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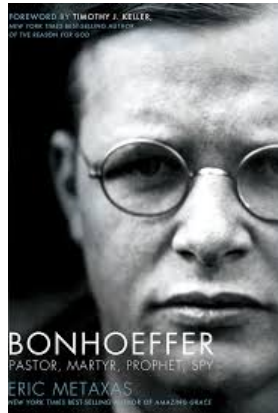


Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy

by MELANNIE SVOBODA SND on SEPTEMBER 9, 2013

I just finished reading the book *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* by Eric Metaxas. Though a *New York Times* bestseller, the book is not an easy read. First of all, it's 608 pages. Secondly it takes you into the heart of Nazi Germany where Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and theologian, took a stand against Adolf Hitler and his policies, a decision that eventually led to his death in a concentration camp.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, born February 4, 1906, was the sixth of eight children of a



prominent German family. His father Karl was a well-known neurologist and psychiatrist in Berlin. His mother Paula came from a distinguished family that included a lady-of-the-court, a military chaplain, and a renowned theologian. Dietrich was a skilled pianist, so many assumed he would become a musician. But Dietrich surprised everybody by going into theology. At a young age he became an effective pastor, preacher, writer, and seminary professor.

Before World War II broke out, Bonhoeffer traveled extensively. In England he worked for ecumenism, in Harlem he became enamored with African-American

spirituals and preaching, in India he met with Gandhi to learn more about passive resistance, in Rome he was deeply impressed with the internationality of the Catholic Church, and in Spain he served humbly as a pastor of a small parish. In June 1939 he accepted an invitation to return to the United States to teach theology, but as soon as he arrived, he regretted his decision. He became convinced that his place was back in Germany with his people. Though many of his American friends tried to convince him

About Sister Melannie Svoboda, SND

Sister of Notre Dame, teacher, student, author, speaker, listener, friend, poet, farm girl.



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Each Monday I'll post a short reflection, a simple musing on some aspect of spirituality—the everyday kind of spirituality that



includes things like walking in the park, slicing an onion for the casserole, caring for a child, studying for an exam, reading a line from scripture, laughing at a joke, or mourning a significant loss.

Along the way I welcome your questions, comments and insights too. After all, we're all in this life—this spiritual life—together!

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to stay in the U.S. for his own safety, Bonhoeffer left the country on July 27, 1939 on the last steamer to cross the Atlantic.

From the very beginning of Hitler's rise to power, Bonhoeffer had opposed him. While many in Germany and in the world were fooled by Hitler's speeches and promises, Bonhoeffer saw into the diabolical nature of Nazism. He was appalled that most of the Christian Churches in Germany were not speaking out against Hitler. After returning to Germany in 1939, he joined the resistance movement that not only smuggled Jews out of Germany, but also were planning to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer, a conscientious objector, agonized over the decision to become part of the resistance. He did so, firmly convinced of the innate evil of Nazism. He wrote: "We must not bandage the victims under the wheel of injustice, but jam the spoke of the wheel itself."

In 1938 the Nazis banned Bonhoeffer from Berlin. In 1941 he was forbidden to preach or publish anything. In the midst of all the horrors of the war, however, there was one bright spot for Bonhoeffer: he fell in love with Maria von Wedemeyer, the granddaughter of a good friend of his. They were engaged in January 1943, but three months later the Gestapo arrested him for his alleged role in smuggling Jews out of the country. The Gestapo did not yet know of his ties to the assassination conspiracy. Bonhoeffer would spend the rest of his life in several prisons and eventually in Flossenberg, a concentration camp. While imprisoned Bonhoeffer ministered to his fellow prisoners, held services, and continued to write letters, theological essays, and poetry—until even his writing was taken away.

During the war, the German resistance movement had tried twice to assassinate Hitler. The first time the bomb planted in Hitler's plane failed to detonate. The second time Hitler changed his travel plans. The third time was July 20, 1944. One of Hitler's own military leaders placed the bomb in the room where Hitler was meeting with his



Dietrich with his twin sister, Sabine, in London July 1939. Sabine who was married to Gerhard Leibholtz, a Jew, fled to England with her family in 1940. Toward the end of the war, Bonhoeffer's brother Klaus and two of his brothers-in-law were also executed by the Nazis.

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staff. The bomb went off killing several of the people in the room, but not injuring Hitler. Everyone directly associated with the plot was rounded up and executed. But it would take many months before Bonhoeffer's name became linked to the conspiracy. When Hitler learned of Bonhoeffer's ties, he angrily ordered Bonhoeffer and several others to be executed immediately. Bonhoeffer was hanged at dawn on April 9, 1945, two weeks before the U.S. forces liberated the concentration camp where he was being held. And three weeks before Hitler himself committed suicide in his underground bunker.

A few miscellaneous thoughts:

* Bonhoeffer was a man of deep, personal prayer. Daily he poured over the scriptures looking for direction for his life.

* Bonhoeffer had a great influence on Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights movement in the U.S., the anti-communist movement in Eastern Europe during the Cold War, and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

* Bonhoeffer's most famous book is *The Cost of Discipleship*. He was only 39 when he was executed. What a loss! Imagine the sermons he might have delivered, the classes he might have taught, the books he might have written.

* In one of his poems, Bonhoeffer explores the question "Who Am I?" He suggests several different answers and then concludes with: "Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!"

* The official website for him is: www.dbonhoeffer.org.

What impression does Bonhoeffer make on you?

Who are today's prophets? What are they standing up for?

