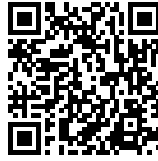




THE FATE OF CHURCHES

Posted on May 1, 2022 by Alfred Delp



This treatise on the role of the Church in modern times was written by Father Alfred Delp, a Jesuit priest, while he was in prison, awaiting execution.

The fragmentary sentences near the end were written while his hands were tied. During this time, he wrote to his secretary in which he recounted a cruel comment of his SS guard who, along with some others, had just beaten him severely: "You won't sleep much tonight. You'll pray, but neither God nor an angel will come and rescue you. But we'll sleep soundly and will be fresh in the morning, to give you another good thrashing."

Despite the grim context, this little treatise is also a testimony of the workings of faith in the face of evil and certain death, and the great strength of Christian hope.

Father Delp was executed, at 38 years of age, by the Nazis, on February 2, 1945; his body was cremated and the ashes scattered in an unknown location in Berlin.

The fate of churches in the coming time will not depend on what their prelates and leading authorities come up with in terms of cleverness, sagacity, "political skills", etc. Nor will it depend on the "positions" that people have been able to obtain from among them. All that is obsolete.

Within themselves, the churches must, for the sake of their existence, decisively be finished with fanaticism and the lagging, disintegrating liberalism. Hierarchy must be real order and leadership. The Church should know this from its origins.

But order and leadership are something else than formalism and feudal personalism. Above all, the conviction must grow again that the hierarchy does not only have confidence in the errors and follies of mankind. It must be known and felt and experienced again that it hears and answers the calls of longing and of the times, of ferment and of new awakenings, that the concerns of each new age and generation are not just filed away in filing cabinets, but are evaluated and treated as "concerns," i.e., worries and tasks.

Also, the other way of the exacting Church, in the name of the exacting God, is no longer a path to this generation and to the times to come. Between the clear conclusions of our fundamental theology and the listening hearts of the people lies the great mountain of weariness that the experience of ourselves has piled up.

Through our existence, we have taken away people's trust in us. Two thousand years of history are not only blessings and commendations, but also a burden and heavy inhibition. And especially in previous times a person become found in the church also only the person become tired, who still committed the dishonesty of hiding his tiredness behind pious words and gestures. A coming honest, cultural and intellectual history will have to write bitter chapters about the contributions to the emergence of mass man, of collectivism, of dictatorial forms of rule, etc.

Whether the Church will once again find a way to reach these people will depend on two things. The first is so self-evident that I will not even mention it. If the churches once again present humanity with the image of a bickering Christendom, they will be written off. We should accept the division as a historical fate and at the same time as a cross. None of those living today would carry it out again. And at the same time, it should be our permanent shame and disgrace, since we were not able to guard Christ's inheritance, his love, in an unbroken way.

The one fact means the return of the churches to "diakonia": to the service of humanity. And to a service that is determined by the need of humanity, not by our tastes or the consuetudinarium of an ecclesial community, however established. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mk 10:45). One only has to call the various realities of Church existence once under this law and measure them against this statement, and one actually knows enough. No human being will believe in the message of salvation and of the Savior as long as we have not bloodied ourselves in the service of the physically, psychologically, socially, economically, morally or otherwise sick human being. Man today is sick.

Perhaps in the next few days I will get around to putting down on paper a few thoughts about man's illnesses. And man today has at the same time become a supreme expert in many fields of life, and who has greatly expanded the space of human power and dominion. He is still quite dazed by this new ability. He does not yet feel some inner loss and atrophy of the organs, which he exchanges for this ability. And he does not need to feel them at all in the beginning. But above all, it is not necessary to tell him and reproach him constantly. A clever and wise leadership will take them into account, but will not talk about them all the time. This able and worldly-wise person is very sensitive to any presumed or

real arrogance. The diligence and reliability, to which the technical life forces the majority of today's people, also give them an eye for the sloppiness and wallowing with which we in the Church perform our "functions" in the broadest sense of the word.

Return to the "*diakonia*" is what I said. By this I mean the joining of people in all their situations, with the intention of helping them to master them, without subsequently filling out a column and section somewhere. By this I mean the following and wandering even into the utmost perplexities and stupefactions of man, in order to be with him exactly and just then, when he is surrounded by loss and degradation. "Go out" said the Master, and not: "Sit down and wait to see if anyone comes." By this I mean the concern also for human space and the human order. It makes no sense to leave humanity to its fate, satisfied with a sermon and religious permit, with a pastor's and prelate's salary. By this I mean the spiritual encounter as a real dialogue, not as a monologue and monotonous whining.

However, all this will only be understood and wanted if fulfilled people come again from the Church. The "fullness." This word is important for Paul (Col. 2:9). It is even more important for our concern. The fulfilled people, not the salvation-anxious or pastor-affiliated frightened caricatures, who know themselves again as not only stewards of Christ, but as those who have prayed with all openness: *fac cor meum secundum cor tuum*. If the churches will once again release from themselves the fulfilled, the creative human being, filled with divine force that is their lot, only then will they have the measure of security and self-confidence that will allow them to do away with the constant insistence on "right" and "heritage." Only then will they have the bright eyes that, even in the darkest hours, will see the concerns and calls of God. And only then they will have ready hearts that are not interested in saying, "We were right after all." They will only care about one thing—to help and heal in the name of God.

But how to get there? The churches seem to stand in their own way here by the nature of their way of being that has become historical. I believe that wherever we do not voluntarily separate ourselves from the way of life for the sake of life, the history what has happened will strike us as a judging and destroying thunderbolt. This is true for the personal destiny of the individual church person as well as for the institutions and customs. We are at a dead point despite all correctness and orthodoxy. The Christian idea is not one of the leading and formative ideas of this century. Still the plundered man lies on the road. Shall the stranger pick him up once more? I think we have to take the phrase very seriously: what worries and distresses the Church at present is man. The man outside, to whom we no longer have a way and who no longer believes us. And the man inside, who does not believe himself because he has experienced and lived too little love. Therefore, one should not make great reform

lectures and design great reform programs, but rather set about the formation of Christian personhood and at the same time equip oneself to meet the immense need of man in a helping and healing way.

Most of the people of the Church and the official Church itself must realize that for the present and its people the Church is not only an incomprehensible and misunderstood reality, but in many respects a disturbing, threatening, dangerous fact. We are walking on two parallels; and there are no connecting footbridges across and over. In addition, each of the two authorities—the "natural" and the "supernatural"—appears to the other as a competent judge. For the Church, this results in a multifaceted obligation.

The hard and honest consideration of how this could have become so. And not a reflection on the guilt of the other.

The old question of what the consequences are for the revival and the appearance of the Church.

Much more important and deeper—education for reverence towards the other person. Away from presumption to reverence.

The Church must understand itself much more as a sacrament, as a way and a means, not as a goal and end.

A personal understanding is more important today than the original objective integrity.

In general, the question arises whether one can, indeed may, always and under all circumstances, leave the judgment of what has become historical to historical values.

Honest sobriety in the statement that the Church today does not belong to the leading powers and forces of mankind.

And that this fact cannot be presented unilaterally by a d'accord [in French in the original] with other powerful instances of history (throne and altar in any forms), but only by the release of its own, inner vitality and possibility *puissance*, not force [words in italics are in English in the original].

The force of the immanent mission of the Church depends on the seriousness of its transcendent devotion and worship. The arrogant man, always of evil, is already in the vicinity of the Church, not to mention in the Church alone and even in the name of the Church or as the Church.

Featured image: Father Alfred Delp at his trial, at the People's Court, Berlin, January 8-9, 1945.

