution, of sickness and sin. That I would be free after thirty days meant nothing to me. I would never be free again, never free when I knew that behind bars all over the world there were women and men, young girls and boys, suffering constraint, punishment, isolation and hardship for crimes of which all of us were guilty.”119

Her sentence was temporary, but the experience left a permanent imprint upon her soul—a soul bearing the weight of humanity’s abuse of humanity and the futility of suffering persecution for the sake of justice.

119 *Long Loneliness*, 78.
Dorothy had long known the world to be unjust, but now she could wholly identify with the downtrodden. But instead of remaining defeated, she endured the prison experience and held out hope that victory could be won in time. She continued to participate in the local activist campaigns and paid close attention to the events unfolding abroad, where the socialist ideas once expressed in the Petrashevsky Circle were materializing in the Russian Revolution. “Peace, bread, and land” proclaimed Lenin, and the masses in Russia as well as those gathered in Madison Square Garden responded with a rallying cry—as if the fetters of lifelong toil and suffering were being shattered by a hammer and swept aside with a sickle. The dreams of the new prophets were being realized in this movement, and America would soon join in victory—or so writers at the Call, Day’s biographer William Miller recounts, may have thought:

And Dorothy almost believed that in the Russian Revolution a great new vista had been reached in the flow of the river, that all was beginning to converge, that time had not and could not betray the final vision of community now because it could be so plainly seen just ahead.¹²⁰

Knowing the outcome of this Revolution and the dreams that it left unfulfilled, one might read this passage as an indication of the young Dorothy’s naïveté. But if she appeared naïve it was only because she so ardently believed the hearts and minds of people worldwide could be changed for the better and a just economic and political system could prevail.

Perhaps more important than documenting her support of the uprising and belief that it would result in the liberation of the masses, Miller reveals that which lay at the heart of Dorothy’s dream. It was a desire that would inflame her entire life, guiding her

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¹²⁰ Miller, 65.
down various paths and leaving a trail numerous searchers would later follow—the desire for community:

I wanted every home to be open to the lame, the halt and the blind, the way it had been after the San Francisco earthquake. Only then did people really live, really love their brothers. In such love was the abundant life and I did not have the slightest idea how to find it.  

This newfound joy in the midst of a natural disaster marked an epiphany that sparked the vision of community early in Day’s childhood, and though she believed it was beginning to materialize in the radical movement in which she participated during her late teens and twenties, Dorothy remained filled with doubt over her role in such matters.

Her experience in the DC prison, though a time of darkness and torment, served as another epiphany. Not only did Day endure physical hunger in jail, but she also experienced a spiritual thirst for something to comfort her sorrow and provide a sense of hope. She discovered the answer in, of course, a book. Once again she found herself alone with the Bible resting in her hands, and the psalms struck a chord in her soul. The experience affected her enough to recall it many years later, but at the time it remained rather undefined—a moment of mysticism perhaps, deeply intense but ultimately fleeting. The Word may have been a welcomed refuge to the despair endured in prison, but could it liberate the political prisoner, the soldier, the worker? Upon her release, Dorothy resumed her involvement in radical circles and reporting for socialist news sources, and while she again rejected religion—acknowledging it as a crutch in time of need—she would later come to a fuller understanding of both the suffering and the solace she experienced in prison.

121 Long Loneliness, 39.
Though Dorothy did not wholly subscribe to any one ideology, whether it be socialist, syndicalist or anarchist, she did embrace the social and political theories being discussed amongst the bohemian crowd in which she immersed herself in Greenwich Village. And yet she also found herself spending many mornings kneeling in the back of St. Joseph’s Church on Sixth Avenue, not knowing “what was going on at the altar, but warmed and comforted by the lights and silence, the kneeling people and the atmosphere of worship."\textsuperscript{122} The stillness presented a stark contrast to her daily reporting and active nightlife, and her desire for the holy, whatever that might be, marked yet another aspect of her search. During this phase Dorothy remained, for the most part, restless. Even her writing, including book reviews, editorial work, and “a novel of social significance”\textsuperscript{123} did not satisfy her. People all around her continued to experience great suffering, and Dorothy could not justify her activities when such injustices remained. She therefore became a nurse at King’s County Hospital in Brooklyn\textsuperscript{124} and worked tirelessly. Dorothy enjoyed this work, even the sweat and tears it cost, but after twelve months she returned to the life of writing to which she felt called. She traveled to Europe and moved back to Chicago and then New Orleans as well as California briefly, befriended influential radicals and Catholics alike, frequented saloons and cathedrals, fell in love with various men and got arrested again. Dorothy Day, full of life and ideas, embraced her surroundings but never held on for long, and spoke of revolution but remained outside the circle.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 84.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 88.
\textsuperscript{124} The suicide of one of Dorothy’s bohemian friends also moved her to break away from such a lifestyle and pursue a seemingly more productive occupation.
Life on the Beach

After this period of drifting, Dorothy, persuaded by a friend, bought a beach house on Staten Island to settle down and focus on her profession as a writer. Here she lived with her new lover, Forster Battingham, a biologist and anarchist who preferred marine culture over human society. For perhaps the first time in her life, Dorothy experienced natural happiness—both with man and her environment. Not only was she filled with joy in her common-law marriage, but she found great pleasure in discovering the secrets of nature on the beach and in the sea. While her previous lifestyle left “no time at all for thought or reflection,” now Dorothy enjoyed a relaxed setting that gave her peace, and in this peace she began to contemplate both the natural and the supernatural. Ironically, Dorothy claims her atheist partner led her to the divine, for his “ardent love of creation brought me closer to the Creator of all things.” This natural beauty touched her deeply, and it could be felt not only in sand dunes and ocean water, but also in human contact. “The very fact,” she continues, “that we were begetting a child made me have a sense that we were made in the image and likeness of God, co-creators with him.” Yes, Dorothy Day was going to bring a child into this world of unjust economics and misguided politics, and she was elated.

This newfound joy fed a desire to worship and pray, and she prayed the rosary (to the best of her ability) that a friend had given her as she walked to the nearby village, addressed the Blessed Mother while performing household chores, and attended Mass regularly on Sunday mornings. Unlike the experiences in prison and Greenwich

125 Ibid., 65.
126 Ibid., 134.
127 Ibid., 135.
128 Ibid., 132-133.
Village, during which Dorothy turned toward religion in turning away from suffering and chaos, the soon-to-be mother now embraced Christianity as if it were a joyous truth. “I am praying because I am happy, not because I am unhappy,” Dorothy stated. “I did not turn to God in unhappiness, in grief, in despair—to get consolation, to get something from Him.”129 Day’s Marxist friends might have been shocked to hear such words come from her mouth, and certainly Forster did not approve of his lover’s thoughts and acts. Furthermore, Dorothy’s youthful thoughts on churchgoers merely fulfilling their Sunday obligation—listening to the Gospel but not carrying it forth—broadened over the course of her wandering years. Commenting on the ethnic subcultures she experienced in her journeys across America, Dorothy realized, “It was the great mass of the poor, the workers, who were the Catholics in this country, and this fact in itself drew me to the Church.”130 Once, Dorothy believed that her identification with the masses and participation in their struggles put her in direct opposition to the pious, socially unconscious, Catholic Church. Now experiencing the beauty of creation in the walks along the beach and the kicks in her womb, the winding path Dorothy had trod over the years appeared to lead unto these sacred doors.

In March of 1927, Dorothy gave birth to a daughter, Tamar Teresa. Tamar, little palm tree in Hebrew, she named after her Russian neighbor’s niece, and Teresa after the saint she so loved, Teresa of Avila.131 The naming of her daughter signified a radical transformation that was taking place in Day. There was no grand epiphany that changed Day’s life, but the tiny seeds that were being planted throughout her childhood and

129 Ibid.
130 Ibid., 107.
131 Ibid., 141.
wandering years began to blossom during the introspective time experienced in carrying a child for nine months. It culminated in the Catholic faith:

I wanted Tamar to have a way of life and instruction…I felt that “belonging” to a Church would bring that order into her life which I felt my own had lacked. If I could have felt that communism was the answer to my desire for a cause, a motive, a way to walk in, I would have remained as I was. But I felt that only faith in Christ could give the answer. The Sermon on the Mount answered all the questions as to how to love God and one’s brother.  

