



**Interview by Ronda Chervin of Alice von Hildebrand  
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Special thanks to Dr. von Hildebrand's attendant, Joy, for serving as go-between with Dr. Chervin on the questions.

**S. Mahfood:** Welcome, I'm Sebastian Mahfood and you are listening to WCAT Radio, the on air wing of En Route Books and Media bringing you the dulcet sounds of Catholic wisdom.

**R. Chervin:** Jesus, I thank you for this beautiful time where I can interview my oldest friend in the world. We've been friends for more than sixty years. And I thank you, dear Alice von Hildebrand, probably the greatest woman Catholic philosopher in the United States, my great mentor for over 60 years. I'm Ronda Chervin. I'm a convert from an atheist Jewish background. I converted through Dietrich von Hildebrand and Alice von Hildebrand in 1959. So now a question for you, dear Lily - Alice von Hildebrand's nickname is Lily, so we always called her Lily. So, Lily, I wish you could tell the people who are listening to this about the first book you wrote yourself *By Grief Refined*.

**A. Von Hildebrand:** Okay. It is important to recall that whatever happens in our lives is due to God, and He sends us a message through what happens. And so the whole question is, "Speak, O Lord, answer and listen." There are situations in our lives which are very difficult. And in each day of distress, or losing one's peace, one has to understand what God is telling us. There are situations in our lives that end unhappily. Now, we should not take this for granted but be certain that the words on our lips should be, "Not without you, O Lord." So, it seems to me that the question is always to be on one's knees, religiously speaking, so that we understand the message that God is sending us. And this is the way to holiness, which is not an easy way. And we need to say to God, "Without your help, O Lord, I can do nothing. With Your help I can transcend more than all this." So, therefore, the question is one of humility and trust. These are absolutely crucial. "Without you I can do nothing, and with your help, I can transcend mountains."

**R. Chervin:** Oh, that is so beautiful, Lily. So, I read that book *By Grief Refined* when Lily wrote it when her husband died around 1975. I read it then and loved it. It meant a great deal to me when I became a widow many years after that. And now, would you say something about your book *Memoirs of a Happy Failure*.

**A. Von Hildebrand:** My life has been an extraordinary life for many years. The "years" were totally different in the sense that I was getting my doctorate in philosophy, and I tried to apply to Catholic colleges, but even though my curriculum vitae was very good, I was systematically turned down. They said that we do not accept women to teach philosophy. That was the situation when I was 25 years old. That because you're a woman, it's a bit difficult in some of these situations. It was perfectly ridiculous, but I tried, and they all turned me down. And, I had to earn my living.

I asked God to help me. I went to confession to an Austrian priest whom I knew, and after confession we started chatting and he said to me, "Um, what are you doing?" and I said "Father, I am very close to my doctorate in philosophy and I'm desperately looking for a job, and in case I don't find it in teaching, I'll have to take a job as a secretary." And he said to me, "By chance, at a conference a few days ago, I met the chairman of the department of philosophy at Hunter college. And I will tell that Chairman about you and he will hire you and he'll let you teach." The chairman called me the very next day and said, "I just heard that one of our professors needs desperately an urgent operation, and we need someone to replace him." That was a Friday afternoon, December 5, 1947. He said to me, "Can you start Monday at 9:00 and teach from Monday to Friday fifteen hours from 9 to 12?" I had never taught in my life. And he told me, "Don't make yourself noticeable. Keep a low profile," and, honestly, I was terrified.

I went to an early Mass, and I said, "God, come to my help." And then I went to Hunter in Manhattan on 68th Street and entered the classroom and taught for three hours. When I left, I said to myself, "One thing is certain. Tomorrow, I'm going to be fired because my performance was pitiful." Then, I went to the chairman, and he said, "O, Madam, the girls like your teaching very much." And I was absolutely amazed. I was so successful in my teaching that within four months, two of my colleagues, one formerly Catholic and one who was a Jew, went to President George Schuster and said to him, "This girl does not belong here. She should be teaching in a small Catholic college in the Midwest." I was living in those days on 113th Street, and the telephone rang, and this voice said, "This is President Schuster. I think you should be teaching in a Catholic college somewhere in the Midwest." But I insisted I wanted to stay at Hunter, and I did so, in spite of much opposition. The conclusion is that God always helps us, but He tries our patience.

**R. Chervin:** Oh, dear Lily, what a wonderful testament.

**Von Hildebrand:** The most amazing thing, in 1968, I was teaching in the philosophy department, and the students were given the right to evaluate their teachers. And to my total amazement, I found out I had the highest report in the department and earned an

award for excellence in teaching. I was teaching them real things while most of my department was teaching them junk. I think it was Chesterton who said that the greatest criminals are not the Nazis, but the university professors who introduce relativism. If you want to know what is the pulse of the country, go to the university and find out if they teach the students truth. Believe me, relativism is a poison that basically leads a country to its destruction. God always helps us, but He often tries our patience.

