

When Bonhoeffer Went Urgently Home

Part Four of a discussion of red, white, blue and beyond

By GABE HUCK

In the 1950s and even more so in the next decade, the writings of a German Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were being translated and published in English. Bonhoeffer had been imprisoned in Germany in 1943. He was executed by hanging in 1945 shortly before the German surrender ended the war in Europe. He was 39 years old.

Bonhoeffer could have avoided arrest and execution quite easily and without shame. By the time war began, he had already studied and taught outside Germany. Against the urging of friends, he returned and was active in the Confessing Church. The communities of the Confessing Church had been formed by Lutherans who deplored the failure of their established church institutions to resist the Nazi agenda.

Bonhoeffer's work continues to be read, pondered and discussed, especially *The Cost of Discipleship*, *Life Together* and *Prisoner for God* (later re-titled *Letters and Papers from Prison*). For many Americans and among them very many Catholics, Bonhoeffer's writing became relevant during the civil rights movement and the U.S. war in Vietnam. I have come back to his words many times since. Recently, a young couple here in Harrisonburg had a copy of Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* on their table as they pondered how to build intentional communities today.

A 2003 film, *Bonhoeffer*, directed by Martin Doblmeier, tells something of the time Bonhoeffer spent at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and how this German-speaking scholar was living in 1931 on the edge of Harlem—where there was a renaissance going on in the midst of the Depression. Bonhoeffer was taken with the prayer and song and faith he found in the African American churches. He brought the music, the words and recordings of the spirituals he had

learned in Harlem's churches, back to Germany and to the seminarians he taught there. This man raised on Bach recognized more than one sort of strength, more than one sort of beauty in the music the church could make. Much later, one of his German friends wrote of those days in the 1930s, "We hummed 'Swing low, sweet chariot' twenty years before the radio and concert halls made it familiar here."

How full of grace is this encounter of a German scholar and theologian who recognized the Gospel and the church singing its Gospel when he saw and heard it far from home. He knew that this is what made home and church.

Bonhoeffer returned to the U.S. for a short time in 1939 but quickly realized that his calling was not here, but in Germany. In Berlin that July, he wrote in his diary these lines (I warn you that these need reading two or three times, so full of insight are they):

Freedom as an institutional possession is not an essential mark of the church. It can be a gracious gift given to the church by the providence of God; but it can also be the great temptation to which the church succumbs in sacrificing its essential freedom to institutional freedom. Whether the churches of God are really free can only be decided by the actual preaching of the Word of God. Only where this word can be preached concretely, in the midst of historical reality, in judgment, command, forgiveness of sinners and liberation from all human institutions is there freedom of the church. But where thanks for institutional freedom must be rendered by the sacrifice of freedom of preaching, the church is in chains, even if it believes itself to be free. (*No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1939-1945*. Entry for July 2, 1939.)

Often it is the stranger to the society who can see it more clearly. Listen to Bonhoeffer sentence by sentence and then together. Think what question you would put to him now about the church in America. Perhaps, we are too close, too caught up, to let these questions rise up on their own. So we have Bonhoeffer. Can we take this challenge, this witness, to heart and try to understand what he experienced even then in the churches here? Has it lingered, grown? What are the signs?

Why do our parishes, our dioceses, our national offices seem so ho-hum about the immense crises we face and largely deny? What became of the Second Vatican Council and the church in the modern world? Of *Pacem in Terris* and U.S. bishops' documents on peace and economic justice in the 1980s? What became of Bishop Oscar Romero's eloquent truths spoken to murderous power? How can they be so alive in the heart of Francis and nearly DOA here in the U.S. church?

We have only to look at the fate of *Evangelii Gaudium* and "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home." It feels so when we can find truth about our responsibilities in papal thought and writing again, but at best only band-aid appeals for the homeless and the refugees in so many churches. I speak of the institution, the lumbering, slumbering institution. I do know that the church of Vatican II is in some sort of infancy in a wild variety of seekers.

While it may well be that the churches worldwide know better than to expect Gospel preaching and living to spring up in the U.S., we can't give up on ourselves. And certainly, there is no awareness at all of the Gospel if, as a church community with various institutions, we sit out these struggles about the economy, the military solutions that are no solutions, the U.S. scorn for the UN, the politics without alternatives, the climate collapse, the pain-killers that kill, the schools,



the health care, the racism of gerrymandering, the descent into mere entertainment to sustain life. So much. We need wisdom and we need to bear witness. And in this present climate, we cannot wait for long.