Ever since she departed for college, Dorothy had been a woman flaunting her independence. She pursued a number of ideologies to satisfy her passion for justice, but remained an autonomous searcher. In the Church she found a new freedom, but one firmly rooted in Christ, that provided the answers she sought in the activist rallies as well as in times of solitude.

The division between her and Forster that began with Dorothy’s interest in the faith widened with the baptism of Tamar, and the split became final in the winter of 1927 during which Day made the difficult choice to follow her daughter in becoming a member of the Catholic Church. “It got to the point where it was the simple question of whether I chose God or man,” Dorothy recalled. Indeed, in choosing God she bid farewell to Forster, but her new faith would ultimately bring her closer to her fellow man, woman, and child than she could have possibly imagined.

The Catholic Worker

In December 1932, Dorothy Day was covering a Communist-led Hunger March in Washington, D.C. as a journalist for America and Commonweal. The marchers, a melting pot of union workers and unskilled laborers in protest of unfair conditions, were

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132 Ibid.
133 Ibid., 140.
being “held prisoners” in a half-mile stretch of road by countless guards equipped with guns and tear gas. As Dorothy observed the scene, she thought to herself, “These are Christ’s poor. He was one of them…and He chose his friends amongst the ordinary worker.”¹³⁴ The 34-year old had been Catholic for five years, and though she had given up her days as a communist activist, the plight of the worker continued to cause her deep anguish. The following day, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, Dorothy went to mass at the National Shrine where she recalls, “And the prayer that I offered up was that some way would be shown me, some way would be opened up for me to work for the poor and the oppressed.”¹³⁵ Upon her return home to New York, a man named Peter Maurin was waiting at her apartment door.

Maurin, born a French peasant who became a teacher and emigrated to North America, shared Dorothy’s desire to change the social order. He complemented her gifted writing skills, activist experience, and practicality with his knowledge of personalist philosophy and Catholic doctrine. In the ensuing months, Day and Maurin developed a plan of action to combat these social ills by exposing them within the context of the Church’s social teachings. They agreed on the first line of action—publishing a newspaper to raise awareness of unjust economic structures and their devastating effects on the worker and the unemployed. On May 1ˢᵗ, Labor Day, *The Catholic Worker* was launched. The first issue of the *Worker* included accounts of exploitation of the Negro in the South, child labor in the local neighborhoods, and recent strikes over hours and wages. Indeed, the paper would prove a successful means of rousing attention to the injustices endured by the worker. For Peter Maurin, however, social reform extended

beyond the distribution of literature. As Day recalls, “He feels it is not enough merely to bring the workers propaganda by way of a newspaper, pamphlets, and leaflets. One must combine this with the direct action of the works of mercy: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless.” Maurin believed the corporal must complement the spiritual, and so both he and Day set out to develop “Houses of Hospitality.”

Day details the outline for this project in *Houses of Hospitality*, revealing their plans to both shelter the poor and provide vocational training. A major component of the Worker Houses was also the Workers’ School, a program providing instruction for the unemployed as well as the students and volunteers joining the movement. These houses would not only provide meals, room and board to the homeless, but also teach the inhabitants skills as well as indoctrinate them in the Worker philosophy—a vision of social reform grounded in religious belief.

Dorothy grounded her work in spiritual discipline, and her cultivation of the interior life gave her the strength and conviction to persevere. Writing on Day’s spirituality, Brigid O’Shea Merriman claims, “She believed firmly that prayer was the first duty of all those working for social justice.” Day’s work with the poor was guided by interior prayer, and these rightly directed tasks conversely proved integral in her pursuit of holiness. Writing *On Pilgrimage* column in 1948, she speaks of the “sacrament of duty” and relates the “great joy in being on the job, doing good works, performing the works of mercy.” Dorothy recognized the daily duties in the Worker

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houses as a means of sanctification, for in serving the poor she believed she was truly
serving God.

When Dorothy Day observed the Hunger March in D.C., she claimed she saw
Christ in the workers. Peter Maurin helped her live out of this conviction, both interiorly
and actively. Seven years after its inception, Dorothy stated, “The Catholic Worker
movement, working for a new social order, has come to be known as a community which
breaks bread with brothers of whatever race, color, or creed. This is my body, Christ said
at the Last Supper…”139 For Day, communion was sacramental, both in the Eucharistic
celebration and the shared meals at the Worker houses. It was centered in Christ, and
embodied the worker, the prisoner, the immigrant, and the homeless. She shared this
notion of the mystical body with Peter Maurin, and together they labored to unite
humanity and bring it into fellowship with the divine.

The Influence of Dostoevsky

Dorothy Day’s influences span the globe, for she visited many places and
befriended a multitude of persons not only in her reporting jobs and activist stands, but
also in the multitude of books she read. Perhaps the people that shaped her the most,
however, were neither labor leaders nor social theorists, but the fictional characters
created by Turgenev, Gorki, Chekhov, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.140 William Miller
reveals, “She would in fact, throughout her life, be a passionate devotee of Russian
literature, and in time the genius of Dostoevsky recommended itself to her so strongly

139 Ibid.
140 In The Catholic Worker Movement: Intellectual and Spiritual Origin, Houston Catholic Workers Mark
and Louise Zwick explore a number of individuals as well as philosophies that influenced Dorothy Day and
Peter Maurin. Chapter 13 is entitled “Dostoevsky and Other Russian Writers” and it analyzes Day’s
references to Dostoevsky stories as well as contributions from Berdyaev and Soloviev who examine
concepts treated by Dostoevsky.
140 Miller, 36.
that his effect on her was oracular and remained so all her life.”

Dorothy loved the Russian novels she could get her hands on, and she expressed a particular fondness for Fyodor Dostoevsky. Though such reading may have been initially undertaken as a source of leisurely pleasure—an escape from the world—the characters and themes she encountered were interwoven in her active search for the truth in this world. But what did Miller mean by this oracular effect that impacted Day throughout her life?

Dorothy first mentions her fascination with Dostoevsky during her senior year in high school—at the mere age of 15—in a letter she had written her friend, Henrietta. Dorothy reveals the feeling of peace that overcomes her during the quiet winter walks with her baby brother. She attributes this sensation to God, and rejoices in the fact that she can spend these few hours in His presence, for life to a 15-year old can be full of anxiety and distress. “Maybe if I stayed away from books more this restlessness would pass,” her next paragraph reads. “I am reading Dostoevsky and last night I stayed up late and this morning I had to get up early and I feel that my soul is like lead.”

Such an effect, perhaps intensified by the burdensome weight of Russian life, seems far from oracular. But it was penetrating, touching her soul in a way that the Christianity professed by those surrounding her could not. Later in college, a time of religious rebellion for Day, she continued to consume Russian literature. “Both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy,” she recalled during this time, “made me cling to a faith in God, and yet I could not endure feeling alien in it.”

Maybe if she sat next to Anna Karenina or a redeemed Raskolnikov she would have found some companions in a faith that did not appear so bourgeois. But alas, Urbana, IL did not provide a landscape for such characters, and after

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141 Ibid.
142 Long Loneliness, 34.
143 Ibid., 43.
leaving a lecture one afternoon from which Dorothy inferred religion has been but a set of “props” taking various forms throughout history, she decided to complete her rebellion. Dorothy, strong and independent, decided religion would only impede her studies—namely the books on her own reading list, and, of course, her writing. Celebrating her new independence she began to curse, to “take God’s name in vain, in order to shock my friends who were churchgoers.”

She shunned football games and sorority parties in favor of the outcasts, worked odd jobs, and, in her nonconformity—including spending many days cold and hungry—rejoiced in such “reckless arrogance.”

In the introduction to *The Long Loneliness*, Dorothy writes, “‘All my life I have been haunted by God,’ as Kirilloff said in *The Possessed*.” Indeed, even in these youthful, dissident years, Dorothy remained acutely aware of her interior being—its torments as well as its pleasures. And like an impassioned Dmitri or a rebellious Ivan, she proclaimed her own immorality and cursed God, yet she could not escape her own soul. If Dostoevsky’s characters influenced Dorothy during this phase it seems as though their experimentation with various philosophies and engagement in depraved activities—“that downward path to salvation”—attracted Day more than the enlightened Christian truths the author also sought to communicate. But as Dorothy experienced the injustices suffered by the worker, the unemployed, and the prisoner, and reflected upon them with her radical friends, she began to grasp the deeper substance of these novels that penetrated her being. Before she moved to Staten Island with Forster, she fell in love

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144 *Ibid.*., 42.
146 *Ibid.*, 11. Also a Dostoevsky story.
with a man who shared with her a voracious appetite for literature. Recalling some of Lionel Moise’s favorite authors, Dorothy states, “This same friend was a reader of Dostoevski, and, whereas I had read him as a matter of routine, because I loved the Russians, now I read him with an understanding of men and suffering.” She continued to read and reread Dostoevsky, and of all his novels and characters that she digested and drew upon to articulate themes in her own writings, *The Brothers Karamazov* played a most central role.

