

Engaged Spirituality: Thomas Merton and Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Christian Renewal

William Apel

'Whoever cannot be alone [allein] should beware of community...

But the reverse is also true.

Whoever cannot stand being in community should beware of being alone.'

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

These words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer were my companions as I entered the Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Oregon to live as a monk during January of 2004. For one month I worked, prayed, and lived with the brothers of this cloistered, monastic community following the ancient rule of St. Benedict. Rising at three o'clock in the morning for silent prayer and vigils, my day was a balance of physical labor, the liturgy of the hours, and personal study (lectio divina).

During this season of silence and community, I re-read Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*. My plan was to study this little volume within the context of monastic living. I also studied a small book written by Thomas Merton entitled *Contemplative Prayer*. What brought these two works together for me were their call for spiritual renewal based on personal prayer and a commitment to a spirituality which was world-affirming rather than world-negating. Both expressed a spirituality engaged not only

with oneself and God, but also with the world in which we live. Both books, the last publications before their authors' untimely deaths, call for the spiritual formation of free, strong, and mature followers of Jesus Christ. In short, they envision a worldly holiness, one which begins deep within, but reaches out in love for others.¹

Abbot Peter

Midway through my monastic experience, I arranged for a spiritual conference with Abbot Peter McCarthy, who knew I had taught and written about both Bonhoeffer and Merton. After a discussion of personal matters, our attention turned to theology and a conversation about Christian community. I thought we would talk about Thomas Merton—after all we were in a Trappist monastery! But what Abbot Peter wanted to talk about was the life and witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I was surprised to learn that the Abbot had used Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* as a study guide for a retreat he had recently

led at the nearby Benedictine Abbey of Mt. Angel. Much to my surprise, he declared, '*Life Together* is the best Benedictine book I have read in a long time.' He asked, 'How did Bonhoeffer learn so much about Christian community?'

I responded much as Kelly did in his editor's introduction to *Life Together* and located the foundation of Bonhoeffer's concept of Christian community in his doctoral dissertation on the church, *Sanctorum Communio*, and in his second dissertation, *Act and Being*. Also like Kelly, I noted that Bonhoeffer early on had shared his sense of Christian community with his university students in Berlin by taking them on retreat. He himself learned much about Christian community by participating in the life of the Black congregation of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.

During his time in London (1933-1935), Bonhoeffer visited several different kinds of Christian communities, like Mirfield where he joined in communal praying of the Psalms. According to Ebehard Bethge, Bonhoeffer also spoke in favorable terms about the semi-monastic life of students and faculty at the Methodist College in Richmond.² All of these experiences gave reality to Bonhoeffer's academic definition of the church as 'Christ existing as community.' When in 1935 Bonhoeffer was appointed director of the newly formed confessing church's seminary at Finkenwalde, he was well-prepared to begin his own experiment in Christian living. According to Kelly:

Bonhoeffer's entire approach to the community life experienced at

Finkenwalde depends on a strong faith in the vicarious action of Christ in Word, sacrament, intercessory prayer, and service that made it possible for Christians to be both '*with* one another' [miteinander] and '*for* one another' [füreinander]. The seminarians were to live *with* one another, but only in the spirit of being *for* one another.³

This indeed represented 'the Bonhoeffer' Abbot Peter had discovered in *Life Together*.

However, before going any further in our Bonhoeffer discussion, I said to Abbot Peter, 'You Trappists, of course, have Thomas Merton and his work on the spiritual life. He is your Dietrich Bonhoeffer when it comes to Christian community. His light shines as brightly as Bonhoeffer's.' Surprisingly, Abbot Peter stopped me dead in my tracks. He told me that Merton was good at many things: he had tremendous spiritual insight and prophetic awareness, but the Abbot noted that Merton never fully grasped the concept of Christian community in the way Bonhoeffer had.

On further reflection I think the Abbot was correct, especially if we nuance his statement ever so slightly. Bonhoeffer did have a better handle on what makes for Christian community than Merton. But this in large part is due to the fact that community was for Merton a given as a Trappist monk. From the time of his early best seller *The Seven Storey Mountain* until his last fully prepared publication, *Contemplative Prayer*, Merton was writing from within a well-defined community of faith. His concern

was different from Bonhoeffer's. Within community, he struggled to find, and not lose, his own true self. He worried about all the distractions in the routine of monastic living. Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, was in search of a community. He wanted above all, to establish a Christian community which could stand up again to the 'community of lies' which was Nazi Germany.

