

Retrieving the Tradition

GOD IN THE CITY

MADELEINE DELBRËL

“If we are responsible that men have lost God, then yes, we should perhaps suffer; but above all we should give them back God.”



If, in my city and other cities, people say “God is dead,” and if, knowingly or not, Christians have been responsible, then I am responsible, because I am the one living today. Christians of all times are one, and I am not the only Christian to live. Myself and the others, what are we to do?

Place these dispossessed brothers and sisters at the center of our lives? Devote ourselves to their suffering, the suffering of the proletariat? Yes, because that is where they are. But if there hadn’t been this break with God they wouldn’t be there. What might we have learned of love, if we had realized that it suffices to suffer as they suffer? When will we get it through our heads that it was not *resignation* that Christ purchased with his death? To love is not to be resigned: not to oneself, nor to others. To love is to have the honor of joy—because it is to have the honor of God. Sometimes we ask ourselves whether our books are in good standing, whether we have suffered what we must. I ask myself whether we haven’t suffered too much, whether we haven’t suffered what we didn’t have to—suffer-

ings which, if we were just a little less lazy, could have been transformed into joy.

If we are responsible that men have lost God, then yes, we should perhaps suffer; but above all we should give them back God. We cannot of ourselves give faith, but we can give ourselves. Faith has put God in us, so we can give God while giving ourselves: to the city. The point is not to run about here and there, holding the suffering of others in our heart. The point is to stay near them, to allow God to dwell in our midst.

One day, to reveal his presence to a man who was living the exile of his people and their religious solitude, God made use of a little shrub. To show himself among the people of the patriarchs and the prophets as the living God, to speak his name and to call this man, God made do with a bush—but this bush was a fire. The life of the bush had become the life of a fire, a fire that came from God and that remained with God.

To give God to the world, to make him present, to make it so that he might pitch his tent with men, we don't need to be anything of any worth. A little shrub will suffice. But we must, without merit, without standing or grandeur, become, as we might expect, sacrifice; we must become a life totally given over to the service of faith, to the service of the very life of God.

It's a question of death and resurrection: of dying to what we were, when we were only men and women; of rising to what we are, as Christian men and women. It's a question of accepting faith as the living love of God, as the life of this love in our flesh, in our heart and mind. Not making of faith an intellectual contract we sign off on, but the covenant in life and for life, first expressed by the Holy Virgin: "Let it be done unto me according to your word."

The very words of the living love of God, buried in our wild brambles! Let us be docile enough that they might be free. The promises Christ makes to those who "hear," "guard," and "keep" them are clear and straightforward: they promise the presence of God in us, his action in us, his power in us, his light in us—provided we allow them to establish, freely and absolutely, their own proper order, which is the absolute primacy of the twofold commandment of love. If, by our total consent, God's love is allowed to reign freely in us, he will not only be present in us, he will be *manifest*. Something of God will become visible to

men—as much to ourselves as to others. Each circumstance will contain the conditions of some aspect of God’s love, a love that is lived in and through these circumstances, that is translated in the difference they make to our life today, for the people of today, through the tasks of today. And each of these acts, when joined to others, as each ember is joined to the fire, will be like the piercing word of a message read in a low voice. Each will bring with it the demand of Gospel love, as massive as it is particular, in which nothing, not even the smallest detail, can be set aside.

Living love, which is tireless in addressing the one for whom “God is dead,” will announce to him or her the calling of the children of God. In our tender concern for this person, there will be no gesture, no word, no beat of the heart, no anguished plea, no respectful silence that we don’t address to Christ in him, to Christ, the Son of God. For he told us that in all these things “you do it unto me.”

But be careful: if the Marxist for whom God is dead is a realist, God is infinitely more so. We must not fall into idealism, which would only serve to mask our omissions and half-measures under the guise of a life of prayer (rather, a life of thinking and dreaming), a life of silence (timidity), a hidden life (a life of hiding), a life of resignation (for the sake of others, of course). To steer clear of this kind of idealism, we need no other realism than the realism of God, the depths of which we have not yet finished searching. To avoid idealism, to get down to work, we need do nothing else than remain within the school of the Church, so as to receive from her the entire message of the Gospel teaching of love, to learn to attend to this message, to hear it and incorporate it according to the living laws which the Church gives us as well.

Above all, our realism will consist in a certainty and a will equal to the task of carrying out, in each of our endeavors, one unique and irreplaceable thing: the enacting of a love that is the very will of God. In this way, everything will acquire vast dimensions, no longer taking its measure from the things of this world, but from God, who knows no measure. It is from *this* unique “power source,” a current of both light and strength, that we must draw our fidelity and our zeal. For we will have to provide everything: the glass of water; food for the hungry (true food for all who are truly hungry, real food and all the real means of giving it); shelter for the homeless; pilgrimage to prisons and

to hospitals; compassion for tears that are shed, both those we must share and those whose causes we must eliminate; friendship for each sinner, for those who are looked down on, for the average, everyday person, with all his pettiness and attraction to what lies in the shadows. All of this must take its bearings from the word “fraternal,” and must find therein its meaning and its fulfillment. For when our goods become the goods of others, they will finally be nothing but a sign of our life given for them, a life that belongs to them by right, indeed, a life that should no longer be our own concern.

The Christian who lives this way in the city will draw near, with his whole being, to the power of Gospel love. The reality of this love will burst forth, outside him as evangelization, and within him as illumination. He will find that to act is not only to illuminate, but to be illuminated; that if prayer is allowing God to act in us, it is also learning to do the work of God.

This Christian will be grateful, for all his acts will become the manifestation of a love without limit and without exception. Of this love Christ alone has said to men that we must not only receive it but also pass it on to others.—*Translated by Michael Camacho.** □

MADELEINE DELBRÊL (1904–1964) was a Catholic lay social worker who lived for many years in the heavily Communist town of Ivry outside of Paris.

* This text is from *Ville marxiste terre de mission*, vol. XI (Nouvelle Cité, 2014), 194–98. Translated and printed with permission.