

# 'A SYMBOL PERFECTED IN DEATH'

**Rahner's Theology and Alfred Delp  
(1907-1945)**

*Philip Endean*

*An article marking the publication of two new volumes on Delp in English: Mary Frances Coady, **With Bound Hands—A Jesuit in Nazi Germany: The Life and Selected Prison Letters of Alfred Delp**,<sup>1</sup> and Alfred Delp, **Prison Writings**, with introductions by Alan C. Mitchell and Thomas Merton.<sup>2</sup>*

KARL RAHNER'S MORE EXTENSIVE ACCOUNTS of Ignatian decision-making are notoriously abstract. 'The subject's own subjectivity' becomes the focus of the individual's awareness; the 'transcendence' that is normally just the tacit accompaniment to all our acts of knowing and willing becomes 'thematic'. The test of a good decision is whether the proposed alternative somehow fits with this 'fundamental consolation', this *Urtröstung*:

... whether these two phenomena are inwardly in harmony, and fit with each other; whether the desire for the contestable object of choice leaves untouched that pure openness to God which occurs in the supernatural experience of transcendence, indeed even supports and increases it, or whether it weakens and obscures it.<sup>3</sup>

The decision emerges from within; resources of grace within the self become active.

<sup>1</sup> Chicago: Loyola, 2003, pp. xv + 238, 0 8294 1794 X, £9.99.

<sup>2</sup> Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004, pp. xlii + 163, 1 57075 524 8, £9.99.

<sup>3</sup> 'Being Open to God as Ever Greater: On the Significance of the Aphorism "Ad majorem dei gloriam"', *TI* 7, 25-46, here 38. 'The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola', in *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, translated by W. J. O'Hara (London: Burns and Oates, 1963), 84-170, block quotation from 158. For one account of how Rahner's various statements on this topic fit together, see my *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (Oxford: OUP, 2001).

Rahner's vision rests on an attractive, generous account of grace within the self. When the Word of God is preached, it meets something within us:

... the awakening of divine experience is not in fact indoctrination with something previously not present in the human person, but rather a more explicit self-appropriation, the free acceptance of a reality of the human constitution that is always there, normally buried and repressed, but nevertheless there inevitably. Its name is grace, and God's own self is there, immediately.<sup>4</sup>

It was on this basis that Karl Rahner could ground his claims about what was essential in Christianity existing beyond the visible Church—ideas which flowed into Vatican II, with its sense of *aggiornamento*, of how there were important Christian values latent in the contemporary world just as such. There is nothing truly human which does not also affect the followers of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Exhilarating and creative though this vision may be, it has its critics. Holiness and conversion are reduced to the mere evoking of potential. There is no room for a God who can reach into our lives, confront us, transform us. So Hans Urs von Balthasar's 'main argument' against Rahner's approach to theology runs like this:

... when God sends His own living Word to His creatures, He does so, not to instruct them about the mysteries of the world, nor primarily to fulfil their deepest needs and yearnings. Rather He communicates and actively demonstrates such unheard-of things that humanity feels not satisfied but awestruck by a love which it could never have hoped to experience.<sup>6</sup>

In biblical terms, Rahner's theology might be said to reduce all Christian conversion to the paradigm of the prodigal son in his pigsty 'coming to himself' (Luke 15:17). There is no room for the Lord's call to Abram to leave one's country and kindred and move forward to a

<sup>4</sup> 'Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit', in *Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Collins, 1979), 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, n.1. For an account of the Council's significance, see the important essays collected in John W. O'Malley, *Tradition and Transition: Historical Perspectives on Vatican II* (Wilmington, De: Michael Glazier, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Current Trends in Catholic Theology and the Responsibility of the Christian', *Communio*, 5/1 (1978), 77-85, here 80.

land that will be shown him. There may be some room for Paul's account of his conversion in Galatians—God choosing 'to reveal His son to me' (Galatians 1:16)—but none for the convulsions of the narratives in Acts.

