

From Union Square to Rome

Dorothy Day

Chapter 13 - Your Three Objections

Summary: Answers three objections of her brother to her faith: that religion is morbid, the Catholic belief in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the problem of evil. Relies on St. Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and the scriptures to elaborate her faith and love of God. (DDLW #213).

You say that religion is morbid. This is quite a natural feeling on your part and it is a very common attitude of Communists toward religion. If those who spend several hours a day in prayer, and hours more in spiritual reading, as St. Teresa did, in a wilful search for God, had these feelings, these struggles—how much more those who are scarcely touched by faith or hope?

You know the reaction of my friends to religion, that it is a deliberate turning away from life. We Catholics know, with a supernatural knowledge, not with a worldly knowledge, that this is not so, just as we know the existence of God and love Him with our will, which is a power of our souls.

St. Teresa struggled for twenty years, she said, to avoid the occasions of sin. To know what she was talking about, what she meant by sin, it is necessary to understand the situation she was in. She had entered the convent at the age of eighteen. The Carmelite convent was a large one, containing so many nuns that it was difficult to feed them all. It was the custom of the day to send unmarried daughters, widows, ladies who wished to retire from the world to the convent, and yet they did not retire from the world. There were a great many visitors. St. Teresa herself said that one of the reasons so many visitors came was to bring food to the nuns, and they received their callers because there was so little food in the convent that they needed to eke out their resources in that way. Later when St. Teresa was making her foundations of the reformed Carmelites, she saw to it that her nuns had enough to eat,

St. Teresa knew that she was far from leading the life she wished to lead when she entered the convent. She wished to give herself up wholly to God. She wished everything she did, every word she said, to tend to that end. But she was a joyful creature. The story is that she went to be received in the convent in a bright red dress. She was full of vitality, life. She wished to live abundantly. The very qualities in her which urged her to give herself to God, drew her to her fellows. She had an abundant love for them, an interest in them, and there was much time spent in conversations.

The more her life was involved with her friends, the more she was drawn to them, the more she felt she was drawing away from God. She was making little account of venial sins, she

said; she was not avoiding the occasions of them. She felt that she was a sinful creature and said so many times in her autobiography. This does not mean anything scandalous—that the convent ladies sat around and received unseemly visits, ate or drank to excess, or indulged in vicious talk or gossip.

But St. Teresa had so great a desire for perfection that any time engaged in idle talk (the most innocent idle talk) seemed to her to be deliberately stolen from God. She knew what she wanted, she knew that there was a better life for her, but she had to struggle to attain it, She tells how she was kept from prayer. “The sadness I felt on entering the oratory was so great that it required all the courage I had to force myself in. They say of me that my courage is not slight, and it is known that God has given me a courage beyond that of a woman; but I have made a bad use of it.”

She told, too, of watching the hour glass, of how she was filled with distractions, of what a constant hard struggle it was to force herself to prayer and spiritual reading. And these struggles went on for twenty years!

“I wished to live,” she wrote, “but I saw clearly that I was not living, but rather wrestling with the shadow of death; there was no one to give me life, and I was not able to take it.

This is the “morbidness” that you mean, I know. If St, Teresa, with her knowledge and insight and the graces God gave her to go on struggling, felt that she was wrestling with the shadow of death, how one who knows nothing of religion must shy off from it every time the matter enters his consciousness!

The shadow of death that she spoke of was the life she was leading, purposeless, disordered, a constant succumbing to second-best, to the less-than-perfect which she desired. But human nature will try to persuade us that the life of prayer is death, is a turning away from life,

As a convert I can say these things, knowing how many times I turned away, almost in disgust, from the idea of God and giving myself up to Him. I know the feeling of uneasiness, of weariness, the feeling of strain put upon the soul from driving it, instead of abandoning it to God. But I do not know how anyone can persist in the search for God without the assistance of the Church and the advice of those confessors with the experience of generations behind them.

The thing you do not understand is the elemental fact that our beginning and our last end is God. Once that fact is accepted, half the struggle is won. If we wish to go on struggling, not to be content with the minimum of virtue, of duty done, of “just getting by,” then we should account it a great honor that God has given us these desires, to serve Him and to use ourselves completely in His service.

