

Preface

My first encounter with Dietrich Bonhoeffer occurred during the summer of 1964. I was into my second year as spiritual director of postulants, the young men who were aspiring to enter religious life in the congregation of the De La Salle Christian Brothers to which I then belonged. At the time, my own religious life seemed to be in tatters. I was experiencing a dry spell in my prayers and meditations, something like that “dark night of the soul” about which John of the Cross had spoken. My own director advised me to get a different “spiritual reading” book—what we Brothers used back then to “prime our minds” for the daily periods of meditation. Browsing in our novitiate library,¹ I noticed by pure chance the attractive title of a new book on the shelves, *The Cost of Discipleship*—as it was then called—by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Opening the book at random—not the best way to select

1. Novitiate is the term used to designate the spiritual training of a “novice” in the rules and spirituality of a religious congregation prior to his or her taking the three vows of religious life. In this instance my religious congregation was the “De La Salle Christian Brothers,” a teaching congregation originally founded in the seventeenth century in France by Saint John Baptist de La Salle, the patron saint of teachers.

spiritual reading literature!—my eyes fell on the startling sentence: “Like ravens we have gathered around the carcass of cheap grace. From it we have imbibed the poison that has killed the following of Jesus among us.”² These perplexing words seemed to be addressed directly to me in my uneasy mood that afternoon. I sensed almost immediately that I too had been pursuing the “cheap grace” of a religious routine, a “salvation by works” that Martin Luther had excoriated, as every moment of my day had been carefully mapped out from rising and morning prayers to evening prayers and the “great silence,” so much so that Jesus Christ had gradually been fading from the center of my religious life.

I began to read the book from cover to cover and became utterly fascinated by the awesome demands of the Sermon on the Mount that Bonhoeffer had made the centerpiece of the book and with which Bonhoeffer had challenged readers with his electrifying commentary. Through Bonhoeffer’s inspirational words Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount seemed to be addressed to me personally for the first time. I was hooked. I resolved to learn more about this author and, like so many others, was surprised to find out that the book had been published in 1937 during the repressive dictatorship of Adolf Hitler, and that Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor who had joined the anti-Nazi conspiracy aimed at killing Hitler and overthrowing the Nazi government in order to bring the Sec-

2. This quotation is taken from the new critical edition, *Discipleship* (DBWE 4), 53. In 1964, the text read: “We Lutherans have gathered like eagles round the carcass of cheap grace, and there we have drunk of the poison which has killed the life of following Christ.” Bonhoeffer’s original text has the word for “ravens” (*die Raben*) not “eagles” and no mention is made of “Lutherans.” More on the new translation and critical edition of *Discipleship* later in this book.

ond World War to an end. I was led to the prison letters and then to the story of his execution just three weeks before the end of the war. Even today, many years after that initial encounter, I continue to be deeply moved by the challenges of his writings and by the personal sacrifice of their author.

The opportunity to engage in a more systematic study of the life and writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer finally came in 1967 when I was assigned to pursue doctoral studies in theology at Louvain University, Belgium. There I was able to work under the noted professor of dogmatic theology, Adolphe Gesché, who had himself for a long time been interested in the issues of a theology of revelation and of Bonhoeffer's radical challenge to the churches as well as to the leaders of those churches and his fellow Christians then caving in to the dictates of Hitler and his fascist ideology. Much research on my part was called for in each of those areas. Professor Gesché's willingness to direct that research made it possible for me to pursue my interest in Bonhoeffer and, through his writings, to study the whole question of the interrelationship of revelation, faith, social ethics, and church.

One pleasant aspect of that research was the opportunity to visit with and come to know the Bonhoeffer family and friends, particularly Eberhard and Renate Bethge. Eberhard was Bonhoeffer's best friend, confidant, the recipient of the prison letters, editor of the posthumous writings, and author of the definitive biography that George Steiner, writing for the *New York Times*, had described as "one of the few assured classics of our age." Renate is Bonhoeffer's niece and daughter of Bonhoeffer's co-conspirator against Hitler, Rüdiger Schleicher, who was himself murdered by the S.S. in the closing days of the war. Renate has been over the years an inval-