Can we face together on Sunday what is broken and hurtful and harmful and deadly in our time and world? Can we face it together in order to face it constantly? Can we face that which is beyond the particular hard stuff going on in our individual lives and consider that harder, wider, enormous harm and evil in which we participate both at home and across the world? I write this as the president has said he will take the U.S. out of the Paris climate agreement. Here is the nation with about four percent of the world's population but responsible for one-fourth of the carbon emissions and we are letting our president say bye-bye to the agreement that seems to many the last feeble hope for pulling back from the brink. Does our church in the U.S. argue and rage against this? How did each of us take up the outrage?

Global warming is but one challenge to the churches. How can we be doing all the everyday things of life and give thanks for so doing while we finance the bludgeoning of the peoples of the Middle East by us and our allies (e.g., Saudi, Israel, Turkey) with the weapons we sold to them day after day? Is it not absurd (but did we say so in church that Sunday) that the president can voice sorrow and anger for the babies killed by one of those bad guys and never, never for those babies killed by our own military or the various militaries we arm? What can we begin to face together about our responsibilities? Not our charity, our responsibility.

How, to take one small but specific area, are our Sunday intercessions doing? A little lifeless perhaps? A little vague? Or not? My experience from the pew is that when we do venture into praying about wars and suffering, our intercession are so often weighted in favor of Americans "in harm's way." I'm pretty sure what the person interceding does not mean by those "in harm's way." Are we, for example,



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commending to the Lord Americans in harm's way from the inadequacies of Medicare, or in harm's way from time in jails and prisons under the "new Jim Crow"? How many ways there are for vast numbers of Americans who are right here to be in harm's way? In this town, there are many refugees who have been resettled in the U.S. Why in this town? Because this town has jobs in plants where chickens and turkeys are killed and shipped to your local grocery chain. So harm's way means low-pay, long hours, dangerous tools, no insurance and certainly no unions. Well might we be praying for those in harm's way. But all of them. All of us.

Can we explore in the homily the meaning of "in harm's way"? Can we further ask that a more serious role be given to intercession? I mean to the ritual and its enactment each Sunday in a way that confronts us all with the Gospel's fairly plain notion of what we must raise up this week to God. And of how we do this in a manner that invites our attention and participation. This could well mean that there is some call/response going on, some alternation of clear statement of urgency in plain but worthy written texts.

Our practice should be clear and current and true. We don't need the "that God will" do this or that. Such clauses are not part of the church's role here. We name the situation and don't pretend to do more except, as assembly, to raise our voices in an emphatic crying out to God. The ministries involved here are: writing the texts (which means prior reading, reflecting, sweating), reading out each intercession and establishing a rhythm, and an assembly chanting the response to each intercession and saying Amen to the presider's brief prayer at the end. We aren't seeking

performance, we're seeking a way to learn who we are. Sunday after Sunday.

I don't mean that the assembly shouldn't hear of someone's ailing grandparent or child, or ignore parishioners who died during the past week, but this is the church at prayer and more it is a church within a city and a nation and a world. What shall we name?

Bonhoeffer joined other German Lutherans who could not accept a church that made its peace with the Nazi agenda. Thus, he stood with the tiny and often underground Confessing Church. He was arrested in 1943 and charged with participating in a failed plot to assassinate Hitler. His friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge, said of Bonhoeffer: "Not that he believed that everybody must act as he did, but from where he was standing, he could see no possibility of retreat into any sinless, righteous, pious refuge. The sin of respectable people reveals itself in flight from responsibility. He saw that sin falling upon him and he took his stand."

We could all well ponder that our nation (ourselves included), perhaps more clearly but with decades of rehearsal, puts us where we "respectable people" will either flee or not flee from Gospel responsibility. Bonhoeffer was often, because of — and yet despite — the depth of his learning, able to speak with great clarity. So might some of our parishioners if given the chance and charge to do so. So might you!

Our joy together at Sunday Eucharist is not superficial. It isn't escape. It may be hope. But it is eyes wide open — and that's the call — to see the whole, to see it honestly, to see what the Gospel's embrace would have us do. Where we would stand. What we would speak.

This is beyond superficial good cheer. But it is not without cheer, not without knowing we can help each other when help is needed, but taking a path that demands eyes be wide open to the world. It demands pondering and taking stands alone and in community.

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