You do not see this, you do not believe it. Every now and then, when you think of religion in your busy life, you end by turning from it with aversion. You are young, and you have not yet really felt the need, the yearning toward God. You have not been in such agony and misery that you turned to One whom you knew not and said, “God help me!” Or if you did, you were ashamed of doing it afterward, feeling it to be cowardice to turn in misery to a God in Whom you did not believe.

I felt this despair when I lay there in jail for fifteen days, contemplating the fundamental misery of human existence, a misery which would remain even if social justice were achieved and a state of Utopia prevailed. For you cannot pace the floor of a barred cell, or lie on your back on a hard cot watching a gleam of sunlight travel slowly, oh, so slowly, across the room, without coming to the realization that until the heart and soul of man is changed, there is no hope of happiness for him.

On the other hand, you have not felt the ecstasy, the thankfulness, the joy, which caused the Psalmist to cry out, “My heart and my flesh rejoice for the living God.” “My soul longeth and fainteth for the courts of the Lord.” (Psalms 83: 1.)

St. John of the Cross, who lived at the same time as St. Teresa and was her good friend, tells about the different stages of prayer and how the first state is the purgative state. He explains how though we feel this joy and this longing of God, a joy which is so sweet that even the remembrance of it is a constant spur to us, still our own imperfections give us constant suffering and unease, and the struggle for the spiritual life is a wearisome one, and that we must not expect to find ease in prayer. He makes us understand this distaste, this recoil from religion. This lethargy comes from a consciousness of the imminence of the struggle, the fact that it is unceasing and will go on to death, and we often think that sheer thoughtless paganism would be a relief.

No one but God knows how long I struggled, how I turned to Him, and turned from Him, again and again. I, too, felt that distaste. I, too, felt that religion had a morbid quality. It is the struggle of the flesh against the spirit. It is the struggle of the natural man against that in him that is divine. (I am going to write you later about the flesh and the spirit, the sensual and the spiritual, for you have an entirely wrong idea as to what Karl Adam calls “the antitheses with which Christianity is concerned.”)

I can understand what you mean by morbid, and can understand how no matter how often you are drawn you are also repelled. If you only knew, and could in intellectual humility submit yourself to the rule which makes all so plain and clear!

We have “a rule of life” that is easy to follow, provided we listen to the wise counsels of such people as St. Teresa, St. Francis de Sales, de Caussade, Father Considine. I mention these names because they are the first ones that come to mind.

St. Teresa understood that weariness of the soul. St. Francis tells us to be gentle with ourselves. De Caussade tells us to abandon ourselves to Divine Providence, and Father Considine tells us to have more faith in God as a kind Father Who is so far above our earthly fathers that He will forgive us all our sins, even the greatest, Who will not give us a stone when we ask for bread.

We are taught that our souls need exercise just as our body does, otherwise it will never be healthy and well, and if the soul is not in a healthy state, of course we feel morbid. Prayer is the exercise for the soul, just as bending and stretching is the exercise of the body. It is intellectual pride, the arrogance of youth, which makes the physical act of prayer difficult.

You submit yourself to the dogma of Communism, you accept the authority of Karl Marx and Lenin, you accept the philosophy of Communism and know while you accept it that you are accepting a “hard saying,” that in all likelihood you will be persecuted for this acceptance.

Perhaps the main trouble is that to you Christianity is too simple. To you Christianity is the accepted thing, so you rebel, and knowing that your rebellion deprives your soul of life, you turn on religion and call it morbid.

It has been only with a great deal of hesitation that I take up the second objection you have to religion. (It is interesting to note that our objections, as the objections of most Communists and agnostics, are to the *Catholic* Faith. The words *Catholic* and *religion* go together in our mind.)

Blasphemies one hesitates to set down on paper, they are so horrifying. Many would put your second objection in this category. One nun to whom I mentioned it shuddered involuntarily, but she did not try to meet it. And in the past when I have heard it, and all Catholics have heard it many times, I, too, did not try to answer. You made your objection in good faith, not in any spirit of hatred or malice, and I have heard it made in good faith before. So I think it is just as well to try to meet it though it is hard, well-nigh impossible, to talk of such things to one who has no faith. I am somewhat heartened by something I read this morning in Faber, "It is our duty as well as our privilege to look into this mystery."

