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The Commemoration of Dag Hammarskjöld, Peacemaker¹

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Today we remember one of the saints of our own times, the Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld. Hammarskjöld was born July 29, 1905, the son of a high ranking Swedish career politician. He studied law and economics in Uppsala and Stockholm, and became an economist and career diplomat. He joined the Swedish civil service in 1938, serving in the Ministry of Finance, and became president of the Bank of Sweden. From 1947 he served in the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1951 he became Minister of State and Deputy Foreign Minister.

In 1953 he was elected Secretary General of the United Nations, and in 1957 was elected to that post for a second term. His tenure as Secretary General spanned one of the stormiest periods of the modern era. He had to deal with the fallout from the Korean War, the crisis over the Suez Canal, and the independence and eventual break-up of the Belgian Congo. While on a mission to the Congo he was killed in an airplane crash on this day [September 18] in 1961 in northern Rhodesia, now Zambia.²

To his friends and associates Hammarskjöld did not appear to be a religious man. However, after his death his personal journal was discovered. This book, published in 1962 as “Markings” revealed him as man of deep spiritual insight and personal faith. This revelation was embarrassing to many of his colleagues, both in Sweden and in the United Nations. But the book documents his wrestling with the truth of Christian revelation and its meaning for his professional and personal life. He seems to have combined his career as a diplomat with a deep desire for personal spirituality, working out his faith in the service of humankind. For him, the realm of spirituality could not be separated from the realm of action in the world.

The question remains, though: Why is this man included in our calendar of commemorations? Was he any more of a “saint” than any

other Christians who work tirelessly at their professions and maintain private spiritual lives?

Hammarskjöld's early spiritual life offers us few clues. The Hammarskjöld and Soderblom families were close. In those years, Archbishop Nathan Soderblom was working to unite Churches and bring the spirit of the Gospel to bear upon social, economic, and industrial relationships in Sweden. In Dag's early years Uppsala was alive with such new intellectual currents emanating from the church. However, religion in the Hammarskjöld household was a matter of tradition and conventional observance. His father was a traditional High Church Swedish Lutheran, while his mother was Low Church in her outlook, and evangelistic religion played an important role in her life. There is little to indicate that either parent's faith affected Dag's own spiritual development. In fact, in his twenties, his mind rebelled against church and doctrine, and he was drawn to a sort of nature mysticism by the Swedish countryside.

In 1954, on an American radio program, he spoke of his faith with these words:

I now recognize and endorse, unreservedly, those very beliefs which once were handed down to me.... The language of religion is a set of formulas which register a basic spiritual experience. It must not be regarded as describing in terms to be defined in philosophy the reality which is accessible to our senses and which we can analyze with the tools of logic. I was late in understanding what this meant. When I finally reached that point, the beliefs in which I once was brought up and which, in fact, had given my life direction even while my intellect still challenged their validity, were recognized by me as mine in their own right and by my free choice. I feel that I can endorse those convictions without any compromise with the demands of that intellectual honesty which is the very key to maturity of mind.

Other than this, there is little in Dag's years as a professional diplomat to testify to any Christian faith. He appears never to have attended public worship as an adult. His biographer mentions briefly that he kept a Catholic hymnal at his bedside.

Why then is Hammarskjöld in our calendar of saints? Because he kept a spiritual journal? Because he had a profound inner faith? Because he was successful as a diplomat, and saved the United Nations from being overwhelmed by American and Soviet criticism?

Many of us who discovered Dag's "Markings" in the late 1960s have come to revere him as a person of integrity and depth. He

appears to understand Jesus better than most biblical theologians. He appreciates the agony of the “dialectic of dying for the world.” As one colleague has put it, Hammarskjöld is like raspberry bushes growing near a fence: they bear fruit on both sides, inside the church’s fence and outside in the world. Like Bonhoeffer, another Lutheran hero of my generation, he showed integrity of faith and life, and did not shirk from uniting faith and action in the world.

Yet he died a closet Christian, who lived his ethics of faith without any outward religious practice. How can we hold up such a person as an example and mentor today? I do not have an answer to this. The only explanation I can offer is to take an oblique path, make a kind of a knight’s move into another territory where there may be some parallels.

As a nominal Lutheran and closet Christian, Dag is still one of us today. And he is very much like many of the quiet, hard working people with whom we work and minister in our tradition. Here is what I mean. Ever since I can remember, I recall being scolded and chastised and ridiculed by other Lutheran folks for how cool, physically uptight and un-evangelical we are. “Don’t be so northern! Be expressive like the Latins. Move your body like the Africans. Witness like the evangelicals!” This still goes on today, and it has reached the point where many of us are ashamed of our tradition, who we are, and look elsewhere for our spiritual food and drink.

I won’t take this seriously any longer. We are who we are, no apologies necessary: a cool, quiet, northern people, who have much to offer. And Dag is one of us. Cool, quiet, private, cautious, slow to respond or to anger, unflappable, but always working for peace, reconciliation, and justice. *Who* even *knew* that he was a Christian?!

Perhaps this is what we have to offer to this new 21st century society: not excitement, pizzaz, flashy programs and multimedia worship, but thoughtfulness, struggle for peace, patience, profound private spirituality, silent witness in the world through actions as well as words.

We have never come up with a Billy Graham, a Chuck Colson, a Jimmy Swaggart, a Francis Schaeffer, a James Dobson, or a David Mainse. We cannot claim a Bill Phipps, a Desmond Tutu, a John Spong, or a Martin Luther King, Jr. But we *do* stand shoulder to shoulder with Philipp Melancthon, Johann Sebastian Bach, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Albert Schweitzer, Elizabeth Fedde, Chester Ronning, and Ishmael Noko.

And Dag Hammarskjöld. He didn't worship publicly. He didn't witness. He didn't sing a new song. He simply worked for peace. I'm still not sure how he got into our calendar of saints. But I'm glad he did. Amen.

Notes

- ¹ In the calendar of commemorations in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, September 18 is assigned to Dag Hjalmar Agne Carl Hammarskjöld. This sermon was delivered in 2003 to the Ministerium of the South West Conference, Synod of Alberta and the Territories of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.
- ² Sources used: Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964); Joseph P. Lash, *Dag Hammarskjöld, Custodian of the Brushfire Peace* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1961); "Dag Hammarskjöld, A modern Saint?" *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto, September 17, 1964) p. 7; Philip Pfatteicher, *Festivals and Commemorations: Handbook to the Calendar in Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980).