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Biographical Preface
by Alan C. Mitchell

In 1947, a volume of selected writings of Fr. Alfred Delp, SJ, was published in Germany under the title, *Im Angesicht des Todes* ("In the Face of Death").¹ Paul Bolkovac, SJ, Delp’s friend and conferee, edited the work. It was a selection of letters and meditations, which Delp had written between August 1944 and January 1945, while he was in prison in Berlin, awaiting trial and execution. He had been charged with high treason and the betrayal of his country for participating in anti-Nazi discussions and for preaching against National Socialism. That book was so widely read that by 1981 it appeared in its 11th edition.

The first English edition of any of Delp’s writings was, in fact, a translation of Bolkovac’s book, published in 1963 by Herder and Herder, under the title *The Prison Meditations of Fr. Alfred Delp*. Thomas Merton wrote an Introduction for that volume, in which he called attention to Delp’s Christian witness in the face of a godless totalitarian regime. Some fifty-eight years after his death, Delp’s words still capture the imagination and draw attention to what is of lasting value and true in the human heart. Delp’s story is as dramatic and compelling today as it was in 1944–45. The present volume reprints the Herder edition.

Alfred Delp was born on September 15, 1907, in Mannheim, Germany, the second of six children of Johann Adam Friedrich Delp, a Lutheran, and Maria Bernauer, a Roman Catholic. His childhood was happy and uneventful, except for the fact that
The Tasks in Front of Us

THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY

God-Conscious Humanism

Every meditation on humanism is historically handicapped at the outset. There has already been a humanism—in fact there have been several. And unless the humanism of the future succeeds in cutting itself off completely from its predecessors it is hardly likely to inspire confidence. And quite rightly. But it is not easy to establish that we are dealing with true humanism and at the same time overcome, or rather transform, the versions that have gone before.

The essential requirement is that humanity must wake up to the truth about itself. We must rouse our consciousness of our own worth and dignity, of the divine and human potentialities within ourselves and at the same time we must master the undisciplined passions and forces which, in our name and by belying us with delight in our own ego, have made us what we are. This is not a disparagement of passions. Woe to the person who tries to live without any—that is the way to disintegration. Humanity must take itself as it is with all the undercurrents and the fire of its nature. But the destructive element

in passions, the element which knows neither limit nor restraint, must be brought under control or it will tear us to pieces and destroy us. Our passionate preoccupation with self must be subordinated; we must retain all the strength and fire of devoted human love but without the blindness, the irresponsibility, the lack of instinct that makes it destructive.

Humans want to be happy and it is right that they should. But by thinking only in terms of self we destroy ourselves for it is a limited concept and has no room for anything stronger than the human order. Left entirely to themselves humans are unhappy and intrinsically insincere. We need other persons to give us a sense of completeness; we need the community. We need the world and the duty of serving it. We need eternity, or rather we need the eternal, the infinite. And there we come to the new, God-conscious humanism.

The Lessons of History

In my study of history I have been constantly filled with regret that we only hear of things after they have already happened. We ought to be able to arrange matters so that we could shape our own history. That would save humankind much distress and suffering. As things are, the road through history is often a way of the cross.

Those who make history are swayed by conditions as they find them, by the dynamics of situations and by the rhythm of their own individual characters. These can affect trivial and unimportant matters and they can also affect whole states, bringing decisions as to the fate of nations down to the narrowest personal level.

Such decisions which condition the actual pattern of any given period are dictated sometimes by intuition, by mood, by fancy or by wishful thinking; sometimes too by expediency, by
necessary defense measures which force many detours and false starts on the historical subjects before they can arrive at their predestined consummation.

