

Friend of God: Andre Trocme
Exodus 3:1-12; John 15:12-17
February 15, 2009

Andre Pascal Trocme was born on Easter Sunday in 1901 in the city of Saint-Quentin in northern France. He was a man over six feet tall, fair-skinned with piercing light blue eyes. His mother was German; his father a Frenchman and very successful manufacturer of lace. His upper class family lived in a house with 12 bedrooms. His early schooling was at home with a private tutor.

A significant experience in Trocme's early life was the death of his mother when he was age 10. His father was responsible for the automobile accident that killed her. Andre forgave his father and gained an awareness that human life is infinitely precious.

As a youth he was a member of a Protestant organization of young people who met regularly for Bible study and prayer. Every day they would take a large potful of vegetables to the Russian prisoners held in nearby camps. One day he saw a group of wounded German soldiers marching through town. Trocme was so moved by the sight of one whose lower jaw had been lost in combat that he found his hatred turning not against the enemy but against war itself.

A few days later he met a German soldier on the staircase of his own house, part of which was being used as military quarters. The German stopped, looked kindly at the lad, asked "Are you hungry?" and offered him a piece of black potato bread.

"No," Andre answered in German, "but even if I were hungry, I would not take bread from you because you are an enemy."

"No! No! I am not your enemy," the soldier said.

"Yes, you are," the young man persisted. "You are my enemy. You wear that uniform, and tomorrow you will perhaps kill my brother, who is a French soldier fighting against you, trying to get you Germans out of our country. Why have you come into our country carrying war and suffering and misery?"

"I am not what you think," he answered. "I am a Christian. I shall not kill your brother. I shall kill no Frenchman. God has revealed to us that a Christian must not kill, ever. We never carry arms. One must refuse to shoot. Christ taught us to love our enemies. That is His good news, that we should help, not hurt each other."

Andre Trocme had met his first conscientious objector. This experience, added to his mother's death, his Christian fellowship, the German with the missing jaw, and his reading of the Sermon on the Mount deeply influenced his growing conviction toward nonviolence.

After the war he studied theology at the University of Paris and joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an international pacifist organization. On a scholarship

he went to Union Theological Seminary in New York City to study the Social Gospel. While there he was a French tutor for the children of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

In the fall of 1925 he met Magda Grilli. She had been born in Florence, Italy, also in 1901. She was studying to be a social worker and Trocme was attracted to her simple care for others, both emotionally and in action. He proposed marriage to her, saying, "I shall be a Protestant pastor, and I want to live a life of poverty. I am a conscientious objector, and that could mean prison as well as all sorts of difficulties." Magda accepted and they set sail for France where they were married. Four children were born to them.

Trocme became a pastor in the Reformed Church of France. In his first two parishes in northern France he served poor industrial laborers and miners. In 1934 he moved his family to Le Chambon in Southern France. It was a community of 3,000 persons, with two thirds of them living on farms in the surrounding area. It was a tourist city, bustling with activity during the summer but cold and passive during the winter. Trocme characterized the village as moving toward death. He took it upon himself to transform the town by starting a secondary school to prepare students for university. It drew students and faculty from around the world. The school promoted a spirit of nonviolence, internationalism, and peace.

In the years between 1938 and 1940 Hitler's Germany was growing in military power and the fear and hatred of Germans was rising in France. The local presbyterial council in Le Chambon endorsed Trocme's nonviolent stance and vowed to support him if war came and he was legally designated as a conscientious objector. In June 1940 France fell into the hands of Germany. Northern France was occupied by the Germans but southern France was as yet unoccupied.

One day Trocme's school received an order to ring the bells at a certain time expressing solidarity with the national government of France. Trocme instructed the custodian of the bell not to do so. When questioned by others, the custodian, a woman named Amelie, stood in front of the locked doors with her arms outstretched and replied, "The bell does not belong to the marshal, but to God. It is rung for God - otherwise it is not rung." Amelie was one of many villagers who shared Trocme's spirit of resistance.

The winter of 1940-41 after the German occupation of France was a most ferocious one. One evening as Magda Trocme was kindling a fire, a knock came at the presbytery (or parsonage) door. There stood a German Jew, visibly hungry, shawled in a blanket of snow. She had fled from Hitler's Germany to northern France and kept running until she entered the Free Zone in the south. She said she had heard that in Le Chambon somebody could help her. Could she come into the house? Magda replied, "Naturally, come in, and come in." This was the first of 2,500 Jewish refugees who were to find safety in Le Chambon, "city of refuge." For

the four years of the Occupation Magda and the other residents of Le Chambon knew that turning someone away from one's door is not simply a refusal to help; it is an act of harmdoing. A closed door is an instrument of evil. Thus the doors of Le Chambon remained opened, day and night, to hundreds of refugees.

