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FILM IN REVIEW; 'Bonhoeffer'

By ELVIS MITCHELL

Directed by Martin Doblmeier

No rating, 90 minutes

With his documentary "Bonhoeffer," which opens today in Manhattan, the director Martin Doblmeier has assembled a touching narrative on the nature of faith. The film is far more successful when raising questions of spirituality and Christianity than when dealing with the subject at hand. That is the German Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who stood early in his opposition to Hitler and whose need to be a part of restorative change during World War II involved him in a conspiracy to assassinate the Nazi leader.

Bonhoeffer's part in this plot on Hitler's life -- the most famous attempt, a bomb placed in a conference room that came close to achieving its aim -- cost him his own in the last days of the Nazi regime.

Bonhoeffer's family, a group of forward thinkers, is described early in the documentary as "conservative in the best way, open to something new but not losing touch with where they stood." The filmmaking isn't particularly stirring, but the film itself, Mr. Doblmeier's feature debut, is comparable to that admirable and unusual definition of the word conservative.

The movie uses a conventional three-act structure, and for those not familiar with Mr. Doblmeier's subject, the blueprint gives the mounting tragedy a grave integrity. It weaves interviews with Christian scholars, historians and Bonhoeffer's contemporaries with film clips of Germany during Bonhoeffer's lifetime while excerpts from his work are read by Klaus Maria Brandauer.

The film closely follows Bonhoeffer's maturation as a progressive thinker who was moved to action to stop a growing evil in the world, becoming an almost solitary German voice denouncing Nazi terror. Bonhoeffer's life, which was filled with drama and ended

on an extraordinarily tragic note, lends itself to chronology, leading the director to move the documentary on a steady, evenhanded course. He intersperses his narrative with interviews with contemporary figures like Archbishop Desmond Tutu, adding a ruminative appreciation of the ideals for which Bonhoeffer willingly sacrificed himself.

Fascinatingly, the movie evokes more passion when those being interviewed are speaking about the prerogatives of faith in the face of evil and judging themselves against what Bonhoeffer achieved in his lifetime. There is a powerful echo of the ethical questions they raise in the work of Mr. Doblmeier, whose impressive filmography includes the documentary "Thomas Jefferson: A View From the Mountain," which also addressed issues of morality in a flawed world.

At a time in the 20th century when Germany seemed to be closing itself off to the world, Bonhoeffer pushed himself to expand his worldview. He courageously denounced Hitler's anti-Semitic agenda and urged Germany's Christian churches to defend the Jews in their hour of need. He conducted his often lonely mission in the name of Christian morality while many others made an expedient peace with the Nazis.

What Mr. Doblmeier illustrates is his subject's determination to enrich his intellectual world with information about the ways other cultures used Christianity to enlighten their existence. In particular, Bonhoeffer's time in New York with Reinhold Niebuhr, the Protestant scholar who was one of the first to apply Christian principles against the oppressive forces of modern politics and capitalism, had a major influence on his thinking.

Bonhoeffer was enriched by his faith, and attending the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem and witnessing the rhetorical and philosophical powers of the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Sr. broadened his perspective. "The Black Christ is preached with rapturous passion and vision," Bonhoeffer observed.

Mr. Doblmeier recognizes that claims on Christianity were not limited to those seeking to do good. One of the most disturbing moments is a piece of film showing Hitler crudely using Christianity like a cudgel, intoning the words, "Now bless our struggle."

Such moments have a shocking power. Mr. Doblmeier uses them sparingly; he drops them in to give "Bonhoeffer" tone rather than bite. His film would benefit from more of a wallop, given the number of documentaries using Nazi Germany as a context. The director's heart is in the right place, though he seems to be shy about showing how big it is. ELVIS MITCHELL