Every age and nation has its mission in history. And the sooner they realize this, and set about fulfilling their role the quicker they will escape from history's ruthlessness to a state of comparative peace. But the problem is always to discover the right theme for a given nation and a given period. A great many people — the majority in fact — never get beyond the stage of viewing life from the historical standpoint as a perpetual struggle for the bare necessities of existence. Life to them is a workshop for the exploitation of subjective passions or for labor in the service of the great "I." So it is important that every nation should have a few individuals capable of perceiving universal tendencies and of making them known again and again. Even Plato wished that philosophers were kings. We are in just such a situation today. My own opinion is that it offers possibilities and responsibilities for Christians. It is not a major task but it is still a function that Christians are capable of performing if they take their purpose in life seriously because they know of the supernatural influence on history.

The bitter lessons humanity has learned from experience in the past hundred years ought not to be erased by chaotic events or a way of life that has again become primitive. These things should be thought out and the results handed on to act as a guide in future trials. It is impossible for me at this moment to arrange the experiences and results in either hierarchic or logical order. I can only put down a few points that seem important to me. The tasks in front of us are:

1. An "existence minimum," consisting of sufficient living space, stable law and order and adequate nourishment, is indispensable. The "socialism of the minimum" is not the last word on the subject but the essential first word, the start. No faith,

no education, no government, no science, no art, no wisdom will help humankind if the unfailing certainty of the minimum is lacking.

2. A minimum of honesty in every field is equally necessary.

3. A minimum of personal standards and human solidarity is necessary.

4. There must be a minimum of worldwide dedication and sense of service. Any idea or ideal the age calls forth, even if it is only the shadow of absolute truth, is preferable to mass-minded thoughtlessness since it keeps alive in humankind a certain feeling for spiritual values without which we receiving apparatus for the spark of truth ceases to function.

5. A minimum of transcendence is essential — we must have something to look up to, to reach for, some kind of aspiration, if we are to be human at all.

6. In addition to these minimum essentials there must be qualities to which one's desire can be wakened, which one can feel oneself capable of attaining.

All this is the "existence minimum" that I would like to sum up in the words respect, awe, devotion, love, freedom, law — the words which, in my opinion, represent genuine fulfillment.

And in conclusion the "existence minimum" will only work if all the essentials are coordinated to work in harmony with each other. Individually this adds up to character; collectively it means the family, the community, the economy.

THE EDUCATION OF HUMANITY

To return to my familiar theme, that humanity today is profoundly Godless. This is a basic fact affecting both its judgment and its decisions. But it also goes even deeper than that for modern people are no longer capable of knowing God. The great
task in the education of the present and future generations is to restore humanity to a state of fitness for God and religion.

What actually does the present state of things amount to? It means that certain human organs have become atrophied and no longer function normally. And also that the structure and the constitution of human life today put such a strain on humanity that people are no longer able to express their true nature. This applies on the technical-sociological plane as well as on the moral plane. Hence humans have built up in their own mind a picture of themselves as a sensitive animal with mind, reason, temperament depending on circumstance.

We have to ask ourselves very seriously what has brought this state of affairs about. We cannot, for instance, lay all the blame on the last few decades. They are the harvest but the seed was sown much earlier. Reading Goethe — particularly Dichtung & Wahrheit and Wilhelm Meister — one cannot help noticing signs that modern humanity was even then well on the way. The center of gravity had already begun to slip. He indicated the different processes of development of which present-day humanity is the end-product. There is the inner development resulting from this shifting of the human center of gravity which has its own inescapable logic and consequences. And there is the external development represented by the technical, sociological, scientific and industrial world. These developments have influenced and furthered each other. Present-day humans are in the strictest sense both the product and the slave of the world in which they live. But that world has become what it is because of the breakdown of the inner standard which should have controlled our choices and safeguarded our ability to master the conditions in which we live.

And what now? Three possibilities suggest themselves. First we must preach the divine order and center our hopes on it. Secondly we must restore human order and await a general improvement as a result. And thirdly we must bring order to the chaos of human living conditions and then trust to the emergence of a new human being.

