

God is a Lover who hungers to be loved in return. Burning with this vision of faith, Catherine de Hueck Doherty challenged Christians of her day to live a radical Gospel life and to recognise God's image in every human being.

She was a pioneer among North American Catholic laity in implementing the Church's social doctrine in the face of Communism, economic and racial injustice, secularism and apathy. At the same time she insisted

that those engaged in social action be rooted in prayer and that they incarnate their faith into every aspect of ordinary life. Catherine was a bridge between the Christian East and West. Baptised Orthodox and later becoming Roman Catholic, her spiritual heritage drew upon both of these traditions.

Catherine was born in Nizhny-Novgorod, Russia, on August 15, 1896 to wealthy and deeply Christian parents. Raised in a devout aristocratic family, she grew up knowing that Christ lives in the poor, and that ordinary life is meant to be holy. Her father's work enabled the family to travel extensively in Catherine's youth. At the age of 15, she married her cousin, Boris de Hueck. Soon, the turmoil of World War I sent them both to the Russian front: Boris as an engineer, Catherine as a nurse.

The Russian Revolution destroyed the world they knew. Many of their family members were killed, and they themselves narrowly escaped death at the hands of the Bolsheviks. The Revolution marked Catherine for life. She saw it as the tragic consequence of a Christian society's failure to incarnate its faith. All her life she cried out against the hypocrisy of those who professed to follow Christ, while failing to serve him in others.



Catherine and Boris became refugees, fleeing first to England, and then in 1921, to Canada, where their son George was born. In the following years she experienced grinding poverty as she laboured to support her ailing husband and child. After years of painful struggle, her marriage to Boris fell apart; later her marriage was annulled by the Church.

Catherine's talent as a speaker was discovered by an agent from a lecture bureau. She began travelling across North America, and became a successful lecturer. Once again she became wealthy—but she was not at peace. The words of Christ pursued her relentlessly: "Sell all you possess, and come, follow Me." On October 15, 1930 Catherine renewed a promise she had made to God during her ordeal in the revolution, and gave her life to Him. She marked this as the day of the beginning of her Apostolate. With the blessing of Archbishop Neil McNeil of Toronto, Catherine sold all her possessions and provided for her son, George. In the early 1930's she went to live a hidden life in the slums of Toronto, desiring to console her beloved Lord as a lay apostle by being one with his poor.



The lay apostolate was still in its infancy in the 1930's. Dorothy Day, another pioneer in this field, was among the few who understood and supported what Catherine was trying to do. Catherine searched for direction, prompted by an inner conviction that she must preach the Gospel with her life. As she implemented this radical Gospel way of life, young men and women came to join her. They called themselves Friendship House, and lived

the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi. In the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930's, the members of Friendship House responded to the needs of the time. They begged for food and clothing to share with those in need and offered hospitality of the heart to all. They also tried to fight the rising tide of Communism, through lectures, classes, and the distribution of a newspaper called "The Social Forum", based on the great social encyclicals of the Church.



Misunderstanding and calumny plagued Catherine all of her life. False but persistent rumours about her and the working of Friendship House forced its closing in 1936. Catherine left Toronto, feeling her work had failed. Through the seeming failure and great disappointments, she heard the voice of Christ beckoning her to share His suffering.

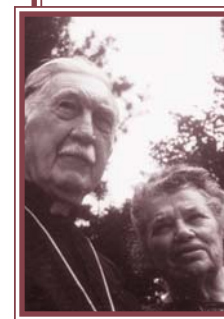
Soon after she left Toronto, Father John LaFarge, S.J., a well-known Civil Rights Movement leader in the U.S., invited Catherine to open a Friendship House in Harlem. In February, 1938, she accepted his request, and soon the Harlem Friendship House was bursting with activity. Catherine saw the beauty of the Black people and was horrified by the injustices being done to them. She travelled the country decrying racial discrimination against Blacks.

In the midst of widespread rejection and persecution, she found support from Cardinal Patrick Hayes and Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York. In Harlem, a small community formed around her, but again, her work ended in failure. Divisions developed among the staff of Friendship House and in January, 1947, they out-voted Catherine on points she considered essential to the apostolate. Seeing this as a rejection of her vision of Friendship

House, she stepped down as Director General.

On May 17, 1947, Catherine came to Combermere, Ontario, Canada, with her second husband, American journalist Eddie Doherty, whom she had married in 1943. Catherine was shattered by the rejection of Friendship House and thought she had come to Ontario to retire. Instead, the most fruitful and lasting phase of her apostolic life was about to begin. As she was recovering from the trauma, Catherine began to serve those in need in the Combermere area, first as a nurse and then through neighbourly services. She and Eddie also established a newspaper, "Restoration", and eventually began a training centre for the Catholic lay apostolate.

