Thirty years after her death, Dorothy Day’s letters and diaries reveal an ordinary but committed woman trying to put love where there is no love.

There is probably no more famous image of Dorothy Day than the iconic photo by Bob Fitch that shows her seated with a look of utter tranquility between two armed and imposing police officers. That photo was taken in 1973 when she was 75. The occasion was her final arrest while picketing with striking farmworkers in California.

It was perhaps that image as much as anything that inspired me to drop out of college after my sophomore year and join the Catholic Worker community in New York City. As Dorothy often quoted, “Youth demands the heroic.”

What did I know about heroism? What, for that matter, did I really know about Dorothy Day? In the five years I spent in the community I certainly learned a great deal more.

For one thing, I learned that you couldn’t understand Dorothy’s life among the poor or her witness for peace and justice apart from her faith and her rigorous discipline of prayer. At the same time I learned that there is more to heroism than walking a picket line or going to jail.

The practice of patience and forgiveness, the effort to love those closest at hand even when they are disagreeable—it was the exercise of Dorothy’s faith in such small, seemingly unheroic forms that allowed her to stand up to the powers of the state. Therein lay the secret of her tranquility in that famous photograph.

I have had occasion to ponder those lessons anew over the past five years while editing Dorothy Day’s personal papers. Both her diaries, The Duty of Delight (Marquette University Press), and now her selected letters, All the Way to Heaven (Marquette University Press), chronicle a life of extraordinary faith and courage, set against the tumultuous events of the 20th century.

From the Great Depression to the protests and upheavals of the 1960s and ’70s, she was a witness or participant in many of the great social and ecclesial movements of her day. And yet her letters and diaries are a reminder that most of any life is occupied with ordinary activities and pursuits. She believed it was in this setting of daily life that we find the true arena for holiness.

Dorothy’s diaries, in which almost every entry notes the hour of daily Mass, reflect the intense practice of her prayer and devotional life. “Without the sacraments of the church,” she wrote, “I certainly do not think that I could go on.” Rising each day at dawn, she prayed the monastic hours from a breviary and devoted much time during the day to meditating on scripture or saying the rosary. Truly her daily life was spent in continuous conversation with God.

But as her letters vividly indicate, that faith came at a cost. All the Way to Heaven includes a long sequence of never-before-published letters to Forster Batterham, the father of her daughter, Tamar. Readers of her famous memoir, The Long Loneliness (HarperOne), are familiar with the story of her love affair with Batterham and how the birth of her daughter turned her heart to God and prompted her conversion to

By Robert Ellsberg, publisher of Orbis Books. He is the editor of All the Way to Heaven: The Selected Letters of Dorothy Day, released this October from Marquette University Press.
Catholicism. Because Batterham would not marry her, she felt she must give him up.

Her letters to Batterham, which continue for five years after her conversion—right up to the eve of her launching The Catholic Worker newspaper—dramatically and poignantly depict the intensity of her love and thus underscore the sacrifice that lay at the heart of her vocation.

That spirit of sacrifice is evident in a letter to a former editor of The Catholic Worker, who planned to remarry without obtaining an annulment of his previous marriage. Dorothy bluntly challenged him to resign from his leadership in a Catholic peace organization. “When God asks great things of us, great sacrifices,” she wrote, “he intends to do great things with us; though they will seem small, they will be most important. Who knows the power of the Spirit? God’s grace is more powerful than all the nuclear weapons that could possibly be accumulated.”

That emphasis on sacrifice is reflected also in her touching letters to an alcoholic monk who was wavering in his vocation: “Yours is a great suffering—I can see that, and of course we do not pick the particular kind of suffering we want to bear. But thank God you have some little burden of suffering to bear at this time when there is so much of it in the world. When it dawns on us that this is a little coin the dear God is enriching us with to purchase salvation—our own and other’s—it ceases to be suffering.”

