

Truth Hidden in Untruth: Thomas Merton and Alfred Delp

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In a journal entry dated September 15, 1962, Thomas Merton notes that the manuscript of 'the book of Fr. Delp'¹ arrived that day and that he is to write a preface to it. On this particular day, Merton seems to be concerned about his own psychological well-being as well as the future of his work. He is also in his usual state of unease with regard to the Cistercian Order; changes have begun in an effort at renewal – there is to be less distinction between choir monks and lay brothers, for example, a move that affects him directly as novice master – as well as unease with the political situation in the United States, with the race problem in high tension, the nuclear build-up and the threat of war. There are also other writing projects, all of which he considers dispensable.

By coincidence, the date of that journal entry, September 15, was the birthday of Alfred Delp, the priest whose manuscript Merton was about to read. Had Delp still been alive in 1962, he would have turned 55 that day. (Merton at the time was 47.)

Eleven days later, Merton writes,

Reading the magnificent *Prison Meditations* of Fr. Delp Superb, powerful material. Totally different from the rather depressing false optimism of our establishment. Here a true optimism of one who really sees through the evil and irreligion of our condition and finds himself in Christ – through poverty, crying out from the abyss, answered and rescued by the Spirit.²

He goes on to quote a sentence from the manuscript: 'Of course the Church still has skilful apologists, clever and compelling preachers, wise leaders; but the simple confidence that senses the right course and proceeds to act on it *is just not there*.'³

What was in this manuscript that had impressed Merton so greatly? And who was this Father Delp? Merton had only a bare outline of who

the man was. Alfred Delp was a German Jesuit priest who had been imprisoned by the Nazis, had managed to get some writing smuggled out of prison, and had then been executed. The manuscript that Merton received consisted of a translated compilation of some of Delp's prison writing: a short section called 'Extracts from Fr. Delp's Diary' (which, in fact, were taken from letters; there was no diary), a series of meditations on Advent, Christmas and the Epiphany, a series of three reflections which he called 'Tasks in Front of Us', two more meditations written after he had received the death sentence—one on the Lord's Prayer and the other on the Sequence prayer for Pentecost Sunday, 'Come Holy Ghost'. And finally two pieces written in the face of his imminent death, which the manuscript called 'The Last Stage'.

Merton's German translator filled in some biographical gaps: Alfred Delp, he was told, had been arrested following the abortive attempt on Hitler's life on July 20, 1944. A loose connection had been made between Delp and the assassination attempt because he had in fact been active in resistance work, in particular as part of a group later called the Kreisau Circle that had been secretly preparing a new German constitution on the assumption that the downfall of the Nazi state was inevitable. This constitution was to be based on Christian principles of justice. Delp was tried and executed, as he himself said in a letter, because he happened to be a Jesuit who was considered to be *a priori* an enemy of the German Reich, and also because his planning for a post-Nazi society proved that he was a so-called 'defeatist' and therefore guilty of treason. He was executed on February 2, 1945.

At the time of his death, Alfred Delp was a highly promising Jesuit thinker and writer. He was born in 1907, an exact contemporary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and almost an exact contemporary of the great Catholic theologian Karl Rahner. Like others of his generation he spent his childhood against the backdrop of the crumbling imperial systems of Europe and the resulting war that lasted from 1914 to 1918. His mother was a Catholic and his father a Lutheran, and although he had been baptized a Catholic, Alfred was brought up a Lutheran. At the age of 14, after an altercation with the local Lutheran pastor, he literally walked out of the Lutheran church and headed over to the Catholic church where his mother was a parishioner. He was confirmed as a Catholic a few months later.