**R. Chervin:** Now I was an atheist student, and by miracle, I met the Von Hildebrands, and I was a total skeptic and relativist. Afterward, I became a Catholic and got my Ph.D. studying with Dietrich von Hildebrand and other great teachers. I was sure that I would teach in places like Hunter to follow my great mentor Alice by teaching in schools that weren't religious. And I never got such a job, and I always taught in Catholic schools. If you Google Alice von Hildebrand, you can read her book *Memoirs of a Happy Failure* about all her wonderful experiences at Hunter, how many people became Catholics because of studying with her. And you can find her other books by googling her name. Now one of her other books is called *Man and Woman: A Divine Invention*. So, what's impressing me now is here is Sebastian Mahfood, a great scholar, a Catholic administrator, and also a philosophy MA - he has a Ph.D. in something else, but also a philosophy MA. I bet he's very impressed that Alice von Hildebrand in her 90's can speak so well and can explain philosophical things so well. Aren't you, Sebastian?

**S. Mahfood:** Yes, it is incredibly impressive, but I'm also in the presence of a philosophical superstar. So, thank you, Alice, for being here today.

**A. Von Hildebrand:** Yes, thank you.

**R. Chervin:** So, can you tell us something about the book, *The Soul of a Lion*?

**A. Von Hildebrand:** My husband was born in 1889. The milieu in his circle in Germany was totally relativistic. And then he converted, and his conversion was so credible because from the moment he entered the Church, he became a daily communicant, so he never missed Mass. It totally changed his life. And then to his joy and gratitude, he was instrumental in seeing his five sisters enter the Church and all of them became Roman Catholic. And this is what I write in the book that the Roman Catholic church is our true home. It was by his example that so many found their way into the Church. So, he became an apostle, with the soul of a lion because of the opposition of his colleagues.

**R. Chervin:** Because people don't know about the book, tell us about how your husband, Dietrich, fought Hitler.

**A. Von Hildebrand:** You know, that's another thing I can say about my husband. You know that Germany was a very powerful and very strong country. In 1870, they waged war on France, and France was crushed simply. And then political dissidence continued. And then in 1914, Germany invaded France through Belgium. And I know this part mainly because both my father and mother were involved. My father was in the

Belgian army. My mother was a teenager. And they signed a peace treaty with Belgium signed in the name of the Holy Trinity. When they waged war, the East side of France had been so [devastated] that they couldn't do anything, so they decided to come to Belgium and create these treaties. Germany was decisively defeated, and so humiliated, so totally crushed. This made the situation very unstable, and so they were at each other for a revolution. And this is when Hitler started to spread his poison. I say solemnly that my husband was the first, I don't say the only first since it's possible that another one was saying, "We cannot accept this poison." So, in 1923, he was already condemned to death by the Germans. And then the Nazi party was getting in.

At the moment when Hitler became chancellor in 1933, my husband left everything, his house in Munich and all. He left the country with \$100 in his pocket because he wasn't permitted to take more. He embraced complete poverty. Then, people said, "You're mad," and he said, "No, I cannot remain for 24 hours in a country that is headed by a criminal." And he always referred to Hitler as a criminal. Then, from this moment, he lived a life of utter poverty. First, he went to Italy, then he went to Austria and fathered a Catholic newspaper that was anti-Nazi. When Hitler invaded Austria, he escaped from the Nazis four hours before they came to arrest him in the middle of the night, and he had already escaped. Thank God, though he was a German citizen, he had a Swiss passport from his grandfather. Swiss citizenship is something very special because once you have it, you cannot lose it, and it is inherited. And so he had the Swiss passport. He went to Switzerland, and he lived exclusively on the charity of Swiss Catholics. From Switzerland, he went to France. He had a very, very modest position to the bishop of Toulouse and wasn't even paid a cent. When Hitler invaded France, he had to escape at the last moment, and he escaped from France and came to the United States. He could only say, "I cannot stand to live in a country for 24 hours that is headed by a criminal." He always referred to Hitler as a criminal.

Now many people don't know this story, that when he came to the United States he found out that a black priest had been invited to say Mass by a bishop, and when the priest entered the Church, everybody left. Dietrich was so horrified that he got in touch with the bishop who took care of this outrage. Dietrich taught in Harlem, which was considered amazing at that time.

**R. Chervin:** Lily is the one who edited this book and put it together of her husband, Dietrich von Hildebrand's, memories of all these battles that he fought. He was also a great fighter for Orthodoxy in the Catholic Church. And he wrote these landmark, prophetic books such as the *Trojan Horse in the City of God* and the *Devastated Vineyard*, which if you read them now you will find to be absolutely prophecies of what's going on in the Church today in many, many ways. We're going to close the program soon, but I ask you, Lily, what is your prayer for us?

**A. Von Hildebrand:** That you may have a passionate love for truth. And that you may strive for it, even if it means to be persecuted. The word "true" should make the heart beat faster. I was teaching at a secular university. I recall one day at a faculty meeting, I mentioned the word "truth" and immediately a colleague turned to me and said, "Whose

truth are you referring to?" And I was persecuted at Hunter. It took me 14 years to get tenure.

**R. Chervin:** I want to thank you so much. Now, Lily, in her late 80s, forced herself to learn how to write emails so she could continue writing articles. She writes all sorts of articles besides these books, but there are also lots of wonderful YouTubes where you can see her talking about all these wonderful subjects. So, if you put in her name in YouTube, you can see her from about 10 years ago or five years ago.

**S. Mahfood:** We hope you enjoyed the program and will join us back for another show on WCAT radio. This is Sebastian Mahfood. Good day.

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