

The life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Clarity and Coherence

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For Dietrich Bonhoeffer the encounter with the Gospel in the context of 20th century totalitarian regimes oriented his life choices in favor of a world at peace. Giulia Iotti is director of the Theological Library of Reggio Emilia, and Roberto Ruini is a graduate in interfaith theology of the Pontifical Lateran University.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in Breslau, Germany in 1906 into an intellectual, upper middle class Lutheran family. He had a twin sister and six brothers. His father taught at the University of Berlin and theirs was a world frequented by intellectuals, artists and musicians¹. Dietrich chose to study theology in 1921, and ten years later was ordained a pastor in an already complex political climate. When Adolf Hitler came to power in early 1933, Bonhoeffer did not hesitate to speak out against Nazi ideology in both public radio speeches and preached sermons. *German Christians* in the Evangelical Church entrusted themselves to the Nazi regime and began distinguishing themselves from what became the *Confessing Church movement*. The Confessing Church was inspired by Karl Barth and expressed itself programmatically in six theses that affirmed Jesus Christ is the only Word of God and gift of God reigning over the whole earth. Thus, it was a refusal to become a mere cog in the wheel of the German State and rejected any form of State control over the Church. Bonhoeffer clearly supported the *Confessing Church*, even though he did not shy away from harshly criticizing it, too, when it failed to speak up in a clear manner regarding the situation of Jews².

The courage to take risks

Bonhoeffer became involved in Christian youth movements, and in 1934 held a meeting with nearly fifty representatives of different countries on the Danish island of Fanø. It took place one month after the German Minister of the Interior had declared debates on ecclesiastical issues illegal. The Germans who participated, and in particular Bonhoeffer, risked exposing themselves to serious consequences. This marked for Bonhoeffer the beginning of a progressive loss of many friends, who abandoned him out of fear³.

After a year and a half in London, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany to organize and direct one of five clandestine *Confessing Church* seminaries, in order to train future pastors in

spiritual resistance to Nazism. He spent more than two years in Finkenwalde, a town in Pomerania (Germany), where he lived a common life with the candidates in which there was an interweaving of theological study, service, prayer and life in contact with nature⁴. But on August 5, 1936, the Ministry of Religion withdrew his authorization to teach and the police closed the Finkenwalde seminary⁵.

Grace at a high price

From that experience emerged several writings rooted in the centrality of Sacred Scripture, including *The Cost of Discipleship*, that spoke "of the call to follow Jesus"⁶. The text is deeply rooted in the historical moment of Hitler's rise, in which society is aligning itself with anti-God thought. Bonhoeffer saw this as a mentality in which it almost seemed that the grace given to us through Christ's death could be obtained *cheaply* and independent of one's behavior. Such an idea, according to Bonhoeffer, is "the mortal enemy of our Church"⁷ because one tries to self-justify one's own cowardice towards the Nazi regime with its racial laws that were imposing a vision against God.

Instead, *costly grace* starts from what it cost God to save humanity through his Son's death and asks us to behave in ways consistent with what Christ wants from us. More precisely, it is certainly not our actions that make us deserving of grace, which remains absolutely freely given, but they are the indispensable consequence of recognizing ourselves as sinners, of receiving the grace that forgives, and having entered into following Christ. It is clear that Bonhoeffer's reflections are strongly contextualized⁸. They are not only a question of theological reflection, but they reflect the face of a drifting Church, and of the German people. "Costly grace is the Gospel sought ever anew, the gift for which one must pray again and again, the door that must be knocked ever anew"⁹. It was a choice that led to obedience and acceptance of the cross.

In the years afterwards, there were "repeated failures" of the Confessing Church¹⁰, until a moment of dramatic tension with *Kristallnacht* (November 1938) in which the Confessing Church was silent. Bonhoeffer then matured in his decision to join the conspiracy against Hitler. But given his visibility as a voice against the Nazi regime, friends organized a trip to the United States in order to ensure a period of academic teaching in a safe place for Dietrich. He accepted the invitation and departed but stayed only a month. The decision to return disrupted those who had worked for his departure¹¹ and showed his desire for communion with his country and his concrete commitment against an ever-expanding reality. "The political situation," he wrote, "is frightening. I must be here, with my brethren, when it becomes grave"¹².

The conspiracy against Hitler

Dietrich's return marked a turning point towards active involvement in the conspiracy against Hitler. Taking advantage of his membership in the *Abwehr*, the counter-espionage of the Wehrmacht General Staff¹³, Bonhoeffer made many trips in which he tried to establish contacts in England. But too many suspicions surfaced relative to his loyalty to

the Nazi regime. On April 5, 1943 he was arrested, imprisoned in the renowned Tegel prison, and subjected to terrible deprivation.

