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Existence as Relationship: Alfred Delp contra the Totalitarian State

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Abstract

This article shows how Jesuit Father Alfred Delp, martyred by the Nazis on February 2, 1945, for being part of an anti-Nazi resistance group, demonstrates how a person of faith and without power can engage the world around him and build authentic relationships with people near and far. It examines how Delp responded in word and deed to the challenges of totalitarianism and Heidegger's philosophy, which presented an estranged view of man; his response was a view of man inspired by Catholic Social Thought and the spirituality of the Sacred Heart.

Introduction

In the Fall of 1941, Fr. Alfred Delp, SJ, gave a series of talks on the seven sacraments to his frightened parishioners at St. Georg's parish. His talks were intended to offer the faithful a way of being human, rooted in the practice of the sacraments, in the midst of the anxiety that pervaded Nazi society. In his presentation on Confirmation, for example, Delp acknowledged the anxiety and self-doubts consuming people. He said, "the fundamental reason" why [Nazi] "terror brings us to our knees is that we cannot endure loneliness."¹ At the start of his talk on the Eucharist, he stated,

Man does not live alone and is not an island for himself. No, he is bound; he needs the other person. He is a human being among human beings, inserted in communities, connected by friendship and fellowship, inserted in the significant orders of people and state, and inserted in the great spheres of decisions of history.²

Delp captures here the experience of living under totalitarian Nazi Germany—*anxiety*³ and *loneliness*.⁴ Nazi terror mobilizes a fear that consumes the person, paralyzing his freedom and severing him from meaningful relations.

¹ Alfred Delp, *Alfred Delp: Gesammelte Schriften 3: Predigten und Ansprachen*, ed. Roman Bleistein (Frankfurt am Main: Knecht, 1985), 330.

² Delp., 363.

³ Delp's sacrament talks use the words *die Not*, *die Angst*, *die Unruhe*, and *der Schreck*.

⁴ Delp's sacrament talks use the words *allein* and *das Einsamkeit*.

Not only is one's social life damaged, but one's inner life is damaged as well.

In the face of the pervasive terror of Nazi totalitarianism, which alienated man from himself and from others and presented a despairing and nihilistic view of reality, Alfred Delp sought in his writings and actions the Christian animation of society, advocating that people relate to one another in the interrelated communities in which they live, including their interiority, their family, and their nation. In the face of the dechristianization of German life by Nazism, Delp advocated a prayerful, intensely lived Christianity that was public, active, outward-looking, and hopeful.

Biographical Sketch

Alfred Delp (1907–1945) entered the Jesuits in 1926 and was ordained a priest in 1937; as a Jesuit scholastic, he studied philosophy and theology amid turbulent social and political times, as Germany suffered from war reparations imposed by the Versailles Treaty and from the Great Depression. Political extremism from both fascism and communism tore the country apart.

Amid these challenging social-historical conditions, Delp engrossed himself in philosophy and theology studies. As a result, he became intrigued with Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* and its thinking concerning anxiety and the meaning of death. Delp perceived Heidegger's philosophy as depicting

the human condition as a dying and a nihilistic Promethean rebellion against death, and in 1935, he published *Tragic Existence*—the first critical study of Heidegger’s philosophy from the Catholic intellectual world. Delp judged Heidegger’s philosophy as incapable of overcoming the nihilism of the contemporary age.⁵

In theology studies, Delp developed a keen interest in the social teaching of the Church, which had emerged with Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (RN)⁶ and Pius X’s *Quadragesimo Anno* (QA).⁷ Delp became something of an expert on Catholic Social Thought for the German Jesuits. This expertise came into play, when during World War II, his provincial, Augustin Rösch, missioned him to help an anti-Nazi resistance group, the Kreisau Circle, develop a blueprint for a post-Nazi German society based on Catholic Social Thought.

During World War II, Delp, as an editor of *Stimmen der Zeit*, carefully and subtly criticized the Nazi regime without drawing the attention of the Gestapo. He used essays, lectures, and homilies to exhort Catholics to be in solidarity with people who suffer. As rector of St. Georg’s parish in Munich,

⁵ Alfred Delp, *Alfred Delp: Gesammelte Schriften 2: Philosophische Schriften*, ed. Roman Bleistein (Frankfurt am Main: Josef Knecht, 1983), 24–90.

⁶ Pope Leo XIII, “Rerum Novarum: On the Condition Of the Working Classes” (The Holy See, 1891), http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html.

⁷ Pope Pius XI, “Quadragesimo Anno: Reconstruction of the Social Order” (The Holy See, 1931), http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html.

he participated in an underground network to help Jewish refugees escape from Munich to Switzerland.

In 1942, Delp was one of the intellectual leaders of the Kreisau Circle, a group of German intellectuals from Catholic, Protestant, and Socialist backgrounds, who worked to shape a post-Nazi Germany based on Catholic Social Teaching. Although the Kreisau Circle had nothing to do with Operation Valkyrie,⁸ Delp and the other members of the group were arrested on July 28, 1944, and sent to the Gestapo prison in Berlin, where he was held in solitary confinement for two months and was subjected to interrogation and torture. After several months of imprisonment, Delp was brought to trial. He was offered his freedom if he would renounce his priesthood. He refused and was hanged on February 2, 1945.

It is important to note that Delp wrote to Marianne Hapig and Marianne Pünder, two social workers who knew him from Munich. Through them, he was able to smuggle out not only letters to family, friends, and fellow Jesuits, but also spiritual reflections on the nature of human existence amidst the isolated bleakness of his prison conditions.

It is also relevant to note that Delp was tortured during the first few months of his imprisonment. Those early months

⁸ Operation Valkyrie was a plot by senior-level German military officials to assassinate Adolf Hitler and then take control of his government. The attempted assassination on July 20, 1944, failed when a bomb planted in a briefcase went off but did not kill Hitler. Hitler's would-be assassins were executed after being discovered.

drove him into an anguish that would remain with him for the rest of his imprisonment. In late October, he wrote,

“I’ve become very alone and very forlorn,” as it says in the Psalms... Although, I am ashamed to admit, sometimes I feel so tired and wrecked that I can no longer grasp this reality at all... I cannot write much to you today; it has not been a good day. Sometimes one’s destiny presses itself into a burden and unloads itself on the heart. And, one does not really know how long this heart can be expected to take it.⁹

One can see in this letter Delp’s anguish. It was as if Delp had experienced his own “agony in the garden of Gethsemane,” where, like Christ, he suffered fear of abandonment as death loomed.

In some letters, however, Delp shared a glimmer of hope amid his anguish. In prison, he became aware of a “transformation” taking place within him, a transformation that included his Kreisau companions. While awaiting trial, the surviving Kreisau members, including Delp, prayed together in secret. As a result, an ecumenical community blossomed out of God’s grace in a Nazi prison during those months of captivity. “We four pray here, two Catholics and two Protestants, and believe in the marvels of God,” wrote Delp in a letter dated 5 January 1945.¹⁰

⁹ Alfred Delp, *Alfred Delp: Gesammelte Schriften 4: Aus dem Gefängnis*, ed. Roman Bleistein (Frankfurt am Main: Knecht, 1985), 21–22.

¹⁰ Delp, 88.