able source of information about the Bonhoeffer family, her uncle Dietrich, how the family helped to shape Bonhoeffer's attitudes toward the Hitler government, and the role the churches could have played in stopping Hitler and preventing the war's terrible slaughter of the innocent. The Bethges provided me with many of the then unpublished documents that I was able to incorporate into my own work. Eberhard wrote the Introduction to my book, *Liberating Faith*, and the Foreword to *A Testament to Freedom*, which I had co-authored with F. Burton Nelson. Renate wrote the Introduction to *The Cost of Moral Leadership*, also co-authored by F. Burton Nelson, to whom this present book is dedicated. Eberhard died on March 18, 2000, as the manuscript of *Discipleship* was being prepared for publication. Wayne Floyd wrote this testament to his memory in his Foreword to *Discipleship*: "All who meet Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the form of his printed words owe a never-ending debt of gratitude to this remarkable human being. Eberhard Bethge, who almost single-handedly was responsible for assuring that Bonhoeffer's legacy would endure for us and generations to come."³

The next great turning point in my development as a "Bonhoeffer scholar" came through my close association with the International Bonhoeffer Society, English Language Section. This development is closely connected with the critical edition of the texts that form the central focus of this book on "Reading Bonhoeffer." Dr. Clifford Green, who had attended an organizational meeting in Germany with Bethge and prominent German scholars in order to found an International Bonhoeffer Society for archive and research

3. Wayne W. Floyd Jr., "Foreword," D (DBWE 4), xiii.

purposes, called a meeting in the Fall of 1972 at his home in Baltimore, Maryland. He had invited John Godsey, author of *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, the first full-length book on Bonhoeffer, Larry Rasmussen, author of the book that analyzed the ethics of Bonhoeffer's role in the anti-Nazi conspiracy, and myself. We were later jokingly referred to as "the gang of four." Be that as it may, we were able to organize the first meeting of an English Language Section of the International Bonhoeffer Society to take place during the 1973 annual convention of the American Academy of Religion, the first of thirty-four sessions that continue to this day. From their inception, these sessions have featured scholars who would present papers on various aspects of Bonhoeffer's theology, ethics, and spirituality, exploring the connection with Bonhoeffer's world and the application of his writings to the problems then besetting our own world. Soon enough we were able to structure ourselves into an official society with standing in the academic world and with regular dues, needed for the annual meeting and for our newsletter. Later we set up a Board of Directors with members elected to the Board and elections held for the positions of President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer. In 1973, before voting procedures were set in place, however, Cliff Green became the first President of the society, and I was named the first secretary and treasurer. Cliff had remarked that it was fitting that the role of treasurer be assigned to me because I was the only member of the growing membership to have taken a vow of poverty! I succeeded Cliff as President for two terms from 1992 to 2000. Michael Lukens, an ecumenical scholar from St. Norbert's College in Wisconsin, was elected to the post in 2000.

For several years the society had been giving equal emphasis to pastoral, spiritual, and ministerial dimensions of Bonhoeffer's theological legacy. It was fitting, therefore, that in 2004, Reverend John W. Matthews, a pastor-scholar from Minnesota and Vice-President of the Society, was elected President to succeed Dr. Lukens. In many ways John Matthews's life and ministry have paralleled Bonhoeffer's own calling as theologian and pastor. In addition to his being senior pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Apple Valley, Matthews has been active in publishing scholarly articles on Bonhoeffer culminating in his popular book, *Anxious Souls Will Ask . . . : The Christ-Centered Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*.

The emphasis in those early years of the society was on counteracting the popular but highly misleading interpretations of Bonhoeffer, such as those suggested by the short-lived "Death of God" movement and efforts to tie Bonhoeffer to political and ecclesiastical agendas not justified by any serious research. To the end of correcting these misinterpretations and presenting Bonhoeffer in texts faithful to his original intent, we directed our energies toward establishing an archive and research center at Union Theological Seminary, where Bonhoeffer's collected writings in addition to significant secondary literature could be housed and made available to scholars, researchers, and anyone else interested in discovering more about the Bonhoeffer legacy. This Bonhoeffer Center was opened in 1977 and continues to sponsor conferences, lectures, and visiting scholar exchanges through cooperation with the German Section of the International Bonhoeffer Society.