**Karamazovs and the Path to Conversion**

The exchanges between characters in *TBK* captured the struggles over belief in the goodness of man and the practice of Christianity with which Dorothy wrestled. Both the darkness of doubt and the light of revelation portrayed through the Karamazov carousing and the monastic teachings guided Day’s search for meaning and nurtured the seeds of the Catholic Worker Movement:

> Through all my daily life, in those I came in contact with, in the things I read and heard, I felt that sense of being followed, of being desired; a sense of hope and expectation.

> Through those years I read all of Dostoyvsky's novels and it was, as Berdyaev says, a profound spiritual experience…those passages in *The Brothers Karamazov*; the sayings of Father Zosima, Mitya's conversion in jail, the very legend of the Grand Inquisitor, all this helped to lead me on. The characters, Alyosha and the Idiot*, testified to Christ in us. I was moved to the depths of my being by the reading of these books during my early twenties when I, too, was tasting the bitterness and the dregs of life and shuddered at its harshness and cruelty.

Recalling the pathway of her conversion, Day, along with another one of Dostoevsky’s characters, felt haunted by God. But this God no longer took the form of “a tremendous

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149 *Union Square to Rome*, 8.
Force…a Hand that stretched out to seize me”¹⁵⁰ as Dorothy recalled in her childhood, but rather the form of a persecuted servant, stretching out his hands in loving embrace upon a cross. She identified with this suffering Christ, felt the power of his love, and began to perceive her vocation as joining in the work of God.

Of course, being a part of radical circles, Dorothy knew well the challenges against Christianity offered by non-believers. “They cite the sufferings of little children, beaten, starved, crying in a premature and horrible despair,” writes Dorothy, “and they say with Ivan Karamazov that ‘the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to 'dear kind God,' who does not seem to hear it.'”¹⁵¹ And yet, she responds (much like Alyosha’s reply to his brother), “They lose sight of the fact that in the Agony in the Garden, Christ took upon Himself the sins of the world and the sufferings due to those sins.”¹⁵² Dorothy drew a connection between the teaching of Christian disciples joining in the sufferings of Christ and the notion of solidarity experienced by the laborers of the world. She recalls this “mystical element” in the radical workers’ relationship that can be found in the “sacred” sites where strikes and protests turned into blood and tears. Places like Ludlow, Bisbee and South Chicago bore the mark of Gethsemane, she believed, thus acknowledging her lighted path to conversion: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these brethren, you have done it unto me.” Feeling this as strongly as I did, is it any wonder that I was led finally to the feet of Christ?”¹⁵³

The story of the onion in TBK helps Dorothy further articulate her conversion. At the conclusion of this parable, Grushenka, the woman desired by both Mitya and his

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¹⁵⁰ Long Loneliness, 21.
¹⁵¹ House of Hospitality, 249.
¹⁵² Ibid.
¹⁵³ Union Square to Rome, 12.
father, reveals that she is in fact this wicked peasant woman. Yes, Grushenka gave an onion, but as she tells Alyosha, it was “just one little onion.” She has been most selfish her whole life. And yet Alyosha does not scorn her, but rather finds the goodness in this single, seemingly insignificant act. To her surprise Alyosha forgives her for such selfishness, offering, he tells Grushenka, an onion of his own. In some respects the antithesis of this wicked woman, Dorothy reflects on the one thing they share in common—the small acts of kindness. And through these small acts, Dorothy claims, she came to know God. After recounting this passage from *TBK*, Dorothy writes, “Better let it be said that I found Him through His poor, and in a moment of joy I turned to Him.”

And in this turn Dorothy entered the Catholic Church, the place to which years of seeking, amidst the cruelty and harshness of an unjust society, ultimately led with her conversion at 30 years of age. In the Church Dorothy found a deeper meaning and a brighter hope in her commitment to the poor, but her search continued as she prayed for a way to work for *the least of these*.

Love and Community

Dorothy gave someone an onion, and God gave her a Frenchman. Peter Maurin instilled Day with a philosophy of labor and knowledge of the Catholic Social Tradition, and she continued to learn from the many books and people that found their way into the Houses of Hospitality. Dostoevsky remained an integral part of this movement. One scholar remarked that *TBK* is essentially Ivan’s worldview versus that of Zosima, and Dorothy undoubtedly understood such a critique as she wrestled with the inequalities of

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human society and the vision of a unified kingdom. She summarizes the opposing views and hints at their significance in a brief passage in *The Long Loneliness*:

Ivan, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, protested that it was quite impossible to love man as he was, with his cruel instincts, his lust for power, his greed, his instincts of self-preservation. It was not a natural thing to think in terms of laying down one’s life for one’s fellows. In the same book however, Father Zosima spoke glowingly of that love for God which resulted in a love for one’s brother. The story of his conversion to love is moving, and that book, with its picture of religion, had a lot to do with my later life.156

Certainly Ivan’s picture of man and his deadly sins that lead to great suffering, both of the guilty and the innocent, conveys a convincing argument reflective of the injustices of 19th century Russia as well as 20th century America. He points to Christ, not as one in whom people can find solace for their own suffering, but as the one responsible for giving people freedom and therefore forever burdening them. Ivan’s solution to this problem took form in the gaunt face and sunken eyes of the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor. Perhaps not unlike the scene in which he appears to Christ imprisoned in the dark Seville prison, Dorothy recalls the ghostly image of the Grand Inquisitor paying visits to her bedside.157 These were dreams, or rather nightmares, but they became a reality as Day confronted Ivan’s creation in the wake of the Russian Revolution.

Dostoevsky did not live to see the rise of his people, but in fact the uprising was misguided, and his character’s epic poem eerily prophesized the events that unfolded. Men did not desire freedom; they craved bread. The Inquisitor knew this reality, and so did another ruler centuries later. Dorothy tells of a “mad friend” visiting the Catholic Worker who once paused during a meal and, holding up a piece of half-eaten rye bread, proclaimed, “It is the bread of the poor. It is Russian Jewish bread. It is the flesh of

157 Miller, 35.
Lenin. Lenin held bread up to the people and he said, ‘This is my body, broken for you.’ So they worship Lenin. He brought them bread.”  

Decades before Dorothy cheered in excitement with her radical friends celebrating the early days of the Revolution, but alas such hopes of liberation and equality were suppressed under Communist rule. If Dorothy failed to detect the false “truths” proclaimed by the Inquisitor when she read Dostoevsky in college, she well understood the dangers of such an ideology as she strove to carry forth the Catholic Worker vision. Though men and women are hungry (and surely they must be fed), freedom is fundamental to the human condition and reigns superior to the coercive promise of bread. Miller articulates this vision as he states, “Poverty, the great mark of human woe, stood as a sign, dark and forbidding, but which through love, the personalist way, could be changed into radiance.”  

Day and Maurin embraced the hungry in a way that transformed suffering and nourished the soul, joining in both Christ’s sacrificial act and redemptive promise. Faithfulness and patient endurance, believed Day, trumped any and all forms of power and control:

To grow in love, to rejoice, to be happy and thankful even, that we are living in such parlous times and not just benefiting unwittingly by the toil and suffering of others—rejoicing even that there is every sign that we are going to be given a chance to expiate here and now for our sins of omission and commission—and so to help the revolution and convert the revolutionaries. This is a dream worth dreaming, and the only kind of a vision powerful enough to stand side by side with the Marxism-Leninism which with its vision is working out in our day the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor.

