

Anchor
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Commitment, Faith, Reconciliation: Muste

Editor's note: This week the Faculty Focus column features the text of Dr. D. Ivan Dykstra's eulogy to Rev. A.J. Muste, Hope alumnus who died recently. Dr. Dykstra, professor of philosophy and chairman of the philosophy department, delivered the eulogy during Wednesday chapel.

By Dr. D. Ivan Dykstra

'Tis a proud privilege indeed to have the opportunity to say something now about A.J. Muste. My credentials, I know, are inadequate; but my debts are very great.

My memories of A.J. go far back. I cannot, indeed, remember a time when his name was not an honored one in my father's house. What he (and Gandhi) wrote we read at family devotions as commentary on what the New Testament might mean for our times. Later, as a struggling preacher plunged fresh from seminary into a war-committed parish in a war-committed world, 'twas A.J. who saved my day, simply by being a living demonstration that under even those conditions - no, particularly under those conditions—Christian preachers have a relevant, healing thing to say.

BUT TO HAVE KNOWN A. J. is to know, too, that no words could add to or even capture his stature. Fortunately, one need not search for words with which to praise; one needs only to describe, for in his case to describe him is to praise him.

Let there be, then, but a few words, but write these words large when you write them about Muste;

and do not leave any of them out, they hang together.

The first must be commitment. He more than most saw long ago that to be Christian means to be committed, and unconditionally. What some of you are now learning by reading books by Bonhoeffer some of us learned longer ago, sitting under the searching personality of A.J.

AND TO BE COMMITTED then was different from being committed now, and harder. Now commitment is in the air, the thing to do; the committed are "in." Then they were "out," the alone, the friendless, the odd ones, and therefore the suffering ones.

And no church sustained commitments then. His church talked war, but Muste talked peace. His church invoked the easy sanctities of nationhood; Muste wrestled toward a higher right. The church's magic word was "patriotism;" Muste's magic word was "love." With his church absorbed in its theologies, Muste lived by action. When his church sold out for public respect, Muste dreamed only of radical justice.

And if today the church is clearer in her calling to be prophetic, and surer she is Christ's, some of it is because A.J. was there to blaze some trails, and to bring a whiff of New Testament living into the dark places of an establishment grown cold and smug and tired and comfortable and flabby.

BUT THE GREAT thing about the commitment was that there was

no mystery about it and no fanfare. 'Twas natural; it fitted him so well. And seeing this in him, men who would not have believed it could only say, "Why not?" Commitment was, in a way, effortless. Pacifism was for him not a desperate, dogged puritan effort to blindly obey a command on stone or in a book; it lay in a heart that was agape at the wonder which life is, and stunned beyond belief at everything that wounds or mutilates a living creature.

Commitment had integrity because integrity meant commitment: If one said he was Christian, then he acted like a Christian. It was a simple as that. So A.J. did not sit moping about in corners or aim to go to pieces; he was the splendidly healthy, whole man: act and word were always one.

They faulted him for his commitments. "Fool!" they cried; or "traitor," "absolutist," "the perfect innocent," "the man who never learns," "the pest"—It's hard to know which term was meant to do the greatest hurt. But none did or could. For A.J. had his answers:

"IF HIROSHIMA and Vietnam be wisdom, for God's sake, let's be fools!"

And behind the commitment lay a faith. And what a faith! And we should let it go at that; the faith was there and that's enough. By faith there was an invincible "yes" for what he did. Why analyze to learn what made it go and so risk losing it?

A genetic accident? Maybe. A lucky psyche? A heavenly vision? All of this and more perhaps to make this Abraham joyfully a little like that older one, the one willing to stake everything on the pursuit of faith's vision, not knowing—or caring much—just where it might get him, but knowing that where it led was good. The indomitable will—you saw it etched in that fiery face and unsagging body.

But there was more: The certainty that in the radical justice he preached he had, behind all the facades and struttings of human might and militance, a sure ally; the deepest conscience of even the worst of men was on his side. A.J. simply knew that that was so.

AND THEN THERE was more even than that. Do not read this as an effort to rehabilitate him by proving how orthodox he was. He was the first to refuse to make an idol of some orthodoxy. But orthodox or no, there was no time really when the faith was not a deeply religious one; for it was the belief that what was deepest in the universe was on the side of what was noblest in mankind. The ideal of a just and peaceful order did not dangle in a vacuum; it had cosmic support, and the name for that cosmic support was God, and God not as passive, placid by-stander, but God as the actively engaged.

So even the excursion into Trotskyism made some sense; for that, too carried with it the intimation that the stars in their courses were fighting on the side of right. And even this excursion had this bit

of the Biblical about it. For should the church of the elect falter in God's mission, then the God who could raise up children for Abraham out of paving stones—this God might just have raised up Marxism as the instrument of his indomitable purpose for justice.

AND WITH "COMMITMENT" and "faith" a third word. If the commitment could be adamant because the faith was strong, maybe the faith could be strong because the end was pure. A.J.'s monument is finally not just the peace union or the labor temple. These—stages on the way—finally I think, emerged into the larger concept: the "Fellowship of Reconciliation." For in retrospect it was the dream of "reconciliation" that gave the broad sweeping strategy for this multifaceted life.

The tactics and the middle targets might change from year to year or week to week. The grand target held it all together; 'twas "reconciliation." With that as guide, wherever there was brokenness, A.J.'s heart was there. And no amount of rationalizing could spoil or blur for him the certainty that peace is unconditionally better than war and healing better than hurting.

AND NOW, WHEREVER the world's hurt ones dare to dream of better things, the dream will burn a little brighter, because A. J. has passed this way, and thrown across our sky the brave slogans of hope. Abraham Johannes Muste, we salute you proudly. May you now rest in peace.