The cooperation that had begun during the underground meetings of the Kreisau Circle had matured into a spiritual union. They understood their impending death as a gift to others. Delp also introduced his Protestant colleagues to Catholic devotions, especially the Sacred Heart. Furtive prayer and worship were profound acts of loving solidarity for these collaborators of Catholic and Protestant backgrounds.

Imprisonment was an opportunity for Delp to encounter Christ, not in some transcendent oasis kept free from a broken world, but rather in the concrete wreckage of human existence. In a letter to Franz von Tattenbach, a brother Jesuit, Delp wrote, “Mass in the evening was full of grace... I did not sleep much last night. For a long time, I sat before the tabernacle and just kept praying the *Suscipe* in all the variations that came to me in this situation.”¹¹ At this challenging point in his life, Delp spoke of the surprising ways in which God loved him.

Through prayer and worship, Delp came to know Christ on an intimate level in prison. A close friendship with Christ, as with other people, requires an openness to being changed. Delp’s prison meditations and letters reveal a man matured by his friendship with Christ. A relationship with Christ did not take away Delp’s suffering amid the hostile environment of prison, yet despite the beatings and the fear of impending death Delp sensed the nearness of God; ultimately, he was not

¹¹ Delp, 41.

on his own. Delp recognized his existence as being graced; his existence as gifted by being in relationship with God.

On December 8, 1944, Delp made his final vows before a brother Jesuit in prison. The final vows had deep meaning for Delp. They were a rejection of the Gestapo's effort to influence him to leave the Jesuits, placing himself completely in the hands of God, embodying a theology of trust, obedience, and self-surrender.

From prison, Delp also wrote a series of meditations on the mysteries of the Christian faith. They were poignant contemplations on the Sacred Heart, Advent, Christmas, the Lord's Prayer, and the Holy Spirit.¹² His reflections are quite sobering, but they reveal a man who, despite his difficult circumstances, did not succumb to despair. Taken together, his essays in the Jesuit journal *Stimmen der Zeit*, his homilies and talks to his parishioners, and his prison memoirs and meditations can teach people to think and act critically against an authoritarian regime that preys on people's fears and loneliness. His writings documented his faith and were acts of solidarity, helping to build healthy, genuine relationships with Christians and people of goodwill, and to connect different communities against the Nazis' pernicious view of man as an isolated, alienated, and collectivized individual.

¹² Delp., 149–306.

Delp was a man of serious intellect, but he was not a professional philosopher or theologian; rather, he is a unique example of an intellectual who, by his very story, in word and deed, embodied the pursuit of truth and justice in the streets, churches, and prisons. Through his sermons, lectures, resistance writings, prison letters, and memoirs, Delp, who was outside the professional academic world, opens the way for a view of Christian intellectual life in concrete, everyday existence.

The Threat of the Nazi Totalitarian Worldview

So let us situate Delp in his time and the turmoil and poverty of post-war Germany and the rise of the National Socialist Party as well as the sterility and emptiness imparted by political leaders and even intellectuals. The late 1920s and the 1930s were bleak times in Europe, marked by a global economic crisis, a loss of faith in liberal democracy and liberal ideas, and a heightening dread of the clash of contesting antiliberal ideas—fascism and communism: in Delp’s Germany, over thirty percent of the workforce was unemployed in 1932.¹³ So, many disillusioned apolitical individuals saw totalitarian movements, particularly Nazism and Communism, as viable solutions to the fledgling, fragile, and unpopular democracy of the Weimar Republic and its inability to solve social-economic

¹³ Anton Kaes, ed., *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 61.

problems.¹⁴ The term “totalitarianism” denotes regimes that, unlike earlier tyrannies, seek to control populations through ideological belief and terror.¹⁵ Consequently, totalitarian regimes seek to degrade the human capacity and desire for authentic relationships by demanding not merely passive consent, but total, compulsory, fanatical participation in an ideologically driven state.

According to Hannah Arendt, people found themselves adrift and alienated in a society of weakened and disintegrating social structures—being susceptible to the phenomenon of the masses.¹⁶ They once had a place in society, but they lost their role, became disconnected from society, and atomized; they fell into despair. Consequently, these restless and fearful individuals sought answers to their suffering. Unfortunately, in their alienation and disorientation they encountered the antidemocratic, totalizing movement of Nazism, which offered not an engagement with reality but logical, scientific, neat, and totalizing systems that could explain everything, especially their “homelessness.”¹⁷ They believed that such totalizing systems could give them back their meaning. So, in the end, these atomized German individuals waited

¹⁴ Colin Storer, *A Short History of the Weimar Republic* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 63–70.

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 438.

¹⁶ Arendt., 315.

¹⁷ Arendt., 346–52.

in desperation for an ideology that would give them a new structure—which turned out to be the politicized mass, a collective remade in the ideology of Nazism.

According to Arendt, if atomized, alienated individuals constitute totalitarian mass movements, then totalitarian ideology is the system of ideas that holds these individuals together and keeps them from reality. The danger of an ideology is that a disaffected individual or a movement of disaffected individuals can come to believe dogmatically in a system of ideas. As a result, these individuals reject reality in favor of the consistency of the ideas, no matter how absurd they are.¹⁸

Like a religion, totalitarianism could appeal to a higher authority because individuals should obey the inevitable ideas of the forces of history, economics, race, or genetics.¹⁹ With this approach and dogmatic belief, totalitarians preached that they could offer individuals what no one else could ever offer—a complete and totalizing grasp of the past, present, and future.²⁰ In this dogmatic world, what mattered was not truth but consistency. As long as totalitarians can show the masses

¹⁸ Ibid., 351.

¹⁹ The intellectual origin of totalitarianism, especially Nazism and Marxist Communism, is German Idealism—a belief in historical destiny and human omnipotence. The critical German Idealist is Georg F. Hegel, who develops the idea of the *Weltgeist*—an invisible force that animates history.

²⁰ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 346.

the logic of history and appear prophetic in their interpretation of events, their hold on the masses is unbreakable.²¹

The destructive impact of World War I, for example, laid the groundwork for the rise of Nazism in Germany and helped people to accept its ideology. Defeat in 1918 left many ordinary Germans bitter and unable to accept the fact of failure. Faith in the democratic Weimar Republic was undermined by its association with defeat. Nationalists propagated the “stab-in-the-back” conspiracy. The seemingly purposeless suffering of World War I and the turmoil of the 1920s created and enabled the historical conditions for a mass belief in the Nazi ideology that could reanimate life with transcendent purpose, meaning, and consistent explanation.²²

In the 1930 elections, the Nazis became the second largest political party and thus a mass movement. In the face of social polarization and political paralysis, the Nazis presented themselves as the alternative to the Marxist-Communism threat, especially amid a dying democracy. Once in power, the Nazis pursued the policy of *Gleichschaltung*, or “coordination to consolidate control.” They purged the civil service, banned other political parties, and terrorized political opponents with increasing relentlessness.²³ In 1938, Bertolt Brecht, the

²¹ Arendt, 349.

²² Roger Griffin, *A Fascist Century*, ed. Matthew Feldman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 76.

²³ Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman, eds., *The Third Reich Sourcebook* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 47–53.

German playwright, who fled Nazi Germany, shortly after Hitler seized power, wrote, “A foreigner, returning from a trip to the Third Reich, when asked who really ruled there, answered, ‘Fear.’”²⁴

The Nazis’ quest for totalizing power was presented as a struggle to transcend previous societal divisions. As Arendt pointed out, totalitarian movements consist of “mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals” and require the “total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty of the individual member.”²⁵ The totalitarian movement of Nazism was all-encompassing, organizing these alienated and isolated individuals into and toward a common goal. However, this unity came at a high price, the price of total uniformity and loyalty—the more totalitarian the movement, the more radical the purity and loyalty required to be a member.