You say you object to religion because it has a cannibalistic aspect which revolts you. A twelve-year-old girl who was reared with no knowledge of the Christian religion said almost the same thing to me last winter. "Catholics believe that they eat the Body and Blood of Christ, don't they?" she said, with a look of distaste. She, too, did not mean to blaspheme. She was honest.

I suppose I never felt this objection, this repulsion, because long before I became a radical I had felt deeply the mysteries of faith, not *the* Faith, but faith nevertheless. Remember, I read the Bible when I was twelve, and I knew what my conscience was, and what was good and evil. I had accepted the doctrine of the Holy Eucharist. So when I came back to God there was not that difficulty to overcome.

It is easy for a little child to accept unquestioningly. That is why the League of the Militant Godless is so anxious to keep religion from little children. Because they know they will accept it, and though they fall away afterward perhaps, in an arrogant and adventurous adolescence, still it is not so insuperably difficult to come back to it because there is some kernel of truth lying hidden there in the soul. You never had any religious instruction when you were a child, so the difficulty is there for you.

If you know the New Testament at all (and you ought to look into it if you do not know it, for many Communists express an admiration for the Man Jesus, and I.W.W.'s in the old days used to speak of "Comrade Jesus"), you will find there that the first to whom Christ taught this doctrine of the Blessed Sacrament turned from Him. This teaching, that Christ would

be their daily bread, was so simple, so elemental a thing, in spite, of its mystery, that children and the simplest and least of people in the world could accept it.

St. Teresa says that Christ is disguised as bread so that we will not fear to approach Him—so that we can go to Him in confidence, daily, needing Him daily as we need our physical bread.

We are not, most of us, capable of exalted emotion, save rarely. We are not capable always of feelings of love, awe, gratitude, and repentance. So Christ has taken the form of bread that we may more readily approach Him, and feeding daily, assimilating Christ so that it is not we but Christ working in us, we may be made more capable of understanding and realizing and loving Him.

Yes, in bread Christ has become so simple—has condescended so far, that a child can eat the Sacred Food with love and gratitude. He said that we would be scandalized, so it is no use for me to be surprised and horrified at the bluntness of your objection. Even the nearest and dearest of His friends dispersed and fled, not realizing the mystery of the Redemption, that Christ was laying down His life for all men.

When He prayed in agony in the garden—when the weight of our sins descended upon Him, all the sins that had been and that would be committed throughout the world forever after; when He suffered all the temptations, all the horror, all the remorse for the rest of the world—His disciples did not understand that either. He watched and suffered alone in His agony. He had told them that the next day He was to die. And in spite of His miracles they paid so little attention to His words that they slept, as the Friend they loved most in the world struggled against the thought of His death. They left Him alone, they slept, and the next day they fled, so little did they understand His teachings, though they had been with Him for three years. They did not understand even after they had eaten with Him at the Last Supper. They did not understand until the Holy Spirit descended upon them and it was *given* to them to understand.

So how can I understand or try to tell you about it? If they who lived with Him, who could see Him as man, eat with Him, sleep with Him, and wander with Him through the countryside, if they were “offended” and dispersed, how can I try to tell you what is in my heart? I do not ask myself, “How can I try to overcome your objection?” Only God can do that. I am not trying to convert you, but just trying not to let go unchallenged your objections, for fear that my not answering would seem to you a kind of denial of Him Whom I love.

There is the question, why did Christ institute this Sacrament of His Body and Blood. And the answer is very simple. It was because He loved us and wished to be with us. “My delights are to be with the children of men.” He made us and He loves us. His presence in the Blessed Sacrament is the great proof of that love.

St. Teresa of Avila said that we should meditate more on the love of God for us, rather than our love for Him. And she emphasizes His sacred Humanity and says that by never losing sight of that it is easier for us to realize that love. She is always talking about the Man Jesus.