Another important function of the English Language Section is, in collaboration with the German Section and

all the other national sections, to organize an international congress every four years. These have attracted scholars from around the world interested in exploring further the literary legacy of Bonhoeffer with particular application to the nagging problems that continue to surface—such as militarism, apartheid, fundamentalism, ecumenical dialogue, genocide, etc.—that affect the peoples of the world, so often at the mercy of oppressive, dictatorial regimes. The following congresses have taken place since the first international congress at the World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1976, to commemorate the 70th anniversary of Bonhoeffer's birth: Oxford, England, 1980; Hirschluch, East Germany, 1984; Amsterdam, 1988, New York, 1992; Cape Town, 1996; Berlin, 2000; Rome, 2004. The latest international congress took place in Prague in the summer of 2008. These congresses have produced an international dialogue among Bonhoeffer scholars in addition to publication of critically acclaimed books of the proceedings that have added to further understanding the continuing relevance of Bonhoeffer's writings to national and international issues. They have also led to the cooperation among the various language sections in the production by the International Bonhoeffer Society of new, more accurate translations and critical editions of the entire corpus of Bonhoeffer's literary legacy.

During all those years of scholarly achievement in Bonhoeffer studies our focus as the English Language Section of the society was never far from the desire to produce those new translations and critical editions of Bonhoeffer's collected writings. This project in the English Language Section, the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition (DBWE), has been spearheaded by Clifford Green, the society's first presi-

dent, who was named by the Board of Directors to the position of Executive Director of the series. Green's outstanding leadership has been indispensable in all aspects of the DBWE, including the fundraising needed to assist Fortress Press in financing the extremely large volumes of Bonhoeffer's collected writings that average over seven hundred pages each.

Robin W. Lovin, then of the University of Chicago, was named the first General Editor; he was ably assisted by Dr. Mark Brocker. Before being named Dean of the School of Divinity at Drew University, Dr. Lovin had organized the format of cooperation with the German editors and the process of selecting editors, translators, and consultants for the individual volumes. He was succeeded by Dr. Wayne W. Floyd Jr., who shepherded the first volume, *Life Together*, through to its completion, to be followed by the next six volumes, not in any sequential order. Before volume 8, the long awaited *Letters and Papers from Prison*, could be set in motion, however, Victoria Barnett succeeded Dr. Floyd as General Editor. Barnett is well qualified for the task on two fronts: her fluency in the German language and expertise in the history of the German church struggle that ties into Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology. She has already guided three of the final nine volumes of the project to their completion.

The problem in producing these volumes in English was compounded by the translations already extant of three of Bonhoeffer's most popular, widely read writings: *The Cost of Discipleship*, *Life Together*, and *Ethics*. All of these were deeply flawed by inaccuracies in translations, omissions of entire lines and passages, inconsistencies in translating the original German from one volume to the next, and, perhaps most of all, the absence of the critical apparatus necessary to

ascertain the meaning of several otherwise obscure passages. In short, this was a need that pressed on both the German and English language sections. The German section, under the general leadership of Eberhard Bethge and the editorial directorship of Heinz Eduard Tödt and Wolfgang Huber, thus began a systematic production of the individual volumes, assigning each to an expert in that particular book or that collection of essays, correspondence, conferences, sermons, etc., providing for each text an introduction and an “Afterword” as well as the critical apparatus so necessary in understanding the German documents, many only in manuscript notes in need of deciphering. The English Language Section followed suit. Here, though, the process involved not only selecting the scholars for the critical apparatus in consultation with their German language counterparts, but also choosing translators who had to combine expertise in German with a good understanding of Bonhoeffer’s theology. As can be seen from the bibliography, this project is still underway, though several of the most significant writings in book form have already appeared, some in a second, paperback edition.

Because of my earlier work in Bonhoeffer’s spirituality with particular interest in his writings on Christian community, I was assigned to do the critical English edition of *Life Together*. Prior to this assignment I had to compose a monograph pointing out why a new translation was necessary. Given the unbelievable number of errors in the translation, still being published in its twenty-fourth printing in a widely popular paperback, that part of the task was easy. Also, the inexplicable omission of Bonhoeffer’s significant “Preface” or any critical notes only bolstered my argument. This was the first of the volumes to be published in the DBWE. My trans-

lator was Daniel Bloesch, with whom I had several friendly exchanges over the translation. Our work, however, had to pass scrutiny from the German editors of the German language edition in consultation with Wayne Floyd, the newly selected General Editor of the entire series. Our collaboration that summer became a model for the further volumes that have combined scholarly insights with accurate notes based on the meaning and context of Bonhoeffer's writings in their German original, illuminated finally by new, fully accurate translations. The commentary on *Life Together* in this book on *Reading Bonhoeffer* is based on my work as editor of that volume in the DBWE.

