

From Union Square to Rome

Dorothy Day

Chapter 2 - Childhood

Summary: Recounts her first childhood experiences of discovering God in the Bible, helping others, singing in church, meeting her first Catholic – “. . . I was filled with lofty ambitions to be a saint, a natural striving, a thrilling recognition of the possibilities of spiritual adventure.” (DDLW #202).

You ask me how did it all come about, this turning toward religion, and you speak of it as though I were turning away from life when all the while it was so much a part of my life.

“All my life I have been tormented by God,” a character in one of Dostoevsky’s books says. And that is the way it was with me. You will notice that I quote the Russian author a good deal, but that is because we both have read him. And I quote him often because he had a profound influence on my life, on my way of thinking.

I have to go back to the beginning, to my first memories of God. It will take a long time to tell it. It might be better told on one of those long walks you and I so loved to take down through the East Side, along the river late at night, through snow and ice in winter, striking out briskly as though we had some objective, and most often our only objective was to settle some problem for ourselves. There were those fall days, too, down in the country when we went out on the pier to fish, and lay there along the bulkhead, listening to the soft lap of the waves down below in the darkness. Some such setting is needed for so long a story.

It began out in California where the family had moved from New York a year before. We were living in Berkeley in a furnished house, waiting for our furniture to come around the Horn. It was Sunday afternoon in the attic. I remember the day was very chilly, though there were roses and violets and calla lilies blooming in the garden. My sister and I had been making dolls of the calla lilies, putting rosebuds for heads at the top of the long graceful blossom. Then we made perfume, crushing flowers into a bottle with a little water in it. Even now I can remember the peculiar, delicious, pungent smell.

And then I remember we were in the attic. I was sitting behind a table, pretending I was the teacher, reading aloud from a Bible that I had found. Slowly, as I read, a new personality impressed itself on me. I was being introduced to someone and I knew almost immediately that I was discovering God.

I know that I had just really discovered Him because it excited me tremendously. It was as though life were fuller, richer, more exciting in every way. Here was someone that I had never really known about before and yet felt to be One whom I would never forget, that I

would never get away from. The game might grow stale, it might assume new meanings, new aspects, but life would never again be the same. I had made a great discovery.

Of course I had heard of Him previous to this. Before we moved to California your older brothers and I had gone to school in Bath Beach, and there every morning the teacher read something from the Bible and we bowed our heads on the desk and recited the Lord's prayer. I had forgotten that until this moment of writing. It did not impress me then, and I remember now simply raising my head after the prayer to watch my breath fade upon the varnished desk.

In the family the name of God was never mentioned. Mother and father never went to church, none of us children had been baptized, and to speak of the soul was to speak immodestly, uncovering what might better remain hidden.

I can remember so many vivid impressions of early childhood. I can remember so many pictures and sights and sounds and smells. I vividly enjoyed my early years. There was so much to do and play and enjoy and read. I can even remember intense sufferings, remorse for childish sins.

But in all the first years I remember nothing about God except that routine chapter and prayer in school which I did not feel. It was that Sunday afternoon up in the dim attic and the rich, deep feeling of having a book, which would be with me through life, that stands out in my mind now.

I had been reading books for a long time, since I was four, in fact. I can remember books I read, children's stories, and the fascinating Arabian Nights which I read when I was six. But this was the first Bible I had ever seen. It came with the furnished house, and I wanted even then to keep it always.

Then there is one of those gaps in memory. It must have been shortly after that we moved from Berkeley to Oakland. Our furniture had come and we were established in a bungalow near open fields and woods, where windows looked out to the hills, and forest fires perfumed the air (there always seemed to be forest fires), making a haze on the changing hills.

I had not taken the Bible with me. As a matter of fact, some years passed before I took it up again. But next door down the road there was a little girl by the name of Naomi Reed. She was just my age and her mother kept a grocery store next to her house. There were brothers and sisters but no father. Mrs. Reed was a widow (the first I had ever known).

They were Methodists and regular churchgoers, and it was not long before I started going to church and Sunday school with Naomi. There was a library attached to the Sunday school and pious books to read. But best of all, there was the hymn singing. The sound of a church full of voices raised in sad or lively but always fervent airs, delighted me. It penetrated to the marrow of my bones so that the hair stood up on my arms and the skin prickled on the back of my neck. I became a regular churchgoer.

It was almost as good to hear Mrs. Reed and her children hymn singing at night before they went to bed. I loved and admired them all. How model a family life I felt them to have—peace, unity, love. I even admired the smugness, their conviction that they were of the saved and we, the non-churchgoers, were of the damned. (Somehow or other I didn't believe that for

a minute, but it was part of their atmosphere, and I accepted it with them.) What I did recognize was that they had something which we did not: a belief, a faith, and the consequent order and tranquillity that went with that belief.

Then Naomi stopped playing with me because I was heard to call my elder brother a bad name (I threw things besides) in a fight over whose guinea pigs were whose. I was cast into outer darkness. I was no longer invited to church. I couldn't play with Naomi any more. I took refuge with a tough gang of kids whose homes were lined with funny papers, who ran away to Idora Park, who stayed out after dark and didn't mind their mothers; and I had a very good time indeed.

The cool delicious sense of being one of the saved could not be sustained. It was hard to hold out against the whole family. I did not want to be saved alone anyway. Perhaps it was just a game, a cloak, a garment, that people put on and off. It was too much for me to think about. I bothered my head no longer about church and faith until a year later when I met my first Catholic.