Dietrich managed to remain on his feet, also thanks to his relationship with Maria von Wedemeyer, which had begun in October 1942. They deepened their relationship through letters and meetings in prison. These were comforting moments for Dietrich and filled him with vital strength that shines forth through many of his letters. He wrote to Maria: "You absolutely cannot understand what it means in my current situation to have you. I am certain that I am under special divine guidance. The way in which we found one another, and the moment so close to my arrest, are clear proof of this for me"¹⁵.

Christianity in an adult, non-religious world

Despite great deprivation in prison, Bonhoeffer continued meditating on the Bible daily. Maintaining this discipline of reading and prayer had always been necessary for him in order to remain rooted in the fundamentals.

His reflections and writings of this period have been called "the theology of Tegel"¹⁶. Among the aspects developed, let us consider those found in the *Project for a Study*¹⁷. It is a preparatory text written in the summer of 1944. Bonhoeffer proposes a description of modern society as a world that has become *adult, not religious*: "Once it was the soul that conquered nature. For us it is technical organization in its many forms [...]. But what is missing is spiritual strength. [...] Jesus disappears from view. [...] Who is God? ... This is not an authentic experience of God but a protracted one of this world"¹⁸.

The encounter with the person of Jesus Christ and being there for others are an authentic experience of transcendence. For Bonhoeffer, the Church should take the New Testament as the paradigm for her action in the world¹⁹ and thus behave consistently: "Only from freedom from oneself, only from 'being-for-others' until death are omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence born. Faith is participating in the being of Jesus. [...] Thus, the Church is Church only if she exists for others"²⁰.

In the same months in which he planned to write this new work, his correspondence with Maria presents us with a Bonhoeffer who places himself in an abandonment of love towards her and a renewed awareness of his journey as a theologian with respect to his life journey. He wrote to her on April 16, 1944: "Fortunately, you don't write books, but you act, you know, you discover, you fill with real life what I have only dreamed of. Knowing, willing, doing, feeling in you are not divided. Rather they formulate a great whole, with one thing strengthened and completed by the other"²¹.

After lengthy interrogations, Bonhoeffer was transferred to Buchenwald concentration camp on February 7, 1945. On April 8th he was taken to the Flossenbug concentration camp and hanged the following day, together with other conspirators.

Grace at a high price

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy, for which a merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

Costly grace is the Gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which one must knock.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

¹ Cf. F. Rognon, *Bonhoeffer, an authentic Christian*, Qiqajon, Magnano (Biella) 2013, pp. 9-13.

² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 26-29.

³ Cf. E. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer. The life of the theologian who challenged Hitler*, Fazi, Rome 2012, p. 294.

⁴ Cf. F. Ferrario, *Bonhoeffer*, Carocci, Rome 2016, p. 34.

⁵ Cf. E. Bethge, *Leggere Bonhoeffer*, Queriniana, Brescia 2006, pp. 82-84.

⁶ D. Bonhoeffer, *Sequela*, Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer 4, Queriniana, Brescia 2001, p. 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁸ Cf. M. Kuske - I. Tödt, *Afterword of the editors*, in D. Bonhoeffer, *Sequela*, cit., p. 289.

⁹ D. Bonhoeffer, *Sequela*, cit., p. 29.

¹⁰ F. Ferrario, *Bonhoeffer*, cit., pp. 136-137.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 136-139.

¹² D. Bonhoeffer, *Selected Writings (1933-45)*, Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer 10, Queriniana, Brescia 2009, p. 356.

¹³ Cf. F. Rognon, *Bonhoeffer*, cit., p. 41.

¹⁴ Cf. E. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, cit., pp. 500-520, 534-538.

¹⁵ D. Bonhoeffer - M. von Wedemeyer, *Letters to the fiancée. Cell 92 (1943-1945)*, Queriniana, Brescia 2012, p. 48.

¹⁶ F. Ferrario, *Bonhoeffer*, cit., p. 201.

¹⁷ G. Lorizio, *Teologia fondamentale (Fundamental Theology)*, in G. Canobbio - P. Coda (edd.), *La teologia del XX secolo. A balance. I. Prospettive storiche*, Città Nuova, Rome 2003, p. 434.

¹⁸ D. Bonhoeffer, *Resistenza e resa. Letters and other writings from prison*, Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer 8, Queriniana, Brescia 2022, pp. 518-519.

¹⁹ Cf. G. Lorizio, *Fundamental Theology*, cit., p. 435.

²⁰ D. Bonhoeffer, *Resistenza e resa*, cit., pp. 519-520.

²¹ Q. Bonhoeffer - M. von Wedemeyer, *Letters to the Fiancée*, cit., p. 167.