For all their differences from the likes of von Balthasar, political and liberation theologians make similar criticisms. Thus Johann Baptist Metz complained that Rahner's account of experience does not take history seriously enough:

It makes the social contradictions and conflicts, out of which historical experience achingly lives and in and through which the historical subject is constituted, disappear into the non-objectiveness of a previously known transcendental experience, in which these contradictions are already undialectically reconciled.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the point about not taking history seriously is also a point about not taking society seriously. We do not have our experiences as isolated individuals, but as participants in culture and society, shaped by a language; for its part, Catholic Christianity is precisely not about the individual soul, but rather a salvation given in and through the Church, the body of believers.

These are speculative issues, and speculative answers of various kinds have been given, both by Rahner himself and by his followers, even if the critics remain largely unsatisfied. They turn, crucially, on the claim that this 'transcendental experience' never takes place on its own, despite some of Rahner's wilder formulations. The abstract idiom indicates, not some supposedly pure 'spiritual' sphere separated from the messiness of everyday life, but rather a respect for the diversity of the Spirit's working. If I articulate my experience of God's Spirit simply through a narrative of my experience, then I am putting forward my experience as a norm for you. The abstract idiom—like the sober, elliptical expressions of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*—respects your freedom to be different, enables you to live the message in a way that perhaps I could never dream of.

**Rahner is  
abstract  
because he  
respects  
diversity**

<sup>7</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, translated by David Smith (London: Burns and Oates, 1977), 65.

This article, however, is something other than a further attempt to make that legitimate case. Instead, it will look at the prison letters of Alfred Delp, a Jesuit contemporary of both Rahner and von Balthasar. Had he lived, he too would probably have made a major contribution to Catholic intellectual life. He was no Marxist, but his writings show a critical awareness of religion's role in society and of the need for correction and purification on the structural level as well on the individual one. But his life was cut short; he was executed by the Nazis in 1945.

Implicit in von Balthasar's most extended critique of Rahner's ideas is a claim that they can never sustain a martyr.<sup>8</sup> In this context, Delp's case becomes all the more interesting, because he was a participant in the renewal of Catholic intellectual life in Germany between the wars—which in Jesuit circles included the discovery of the Ignatian sources.<sup>9</sup> There was indeed thought in the early 1940s that he might collaborate with both Rahner and von Balthasar on a large systematic theological work, though von Balthasar seems to have been sceptical about Delp's abilities.<sup>10</sup> Delp was arrested precisely because he was involved in discussions about how Germany was to be reconstituted politically and culturally once the war had ended. He is a witness, therefore, to how the spirituality sustained by that renewal appears when faced with violent political opposition.

We are fortunate to have in English now not only a reissue of Delp's more extended meditations, but also an substantial collection of the much more immediate and emotionally raw letters that he was able to write to various friends and acquaintances.<sup>11</sup> Delp's prison writings

<sup>8</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, translated by Richard Beckley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994 [1966]), notably the sarcastic little dramatic sketch at the end. For another discussion of Rahner and Alfred Delp addressing von Balthasar directly, see my 'Von Balthasar, Rahner, and the Commissar', *New Blackfriars*, 79 (1998), 26-33.

<sup>9</sup> An exchange of letters between Delp and the German intellectual Karl Thieme, reproduced in the third volume of Alfred Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Roman Bleistein, 5 volumes (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1982-1987), contains one of the first discussions of Nadal's *simul in actione contemplativus*.

<sup>10</sup> The story, which in hindsight seems quite incredible, is set out in Karl H. Neufeld, *Die Brüder Rahner: Eine Biographie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1994), 178-186. A version of the scheme for the project appeared as 'A Scheme for a Treatise of Dogmatic Theology', *TI* 1, 19-37; see also p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> A conventional review might perhaps express regret that the opportunity was not taken to publish the two together, on the basis of the much fuller Bleistein edition, and also to make a better attempt at completeness. But the nature of the texts makes any edition or translation problematic. Together, these US American volumes provide a serviceable introduction to a figure who deserves to be much better known than he is.

show us that critics—both conservative and liberationist—of Rahnerian theology and spirituality need to make their case more carefully. By no means is this vision politically impotent; by no means has it nothing to say when tested to the uttermost.