A network to assist refugees was developed in the tiny village. False identity cards and ration cards were designed to protect against roundups and against hunger. With the assistance of the Quakers, the Chambonnais established several houses for refugee children whose parents had been deported to forced labor camps. There was also a group of 13 people who met in a Bible study class with Trocme every two weeks. Then they went to thirteen different areas of the parish and led similar classes. These thirteen local leaders were the backbone of the parish as far as sheltering and hiding refugees was concerned. Through them nonviolent resistance in Le Chambon developed its basic theory and practical applications. In those class meetings they made plans for "overcoming evil with good." They lived the story of the Good Samaritan and the principles of the Sermon on the Mount.

In the summer of 1942 the Vichy police came with two buses and demanded from Trocme a list of the names and addresses of Jews hiding in Le Chambon. Trocme replied that he did not know the names of the persons, which was true because they had false identity cards and he did not know their real names. He went on to say, "But even if I had such a list, I would not pass it on to you. These people have come here seeking aid and protection from the Protestants of this region. I am their pastor, their shepherd. It is not the role of a shepherd to betray the sheep confided to his keeping."

That Saturday night the Boy Scouts and Bible class leaders went to certain outlying farms to warn the Jews to flee into the woods. On Sunday the police searched the village houses and the surrounding farms, calling for identity papers from everyone, but they found only one Austrian Jew, who was arrested. He sat in one of the buses, surrounded by several policemen. Jean-Pierre, Trocme's oldest son, gave the Jew his last piece of rationed imitation chocolate. Others brought more presents, and soon the quiet little man had a pile of gifts beside him almost as big as himself. He was later released because he had only two grandparents who practiced the Jewish religion.

One evening in January 1943 there came to the presbytery door one of the top leaders of the Reformed Church of France. He demanded that Trocme stop helping refugees. Trocme refused to stop, but he did submit his resignation as pastor to the presbyterial council of Le Chambon. Their reply was unanimous on two counts: a flat refusal to accept that resignation, and strong, clear encouragement that he should go on helping Jews and other refugees--against German orders, against French laws, and against his own church's wishes.

A few weeks later two Vichy policemen arrived at the presbytery to arrest

Trocme. Trocme was out visiting his parishioners in the countryside so they waited for him. Trocme returned home two hours later to be arrested. Before they left, Magda invited the two policemen to have dinner. The family sat down to eat with the officers, but the chief of police did not have the heart to eat, and his face hung down almost to the plate in his misery. Soon after the meal began, parishioners started coming into the presbytery to say good-bye to their pastor. Most of them were crying. As they embraced Trocme, they put precious gifts in his hands. There were candles, sardines, chocolate biscuits, warm stockings, a big sausage, and a roll of toilet paper, a rare commodity in those poverty-stricken days. The two officers watched with amazement; then the chief began to weep over his untouched food. When Magda noted that Andre would have no matches to light the candle, the chief of police reached into his pocket and handed over a box of matches.

As the three men left the presbytery and walked to the village square, the street was lined with villagers, parishioners, students and teachers at the school, and even refugees, singing the old Lutheran hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." On the way out of town the officers arrested Edouard Theis, Trocme's assistant minister and head of the school.

The prisoners were taken to a concentration camp where they were warmly welcomed by their fellow prisoners. Soon Trocme and Theis began leading Protestant worship services three times a week which were attended by overflowing crowds, most of whom were Communist. There within the concentration camp the two men were creating another Le Chambon.

After a month of incarceration, the two Protestants were called to the camp director's office, where they were told that they would be released. But first they had to sign a paper in which they pledged to obey all orders of the French government. Trocme and Theis refused to sign and were sent back to the barracks. The next day the two pastors were called back to the office and released without signing the oath. A few days later their fellow prisoners were deported to concentration camps or salt mines where they died.

In August 1944 the battle for the liberation of France began and culminated the next month. As the French began to conquer the Germans, Andre Trocme kept faith with his pledge of nonviolence and did much to prevent the German soldiers from being massacred.

After the war Trocme set out to rejuvenate the School in Le Chambon. A few years later he accepted the position of European secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Later he became pastor of Saint-Gervais, one of the oldest parishes in Geneva. He held this post until his retirement. He died in 1971, a year after he retired from ministry. In 1972 the state of Israel posthumously awarded Trocme the Medal of Righteousness. The certificate described him as a man "who, at the peril of his life, saved Jews during the epoch of extermination."

Andre Trocme lived with the belief that every human life is precious. The only enemies are suffering and killing; every human being is a friend. Every person, Jew and non-Jew, German and non-German, has a spiritual diamond at the center of his or her vitality, a hard, clear, pricelessly valuable source that God cherishes. That is what he meant when he said to authorities who came seeking Jews, "We do not know what a Jew is. We know only men." Trocme's ethic and action were inspired by the example and words of Jesus. His obedience to Jesus was not like the obedience of a soldier to a military leader; it was more like the obedience of a lover to his beloved. He wanted to be close to Jesus, a loving disciple who followed in Jesus' footsteps. Andre Trocme, follower of Jesus Christ, mentor and model for modern disciples of Christ.

The resource for this sermon was *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, by Philip Hallie (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

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