

ENTERTAINING ANGELS: THE DOROTHY DAY STORY

US, 1996, 114 minutes.

Moira Kelly, Martin Sheen, Heather Graham, Lenny Van Dolen, Melinda Dillon, Brian Keith

Writer: John Wells

Direct: Michael Ray Rhodes

Outline

Twenty year old Dorothy Day is a reporter - and a suffragette. She is also part of a New York socialist group that meets to drink and discuss. It includes Eugene O'Neill. The group is free-thinking and free-acting. The pregnant Dorothy has an abortion and moves away from New York.

Another member of the group, Forster, follows her to Staten Island. He enjoys fishing and they lead a quiet life, and Dorothy responds to his love. She encounters a homeless man and a friendly nun and follows them to a church. Despite her scepticism and the comments of her friends (and Forster's hostility), she goes more often to help with the soup kitchen and starts reading Catholic writing. Once again she becomes pregnant and has a daughter. Forster resists marriage.

Dorothy and her daughter are both baptised and later move back to New York to live with her brother's family. The eccentric and charismatic Frenchman, Peter Maurin, urges her to start feeding the poor and caring for street people, which she does, soon finding the family overwhelmed by need. She also begins a small paper, *The Catholic Worker*.

As the years pass during the 30s, she takes on more and more - and more and more people come to help. Some Catholics condemn her as a communist. The Cardinal asks her to remove Catholic from the name but she resists. However, when a depressed girl from the shelter kills herself, the group tell Dorothy that they can't manage and that she is full of ego. She prays desperately,

confronts her friends and workers and admits it, but is determined to go on. They all stay to help her.

Comment

Entertaining Angels is a Paulist picture, produced by Fr Bud Kieser, the Paulist priest who for decades made Insight movies for television, then moved into feature production with *We are the People* and *The Fourth Wise Man* (with Martin Sheen) and then produced *Romero*. He had hoped to raise money from *Romero* to make his Dorothy Day project but this took six years.

John Wells' screenplay takes an incident in a prison in 1963 as a framework for telling Dorothy Day's story until she turned forty. However, she was to live another 43 years, dying in 1980. The US entered World War I when she was twenty and she lived until the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The official opening of her cause for canonisation was proclaimed in March 2000.

While the film uses the familiar conventions of the 'biopic', using selected incidents to create a portrait and emotional struggles to engage audience empathy, the Dorothy Day story has an intrinsic interest because of Dorothy's pre-conversion past, her abortion, her not marrying, her being a single parent - a 20th century American figure and a lay saint. She was also a woman of energy in causes for justice in the *Catholic Worker* and with compassion in her work for the marginalised. Moira Kelly gives energy to her performance although she looks, perhaps, too young. Martin Sheen portrays her friend, the eccentric but kind Peter Maurin.

The screenplay is from the 90s, is critical of the narrow Catholicism of the anti-communist era and offers challenges to the contemporary church to live the Gospel (especially in the kitchen sequence with the Cardinal of New York).

Some key sequences.

1. Dorothy's life-style as a reporter, her friends. Her becoming pregnant and the response of the father. Going for the abortion, the aftermath. Her later pregnancy and wanting her daughter, the early years of someone who was to become a saint.

2. The impact of Sister Aloysius on the bike and her cheeriness, her direct approach to Dorothy to help, to come to Church, to read. The experience of conversion and the influence of Peter Maurin.

3. The nature of Dorothy Day's holiness, her speech to the Catholic group, the aftermath with the Cardinal's visit and her quoting the sermon on the mount. Her long service of the street people; their demands, their failings. Her desperate visit to the church and shouting at God. Making her peace and her 'confession' to the group.

Prayer: Jesus, help us to hear and act on your new commandment of loving one another as you love us. Through the intercession of Dorothy Day, may we learn to serve those who are on the margin of our society. Amen.