

# The Role of a Prophet: Thomas Merton and Alfred Delp

## Mary Frances Coady

On September 15, 1962, Thomas Merton received a manuscript in the mail. The manuscript was an English translation of *Im Angesicht des Todes* (*In the Face of Death*), a selection of writings by the German Jesuit Alfred Delp. The writings, committed to tiny pieces of paper, had been smuggled out of Berlin's Tegel Prison during the months from Delp's arrest in late July 1944 until his execution by hanging on February 2, 1945. By coincidence, the day Merton received the manuscript was Delp's birthday. Had he still been alive, he would have turned fifty-five.

The manuscript, along with a request to write an introduction, had been sent to Merton by Justus George Lawler, an editor at the publishing firm Herder & Herder, which had acquired the North American rights to the English translation of *Im Angesicht des Todes*. The book had already been published in Britain, appearing under the title *Facing Death*. The prominent Jesuit ecumenist Thomas Corbishley had written a short Foreword:

We, whose faith is such a wan affair, who are so easily perturbed by the trivialities of social encounter, so slow to see our whole existence in terms of our Christian destiny, can find inspiration in the shining courage of a fellow-mortal who, in the long-drawn-out agony of those months found in his Christian-Jesuit vocation an angel of God to comfort him.<sup>1</sup>

The book had been reviewed in the publication *Life of the Spirit*. The reviewer was Faith Tolkein, the daughter-in-law of the author J R R Tolkien, who wrote of *Facing Death*:

What [Delp] has to offer us is not only an example of great fortitude; fear and loneliness, far from weakening his faith, gave a profound and urgent meaning to it which we, in our comparative ease and security, have a great need to learn today.<sup>2</sup>

Merton knew none of this on the day he received the manuscript, nor did he know anything of Delp himself beyond what was contained in the pages that lay before him. He had been finding himself in a rather transitional phase during the early 1960s as Cold War tension constantly seemed to erupt into conflagration, and the possibility of nuclear war remained a threat. In his biography of Merton, *Silent Lamp*, William Shannon traces the steps in Merton's transition: from 'supporting, advising and encouraging intellectuals who were dealing with the moral and social issues of the day' to 'the discussion of the issues themselves'.<sup>3</sup> Shannon places October 1961 as the point of Merton's 'definitive and official entry into the struggle against war'.<sup>4</sup> Merton's prose poem *Original Child Bomb* was published that month, and his 'Auschwitz' poem 'Chants to Be Used Around a Site with Furnaces' had already been published in *The Catholic Worker*. The problem hanging over Merton as his writing took off in a new direction was the question of Trappist approval, and in particular the regulation that before publication his writing was required to pass through the hands of three Trappist censors. It was a constant headache, some of the censors being more rigid and narrow-minded in their thinking than others.

The censorship concern did not deter him, however, and starting in October 1961, articles on the various aspects of war followed one after another. In early April 1962, a United States congressman by the name of Frank Kowalski, worried about the buildup of nuclear weapons, wrote to Merton asking him to write a prayer for peace that could be read before Congress. Merton wrote the prayer, and it was read aloud before the House of Representatives on April 18, 1962. Eight days later, perhaps in reaction to this most public of prayers for peace, Abbot James Fox gave Merton a directive that had come to him the previous January from the Abbot General: Merton was to stop publishing on the subject of war and peace. His burst of anti-war writing continued, however, in the form of mimeographed material that he began circulating among his friends and that eventually became known as the 'Cold War Letters'. Shannon refers to this explosive period of writing, which lasted roughly from October 1961 to October 1962, as 'the year of the Cold War letters'.<sup>5</sup>

And so it was toward the end of this 'year of the Cold War letters', on September 15, 1962, that Delp's manuscript arrived in Merton's life as he grappled with pent-up frustration and pondered his own place in the monastic way of life and his vocation as a writer. The day he received the manuscript, he wrote in his journal that in addition to other tasks, he was to write 'a preface in the book of Fr. Delp, the MS of which came to me

today'. He adds with zero enthusiasm (and perhaps anticipating a book of simple piety): 'All this can be done or not done, it doesn't matter.'<sup>6</sup>

Four days after this journal entry, he wrote to a correspondent:

I have come across a manuscript of meditation by a Father Delp, S.J., who was executed under Hitler. Most of it was written in prison, and in reading it one gets the impression that only people like this know what they are talking about. I am asked to write a preface to this, and I wonder what one can say, except that this is truth and what is not like this is untruth.<sup>7</sup>

Six days later, he wrote, comparing the introduction he had been asked to write with his review of another book:

Still more moving and important a task, one that stirs me deeply, is the introduction to Fr. Delp's meditations in prison. It is perhaps the most clear-sighted book of Christian meditations of our time. ... Not 'consoling' except in the profound sense in which the truth consoles one who has been stripped of illusions. How honest he is about the Church and about modern man!<sup>8</sup>

The following week he continued to reflect on the 'magnificent' words in Delp's prison writings. 'Superb, powerful material,' he wrote. '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.'<sup>9</sup>