### **Alfred Delp's Life**

Alfred Delp was born in the southern German city of Mannheim in 1907.<sup>12</sup> Shortly after leaving school in 1926, he joined the Jesuits, and embarked on the long process of training. He showed particular ability in philosophy and the social sciences, and a piece he produced as a student on what were then the new ideas of Martin Heidegger was eventually worked up into a book: *Tragische Existenz* (1935), the first serious Roman Catholic reaction to Heidegger's work.<sup>13</sup> He was ordained in 1937, and in 1939 joined the staff of the German Jesuit periodical, *Stimmen der Zeit*.

In 1941, *Stimmen* was forced to cease publication; its offices and the living quarters of its editors were seized by the Gestapo. Delp at this point moved out of community, and took charge of a beautiful baroque church, St Georg's, Bogenhausen, a district of Munich. The post was also set up in such a way as to leave him free for a wide variety of other work such as lecturing and writing.

One of these freelance activities consisted in work with a group which the Gestapo were later to call the *Kreisauer Kreis* (Kreisau Circle), under the leadership of a young German count and lawyer, Helmuth James von Moltke, in 1942 and 1943.<sup>14</sup> The Gestapo's title derives from Moltke's estate at Kreisau in Silesia, now part of Poland.

What distinguished this particular group was an interest in Christian Socialism transcending confessional barriers in a way that was then unusual and prophetic. Hence its membership included clergy and union leaders. Delp's major Jesuit superior, Augustin Rösch, had been recruited in 1941; Delp himself joined later in 1942, following a request from von Moltke to Rösch (in the latter's words)

<sup>12</sup> For a biography of Delp, see Roman Bleistein, *Alfred Delp: Geschichte eines Zeugen* (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> Now available in Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften* 2, 39-147.

<sup>14</sup> The English 'James' because his mother was South African. His letters to his wife have been published in English: *Letters to Freya: 1939-1945*, edited and translated by Beate Ruhm von Oppen (London: Collins Harvill, 1991).



A sketch of Alfred Delp by his brother  
Fritz

for 'a sociologist with whom he could, above all, discuss the problem of the workers and how the world of German workers could once again become Christian'.<sup>15</sup> The group met three times in 1942 and 1943. When Delp arrived in Tegel prison in Berlin, he found that the Protestant chaplain was known to him: Harald Poelchau had himself been a member of Moltke's circle.

On 20 July 1944, Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg, a member of the General Staff, attempted to assassinate Hitler in his East Prussian retreat. The attempt failed, and the result was a wave of arrests among resistance figures. Delp was taken into custody on 28 July after the morning Mass at St Georg's.<sup>16</sup>

We know almost nothing about Delp's first months in captivity. He remained in Munich till the night of 6 August, when he was transferred to Berlin. On or around 15 August, Delp was interrogated and tortured, and he remained in a Gestapo prison until September 27, when he was transferred to the civil prison in Tegel.

This was a significant move. Whereas it was almost impossible for outsiders to establish contact with inmates in a Gestapo prison, conditions were much looser in what was still administered as a straightforward gaol for common criminals. It was only after the transfer that Delp was able to celebrate Mass, to keep the reserved

<sup>15</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 259.

<sup>16</sup> He seems to have been arrested because his name was given under interrogation by Count Peter Yorck von Wartenburg, a member of the Kreisau Circle heavily incriminated in the assassination plot. Whether Delp himself knew of Stauffenberg's intentions seems doubtful. For reasons that are unclear, Delp had indeed visited Stauffenberg on the evening of 6 June, which was of course D-Day. But the evidence suggests that he was not privy to Stauffenberg's plans. Whatever the truth (and one cannot exclude the possibility that Delp did know, maybe under the seal of confession), not even Nazi justice made that charge stick.

Eucharist in his cell, and to write extensively. The material was smuggled in and out with his laundry.