In Arendt’s view, what made totalitarian movements so pernicious was their ability to operate on a grand scale with sway over millions, who were united under the banner of responsibility through the cult of the leader or an ideology. All marched with the desire to change society. Yet, in this crowd of millions, a mob formed under the auspices of change, and each individual disappeared—taking his individual responsibility along with him. Suddenly, the millions vanished into the

²⁴ Bertolt Brecht, *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, ed. John Willett (London: Methuen Drama, 2009), 93.

²⁵ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 323.

abstraction of the movement. All individuals were branded as the movement, and yet none of them was the movement. Suddenly, the movement and its members were both here and nowhere. Coupled with an ideology of process and progress, these individuals could give up their particularity, flaws, and problems and become part of the force of the movement.²⁶

The appeal of disappearing into the abstraction of the crowd and becoming part of the anonymous and transcendent forces is obvious.²⁷ In exchange for the burden of responsibility, free thought, and free will, it offered: security, acceptance, power, and purpose. Living in abstraction lightened the existential burden. It allowed members to disperse their flaws and problems amongst millions while claiming all their virtues and victories for themselves: “they were monsters of conceit in their success and monsters of modesty in their failure.”²⁸

Thus, the mass of millions became an ominous force. Still, for Arendt, the individual had become only a millionth of something else, and no individual member could take responsibility for what was done in the movement’s name. Each individual enjoyed the immense power of being legion and part of the whole, but no individual could assume even a millionth of the responsibility when that power caused atrocities. Such is the peril caused by abstracting

²⁶ Arendt, 215.

²⁷ Arendt.

²⁸ Arendt.

responsibility. As the individual disappeared into abstraction, so did the movement's responsibility. When crimes were committed, when the Holocaust occurred, all the members could do was look around, shrug their shoulders, and deny personal responsibility.²⁹

Toward the end of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt links ideology and terror to the phenomenon of loneliness. Arendt argues that the experience of loneliness itself helped to create and sustain the conditions of totalitarianism:

What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our century.³⁰

For Arendt, loneliness radically cuts a person off from human connection, including himself. She defines loneliness as a wilderness wherein a person feels abandoned by all worldliness and human companionship, even when surrounded by others. The word she uses for loneliness in her native tongue was *Verlassenheit* – a state of being deserted or abandoned.³¹ Loneliness, she argues, is a desperate and unbearable experience for man because in loneliness, he “loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and

²⁹ Arendt.

³⁰ Arendt., 478.

³¹ Arendt., 476.

that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all.”³² Moreover, when a person experiences loneliness, he loses the ability to find hope and common ground with others. Now I would like to deepen our understanding of the Nazis’ reductive view of the human person by exploring Delp’s critical study of Martin Heidegger, who was sympathetic to the Nazi project and proposed a view of man, according to Delp, as ultimately a solitary being attempting to overcome the fears of loneliness and death.

Alfred Delp on Martin Heidegger’s Being and Time: Tragic Existence

In 1928, Delp pronounced his perpetual vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and entered philosophy studies in Berchmanskolleg near Munich from 1928–1931. The Jesuit philosophy faculty was in transition between two worlds—neo-scholasticism and modern philosophy as embodied by Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger. Delp threw himself into an evaluative study of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Delp demonstrated a desire to argue with Heidegger’s ideas, and the fruits of his intellectual labor led Delp to publish *Tragic Existence*, which criticized Heidegger’s philosophy as a reductive understanding of existence.

If we interpret twentieth-century thought as an ongoing dialogue between advocates of different philosophical or

³² Arendt., 477.

theoretical views, then we must consider that Heidegger shaped a generation of scholars, including Catholic philosophers and theologians. In his critical study, Delp argues that Heidegger presents a nihilistic view of man, because man is not defined by his relationships with the world and God, but as an individual defined by his confrontation with anxiety and death. This project was the first critical study of Heidegger's philosophy from the Catholic intellectual world.³³

Delp described Heidegger's philosophy as centered on the situation (*Befindlichkeit*) of the contemporary person, consumed by the anxiety (*Angst*) about the meaning of existence. Delp believed that anxiety, for Heidegger, ultimately brings existence to its completeness. Delp read Heidegger's grasp of anxiety as existence "being thrown" into the dark abyss—nothingness—from which it came.³⁴ Man must decide his fate in the face of this nothingness. In Delp's view, people in this philosophical system "have nowhere to look beyond" themselves. He writes, "Behind [them] lies the nothingness of [their] origin. Before [them] lies [their] future," which consists of decay, collapse, and extinction in death. *Dasein* is

³³ This section is an advancement of a previous discussion on Delp's intellectual grappling with Heidegger. See Peter Nguyen, *Against the Titans: Theology and the Martyrdom of Alfred Delp* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020), 24–26.

³⁴ Delp, *Alfred Delp: Gesammelte Schriften 2: Philosophische Schriften*, 93.

finite because its future is finite.”³⁵ Consequently, existence is “hollowed-out,” devoid of “depth and substance.”³⁶

For Delp, Heidegger’s philosophy left the question of one’s existence unanswered. Existence was narrowed or reduced to finitude, directed only downward into a nothingness.³⁷ Nonetheless, according to Delp, Heidegger tried to present a positive view on existence despite anxiety and finitude. “Dasein” has the “desire” to “try to master existence,” even if existence is a “Being-towards-destruction, then let it at least be a proud destruction, out of clear knowledge and firm will.”³⁸

As a result, Delp judges Heidegger’s philosophy as nihilistic. Delp writes, “*Dasein* usurps the immanent law of decay intrinsic to its nature. It becomes its own arbitrary lawgiver. Its existence has a purpose that goes beyond the being-to-death: the mastering of its existence. It gave this purpose to itself.”³⁹ So Delp charged Heidegger with bringing this philosophy to the hearts of impressionable young men and women, encouraging them to find the strength and determination to master and overcome their existence’s pointlessness. This approach corrupts people, who “must live

³⁵ Delp., 95.

³⁶ Delp.

³⁷ Delp., 97.

³⁸ Delp, 110.

³⁹ Delp.

and die without dignity amid a chaotic and desperate time.”⁴⁰ Heidegger’s will to live was without reason, substance, or purpose. Heidegger did not adequately resolve the question of the meaning of existence.

In Delp’s analysis, Heidegger posits a worldview in which life is something to be suffered; a lonely world emerges. Delp wrote of Heidegger’s philosophy:

This being-in-the-world is dominated by a lasting great inner pessimism, the highest achievement of which is not able to do more than to say yes to the fall into nothingness. This tragic, burdensome world of anxiety is a lonely one. The only community of existence is the man of everyday decay.⁴¹

All that remained was a distressing anxiety. Delp concluded that Heidegger’s philosophy is a “counter-theology.” The creature would try to replace God, and the meaning of existence would be sought only in itself. He writes, “The creature supersedes God. The creature finds itself with itself and is completed thereby with itself.”⁴² As a result, life has been reduced to a solipsism or monism, tempting man to be like God and causing a breakdown of the real difference between the Creator and the creature.

