

Priestly Power and Prophetic Critique: A Historical Reflection

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In his remarkable book, *The Bible and the Priesthood: Priestly Participation in the One Sacrifice for Sins*, Anthony Giambrone, O.P., provides an exegetically sensitive and theologically insightful biblical theology of priesthood. The three chapters on the Old Testament use key passages to illuminate a major theological theme: priesthood as theophany, the prophetic critique of priestly sin, and the anticipation of a renewed, cleansed priesthood. Turning to the New Testament, Giambrone then explores in two chapters how Jesus inaugurates this new priesthood. Each of these five chapters is accompanied by two excurses, which delve into related topics. The result is a robust biblical theology that effortlessly integrates critical diachronic exegesis into a canonical, theological understanding of the sacrament of orders in the Catholic tradition. It should not be missed how rare this interpretive skill is; in fact, Giambrone's book could well serve as a model for what post-Second Vatican Council Catholic interpretation should be. Rather than fragmenting the biblical witness, he illuminates the subtle, multi-layered reality of priesthood in the divine economy of redemption.

In addition, for the modern world, Giambrone's task is all the more challenging, not only because of recent scandals within the Church, but because many people in the modern world are innately suspicious of hierarchical power, religion, and patriarchy: all of which are associated with the Catholic priesthood. In fact, modern Western people typically find the very concept of a hierarchical society to be alien to their idealization of societies which are (or at least strive to be) egalitarian, democratic, and

self-determining.¹ For such people, the mediation of divine grace through other persons can seem unnecessary at best, which is surely a factor in the decline of participation in the sacrament of confession. Because of this, I can imagine that many readers might gravitate especially to chapter 3 and the accompanying excurses, which treat the theme of the prophetic critique of priestly sin.

In this chapter, “‘Like People, like Priest’ (Hosea 4:9): Priestly Sin and the Prophetic Critique,” Giambrone rightly opposes the so-called “Antagonism Hypothesis,” which attempts to pit the ethical demands of the prophets against the power and corruption of the priesthood. Proponents have tended to focus on passages like Amos 5:21–24 and Isa 1:11–17, leveraging these polemics from particular circumstances against the very legitimacy of the Israelite cult. However, as Giambrone and others have shown, this interpretation of the prophets owes much more to Reformation and Enlightenment prejudices against priesthood than to a careful reading of the prophetic literature in its ancient Near Eastern context. Once this prejudicial anachronism is overcome, it is clear that the prophets are not opposed to priesthood *qua* priesthood, but to the failure of priest and cult to function *properly*. This, of course, actually presupposes the legitimacy of the priesthood and the temple, and thus its need for reform, not elimination. It is telling that, in the middle of the last century, there was a parallel “antagonism hypothesis” regarding the wisdom literature in which the sages were pictured as hostile to the cult and advocating a universal ethic grounded in a natural theology. Beginning with Leo Perdue’s *Wisdom and Cult* and gaining more traction with the recognition of the scribal context of ancient Jerusalem, this view has also been largely abandoned.²

Rather than three traditions in competition and each beckoning the modern reader for allegiance, the priestly, prophetic, and wisdom literature are best viewed as complementary and overlapping theological (and literary) modes within ancient Israel. The rejection of these antagonism hypotheses has important implications for how the Old Testament priesthood and its failures relate to priesthood in Christianity. Giambrone draws the parallel with characteristic clarity:

¹ See for example, Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), especially 109–41.

² Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult: A Critical Analysis of the Views of Cult in the Wisdom Literature of Israel and the Ancient Near East*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 30 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977).

Faced with the same objective reality of a corrupt priesthood and compromised temple establishment, the difference between the proto-rabbinic response of mixed horror and humor, with continued fidelity to the institution, and the Essene answer of blistering venom, open schism, and the effort to be perfectly pure resembles in a way the difference between the two paths taken in sixteenth-century Europe. One group, seeing the issues, worked within the system; the other walked out to claim the higher moral ground. The proto-rabbinic (Pharisaic) reaction, vulnerable perhaps to the accusation of enabling, nevertheless enjoys a certain Catholic appeal.³

Here Giambrone puts his finger on what I think is a decisive issue, particularly for thinking about the priesthood today: how does one maintain “fidelity to the institution” without thereby “enabling” those who use the institution for corrupt purposes? Does fidelity to the institution necessitate, at least at some level, a complicity in the structures of power that prove critical for the perpetuation of corruption or abuse?⁴

