

Celebrate Maine's own 'Holy Woman' this May | Opinion

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From Mother's Day to Memorial Day, not to mention the unofficial kickoff of graduation and wedding season, May is full of holidays and celebratory events. But one special day routinely flies under the radar: May 13.

One of America's most important leaders, Frances Perkins, is recognized as a "Holy Woman" by the Episcopal Church on that day. The country's first female and longest-serving secretary of labor, Perkins was the chief architect of Social Security and other "New Deal" programs during her time in the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration. Since 2009, she has been honored in the Episcopal liturgical calendar with a [Feast Day on May 13](#), recognizing her lifetime of good deeds and steady faith.

Even those who recognize Perkins' importance as a national figure are sometimes unaware of how faith led to her advocacy for workers' rights and devotion to supporting the most vulnerable. Confirmed Episcopalian at the age of 25 after being raised a Congregationalist, Perkins' faith in God inspired her longtime public service and was a source of strength and commitment throughout her life. She herself [said](#) that she accepted her pioneering role as the first woman in a presidential cabinet "to work for God, FDR and the millions of forgotten, plain common workingmen." Talk about leading with faith!

Perkins [participated](#) in the activities of Episcopal parishes in several states and Washington, D.C., throughout her adult life. During her tenure as labor secretary, she spent a day each month in retreat at an Episcopal convent in Catonsville, Maryland. She spent summers at the Perkins Family Homestead in Newcastle, Maine, attending St. Andrew's Church and devoting many quiet hours to reflection and prayer on the property's scenic trails to the Damariscotta River.

Perkins took divine teachings and applied them to everyday life by pursuing real, lasting change for all people. Although she rarely spoke publicly about her faith, [Perkins' words were clear](#): "The special vocation of the laity is to conduct and carry on the worldly and secular affairs of modern society ... in order that all men may be maintained in health and decency."

And it worked. Perkins ultimately helped win Americans the eight-hour workday, the 40-hour work week, overtime pay and life-saving worker protections. Her efforts lifted millions of Americans out of poverty and created the modern middle class. [Professor Donn Mitchell](#) described social insurance as "nothing less than a religious quest for Perkins," who believed it to be "the most moral concept humankind had ever developed" because it drew on the instinct for neighbors to help neighbors.

Frances Perkins' commitment to bettering the lives of those most in need exceeded the expectations of her role as labor secretary. During the Nazi regime in Germany, she collaborated with the [German Jewish Children's Aid organization](#) to grant more than 400 Jewish children entry to the U.S. without financial sponsors. She also convinced FDR to prolong temporary visas so that 12,000 to 15,000 Jewish Germans already in the United States could stay in the country indefinitely. She worked hard for what she believed was right, using whatever power she had even when these efforts were deeply unpopular.

The final resting place of this faithful public servant is next to her husband, Paul Wilson, in Newcastle, Maine, the New England town she considered her one true home — which is now also the home of the [Frances Perkins National Monument](#). Here, the Frances Perkins Center shares Perkins' life and legacy and inspires the next generations of public servants.

Beginning June 17, people can visit the national monument's welcome center and self-guided exhibit to learn more about this remarkable woman, or walk in her footsteps any time of year throughout the Homestead's grounds and trails.

From time to time, we all need reminders about the importance of positive change and our own potential to be the change we wish to see in the world. What better reminder than May 13, the Feast Day honoring this holy woman who improved the lives of millions through her compassion, ingenuity and action.

This day is an opportunity for each of us — regardless of our faith — to aspire to live a life reflective of our values. For Frances Perkins, loving one's neighbors and lending a helping hand to anyone who needs it was a responsibility, not a choice. Today, we can learn from her example by doing right by those around us, and always in service of the greatest good.

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