The second volume to which both John Godsey and I had applied also required a report pointing out the errors in translation of the extant volume, *The Cost of Discipleship*, and the passages in which critical notes were absolutely essential. John and I uncovered at least a hundred errors in translation and were able to make a good case for an expanded critical apparatus based on the German editors' annotations, since each of us had already spent years in researching and teaching Bonhoeffer's book on *Discipleship*. We were also quite familiar with the original German text and the errors in the popular edition. For the next three years we traveled between Philadelphia and Bethesda at work on editing the translation. We were fortunate to have as one of our translators Barbara Green, herself fluent in German and already a published author of articles interpreting Bonhoeffer. She was joined by Reinhard Krauss, a German pastor and scholar, who has had considerable experience working on other volumes in the DBWE. We became a team of four coordinated by the General Editor, as we strived together to produce an accurate,

readable and critically annotated volume. This is the volume that serves as the definitive text of *Discipleship* on which that chapter of this book, *Reading Bonhoeffer*, is based.

When I had completed my work on these two volumes, a labor that began in 1993 and ended in 2001, I entertained the idea of writing a separate book to be used as a kind of “Reader’s Study Guide” that adult education forums, parish ministries, prayer groups, and spiritual reflection gatherings, as well as regular classes on Bonhoeffer in seminaries and universities, might find useful for their discussions. By 2000, however, I was under contract along with Dr. F. Burton Nelson to write the book, *The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. That having been completed and, while I was nearing semi-retired status at La Salle University, I was invited by Jon Stock of Wipf and Stock Publishers to write this book on Bonhoeffer as part of their new series, Cascade Companions. This series was established to make the richness of the vast, complex Christian theological tradition accessible to the general reader. The series addresses this challenge by publishing books on reading and studying in context selected writings of outstanding theologians. Jon sent me the first volume, *Reading Augustine: A Guide to the Confessions*, to give me an idea of what the series was all about. I accepted his offer and, given the nature of the series, decided to narrow my scope down to Bonhoeffer’s two spiritual classics, *Discipleship* and *Life Together*.

But because of my own peace activism and my teaching classes and seminars on peace and social justice to both graduates and undergraduates at La Salle University, I decided to include in this “reading-study guide” three of the most thought provoking of Bonhoeffer’s collected writings

in which he denounced wars and the militarism that was already budding again in his native Germany. Bonhoeffer had used the occasions of a talk presented at an ecumenical conference in Switzerland, a sermon preached on the German Memorial Day, and a dramatic conference presented at a morning service during an important ecumenical gathering in Denmark in 1934, in order publicly to reject war as a denial of Jesus Christ and a rejection of the church's mission to represent Jesus Christ on earth. With uncommon fervor he urged those gathered to hear him to undertake a courageous Christian mission to promote peace in the world at a time when Germany was already engaged in rearming itself under the leadership of Adolf Hitler and when military glory was still being exalted at the expense of fidelity to the teachings of Jesus Christ. These writings are the strongest statements against war that one could ever find in any documents from that troubled period of world history. After composing a biographical first chapter, I have structured the book into three additional sections that deal in turn with *Discipleship*, *Life Together*, and the selected writings by Bonhoeffer on promoting peace against the deceptive allure of war.

Should this book achieve any success among its readership in assisting people to appreciate Bonhoeffer's spiritual classics and his role as a peace activist, it should be noted that I am indebted to several helpful colleagues. First to Clifford Green, Executive Director, for his unfailing leadership and encouragement in the initial phase of the DBWE project and throughout the production of every succeeding volume, now a work of close to twenty years. I have appreciated and benefited from the supervisory assistance of Wayne Floyd, then General Editor, who took the lead in the production