To explore this, I would like to develop Giambrone’s own point, but press it a bit further: not only is it possible to remain loyal to the institution of the priesthood while engaging in prophetic-style critique; in some cases, loyalty to the institution is actually *best demonstrated* by prophetic critique.⁵ Further, if this willingness to call the hierarchy back to Christ’s “reconfiguration of hierarchical authority as self-sacrificial service”⁶ results in rejection or even persecution by the hierarchy, the prophet’s own suffering at the hands of the institution ironically comes to function as its own prophetic sign-act of what the institution itself should be: as with Christ, they should seek the renewal of God’s people even at great cost

³ Anthony Giambrone, *The Bible and the Priesthood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 110.

⁴ The force of this problem should be evident to anyone who has read, e.g., the *Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report* (2018) or the *Murphy and Ryan Reports* from Ireland (2009). Perhaps even more salient in this regard is the recently released report by Ireland’s Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation (2021) in which the horrific (and criminal) treatment of women and children in the decades following the 1937 Constitution was directly enabled by society’s unquestioning deference to Church power in the political and social spheres, even when that power was being abused.

⁵ See Giambrone, *The Bible and the Priesthood*, 190: “The papocaeserism of a clerical college swollen with landed estates and worldly *exousia* was also an obstacle—in fact the very same obstacle—to the true Petrine pastoral model of laying down one’s life.”

⁶ Giambrone *The Bible and the Priesthood*, 161.

to themselves. In other words, prophetic critique is most effective when it models *back to the Church* the Christological and Petrine model of self-sacrificial love *for the Church*.

Taking as my point of departure Giambrone's passing comment that "the sad species of clerical corruption and political interference [is] familiar enough to those who know a bit of Church history,"⁷ I would like to consider briefly just two instances from Church history in which a prophetic critique of the hierarchy was not just *compatible* with fidelity to the institute, but proved *essential* to it in the way I have just described: one involving ecclesiastical corruption within its ranks and one involving ecclesiastical weakness in the face of evil.

St. Peter Damian

The first case concerns the eleventh-century Benedictine monk, and later cardinal, Peter Damian. A vociferous voice for reform in his own time, his reputation continued to grow in subsequent Church history and he was named a Doctor (of Reform) of the Church in 1828.⁸ For our purposes, two of his works are particularly significant. The first, *Liber Gomorrhianus* (*Book of Gomorrah*, sometimes known as Letter 31), was written to Pope Leo IX in 1049 CE or shortly after and has garnered renewed interest in recent years because it contains a pointed indictment of clerical sexual sins with certain similarities to the present day. Although this is the best-known aspect of the treatise, his discussion of this topic is complex and throughout it is interconnected with other themes such as justice, the nature of discipline, and the appropriateness of criticizing the hierarchy.⁹

The level of ecclesiastical immorality and corruption in Peter Damian's time was among the worst in the history of the Church. Just a century and a half before the *Book of Gomorrah* was written, Pope Stephen VII

⁷ Giambrone, *The Bible and the Priesthood*, 106.

⁸ Curiously enough, however, over the next few centuries his influence on subsequent canon law, a central plank of his reform agenda, was relatively minor; see Robert J. Olsen, "A Queer Little Book: An Examination of the Reception of Peter Damian's *Liber Gomorrhianus* by the Papacy and the Canonical Tradition," *Viator* 49 (2018): 89–110.

⁹ Although technically a letter, the *Book of Gomorrah* is often called a treatise because of its length and topical nature. However, this designation risks obscuring the fact that the letter form substantially accounts for the force of his rhetoric, which often strikes modern readers as overly harsh. Seen in the context of its time, the strong language is not nearly so shocking; see Christopher D. Fletcher, "Rhetoric, Reform, and Christian Eloquence: The Letter Form and the Religious Thought of Peter Damian," *Viator* 46 (2015): 61–92.

infamously had the corpse of his predecessor Pope Formosus dug up to stand trial as an anti-pope. Ensuing years saw the papacy tossed to and fro by power struggles and political maneuvering. Accusations of sexual debauchery, corruption, theft, and even murder were routinely (and plausibly) leveled against popes and bishops. Many ecclesiastical positions and Church benefices were sold and churches treated as investment properties. It was not unusual for priests to live with wives or mistresses with full knowledge, even tacit approval, of their parishes. Still worse, instances of priests using their power and status to sexually prey upon young men, adolescents, and children were common and commonly known. In short, people had very good reason to question whether their clergy's ordinations were even legitimate and whether the sacraments performed by them were valid. It was of existential importance to their lives. The anti-Donatist position of the Church Fathers was being severely tested.

