You Never Leave the CW

[An interview with Joe Zarrella, by Jim Loney—Eds. Note.]

Jim Loney: Could you tell me about how you first came to the Catholic Worker and met Dorothy Day?

Joe Zarrella: I met Dorothy in the most formative years of my life. She was a complete influence on me.... I got a job immediately after I got out of high school. It was May Day. I wasn't feeling too good, but I used it as an excuse to get off work. On the way home (I lived in Brooklyn), I decided to get off the subway and see what the May Day parade was like. There was a group of people there distributing **The Catholic Worker**. Out of the clear blue sky I said,"Can I help?" That was the beginning of the end.

From there, I went down to the house, which was on Charles Street.... In retrospect, I feel that the Holy Spirit had something to do with me getting off that train because my whole life changed from that moment on.

JL: Can you talk a little about Dorothy? How would you describe her to someone who never knew her?

JZ: I loved her dearly. She was with me all the time. I have a picture of her on my desk. It's there constantly, as a reminder of who I should be. I enjoyed the rare moments that we had with her. There were times, if it was possible, I would meet her at the bus. Sometimes, we'd love to have flowers for her up in her room.

The good moments would be when I would bring the mail to her in the morning. She'd be upstairs in bed. I'd get her a cup of coffee, something to eat. And while she was opening the mail, she would exchange her thoughts, tell me about people. These were intimate moments with her. Depending on what she was doing, she would share part of her life. I only regret that I didn't pay more attention than I did.

She wasn't a dynamic speaker in the sense of a person like Catherine De Hueck, who would be very forceful and really bring the crowds to their feet. Dorothy had a quiet intensity about her talk. She spoke without any notes. I don't remember her giving a prepared speech. She would drift, go from one point to another, one thought would borrow from another, but they were all very interesting and very to the point about who she was. She'd talk about books and the life of the Worker, Peter....

She was constantly challenging you to a greater sense of perfection. That's why I always felt so uncomfortable. I feel uncomfortable to this very day. I think once you've been in the Catholic Worker movement, you're never the same, ever. Your whole life is influenced by it. You're constantly at odds with yourself. Should I get this? Do I need it?...She has created an awareness in you that keeps you from falling prey to consumerism and the lifestyles today. That's wonderful, and, because of that, when you leave the Worker, you never really leave the Worker.

JL: You would have been eligible for the draft during World War Two. What happened to you then?

JZ: Luke Callaghan and I started what we called Pax, and we tried to register people in this country as conscientious objectors. We put out a news bulletin and whatnot, but it

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never got very large. Then the conscription came. I was very lucky. I went with Dorothy to the Senate to speak against conscription. I spoke and, I'll tell you, it was a frightening experience, to see all those senators up there on that stand and they're looking down at you. You know, they browbeat you. I thought, My God, if they start asking me questions, putting it right to me, could I take it? But fortunately, they didn't ask me anything. I gave my talk, and Dorothy gave hers, and I was really surprised at how respectful they were to her.

Of course, that was a trying time. You'd wonder what you'd do when the time came. We, at least I and a number of others, couldn't object to registering. But I drew the line when it came to accepting the draft. So, I applied as a conscientious objector and then I had to fill out some papers, what I believed, who could give witness to it. You had to pretty much prove that this wasn't a recent conversion so that you're trying to escape getting in.

I purposely put [my references] as far apart as I could so that the FBI would have a lot of trouble just going around; I tried to make as much inconvenience for them as I could. Then you had to write a paper, and after you did that, if they accepted you that far, you went before a judge—at least I did. You went in a private room with a stenographer and they would question you, put alternatives to you. Why can't you be an ambulance driver in the American army? I said, Can you promise me that I wouldn't be carrying a gun or that you wouldn't move me [to a fighting unit]? No, they can't make that promise. And then they said, Well, you can go in the engineers. They're not fighters. But they have to when the situation demands, you have to carry guns, so I said I can't.

So, I got my four to nothing decision to be a conscientious objector. Then I had to figure out what to do....

I pondered between going to jail or seeking some alternative service. I ended up being a volunteer in the American Field Service, which had no connection to the army. You paid your own way, bought your own equipment and you didn't get paid. I figured, you know, this was a Work of Mercy.... Here were people giving up their lives for what they believed, and we believed in the Works of Mercy, and we should give up our lives to save guys, be an agent of mercy. I figured this was about as close a way that I could do it without being involved in the military....

The life at the Worker in those days was pretty tough. We had nothing. We lived absolutely from day to day. And I don't think that, in many ways, we could have survived if we hadn't lived in the neighborhood that we did. The Italians were very hospitable, very friendly. They let us run up bills for food. We never were out of debt. Our checking account—you couldn't keep the books! Miss Day is on the road. What does she know how much you got? So there were always bounced checks!

I always tell this story. Gerry and I used to take care of the mail. On Monday morning, when we'd go for the mail, I'd say, "Well, Gerry, we know we're going to get a dollar this morning," because my wife [Alice] used to send a dollar every week. She worked in an office back in Tell City, IN. And she only made about seven dollars a week, but, every Monday, you could be assured of getting that dollar.

JL: This was before you knew her?

JZ: Yes. In fact, she came to the door, somebody yelled to the back. I looked up and said, "So that's Mary Alice!"

...But it was a constant struggle. We didn't have much to eat. You had a cup of coffee, some bread, soup at dinner. Occasionally, we had meat, meatloaf and things like that. It was a very meager existence but, somehow or other, it didn't bother you. I don't think I ever felt like I was deprived. And, of course, every once in a while somebody would come down and take us to the local restaurant and we'd have eggs, home-fried potatoes. Or, somebody would take us, we'd go down to pool halls and have a beer, just sit around and chew the fat.

JL: There seems to be a real joy in you as you talk about that time.

JZ: Oh yeah, it was really an exciting time to live. It really was. There were constant street demonstrations and picketing, evictions. We were involved in something all the time.... We were the first people that picketed the German Consulate and protested the persecution [of Jews] in Germany.

JL: What did you do after your time at the New York Catholic Worker?

JZ: After I left the Worker, I went to Tell City with Alice. Her father was superintendent of the furniture factory, and they employed about 800 people. I started work there and I worked in the lumber yard. I didn't get any special privileges. I didn't want any. I did a lot of manual labor, and made fifty cents a day. I made more money when I was a telegram boy than I did as a married man, working about ten hours a day. No insurance, no paid holidays, no vacation. Nothing. Fifty cents.

So I decided to organize the place. Well, you can imagine. I about tore that family up. The boss would talk to me, telling me I should take it easy, don't do this. The pastor of the church came down and called me to the rectory, and he says, You know the social encyclicals, I understand, but Tell City is different. We don't need those things.

I had a lot of pressure. I was all alone, outside of my wife. One time, there was a whole family gathering about it. But, fortunately, Alice stood by me. We survived, we organized the factory and brought decent wages and vacations and holiday pay and insurance, all the things that people need.✣