We were in California until after the earthquake which shook us eastward. We were living in Oakland at the time and though I remember some years later praying fearfully during a lightning storm, I do not remember praying during that cataclysmic disturbance, the earthquake. And I remember it plainly. I was eight years old then. It was after two in the morning when it started, and it began with a fearful roaring down in the earth. It lasted for two minutes and twenty seconds, and there was plenty of time to have died of fright, yet I do not remember fear. It must have been either that I thought I was dreaming or that I was half conscious. Pictures fell from the walls, the bed rolled from one end of the polished floor to the other. My father got my brothers out of the house and my mother was able to carry my sister—God alone knew how she did it—out of the bungalow. I think the first shock was over before they got back to me.

What I remember most plainly about the earthquake was the human warmth and kindness of everyone afterward. For days refugees poured out of burning San Francisco and camped in Idora Park and the race track in Oakland. People came in their night clothes; there were new-born babies.

Mother had always complained before about how clannish California people were, how if you were from the East they snubbed you and were loathe to make friends. But after the earthquake everyone's heart was enlarged by Christian charity. All the hard crust of worldly reserve and prudence was shed. Each person was a little child in friendliness and warmth.

Mother and all our neighbors were busy from morning to night cooking hot meals. They gave away every extra garment they possessed. They stripped themselves to the bone in giving, forgetful of the morrow. While the crisis lasted, people loved each other. They realized their own helplessness while nature "travaileth and groaneth." It was as though they were united in Christian solidarity. It makes one think of how people could, if they would, care for each other in time of stress, unjudgingly, with pity and with love.

It was in Chicago, where we moved to afterward, that I met my first Catholic. It was the first time we had been really poor. We lived in an apartment over a store, on Cottage Grove Avenue. There was no upstairs, no garden, no sense of space. The tenement stretched away

down the block and there were back porches and paved courtyards with never a touch of green anywhere. I remember how hungry I became for the green fields during the long hot summer that followed. There was a vacant lot over by the lake front and I used to walk down there with my sister and stand sniffing ecstatically the hot sweet smell of wild clover and listening to the sleepy sound of the crickets. But that very desire for beauty was a painful delight for me. It sharpened my senses and made me more avid in my search for it. I found it in the lake that stretched steel gray beyond the Illinois Central tracks. I found it in that one lone field of clover. And I found a glimpse of supernatural beauty in Mrs. Barrett, mother of Kathryn and six other little Barretts, who lived upstairs.

It was Mrs. Barrett who gave me my first impulse towards Catholicism. It was around ten o'clock in the morning that I went up to Kathryn's to call for her to come out and play. There was no one on the porch or in the kitchen. The breakfast dishes had all been washed. They were long railroad apartments, those flats, and thinking the children must be in the front room, I burst in and ran through the bedrooms.

In the front bedroom Mrs. Barrett was on her knees, saying her prayers. She turned to tell me that Kathryn and the children had all gone to the store and went on with her praying. And I felt a warm burst of love toward Mrs. Barrett that I have never forgotten, a feeling of gratitude and happiness that still warms my heart when I remember her. She had God, and there was beauty and joy in her life.

All through my life what she was doing remained with me. And though I became oppressed with the problem of poverty and injustice, though I groaned at the hideous sordidness of man's lot, though there were years when I clung to the philosophy of economic determinism as an explanation of man's fate, still there were moments when in the midst of misery and class strife, life was shot through with glory. Mrs. Barrett in her sordid little tenement flat finished her breakfast dishes at ten o'clock in the morning and got down on her knees and prayed to God.

The Harrington family also lived in that block of tenements, and there were nine children, the eldest a little girl of twelve. She was a hard-working little girl, and naturally I had the greatest admiration for her on account of the rigorous life she led. I had a longing then, I can remember, for the rigorous life. I was eight, and I had begun to help my mother for the first time. It was the first time our own family (to me a large one though we were only six) had to do without a servant, and my sister and I were pressed into service to help with dishes and housecleaning. I remember the joy I got out of it, this having a part in the family's concerns, having them depend on me too for my help. I took my dishwashing very seriously and I can remember scouring faucets until they shone. The work grew wearisome, of course; it did not always have the aspect of a game. But it had to be done and after six months of it, I was well used to the fact that I had to do my share.

But I had a tremendous amount of liberty compared to little Mary Harrington, my senior. It was not until after the dishes were done that she could come out to play in the evening. Often she was so tired that we just stretched out on the long back porch, open to the sky. We lay there, gazing up at the only beauty the city had to offer us, and we talked and dreamed.

I don't remember what we talked about, but I do remember one occasion when she told me

of the life of some saint. I don't know which one nor can I remember any of the incidents of it. I can only remember the feeling of lofty enthusiasm I had, how my heart seemed almost bursting with desire to take part in such high endeavor. One verse of the Psalms often comes to my mind: "Enlarge thou my heart, O Lord, that Thou mayest enter in." This was one of those occasions when my small heart was enlarged. I could feel it swelling with love and gratitude to such a good God for such a friendship as Mary's, for conversation such as hers, and I was filled with lofty ambitions to be a saint, a natural striving, a thrilling recognition of the possibilities of spiritual adventure.

I, too, wanted to do penance for my own sins and for the sins of the whole world, for I had a keen sense of sin, of natural imperfection and earthliness. I often felt clearly that I was being deliberately evil in my attitudes, just as I clearly recognized truth when I came across it. And the thrill of joy that again and again stirred my heart when I came across spiritual truth and beauty never abated, never left me as I grew older.

The sad thing is that one comes across it so seldom. Natural goodness, natural beauty, brings joy and a lifting of the spirit, but it is not enough, it is not the same. The special emotions I am speaking of came only at hearing the word of God. It was as though each time I heard our Lord spoken of, a warm feeling of joy filled me. It was hearing of someone you love and who loves you.