

Meditation on the Death of the Rosenbergs

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Summary: An empathic reflection on the last hours before the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg who were convicted of spying for Russia. Weaves images of children, fear of death, praying the psalms, and the duplicity of prelates who bless US warmaking. Says we must pray for mercy and have no part with the vindictive state. (DDLW #654).

At eight o'clock on Friday, June 19th the Rosenbergs began to go to death. That June evening the air was fragrant with the smell of honey suckle. Out under the hedge at Peter Maurin Farm, the black cat played with a grass snake, and the newly cut grass was fragrant in the evening air. At eight o'clock I put Nickie in the tub at my daughter's home, just as Lucille Smith was bathing her children at Peter Maurin farm. My heart was heavy, as I soaped Nickie's dirty little legs, knowing that Ethel Rosenberg must have been thinking, with all the yearning of her heart, of her own soon-to-be-orphaned children.

How does one pray when praying for "convicted spies," about to be electrocuted? One prays always of course for mercy. "My Jesus, mercy." "Oh Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on them." But somehow, feeling close to their humanity, I prayed for fortitude for them both. "Oh God let them be strong, take away all fear from them, let them be spared this suffering, at least, this suffering of fear and trembling."

I could not help but think of the story in Dostoevsky's *Idiot*, how Prince Myshkin described in detail the misery of the man about to be executed, whose sentence was commuted at the last moment. This had been the experience of Dostoevsky himself, and he had suffered those same fears, and had seen one of his comrades, convicted with him, led to the firing line, go mad with fear. Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, as their time approached and many appeals were made, must in hoping against hope, holding fast to hope up to the last, have compared their lot to that of Dostoevsky and those who had been convicted with him. What greater punishment can be inflicted on anyone than those two long years in a death house, watched without ceasing so that there is no chance of one taking one's life, and so thwarting the vengeance of the State. They had already suffered the supreme penalty. What they were doing, in their own minds no doubt, was offering the supreme sacrifice; offering their lives for their brothers. Both Harold Urey and Albert Einstein, and many other eminent thinkers at home and abroad avowed their belief in the innocence of these two. They wrote that they did not believe their guilt had been proved.

Leaving all that out of account, accepting the verdict of the court that they were guilty, accepting the verdict of the millions of Americans who believed them guilty, accepting the

verdict of President Eisenhower and Cardinal Spellman who thought them guilty— even so, what should be the attitude of the Christian but one of love and great yearning for their salvation.

“Keep the two great commandments, love God and love your neighbor. Do this and thou shalt live.” This is in the Gospel, these are the words of Jesus.

Whether or not they believed in Jesus, did the Rosenberg’s love God? A rabbi who attended them to the last said that they had been his parishioners for two years. He followed them to the execution chamber reading from the Psalms, the 23rd, the 15th, the 31st. Those same psalms Cardinal Spellman reads every week as he reads his breviary, among those 150 psalms which make up not only the official prayer of the Church, but also the prayer which the Jews say. We used to see our Jewish grocer on the east side, vested for prayer; reciting the psalms every morning behind his counter when we went for our morning supplies. I have seen rabbis on all night coaches, praying thus in the morning. Who can hear the Word of God without loving the Word? Who can work for what they conceive of as justice, as brotherhood, without loving God and brother. If they were spies for Russia they were doing what we also do in other countries, playing a part in international politics and diplomacy, but they indeed were serving a philosophy, a religion, and how mixed up religion can become? What a confusion we have gotten into when Christian prelates sprinkle holy water on scrap metal to be used for obliteration bombing, and name bombers for the Holy Innocents, for Our Lady of Mercy; who bless a man about to press a button which releases death on fifty thousand human beings, including little babies, children, the sick, the aged, the innocent as well as the guilty. “You know not of what spirit you are,” Jesus said to his apostles when they wished to call down fire from heaven on the inhospitable Samaritans. I finished bathing the children who were so completely free from preoccupation with suffering. They laughed and frolicked in the tub when the switch was being pulled which electrocuted first Julius and then his wife. Their deaths were announced over the radio half an hour later, jazz music being interrupted to give the bulletin; and the program continuing immediately after.

The next day the New York Times gave details of the last hours, and the story was that both went to their deaths firmly, quietly, with no comment. At the last Ethel turned to one of the two police matrons who accompanied her and clasping her by the hand, pulled her toward her and kissed her warmly. Her last gesture was a gesture of love.

They were children of that race to which Mary, and Jesus and Joseph, the Holy Family, belonged. In their humanity they more closely resembled Jesus than we do who are not Jews. For that, too, we must love them. “Spiritually we are Semites,” Pope Pius XI said. For that we must love them. “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” For that saying we must love them.

Let us have no part with the vindictive State and let us pray for Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. There is no time with God, and prayer is retroactive. By virtue of the prayers we may say in the future, at the moment of the death which so appallingly met them, they will have been given the grace to choose light rather than darkness. Love rather than Hate. May their souls, as well as the souls of the faithful departed, rest in peace.