

# THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

## *Church: They Had Everything in Common*

BY DOROTHEE SOELLE

[Editor's Note: The following essay is a chapter from a forthcoming book called *Christians As Resisters*. In a letter, Dr. Soelle describes the book as "an introduction into the Christian faith for lay people, especially the younger reader (about 14 years). It deals with the major traditional topics of the Christian faith, but in a very untraditional way. Every chapter, on one or another dogmatic theme (such as creation, sin, prayer, eternal life, etc.), has three parts. Each starts with a short narrative taken from day to day life, often autobiographical material. In this part, the normalcy of negative experiences comes through. Love and hope seem to be unrealistic illusions. Secondly, it reflects upon these experiences in the light of the biblical tradition and its promises. Biblical texts are used as counter-stories that contradict the normal hopelessness. In a third part, a contemporary counter-story about resisters, such as Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or unknown ordinary people, is told. This is seen to be a continuing re-writing of the Bible."]

**A** man whose wife died recently and left him with two children said to us:

I often don't know how it can go on like this, with my job and with the two small children. But I'll make it. I don't need help from anyone. I don't want to be a burden to anyone. When I can't get myself to go on any longer, I just take some Valium. No one really cares how I am or how I'm making out. I don't show anyone how I'm feeling inside. Since the first day after my wife died, I've told my kids that they don't have to alter their lives in any way. The children should not have to suffer for the fact that my wife is dead. And our grief is our own business and no one else's.

Dorothee Soelle, currently Harry Emerson Fosdick Professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York and formerly a member of the faculty of the University of Cologne, is deeply involved in education and political action for world peace. A prolific author, her publications include *The Strength of the Weak* (1984), *To Work and To Love*, with Shirley A. Cloyes (1984), *The Arms Race Kills Even Without War* (1983), *Choosing Life* (1981), and *Suffering* (1975).

At first we marveled about this man. He was strong. He didn't bewail his fate. He was managing two jobs (his work and his kids). He didn't bother anyone else. But then we began to ask whether it really was desirable and human to be so strong and independent. Why should he conceal his pain? Isn't it more human to show it and to allow others to share it? Is it really true that no one cares about how he lives his life? Aren't we here mutually to look after each other's hurts and to share our burdens? Isn't he asking too much of himself to want to be outwardly as strong as a giant? His behavior is certainly consistent with one of the popular rules of our society which people often cynically express: God helps those who help themselves.

There is a story in the New Testament that speaks against this:

Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need (Acts 4:32-35).

In that young church and among those new Christians there was no one who owned something and kept it for himself alone. Possessions were sold, and the money was distributed according to individual need. No one was ashamed to accept something. Their slogan was not, *God helps those who help themselves*. Rather, because God helps everyone, they were there to help each other. That is the church—or better said, that is what the church should be; each one for everyone.

Throughout the world today in the midst of a paralyzed church life, new groups of base communities are being established. These are groups of people who want to live together as Christians. They share their free time, often their possessions, and share the tasks which they commit themselves to in their part of the city, in their neighborhoods. The starting point of this activity is not in the work of pastors but is *based* in the work of ordinary people. Pastors and priests are co-workers like all the others. The people in these base communities often have difficulties with the official church, because in their prayers and in their celebrations they are not being just *purely religious* but are very consciously there for the poor and underprivileged. Whenever they make efforts to offer tutoring help to Turkish schoolchildren who don't know the German language, they always run up against difficulties: with their church authorities, with the neighbors who complain that they're making too much noise, and often with public officials as well. All this means, however, that the members of the base community grow even closer together and help each other out: with cooking the meals, with child care, with traveling long distances to an office or to a doctor. They live less and less for themselves alone. They become more and more the

church, not because they are being more churchly, but because they are taking the gospel more seriously.

John, the forerunner of Jesus, was asked: "What should we do then?" He answered: "Whoever has two coats, share with the one who has none; and whoever has food, do likewise" (Luke 3:11, Soelle/Steffensky).

The people to whom John said that were extremely poor. The tattered and the half-naked were no exceptions. Our difficulty today is that the poor are so far from us and are known to us only indirectly via television, newspapers, and books. In spite of this, we think that the church, today as well as back then, begins with one thing: sharing.

Maybe in reality it wasn't completely that way for the first Christians. But, in this story about the early church, every church of today now has a picture by which it must let itself be measured and by which it can show whether it is really *church*.

The early Christians were of one heart and soul, as it says in the text from Acts. Other passages of the Bible express this close fellowship of Christians in a similar way. Several times it says that the whole church is one body with many members. When one of these members suffers, says I Corinthians 12:26, then all the members suffer; when one member rejoices, then all the members rejoice. We think again of the man whose wife died and of his loneliness. He is proud and independent. But no one is there to share his grief. He wants to weep with no one. When he is weak, he wants to show it to no one. He would rather swallow some Valium. The French writer Paul Valery once said: "Alone we are always in bad company." Alone we have less courage and strength for living. Alone we run right up against our anxiety. Alone we do not come up with many new ideas.