At a summer school of Catholic Action that Catherine organised in 1950, Fr. John Callahan came to teach. He was to become Catherine and Eddie's spiritual director and the first priest member of Madonna House. Under his guidance, in February 1951, they made an act of consecration to Jesus through Mary, according to St. Louis de Montfort. Mary, Mother of the Church, became guide to their lives and to Madonna House.



Catherine's lifelong passion to console Christ in others propelled her forward. Again young men and women asked to join her. Graces abounded. In October 1951, Catherine attended the first Lay Congress in Rome. The Papal Secretary, Msgr. Montini (later to become Pope Paul VI) encouraged Catherine and her followers to consider making a permanent commitment.

On April 7, 1954, those living in Combermere voted to embrace a permanent vocation with promises of poverty, chastity and obedience, and the Community of Madonna House was established. The following year, Catherine and Eddie took a promise of chastity and lived celibate lives thereafter. From these offerings, an explosion of life took place and Madonna House grew. On June 8, 1960, Bishop William Smith of Pembroke offered the Church's approval to the fledgling community at the blessing of the statue of Our Lady of Combermere.



Catherine had a faith vision for the restoration of the Church and our modern culture at a time when the de-Christianisation of the Western world was already well advanced. She brought the spiritual intuitions of the Christian East to North America. Lay men and women as well as priests came to Madonna House to live the life of a Christian family: the life of Nazareth. They begged for what they needed and gave the rest away. At the invitation of bishops, they opened houses in rural areas and cities in North and South America, Europe, Russia, Africa, and the West Indies.

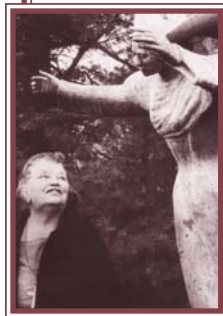
Catherine's vision was immense, encompassing farming, carpentry, cooking and laundry, theology and philosophy, science, the fine arts, and drama. "Nothing is foreign to the Apostolate, except sin... The primary work of the Apostolate is to love one another... If we implement this law of love, if we clothe it with our flesh, we shall become a light to the world," she said, "for the essence of our Apostolate is love—love for God poured out abundantly for others."

In response to the deepening dilemmas of

the Western world, Catherine offered the spirituality of her Russian past. She introduced the concept of "poustinia", which was totally unknown in the West in the 1960's, but has since become recognised in much of the world. "Poustinia" is the Russian word for "desert," which in its spiritual context is a place where a person meets God through solitude, prayer and fasting. Catherine's vision and practical way of living the Gospel in ordinary life became recognised as a remedy to the depersonalising effects of modern technology. In response to the rampant individualism of our century, she called Madonna House to "sobornost", a Russian word meaning deep unity of heart and mind in the Holy Trinity—a unity beyond purely human capacity.

Catherine de Hueck Doherty died on December 14, 1985, after a long illness. She left behind a spiritual family of more than 200 members, and foundations around the world. She left to the Church, which she loved passionately, a spiritual heritage that is a beacon for this new century.

In 1996 the directors of Madonna House petitioned the Bishop of Pembroke, Ontario, the home diocese of Madonna House, to open her cause for canonisation. The process is now underway.



The following is taken from a Letter to Madonna House Family:

"We need to be poor! Let us live an ordinary life, but, beloved, let us live it with a passionate love for God.

Become a mystery. Stretch one hand out to God, the other to your neighbour. Be cruciform. ... Christ's cross will be our revolution and it will be *a revolution of love!*"

## Suggested Reading

*Fragments of My Life: A Memoir*  
by Catherine Doherty

*Tumbleweed: A Biography of Catherine Doherty*  
by her husband, Eddie Doherty

*Katia: A Personal Vision of Catherine Doherty*  
by Fr. Émile-Marie Brière

*They Called Her the Baroness:  
The Life of Catherine de Hueck Doherty*  
by Lorene Hanley Duquin

*The Life of Catherine Doherty*  
a booklet by Mary Bazzett

*The Life of Eddie Doherty*  
a booklet by Mary Bazzett

*A Cricket in My Heart*  
an autobiography by Eddie Doherty

*Living The Gospel Without Compromise*  
by Catherine Doherty

*Poustinia:  
Encountering God in Silence, Solitude and Prayer*  
the spiritual classic by Catherine Doherty

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Internet: [www.madonnahouse.org](http://www.madonnahouse.org)

Phone: (613) 756-3728  
Fax: (613) 756-0103

# Catherine de Hueck Doherty



Foundress of  
Madonna House  
1896–1985