Soon after the reforming bishop of Toul, well regarded for his personal holiness, became Pope Leo IX in early 1049 CE, Peter Damian addressed him in the letter known as the *Book of Gomorrah*. The pope returned a short reply, and it has been customary to print this response as a forward to the *Book of Gomorrah*. Peter Damian's argument has many interrelated aspects, and a substantial part of his argument involves critiquing inconsistencies in the standard penances assigned to different offenses and arguing that penalties for clerics should be at least as strict as those for laity, not less.¹⁰ For our purposes, however, the particularities and the rhetorical intensity with which they are expressed may be bypassed; what are most important are the ecclesiological assumptions in the correspondence between Peter Damian and Pope Leo IX and how these are related to the biblical account of priesthood. Here I wish to make three basic points.

First, Peter Damian thinks it is quite legitimate to confront the hierarchy, even forcefully and bluntly, and he bases this on the example of the Old Testament prophets. In the *Book of Gomorrah*, he uses a good deal of space to lay out in detail the corruption and hypocritical inconsistency of many bishops and priests. What allowed such corruption to fester? At root, reformers like Peter Damian thought the precondition for scandal was a

¹⁰ This peculiar phenomenon was by no means unique to the eleventh century. See Patricia McGuire, "Cardinal Sin," *Trinity Washington University President's Blog*, July 27, 2018: "But the Church has a sad history of sometimes rendering unequivocally harsh judgment against those who violate even minor rules while looking the other way when its own ordained leaders violate the most sacred and profound rules about moral conduct and respect for human dignity" (www.trinitydc.edu/president/2018/07/cardinal-sins/; accessed July 17, 2023).

failure to understand the proper role of a bishop, especially as it relates to accountability. In the words of C. Colt Anderson,

Instead of seeing the bishop as a teacher who leads people by his humble example, whose authority is based on his service for the community, and who seeks to persuade people freely to embrace a Christian life, a number of medieval bishops frequently understood their roles as princes or lords of the Church, whose office unequivocally demanded obedience, and who pronounced the moral law by fiat. For Peter Damian and the medieval reformers, scandal is the inevitable result of collapsing teaching authority into the power to govern.¹¹

After diagnosing the problems of sin within the hierarchy, Damian frames his stance in the personas of prophets like Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. In section 18, he shifts from speaking in the third person about corruption to a first-person lament that blends his own concerns with the cries from Jeremiah and Lamentations, and it is clear he is self-conscious about this when he says, “this doleful expression, now elicited from me in sobs, is no less suitable than when it was borne from the mouth of the prophet.”¹² In section 21, he quotes Isaiah’s denunciation of the corrupt priests of his day in Isa 1:10–15 and insists that the same condemnation applies to corrupt bishops and priests of his own day. Anticipating a hostile reaction, he admonishes these clergy: “But to those among you who are angry with me and refuse to listen to the writer, at least listen to the one who speaks to you through the prophetic mouth.”¹³ Throughout the remainder of the letter he continually appropriates the warnings of judgment in Isaiah, Zephaniah, and Ezekiel as well as New Testament texts like 2 Peter. As such, he articulates his own confrontation with fallen bishops and priests as a continuation of the prophetic critique of the priesthood in the Old Testament.

Second, it is clear that Peter Damian’s invective, as strong as it is, had the aim of reforming and purifying the Church, not rejecting, discrediting, or dismantling it. This is clear not only from his adoption of the persona

¹¹ C. Colt Anderson, “When Magisterium Becomes Imperium: Peter Damian on the Accountability of Bishops for Scandal,” *Theological Studies* 65 (2004): 741–66, at 742.

¹² Matthew Cullinan Hoffman, *The Book of Gomorrah and St. Peter Damian’s Struggle Against Ecclesiastical Corruption* (New Braunfels, TX: Ite Ad Thomam, 2015), 126. All translations are from this edition.