Life Together

Bonhoeffer has described his leadership of the seminary at Finkenwalde as the 'fullest time' of his life. In some ways, it may also have been the happiest of times. Begun in the spring of 1935 in Zingst, the seminary soon moved to its more permanent quarters at Finkenwalde. Closed by the action of the Gestapo in October 1937, the seminary and its attendant Brothers' House existed for only two and a half years. Nonetheless, it was a beacon of light in a world of darkness. *Life Together*, written by Bonhoeffer shortly after the closing of Finkenwalde, described it as 'one individual contribution' toward answering the need for 'new ecclesial forms of community.'⁴

Much of what Bonhoeffer attempted to do in the formation of a Christian community at Finkenwalde was grounded in the Protestant approach of Martin Luther, that Christian community is to be lived *in* and *for* Jesus Christ. There is no other basis for Christian community than this. As he writes in the first chapter of *Life Together*:

One is a brother and sister to another only through Jesus Christ. I am a brother or sister to another

person through what Jesus Christ has done for me and to me; others have become brothers and sisters to me through what Jesus Christ has done for them and to them... Our community consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us. That not only is true at the beginning, as if in the course of time something else were to be added to our community, but also remains so for all the future and into all eternity. *I have community with others and will continue to have it only through Jesus Christ.*⁵

Bonhoeffer rejected the notion that Christians can create community out of their own religiosity or spiritual intentions. He observed, 'what persons are in themselves as Christian, in their inwardness and piety, cannot constitute the basis of our community...'⁶ Bonhoeffer was painfully aware of how easy it was for Christians to deceive themselves with all kinds of good intentions, and how quickly those intentions can be manipulated by others—in Bonhoeffer's case, by the so-called 'German Christians' of the Nazi-controlled Reich.

There is also much in Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* which lends itself to a Catholic interpretation. In fact, Bonhoeffer is very explicit about building upon ancient Catholic traditions as well as Protestant teachings. The course of the day's work and prayer at Finkenwalde, for example, was organized from a Catholic monastic perspective. Bonhoeffer argued that when the day's study and work comes to an end, 'It is a good thing if the daily evening worship can really be held at the end of

the day, thus becoming the last word before night's rest. When night falls, the true light of God's Word shines brighter for the community of faith.'⁶ Bonhoeffer refers directly to monastic tradition at this point in *Life Together*. He notes:

It is an old custom of the monasteries that by set practice in the daily evening worship, the Abbot asks his brothers to forgive him for all the sins of omission and wrongdoing committed against them. After the brothers assure him of their forgiveness, they likewise ask the Abbot to forgive them for their omission and wrongdoings and receive his forgiveness. 'Do not let the sun go down on your anger' (Eph. 4:26)⁷

This principle, a very ancient one in the church, is reaffirmed by Bonhoeffer. According to him, 'It is a decisive rule of every Christian community that every division that the day has caused must be healed in the evening.'⁸ This was an important step toward an engaged spirituality for Bonhoeffer. He understood that Christians, especially young pastors in the hostile environment of Nazi Germany must learn to be repentant in little matters so that they might be faithful in large matters.

The issue of personal confession was also at the center of life together at Finkenwalde—something most of Bonhoeffer's fellow Protestants regarded as too 'Catholic a thing.' Bonhoeffer, however, believed 'the final breakthrough to community' comes with confession of sin to another brother or sister in the faith. Until this occurs, Christians live

with the pious assumption that their personal devotion or their sanctified community life somehow lifts them above sin. In this type of pious community, writes Bonhoeffer, 'We are not allowed to be sinners.'⁹ This keeps God at a distance and can cause the Christian life to be full of lies and hypocrisy. It results in an isolated spirituality rather than an engaged spirituality.

Nothing, however, unsettled Bonhoeffer's students more than the daily practice of meditation. This they viewed as thoroughly Catholic and wholly unnecessary. From the start, Bonhoeffer asked his students to spend time meditating upon Scripture. According to Kelly:

Some read, some slept, some smoked their pipes, some let their minds wonder. Some voiced their resentment over being the butt of jokes from other preachers' seminaries about their 'unevangelical monasticism.'¹⁰

Bonhoeffer nevertheless insisted upon meditation and eventually won over most of his students. A true Christian community had been established thanks to the grace of God and much hard work.

Contemplative Prayer

In this book Merton focused upon the need for a deep, personal prayer life. Merton addressed personal prayer in monastic communities, but he hoped that what he had to say would be helpful to all Christians. Merton writes, 'A practical, non-academic study of monastic prayer should be of interest to all Christians, since every Christian is bound to be in

some sense a person of prayer.¹¹ Bonhoeffer would have agreed: personal prayer must be at the basis of our spirituality—especially an engaged spirituality which leads to love of others.

Monks, as Merton observed, exist as marginal people within modern society. Because of this, they offer a prophetic word free from the conventional views of mainstream society. To use language from Bonhoeffer's *Prison Letters*, the monk is able to speak 'a word from below.' He truly exists as an individual without political power or worldly status. Like Pastor Bonhoeffer's seminarians, the monk is an outsider. Merton, however, feared that many in monastic communities had lost this prophetic perspective. Monasteries had become factories of prayer, and worst of all they were filled with ecclesiastical types more concerned about institutional survival than prophetic witness.