Like other young Germans of his generation, Delp was swept up into the patriotic fervour of highly structured youth movements that

featured rallies and marches and marching songs following the First World War. The movement that young Alfred Delp joined was founded and run by Jesuits, and this association marked the course of his adult life. He joined the Jesuits in 1926. These years—the 1920s and early 1930s—were watershed years for European students studying Catholic philosophy and theology. Theological thinking was moving away from a static scholasticism toward new ways of approaching the Church's relationship with the world of secular reality. These new developments were to come to fruition at the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, but in the European theology schools of the 1920s and 30s the seed was being sown. Alfred Delp proved himself to be an outstanding student, and he quickly developed an interest not only in theological matters, but also in political concerns, not the least of which was the alacrity with which a humiliated Germany, downtrodden with unemployment, became enthralled with National Socialism.

Something else happened in these years that particularly attracted Delp. This was the 1931 papal encyclical called *Quadragesimo Anno* (Fortieth Year), written to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the ground-breaking social encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, called *Rerum Novarum* (Of New Things). *Quadragesimo Anno* reiterated what the earlier encyclical had stated: a condemnation of unequal distribution of wealth, the value of laborers and employers working in partnership, the subordination of property rights to the common good, the importance of establishing social harmony by abolishing class conflicts. The 1931 encyclical went further by critiquing communism and socialism, blaming them for considering only a collective spirit and ignoring the needs and aspirations of individuals, and for ignoring the human person as a supernatural being who had spiritual needs as well as temporal ones. If a renewed society was to be based on justice and charity, the encyclical said, a renewed social reconstruction had to be preceded by a profound renewal of the Christian spirit. This encyclical could be said to form the blueprint from which Delp's own thought developed. His prison writings form a distillation of his thought over the course of the thirteen years that had elapsed from the time he first read the encyclical. He was only 37 years old at the time of his death, and so his social and political thinking was still in process and there was of course no chance for it to develop further.

But it resonated greatly with Thomas Merton's thinking in the early 1960s. The dominant world situation at that point consisted of two huge

blocks of power, each possessing the capability of wiping each other out. As for the Christian response, the chief characteristic it displayed in social and political life was fear of communism. The first social encyclical of Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* (Mother and Teacher), on Christianity and social progress, published in 1961, was met with only polite lack of interest. 'Good Catholics' tended to follow the rules of the Church uncritically—Mass on Sunday, no meat on Friday, etc.—and the more devout immersed themselves in pious practices.

Merton agreed with Delp's conclusion that it was a travesty to wage war—or in the case of the early 1960s, to contemplate global destruction—in the name of religion. He quotes Delp here: 'The most pious prayer can become a blasphemy if he who offers it tolerates or helps to further conditions which are fatal to mankind, which render him unacceptable to God or weaken his spiritual, moral or religious sense.'⁴

Merton was impressed with Delp's analysis of humanity's needs: the need for inner truth, the need to recover spiritual freedom, the need to listen to 'the voice in the wilderness' which was growing ever fainter. What also impressed Merton was that Delp, in making a statement like 'Our lives today have become godless to the point of complete vacuity',⁵ is not consoling Christians with the belief that they possess the truth and that everyone else is wrong. In Merton's words, he questions 'even the faith of the faithful and the piety of the pious.'⁶ Delp goes deeper than simply condemning the Nazi system; he sees this system as the end result of a humanity that has abandoned God and has thus lost its way and become imprisoned in forces of its own making. Again, Merton quotes Delp: "'Today's bondage,' he says, speaking of Germany in 1944, 'is the sign of our untruth and deception.'⁷

Merton recognized the opposite side of this coin in Delp's writing, and that is, the person who 'believes more in his own unworthiness than in the creative power of God,'⁸ the person who allows pious prayers and fixed liturgical practices to substitute for any real face-to-face contact with God. And here, he was possibly thinking at least in part of the relatively superficial and cosmetic changes that were coming about in the name of renewal within the Cistercian Order in the early 1960s. Here, Merton says obliquely, are the seeds of crypto-fascism.