Ivan Karamazov not only addresses humanity’s need for bread in his presentation of the Legend, but he also identifies the other craving with which the cunning Inquisitor is all too familiar: community. He believes all individuals yearn for community just as they

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158 Long Loneliness, 223.
159 Miller, 246.
crave bread, but that attaining true community was impossible. Only illusions exist, the
Inquisitor claims, and he deceives his people with the same illusion Lenin has offered the
Russian masses. This community takes the form of the collective ideal, where the worker
is exalted and the proletariat class itself becomes the Messiah. The Inquisitor speaks
correctly, for such a community is false, as history has proven. But Day believed a true
sense of community could be fostered, and she grew to understand this reality through the
Christian personalism preached by Peter Maurin. Dorothy saw not the workers as Christ,
but rather Christ in the worker. She strove to affirm the dignity of each human being, and
upheld his or her individual freedom while promoting personal responsibility. Each
person possessed an infinite worth as God’s creation, and one’s work offered an
opportunity for self-expression. Furthermore, in fulfilling such duties, one effectively
served one’s neighbor in contributing to the overall sustenance of the community. This
personalist approach, complemented by a philosophy of labor, provided the foundation
for the Catholic Worker houses, and within its walls there formed an authentic
community.

Ivan Karamazov did not revel in the ills of society or boast of the absurdity of
God’s existence. He struggled intensely with man’s selfish desire and ruthless power—a
gripping reality about which he had read daily in the papers and witnessed in the
streets—and devised philosophical arguments to explain such depravity. Fr. Zosima also
experienced a deep affliction over the vices of society, but he counters Ivan’s belief that
“everything is permitted” with the tenet that “each man is guilty before all.” Evil
abounds, but each individual bears a responsibility for his or her neighbor’s actions, and
by enduring these sins the individual and thus the world can begin to transform. Zosima

161 Union Square to Rome, 10-11.
and his fellow monks, most notably Ivan’s youngest brother, provide a living example of this way of life. It is the pathway of discipleship centered on Christ’s command to love, and Day often referenced the elder’s teachings in her contributions to the paper:

"Love one another, Fathers," he said, speaking to his monks. "Love God’s people. Because we have come here and shut ourselves within these walls, we are no holier than those that are outside, but on the contrary, from the very fact of coming here, each of us has confessed to himself that he is worse than others, than all men on earth...

"When he realizes that he is not only worse than others, but that he is responsible to all men for all and everything, for all human sins, national and individual, only then the aim of our seclusion is attained. For know, dear ones, that every one of us is undoubtedly responsible for all men and everything on earth, not merely through the general sinfulness of creation, but each one personally for all mankind and every individual man. For monks are not a special sort of man, but only what all men ought to be. Only through that knowledge, our heart grows soft with infinite, universal, inexhaustible love. Then every one of you will have the power to win over the whole world by love and to wash away the sins of the world with your tears…" 162

This excerpt is taken from an article by Day entitled “Why Do Members of Christ Tear One Another?” It examines the sin and suffering plaguing society through the light of Christian love, and Zosima provides helpful words in shaping Dorothy’s response to the brokenness of humanity. Dorothy stressed not only personal responsibility, but responsibility for one’s neighbor, for all persons are members of the body of Christ. Like Alyosha, she applies this monastic rule living in the world, amongst the unkempt, uneducated, and unappreciative.

Dorothy Day demystified any romantic notion of serving the poor. There was no glory, except perhaps the glory of the Lord towards which she strove. The work never ended; for as long as one person walked the streets hungry, there remained a chore to

162 Dorothy Day, "Why Do the Members of Christ Tear One Another?" The Catholic Worker (February 1942), 7.
complete. And serving the least of these, in all of their inabilities, can make for awfully burdensome work. This powerful, but stark reality of the core belief practiced by Day and the Catholic Worker once again finds sharp expression in Dostoevsky. One of the characters seeking counsel from Zosima is a wealthy landowner who, in expressing her conflicting desires to the monk, speaks to the challenge of this fundamental Christian command:

I love mankind so much—would you believe it?—I sometimes dreaming of giving up all, all I have, of leaving Lize [her daughter] and going to become a sister of mercy. I close my eyes, I think and dream, and in such moments I feel an invincible strength in myself. No wounds, no festering sores could frighten me.

...Yes, but could I survive such a life for long?...That’s the main question, that’s my most tormenting question of all...could you stand it for long on such a path? And if the sick man whose sores you are cleansing does not respond immediately with gratitude but, on the contrary, begins tormenting you with his whims, not appreciating and not noticing your philanthropic ministry...what then? Will you go on loving or not?163

The lady articulates a romantic notion of charity that, in actuality, quickly turns into sacrifice and drudgery. She answers her own question as to whether she could survive such a life for long, but the response elicited from Zosima succinctly captures the reality that is Christian love. “Love in practice,” states the elder monk, “is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.”164 This explanation left a profound impression on Day as she came to know the true demands of unconditional service to others in daily life at the Worker. She in fact would quote the monk’s line so often in her reflections that William Miller chose it as the title of his book on Dorothy and the Worker—*A Harsh and Dreadful Love*.165

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163 *TBK*, 56-57.  
165 Dorothy had to correct the various people who attributed this phrase to her.
On the evening of the Immaculate Conception in 1932, Dorothy asked for a way to open up so that she might use her gifts to serve the poor and oppressed. The next day Peter Maurin answered that prayer. He was a man, as Daniel Berrigan tells, who “took the intent of Christ seriously—the neighbor, the call to labor and sacrifice, the drudgery that made the kingdom possible.”\textsuperscript{166} It was a vision of the kingdom also shared by Fyodor Dostoevsky, penned and prophesized with clarity and insight in \textit{The Brothers Karamazov}. Not utopian, nowhere close to perfect, but real as the pain felt by a tormented Ivan and as beautiful as a Mitya redeemed was this vision. Day not only read and reread the novel with equal clarity and insight, but began to understand her vocation as participating in the Gospel story of suffering and salvation experienced by Dostoevsky and portrayed through his characters.

\textsuperscript{166} \textit{Long Loneliness}, xvi.
IV. THE STORY CONTINUES

Today Catholic Worker communities exist throughout America and overseas, each its own story, rooted in Day and Maurin’s shared vision, attracting countless men and women seeking to serve their impoverished brothers and sisters in the name of Christ. As the site of theology, *TBK* proves highly influential in this vision as it reflects the story of Scripture in the characters’ suffering and search for redemption. Further, as literary art, *TBK* provided Dorothy a passage from the ordinary into the mystery that is God’s creation. She entered the story and encountered its characters, saints and sinners alike, and their portraits helped her recognize the Incarnational reality of humanity. The epiphanies she discovered throughout these pages helped her articulate her conversion to the Church and later framed daily life in the houses of hospitality. In these communities the Karamazovs remained integral members, for Dorothy continued to draw upon their dialogue and interactions in perceiving her work as participating in the Paschal Mystery. Dorothy’s encounter with Dostoevsky’s novel embodies John Paul II’s proclamation of the Spirit cultivating redemptive beauty through the creativity of artists, and her renewal of the American Church testifies to the necessity of art in the life of the Church and thus the field of theology.
Secular and Sacred Scriptures

The world of *TBK* is the world of 19th century Russia, of Orthodox traditions and Enlightenment challenges, of rising conflict between clergy and academy, aristocracy and peasantry. But such a portrait is neither a society painted with broad strokes nor a class struggle captured by panorama. Rather, it is dug up from deep within each character—a plunging into the novice’s soul in the moment of forgiveness, a probing of the lackey’s psyche as he plots his murder. The Karamazov world is a picture of the human condition, and the social ideal arises not out of a religion or revolution but an Alyosha and a Smerdyakov. Though the story as a whole revolves around an act of patricide (hardly a site of theology), the circumstances leading up to the murder and the trials that ensue reveal a sacramentality that pervades a world ridden with sin. For Dostoevsky such revelation took the form of *Church*, not as an institution but rather as a people. It is precisely here—the people, his characters—wherein one locates the intersection of the sacred and secular.

The author illuminates the intrinsic value of these portraits in the letter written the evening his execution was spared. Experiencing a somber joy in being saved from death yet awaiting years of imprisonment, Dostoevsky pours forth his own soul to his beloved brother, Mikhail:

> Brother, I’m not depressed and haven’t lost spirit. Life everywhere is life, life is in ourselves and not in the external. There will be people near me, and to be a human being among human beings, and remain one forever, no matter what misfortunes befall, not to become depressed, and not to falter—this is what life is, herein lies its task.⁠¹⁶⁷

Such convictions would be tested and strengthened throughout Dostoevsky’s years in Siberia, and they would mark the realism expressed throughout his art decades later.