of those volumes of the DBWE in which I was involved. My many hours dialoguing with Wayne over how to translate the more difficult passages of *Life Together* helped me in the final crucial months when deadlines had to be met. Wayne's philosophical strengths and his published work on the conceptual foundations of Bonhoeffer's theology in his much earlier Berlin dissertations gave me additional insights into the nature of Christian community life as inspired and directed by Bonhoeffer. My work on *Life Together* did not end there. In writing chapter seven of our book, *The Cost of Moral Leadership*, Burton Nelson and I returned to the volume and had even more intense conversations on Bonhoeffer's text. My commentary on and questions about this text are either based on or drawn from chapter seven of our book. I am indebted to Burton for sharpening my focus, particularly in the application of Bonhoeffer's spirituality of Christian community life to problems in ecclesiology today. Burton died on March 22, 2004, and is sorely missed not only by me but also by his wonderful family and his extended family, his colleagues at North Park Theological Seminary, and in the English Language Section of the International Bonhoeffer Society.

Many of my interpretive commentaries on *Discipleship* are derived from the several exciting discussions on Bonhoeffer's text that I had with my co-editor, John Godsey. We spent countless hours, both formal and informal, refining our understanding of *Discipleship* with its strong Christocentrism and powerful homiletic comments on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, as well as Bonhoeffer's ecclesial insights drawn from the Pauline letters, among other sources, that became part two of the text. While the commentary is my own, any insights I have been able to share with readers

of this book are the fruit of our sessions together. John was himself strongly influenced, as Bonhoeffer had been, by the great Swiss reformed theologian Karl Barth, and has continued his scholarly productivity over the span of nearly half a century. As an Emeritus member of the Board of Directors of the Bonhoeffer Society, John continues to be an inspiration to the young scholars who continue to research Bonhoeffer's theological legacy.

In my classes on Bonhoeffer's Christian spirituality, I am also indebted to my students who were the first to use the discussion questions in their exchanges and debates on how Bonhoeffer's writings applied to their own lives, their churches, and to the United States becoming involved in another war and, to their dismay, in process of being considered a rogue nation by the international community. Some argued that our nation's policies, under our present President, were uncannily similar to what Bonhoeffer had encountered and opposed in the 1930s. As I am entering my senior years and semi-retired status, these students have helped keep my mind fresh and have rewarded me with a sense of appreciation for having introduced them to the inspiring books and other writings that are the grist of this book. I am grateful for their collaboration in the form of questions, reactions, and even the debates with one another on the material of this book as *Reading Bonhoeffer* was taking shape.

I am additionally grateful to Rev. John Matthews, President of the International Bonhoeffer Society, English Language Section, for writing the Foreword to this book. John has been a helpful colleague to me and the entire English Language Section for his scholarly work on Bonhoeffer's Christian spirituality. His election as President of the Society

is a tribute to his organizational leadership but more especially for his exemplifying so well the twin aspects of Bonhoeffer's spiritual legacy: scholarly expertise and pastoral care. Like Bonhoeffer himself, John Matthews has been an inspirational light to the churches in their efforts to serve Jesus Christ in what Bonhoeffer called a "world come of age."

The book might never have been completed on time were it not for the skills of my secretary, Yvonne Macolly, who was able to reconstitute chapter 3 that I, still the low-tech anti-nerd, had inadvertently erased from my computer's hard drive and disk.

That the manuscript ever reached publishable form is due in a special way to the expertise of Charlie Collier and Heather Carraher at Wipf and Stock Publishers. Together they did both major and minor surgery on various segments of the text. Their meticulous work was followed by Halden Doerge, who gave the text one final editorial scrutiny for stray sentences in need of further improvement. I am indebted to Charlie, Heather, and Halden for their helpful corrections and perceptive suggestions in producing a more readable text.

Finally, and most of all, I continue to admire the patience of my wife, Joan, and my handicapped daughter, Susan, who kept encouraging me in yet another time consuming project. While Susan never tired of asking me, "Aren't you finished with that book yet?"—an advanced take on her questions during family trips, "Are we there yet?"—still her brand of encouragement added both humor and a sense of urgency to complete the book. But completing the book within the time span allotted by Wipf and Stock needed the time away from home, gardening chores, and assorted other duties that Joan always provided. The book is dedicated to my soul brother,

Burton Nelson, to be sure, but it would have been impossible even to begin without the love and support of Joan, who over the thirty years of our marriage, never ceases to amaze me with her graciousness and forbearance. And to Susan: yes, we are there now!

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