And what is the Church doing? Merton asks, echoing Delp. Still piously preaching, convinced it contains all truth. He adds a sentence that is interesting in the light of his later turn toward the East: 'We

might devote a little more thought to the question whether it is not possible that, in a dialogue with them, *they* might have something to give *us*.'⁹ The result is a Church leadership out of touch with modern humanity, no less in Merton's time, nearly twenty years later, than in the mid-1940s.

But then Merton turns to Delp's prescription for humanity's sickness—first of all, we must stop wringing our hands in despair and acknowledge the truth that God is still with us, and that, in Merton's words, 'an encounter with him is still possible. Indeed, it is our only hope.'¹⁰

Alfred Delp was in Tegel Prison in Berlin from the end of July 1944 until the end of January 1945, during which time the Church passed through the liturgical seasons of Advent and Christmas. Advent had always been the liturgical season to which he had been most drawn. In prison, as he paced three steps in one direction, three steps in the other, his hands nearly always in handcuffs, the 'Advent discovery' that Delp made was that God was present in the midst of his desolation. This realization was a pure gift, not in any way a result of his own efforts. In this intense realization, Delp writes, and Merton quotes,

What use are all the lessons learned through our suffering and misery if no bridge can be thrown from one side to the other shore? What is the point of our revulsion from error and fear if it brings no enlightenment and does not penetrate the darkness and dispel it? What use is it shuddering at the world's coldness which all the time grows more intense, if we cannot discover the grace to conjure up better conditions?¹¹

What Merton sees in Delp's Advent reflections is humanity's helplessness and evil tendencies combined with God's grace, 'not as somehow opposed . . . but as a single existential unity.'¹² And further: this insight is not intended to lull us into a complacent quietism, but is intended to return us back again and again to our world and the shocking acts of destruction that continue to take place in our midst. (It might be said here parenthetically that, like Merton, Delp was anything but a plasterboard saint. He had an extraordinary *joie de vivre*, and he was loud and boisterous, sometimes brash and arrogant. He had many friends, but was not universally liked within his own religious community. Like Merton, he was a flawed human being, who became aware of God's grace seeping through the cracks of his own imperfection.)

What further resonated with Merton was Delp's insistence on linking his particular situation with that of the whole human race. Delp's insight, that hidden in the midst of evil is grace—or as Merton puts it, 'truth is hidden in the very heart of untruth'¹³—is not meant to sustain him alone. It is meant as an impetus to work for the renewal of the whole social order. 'It is,' writes Merton, 'not simply the decision to accept one's personal salvation from the hands of God, in suffering and tribulation, but the decision to become *totally engaged in the historical task of the Mystical Body of Christ ...*'¹⁴

It is interesting to note that the volume of Merton's journals for this period of his life is entitled *Turning Towards the World*. Merton had obviously moved beyond worrying about his own spiritual life toward embracing society and critiquing the way it was governed. (And he was getting into trouble for it with his Order. He had been forbidden from publishing anything further on the subject of war, but continued voicing his opinions in what he later called the Cold War Letters. He writes with glee, then, in his journal on November 13, 1962: 'Censors approval came for the Preface to Fr. Delp's *Meditations*—I got the *English* censors to do it.'¹⁵) Merton recognizes Delp as being 'profoundly mystical and wide open to the broadest ideals of Christian humanism.'¹⁶ In other words, there was really no distinction between his personal prayer life and his work on behalf of society. In fact, as Merton notes, Delp's work was accomplished in his prison cell, and once again Merton quotes him: 'To restore divine order and to proclaim God's presence—these have been my vocation.'¹⁷

Merton notes Delp's remarks that the work of restoring order to society demands basic living standards, and here Delp is quoting the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* almost verbatim: minimal physical standards—food, clothing, living space, decent wages—as well as ethical minimums—honesty, respect, human solidarity. In fact, it was in these matters that Delp had immersed himself in his work with the Kreisau group, which was planning a society that was to be run along the lines of Christian socialism.