¹³ Hoffman, *Book of Gomorrah*, 136.

of the weeping Jeremiah, but because he returns to this point repeatedly at key points in the argument. Woven throughout his prophetic condemnations is an anguished compassion for the repentance and reform of these sinful clergy and a distress that enemies of the Church have reason to gloat (see, e.g., section 18). His greatest desire is to see the purification of the Church (section 19). It is for this reason that Peter Damian's most common metaphor for the corruption within the hierarchy is a wound in need of healing.¹⁴ In addition, he drew upon the Church's traditional rejection of Donatism (see section 26) to reassure his contemporaries that, while individual clergy may stand under severe divine judgment, the state of such clerics did not invalidate or jeopardize the validity of the sacraments.¹⁵ Notably, he takes the same stance with regard to those who had purchased their ordinations (simony). In the second important work, *Liber Gratissimus*, which was written around the same time as the *Book of Gomorrah*, he defends the validity of the ordinations and sacraments of simoniacal bishops and priests. And he continued to advocate for this position even when it endangered him. In 1067, the bishop of Florence was accused of simony and Peter Damian insisted that all sacraments in the diocese were still valid even as he was confronted by a violent populace.¹⁶

Third, and crucially, both Peter Damian and Pope Leo IX assume that this critique can be leveled not only *despite* fidelity to the Church, but *because of* fidelity to the Church. This follows directly from the anti-Donatist distinction between the validity of the institution, on the one hand, and culpability and falling of some of its clergy, on the other. Both men saw such confrontation of corruption as a matter of divine obedience; in other words, it was not merely permissible, but imperative for the sake of the Church. In the midst of praising the letter, Pope Leo IX notes that "stirred up by holy rage, you wrote of such clerics according to your judgment; it is appropriate, as you desire, that we intervene with our apostolic authority."¹⁷ Citing Rom 1, Peter Damian observes that

¹⁴ It is interesting to note in passing that there is a parallel approach in Pope Francis's approach to evangelization, in which he commends viewing the world as those who are wounded and in need of healing rather than those who are wicked and in need of judgment. See Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, trans. Oonagh Stransky (New York: Random House, 2016), 6–18. It is also a theme on display in Pope St. John XXIII's opening of the Second Vatican Council.

¹⁵ Anderson notes a development in Peter Damian's thinking as the implications of the Donatist controversy were increasingly impressed upon him ("When Magisterium Becomes Imperium," 752).

¹⁶ Hoffman, *Book of Gomorrah*, 39.

¹⁷ Hoffman, *Book of Gomorrah*, 78.

those who are aware of corruption in the Church but look the other way are guilty of complicity in the sin (section 6).

Once again, he draws from the example of the Old Testament prophets to make his point. Especially important is his quotation of Ezek 3:18: "If I say to the wicked, You shall surely die—and you do not warn them or speak out to dissuade the wicked from their evil conduct in order to save their lives—then they shall die for their sin, but I will hold you responsible for their blood." (New American Bible Revised Edition). He then connects this with the Old Testament priest Eli, who incurred divine judgment because he failed to correct the corruption of his sons (1 Sam 2:27–36). Subsequently, the example of Eli became a standard feature of pleas for reform.¹⁸ Notably, Giambrone also draws on the story of Eli in a complementary fashion to show that the condemnation of Eli's line did not imply a rejection of the priesthood *qua* priesthood.¹⁹ Strikingly, Peter Damian extends this obligation to confront corruption even to the laity, including women. To make his point, he draws on Old Testament figures like Phinehas and women leaders like Deborah, Jael, and Judith.²⁰ Rather than betraying the Church, Damian sees in these Old Testament figures a model for restoring the Church's credibility by publicly demonstrating that her servants were willing to condemn and challenge sin whenever and wherever it occurred.²¹ But even more fundamentally, Peter Damian insists that confronting those who have fallen with the goal of repentance is a necessary part of loving one's neighbor, in obedience to the Gospel (section 26).

Father Alfred Delp, S.J.

The second instance from Church history which reveals how prophetic critique can arise from fidelity to the Church is from a much different time and circumstance: the martyrdom of the Jesuit Alfred Delp in Nazi

¹⁸ Anderson, "When Magisterium Becomes Imperium," 757.

¹⁹ Giambrone, *The Bible and the Priesthood*, 111–15.