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Kathleen Magiera September 9, 2013 at 4:26 am



Deaf Sr. Melannie,

What a beautiful reflection on Dietrich Bonhoeffer! He is such an example of faith in times of chaos. Bonhoeffer stood up against the flood of Hitler's regime bravely witnessing for Jesus and those who were being persecuted.

Pope Francis has become a prophet who speaks to me. In a very short time, he is consistently calling us to be stand with the poor and lowly. When Pope Francis embraced the man with significant disabilities in the crowd, it brought tears to my eyes. Pope Francis is a true inspiration for me.

Kathleen

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND September 9, 2013 at 4:33 pm



Dear Kathleen, Yes, Bonhoeffer was a great example of lived faith in a time of chaos. And I'm glad Pope Francis' simple actions can touch your heart so deeply. I appreciate your words! Melannie

REPLY

Suzanne Sayer September 9, 2013 at 10:33 am



I have not heard of Bonhoeffer until now. I definitely want to read more about him—even if the book is 608 pages! When I looked on Amazon, it also noted that the author wrote the book *Amazing Grace* about William Wilberforce and his fight against slavery—another man who stood up for the rights of others.

I agree with Kathleen that Pope Francis is an inspiration for all. His call to prayer and fasting for peace this past weekend became a world-wide cause. His words were inspiring. I pray that our leaders will listen.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND September 9, 2013 at 4:31 pm



Dear Suzanne, I hadn't realized that the author also wrote the book about Wilberforce. We need examples of REAL people living ordinary but faith-filled lives. Thank you for your addition! Melannie

REPLY

Mary Schneider September 9, 2013 at 10:38 am



Dear Sr Melannie:

What a tremendously moving article. I cried at the injustices this beautiful man suffered. I wonder if I have what it takes to stand so firmly against evil; I certainly pray I do. Thanks for educating me on Dietrich Bonhoeffer!!!!

Mary

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND September 9, 2013 at 4:28 pm



Dear Mary, Yes, Bonhoeffer suffered terribly, yet he stood firmly against evil. He attributed his strength to that daily scripture reading and prayer. He once wrote: "Death is hell and night and cold, if it is not transformed by our faith. But that is just what is so marvelous, that we can transform death." Thank you for writing, Mary! Melannie

REPLY

Chris Keil September 9, 2013 at 11:14 am



What a coincidence, just yesterday our pastor's sermon mentioned Bonhoeffer and his book "The Cost Of Discipleship". Over the past several months I have coincidentally read several books related to WW2, Germany, the holocaust and even visited the Holocaust Museum. It has given me a whole different perspective of how the lives of people are affected by war, prejudice and hatred still till this day. We are so blessed in this country to be "safe".

I realize that there were a lot of people/nations questioning why "someone" hadn't done something sooner about Hitler, yet, who would've known that it would spread to the whole continent?

And yet today, we are faced with the question of peace in the Middle East and whether or not there should be military intervention in Syria.

As long as we have humanity we will have good and evil. We need to continue to pray along with Pope Francis for a peaceful/non-military action toward Syria. I would love to read Bonhoeffer's book and I may need to wait awhile to read the book about his life.....too much at once can be very disheartening.

Thank you Sr. Melannie.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND September 9, 2013 at 4:23 pm



Dear Chris,

Thank you for your words. It is important to know history. It sheds a light on contemporary times...I too visited the Holocaust museum in D.C. and, at the end, I could only weep. I could not even speak...Yes, we must pray for the situation in Syria as Pope Francis has urged us to...Thanks again! Melannie (your "old" high school English and religion teacher)

REPLY

Regina Davala September 10, 2013 at 8:57 am



I also found this book deeply moving. One of my favorite Bonhoeffer quotes is: "The restoration of the church must surely depend on a new kind of monasticism which is a life of uncompromising discipleship, following Christ according to the Sermon on the Mount."

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND September 10, 2013 at 12:01 pm



Dear Regina, Thank you for the great quote by Bonhoeffer. Yes, he was very interested in monasticism—but not a monasticism that separated itself from the world, but a monasticism that was deeply involved with the world. Thanks for writing Regina! Melannie

REPLY

Rose September 10, 2013 at 10:08 am



Dear Sr. Melannie,

Thank you so much for the introduction to this wonderful man! His courage and conviction against such evil is inspiring and assuring. Growing up in a New York neighborhood with many, many holocaust survivors (I recall vividly the tattooed numbers on the insides of their wrists), I can so appreciate champions like Bonhoeffer. I am sure that he indirectly helped each and everyone. I hope to read this book soon.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND September 10, 2013 at 12:03 pm



Dear Rose, Growing up with actual holocaust survivors in your neighborhood certainly left an impression on you. And rightfully so! I hope you do get a chance to read the book someday. Thank you for writing! Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Matt Fisher September 14, 2013 at 12:29 pm



Interesting note - the late Br. Dietrich Reinhart OSB, monk of St. John's Abbey and president of St. John's University for 17 years, chose the name "Dietrich" when he took monastic vows in honor of Bonhoeffer.

Like Martin Luther King Jr. and Archbishop Oscar Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one of the few people from 20th century Christianity who is honored and celebrated by many different Christian denominations. What a powerful, powerful, witness!

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND September 14, 2013 at 2:46 pm



And thank you, Matt, for sharing this interesting fact that illustrates the respect many have for Dietrich Bonhoeffer! Sr. Melannie

REPLY

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