On September 30 he wrote to his German translator, Elsa Engländer, who lived in Linz, Austria, that he had finished the preface to the Delp meditation. 'I found them most powerful and deeply moving. I think this is one of the great spiritual books of the age,' he wrote. 'It is a noble and great document of German Catholicism in World War II.'<sup>10</sup> From Engländer, Merton learned more about Delp: that he had been a member of a loosely-knit group around Count Helmuth von Moltke, a lawyer from Silesia (who was also executed), and that the group had been planning a new German republic based on Christian principles after the inevitable downfall of the Third Reich. He had been arrested in the days after Claus von Stauffenberg's ill-fated attempt on Hitler's life on July 20, 1944. In the manuscript itself, there were hints of Delp's life in captivity: the night of brutality and bitterness in the Gestapo prison on the Lehrterstrasse in Berlin, the cell that allowed only three paces in either direction, muted references to the presence of the Eucharist — like the written messages,

smuggled in — that he kept in a small pouch inside his clothing.

Two weeks later, Merton sent the publisher his introduction to Delp's text, though the process was not yet finished: what he had written still had to pass through the censorship gauntlet. On November 13 he wrote in his journal: 'Censors approval came for the Preface to Fr. Delp's *Meditations*.' One can imagine a certain amount of satisfactory glee as he added parenthetically: '(I got the *English* censors to do it.)'<sup>11</sup>

The book was published in the United States and Canada in 1963. The cover bore sombre blotches of black, white and grey, as well as a new title: *The Prison Meditations of Father Delp* and, in smaller letters, 'With an Introduction by Thomas Merton'. The introduction was reprinted as a review in the periodicals *Continuum* and *Jubilee*, and, in the United Kingdom, *The Way*. Later that year, the American television series 'Directions' broadcast a half-hour episode called *Facing Death*, which was part drama and part documentary.

In the introduction, Merton speaks of the way Delp analyzed the needs of humanity and the godlessness of the twentieth century, questioning even 'the faith of the faithful and the piety of the pious'.<sup>12</sup> He points out how Delp went further than simply condemning the Nazi system by indicating that Nazism is the end result of a humanity that has abandoned God and has become imprisoned in the creation of its own god. He notes further the need expressed by Delp for the Christian to move beyond pious prayers and into the genuine encounter with the living God.

Commenting on Delp's Advent meditations, Merton notes that humanity's inadequacies and God's grace are not opposed to each other but exist 'as a single existential unit'.<sup>13</sup> He was impressed with Delp's insistence that his particular situation — imprisonment, with hands tied — was linked to the situation of the whole human race. And further: that grace is active in the midst of evil; or, as Merton describes it, 'truth is hidden in the very heart of untruth'.<sup>14</sup> It is 'not simply the decision to accept one's personal salvation from the hands of God in suffering and tribulation,' Merton writes, 'but the decision to become *totally engaged in the historical task of the Mystical Body of Christ*'.<sup>15</sup> From the distance of a decade and a half, Merton recognized Delp for what he truly was in the terrible extremity of his prison cell: he was writing as a mystic and a prophet.

Delp's prison writing was, in a sense, a vindication of the writing that Merton himself had undertaken over the previous year. 'No one has a more solemn obligation to understand the true nature of man's

predicament than he who is called to a life of special holiness and dedication,' he wrote toward the end of the introduction. 'The priest, the religious, the lay-leader must, whether he likes it or not, fulfil in the world the role of a prophet.'<sup>16</sup>

If William Shannon's assessment of this period of Merton's life is correct, it seems that he more or less ended his 'year of the Cold War Letters' by introducing North American Christians to an important new spiritual voice: that of a fellow prophetic sojourner writing from a prison cell in Nazi Germany: a worthy introduction and a fitting conclusion to the year.

## Notes

1. Alfred Delp, *Facing Death* (Bloomsbury, London, 1962), p. viii.
2. *Life of the Spirit*, vol. 18, no. 207, December 1963, pp. 250-252.
3. William Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1992), p. 209.
4. *Silent Lamp*, p. 210.
5. *Silent Lamp*, pp. 209ff.
6. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 4, 1960-63* (Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1996), p. 247.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Cold War Letters*, edited by Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Orbis Books, NY, 2006), p. 178.
8. *Turning Toward the World*, pp. 248-9.
9. *Turning Toward the World*, pp. 250-1.
10. *The Cold War Letters*, p. 66.
11. *Turning Toward the World*, p. 264.
12. Alfred Delp, *The Prison Meditations of Father Delp*, introduction by Thomas Merton (Palm Publishers, Montreal, 1963), p. xiii.
13. *The Prison Meditations*, p. xxiii.
14. *The Prison Meditations*, p. xxiv.
15. *The Prison Meditations*, p. xxv.
16. *The Prison Meditations*, p. xxix.

**Mary Frances Coady** is the author of several biographies, young adult fiction, and short stories. Her book about Alfred Delp, *With Bound Hands: A Jesuit in Nazi Germany*, is published by Loyola Press. Her most recent book is *Caryll Houselander: A Biography* (Orbis Books). She is also the author of *Merton and Waugh: A Monk, A Crusty Old Man, and The Seven Storey Mountain* which was published in 2015 by Paraclete Press. She lives in Toronto.