⁠¹⁶⁷ *TBK*, xii-xiii.
TBK is an honest look into the ugliness and beauty of a world where blasphemous remarks and biblical references are intermingled in a cacophony that is Russian life. It was Dostoevsky’s task to distinguish these voices and root them in their proper characters, for it is each individual life that animates the story and makes this world worth representing. He affirms these lives not by any measure of intelligence or sanctity, but merely by giving them voice. Even Fyodor Pavlovich, in all of his cackling and buffoonery, even he matters.

Meandering through street corners and into pubs, exiting the monastery and entering the prison, the reader encounters the Karamazov family and its many acquaintances, and through their respective exchanges one can gain deeper insights into these human beings among human beings. The love and sin and suffering experienced by these lives are indeed wholly human, but they express something deeper at work, something stirring within the interior space of each character. It is not, as Boyle notes, the word of God springing forth from the souls of these figures, for only the Divine Author can create such a reality. Rather, this stirring is a response to that word—*the groanings of the Spirit within*—polished in sermons, sputtered in fits of rage, and summed up in a gentle bow. It is the prayer of the Russian people, spoken in many voices and many tones, that yearns to be heard and received and reconciled.

This prayer begins in the bows of the monastery and finds resonance in the streets as Zosima sends forth Alyosha to mediate the troubles of his family members. The novice, much like his mentor, draws out their groanings by drawing them into the Gospel story. Yes, parricide ensues and physical as well as mental imprisonment afflicts each of the older brothers, but in the shadows of these sufferings begins to emerge the light of
redemption. This radiance finds its rightful source in the cross throughout Zosima’s teachings, and it is reflected in the encounters between the brothers Karamazov. According to Boyle, the ethical meaningfulness of the story, that is, its theological truth, is revealed most fully in these encounters:

For Catholic Christians the face of the other through being a face at all, speaks with the voice of God; through being this face it is the face of God; and through being a face among others it is the face of a fellow Christian, another for whom Christ died, and lovable accordingly, a member, potential or actual, of Christ’s spiritual body, the church.168

Such an incarnational representation marks the intersection of the sacred and the secular in TBK, where even a new man can arise within a once hedonistic Mitya. It is Alyosha, though, who stands most prominently in the middle of this intersection, subjecting his will to the demands of the monastery and receiving each person who crosses his path with an openness and love deeply rooted in this co-membership. Certainly many of these characters, especially his family members, appear rather unworthy of any mercy, but as Christ carried his cross for all sinners, so Alyosha bears the weight of his broken family. With utmost humility he looks upon their faces, seeking not to reprimand or to moralize, but only to offer a forgiving embrace. In these instances Alyosha is not merely following biblical instruction, rather, he truly believes that Mitya and Ivan, Grushenka and Katerina, the elder monks and the mischievous children are each his brothers and sisters. It is this understanding of the world and humanity that makes Alyosha Dostoevsky’s hero. Robert Inchausti, borrowing from Ernest Becker, acknowledges the author’s profound insight in creating a character whose suffering transcends power:

What Dostoevsky is describing in Alyosha is not a creature who is trans-

168 Boyle, 188.
formed and who transforms the world in turn in some miraculous ways, but rather a creature who takes more of the world into himself and develops new forms of courage and endurance.169

Alyosha heeded Zosima’s instruction to leave the monastery and serve the world, and in offering himself to his family and their acquaintances he enters into communion with the body of the forgiven. He cannot grant them salvation, but as a witness to the Gospel teachings he points to the redemption that lies beyond suffering in the body of the resurrected. The monk’s words prove prophetic indeed as Alyosha finds happiness in enduring the sins of his society, and the final expression of TBK is one of merriment in the ringing voices of the children walking hand in hand with the young Karamazov—a prayer of laughter marking the promise of Russia.

One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic

In A Writer’s Diary, Dostoevsky implores his fellow Russians to partake in building this kingdom envisioned by Alyosha. He urges the offering of “our gift, our Orthodoxy, to the universal service of humanity for which it was intended.”170 For the author, this gift takes the form of a servant who will work without qualms for the “sake of universal reconciliation.”171 This Christian virtue of service, essential in attaining reconciliation and therefore solidarity amongst the people, takes root in Alyosha and Zosima and spreads throughout the story in their encounters with various characters. These central figures reveal the fundamental message of the novel, for again Dostoevsky’s intent was to portray the Church as the social ideal in TBK. Faith in God is essential in building the Kingdom, but so is faith in humanity, and a sort of synthesis

169 Robert Inchausti, Subversive Orthodoxy: Outlaws, Revolutionaries, and Other Christians in Disguise (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 54. (Quoting Becker, Denial of Death, 279, in italics).
170 A Writer’s Diary, 526.
171 Ibid., 527.
occurs in the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the Russian people. As Zosima reveals, “The salvation of Russia is from the people. And the Russian monastery has been with the people from time immemorial.”

Alyosha stands in both realms, enabling him to serve as a harbinger for what Russia could become. But for Dostoevsky such a vision must not be limited to the Russian state. The Church, if it is to be truly Church, must reclaim, as Boyle noted, its original ecumenical meaning and encompass all of humankind. The Russian people, however, in their long history of suffering, could take the first step towards moral regeneration by acknowledging this Christian truth and seeking, as a unified whole, to reconcile the entire world by embodying Christ’s commandment. Soloviev, with whom Dostoevsky traveled to Optina Pustyn—the monastery after which Zosima and his community are modeled—offers insight into the vision the author held close to his own heart:

The path [of TBK] is moral action: the two-fold action of moral self-abnegation. In order that a person disavow his arbitrary opinion, what is first of all required is deliberate veracity for the sake of common national faith and truth. A person should bow before the people’s faith, not because it is the people’s, but because it is true.

This truth is incarnated in the Church, the people of Russia, and though they indulge in greed and corruption, they are keenly aware that such activity is sin, and that it must be atoned. Through their suffering they are purified, and standing guilty before all and for all they are redeemed. Such is the word that Dostoevsky spoke, a word that found expression in the maddest outburst and the most silent of kisses by the brothers Karamazov.

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172 TBK, 314.
173 Soloviev, 12.
The Sister Karamazov?

“Rita [a guest at the Catholic Worker], wondered once about my always referring to books,” writes Dorothy. “I told her it helped my perspective.” For Dorothy Day, the search for meaning in the places and faces she encountered during her youthful years seemed at many times futile, for the contradictions she witnessed and the loneliness she endured rendered the world seemingly unintelligible. Her nomadic life mirrored the uncertainty she experienced within, leaving her with a fragmented sense of self. Dorothy was drawn to the saints and psalms as a child, only to retreat from a bourgeois Christianity inside church walls during her teen years. She enjoyed the privileges of a middle class family, but shunned conventional society in the name of those afflicted by economic injustice. She celebrated her freedom and the rise of the worker, then found herself in prison and later abandoning the Communist cause. Dorothy spent many years searching for her identity, often in the streets and perhaps more often in the pages of great novels. Her voracious appetite for reading heightened her conscience and sharpened her outlook as she struggled to first understand a world of great suffering and then conceive a plan of action by which she might find fulfillment in the pursuit of justice. Though no one book provided her with answers to these questions, *The Brothers Karamazov*, as guests at the Catholic Worker would discover years later, indeed helped her perspective on the surrounding world and her vocation within it.

The insights into the human condition as revealed by the brothers’ brokenness, the conflict over freedom and control, and the possibility of joy through suffering—an inescapable suffering that afflicts each character in the story—gripped Dorothy’s soul.

