

The Catholic Hierarchy in France during the War and the Persecution of the Jews

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The behavior of the French Catholic Church and its faithful in response to the antisemitic persecution, has never been absent from the debates about the past. During the past quarter of the century, however, the subject has risen to new tones with the reawakening of the Jewish consciousness and the many studies carried out that have placed the problem at the very core of Vichy historiography. Whence the question: Is the Church guilty for its silence and passivity in the face of the antisemitic policy conducted by the Pétain government and the extermination policy pursued by Nazi Germany starting in 1942?

The answer to this is far from simple. The data are complex and ambivalent, all the more so because we must guard ourselves against anachronism. Following the French defeat in the war, France was divided into two zones. The north was governed by the German occupation forces, while the south was unoccupied and a French government was established on July 10, 1940, headed by Marshal Petain and seated in Vichy. The Vichy government replaced the principles of the French Revolution (Freedom, Equality and Fraternity) with a return to nationalistic values.

It is a historical fact that in 1940 the problem of the Jews living in France was not a priority issue for the majority of the French people, for the French Catholics, or for the religious hierarchy, which was concerned chiefly with maintaining its institutions, protecting its believers, and adapting itself to a new regime that seemed to be sympathetic to the Church and its interests.

Although violent persecution of the Jews did not begin immediately, an official antisemitism began to rage as soon as October 1940 with the promulgation of the anti-Jewish legislation; French Jews were deprived of their rights and foreign Jews of their liberty. But these actions were taken and applied in an atmosphere of almost total indifference. People were much more concerned with the terrible trauma of the defeat, with the sundering of France into two

zones, with the absence of more than a million and half young Frenchmen still held prisoner in Germany. The French were not yet aware of the danger of Nazi ideology and could not imagine the deadly sequence of the first antisemitic laws. Accordingly, silence prevailed among the Catholic hierarchy when the first law against the Jews was issued, 3 October 1940.

In offering full support to the “National Revolution” regime installed by Marshal Pétain, and for fear of endangering the Vichy program of restoration of the country, the Catholic hierarchy refrained from protesting against the unjust decree punishing the French Jews and kept silent. They maintained the same silence when the foreign Jews (4 October 1940) were shamefully confined in “special camps” of evil character.

In June 1941, Vichy promulgated the second Jewish Law, which worsened the Jews’ condition. The episcopate on both sides of the line of demarcation persisted in its silence, even when, in the spring of 1942, the occupation authorities required Jews, living in the southern zone, to wear the yellow star. From then on the antisemitic measures followed one upon another at an accelerated pace.

On July 15 and 16, 1942, the great Velodrom d’Hiver roundup took place in Paris: 13,300 men, women, and children were arrested by the Paris police in advance of their deportation to the east. This shameful scene elicited no public protest from the Church. The assembly of cardinals and Arcbishops of the Northern Zone, met on July 22. In spite of their real disapproval, they maintained their public silence, leaving the faithful unaware of the danger of falling in with Nazi neopaganism and they chose to send a protest letter to Marshal Pétain personally.

Deprived of information and instructions from their hierarchy, most Catholics - like many other French people – were unaware of the dangers run by their Jewish compatriots following the armistice. We must also recognize that antisemitic and xenophobic propaganda - widely disseminated by the press in the late thirties and rendered more intense and attention - getting in the climate of political and economic crisis prevailing in France - had penetrated entire sectors of society. What is more, many Catholics carried with them the traditional Christian burden of anti-Judaism, more or less conscious, but

deeply rooted in the mind, on which the antisemitic slogans of the official press could build.

However, following the roundups of foreign Jews carried out in the Free Zone in the summer of 1942, there was a crucial change in the attitude of Catholics and their spiritual leaders. Several Bishops had proclamations read out in the churches and distributed quietly in the parishes, despite all the efforts by the Vichy police to intercept them. The result was that thousands of priests, monks, nuns, and laypersons performed acts of charity toward the persecuted Jews, acts that were at the same time a show of defiance toward the Pétain government.

