

# The Catholic Church and the Nazi Regime

by Michael Curtis



**Don't blame me for believing** in that regime. I'm under its spell, but how can I help it? Don't blame me.

Some statements are difficult to utter, in particular, "I'm sorry," or "I made a mistake." No one enjoys and few individuals are willing to admit being wrong. At best they may enter into a tortuous search to explain away past mistakes or wrong doing. It is a human failing that many, perhaps most, people are reluctant to admit mistakes. Nowhere is this more true than of deniers of the extent of crimes of the Nazi Regime, of the Holocaust, one of the most voluminously documented events in history. Instead of accepting the evidence of this documentation and the reality of the Holocaust, let alone expression of compassion about it, Holocaust deniers see it as a fictional or exaggerated presentation of events by a Jewish conspiracy, and attempt, at the extreme, to deny it entirely, or usually to minimize its

significance, or to explain it away.

In this way the Nazi Regime's intention and policy is seen as necessary response to changing events. The presentation of Holocaust deniers therefore is of a Nazi policy of deportation of Jews, not extermination or Final Solution, and there were no extermination camps or gas chambers, and the numbers of those murdered has been vastly exaggerated. In any case, this argument would be based on the defense, don't blame me. A final defense is that there could be no challenge possible because of Adolf Hitler's political and public authority, of his ideology and political strategy, and the Nazi control and monopolization of the public sphere.

However, it remains true that to err is human, to forgive divine. In a speech at Cesena, Italy on October 1, 2017 Pope Francis asserted that a good form of politics is not subservient to individual ambitions or powerful factions and centers of interests. In light of this he desired to clarify the position of the Catholic Church on its attitude to and behavior during World War II. Therefore, on March 2, 2020 the Vatican, for the first time, opened up its archives on the wartime attitudes of Pope Pius XI, after Pope Francis had declared the Church was "not afraid of history."

It may well be the thousands of pages of the archives will not reveal any smoking gun concerning Pius XII, but at the moment controversy exists, partly because of different interpretations of the Vatican's actions and non-actions and partly because the Pope's diplomatic language makes it difficult for outsiders to judge his motives. Did the Pope know of the mass killing of Jews and keep silent about it? Or did he use quiet diplomacy and encourage Catholic institutions to hide Jews? Unfortunately, the study of the papal documents has been suspended because of the pandemic and Covid-16 causing Italy to go into lockdown on February 21, 2020. This particular and important issue remains unresolved.

During World War II about one third of Germans were Catholic, especially in south Germany. A Concordat had been signed in Rome between the Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, later Pius XII, and Fritz von Papen, German vice-chancellor. Though its significance has been disputed, it gave Hitler intellectual respectability and led him to believe Catholics approved his regime. Pacelli and the Catholic hierarchy thought they had protected the welfare of Catholics, and the two sides agreed on a bulwark against communism.

However, the Catholic clergy was not to engage in political activities nor hold any political office. Open disagreements with the Nazi regime were avoided. Bishops swore an oath of loyalty to the Reich. The German Center political party, regarded as a Catholic party, dissolved itself in July 1933. The editor of Munich's Catholic weekly, Fritz Gerlich, was murdered. During the war, German Catholic schools, press, trade unions, political parties, and youth organizations were forbidden or persecuted. Catholic lay leaders were arrested and about 400 priests were sent to Dachau.

Recognizing the "tribulation and persecution" by the Nazi regime and the breaking of the supposed understanding of the Concordat, Pacelli, now Pope, published the Encyclical, *Mit Brennender Sorge*, with burning anxiety, on March 14, 1937. He explained the Vatican's concern for "the salvation of souls," and the policy to spare Catholics the trials and difficulties they would otherwise face without an agreement. But the Concordat had not brought the hoped for "fruit." The Pope declared the Vatican sought the restoration of a true peace between Church and State. But if this peace was not forthcoming, the Church "will defend her rights and her freedom in the name of the Almighty."

One problem in any possible such defense were the differences between the Churches and within the Protestant church. The Protestant theologian Ludwig Muller, leader of the "German Christians" in East Prussia, a long time Nazi, became Reich

Bishop in September 1933, and sought to make his church an instrument of Nazi policy. On this point he was opposed by Lutheran pastor, Martin Niemöller of the "Confessing Church," who initially was also a Nazi supporter but changed to opposition, and was in concentration camps between 1938 and 1945.

After all the decades of somewhat ambivalent statements of the behavior of the Catholic Church it is important to see what amounts to a confession of guilt about Catholic complicity with the Nazi regime. On April 29, 2020 the German Catholic Bishops Council issued a report, roughly 25 pages, on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory over Nazism on May 7, 1945. Bishop of Limburg George Batzing, president of the conference was forthright: "We must not sit back, but must carry the legacy into the future, at this time when old demons, nationalism, "ethnic" thinking and authoritarian rule, were raising their head in Europe."

Statements were forthright. The Church was accused of failing not only to remember its past role, but also of not owning up to it. Catholic bishops did not oppose the war of annihilation started by Germany, or the crimes the Nazi regime committed, and gave the war a religious meaning. Bishops did not share Hitler's ideology, but they helped support both the military and the regime. Hundreds of Catholic priests accompanied the Wehrmacht on the frontlines to offer spiritual guidance. Thousands of church properties were converted into military hospitals, and thousands of nuns worked as nurses, to carry out duties to the fatherland. The Church on Hitler's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1939 flew swastika flags, and prayed for the "fosterer and protector of the Reich." Pope Benedict XVI was a member of the Hitler *Jugend*.

The Bishop of Hildesheim, Rev. Heiner Wilmer, head of the foreign affairs committee of the Catholic Conference, who taught one year in the Bronx, said that for all its "inner

distance" from Nazism the attitude of and its occasional open opposition, the Catholic Church in Germany was part of the society at war. He continued, declaring that even though the attitude of bishops changed and became more critical during the war, they did not pay enough attention to the suffering of others. In his frank expose of the attitude of the German Catholic hierarchy, Bishop Wilmer pointed out that on the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, the leaders had called for followers to do their patriotic duty.

The Bishop's Conference acknowledged that Monsignor Cesare Orsenigo, Vatican ambassador to Germany during the war, had welcomed Hitler's accession to power and was in frequent touch with Nazi officials. He argued that Hitler realized that Christianity was essential to private life and the German state. He held that Nazism would cooperate with the German Church to defeat Bolshevism which had persecuted the Church in the Soviet Union. He advocated "compromise and conciliation" with the Nazis, obliquely referring to treatment of Jews.

It is worth remembering that some prominent Catholics were not supporters of the Nazi regime. Perhaps the best known is Monsignor Angelo Roncalli, later Pope John XXIII, who was the papal representative in Turkey and Greece during the war. Among other things he helped prevent deportation of Greek Jews, interceded with King Boris of Bulgaria on behalf of Bulgarian Jews, and with the Turkish government on behalf of refugees, and helped in other countries.

Nevertheless, the Catholic Bishops Conference makes clear that the German bishops did not oppose Hitler with a clear "no" and that most of them bolstered the Nazi's will to endure, and made themselves complicit in the war. The bishops may not have shared the Nazi justification for the war on the grounds of racial ideology, but their words and their images gave succor both to the soldiers and to the regime prosecuting the war, and gave the war a religious meaning.

Conference president Bishop Batzing left no doubt. Anyone who has learned the lessons of history must vehemently oppose the old demons raising their heads again. This applies without ifs and buts to the Church which is committed to the gospel of peace and justice. He deserves praise for saying : "I'm sorry. We made a mistake."