From here onwards, we can follow Delp's story through his writings. One high point came when he was enabled to take his final vows as a Jesuit. For reasons probably known only to people now dead, Delp's final vows, originally planned for 1943, had been delayed until August 1944, by which time he was in solitary confinement.<sup>17</sup> On 8 December, however, he was visited by Fr Franz von Tattenbach, and was able to pronounce his vows in Tattenbach's presence. Over the Advent and Christmas periods particularly he was able to write the strikingly moving meditations we find in the Orbis Books volume. Eventually he was tried, between 9 and 11 January 1945. In the end, any association with the Stauffenberg plot was forgotten: his crime was simply to have been a Jesuit associated with the Kreisau circle, and for that he was sentenced to death. Normally the execution would have followed almost immediately, but for some mysterious reason he was left alive another three weeks or so, even as the others condemned with him were gradually taken off to be hanged. Finally his turn came on the morning of 2 February, he was taken the short distance from Tegel to the execution prison at Plötzensee. It was both a First Friday—'always special days for me'<sup>18</sup>—and a day on which Jesuits customarily take final vows.

### ***Walking the Tightrope***

The sheer human richness of Delp's writing becomes clear in the first letter that Coady reproduces. It is written to Luise Oestreicher, the secretary at St Georg's, to whom Delp was clearly very close:

Dear L,

I'm writing you a few greetings again. I don't know if they'll get to you. Just as I don't know about anyone at all except the people handcuffed here, who are becoming fewer every day. '*Unicus et pauper sum ego*', 'I have become very alone and wretched', it says in a Psalm.<sup>19</sup> I'm so grateful for the host, which I've had here in my

<sup>17</sup> For a judicious and discreet discussion of this issue, see Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 331-332.

<sup>18</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 107. Subsequent references to the Coady volume are given by page number within the text. Where appropriate, the translation has been modified.

<sup>19</sup> Psalm 25:16 (Vulgate).

cell since October 1. It breaks the loneliness, although, shame to say, sometimes I'm so tired and devastated that I simply can't take this reality in any more.

At the moment, I need all my strength to cope with a toothache and the pain from inflammation in my sinuses. I hope it won't fester. That's always nasty for me.

I can't write much to you today; it's not a good day. Sometimes a person's whole fate crowds together in one great heap and settles itself on their heart, and one really doesn't know how long the heart can be asked to take it all.

I still haven't heard anything from you. But it's obviously very difficult now. How's it all going to go on?

I believe in God and in life. And whatever we pray for in faith will happen for us. Faith is the secret. And I don't think that God will let me choke .... Even this situation doesn't turn on more than that. God has radically taken me up on what I used to say: with Him alone one can live, and cope with one's fate. ...

I'd ask very much for a couple of Masses in St Georg's if that's possible. At any rate, I must now rely very much on the communion I share with good people. My own strength is gone. *Dios sólo basta*—'God alone suffices'. I used to say that in the past when I was very sure of myself. And look at me now. Up till now, everything I have done has been false and it has got worse and worse. But tell Tattenbach and Dold<sup>20</sup> that they should pray in the Society hard. There's nothing more they can do either. Were I worth millions, there'd be some people who'd know ways of getting right to the top, but as it is I am simply a beaten up and failed human being. The way lies along a tightrope—may it be taken in God's name .... (pp.88-89)

Delp is in touch with his conflicting feelings, and gives them powerful expression. Moving testimonies of faith intermingle with desperate desires for self-preservation—he can encourage his Jesuit brethren, for example, to activate indirect contacts with no less gruesome a figure than Himmler.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Two Jesuits in Munich.

<sup>21</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften* 4, 58.



Delp writes up his moments of growth in terms that resemble Rahner's—what is normally implicit, or what has merely been a slogan in our lives, becomes challengingly real:

Life has become so enormously vivid in these long weeks. Much that was previously just on the surface is now experienced in the third dimension. Things seem simpler, yet sharper, more angular. But most of all Almighty God has become so much more real and active. Much that previously I thought I knew and believed—I'm believing and living it now.

For example: how I used to mouth off the spiel about hope and trust. Now I know from experience that I was as stupid and silly as a child. How I have cheated my life of its strength and depth, my work of its fruitfulness, my people of blessing because I wasn't sufficiently capable of taking seriously, from the heart and honestly, God's word about the confidence that calls on Him. (p. 132)

Imprisonment and the threat of death was something that *happened* to Delp; he was constantly, dramatically dependent on outer events that he could not control. But these events carried the grace of God for him only because they interacted with the grace within himself. The potential for grace diffused over the creation, and therefore latent in every human heart, only becomes real when confronted with something from outside—something which may be quite unpredictable. Moreover, the process is not static: the self changes as a result. Delp's writings—whether or not his shortcomings were real—speak frequently of his need for repentance.