There were a total of six of these indignant messages, which reflected the reawakening of the Christian conscience, written by three Arcbishops and three Bishops. From August 23, 1942, until September 20, Monseigneur Saliège, Arcbishop of Toulouse, followed by Monseigneur Théas, Bishop of Montauban, Monseigneur Delay, Bishop of Marseilles, Cardinal Gerlier, Arcbishop of Lyon, Monseigneur Vanstenberghe of Bayonne and Monseigneur Moussaron, Arcbishop of Albi wrote messages to be read out in their churches.

Of course the number of Episcopal protests may seem to be negligible - six, at a time when there were around a hundred Bishops in France. But their impact was considerable, because the denunciation of the brutality of the roundups was tantamount to an attack on the entire system of brutal persecutions and deportations. As a result of the movement in public opinion set off by these protests, from then on a rift gaped wide between the Church and the Vichy government, a breach that grew wider several months later, in the wake of the imposition of compulsory labor service. To tell the truth, a minority of Catholics had not waited for the Episcopal statements of the summer of 1942 to hear the voice of conscience; they had already rejected the poison of Nazi ideology and provided assistance and shelter to persecuted Jews, to the extent possible.

All over France, thousands of the clergy and faithful performed many similar acts of charity and discreet operations. If a majority of the Jews in France, aliens and citizens alike, survived the genocide it was to a very great extent

thanks to the help they received from Catholics and Protestants - sometimes as individuals, more often through their institutions (convents, boarding schools, presbyteries, associations, families) - where the potential victims were hidden and protected.

We must not deduce from the Catholic authorities' change of heart toward the persecuted Jews that they had reached the point of rising against the Vichy regime and condemning Pétain himself for supporting the roundups. There were many Catholics who were willing to hide, shelter, and rescue Jews, especially children, at the risk of their freedom or lives, but who had no doubts about the merits of the National Revolution. In 'When Memory Comes', Saul Friedlander relates that the religious institution that saved him, in full cognizance of the danger, venerated Marshal Pétain, whose portrait adorned the classrooms, dormitories, and dining room, alongside that of Jesus.

Yet that same year, during the summer of 1943, intervention by the hierarchy once again saved a number of recently naturalized Jews. The Germans, furious at not having been able to lay hold of the number of deportable Jews it had sought in the roundups of 1942–1943, demanded of Petain's regime to revoke the citizenship of naturalized Jews. Monseigneur Chappoulie, the official spokesman of the church, sent a letter to the government in which he solemnly warned that any new deportations would provoke strong feelings and protests in Catholic circles and force the Bishops to speak up once again. As a result, Petain rescinded the order.

This last example forces us to ask a question that cannot be evaded: in those troubled times, when so many of the faithful were deeply confused, should not the hierarchy have clearly restated the principles of justice and respect for human beings in order to light up the conscience of the faithful? Should it not have intervened whenever and wherever human rights as well as Christian rights were being trampled underfoot? The fact remains that, as a group, the Bishops declined to examine their consciences and simply considered that they had done their duty. By their lights, they had fulfilled their mission by protecting the institutions of the Church, especially the youth movements, and reached the conclusion that they had done well, without saying so and without showing it.

The years have passed, but the memory of the attitude of the French Church between 1940 and 1944 continues to trouble the French people and notably the Christians among them. This is why, on September 30, 1997, standing at a symbolic site - the Drancy camp – the episcopate issued a public statement of repentance, before God and before human beings, especially the Jews. After having recalled that throughout the occupation years the spiritual authorities were kept prisoners of an attitude of conformity, prudence, and silence, the authors of the declaration - the Bishops of the dioceses where the major internment camps for Jews had been located - recognized the failure of the French Church and its responsibility toward the Jewish people. They concluded: “We confess this fault. We implore God to forgive use and ask the Jewish people to hear this cry of repentance.”

Source: Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith and Ireana Steinfeldt, *The Holocaust and the Christian World*, Yad-Vashem 2000. pp. 83-86