⁴⁰ Delp.

⁴¹ Delp., 119.

⁴² Delp., 127.

Delp points out that earlier philosophies sought to explore the human being in relation to the Divine and the rest of humanity, but Heidegger's philosophy reduces the human to an isolated being. The spread of such a philosophy only increases the atomization of society—we are becoming “accustomed to the fact that we live in a world of divorce... The sign of our time is that people will separate themselves from one another.”⁴³ The relationship between such a myopic philosophy, a broken culture, and the dawning of political radicalism “will give rise to persons who preach deceptively about humanity's finitude but seek everything and, therefore, become less.”⁴⁴

For Delp, Heidegger's philosophy spoke of the “thrownness” of the world but did not seek a reason to look for a “thrower.” Instead, what brought people liberation was the recognition of the inherent “guilt, decay, arbitrariness, loneliness, and anxiety” in life and the decision to live as if there were nothing beyond life.⁴⁵ In a world without a divine foundation, the person “who conquers pain and fear will become a god himself.”⁴⁶

Delp calls to this seductive but reductive view of existence as a “titanic finitism,” wherein the human person's freedom

⁴³ Delp.

⁴⁴ Delp.

⁴⁵ Delp., 143.

⁴⁶ Delp., 131.

decides everything. In Delp's view, the contemporary "person is frightened and at the same time goaded into revolt. As a result, the person stretches himself, takes hold of his finiteness, and begins to adopt the attributes of the Divine. He makes himself into a god."⁴⁷ Sadly and deceptively, modern man sees himself as an autonomous being, answerable to no one but himself.

The pessimistic individual existence meant that people would be unable to find meaning in their relationship with others, especially with God, who is the ground and goal of existence. From a Christian view, Delp asserts that "the tragedy" of Heidegger's philosophy and our time was that "one does not encounter humanity because one does not find God, and one does not find God because one has no humanity."⁴⁸

For Delp, the key to living honestly was to encounter the center that transcends finitude and connects all life. If people could find and return to this center, who is God, they could overcome the crisis of their time. Moreover, this center grounded and related all things, enabling people to find a new depth of meaning in all things, including misfortunes, hardship, and even death. Alone, humanity "lacks the power to unite opposites, bind them into a higher unity, and create a creative synthesis."⁴⁹ For Delp, a relationship with God

⁴⁷ Delp.

⁴⁸ Delp., 143.

⁴⁹ Delp., 145.

offered the security and assurance that life was not condemned to creaturely freedom in the face of a cold, arbitrary existence. He wrote, “Where existence is liberated from a tragic worldview, then whoever loses his [or her] life, will find it again overflowing.”⁵⁰

The immediate response to Delp’s first academic work was modest in the face of a growing totalitarian state and impending war.⁵¹ Heidegger, who at the time was a member of the Nazi Party and the rector of Freiburg University, did not respond. The war and the execution of Delp interrupted the discussion of the first engagement of Heidegger’s philosophy from the Catholic side. Although his work on Heidegger was considered a young scholar’s early grasp of a formidable system, Delp’s grappling with Heidegger’s thought was significant insofar as it represented a crucial stage in his intellectual development.

Delp’s interpretation of Heidegger points to his fear of the connection between totalitarianism and loneliness—a relationship to which Arendt references at the end of *Origins*. As discussed, totalitarian states isolate people, deprive them of human companionship, and make responsible action in the world difficult. Consequently, the person becomes anxious and falls prey to extremism. As the years passed from the

⁵⁰ Delp., 147.

⁵¹ Roman Bleistein, *Alfred Delp: Geschichte eines Zeugen* (Frankfurt am Main: Knecht, 1989), 59.

onset of totalitarianism in the 1930s, when he was writing on Heidegger, to total war in the 1940s, the German Jesuit realized that the cataclysmic events had diminished the inner strength of his and his fellow Christians.

Delp's engagement with Heidegger's philosophy did not end with the publication of *Tragic Existence*, but continued to deepen and surface in his writings, lectures, and sermons. For example, on April 4, 1943, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, Delp gave a homily acknowledging the anxiety and loneliness that permeated people's lives, suppressing their trust in themselves and others and their freedom to act. While it is natural to be afraid during wartime, Delp said, people, including his fellow Christians, are allowing the fear of the "mercilessness of the time" to turn them into insensitive people. Toward the end of the homily's first paragraph, he asserts, "Feeling anxious is one of our deepest wounds. An immense consolation we need today entails God healing our anxiety. So, this is our question: 'Is the Lord God more powerful than our anxiety, or are we hanging helplessly between heaven and earth?'"⁵² For Delp, anxiety has become the disposition and the disease of contemporary interior life.

Such anxiety stemmed from the pervasive ideology and terror of National Socialism, which had penetrated all aspects of life, including the private sphere. Here Delp relates the phenomenon of anxiety to that of loneliness. He writes,

⁵² Delp, *Alfred Delp: Gesammelte Schriften 3: Predigten und Ansprachen*, 188.

Fear makes life a lie. Look at the masks behind which the fearful life hides. Look at the mask of a busied person who cannot bear lonely minutes, the lonely hours anymore... Alternatively, look at the mask of brotherhood or community, which is often a mask because it signifies a flight into the collective. Another mask, behind which fear hides, is that of the rigorist, who... does not trust himself or others to live bold lives and wants to spoon feed or be spoon fed... Within and without, this finely woven net is cast because we are afraid of a human who is brave enough to live on his own terms and face things from his own perspective.⁵³

This passage of Delp's homily echoes or anticipates Arendt's diagnosis of terror and fear in a totalitarian society. As has been said, the ubiquitous terror of totalitarianism destroys the ability to move, act, and think while it turns each individual, in his lonely isolation, against all others and against himself. Experience, thought, and action are impossible. The lonely man may be in the company of others, but he cannot relate to them.

A return to Arendt is helpful here. She writes, "What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one's own self, which can be realized in solitude but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals."⁵⁴ For Arendt, loneliness is not the absence of people but the absence

⁵³ Delp., 191–92.

⁵⁴ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 477.

of self-identity, which is attained through companionship and community.

Knowing that his fellow Christians have become victims of a fear that “disempowers the inner life,” Delp nevertheless encouraged them to recover and embrace their identity. He notes that Christians have become “silent” and “taken flight” from the world: “We are afraid to be who we are.”⁵⁵ As a result, Christian existence in Germany has been reduced to a “lie” and a “petty yearning for a little worldly security.”⁵⁶ Despite the sober critique, Delp, as a pastor of souls, wants to give men and women genuine consolation. Such joy means living out one’s Christian calling, not hiding it.

Alfred Delp and Catholic Social Teaching

For Delp, overcoming anxiety and loneliness means helping people to recover the encounter with one another and with God. In the midst of the devastation of the Second World War, his writings, especially for the Kreisau Circle, sought to restore contact between Catholic intellectual life and the reality of faith and concrete everyday life, whether ecclesial, familial, social, or political. Framed as it was within the paradigm of totalitarianism and total war, recovery for Delp meant integrating the planning of a post-Nazi German society grounded in Catholic Social Thought

⁵⁵ Delp, *Alfred Delp: Gesammelte Schriften 3: Predigten und Ansprachen*, 191.

⁵⁶ Delp., 192.

to arrest the dynamics of dechristianization, which include anxiety, loneliness, and alienation.