But it is hard to understand the love of God for us. We pray daily to increase in the love of God because we know that if we love a person very much, all things become easy to us and delightful. We want, rather unreasonably, sensible feelings of love. St. Teresa says that the

only way we can measure the love we have for God, is the love we have for our fellows. So by working for our fellows we come to love them. That you understand, for you believe that you are working for them when you give hours every morning to the distribution of literature, climbing tenement-house stairs, knocking at doors, suffering rebuffs, enduring heat and cold, weariness and hardships to bring to them what you consider a gospel which will set them free.

And if you and I love our faulty fellow-human beings, how much more must God love us all? If we as human parents, can forgive our children any neglect, any crime, and work and pray patiently to make them better, how much more does God love us?

You may say perhaps: "How do we know He does, if there is a He!" And I can only answer that we know it because He is here present with us today in the Blessed Sacrament on the altar, that He never has left us, and that by daily going to Him for the gift of Himself as daily bread, I am convinced of that love. I have the Faith that feeding at that table has nourished my soul so that there is life in it, and a lively realization that there is such a thing as the love of Christ for us.

It took me a long time as a convert to realize the presence of Christ as Man in the Sacrament. He is the same Jesus Who walked on earth, Who slept in the boat as the tempest arose, Who hungered in the desert, Who prayed in the garden, Who conversed with the woman by the well, Who rested at the house of Martha and Mary, Who wandered through the cornfields, picking the ears of corn to eat.

Jesus is there as Man. He is there, Flesh and Blood, Soul and Divinity. He is our leader Who is always with us. Do you wonder that Catholics are exultant in this knowledge, that their Leader is with them? "I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world."

Christ is bread on our altars because bread is the staple of the world, the simplest thing in the world, something of which we eat and never get tired. We will always have bread whether it is corn, wheat, or rye, or whatever it is made from. We will always find wherever we go some staple which is called bread.

We eat to sustain life. It is the most elemental thing we do. For the life of the body we need food. For the life of the soul we need food. So the simplest, most loving, most thorough thing Christ could do before He died, was to institute the Blessed Sacrament. He did this by taking a piece of bread which He blessed and broke and gave to his disciples saying "Take ye and eat. This is My Body." And taking the chalice He gave thanks, and gave to them saying: "Drink ye all of this for This is My Blood." And He told them to do this in commemoration of Him.

If you sat and thought forever and ever, you could not think of any way for Christ to remain with us which would bring us closer to Him. I could keep on writing and writing and never come to the end of this, but I won't. I only hope that in your sincerity, which acknowledges my sincerity, you will read me through. You know how much emphasis Christ put on the "little ones" who are the majority. Not only the children, but the poor and helpless. Those without learning, when it comes to reading books about the Blessed Sacrament or dialectic materialism, are another instance of what I mean,

With all my writing to you the products of my thought on this subject, I can only end with the words of Jesus, "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: Even so, Father. For so it seemed good in thy sight."

For so it seemed good in His sight!

Your third objection is that you could not understand the problem of evil. Who am I to try to answer that great and grave objection that has been made so many times in the face of tragedy? But St. Peter said that we must strive to give a reason for the faith that is in us.

During the last winter I have thought a great deal about this, knowing that I should some day sit down and write it to you. Again and again the problem of evil has come forward, has been discussed; but it is hard to state the problem and try to give logically the conclusions reached by one simple person. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, " Evil in a large sense, may be described as the sum of the opposition which experience shows to exist in the universe, to the desires and needs of individuals,"

Leaving out "moral evil" which I am sure you recognize since you recognize since you never deliberately say to yourself, "This is wrong; I am going to do it," and since you recognize your duty to your neighbor; leaving out metaphysical evil, since we will not here deal with earthquakes, cyclones, floods, and the predatory instincts of animals, –there remains "physical" evil, which is the "evil" to which you refer.

"Physical evil," the *Encyclopedia* continues, "includes all that causes harm to man, whether by bodily injury, by thwarting his natural desires, or by preventing the full development of his powers, either in the order of nature directly, or through the various social conditions under which mankind naturally exists. Physical evils due to nature are sickness, accident, death. Poverty, oppression, and some forms of disease are instances of evil arising from imperfect social organization. Mental suffering, such as anxiety, disappointment, and remorse, and the limitation of intelligence which prevents human beings from attaining to the full comprehension of their environment, are congenital forms of evil which vary in character and degree according to natural disposition and social circumstances."

