

Editorial

As we are all learning to live with the ongoing Covid pandemic, many can now return to their place of worship, albeit with some restrictions still in place. But many people in the world are unable to do this – indeed may never have done so - due to the persecution of their Christian faith by the authorities. According to Open Door, the non-denominational mission supporting persecuted Christians in the world, there are currently an estimated 340 million Christians around the world who face persecution and discrimination. Such people must live out their faith in secret, forever in fear of the knock on the door or of being denounced. And the penalties can be severe. One can hardly imagine the courage required to persevere with ones faith in Afghanistan under the Taliban, Iran, or Saudi Arabia, to name but a few countries, where apostasy from Islam is considered an insult to Allah, deemed to be punishable by death.

The cover portrait by Mike Quirke, is of Franz Jägerstätter who took an open stand against the evils of Nazism. His life and witness was highlighted by Jim Forest in the talk he gave as part of the Society's first ever webinar in May this year. Jim also spoke at the events in Edinburgh in December 2018, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Merton's death. In his sermon on the prophets given in the Episcopal cathedral, he said that 'We are called to make straight the way of the Lord – that is to become a people who would rather die than murder the innocent,' and asked for each of us 'the courage to say "no" when a "no" is needed.' Jägerstätter's witness, his supreme courage to say 'no' even in the face of his family, friends and the pleadings of the Church, was an inspiration to Merton, and helped to inform the retreat on the spiritual roots of protest, held at Gethsemani in November 1964, attended by Jim Forest. In his essay, 'An Enemy of the State', Merton wrote:

The real question raised by the Jägerstätter story is not merely that of the individual Catholic's right to conscientious objection ... but the question of the Church's own mission of protest and prophecy in the gravest spiritual crisis man has ever known.

Jägerstätter's witness and stand against an authoritarian regime is becoming more widely known, not least through the release in 2019 of the feature film, *A Hidden Life* (see review on page 11). Not every Christian is called to take such a radical stand; but many heed the call to

make a faithful life-long witness to the injustices of society. One such individual is Ian Cowley, who in his book, *The Contemplative Struggle*, tells of his years as a peace activist against apartheid in South Africa. As Ben Hopkinson challenges in his review (see page 44): 'The great question that runs through the book is: What does it mean to be held firm in Christ in the centre of our being and to live with integrity in the 21st century?'

This issue also carries a review of the film, *Day of A Stranger*, directed by Cassidy Hall, and reviews of books by Pierre-André Burton OCSO, Fiona Gardner, Paul Pearson and Sophronia Scott. The book by Paul Pearson, *Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton*, is a beautifully presented collection of Merton's own photographs. In 1958, Merton bought a copy of *The Family of Man*, the catalogue of the exhibition of photographs of the same name mounted at MOMA in New York in 1955. This provides the jumping-off point for Fernando Beltrán Llavador's article, 'Thomas Merton's "One only Kindness"', in which he asks the question, 'Who is our longing and whose our belonging?' In her article 'A Door Opening onto Theology', Elizabeth Rainsford-McMahon shows how skillfully Merton crafts 'still-points' in his writings. Also included are poems by Matthew Robb Brown, and an article by Sr Mary Luke, 'The Gracehoper was always Jigging a Jog', in which she urges us to be 'full of joy and hope, full of joyicity'. Finally there is an anonymous meditation for Advent, based upon one of Merton's journal entries from Advent 1966, 'Signs of Hope in Conflicted Times'.

It was during the Advent of 1944 that another Christian imprisoned by the Nazis for his stand against the regime, the Jesuit Fr Alfred Delp (he was executed in February 1945), wrote a profound series of meditations on the meaning of Advent. They were published in English in 1963 with an introduction by Merton. Fr Delp wrote: 'Unless a man is shocked to his depths at himself and the things he is capable of, as well as the failings of humanity as a whole, he cannot understand the full import of Advent.'

For Delp, and for Merton, the import of Advent is that it is not just a season but a continuous Advent. In the words of Fr Delp, it is 'a movement towards receiving the ultimate revelation with all the pain inseparable from that achievement.' Three years earlier during Advent 1941, Merton had entered Gethsemani. That year, just before Midnight Mass, he recorded in his journal: 'Lord, it is nearly midnight, and I am waiting for You in the darkness, and the great silence.'

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of The Prince of Peace, may this be the prayer of our own hearts this Christmas.

Stephen Dunhill