Merton comes, finally, to Alfred Delp's true place in Germany of 1944: that of a mystic and a prophet—and as he writes, Merton is all too aware of attempts at renewal taking place in the communities of monks and nuns. There is still a chance, he says, for mystics and prophets to listen to the voice crying in the wilderness and to become attuned in the deepest way to the problems of the world. Otherwise,

he says, they will fall prey to the complacency that allowed the Nazi system to flourish and similar regimes to make gods of themselves.

One wonders what wisdom Delp and Merton would have brought to these questions as old men. Are the ideas expounded by Alfred Delp, echoing the social encyclicals, only pipe dreams? Is human nature, even with God's grace, just simply too inclined toward greed and selfishness? As Merton was writing his comments about Delp's prison writing, the Second Vatican Council was just beginning. Although he had little regard for church bureaucrats, he was filled with hope that the Council would help to shed new light on humanity's relationship with God.

And how has it done so? The Council certainly brought the Roman Catholic Church beyond a fortress mentality, and in the 'Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World' and the 'Declaration on Religious Freedom', there is an opening outwards, an explicit recognition that the world as created by God is good, that the Roman Catholic Church does not have all the answers, that as we stand in the shadow of the Cross, we are at the same time filled with the glorious light of the Resurrection.

But it is now forty years since the days following the Council. And what has the Roman Catholic Church brought to the world of which it proclaimed it was a part? Is the world a better place? Certainly, much good has been achieved. The popes (Paul VI and John Paul II) and some bishops have spoken out forcefully about matters of justice and peace. But, some would argue, justice remains ill-served within the Church itself. Bishops are treated like branch managers, theologians are held in check, lay people (especially women) tend to be discounted unless they behave like obedient children. What would Delp and Merton have to say about a Church that has become reduced in some ways to sharply divided ideologies? A Church that often seems to operate like an agency of morality rather than a living witness to the world? What would they say about the religious ignorance and indifference that characterize the post-Vatican II generation in Europe and North America? Or the frittering away of the incredible richness of the Christian spiritual tradition?

What wisdom would Delp and Merton impart to the Churches that are trying to lead Christians across the rim of chaos into the world of the twenty-first century? I've struggled with this question and find it difficult to speculate an answer. My head nods in recognition when I

read their critiques, but in both cases I find myself most deeply moved by the lines they wrote that were simple and personal rather than grand and sweeping. In one of Delp's last prison letters, to the newborn son of friends in Munich, he wrote, 'I desire ... that you live your life with God in adoration, in love, and in freely given service.'¹⁸ And in a December 1961 letter to the psychologist Erich Fromm, Merton wrote, '... only in His service is there true freedom, as the Prophets would tell us.'¹⁹ Freedom and service, then. The institutional Church held these two loyal rebels within its fold even as they chafed against its immense imperfection. May our Churches do the same for us Christians as we struggle to find the way to live in true freedom and to give ourselves in service. May our Churches support our efforts to seek the truth that continues to be hidden in untruth.

Notes and References

- ¹ Thomas Merton, *Turning Towards the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton* Vol. 4, 1960-63, Victor A. Kramer (ed.). San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1996, p.247
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 250
- ³ Alfred Delp, *The Prison Meditations of Father Delp*, Introduction by Thomas Merton. New York, Herder and Herder, p. 176, quoted by Merton in *Turning Towards the World*, p. 250. The italics are Merton's
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p.129 and p.xii
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p.71 and p.xiii
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p.xiii
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p.xiv
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p.xv
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.xviii
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.xxi
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.25 and p.xxii
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p.xxiii
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p.xxiv
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.xxv
- ¹⁵ *Turning Towards the World, op. cit.*, p.264
- ¹⁶ *The Prison Meditations of Father Delp, op. cit.*, pp.xxv-xxvi
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.50 and p.xxvi
- ¹⁸ Mary Frances Coady, *With Bound Hands: A Jesuit in Nazi Germany*. Chicago, Loyola Press, 2003, p.202
- ¹⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, William H. Shannon (ed.). New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985, p.317