Delp will sometimes speak loftily of being the 'summit of *Dasein*', and more generally of high peaks. But what he experiences as a greater closeness to God, a greater spiritual authenticity, is also an enriched experience of the creation. A letter to Luise Oestreicher speaks of three executions that have taken place, and continues:

Inside myself, I have much to do with the Lord God: much to question, much to surrender. One point is clear and palpable in a way as it rarely has been: the world is so full of God. It's as though from every pore of things God is streaming out and confronting us. But we're often blind. We remain stuck in the good times and in the bad, and don't stay with the experiences right up to their source, where they flow out from God. (p. 92)

The enriched involvement extends to people and to the Church. To the women almoners who were providing for his needs, Delp wrote:

I make the effort and am discovering ever new sides to God: the world is full of God. Even misery is the coming of God .... You've already helped me so much. The experience that a piece of bread can be a great grace is new for me. But just the awareness that there are people nearby who care about one and have a feeling for one is so often a great comfort.

Precisely because Delp's prison letters are so intensely personal and introspective, they are redolent of his relationships. He clearly feels dependent on others' prayers at every turn. It is in this sense that Delp's experience of God is also an experience of the Church, an experience of enriched, indeed definitive, incorporation into the body of Christ. He could write prophetically about the future of the Church, of how it was simply sterile and irrelevant to carry on old interconfessional arguments about who was right and wrong at the time of the Reformation.<sup>22</sup> Rather the love for Christ which led him into resistance enabled him also to discover a kinship across barriers. One member of the Kreisau circle imprisoned with him was a Lutheran pastor, Eugen Gerstenmeier. At the turn of 1944-5, Delp wrote to Gerstenmeier thanking him for a Christmas gift, whatever that could have been:

And when we're out of here again, let's show that it meant and means more than a personal relationship. The historical burden of the separated Churches we'll still have to carry as a burden and a legacy. But this should never again bring Christ into disrepute. I have as little belief as you in idealistic mish-mashes, but the one Christ is undivided, and where undivided love for him leads us, much will turn out better for us than it did for our squabbling predecessors and contemporaries. As well as Mass, I have the Blessed Sacrament permanently in my cell, and I often talk to the Lord about you. He is consecrating us here for a new mission. (pp.135-136)

Yet, as the quotation testifies, this expansiveness was rooted in an ever deeper commitment to the central symbols of Delp's own

<sup>22</sup> Notably in the trenchant text, 'The Fate of the Churches', in *Prison Writings*, 94-99.

tradition: the Eucharists that he could celebrate at night 'with chained hands'; the gospels through which 'the figure of the Lord over and over again finds new ways to touch the soul' (p.45); the devotion to the Heart of Jesus.

### **Fixed Points**

I am suggesting that Delp's story illustrates how we should understand the abstractions of Rahner's theology. The 'experience of transcendence' occurs in and through encounter with the surprises of history. It involves conversion, transformation, and growth in solidarity. It also involves commitment and decisions—but commitment to a God whose designs remain unknown to us, who is Mystery. Rahner's critics worry that his theology is too tentative, not sufficiently committed to definite options. The truth, rather, is that the commitment is to a God who may indeed be at work in our choices, but in ways that we can never control. We may be confident *that* God remains with us in life and in death, but our conceptions of *how* this is so remain permanently provisional, permanently open to correction. The experience of martyrdom is thus an ambiguous, tentative affair, to be endured in trust rather than in confident knowledge. What you are dying for is permanently able to call you into question.

When Delp takes his vows, he rejoices that 'my life has now taken on its authentic and finally valid form'. 'The Lord God has given me a fixed point in his universe—something I have long waited for.'<sup>23</sup> The theme recurs after the trial, in language that uncannily anticipates what Rahner would write some ten years later about 'transcendence becoming thematic'.<sup>24</sup> During Delp's trial, it became clear that he was not to die for alleged complicity in the Stauffenberg plot, but simply because he had, as a Christian and a Jesuit, worked for values that the



Chained Hands—Detail from a statue of St Sebastian by Tilman Riemenschneider (?1460-1531). Delp kept this reproduction on his desk.