In 1929, at the beginning of the Great Depression, Delp had immersed himself in the study of the Church's social teachings, particularly the social encyclicals *RN* and *QA*.⁵⁷ In these two encyclicals, the Church, generally sought to present an integral vision of the human person, which had been fragmented by the upheavals of the times, such as the Industrial Revolution and capitalism. The disintegration of modern anthropology was also due to radical movements, such as Communism and Nazism. These post-Hegelian, totalitarian movements imposed the concepts of an ideal and uniform society. Therefore, the Church saw threats from fascist and communist states because they tried to reduce social life entirely to economic or racial dimensions.

When the provincial of the German Jesuits missioned Delp in late 1941 to be a member of the anti-Nazi resistance group, the Kreisau Circle, Delp committed himself to building a postwar democratic society based on *RN* and *QA*. His writings for the Circle, written for three meetings (May 1942, October

⁵⁷ The world was in the grip of the Great Depression when Pius XI issued *QA*, updating and celebrating the fortieth anniversary of *RN*. After World War I, class struggle became more bitter, and totalitarian regimes were rising in Europe. Pius wanted to restore societal harmony, insistent on the need for structural change. In the encyclical, he introduced the concepts of "social justice" and "subsidiarity." Recognizing the threats of unbridled capitalism and communism, he advocates a just distribution of goods as a necessary means of protecting the social fabric.

1942, and June 1943), show sensitivity to people's economic and spiritual poverties: their fear, insecurity, and alienation in fascist Germany.

In his essay, *The Restoration*, written for the third Kreisau Circle meeting in 1943, Delp stated that Christians and people of goodwill should “promote social justice, cultivate a genuine spirit of community (solidarity), through Christian love and fraternity.”⁵⁸ Drawing on the two encyclicals, Delp set forth norms and principles that could be applied to the complexities of social life caught between the tensions of liberal individualism and collective totalitarianism—the common ground between Nazism and Communism. He writes,

Above all, it is necessary to cultivate the proper community spirit to eradicate class hatred, balance conflicting interests, and thus eliminate the root of class and race struggles. Therefore, everything must be promoted that serves the community, aiming, emphasizing, and supporting the common good—so often mentioned as a goal.⁵⁹

In Delp's view, “the family needs to be related to neighborhood, the community to the village and city, and the individual to the entire people.”⁶⁰ Here, Delp's 1943 remarks foreshadow Arendt's 1958 reflections

⁵⁸ Delp, *Alfred Delp: Gesammelte Schriften 4: Aus dem Gefängnis*, 394–95.

⁵⁹ Delp., 393.

⁶⁰ Delp.

on loneliness. Totalitarian governments aim to destroy natural relationships and associations, so that the only relationship an individual can have is with the state. The individual becomes a mass man.

Nonetheless, the struggle for social justice and the common good, for Delp, must be balanced with the defense of human dignity. He begins his essay by writing,

The frightening aspect of this time of war is that not only have the relations of peoples among themselves been thrown into confusion, but chaos has seized the inner disposition of the individual and, to a greater extent, the specific communities of peoples.⁶¹

Again, Delp anticipates Arendt's insight that an individual needs a healthy relationship with oneself and others. A person must be comfortable with solitude because, in solitude, one can keep oneself company, one can have a conversation with oneself. In solitude, one does not lose contact with the world because the world of experience is ever-present in our thinking—one interior life. To quote Arendt, quoting Cato: "Never is a man more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself."⁶² Such is what totalitarian ideologies and movements destroy—the ability to think with and for oneself.

⁶¹ Delp., 394.

⁶² Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 476.

Moreover, for Delp, since every human being has an interior life, the person is the originator, the bearer, and the goal of social life. Such is Delp's response to the totalitarian perversion of the common good, where society's needs come at the expense of the individual person. It is his retort to the Nazis' inability to see the God-given dignity of the person. For Delp, the human person is a social being, and reciprocally, society is a personal community.

In response to the Nazis' terror tactics and utilitarian use of justice, Delp asserts that persons are relational beings with the "indispensable claim to a concrete sphere of rights which is immune from any arbitrary encroachment of foreign power." Also, the state's "legal order must assist the individual in knowing his clearly defined right, defend it, and, if necessary, secure it judicially."⁶³

Moreover, Delp insists that the authority of the state comes to civic leaders through the people and directly from God, and that its aim is to defend human dignity and promote the common good. When the state forgets the source of rights, it falls "into a destructive positivistic and utilitarian legalism that perniciously proclaims the law is what benefits the state."⁶⁴ Consequently, the person becomes a cog in the machine, an instrument to be discarded when deemed useless.

⁶³ Delp, *Alfred Delp: Gesammelte Schriften 4: Aus dem Gefängnis*, 390.

⁶⁴ Delp., 383.

The language of rights used by Delp in his first essay derives from and advances *RN* and *QA*. Delp's defense of persons anticipates the post-World War II Catholic Church and certain secular organizations' attempts to find a third way between classical liberalism with its invisible hand metaphor and totalitarianism's brutal suppression of human dignity. In Catholic teaching, the language of rights communicates a relational theme, because man's nature is to be social and to live among his fellow creatures.

Moreover, from a Catholic view, human rights ultimately derive from a person's relationship with God, not the state. Delp, in *The Restoration*, writes,

From this immutable divine order of law arise the inalienable human rights, which are given with the God-created nature of man and are therefore independent of every state and political order, and the curtailment and violation of which have the most pernicious consequences for the life of the individual person and the community. This includes, above all, freedom of the spirit, conscience, and faith.⁶⁵

Thus, the relational nature of the human person does not mean that the state swallows up the person. In his paper, in light of the pervasive and oppressive terror ideology of Nazism, Delp emphasizes that there is an "indispensable claim of a person to a concrete sphere of rights which is immune from

⁶⁵ Delp., 389.

any arbitrary encroachment of foreign power, including the state.”⁶⁶ It is also the task of the state to “safeguard the basic rights of the human person.”

According to Delp, the state’s respect for the individual person is not an anti-social stance. Instead, he asserts that the state has a responsibility to maintain and promote the common good:

The state must preserve, protect, and assist the creative development of the common good, i.e., the state is neither an end in itself nor a means for another entity (people, race, “collective”), which would be an end in itself, but its task is the protection of the development of social life.⁶⁷

The principles of a healthy society are that man has rights that the state cannot take away from him and that man is the end of any social organization—as opposed to the destruction of man in a totalitarian state.

In the *Restoration*, Delp was also concerned with the right to form associations and the family. Delp, drawing on *QA*, believed that supporting the family was in the interest of society, but he refuted the reductive, profane, and Nazi view of the family as a unit that merely produced offspring for the state:

⁶⁶ Delp., 390.

⁶⁷ Delp., 391.

The ruin of the family in our time, apart from the personal lack of inhibition and the lack of understanding of the family idea in wide circles, especially in the working class, is the purely biological approach to marriage and the family, as the state often promotes it.⁶⁸

Such a materialistic approach, as Delp argues, “is incapable of seeing the personal dignity and spiritual values of the family.”⁶⁹ Consequently, it would lack the mark of self-sacrificial love. Like Pius XI, Delp advocates a family wage to allow one parent to work and the other to raise their children. He argues that the state should “ensure the economic security and privileged position of the family in every possible way, which include family wages, tax benefits, legal privileges for the father of the family, and educational subsidies for public and private social institutions.”⁷⁰ In this way, the state would not only provide a safety net to protect families in times of crisis, but it would strengthen one of the building blocks of a healthy civil society.

