

# THE RESPONSE OF THE GERMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH TO NATIONAL SOCIALISM

**Michael Phayer**

The German Catholic Church reacted in a variety of ways to Nazism during Hitler's twelve years of rule that spanned the last years of the inter-war period and the Second World War.

Before Adolf Hitler became chancellor, Catholic bishops warned the faithful about Nazi racism. In some diocese it was not even allowed for Catholics to join the National Socialist party because of the problem of racism. These warnings proved effective; very few Catholics voted for Hitler or the National Socialists during the elections between 1930 and 1933.

After Hitler came to power early in the year 1933 the church dropped its opposition to the Nazi party. Catholics were told that they were free to cooperate with the new government and even to join the party. Many Catholics did although they remained under-represented in organizations like the SS and SA. The critical mistake of the church was its failure to hold fast to the principle that Nazi racism was immoral.

The reason behind the church's unfortunate about-face concerned the Concordat, the 1933 agreement that defined relations between the German government and the Church. Concordats are accords, like treaties, between nation states and the Vatican state. Before the Concordat between the Vatican and Germany had been signed, Catholic newspapers predicted that the Church and National Socialism would be enemies. The ink had not yet dried on the agreement before the Nazi government broke it by sterilizing people on racist principles.

The main negotiator of the Concordat was the Vatican Secretary of State, Eugenio Pacelli. As a Vatican diplomat and later as Pope Pius XII, retention of the Concordat became one of the highest priorities of the Holy See. The advantage that the Vatican saw in the Concordat lay in the fact that the religious liberties that it guaranteed German Catholics and the church would persist long after Hitler's tenure in office as Chancellor of Germany was over.

But, because the Concordat defined church-state relationships, it constrained Catholics and their leaders whenever the Nazis took actions against Jews. This could not occur in a country like the

*'...The great and overwhelming majority of . . . Christians in the world, still believe that the Jews killed Jesus, that they are . . . rejected by God, that all the beauty of the Bible belongs to the Christian Church and not to those by whom it was written; and if on this ground . . . modern anti-Semites have reared a structure of racial and economic propaganda, the final responsibility still rests with those who prepared this soil and created the deformation of the people.'*

James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue*, 1934.

## THE CHURCHES AND NAZI PERSECUTION

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*'... there is a deep-seated moral crisis in Germany... What previously had been naturally understood as moral has been shattered... the silence of the bishops is perhaps even more fearful than anything else... it introduces uncertainty into the ranks of the faithful'.*

Waldemar Gurian, *St Ambrosius und die deutschen Bishöfe*, (1934).

United States where a 'wall of separation' exists between the church and the state and concordats are impossible. In Germany the Concordat meant that the church could not meddle in affairs of state that did not concern Catholics.

As the Nazis became ever more radical in their treatment of Jews, whose rights as citizens were restricted by the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 and whose very homes, synagogues and businesses were destroyed in 1938 during the national pogrom (*Kristallnacht*), German church authorities had to keep silent or forfeit the Concordat. Even so, the Nazi government constantly harassed the church by seizing its kindergartens, attacking its members on trumped-up moral charges, removing crucifixes from schools, closing down its presses and restricting its welfare program to caring only for the racially 'unfit'.

Pope Pius XI became increasingly alarmed late in his pontificate about racism in Europe and the United States and, in particular, Germany. In 1937 he released an encyclical, *Mit Brennender Sorge* (With Burning Anxiety), that was smuggled into Germany and read in March from all church pulpits simultaneously. This infuriated Hitler and the Nazis because, although the encyclical did not denounce them personally or National Socialism, it condemned racism.

In 1939 the Nazi regime began killing German citizens whom they singled out as racially unfit. Taking individuals from hospitals and homes for the mentally disadvantaged, Nazi personnel trucked these unfortunates to specially constructed gas chambers. Here they were killed and cremated. When word of the Nazi 'euthanasia' program gradually seeped out to the public, August Graf von Galen, the Bishop of Münster, spoke out explicitly against it, accusing the government of breaking the law. Von Galen's brave sermon did not stop the Nazis from continuing their killing, but it forced the program to go underground.

By the latter part of the decade of the Thirties church officials were well aware that the ultimate aim of Hitler and other Nazis was the total elimination of Catholicism and of the Christian religion. Since the overwhelming majority of Germans were either Catholic or Protestant this goal had to be a long-term rather than a short-term Nazi objective. Before it could be achieved Germany invaded Poland in the fall of 1939 and World War II commenced.

As a result of the war an undeclared truce governed relations between the Nazi government and the church. Hitler, not wanting to distract Christians from the war effort, restrained the anti-Catholicism of some of his top lieutenants like Martin Bormann and Josef Goebbels. The bishops, on the other hand, not wishing to appear unpatriotic in the eyes of Germans, backed the war effort even though it had been launched against Catholic Poland.

Unfortunately, nationalism, along with the Concordat, also restrained the bishops from speaking

### For Reflection

What problems did the German bishops face during the Third Reich?

What optional paths were available for German bishops when they faced conflict with Hitler and the Nazis?

In retrospect, was the Concordat an advantage or a disadvantage for the German Catholic Church?

out against the Holocaust. They had the opportunity to join resistance organizations like the *Kreisau* circle but refrained from doing so. Many of the bishops knew, however, about the murder of the Jews. In the middle of the war in 1943 the bishops hotly debated at their annual meeting in Fulda whether they should speak out explicitly about the Holocaust or confront Hitler with a direct accusation. Unfortunately, bound by the Concordat and their nationalistic feelings, the bishops failed to do so.

Even so, several bishops spoke out rather explicitly about the Holocaust. In November 1942, Konrad Preysing of Berlin preached on the right of all people to life, a sermon which the Gestapo said was an attack on the state. The following month Bishop Josef Frings wrote a pastoral letter, that was read at Sunday masses throughout the diocese of Cologne, cautioning the faithful not to violate the inherent rights of others to life,

*'... think, my Lord Cardinal . . . and discuss with other church leaders how you want to support the great task of National Socialism . . . and how you want to establish friendly relations with the state. Either National Socialism and the church will win together or they will both go under.'*

Hitler, speaking to Cardinal Faulhaber in Munich on November 4, 1936.

liberty and property even under wartime conditions and even if they were 'not of our blood'. In June 1943, Bishop Frings spoke out in the Cologne cathedral: 'No one may take the property or life of an innocent person just because he is a member of a foreign race.' This and other similar statements were enough to cause the Bishop to be harassed by the Gestapo.

Some years after the war and the Holocaust, German bishops, the successors of those who had lived through the Third Reich, regretted that church leaders had not spoken out more forcefully and explicitly about Nazi antisemitic policies and about the Holocaust. As the Second Vatican Council got underway the German bishops apologized publicly for the 'inhumane extermination of the Jewish people'. During council's deliberations in 1964 the German bishops issued a letter saying that they especially welcomed the council's statements on the Jews 'because we are aware of the awful injustices that were perpetrated against the Jews in the name of our people.'

In the words of the German Jesuit historian Ludwig Volk, it was a 'genuine and deplorable difference' that the Jews, unlike the 'racially unfit', mentally retarded, and handicapped, found no champion the likes of Bishop von Galen to attempt to stop their murder through a calculated appeal to the public.

#### For Further Reading

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