²⁰ Interestingly, Anderson notes that, although Peter Damian was a strong proponent of papal primacy, he also thought the example of Paul correcting Peter in Gal 2 implied that even the pope could be subject to correction and, in extreme cases, even could be deposed ("When Magisterium Becomes Imperium," 759–63). Beginning in the fourteenth century and through the First Vatican Council, the problem of conciliarism versus ultramontaniam became a prominent feature of ecclesiology. See Francis Oakley, *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church 1300–1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²¹ Anderson, "When Magisterium Become Imperium," 765.

Germany. Born in 1907, he entered the Jesuits in the late 1920s and was ordained in 1937. Because of his association with the opposition group the Kreisau Circle, he was arrested on July 28, 1944, in the wake of Claus von Stauffenberg's failed attempt to assassinate Hitler. After suffering torture and interrogation, he was eventually put on trial before a judge with a virulent hatred of priests, especially Jesuits. His fate was a foregone conclusion, and he was executed on February 2, 1945, at the age of thirty-seven. In the intervening months, he penned a series of letters, meditations, and short essays which were smuggled out of his prison and have since been published. In these writings, we see a deeply human faith infused with the theological sharpness of someone who was a conversation partner of such towering figures as Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar.²² Here I would like to consider Delp's prophetic essay "The Fate of the Churches" against the background of how the Catholic Church related to the Reich.

While both the capitulation and absorption of the Protestant churches into the "German Christian" movement and admirable resisters like Dietrich Bonhoeffer are more widely known, the Catholic Church's relationship to the Nazi party had its own ambiguities. While Catholics were the most resistant voting bloc to Nazi ideology early on, after 1933 compromise or even support became increasingly common.²³ In fact, crucial to Hitler's consolidation of power was the cessation of opposition by the Catholic "Center Party," partly under the miscalculation of high-ranking Catholic politicians like Franz von Papen who thought they could manipulate Hitler to their own ends. With the signing of a concordat between the Vatican and the Third Reich on July 20, 1933, most of the remaining vestiges of resistance to Hitler in the Catholic Church in Germany collapsed.²⁴ More ominously, article 16 of the concordat required the Catholic Bishops in Germany to swear an oath of loyalty to the Reich, a provision the National Socialists had learned the Church was willing to make from the Vatican's earlier concordat with Mussolini in 1929.²⁵

How much to characterize this and subsequent moves by the Vatican (and the roles of Popes Pius XI and Pius XII more generally) as pragmatic

²² A helpful, brief biography of Father Delp in which the author characterizes him as a prophetic figure is Andreas Batlogg, S.J., "A Martyr to the Nazis," *America*, January 21, 2008, 19–22.

²³ John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism: A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis* (New York: Norton, 2022), 197–98.

²⁴ See the account in Robert P. Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 47–60.

²⁵ Robert Krieg, *Catholic Theologians in Nazi Germany* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 7.

realism versus moral compromise continues to generate heated debate, but one aspect of the concordat is clear: a central concern of the hierarchy was to protect its *institutional* standing, functions, and rights within Germany, and for this they were willing to trade the concession that clergy would stay out of politics.²⁶ However, the hidden trap in this deal was that the Church could easily be increasingly marginalized as more and more things could be deemed “political.” In such an arrangement, the cost of protecting the institutional structure of the Church in order to maintain access to the sacraments was the eventual loss of any prophetic voice the Church might have within society. In 1933, this was a trade the Vatican was willing to make.²⁷ By 1939, both Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany mostly celebrated Hitler’s assaults on Czechoslovakia and Poland.²⁸ For the remainder of the Third Reich, the Church provided little obstacle to Hitler’s plans, even despite some heroic prophetic voices such as Edith Stein and Bishop von Galen of Münster.

What led the Church to pursue a path that ultimately resulted in its own subjugation and marginalization within Germany? The most compelling answer is that many in the Church were espousing an ecclesiology that was too one-sided. In a balanced treatment of the Vatican’s dilemma, José Sánchez points out that the pope understood his primary responsibility to be with protecting the place of the Church in society because, “according to Catholic theology, the Church is the necessary means of providing the sacraments which give the grace needed for salvation. Without the priests to administer the sacraments and the freedom to receive them, Catholics can be hindered in their search for salvation.”²⁹ The problem, as Sánchez points out, is that the Roman pontiff also has the obligation to proclaim the Gospel, which includes being a voice for justice, and in 1933 Germany the Church thought it had to choose between the two. In the years since, and especially since the promulgation of *Lumen Gentium* at Vatican II (1964), there has been increased attention to the other aspects of the

²⁶ Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust*, 57.