<sup>23</sup> In letters to his almoners omitted by Coady; see Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften* 4, 42, 73.

<sup>24</sup> It is, of course, quite possible that Rahner's ideas were circulating informally among German Jesuits in the 1940s.



*Alfred Delp sailing, 1943*

Nazi regime could not tolerate, and planned for the future of Germany after Hitler's downfall. This consoled Delp uncannily. Previously his suffering and impending execution had had *kein richtiges Thema*: it had not been *about* anything sensible, anything of which Delp was really guilty. But now the values that had sustained all his living and acting, had become thematic:

Through the way the process has run, my life has received a worthy focal point (*Thema*), something for which one can live and die. (p.169)

As God's grace touches us, it is our relationship that deepens, and hence the authenticity of our choices. As we learn to live more intensely in the reality of God, and abandon what Delp calls 'a life of halves and quarters',<sup>25</sup> our options look different. Our perspective changes; we are free to engage with reality more authentically. And this remains so, earthily so, even though God does not—in the way we might sometimes dream of—intervene to make one path plain. Delp is in fact repeatedly aware, even after his trial, of how things could still turn out either way:

<sup>25</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften* 4, 94.

Almighty God has never put me into such darkness before. But my desire is to stay firm. Either He wants the sacrifice or He wants me to trust right up to the crucial test. My desire is to try. Either he is sowing me as seed or he is preparing me to do something big. (p.193)

I'll see you again, one place or the other. (p.204)

Moreover, we ourselves never quite have the luxury of being sure we know what we are about. Immediately after the trial, Delp writes:

These last few days I have been doubtful, and wondered if I have become a victim of self-deception, if my will to live has been sublimated into religious illusions, or what it's all been about. (p.181)

For all the human immediacy of Delp's texts, we have no conclusive answer to that question. Like Eliot's Becket, he has to live with a spectre of doubt:

The last temptation is the greatest treason  
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.<sup>26</sup>

All we know—though this is a significant claim—is that such a question is worth asking. Christianity assures us that grace is distinguishable from neurosis, even if we remain tentative about any particular attempt to make the distinction. Faith gives us fixed points that enable us to endure the mystery, in whatever surprising and self-subverting way it might emerge:

Since the Blessed Sacrament has been here, the world has become much better again; and so I want to hand myself over further to God's freedom and God's goodness, and make the effort not to deny Him anything. And yet remain confident that he will bring us across the lake without us going under. (p.95)

<sup>26</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, towards the end of Act 1.

### ***Rahner and the Witness of Martyrdom***

At least in some respects, Delp and Rahner were kindred spirits. In one of his prophetic pieces, Delp had spoken of the passion and dynamism required for ministry in a post-Christian culture:

The Society must again become a source for springs of creativity. I hope very much Karl Rahner manages that for theology.<sup>27</sup>

As an old man, Rahner wrote the introduction to the first volume of Delp's collected writings when they appeared in 1982. Delp's work was theologically dated, but,

... these texts nevertheless bear testimony to what Delp lived and died for. As such testimony, they are still worth printing and reading even today. For when one reads them as such testimony, one is not just reading printed sheets of paper. And only when one reads them in this way can one really understand them and value them properly.<sup>28</sup>

Rahner himself lies buried next to the remains of Johann Schwingshackl, a Jesuit who died of pneumonia in a Nazi prison while awaiting execution. And in 1961, Rahner gave the ordination retreat for the candidates in the Jesuit community in Innsbruck.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps symbolically, we only have a fragment of the opening talk of this retreat. The text breaks off in mid-sentence:

The most important Exercises in life are mostly not made during the Exercises as such. Rather they happen where God brings us up against life's final, bitter, serious moment ....