The novel enlightened her, but it by no means lightened her burden, except that of knowing Karamazov characters accompanied her as she too was wading through the dregs of life. She speaks of Zosima’s sayings, Mitya’s conversion and Ivan’s Inquisitor as episodes in the story that “helped to lead me on.” Perhaps, in this respect, *TBK* served as a truthful novel for Day. Such an account, according to Hauerwas, not only helps the reader create a framework within which to place his or her past and present experiences, but it also directs one’s moral compass in the pursuit of future endeavors:

Thus a true story is one that helps me to uncover the true path that is also the path for me through the unknown and foreign…For we must remember that the world is not simply waiting to be seen, but we must learn to see by how we insist on seeing it.175

Throughout her twenties Dorothy’s path led her in so many directions it was perhaps no path whatsoever. She participated in various ideological circles, cheered on the Russian revolution as a harbinger of economic justice, sought a more practical line of work as a nurse, and then retired to the beach with her lover, her books and her pen. She remained restless—still fleeing a God that continued to haunt, still enduring the loneliness that comes with uncertainty and unfulfilled desires. Perhaps it was this very vulnerability that enabled her to identify with characters in *TBK*, each suffering by human hands and struggling over matters of faith in his or her own particular way. Relating this story to her own reality helped bring Christianity to life for Dorothy. The teachings of the monk and encounters between brothers contributed to her understanding of a broken humanity during these years, and though her search continued, a pathway to the Catholic Church was beginning to emerge. Dorothy credits Dostoevsky as an author who “had given me

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175 *Truthfulness and Tragedy*, 80. Recall from Chapter 2: “Dostoevsky did not merely present Russian life as it appeared; rather, he took what he encountered and molded it into a vision for what Russian society could be.”
desire and background\footnote{176}{Long Loneliness, 142.} that led to these doors, and upon entering she began to see the world according to her newly professed convictions.

Though many influences converged in the narrative that was Dorothy’s life to bring about not only the conversion but also her work within the Church, Dostoevsky’s story reappeared throughout the various segments of Day’s journey and had a lasting effect on the Catholic Worker. Referencing \textit{TBK} in recalling her pre-conversion years, Dorothy claims “that book, with its picture of religion, had a lot to do with my later life.”\footnote{177}{Ibid., 87.} Such a statement makes for a rather broad and perhaps ambiguous claim, but again Hauerwas’ description of a truthful story provides a context in which the impact of \textit{TBK} can be explored:

\begin{quote}
A story that is true must therefore demand that we be true and provide us with the skills to yank us out of our self-deceptions…It is only on the basis of such a story that we can know how to go on with the courage appropriate to human existence.\footnote{178}{Truthfulness and Tragedy, 80.}
\end{quote}

Dorothy’s youthful rallying cry later took the form of a solemn prayer, collectivism turned to personalism, and the bread of Lenin was rejected for the Holy Eucharist. The proclamations of the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor—architect of a grand deception—ultimately helped to free Dorothy from her own deceptions as a subscriber to Communist thought and the temporal achievement of a classless utopia. The Inquisitor does not free Dorothy from such deceit because he serves as an example of an immoral character; on the contrary, he is a most moral leader. But his morals are built upon false notions of freedom and community, for he builds a society in which the self surrenders to the collective whole and the human experience becomes an exercise in conformity. Morality
for Day was fundamentally relational, and in embracing the personalist way she rejected Ivan’s poem and its present embodiment in Lenin’s Russia. The freedom inherent in personalism was not without its own challenges though, and Dorothy faced resistance from the guests inside Houses of Hospitality:

[A]ll of them weary of the idea of freedom and personal responsibility—\[I feel bitterly oppressed, yet confirmed in my conviction that we have to emphasize personal responsibility, but under protest…Today I just happened to light on Dostoevsky’s “Grand Inquisitor,” which was most apropos. Freedom—how men hate it and chafe under it; how unhappy they are with it.\]^179^ There were rights as well as duties for staff and guests alike at the Catholic Worker, and living in community meant both exercising one’s freedom and working to ensure each individual could do likewise. Community was indeed difficult because it involved other people, but both Day and Maurin held the conviction that this expression of personalism was foundational to the Houses of Hospitality.

The courage to go on is what Hauerwas claims true stories offer in helping individuals situate themselves in the world and then move forward with strength of conviction. In the witness of Alyosha’s character, *TBK* helped Day articulate what it means to live in communion with others and practice selfless love. Recalling how the novel helped lead her on during the difficulties she experienced in her twenties, she writes of Alyosha as one who “testified to Christ in us.”[^180^] And later commenting on the struggles endured at the Catholic Worker, she praises Peter Maurin and his perseverance in teaching and practicing a painful and patient indoctrination. “He had the simplicity of an Alyosha,” she states, for he “accepted gratefully what people offered, finding plenty of

[^180^]: *From Union Square to Rome*, 8.
work to do, always taking the least place—and serving others.” Peter, like
Dostoevsky’s novice, displayed a humility and endurance that fostered an inward renewal
in the Worker community. His philosophy included an emptying of oneself for the
nourishment of the other, and he enacted this belief by practicing voluntary poverty.
Dorothy viewed such thought and action as essential to carrying forth the CW vision.

“Reading *Warriors of God* by Walter Nigo,” Day notes in her diary. “Purpose of book to
call for a new transfigured monasticism. A new *brotherhood of those marked by pain*, as

Her literary allusions were many, and through the decades *TBK* found its way into
Dorothy’s journal entries as she put the day’s events in perspective. At times Peter
imaged Alyosha, and Dorothy imagined a community that in time would likewise testify
to Christ and empty itself, both materially and spiritually.

**Love is the Measure**

Dostoevsky wrote with a keen sense of the tragic—no doubt impressed upon him
during his own experiences not only as a prisoner but as a member of burdened Russian
society at-large—and his novel helps Dorothy Day discern her vocation not only because
it exposes her self-deceptions, but because it helps her articulate the religious convictions
that render the self’s relationship to God and the world more intelligible (which, in part,
helped reveal those deceptions). For nearly her entire life, Dorothy concerned herself
with the well-being of the downtrodden, but not until she began to perceive humanity
through a cruciform lens did she share an identity with them. While Alyosha’s
embodiment of monastic practice in the world helped give Day perspective, it was the

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181 *Loaves and Fishes*, 27.
elder monk whose counsel illuminated Day’s work more profoundly than any character in any book. Fr. Zosima, who Day once referred to as “that very much alive character,” spoke of a love for God that resulted in love for one’s brother and sister, and such love could only be realized and practiced when one grew in the knowledge that he or she is responsible for all of humanity. While Dorothy engaged in her early activist work seeking victory for the workers, she later came to the realization that her commitment to those oppressed was rooted in the mystical body of Christ. Her paradigm shifted to one of communion where love, regardless of the outcome, was the measure. It was a love that required Zosima to surrender himself and bow down before even the basest of men in the Karamazov family, and it was a virtue Dorothy continually strove to practice. It could never be perfected, only worked at each day through each interaction, and often there was desperation and failure. Perseverance and humility, as instructed by the elder, were required, and so Dorothy sought divine intercession in meeting these acute challenges:

I pray for love—that I may learn to love God, and I am surrounded by such human hatred and dislike that all natural love and companionship is taken from me. Certainly all the joy one has in loving others is taken from me…Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.

Perhaps not coincidentally, this petition Dorothy asks of God echoes both the hope and the doubt expressed by the lady landowner seeking counsel from Zosima. The woman dreams of a love that, once given, is extolled and returned by the beloved. With eyes closed a rush of inspiration overcomes her body and she shouts in exhilaration at the prospect of administering works of mercy. But such vigor, like the dream, is fleeting.

183 Ibid., 90.
Zosima, listening intently, reflects upon the lady’s desire and offers a reply that finds permanent resonance within the walls of Hospitality Houses worldwide.