²⁷ Interestingly, in the following decades a comparable dilemma played out in the rise of military dictatorships in Central and South America, particularly where the political theology of Jacques Maritain was influential. For an excellent theological and social analysis of how the Chilean bishops recovered the Church’s prophetic voice during the military dictatorship of General Pinochet, see William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 1998).

²⁸ Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust*, 126–29.

²⁹ José Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust: Understanding the Controversy* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 36.

Church's nature, such as the Church as the People of God, as the Bride of Christ, as a spiritual community, and as the Body of Christ.³⁰

This is the essential context within which to read Alfred Delp's essay "The Fate of the Churches."³¹ Imprisoned and awaiting execution, he provides a meditation on the destiny of the Church in the years after he is gone, and in doing so, he remarkably anticipates some of the ecclesiological course corrections of Vatican II. The essay begins rather bluntly with a warning: "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."³² He goes on to acknowledge that the Church can no longer expect obedience from people simply because it demands it. This is in part because of the rapidly changing values in the world, but also because "we have destroyed people's confidence in us by the way we live."³³ This is all the more damaging because, Delp insists, the world continues to witness the "spectacle" of a Church constantly beset by infighting and division.

On the basis of this diagnosis, Delp argues that the Church will recover its mission only if it focuses its energies on the true needs of humanity rather than the needs and desires of "a privileged clergy." Interestingly, like Peter Damian, Delp tries to effect this shift of perspective by characterizing this situation in terms of an *ailing* humanity and the Church's mission to provide *help* and *healing*. What is needed, he suggests, is for the Church to stop its obsession with asserting its own rights, with insisting that it is always right, with making the preservation of its own traditions its highest aspiration, and instead go to where people are in need, "walking by [their] side, accompanying [them] into the depths of degradation and misery."³⁴ Instead of insisting that it is *owed* reverence as a venerable institution, Delp suggests the Church should view itself more as a sacrament, "as a way and a means, not as a goal and an end in itself."³⁵

In a world besieged by ideologies of fascism, communism, and

³⁰ Avery Dulles writes: "I hold that Catholics today should not wish to defend a primarily institutional view of the Church. Reacting somewhat against earlier concepts of Catholicism, I take a deliberately critical stance toward those ecclesiologies that are primarily or exclusively institutional" (*Models of the Church* [New York: Doubleday, 1978], 2).

³¹ Alfred Delp, S.J., *Prison Writings*, with an Introduction by Thomas Merton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 94–99.

³² Delp, *Prison Writings*, 94.

³³ Delp, *Prison Writings*, 95.

³⁴ Delp, *Prison Writings*, 96–97.

³⁵ Delp, *Prison Writings*, 98.

materialism, some might think it wiser to “circle the wagons” and eschew any criticism of the Church. But Delp disagrees; rather, a purified Church living out Christ’s mission is the best hope in such a world. Elsewhere he asserts: “Whoever has fulfilled his duty of obedience has a right to cast a critical eye over the realities of the Church and where the Church fails the shortcomings should not be glossed over.” Aware of how this passage and ones like it will strike some readers, Thomas Merton comments: “It is impossible to dismiss these criticisms as the words of an embittered rebel, disloyal to the Church. Father Delp died for the Church. The words of one who has been obedient unto death cannot be dismissed or gainsaid.”³⁶ By drawing on the phrase “obedient unto death” in the great Christological hymn of Phil 2, Merton characterizes Delp’s prophetic confrontation of the Church and his subsequent martyrdom as an act of *imitatio Christi*. In fact, the German government offered Delp a reprieve from his death sentence if he would only renounce the Jesuits, but he refused. In his willingness to suffer through imprisonment and martyrdom out of devotion for the Church, Father Delp embodied what he prophesied the Church must become.³⁷ At the end of his important essay “Spirituality for the Age of Overkill,” Thomas Merton concludes that Delp rightly perceived that the choice confronting Christians in 1940s Germany was not *whether* to act like a prophet, but in deciding what *kind* of prophet to be: “The priest, the religious, the lay-leader must, whether he likes it or not, fulfil in the world the role of a prophet. If he does not face the anguish of being a true prophet, he must enjoy the carrion comfort of acceptance in the society of the deluded by becoming a false prophet and participating in their delusions.”³⁸

Delp’s prophetic stance was Janus-faced. In “The Fate of the Churches,”

³⁶ Thomas Merton, “Spirituality for the Age of Overkill,” *Continuum* 1 (1963): 9–21, at 15.