However, more belong to the church than those living in the present who share property and the potentialities of life with each other and are *one in heart and soul*. To the church belong also all those who have lived before us and who have been attached to the meaning which faith in Jesus gives to life. To the church belong also those who have died. Church is the place where the dead are not forgotten and where their stories continue to be told. We would like to tell the story of one of those who have died, namely Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and then we'll say why it's important to remember him. Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) was an important figure in the church's struggle against the Nazis. From the very beginning he fought against National Socialism and against the pastors and theologians who fell into it. He organized and directed a seminary for young theologians of the Confessing Church. The Confessing Church was that part of the church that was least deceived by Nazi ideology. For that reason, and because he interceded for persecuted Jews, the Nazis made things difficult for him. His situation became increasingly untenable. He was not allowed to speak in public or to publish his writings. Friends of Bonhoeffer who wanted to protect him were able to get him a teaching position in theology in New York City.

That was in 1939, shortly before the outbreak of the war. "Stay here," his American friends said to him. "You can help people in Germany far better from here than if you were over there."

Bonhoeffer hesitated for a long time and did not know what to do. He wrote to a colleague in New York:

I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history alongside Christians in Germany. I can have no right to reconstruct Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share in the trials of this period along with my people. My brothers in the Synod of the Confessing Church decided that I would get away. It may be that they were right when they urged me to do so; but it was wrong on my part to leave. Such a decision every person has to make for himself. Christians in Germany now stand before the frightful alternative of either willing the defeat of their own nation so that Christian civilization can live on, or to speak out for victory which will eventually destroy civilization. I know which of these alternatives I have to choose, but I cannot make the choice while I remain in safety.

Bonhoeffer did not want to shrink from the confrontations, from the struggle, nor even from his possible death. He went back and was active in the political resistance with those who on July 20, 1944, attempted to assassinate Hitler. In 1943, he was imprisoned and a few days before the end of the war he was hanged by the Nazis in the Flossenburg concentration camp.

What does it mean to know the story of this man who is now dead? One person out of the community to which we belong, a Christian, had a big dream in life. He thought that human dignity belonged to everyone, also to Jews, also to gypsies. He committed himself to this dream, which at that time seemed impossible and was mortally dangerous. He did not choose the expected way out, to remain in safety in America, but he returned to Germany, even though that return cost him his life. This decisive moment in his life touches us almost more than his death in the concentration camp: he gave up his security and chose the struggle against fascist murder and death. It strengthens our faith in life when we can see how a person lived his life without betraying himself. The dream that we have for our lives will then be clearer, more radical, sharper, when we take seriously how grand and how courageous the dream of this departed person really was. We shall also feel that we owe something to this one person who died, namely to embody a portion of what he dreamed. The one who died needs us, because his grand desires for this life are not yet fulfilled. We must keep the flame burning, the flame that he began.

Church—that is, the potentialities of our life—resides not in us alone; we have brothers and sisters who help us in life; we have fathers and mothers; we have the deceased, whose successful lives encourage and strengthen us. When we are too weak by ourselves to preserve life's grand desires and dreams, we can look for the dreams which our fellow Christians of the past have had. Precisely because we recognize that our own lives, isolated and separated from others, are barren and insuffi-

cient, we have therefore linked ourselves up with the desires, the courage, and the work of the many. We discover then that we certainly don't need to be alone and live for ourselves only. There were people before us who have engaged in the struggle. There once was this Dietrich Bonhoeffer who did not remain in the safety of America, and his courage was brought back home. Again and again there have always been groups of people who were capable of resistance. When the Nazis decreed that every Jew had to wear a yellow star with the word "Jew" printed on it, the Danish king and many people in Denmark along with him declared: "Then we all shall wear such a star!"

Church means also to have a place where such stories are remembered and told. We need these risky memories of the many and the courageous who are around us and have gone before us. We also need to have confidence in those who will come after us. We hope that when our own strength diminishes, those who come after us will achieve more than we have achieved. As the farmers who were overcome in their struggle for liberation from the princes sang:

Returning  
We come home defeated  
But our grandchildren will win  
If it's ever repeated.\*

When a person grows old in dignity, he then learns that it doesn't matter whether he has won every victory by himself alone. It sounds old-fashioned, but it is very true: it's comforting to know that we don't have to do everything alone and that our failures do not mean the failure of the cause for which we have fought. That is *church*: that we are never alone, never alone in our dreaming, never alone in our defeats.

\*From *Anfänge neuen Lebens, Gottesdienst in der Katharinenkirche in Hamburg, 1978* (*Beginnings of a New Life, Worship in the Church of St. Catharine in Hamburg*).



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