Among those hearing that talk was Ignacio Ellacuría, who would, twenty-eight years later, be martyred in El Salvador.<sup>30</sup>

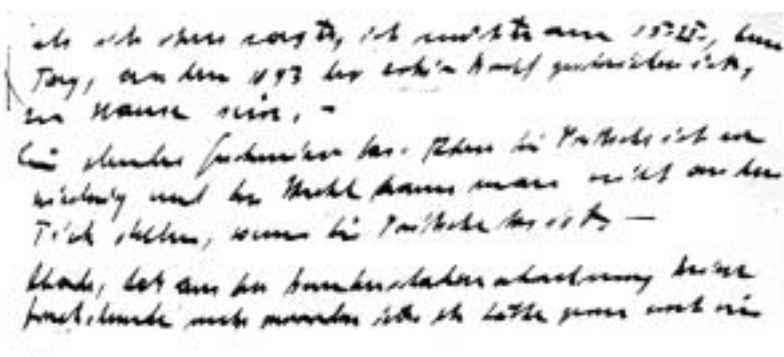
The intellectual and spiritual renewal in German Catholicism between the wars led Rahner to develop a theology leading Roman

<sup>27</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften* 4, 326. This text was still unpublished when the translation used in *Prison Writings* was made.

<sup>28</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften* 1, 44.

<sup>29</sup> Published as *Meditations on Priestly Life*, translated by Edward Quinn (London: Sheed and Ward, 1970).

<sup>30</sup> My discovery of the fragment in the Rahner Archive took place a week or so after Ellacuría's death. The theme of providence and coincidence in Delp's prison writings is a significant one, but there is no space here.



From the manuscript of one of Delp's letters, 6 January 1945, illustrating the difficulties they present for editors and translators. The middle paragraph can be translated: 'A wretched mess this is. But the plank bed is so low, and you can't put the chair up against the table when the bed's let down.'

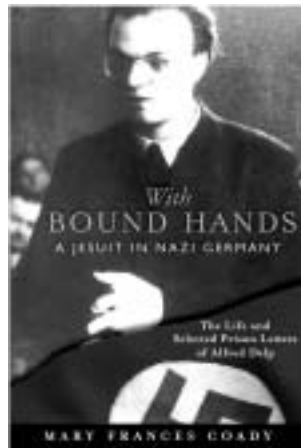
Catholics at once to a deeper grasp of their best tradition and to far-reaching institutional and cultural change. For his part, Delp shows the toughness and challenge of what was being discovered in the *ressourcement* movement. Far from representing a mere sell-out to modernity, it points us constantly forward to the subversive and surprising ways in which the grace of a God can become manifest—a God who has no favourites, and who is present in all things.

For Rahner, Christian revelation was symbolic in structure. Its function was not to 'contain' grace. Rather it purified our commitment; it pointed us forward and outward to a grace present in the whole cosmos; it liberated us for right action. When this theology is placed alongside the witness of Delp, an English-speaking reader cannot but be reminded of lines from another powerful expression of Christian faith to emerge from World War II: Eliot's 'Little Gidding': Eliot muses on those who died in an earlier conflict, the English Civil War, wondering why we somehow celebrate 'these dead men more than the dying'. It is not that we can somehow revive their struggles:

These men, and those who opposed them  
And those whom they opposed  
Accept the constitution of silence  
And are folded in a single party.

Whatever we inherit from the fortunate  
 We have taken from the defeated  
 What they had to leave us—a symbol:  
 A symbol perfected in death.  
 And all shall be well and  
 All manner of thing shall be well  
 By the purification of the motive  
 In the ground of our beseeching.

*Philip Endean SJ* is Editor of *The Way* and teaches theology in the University of Oxford.



***WITH BOUND HANDS***  
***A Jesuit in Nazi***  
***Germany***  
**Mary Frances Coady**

Alfred Delp was a proud German, a Jesuit priest, a resister of Nazism, and a martyr. Executed in 1945 for crimes against the Third Reich, Delp left a legacy in letters written from his prison cell. *With Bound Hands: A Jesuit in Nazi Germany* tells of Delp's life and his spiritual transformation in the face of imminent death.

£9.99, xv + 238 pp.

Available from *THE WAY*, Campion Hall, Oxford, OX1 1QS, UK  
[www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)