³⁷ Some scholars have also detected a theological potency in Delp’s martyrdom for others in the Catholic theological renewal of the twentieth century, e.g., with respect to Rahner’s idea of grace as an openness to the transcendent (see Philip Endean, S.J., “‘A Symbol Perfected in Death’: Rahner’s Theology and Alfred Delp (1907–1945),” *The Way* 43 [2004]: 67–82) or Balthasar’s concept of participation in the divine kenosis (see Peter Nguyen, S.J., *Against the Titans: Theology and the Martyrdom of Alfred Delp* [Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2020]).

³⁸ Merton, “Spirituality,” 20. Relatedly, one of Delp’s best-known quotes comes from an essay on the “Our Father” in which he says, “The most pious prayer can become a blasphemy if the one who offers it tolerates or helps to further the conditions which are fatal to humankind, which render him unacceptable to God or weaken his spiritual, moral, or religious sense” (*Prison Writings*, 108).

he speaks both to the predicament of modern humanity under the sway of evil ideologies and to the failure of the Church to renounce the preoccupation with rights and power which was making it too weak to confront these ideologies effectively. He perceives that the Church's focus on preserving institutional structures as a vehicle for *the sacraments* runs the risk of enervating the Church's life as *a sacrament* of God's presence in the world. To be effective in the mission of the Gospel, the Church must return to embodying the self-sacrificial compassion of Christ. Otherwise, the Church risks trying to gain the world but losing its soul (Mark 8:36).

Conclusion

A major theme in the history of the Church is the challenge of establishing authority without succumbing to the corruptions of power. In fact, sociologists of religion have pointed out that there is a broad tendency in the institutionalization of religion and its establishment as an influential part of society to drift toward corruption precisely because such success and status provides an opportunity for careerism and the likelihood it will be rewarded for advancing the self-preservation of the institution.³⁹ Thus, the history of the Church shows clearly that, for the Church to be effective in her mission, there must remain within the hierarchy of authority constructive avenues of accountability. Thus, the possibility of prophetic critique is essential to the exercise of priestly authority.

While the motto *ecclesia semper reformanda* is most often associated today with Protestantism, it has always been a concept central to Catholicism. As noted by Giambrone above, the key difference is whether that attempt at reform comes from within and aims at purification and healing, or whether it proceeds on the belief that separation is the only possible means of purification. In figures like Peter Damian and Alfred Delp, prophetic critique of the Church was undertaken out of love for the Church. So deep was their fidelity to the Church as the Body of Christ that these two figures were willing to suffer endangerment and death in seeking the Church's purification. Far from enabling corruption, the continued allegiance of such reformers positions them to confront a hierarchy in need of reform with an embodiment of Christ's love for his people, at once deeply sinful and yet holy (*Lumen Gentium* §8). Sadly, it also often

³⁹ This was one of the five "dilemmas of institutionalization" classically identified by Thomas O'Dea; see Thomas F. O'Dea and J. Milton Yinger, "Five Dilemmas in the Institutionalization of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 1 (1961): 30–41, at 33–34. My thanks to my colleague William Dinges for pointing this out to me.

positions them to suffer for it, but they must be willing to accept this as part of the call to follow Christ. In this, figures like Peter Damian and Alfred Delp embodied deeply the reality articulated by Romano Guardini:

Christ lives on in the Church, but Christ Crucified. One might almost venture to suggest that the defects of the Church are His Cross. The entire Being of the mystical Christ—His truth, His holiness, His grace, and His adorable person—are nailed to them, as once His physical Body to the wood of the Cross. And he who will have Christ, must take His Cross as well. We cannot separate Him from it.⁴⁰ 

⁴⁰ Romano Guardini, *The Church and the Catholic and The Spirit of the Liturgy* (repr. Hassell Street Press, 2021), 55. In the English-speaking world, Guardini is often credited with the quote that “the Church is the cross on which Christ is crucified,” but this is actually Dorothy Day’s oft-repeated paraphrase of this passage from Guardini’s *The Church and the Catholic*.