Delp’s vision of a postwar German state has a legal structure that recognizes the distinction between state and society and can adjudicate between competing exercises of freedom by individuals and by groups of persons. It cannot

⁶⁸ Delp., 392.

⁶⁹ Delp.

⁷⁰ Delp.

favor “a race, class, or political party.”⁷¹ This state would maintain an independent civil and legislative service, and people would have the right to associate freely with different associations and political parties. He writes,

The principle of “subsidiarity” must not be disregarded. There must remain a space free of the state in which the individual’s independent, joyful self-reliance and daring enterprise can develop, even if it remains the state’s task to watch over the necessary cooperation of the free forces for the common good.⁷²

With an independent civil and legislative service, this state would uphold people’s right to associate freely with different associations and political parties.

Regarding workers’ conditions, Delp, echoing the principles of *RN* and *QA*, insists that the development of the common good includes the protection of workers’ dignity. Delp lists potential laws that would empower the working class and promote a more just and equitable society.⁷³ Legislation should help people from all walks of life “acquire property” and start businesses; this includes establishing proper wages to help people gain property ownership. Not surprisingly, Delp supports legislation to establish a “family wage” and access to “healthcare.” In addition, employers should provide

⁷¹ Delp., 391.

⁷² Delp.

⁷³ Delp., 393.

workers with “reasonable working hours,” safe “working conditions,” and “vacation time.”

Against the background of industrialization, Delp insists that the state should provide “training” and “mentoring” programs available for workers to help them adapt to the changing economy. Moreover, the state must give workers the “right to strike” and establish “courts” specifically to “mediate labor issues.” Delp rejects a “forced egalitarianism” along the lines of a collectivist state. Instead, he insists that the “principle of achievement must be recognized.” A just society does not exploit its workers but rewards them. According to Delp, instead of “expropriation of the expropriators, the goal must be the deproletarianization of the proletariat.”⁷⁴

Overall, Delp’s “*Restoration*” presents a vision for a post-Nazi German society that is essentially a liberal democratic state that protects the rights of people but also advocates for the restoration of faith in God.⁷⁵ He opens the paper with a sober recognition of people’s plight under the tyranny of Nazism. He asserts that “within people, hatred smolders” due to an “ideological worldview.” Consequently, “people torn by the strife are incapable of receiving and creating peace.” From this perspective, it is undeniable that the way out of the “fruitless attitudes, teachings, and applications” of Nazism and the “renewal of life” involves the restoration of

⁷⁴ Delp.

⁷⁵ Delp., 388.

humanity's awareness of God's sovereignty. The rejection of this sovereignty "has shaken and marred the interiority" of human existence. In Delp's vision, people in postwar Germany must not just recover genuine relationships with one other, but also their relationship with God.⁷⁶

Delp's work to help people regain genuine relationships with one another and with themselves was not relegated to the Kreisau Circle. As a rector of St. Georg's parish, Delp gave talks to Catholics in Germany. Most notably, in "Trust in the Church," a talk given at a Catholic men's conference in Fulda, Germany, in the fall of 1941, Delp lamented the failure of the Catholic hierarchy to help people trust each other and the Church, leading to a crisis of faith.⁷⁷

The "economy of salvation," Delp insists, is "founded on trust," which concerns a person's relationship to a transcendent "objective reality, which brings personal fulfillment and security."⁷⁸ The words and deeds of Christ are received and embraced by a receptive person. "Trust is the topsoil for a

⁷⁶ The work of Delp and his fellow companions in the Kreisau Circle, along with other resistance groups, helped to contribute to post-war Germany's rise. See Thomas C. Kohler, "Rebuilding Democracy: The Christian Basis for Post-War German Success," *First Things*, November 2014, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/11/rebuilding-democracy>.

⁷⁷ For a fuller treatment of Delp's "Trust in the Church" see Nguyen, *Against the Titans*, 154–58.

⁷⁸ Alfred Delp, *Alfred Delp: Gesammelte Schriften I: Geistliche Schriften*, ed. Roman Bleistein (Frankfurt am Main: J. Knecht, 1982), 263.

virtuous life,”⁷⁹ and the lack of public testimony by Church hierarchy amid the Nazi reign of terror has accelerated the erosion of the Christian life in Germany. Moreover, the lack of Christian witness harms not only the believer, but also the contemporary person, who is abandoned to cope with a history perceived as “incomprehensible, violent and predatory,” which negates and destroys all authentic relationships.⁸⁰

Tragically, the person in a totalitarian society is closed in on himself; he locks himself in a cage from which there seems to be little or no exit. His world is made small, closed off to any real relationship. Such a perspective leads to a “resounding ruthlessness,” wherein human actions arise from the depths of irrationality and despair.

For Delp, the Church’s task is not to preserve its institutions but to enable these “resigned” people to regain confidence in their world and to see reality as God-centered. Anticipating the insight of Arendt, Delp exhorts the Church leaders to help people to recover confidence in themselves, others, and reality through their witness; silent neutrality is not an option under a totalitarian regime.

Because a totalitarian regime can dull the conscience and cause people to lose sight of the eternal truth or to ignore atrocities and violence, the formation of a God-informed conscience through Christian witness can lead to the re-humanization of

⁷⁹ Delp., 264.

⁸⁰ Delp., 265.

society. For this reason, in “Trust in the Church,” Delp rebukes the fearful silence of the clergy in the German Catholic Church amidst the war’s horrors and tragedies:

We [priests and bishops] somehow lack great courage... We are so anxious and go on the run. We flee to Christian antiquity—as if we could ever expect an answer and instruction from the past. We flee to periods of the Christian past—as if we were not assigned a mission for the present age, and thus hold genuine promise for each day. These “continuous renaissances” are signs more of weaknesses than of life. The ever recurring and repeated religious and “essentially ecclesiastical concerns indicate a similar manifestation of anxiety of existence and responsibility.” Moreover, what is overlooked here—and even more critical for Christianity’s continued existence—is man’s reality.⁸¹

Because a fearful bunker mentality pervades the clerical ranks, people are alienated from themselves, each other, and the truth. The best that church leaders could offer was a liturgy—but a liturgy cut off from the concerns of the world.

Delp weaves the Church’s social justice and evangelization tasks into one mission. In universalizing the Gospel’s message of the “love of neighbor,” Delp affirms that the Church cannot ignore the plight of men and women. To do so, it risks diluting its relevance in the modern world. Moreover, the sharp division

⁸¹ Delp., 278.

between faith and justice is an inauthentic expression of the Church in the contemporary world: “Has the Church forgotten man and his fundamental rights? How will the Church save Christians if it leaves other men and women who should be Christians in the lurch? With man dies the Christian.”⁸²

The Sacred Heart and Relationship with God

According to Delp’s charges, the German ecclesiastical hierarchy, in the midst of Nazi terror and persecution, reduced the life of the Church to outward ritualistic ceremony. For the ordinary Catholic, secular life and religious life were two separate arenas. What was needed was a Christian animation of society that would help people to be public, engaged, outward-looking, and relational. Thus, in Delp’s view, the Christian animation of society, especially a society damaged by totalitarianism, must be based not only on Catholic Social Thought, but especially on a prayerful, intensely lived Christianity rooted in devotion to the Sacred Heart.⁸³

⁸² Delp., 279.