So, you say, if God created everything, He created evil—God is responsible for it, and you don't like that kind of a God, and, not liking Him, refuse to believe in Him.

I will agree with you that we believe God created everything and that He is all Good. But we believe too that evil is a negative thing, not a positive thing. That is an absence of Good.

We also believe that God granted free will to man, and how great and terrible a gift that is! How incomparably better it is of our own free will,—of our own choice, that we should choose the Good. How much better is that love which we give freely, as free men and not as slaves. How great is that liberty which the Church teaches us we have.

We admit that our free will is often limited by circumstances, and priests show that they recognize this when they deal with the question of mortal sin, which is only mortal sin when

committed with full consent of the will.

Fear, insecurity, hunger, anger, love,—all these things go to influence the will.

Do you remember the man in *The Black Pit*, that Communist play which was at the Civic Repertory Theatre some time ago? The youth did not wish to become a company spy, but he was influenced by circumstances—his poverty, the approaching confinement of his wife, his brother's crippled state, his previous sentence in jail,—to commit what he knew to be a mortal sin, and injury to his comrades. But even though his will was limited, the audience felt that he was weak, that he should have been strong and that he should have sacrificed everything, wife, child, and family and even his own liberty, rather than his integrity as a worker.

Another thing about free will. Do you remember our friend, Lilian, whose eighteen-year-old son turned on the gas and committed suicide some years ago? She stayed with me, you remember, for some months after the tragedy, and I, too, was bowed to the earth with it. And one day she said to me, in the midst of her grief, accepting the tragic act of her son, “He had to do it. It was his own will. I always let the boys choose the way they should go. I did not wish him to consider me and to stick to me from a sense of duty. I loved his adventurousness and his freedom and when he came and stayed with me I knew it was because he wanted to. I would not have him back. If he wanted to go, it was up to him.

It may seem strange and even sacrilegious, but from this woman with her distorted sense of values—she had no faith of any kind—I learned much. I remember it came to me with a sense of shock,—my first realization of how great and terrible a gift is free will, and how it ennoble man.

Perhaps many people would say that they would rather be without it. Perhaps they say, “Why did God allow me to do this, to commit these sins, to store up for myself this punishment?” But how can any reasonable human being deny that the gift of free will is a great and ennobling gift?

You remember, then, the story of Adam and Eve and the garden. They chose to defy God, to set their wills against His, and since then “all nature travaileth and groaneth.” Since that time there is sin and suffering in the world, and a constant battle to fight. Heaven must be taken by violence. That is the great war which has been going on always, and when I think of Communism, how small and petty and futile class war seems! For those who wish the struggle, the heroic, let them engage themselves in taking heaven by violence.

I have treated the question so sparingly. I have only suggested things to you, brought to your attention my own rambling thoughts on the question, which above all questions has perplexed the greatest minds. Mind you, I am not thinking that I am solving any problem. I am just trying to give you my own reactions to the questions that bother you.

I confess that what I do not understand I let pass by. There are some problems that I like to grapple with, and think about, but I do not force myself. I am not disturbed by problems, and I further confess (and you will not despise me because I am a woman and women are like that) that I avoid thinking, very often, of things I do not understand.

It is so much easier to abandon oneself to Divine Providence and think of those comforting

words, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” And we certainly are blessed, I assure you, and I thank God for so blessing me.

Gratitude brought me into the Church and that gratitude grows, and the first word my heart will utter, when I face my God is “Thanks.” And that goes, with the help of God, for the gift of free will even though it entails sin, evil, suffering and death.

You remember that terrible scene in *Point Counter Point* by Aldous Huxley where the child dies in longdrawn-out agony? I thought then as I read that here was a man who was being harrowed by contemplating the physical suffering of the world and was almost hating God for it in his rebellion against it. Strangely enough I did not mind his hating God so much as I humanly minded the suffering of that child. A Jewish convert said to me once, “The Communists hate God, and the Catholics love Him. But they are both facing Him, directing their attention to Him. They are not indifferent. Communists are not in so bad a case as those who are indifferent. It is the lukewarm that He will spew out of His mouth.”