But if I preach till I am black in the face, trying with whatever skill I may possess to persuade humans to resume their proper status yet as long as human beings have to exist in inhuman and unworthy conditions the majority will succumb to them and nothing will make them either pray or think. Nothing short of a complete change of the conditions of life will have the least effect. The revolution of the twentieth century has need of an ultimate aim; it ought to be to guarantee every human being space to grow in.

But even if this happens under a democratic constitution, if things are left in the charge of present-day humans then sooner or later they will degenerate into chaos again. For present-day humanity is sick and incapable of handling its affairs — it can no longer cope with life. So a new approach is necessary, a more intensive method. Humans must be shown how to help themselves; they must be spiritually and physically strengthened in order to rise to full stature. This involves education toward self-reliance, responsibility, judgment, conscience; education that will instill good-neighborliness and eliminate the countless forms of superficial thinking and mass-mindedness; education toward transcendence, purposeful education toward perfect adulthood, education toward God. All these things are intimately connected and you cannot have one without the others. Only a person with a certain spiritual awareness, however small, is fit to accept the word of God and fulfill the divine order in his everyday life. For no order can be achieved except in accordance with God's law. The new order of the world must be based on the historical fulfillment of the order of God, otherwise it will be just another edifice on shifting sand doomed to destruction like the rest. Human regeneration must come from
within according to the pattern which defines us as being created in God's image. Otherwise history will repeat itself and we shall be faced with further madness and confusion.

But how are we to set about it? It is obvious that all these things are important and linked — but where are we to begin? What is the first requirement, the essential foundation?

There will always be a few persons who see things as a whole, aware of all the connections and implications, who can trace the truth in every outward manifestation to its roots, to that source where all things are linked by God and sustained by him. Such persons must immerse themselves in two aspects of being — in the recognition and acknowledgment of God, that is to say in religion, and in the recognition and acknowledgment of the laws that apply to human existence, that is to say in humanity itself. Actually these two requirements need not be bracketed together. The person of great holiness is not necessarily an adept in worldly affairs. But if a saint should by chance be mixed up in worldly affairs they would inevitably start moving in the right direction for the mission of the saint, to render exceptional homage to God, is by no means opposed to the ideal order of things in this world.

All the same specialization is fashionable nowadays and absolute thoroughness in both spheres is necessary. Religion in the past has often occupied itself so little with the practical problems of everyday life that it has been discredited, and worldly wisdom has so often overreached itself that it has lost confidence in its own power.

Re-education and re-inspiration of the people will help to restore religion to its proper state of prestige and for that reason both are necessary. Anything that can help to heal our spiritual ills or improve the conditions of our life should be encouraged even if it cannot solve the whole problem. Humanity must be induced to take itself seriously as being created with a divine purpose to a divine pattern. We must be taught to recognize that pattern and to understand that it is our duty to realize it (existential humanism). Then through a sense of responsibility this humanism must be nursed and broadened into a new humanism, a God-conscious humanism.

But can this be described as the education of the individual to God? Let us start with the basic necessities. First the need to bring about conditions which will no longer require an almost superhuman effort on our part to turn our attention to God. Then the need for conditions in which the human heart is healed, even as far as its desires are concerned, quickened by that holy yearning which only finds true satisfaction in God and therefore turns to God again. And most important of all, conditions which encourage a human being who is God-like, filled with divine power to address and challenge others.