Dorothy loves with her eyes open, and what she sees makes the Catholic Worker commitment to serve the poor an utmost struggle to continue. The people and their problems encountered in the Houses of Hospitality undoubtedly wore thin the patience and energy of each inhabitant, including Dorothy. Her efforts were often thankless and at times met with resistance and spite, but such challenges offered the greatest opportunities to grow in love and deepen relationships with God and one another. “A true story thus must enable us to know what our engagements have committed us to,”¹⁸⁴ Hauerwas claims, and both the prayer offered by Dorothy and her own reply pay testimony to the truthfulness of TBK and its role in helping Day grasp the reality of her convictions as manifested in the Catholic Worker mission:

Only solution is to see every man as better than oneself. Which means hunting for good points, seeing Christ in them, sowing one’s judgment, loving even unto folly…Again it is ‘loving in general.’ Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams. It is a sword sundering bones and marrow. It reaches down into the depths. It means suffering. Passion is suffering. It is selfless. It seeks to lose self in God.¹⁸⁵

Surely Zosima and then Alyosha were regarded as holy fools in taking seriously this call to compassion, and Dorothy likewise loved unto folly, nearly falling apart in doing so. It required an immense humility as well as abundant patience and courage. Yet it was not so much the act of giving that posed the greatest challenge, but rather the practice of recognizing those to whom she gave as sisters and brothers in Christ. Amidst the filth and odor emerged the face of God, and once this reality could be perceived the gift of love showered forth. Sometimes the “hunting for good points” became a rather tiresome

¹⁸⁴ Truthfulness and Tragedy, 80.
¹⁸⁵ Duty of Delight, 102.
expedition, but again a Dostoevsky character helped Day’s search. “Everyone has ‘given
away an onion,’” Dorothy once wrote in her journal. “Gruschenka story in Bros
Karamazov. Jim Ryder who comes in ‘off the road’ and always with a bottle.”186

Dorothy attributed God’s goodness to her as a result of once giving away, like the
peasant woman, an onion. Now she related it to the drunk for whom she repeatedly
opened her door. It was another allusion that gave her perspective, for those who
appeared lowly to onlookers were not below Dorothy. She reached down into the depths,
literally and metaphorically, to lift them up. Active love is “labor and perseverance” says
Zosima, and indeed it was tiring and trying for Dorothy. It was also costly. Living in
community within the Houses of Hospitality provided little escape from the sinfulness of
society she read about daily in the papers. Often she met victim and perpetrator alike in
her own living room, and though Dorothy endured the trials of the adults entering off the
streets, it was perhaps the condition of the youth that brought the heaviest weight upon
her:

How one’s heart aches over children. It was the same with Tamar—then
with her children, and now with the great grandchildren. One can only
say “to love is to suffer.” The sight of infidelity, broken homes, adult
unhappiness is cruel for children. Dostoevsky understood this when he
wrote of “the sufferings of one little child” in Brothers Karamazov.
Ivan’s bitter words, his rejection of God.187

Dorothy was first and foremost a mother. She experienced both the pain and the joy of
childbirth and childrearing, and she had a natural affection for children throughout her
life. But there were children whose condition took the joy from her, for society had
stolen their innocence and left them to pay. Dorothy endured a loneliness in raising
Tamar, and similar feelings, sometimes brimming to despair, arose when playing with the

186 Ibid., 524.
187 Ibid., 496-497.
unkempt offspring of guests. Ivan’s words confronted her, and she responded by embracing God in embracing the children. It was passionate love, seeking to heal the brokenness only through enduring it. She labored and persevered and fell and got back up to bear the burdens of those suffering around her, especially the youth.

The love of which Zosima spoke was a love that found fullest expression on the cross. There hung Christ, bones and marrow sundered, as a sacrifice for the reconciliation of humanity. It was this reality in which the elder rooted his counsel, including that offered to the romanticizing landlady. Harsh and dreadful are the works of mercy indeed, and, as former editor of the CW newspaper Jim Forest notes, this counsel found a deep rootedness in the reality of daily life at the Worker:

I often heard Dorothy Day recite those words. I doubt any chapter in any work of literature had so much importance for her. She had first read Dostoevsky's novel when she was ill in her teens. It was partly through Dostoevsky that she formed an understanding of Christianity that wasn't typically Western, seeing it not simply as an institutional structure but as a way of life in which nothing was more important than seeing Christ in others.¹⁸⁸

The risen Christ retained his wounds from the cross, and, in fact, he is only identified amidst his disciples by these wounds. Dorothy recognized this body in the hands and sides of those around her, and heeded the monk’s words that, as members of the same body, “we’re all responsible for all.” She carried forth this vision of the Church in her daily work—a vision so profoundly influenced by Zosima that Forest refers to him as “somehow a co-founder of all the Catholic Worker houses of Hospitality.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ Jim Forest, “Opening Heart and Home: Dorothy Day taught us the real meaning of hospitality by the way she lived day to day,” Sojourners (July, 2004), available at http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action= magazine.article&issue=soj0407&article=040723
Narratives Intertwined

In 1973, four decades after the first house of hospitality was erected, Dorothy writes, “I do not think I could have carried on with a loving heart all these years without Dostoevsky’s understanding of poverty, suffering, and drunkenness.”\textsuperscript{190} Fyodor Pavlovich and his sons Dmitri and Ivan bear the mark of this understanding, a brokenness and torment made explicit in their wailing—as theater but also as the only way they know how to express themselves—and a product of the calamity, clamor and weight of Russian life. Alyosha hears these groans most acutely, not because they emanate from within, but rather because he has learned from Zosima that his family’s sin is his sin, and he therefore shoulders the weight of unworthiness, of failure, of the need to forgive and be forgiven. The Karamazovs’ very real experiences of love and loss, of sin and reconciliation, enabled Dorothy to speak of God because it enabled her to speak of a suffering humanity imaged in God’s likeness—a likeness that reflects the tragic character of the Gospel story. And in this suffering arises the hope for redemption, the saving work of Christ in which the Church, as members of his body, is called to participate.

The secret of renewal held in the heart of the young Karamazov—the kingdom wherein suffering is transcended and steadfast love reigns—sadly, did not materialize in the way Dostoevsky had hoped for his native Russia. This vision did, however, take root in Manhattan’s Mott Street, where Dorothy Day helped lead the 20\textsuperscript{th} century American church in a new direction as a people who daily lived Christ’s example of feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. Day encountered \textit{TBK}, and this literary art, as a witness to the Spirit’s activity in the world, in turn helped frame the houses of hospitality, illuminate its rooms, and shape its community members. Dostoevsky infused this activity

\textsuperscript{190} \textit{Loaves and Fishes}, 217.
in his characters, and Dorothy had responded to it with a love and a patience that endured nearly 50 years of daily life at the Catholic Worker.

“it is just after midnight,” Dorothy once recorded, “and I have been sitting in the outer office alone with two mad creatures with God in their hearts. All three of us tormented in our various ways…”191 She is not quoting the young Karamazov or the elder monk, but her tone carries a resonance akin to these Russian voices. Dostoevsky was one of Dorothy’s favorite authors, and I bet Dorothy could be one of Dostoevsky’s favorite characters. He did not create her, but he certainly helped shape this woman. The feeling of being haunted by God, an allure and then rejection of communism, her profound sense of sin and acts of holy foolishness—all of these occurrences and characteristics contributed to the chapters that comprised her own narrative.

TBK shaped Dorothy’s way of being because it shaped her way of seeing the world, for reading the novel gave her imagery, language and companionship to help her reflect upon and articulate her youthful struggles, conversion to the church, and carrying forth of the Catholic Worker vision. Karamazov characters appeared throughout Day’s life and helped her expose false realities (the Grand Inquisitor as Lenin), reflect on freedom and suffering (Ivan), acknowledge the value of small acts (Gruschenka), and recognize the servant Christ (Alyosha as Peter). Their journeys drew her into the Gospel story by helping Dorothy to perceive her role as well as the roles of those accompanying her in bringing forth the kingdom. She also gained perspective on what this commitment to her vocation required as Zosima’s counsel to the landlady revealed the reality through which one enters the kingdom—the cross. She embraced this reality and emerged from the novel with an understanding of the Christian life so profoundly shaped by these

191 House of Hospitality, 87.
Russian figures, one might even say Dostoevsky’s art produced an oracular effect on Dorothy Day.

Art, Morality and God

_The Brothers Karamazov_ is only a book, an inanimate object shelved in a library or resting in a reader’s hands. The words on the pages alone cannot influence or inspire the Church. But encountering the novel, Dorothy Day articulates her role and the roles of those surrounding her as participating in the story of Revelation, a story that culminates in the passion of Christ and continues in the work of the Church. Though not a theologian, Dorothy was a deep theological thinker, and Dostoevsky offered her the grammar for such reflection in presenting neither systems of thought nor solutions to ethical dilemmas but a novel about three brothers enduring life in a broken world.