⁸³ Devotion to the Sacred Heart is a special form of worship or devotion to the 2nd Person of the Trinity that focuses attention on the physical Heart of Jesus Christ as the symbol of God’s love. Although the devotion dates back beyond the Middle Ages to the patristic theology of the wounded side of Jesus as the source of grace and the birth of the Church, the devotion that the Catholic Church teaches today is associated with the 17th-century visions of St. Margaret Mary Alcoque at the convent of the Order of the Visitation in Paray-le-Monial. Beginning in 1672, Margaret Mary began to receive apparitions of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Jesus revealed His Heart as the symbol of God’s love for mankind; her mission was to establish devotion to His Heart. Margaret Mary’s superior treated these visions with

Where totalitarianism uses terror to isolate people, deprive them of companionship, and make action in the world impossible, for Delp, prayer and solitude become the creative and paradoxical means of confronting the loneliness which result from anxiety. When Christians pray, they allow God to dwell within them, so that the Holy Spirit does the praying in and through them at the deepest level.

In October of 1936, Delp completed his theological studies in Frankfurt. He was ordained a priest at St. Michael's Church in Munich on June 24, 1937, and he returned to Frankfurt in the fall to complete his licentiate in theology, which he received in 1938. The following September, he left for Lake Starnberger, south of Munich, for his tertianship, the Jesuit's final year of formation before formal entry into the order. During this stage, called the "school of the heart," a Jesuit undertakes a thirty-day *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of

disbelief. According to one of the visions, Jesus revealed to Margaret Mary that "sinners will find in My Heart the source of an infinite ocean of mercy." St. Claude La Colombière, a Jesuit confessor to the nuns, became convinced that her experiences were genuine and adopted the teaching the visions had given her. Her revelations were made known to the community through a book written by Claude, and devotion to the Sacred Heart began to spread throughout France. The spread of the message of the Sacred Heart of Jesus came at a time when the Church was confronting Jansenism, which held a deep pessimism about human nature, a belief that most people would be damned and only a few saved, and a rigorous observance of rules that involved a severe limitation of mercy. The Sacred Heart's message of infinite mercy challenged Jansenism's image of God's wrath and limited love. The Society of Jesus practices this devotion and seeks to spread it.

Loyola for the second time in his life. He kept a journal of his experience on the retreat.⁸⁴

During this time in his life, Delp underwent a religious transformation. He recognized the importance of prayer and encountered the transforming love of God in Jesus Christ. A significant theme in his journal is his devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus: six journal entries make serious reference to this devotional practice. Delp saw his devotion not as simple piety, but as central to the Christian life because it allows Christians to encounter the person of Jesus Christ as experienced through the medium of prayer.

A poignant treatment of this devotion occurs in a journal entry dated November 1, 1938—a few days before the end of the retreat. Delp recognizes that it is, in fact, in the Heart of Jesus that he gains the ability to approach God and be drawn into Trinitarian life:

I must live intimately with my God—I and you—intimacy; and have joy in Him and meet Him with the heart. Trinitarian living and praying. From the Father in the Son through the Spirit to the Father. To stand face-to-face with Christ, the Heart of Jesus, the door to the Trinity. The Heart of Jesus is the way of sacrifice, fidelity, and passion; His Heart leads me to the Father. Only the lover can be the true man. Everything

⁸⁴ This section is an abridged refinement of a previous treatment on Delp's spirituality of the devotion to the Heart of Jesus. See Nguyen, *Against the Titans*, 181–206.

is a sham and a fraud. In the Kingdom of God, there is no self-made man. An open heart receives the thoughts of God. An open ear receives His guidance. Life either comes to grips with the great Heart or nothing else.⁸⁵

The jottings reveal a process of spiritual discovery and maturation in Delp's relationship with God, who does not allow him to be imprisoned within the perverse Nazi ideological construction of the human person. Delp's entries suggest that the process of maturation and transformation is not a solipsistic journey.

In the *Exercises*, Delp intimately encountered God, who dwelt within him. In reciprocation, the praying person expresses to God what is deepest in his heart. The prayer that expresses our desires and concerns puts into words what is inside us and invites us to listen to what we are saying. In this way, the praying person relates to himself as another; he finds consolation in knowing himself better in solitude. This is the antidote to the loneliness in which the person cannot relate to others or to himself.

We now turn to Delp's Sacred Heart prison meditations. The first two meditations are on devotion to the Heart of Jesus.⁸⁶ The main themes of Delp's meditations on this

⁸⁵ Delp, *Alfred Delp: Gesammelte Schriften 1: Geistliche Schriften*, 257.

⁸⁶ Delp's biographer, Roman Bleisten, SJ, describes these particular meditations as a rescue ("a yanking out" would be a more accurate translation) from the kitsch that has invaded the devotion. See Roman Bleisten, *Alfred Delp*, 338.

devotion are the recognition of humankind's brokenness, God's initiative to save humanity, prayer as the dialogical event wherein one encounters the saving love of God in Jesus Christ, and the encounter with Christ that re-creates the human person as a disciple.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart allows God to begin a life-saving dialogue by revealing to a broken person that he belongs to God and helping him to commit to God. The devotion, for Delp, reaches the person amid his despair:

Humankind is addressed most intensively in his own unique and personal atrophy... The God of nearness and salvation is simply the overcoming of powerlessness, cruelty, and helplessness. Let Christ, the bringer of salvation, expiation, completed deliverance, and loving sacrificial and robust intention, meet this person. Won't this person be pulled out of the massification and commodification of humanity and be shown the Word of the Lord God? Does not the law of mercilessness of this time, in all its arrogance, collapse? Moreover, does not the eternal Spring start to flow and stream again under the blessing of *fac cor meum secundum cor tuum*? It will be like it was in the beginning. *Fecit hominem secundum imaginem suam* (Gen. 1:27). This person understands the urgency and becomes an image of the Lord, or he stops being a person and dies.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Delp, *Alfred Delp: Gesammelte Schriften 4: Aus dem Gefängnis*, 246–47.

The pairing of the Latin phrases at the end of this meditation is significant. The phrase *fac cor meum secundum cor tuum*, which means “make my heart like your heart” or literally “make my heart according to your heart,” is the responsorial found at the end of the Litany to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The phrase *fecit hominem secundum imaginem suam*, taken from Genesis 1:27, means “make humanity according to your image.” The juxtaposition of the two indicates that Jesus Christ remakes or renews the human being according to His likeness.

This part of the first prison meditation reflects what it means to be interiorly transformed into a “likeness of Christ,” “a fruitful instrument of the Lord’s redemption,” or an adopted son or daughter of God. Here, Delp uses the word *image*, which has biblical significance. The term conveys an anthropological view that originates in the Genesis creation story. The opening chapter of Genesis states that God created man and woman “in His image” (1:26). The subsequent narrative relates that God “formed man [*adam*] from the dust of the ground [*adamah*] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (2:7). Thus, it can be argued that man and woman are human persons because they are made in God’s image and are in a relationship with God. In this way, in the biblical sense, an image expresses a relational dimension.

