

## Introduction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Charles E. Ford

20 October 2008

The German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906 – 1945) was a major figure in the church struggle which took place with the German Protestant Church during the period from 1933 to 1945 when the National Socialist Party of Adolph Hitler held power in Germany. He was one of many Protestant pastors and theologians who took part in the church struggle. He was, however, the only pastor or theologian to take another step: he joined the German Resistance movement when war was about to begin in August 1939.

The German Resistance movement was created by Admiral Walter-Wilhelm Canaris who was the head of the Abwehr, German military counter intelligence. Within the Abwehr he had created a unit to arrange for the overthrow the National Socialist regime. The two leaders of this unit were Colonel Hans Oster and the lawyer Hans von Dohnanyi who was married to Bonhoeffer' sister Christine. When Bonhoeffer returned to Germany from the USA in August 1939, he was made an unpaid Abwehr agent. This exempted him from the military draft.

Through Dohnanyi Bonhoeffer became familiar with the leading Resistance figures, whom he encouraged in their resistance. The resistance made 15 unsuccessful attempts to replace the National Socialist regime. The last was on 13 March 1943 after Hitler was induced to fly to the east front to review the troops. The bomb planted on his plane on the return flight failed to explode. Heinrich Himmler was head of the military units of the Party and was especially suspicious of the Abwehr. Abwehr work involved the unauthorized transfer of funds abroad and one of these transactions was uncovered at the border. This gave Himmler the opportunity he sought to crack down the Abwehr, which he suspected of activity in pursuit of financial gain.

Several leading Abwehr figures were arrested, including Dohnanyi and Bonhoefer. After this a new figure entered the Resistance, Colonel Claus Shenk von Stauffenberg. He made the last attempt to remove the National Socialist regime. He would attend conferences Hitler held with top military figures. At such a conference on 20 July 1944 he planted a bomb under the conference table and left the conference room. The bomb exploded and killed four people but failed to kill Hitler. Stauffenberg was driven back to Berlin believing that he had killed Hitler. Only upon arrival at the Resistance center in Berlin did he learn otherwise. He and his adjutant Lieutenant Werner von Haeften were summarily tried and executed. Von Haeften had been a confirmation classmate of Bonhoeffer and Bonhoeffer had encouraged him in the resistance

The resistance activities of Bonhoeffer and the German Resistance within the Abwehr were only discovered in the last month of the war, when someone discovered and read the diaries of

Admiral Canaris. Hitler was informed. On 7 April he sent a direct order to execute seven leading resistance figures, including Canaris, Dohnanyi and Bonhoeffer. They were executed on 9 April 1945.

Bonhoeffer's opposition to National Socialism was very much a defense of the Christian Church and Christian civilization. His book *Ethics*, contains the extremely cogent passage in opposition to abortion and in defense of human life, from which the first quote above is taken. It was recently quoted in a statement issued on August 25, 2008 by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Denver, the Most Reverend Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap. He was responding publicly to a statement on August 24 by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi about certain Catholic teaching that ``shouldn't have an impact on a woman's right to choose.''

The Archbishop responded with a quote from ``one of the premier works on the subject.'' a book by the Jesuit John Connery. This is followed by a substantial quote in defense of human life by Connery. When this quote is finished the Archbishop turns to another pastor. ``Or in the blunter words of the great Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer.''

He then quotes the first half of Bonhoeffer's statement.

The second quote given above comes from a wedding sermon which was written for the marriage of Bonhoeffer's close friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge, who married one of Bonhoeffer's nieces, Renate Schleicher, in May 1943. Bonhoeffer was scheduled to deliver the sermon at the wedding but was arrested the month before. Therefore it was sent from prison and is included in the publication ``Letters and Papers from Prison.''

The quote is approximately one paragraph from a six paragraph sermon. I have quoted from this paragraph at every wedding I have attended in the past 25 years and regard the sermon as one of the finest things written on marriage. The sermon articulates the uniqueness of marriage as the original human institution, given at creation, as the means by which the human race is to be perpetuated. It should perhaps be noted that at the time of the wedding, Bonhoeffer was himself engaged to be married, a marriage which never took place because of his execution.