She writes frankly about the ordeals of living among the poor and sick, of the dirt and disorder of Catholic Worker life, of the misunderstanding and even hatred she experienced at times from those closest at hand: “Yesterday I had to drive the station wagon down for bread, and it smelt of vomit and human excrement from the people sleeping in it at night. We spent the day scrubbing out the thing at the farm. Drunkenness and madness and filth and ugliness.”

Often she refers to her temptation to simply walk away from the Catholic Worker: “The opposition to the work, the idea that I did not understand or interpret Peter Maurin correctly. There has been many an occasion when I never wanted to see a CW again.” But then, she adds: “Some such thought as that of St. John of the Cross would come, ‘Where there is no love, put love, and you will find love,’ and makes all right. When it comes down to it, even on the natural plane, it is much happier and more enlivening to love than to be loved.”

Of course, like all holy people, she frequently
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The church she loved. From a prison camp in California, following her arrest with the farmworkers, she addressed a letter to the bishops, challenging them to give up their property and dearest to understand, to respond.

At the same time, the memory of her own youthful struggles made her particularly sensitive to the searching and sufferings of youth. To a young woman in distress she wrote, “Please forgive me for presuming to write you so personally—to intrude on you and your suffering, as I am doing, but I felt I had to—because I have gone through so much the same suffering as you in the confusion of my youth and my search for love…. It is a very real agony of our own, wanting human love, fulfillment, and one so easily sees all the imperfections of this love we seek, the inability of others ever to satisfy this need of ours, the constant failure of those nearest and dearest to understand, to respond.”

Yes, her letters and diaries document a number of courageous stands, such as her repeated arrests for her part in protesting compulsory civil defense drills in New York, or facing down the government over her refusal to pay taxes for the Vietnam War.

Then there was her willingness to challenge the princes of the church she loved. From a prison camp in California, following her arrest with the farmworkers, she addressed a letter to the bishops, challenging them to give up their property and embrace “holy poverty.”

When New York’s Cardinal Francis Spellman undertook to break a strike by Catholic gravediggers, she pleaded with him to instead go to the strikers, “as a father to his children…. Go to the union, ask for the leaders, tell them that as members of the Mystical Body, all members are needed and useful and that we should not quarrel together, that you will meet their demands, be their servant as Christ was the servant of his disciples, washing their feet.”

And yet protest was not the final word. Ultimately, she believed, we change the world by changing ourselves. To a young man in prison she wrote: “I wrote the life of St. Thérèse because she exemplified the ‘little way.’ We know how powerless we are, all of us, against the power of wealth and government and industry and science. The powers of this world are overwhelming. Yet it is hoping against hope and believing, in spite of ‘unbelief,’ trying by prayer and by sacrifice, daily, small, constant sacrificing of one’s own comfort and cravings—these are the things that count.” Vigils, fasting, prayer, and marches were all indispensable, she wrote. But in the end, “All these means are useless unless animated by love.”

It is 10 years since Cardinal John O’Connor of New York initiated Dorothy’s cause for canonization, a process that may lead one day to her being called St. Dorothy. However Day might have regarded such an eventuality, she certainly would have objected to any effort to put her on a pedestal, to make her seem unapproachable, otherworldly, or mysterious. To the extent that these writings advance her “cause,” I am glad they accentuate her reality as a woman of flesh and blood, and demonstrate, as Jesuit Father Jim Martin has observed, that “holiness finds its home in our humanity.”

The fundamental significance of Dorothy’s canonization is not simply her own example of holiness but the way she held up that vocation as the common calling for all Christians. She did not believe holiness was just for a few. As she once put it in a banner headline in The Catholic Worker, “We Are All Called to Be Saints.”

This was simply a matter of taking seriously the logic of our baptismal vows to put off the old person and put on Christ, to grow constantly in our capacity for love through the exercise of mercy, compassion, and forgiveness.

She lived out her own vocation in the Catholic Worker movement. But she set an example for all Christians, especially laypeople, reminding us that the gospel is meant to be lived and challenging us to find our own unique—and yes, heroic—way of living out and bearing witness to it in our daily lives.