In my opinion all the direct religious effort of the present time falls short as far as any permanent effects are concerned. As long as a person lies bleeding, beaten and robbed by the wayside, the person who tends and helps him will be the one who wins his heart — not the one who passes by on the other side on the way to his holy offices because the person doesn't concern him. Therefore fuller and deeper religious teaching is needed for those who already have the genuine kernel of religious knowledge in them. They must be equipped so that they can go to the rescue of the rest of humanity and cope with the task of healing them. Humanity must be educated to resume its proper human status and religion must be taught intensively by truly religious teachers. The profession has fallen into disrepute and it will have to be reestablished. For the next few years those chosen to teach should be truly religious and ready to co-operate in all efforts for the betterment of humankind and human order. They should insist authoritatively on these efforts and not be satisfied with the mediocre.
In insisting on these I feel I am condemning present-day religious endeavors as sterile because they do not help humanity in the depths of need but merely skim the surface. But it is how I see it—for instance none of the contemporary religious movements take as their starting point the position of humankind as human beings. They really concentrate on the difficulties of the religious minded person who still has religious leanings. They do not succeed in coordinating the forms of religion with a state of existence that no longer accepts its values.

Equally efforts directed toward bettering humanity’s physical or spiritual existence ought not be made in order to acquire power. For the next few centuries Europe is hardly likely to tolerate alliances between altars and any kind of throne. The effort must be brought down to the level of the outcast lying by the wayside; he is the one who must be restored to human dignity by the release of his latent virtues and all the inherent good in his nature. Our concern must be with a person’s reverence, devotion, love; only when he is using these capacities is he a human being at all. We must direct our efforts toward reawakening love. When this has been achieved humans will begin to feel at home for a while and then the restless Spirit will lead them on to further progress.

THE FATE OF THE CHURCHES

In future years the fate of the churches will not be decided by whatever their prelates and leaders can produce in the way of skill, wisdom, diplomatic talent and so on. Nor will it depend on the important positions their members attain. That kind of achievement belongs to the past. For the sake of their very existence the churches must somehow break away from their sentimentalism and outmoded liberalism. They must get back to fundamentals. Hierarchy is essential for genuine order and direction; the Church at least should know this by its own origin. But order and direction are not to be confused with formalism and feudalism. The hierarchy must make it plain not only that it is aware of the errors and foolishness of individuals but also that it is also conscious of the despair and yearning of the age, of the unrest of contemporary trends and that it can hear and answer the bewildered, frightened seekers who cannot find their way. Humanity must feel that the concerns of the modern age and the problems of the new generations are not simply filed away as records but are matters of active and urgent concern to those who have assumed the task of dealing with them.

A Church that makes demands in the name of a peremptory God no longer carries weight in a world of changing values. The new generation is separated from the clear conclusions of our traditional theology by a great mountain of boredom and disillusion thrown up by past experience. We have destroyed people’s confidence in us by the way we live. We cannot expect two thousand years of history to be unmixed blessing and recommendation—history can be a handicap too. But recently the person turning to the Church for enlightenment has all too often found only a tired man to receive him—a man who then had the dishonesty to hide his fatigue under pious words and fervent gestures. At some future date the honest historian will have some bitter things to say about the contribution made by the churches to the creation of the mass-mind, of collectivism, dictatorships and so on.

Whether the Church once again finds its own way to the heart of modern humanity depends on two things. The first is so obvious that it can hardly need elaborating. If the churches persist in presenting humanity with the spectacle of a Christendom at logger-heads with itself they might as well give up. It is
no use saying we should resign ourselves to the rift as a historical legacy, a thing we must bear like a cross. That impresses nobody nowadays. It is to our eternal reproach that we were not capable of preserving the heritage of Christ intact.

The second essential is the return of the Church to the service of humanity in a way that conforms to human needs, not to private tastes or to the code of a privileged clergy. The Son of Man came to serve…. By this standard the realities of many religious institutions would be found wanting. No one will believe our message of salvation unless we work ourselves to the bone, physically, socially, economically or otherwise, in the service of ailing humanity. Modern humanity is sick; perhaps I shall be able in the next few days to write down some thoughts on this sickness. Modern humanity has become an expert in many departments of life—our range of power is enormous. But we are intoxicated by our own cleverness and we have not yet realized all the sacrifices that have had to be made, how much has had to be given in exchange for this power. These things have not yet forced themselves on our attention—and it is pointless to try to keep reminding us of them. A wise guide keeps an account but tactfully refrains from producing it until the proper moment comes. Modern humans, those worldly wise persons who think they know all the answers, are extremely sensitive to any form of presumption, real or imagined. And the precision which the scientific age imposes on many people makes them highly critical of the superficial way in which we clergy often perform our duty in the wider sense of the word.