In the Christian spiritual tradition, the notion of image takes on greater significance, where the object of contemplation is

the figure of Christ. He is the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). He is “the one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus himself man” (1 Tim. 2:5). This “mediator of a new covenant” (Heb. 9:15; 12:14), being himself a man, is God’s perceptible image. The Greek word for image used in Paul’s Letter to the Colossians is εἰκών, which means a material image, a likeness, a representation, an exact image, a resemblance, or a portrait. The phrase “image of the invisible God” presents Christ as the new Adam, the head of the new creation (Col. 3:10). Adam has been created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and commissioned to rule over all the earth (Gen. 1:28), but he has disobeyed God. Jesus Christ, who is the new head of humanity, saves humanity from sin by remaking them in His image.

Far from simple piety, in an age of great anxiety and loneliness, the devotion to the Heart of Jesus communicates a sanctuary⁸⁸ from which persons can act in the world. Delp writes that the merciful love of the Heart of Jesus propels “people beyond themselves.”⁸⁹ Such empowerment entails not an escape but an engagement with men and women in challenging contexts.

Delp recognizes that the Sacred Heart devotion allows the “devout to encounter the love of God,” and God’s

⁸⁸ Delp., 249.

⁸⁹ Delp., 248.

offer of “salvation to people.”⁹⁰ The devotion establishes a “relationship” of “healing,” “re-creation,” “consecration,” “empowerment,” and “intimacy between the 2nd Person of the Trinity and the human person—me.”⁹¹ The re-creation permits Christ’s saving love to address the human person at the core of his existence; moreover, because Christ has entered into complete solidarity with sinful humanity, God takes up a concern for all aspects of our lives, including those aspects that are fearful and sinful.

Thus, Christ transforms the human person, so incapable of speech, into a dialog partner with God. Delp writes,

Between heaven and earth, there is no great chaos, no great silence or a sort of neutrality, but rather, that living relationship that goes back and forth. During the last few weeks, I have wholly and utterly lived from this truth, founded on prayer, adoration, and faith. Moreover, it should remain that way.⁹²

In this passage, Delp acknowledges that he is in a loving relationship with Christ while isolated in his prison cell and haunted by the terror of death. The defining mark of a person’s relationship with God is God’s rescue of the person, permitting God to be in a relationship with the person so that the person knows that he is not alone.

⁹⁰ Delp., 249.

⁹¹ Delp.

⁹² Delp., 250.

Thus, far from helping Delp to avoid or escape a troubled world, the devotion illuminates Delp's harrowing ordeal:

We are in the midst of world misery. We, the people, with an eternal longing in our hearts and a burning desire for an encounter, happiness, and freedom in the soul, run around as the besieged, the hunted, and the threatened. We sit in the shadows as the shackled and the imprisoned. As the alienated, the abandoned, and the defenseless, we call upon others... Here, the message of the Heart of Jesus meets us in our threatened existence.⁹³

In this passage, Delp expresses his anxiety and abandonment in Christ. A general state of fear engulfs his life. At this point in his imprisonment, he is awaiting trial and the threat of death. Nevertheless, Delp experiences God's presence with him and his companions.

For Delp, the Sacred Heart communicates a relationship with and guidance of a God who wants men and women to use their freedom properly. In Christ, they are invited to embrace a liberty that neither ignores nor avoids the fear of death, the "constriction" of the heart "incarcerated," or "the plunge into the abyss." In his second meditation on the Sacred Heart, he writes:

Everything that lives before God lives through Him and because of Him. Even if a person realizes this very late, he

⁹³ Delp., 258.

nonetheless drinks from this source. Such is not intended to be a hardening of the person, not a restriction, but freedom, and only those who are secure are capable of this.⁹⁴

For Delp, to pray through Jesus in the Sacred Heart, means to be freed from the overwhelming grip of anxiety and loneliness. He becomes a person in Jesus, no longer defined by the violence of profane external forces—*äußerem Zwang*—in particular, the Nazis.

The person needs to know that a heart is beating here which can do more than the little or the many things a human heart can do. O, a lively heart is quite powerful. It overcomes distance. It climbs over walls. It breaks through loneliness. It redeems forlornness that nobody else has the courage to address who first wants to think and then help. “Love can do everything,” says Paul (1 Cor. 13:7).⁹⁵

For Delp, the person under a totalitarian regime lacks fundamental assurance about life itself, its origins, and its telos. Moreover, since the modern person lacks God in his life, the profane external powers of the world can create chaos in his interiority and perverts his relationships with others. Totalitarianism ruins man’s relationship with himself and with others by making him skeptical and cynical, so that he can no longer rely upon his judgment. The loneliness, bred by a totalitarian state and its ideologies leads to tyrannical

⁹⁴ Delp., 260.

⁹⁵ Delp., 258.

thinking and destroys a person's ability to distinguish between fact from fiction – to make judgments. In loneliness, one is unable to dialogue with oneself because one's ability to think is impaired.

This sense of encountering Jesus in the Sacred Heart becomes a healing for Delp amid anxiety. Delp's Sacred Heart prison meditations are testaments to Divine-human friendship. Devotion to the Sacred Heart tells us that God does not save us unilaterally or generically. God does not speak arbitrarily. He comes to us as a unique person, with his voice, words, and deeds, to which we must respond with ourselves. God gives us the grace within us for that same response. He comes with an offer of friendship and invites us to reciprocate. Despite our weakness, smallness, and unworthiness, God seeks us as His own and offers us his love so that we may escape from the corruption of a broken world and become partakers in His divine nature and co-laborers in His mission to redeem the world.

Overall, Delp's writings on the Sacred Heart provide a concept of being a Christian in the world. They provide a model for integrating the spiritual and the temporal in the midst of the challenges of a devastated country and when one seems powerless and captive to hostile forces. Importantly, the writings tell us that the source of his witness comes from his devotion to Christ.

Conclusion

Delp was an intellectual in the best sense of the word: as a Jesuit, he was devoted to finding God in all things, and he showed it from his early work in philosophy. He did not limit himself to what was in the books and on the exams, but evaluated a trendy philosopher like Heidegger in terms of his faith and stood up to him. As his historical-social context deteriorated with the rise of the Third Reich, he tried to form Catholics to do more than just survive. For his “resistance” in looking at how to rebuild Germany—and, by extension, much of Western Europe—after the war, he suffered greatly in prison, not only physically but also in his innermost soul. At the center of his spirituality was a surrender to God in the image of the Sacred Heart.

Delp testified to the relational nature of the human person in his desire to build a new Germany based on Catholic Social Thought. He believed the institutional Church should have no limits in its concern for people. He encouraged his fellow clergy to engage and participate in the animation of a society shattered by terror. Nevertheless, Delp suffered from anxiety and loneliness and found a way to live with them, terrible as they were. The source of Delp’s strength was his relationship with Jesus Christ as experienced through devotion to the Sacred Heart. Through this devotion, Delp came to know and love God, and especially to allow God to love him at the lowest points of his life.

Ultimately, in Delp's martyrdom, the laying down of his life is a response to Christ's love in the midst of the pervasive terror of totalitarian Germany. In Delp's act of self-giving, Christ manifests anew his victory over sin and death, as well as over fear and loneliness. For Delp, martyrdom is an *imitatio Christi*, but it would be a mistake to see this imitation as some static role-playing on Delp's part, especially if one does not hold that there can be dialogue or encounter between God and the human person. Instead, in Delp's reflections, "imitation" refers to the desire to be in a relationship with Christ and to serve Christ—to help restore authentic relations for men and women.

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