In attempting to convey the daily experience inside the Houses of Hospitality, Stanley Vishnewski recalls Dorothy saying one must read Dostoevsky if he or she wishes to understand the Catholic Worker. In attempting to explain this relationship between art and morality, Stanley Hauerwas writes of the difficulty in conveying a story’s insights apart from reading the novel itself. To comprehend the human condition as revealed by the characters and events, he claims, one must enter into the text and grasp the subtlety of description. Novels, unlike rules or analyses, do not seek to control or define the world but rather to present it as it appears, in all of its disarray and uncertainty. They mirror life in allowing for the contingent and accounting for the web of factors that influence character development, and in encountering these stories the reader is able to draw connections to his or her own unfolding story.
Art presents no formula for living correctly but rather seeks a path to the inmost reality of the human person—a reality that finds its source in the Creator. One artist who further illuminated the role of art as an expression of this createdness and thus revelatory of God and the moral life was the master wood engraver, Fritz Eichenberg. Eichenberg was a converted Quaker who spent the early part of his career making prints for novels written by Dostoevsky, an author with whom he felt a “spiritual kinship.”

No stranger to political persecution and isolation himself, Fritz, a born Jew, fled Nazi Germany for America in 1933. In illustrating the Russian classics, including *TBK*, he claims he found inspiration—an inspiration that not only guided his art but healed his own brokenness:

> [I]n the end there is always redemption and this is what attracts me very greatly to the Russian novelists. They do not give an unrelieved account of human suffering. There is always proof in the end that through suffering one becomes purified, and that redemption is the hope for which you are praying, for which you are working.

A number of critics commented on the grimness and morbidity of the engravings Eichenberg crafted for these stories, but the many people he met in his travels to the Soviet Union said that the artist understood the Russian soul.

Eichenberg’s own experiences and struggles resonated with Dostoevsky’s trials, and he comments that just as the author “overcame these things by pouring all his anxieties and his insights he gained through extreme suffering into his novels” so too does the wood engraver find redemptive value in etching characters to illustrate these pages. Eichenberg literally created light out of darkness through the media with which he labored:

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They let you create light out of the dark as you face the black woodblock or the darkened surface of the lithographic stone. You spread light by the first touch of the graver or etching needle. You create a source of light which spreads over the “stage,” picks out the main actors and sets the scene for their relationships.”

This light helped Eichenberg emerge from his own struggles, and he hoped others were moved by it as well. “All truly great art is universal,” believed Eichenberg, “it belongs to the world.” And so Eichenberg labored to animate characters and scenes for readers to visually appreciate and perhaps gain a deeper insight of the text, regardless of the translation. There were also those that could not read, making these pictures all the more important. It was mainly for this reason that Dorothy Day commissioned Eichenberg to illustrate the Catholic Worker newspaper (without pay, of course). She had witnessed Fritz’s depictions of Dostoevsky’s characters, and she wished for such artistic expression to animate her columns.

The October-November 1981 edition of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper (*CW*) celebrated Fritz’s 80th birthday, and it included the transcript from the artist’s interview with Robert Ellsberg months earlier. In the interview Ellsberg comments on the three images of Christ so prominent in Eichenberg’s work: *the man who suffers, the figure on the Cross; a challenge to our easy consciences—the face who haunts your Grand Inquisitor; and the figure of Christ who comes among us disguised in the body of the poor, the prisoner, the outcast.* Each of these images could be seen in *CW* editions for the past four decades, but the last image in particular captured daily life in the houses of hospitality. Eichenberg remembers his visits to the original house of hospitality on Mott Street in Manhattan where he found inspiration in the daily undertakings that led to one
of his most popular etchings: *Christ of the Breadlines*. “And that breadline curled around the block with those ragged men and women, so injured and yet with a kind of silent dignity,” recalls Eichenberg. “I was very moved by that sight, and I imagined Christ among them.”

Eichenberg captured both the ragged and the divine in the faces of his woodcuts, for it was this feature that revealed not only a person’s identity, but also his or her shared createdness. Commenting on this significance, he explains, “To me this is the one way to get people to understand one another. If you don’t look a person in the face, you won’t know a thing about him. But everything is written there, you just have to learn how to read it.”

*Everything*, including the image and likeness of Christ, and in illustrating scenes from daily life at the House of Hospitality, Eichenberg gave form to the mystical body. He also delivered talks on Friday nights at Mott Street, and his presentation on *The Drama of the Human Face* struck a chord deep within Dorothy’s soul. “It was to her the human pilgrimage,” recalls Eichenberg, “the Via Dolorosa which we all have to trudge—and how’s it reflected on humanity’s faces, from the first cry to the last of the crucifixion.”

Digging a needle into blocks of wood, Eichenberg further delved into the Incarnation and the inevitable suffering accompanying each individual on the road to redemption. He gave new shape to the matter Dostoevsky had fashioned in the form of Karamazov characters. It was a matter infused with the Spirit that inspired Day as she read the Russian novel, and it continued to nourish her appetite for art as prints of woodcuts complementing her *CW* columns.

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197 Ibid., 55.
198 Ibid., 60.
199 Ibid., 81.
200 Eichenberg spoke of Dorothy as “hungry for art.” (Ibid., 54).
“Her love of art, music, literature was passionate,” Eichenberg recalls, “a love that lifted her out of the day-by-day sacrificial and self-ordained vocation of living with the poor, the rejected, the lacerated, the untouchables.” Such a description echoes John Paul II’s *Letter to Artists* in which he identifies art as a gift of the imagination that rises above the everyday in its appeal to the beautiful. But this lifting out of the mundane was not an escape. Quite the contrary, as exemplified in her encounter with *TBK*, Dorothy delved into the very essence of her daily toil: Christ’s redemptive act. Eichenberg was drawn to Dostoevsky because his stories were an expression of his own search for redemption, and Dorothy was drawn to Zosima’s counsel on love in practice and Alyosha’s embodiment of redemptive suffering. “Beauty will save the world,” writes the pope in the conclusion to his letter. Of course, that line comes from another Dostoevsky story, and Dorothy quotes it in her writings as well. Such beauty is not the work of art itself, however, but rather the mystery of God’s creation that the work seeks to portray. This mystery fully reveals itself in the Incarnation and culminates in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who, in Dostoevsky’s Eastern Orthodox tradition, is praised as “the supremely Beautiful.” Christ reigns as the Savior of the world, and the cries of the Karamazov characters not only gave expression to the Beautiful that is God’s only Son but also beckoned Day to participate in His salvific work.

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202 *Letter to Artists*, §16; (Taken from *The Idiot*. “I believe the world will be saved by beauty,” says Myshkin.)
This imagination and sense of mystery makes artists, according to Eichenberg, “partners with the divine spirit that created our Universe.”203 As craftsmen and women (twórca), artists participate in the work of the Creator (stwórca) through fashioning matter that reveals the inner-reality of the world. For this reason John Paul began his letter with a verse from the Genesis story, and he drew it into the Easter message of the cross revealing both God to humanity and humanity to itself. Eichenberg likewise speaks of artists as “seeing through the fabric of texture and flesh into the soul of things, sensing impending change, suffering with humanity.”204 Through song, story and woodcut they not only serve as witnesses to the signs of the times but also as prophets who interpret and give aesthetic form to the divine operating in these signs, even those pointing to tragedy.

Theology and art cannot be separated because, as the master engraver notes, “Life and Art cannot be separated.”205 Dostoevsky’s novels are infused with the love and suffering and madness that he experienced in his relationships with the peasants and prisoners of his native Russia, and his recognition of these figures as brothers and sisters redeemed in Christ inspired the characters he crafted in his writing. Similarly, the drama revealed in the human face animated Eichenberg’s woodcuts, and his understanding of these faces as both created by God and imaged in God’s likeness impassioned his toil at the workbench. Neither artist, however, perfected his craft for the sake of art itself. Rather, they sought reconciliation amongst their people and unity in the world, and such hope was reflected in the fiction and the faces they created.

203 Eichenberg, 98.
204 Ibid., 92
205 Ibid., 94.
In probing the depths of joy and loss, of suffering and redemption, artists illuminate the story of Revelation that continues to unfold in the work of the Church. The field of theology helps inform and guide this work, and theologians would serve the Church well by responding to John Paul’s appeal—an appeal first made by Fritz Eichenberg: "The debt we owe great art, accumulated over the centuries, is immeasurable. Let’s try to pay it off by listening to its immortal voice, reviving our own creative spirit for the sake of the Peaceable Kingdom." Isaiah envisioned Christ’s reign as a time when wolf would dwell with lamb, leopard would lie with calf and lion, and a little child would lead them all. May theology draw upon today’s artists who, like the prophets of old, cultivate redemptive beauty and foster eternal truth through the fruit of the imagination.

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206 Ibid., 104.
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