

Daily Meditation 02-12-24, Dorothy Stang & Père Chenu: Teachers of Courage, Firmness, Resistance

Good morning.

Today we're meditating on Dorothy Stang and Father Chenu, teachers of courage, firmness and resistance. And I'm asking the question, what do these two special people have in common, besides their death dates, which were one day apart (although in different years).

And in addition to the teaching of courage and firmness and resistance, which we talk about in today's meditation, and also the fact that both of them were lights, and even lightning in the midst of darkness and thunderstorms, as described by the eulogist at Père Chenu's funeral -- another thing they shared in common was, of course, the overall struggle for justice.

The fact that Chenu has been called the Father of Liberation Theology, by the founder, if you will, of Liberation Theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez (the first one to write a book on that topic), is, of course very significant.

And Gustavo Gutiérrez studied with Chenu in Paris. And in fact, he's ending his life, not in Peru, but in France, with the very Dominicans' French Province that Chenu belonged to. But both of them were very committed to the struggle for justice among the poor. And, of course, Chenu teaching Gustavo Gutiérrez brought alive the concepts that Gutiérrez put into practice in his theology around justice.

And Sister Dorothy Stang lived this, very much, working for the peasants in Coroatá state where she lived and died. She worked there for almost 40 years. And her death was deliberately the result of her work, and that of many others, because the powers that be were not pleased with the attention finally being given to peasant farmers.

But another dimension, that Father Chenu and Sister Dorothy shared, was joy. They both were very joyful people, even in the midst of chaos, and struggle in their own lives.

Chenu wrote a book in 1937, about reinventing theological education. In 1942, five years later, it was put on the index [of prohibited books] by Rome. And of course, he was president of the school where he was trying to redesign education, and of course, he was immediately fired, lost the job. As he put it, "I was in disgrace for many years."

In the 1950s, he supported very strongly the worker-priest movement in France. There were over 90 Dominicans involved in that movement at that time. And the Pope forced that movement to shut down. Chenu was the theologian behind it, so once again, he was disgraced.

He was exiled from Paris, where he was teaching at three different universities. And living in the Dominican community there, he was exiled from his community and he had to quit his teaching at three

different universities, and leave Paris. He wasn't allowed to return until 1962, when a new Pope, John the 23rd, launched the Vatican Council. Interestingly, exactly 20 years after his book was put on the index.

But all this time, all his struggles, he kept his joy. He was a very joyful human, and he used to bring joy alive in others, and many stories about that from his own province.

And those who knew Sister Dorothy, know that she had a strong sense of joy and playfulness as well.

In her book, "Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen," she has lots of drawings. They're all playful drawings, on many pages in this book. And it just shows that she was that kind of person. And this particular book was found by her bedside, after she was murdered.

So here's here's one such picture, with a lot of circles, and especially spirals. And so much of it is very playful. They're birds and fishes flying, corresponding to the teaching from Hildegard that says, "just like the fishes that dance in the waters of trust, God feeds the contrite with nourishment of life." So she didn't just read the book; she had her colored pencils with her, playing with it as well.

Now this book was given to me by her brother David Stang, and it is a beautiful gift from him. And it includes in a plastic bag, what he writes here, "Sand, dirt, and Dorothy's blood mixed from Bon Esperanza, where she was murdered," and the date of 2/22/2005. He gave it to me. So Hildegard herself is something that Chenu and Sister Dorothy had in common.

Of course, Dorothy got this book from our school, The Institute of Creation Spirituality. And she really loved Hildegard. She went back to the Amazon and often did circle dancing, chanting Hildegard of Bingen's phrases, that we used to do in our classes.

And Chenu himself, in the 1930s, taught courses on Hildegard. And, of course, we were teaching courses on Hildegard, including a music course to sing her music, "Art As Meditation." And it was a wonderful class, and many students had profound mystical experiences while singing her music, which was her intention in her composing, and leading song at her monastery in Germany.

It's so demanding of breath to sing her music, that you either get high, or you faint! And a lot of our students got high, singing Hildegard's music. And clearly, I think, our Sister Dorothy was one of those.

So these wonderful combinations of joy and playfulness, childlikeness, come together with the seriousness of challenging powers and the forces of injustice. It's a part of Dorothy Stang's story, and was certainly part of Chenu's story, as well as his teaching.

Thank you. See you next week.