A more engaged spirituality was clearly needed. Like with Bonhoeffer, Merton believed this must begin with an intentional prayer life. The 'climate' of prayer, which Merton wanted to restore, was the prayer of the desert, a prayer of the soul alone before God. Merton wanted to return to the simple 'prayer of the heart.'¹² Just as Bonhoeffer encouraged his seminarians to place themselves before God by meditation on the Word, so Merton wanted his fellow monks to place themselves before God in simple prayer—not prayer as a part of the liturgy (as important as that is), but prayer as a personal act in which one is stripped bare before God. In Merton's words:

The dimensions of prayer in solitude are those of man's

ordinary anguish, his self-searching, his moments of nausea at his own vanity, falsity and capacity for betrayal...The way of prayer brings us face to face with the shame and indignity of the false self that seeks to live for itself alone...This 'self' is pure illusion and ultimately he who lives for and by such an illusion must end either in disgust or madness.¹³

Merton realized that as long as the monk and the Christian failed to find their true selves before God in prayer, there could be no possibility for genuine community or a spirituality of engagement leading to love of others. Just as with Bonhoeffer, Merton believed others are brought into one's personal prayers as they are remembered in contemplation. According to Merton: 'The love of others is a stimulus to interior life, not a danger to it, as some mistakenly believe.'¹⁴

Also like Bonhoeffer, Merton was aware that self-deception, can easily enter one's prayer life. The experience of the 'wasteland' is something that cannot be avoided and brings with it many illusions and uncertainties. But these times of anguish and self-searching ought not to immobilize the one who prays. Merton understood that we must eventually come out from our dark places. As with the desert fathers and mothers, 'the wasteland' can be a creative time of struggle but it has an end. According to Merton, we should stay in the desert long enough for God's wisdom to penetrate our hardened hearts. But, as the Psalms suggest, we eventually emerge with hopeful

expectation. In short, we are freed to love once again.¹⁵

In this kind of prayerful contemplation, Merton believes we are joined to others. We become one in love. We 'speak' to one another differently. In his words from the *Asian Journal*, Merton says:

True communication on the deepest level is more than a simple sharing of ideas, of conceptual knowledge, or formulated truth. The kind of communication that is necessary on this deep level must also be 'communion' beyond the level of words, a communication in authentic experience which is shared not only on a 'preverbal' level but also on a 'post verbal level.'¹⁶

When Bonhoeffer wrote *Life Together*, he probably had not yet arrived at this deeper contemplative level. But he soon would. Peter King in *Dark Night Spirituality* suggests we might even speak of 'Bonhoeffer the Contemplative' during the last two years of his life in prison. Here, he was literally alone with himself—mindful of his community of faith, but without its physical presence.

Times of meditation (Merton would say contemplation) came to sustain Bonhoeffer. Indeed, what in Bonhoeffer's prison letters might look like hesitation and confusion is, in fact, evidence of a confident, but not triumphant, living out of an engaged Christian spirituality. Such spirituality is not far from Merton's commitment to be a contemplative in an age of action. King writes:

Increasingly, Bonhoeffer became aware of the inadequacy of many of the traditional expressions of the Christian faith, both to his life as an Abwehr agent and anti-Hitler conspirator, and also to his fellow conspirators and, later, fellow prisoners in Tegel. This experience, coupled with his own temperamental hesitancy to speak of God—especially to those who did not share his belief—led to the increasingly intuitive and open-ended theology of his final years.¹⁷

The spiritual journey of Bonhoeffer, as with Merton, remained dynamic and changing to the end. Indeed, Bonhoeffer's 'intuitive and open-ended theology' at the close of his life continues his exploration of solitude and community. He and Merton were indeed kindred spirits.

We perhaps can take some comfort in the fact that the future of Christianity, at least its form and shape, was as uncertain to Bonhoeffer and Merton as it is to many of us. But as Bonhoeffer noted, this much he knew: Christianity in the future will in one way or another consist of 'prayer' and 'just actions.' I think Merton as a contemplative in an age of action would fully agree. Both, I think, envisioned an engaged spirituality which involved the living of the whole Gospel for the whole world. In other words, what was called for was a spirituality of engagement, a spirituality of prayer and boundless love. Our challenge is to continue to work for this type of Christian renewal which these two spiritual masters anticipated over a half-century ago.

Notes

1. My use of the term 'engaged spirituality' is borrowed in part from Thich Nhat Hanh's use of the phrase 'engaged Buddhism.' Also, Merton's most extensive references to Bonhoeffer are in *Conjecture of a Guilty Bystander* and should be carefully read by those wanting to pursue the topic of Merton and Bonhoeffer beyond the scope of this paper's focus.

2. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), p.412.

3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), p.8. The quotation here is from Geoffrey B. Kelly's editor's introduction to the English edition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works, Volume 5.

4. *Ibid.*, p.8.

5. *Ibid.*, p.25.

6. *Ibid.*, p.118.

7. *Ibid.*, p.78.

8. *Ibid.*, p.79.

9. *Ibid.*, p.79.

10. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p.16. The quote is taken from Geoffrey Kelly's editor's introduction.

11. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p.87.

12. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: An Image Book Doubleday, 1996), p.19. Originally published as *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* by Cistercian Press, 1971. Ecclesiastical approval to publish this book was received in October 1968.

13. *Ibid.*, p.23.

14. *Ibid.*, p.24.

15. *Ibid.*, pp.27-28.

16. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1973), p.315. Edited from Merton's original notebooks.

William Apel is a professor of religion at Linfield College in Oregon, USA. He is the author of *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton* and has written for the Merton Annual, the Seasonal, and the Merton Journal.