

## **Dorothy Day. . .for they shall be satisfied**

From *The Ladder of the Beatitudes* by Jim Forest

In the Early seventies *The New Yorker* printed an essay that had the intriguing title, “An Inquiry into Enoughness.” The person who feels he or she has enough, it turned out, is hard to find. There is no such thing as enough. It seems to be the nature of emperors to covet larger empires. Robert Coles came away with similar conclusions when he wrote *Privileged Ones*, a book about the children of the affluent, many of whom have such fleeting glimpses of their busy parents that they often feel like wealthy orphans.

As part of the Catholic Worker community in New York City’s Lower East Side, I occasionally met people who had practically nothing, in some cases not even a room of their own, yet they seemed to own Manhattan and to be bearers of treasure chests of wisdom. One of them was Charlie O’Keefe. Pink faced and with twinkling eyes, he was a down-but-not-out Jack Lemmon. Charlie had a weakness for the bottle, which meant that from time to time he disappeared from sight. The works of Shakespeare were on the tip of Charlie’s tongue. He claimed ownership of the New York City Public Library as well as a derelict pier on the East River. Ladling soup for those who dined gratis at Saint Joseph’s House, he might recite *Romeo and Juliet* one day, *Hamlet* the next, and *The Taming of the Shrew* the day after that. It was a great moment in his life, and mine, when we got him a pair of shoes that properly fit his large feet. I had never imagined he hobbled because of some injury years before. He never mentioned that his shoes were too small. It was only because one shoe had split down the back that it dawned on us to look for a bigger pair in the community’s clothing room. When we found nothing the right size, a friend and I took him to a local shoe shop and bought him a brand new pair. Charlie just about tap danced back to the soup kitchen.

Saint Joseph’s House at that time was on Chrystie Street—a crumbling three-storey brick building that had been put up cheaply in the nineteenth century. The inside walls had been painted white when the Catholic Worker community took possession: the perfect color for appropriate graffiti. On the third floor, the office, various sayings from the church Fathers had been written here and there, but the text I think about most often was a line from the French poet Leon Bloy: “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.”

Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker, had come to live in the slums not because she felt obliged by God to immerse herself in ugliness but because of the beauty she found in places of poverty and the joy it often gave her: the beauty in faces, the beauty of trees and plants that managed to survive despite urban desolation, the beauty of kitchen smells at supper time coming from neighborhood apartments, the beauty of the liturgy even in the poorest parish church. She often quoted Dostoevsky’s words: “The world will be saved by beauty.”

Absolute Beauty, the beauty at the heart of beauty: Christ.

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