So I would rather that you, too, would think of the suffering of a child and hate God than be indifferent to Him. Then I could talk to you and you would listen.

Do you remember Ivan, in Dostoyefsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* and his rebellion against free will? “Why should man know that diabolical good and evil when it costs so much? The whole world of knowledge is not that child’s prayer to ‘dear kind God’! I say nothing of the sufferings of grown-up people, they have eaten the apple, damn them, and the devil take them all! But these little ones!”

But leaving the problem of the child for a moment, think of love and of suffering for yourself. All you know is human love. But St. Teresa said that we can measure our love for God by our love for our fellow human beings. For a long time I thought she meant it just as a general statement of love for our fellows. But it came to me later that she was thinking of the love of a woman for a man, a man for a woman—human love.

When you love, you are absorbed by the thought of the one you love. It is there always in the background of your thoughts. You live more intensely, you feel more vividly. The sunshine is brighter; beauty and pain are intensified. And if you love God really and vitally, you will think not that this is a temptation of the flesh but that this love which has descended upon you can be used as a rule by which you can measure and increase your love for God.

You are conscious always of the presence in this world with you of another human being who is bound to you in some strange way, by some spell, so that you are obsessed by the thought of him. But what about God? I wonder am I continually conscious, in the background of my thoughts, of His presence in my life? Am I practicing the presence of God, as the phrase is? Because of God is each task ennobled, each contact vivified, each moment more intense? Is the love of Christ, in other words, driving me on?

When one is in love, one cannot conceive of not being in love. Life seems dull and drab to contemplate without this vital emotion. Can one conceive of life without God, separated from Him? Yes, human love is a good comparison, a good measuring rod. And you will agree with me that the desire for sacrifice comes with love. What do you suppose was the emotion that upheld Sacco and Vanzetti when they were imprisoned for those eight long years? You have read their letters, and you know as I do, that it was the love of their fellows, a desire to

suffer and sacrifice themselves for them. If the love of man can lead one to such an exalted state—what of the love of God? Think of the numbers of men who have died for the love of God, holding out their arms to share in Christ's sufferings.

Yes, love, great love—and who wishes to be mediocre in love?—brings with it a desire for suffering. The love of God can become so overwhelming that it wishes to do everything for the Beloved, to endure hunger, cold, sleeplessness in an ecstasy of zeal and enthusiasm. There is a love so great that the Beloved is all and oneself nothing, and this realization, leading to humility, a real joyful humility which desires to do the least, the meanest, the hardest as well as the most revolting tasks, to crush the pride of self, to abandon oneself fully, to abandon even the desire for heroism. To prostrate oneself upon the earth, that noble earth, that beloved soil which Christ made sacred and significant for us by His Blood with which He watered it.

You may say, yes, admitted the desire to suffer every pain and anguish for oneself, but what of the sufferings of others? And you may say to me—could you stand by and see your child strung screaming by the thumbs in some Mexican jail—they have done that even to children in Mexico—without being so convulsed by hate, if not for God, for those fiendish creatures who perpetrate the torture? Could you love them as you are bidden to do? Could you see your ten-year-old child convulsed and screaming in an agony from some disease and not question the goodness of the God that permits such things?

And I can only say to you in answer—and I weep with misery and anguish as I write it—that even so, I am begging God to reinforce my fortitude so that if such horrors should come upon me (and thank God we cannot foresee such things), and all my human nature were convulsed even to madness, my will—my free will which God has given me—would hold me rigidly in His presence so that in life, which contains such unbearable and terrible things, as well as in death, I will choose Him and hold fast to Him. *For Who else is there?* Would you have me choose Nothingness?

Yes, I tell you, it has been hard to write all this. It has taken me more than a year to do it. All of it is addressed to you with love and with yearning and because there are many of you, and because God has given me writing to do as a vocation, I write.

And I beg you to read and to believe me when I say that I believe that neither life nor death, nor things past nor things to come, can separate me from love of God, provided that by using that gift of free will, I direct my choice toward Him.

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