I said we must get back to the ideal of service. By that I mean meeting the man in the street on his own ground, in all circumstances, with a view to helping him to master them. That means walking by his side, accompanying him even into the depths of degradation and misery. “Go forth,” our Lord said—not “sit and wait for someone to come to you.” There is no sense in preparing a fine sermon while we are losing contact with the listeners and leaving them to their fate. I look on the spiritual encounter as a dialogue, not a monologue or an address, a monotonous drone of words.

But all this will only be understood and desired when the Church again produces men and women who are in themselves properly fulfilled. Fullness; the word had a special attraction for St. Paul. It applies today even more forcibly than it did then. Fulfilled men and women—not pious caricatures. People who are genuinely impregnated with the spirit of their calling, people who have prayed with all sincerity: make my heart like thine. Whether the Church will again produce such fulfilled, creative people we do not know. But only if she does so will those she sends forth feel sufficiently secure to dispense with insistence on rights, sufficiently self-reliant to relax the perpetual preoccupation with traditions and so on. Only then will they see God’s requirements with clear eyes even in the darkest hours. Only then will their willing hearts beat with a compassion that sweeps aside as negligible the old stubborn attachment to being “right after all.” Their hearts will beat with one desire—to help and heal in God’s name.

But how can we get to that stage? Churchmen seem to stand in their own light because of the habits they have acquired, historically speaking. Personally I believe that unless we voluntarily stride out across new ground, leaving the well-worn paths, history-in-the-making will destroy us with a thunderbolt of judgment. And that applies both to the personal destiny of the individual churchman and to religious institutions as a whole. Despite all right thinking and orthodox belief we have arrived at a dead end. The Christian idea is no longer one of the leading and formative ideas today. The plundered human victim lies bleeding by the wayside—must it be a stranger that comes to the rescue? It seems to me we ought to think about this
very seriously. The burden that is pressing on the Church at the present time and disturbing it so much is humans themselves — those outside whom we cannot find a way to reach because they have no longer any belief, and those inside who no longer believe in themselves because they have experienced and given too little love. All this should make us see that it is no use making fine speeches about reform or drawing up reform programs. We ought to devote our energies to the development of the Christian character, preparing ourselves to deal with the needs of humankind, helping and healing in this age of unanswerable distress.

Most of the ordained in the official Church must realize for themselves that at present the Church is a misunderstood — and incomprehensible — reality to contemporary people and must be aware how disturbing, threatening and dangerous a state of affairs this is. We are going along two parallel roads and no bridge links them. Further we have both encouraged the belief that each is constantly sitting in judgment on the other. So far as the Church is concerned she has much to answer for. We ought to start with an honest examination as to how this state of affairs came about. And this probe must be free from any tendency to blame our opponents. And at this point of course up crops the old question — what good could such an examination achieve? Well first in importance is the recognition of the need for promoting respect for others. We must abandon our arrogant pretensions to reverence as a right. The Church must come to look upon herself far more as a sacrament, as a way and a means, not as a goal and an end in itself. Nowadays personal regeneration and revitalization is far more important than even the most comprehensive factual knowledge. In sober honesty we must face the fact that the Church today is no longer one of the controlling powers in human affairs. And that it cannot be made comparable with any other powerful historical

factor (alliance of throne and altar in any form) but its influence must be centered in the integration of inner life with human potentialities (puissance, not force). And the impact made by the Church’s message on this plane depends upon the sincerity of its transcendent surrender and devotion. Arrogance anywhere near the Church is objectionable — and never more so when it occurs in the name of the Church, or worse, actually as part of the Church herself.