

THE CATHOLIC RESPONSE TO NAZISM

As part of their atheist philosophy, Communists and Marxist Socialists were dedicated to destroying religious belief, and accused the Church of supporting unjust social systems. By the 1930s the violent suppression of religion in Communist Russia was well known in Germany. So when Nazism arrived it assured voters that it would defend Christian civilisation against atheist Communism.

The Nazis exaggerated any apparent similarities between their policies and Christian social teachings, while the Communists were keen to identify the Church as supporting Nazism. In this way both were united in spreading the falsehood that the Church favoured Nazism. This lie was echoed by Western Socialist 'intellectuals' and by the Jehovah Witness sect, preaching it as part of their misunderstanding of the Bible. Many of these lies and half-truths are to be found in modern history books - at least by implication- and may be summarised as follows:

Hitler was a Catholic and Nazism was founded in strongly Catholic Bavaria where Hitler gained his first victories in Munich. Franz von Papen, leader of the Catholic Party, formed a coalition with Hitler and persuaded the President to appoint Hitler as Chancellor (Prime Minister). Pope Pius XI signed a Concordat with Hitler to show his approval of him, and to encourage international recognition of the Nazi state.

Even when Hitler carried out anti-Church measures, the bishops remained sympathetic because they saw him as a barrier to Communism. Later the Church, and Catholic politicians throughout Europe, supported Hitler's crusade against Communism when he invaded Russia. The Church ignored the plight of Jews and others by refusing to condemn Hitler and, at the war's end, assisted Nazis to escape to South America.

BUT WHAT ARE THE REAL FACTS?

Hitler was born in Austria in 1889 and, although his father was irreligious, his mother had him baptised in the village Catholic Church. In the schools priests taught religion but teachers of all views gave the other lessons. Hitler's teacher of history at the Secondary school, Dr. Leopold Poetsch, was a supporter of the anti-Catholic Pan-German Movement, and later joined the Nazi SS. He introduced the young Hitler to Pre-Christian 'New Age' ideas. In his 1924 book: *Mein Kampf*, Hitler wrote of him:

“...his dazzling eloquence not only held us spell-bound but actually carried us away. Even today, I think back with gentle emotion on this grey-haired man who, by the fire of his narratives, sometimes made us forget the present: who, as if by enchantment, carried us into past times and, out of the millennial veils of mist, moulded dry historical memories into living reality. On such occasions we sat there, often aflame with enthusiasm. And sometimes even moved to tears.”

By his teens Hitler had rejected Catholic beliefs and continued to form his views by reading anti-Christian, racist new age literature. This claimed that in the far past a superior intelligent Aryan race had evolved in Europe, but the Christian teachings of racial equality, love of enemies and peace, together with allowing racial inter-marriage, had led to Aryan blood becoming less pure and so to weakness and decadence.

This teaching asserted that the Germans retained much Aryan blood and by modern Eugenic methods of selection, such as sterilisation, abortion, infanticide and euthanasia, hereditary defects, (i.e. bad traits) could be bred out of the German and similar Aryan European races. Hitler saw the Jewish race as the enemy of the Aryan race and attacked Christians for, amongst other things, accepting the Jewish Bible.

By joining the German army, Hitler avoided service in the multi-racial Austrian forces, He was despondent when Germany lost the war and blamed the Jews and the action of the Socialists, Catholics and Liberals in parliament. The Nationalists held a special hatred for Matthias Erzberger, the Catholic political leader, because he had proposed a 'Peace Resolution' to Parliament in July 1917. This was passed with Socialist and Liberal help. In August, Pope Benedict XV presented a similar peace proposal to the nations at war. But the Kaiser (Emperor) overruled his parliament and the war continued for fifteen more months. A Nationalist murdered Erzberger in 1921.

After the war Germany found herself in a pitiful condition with mass unemployment, inflation and the burden of paying reparations to France. An elected President replaced the Kaiser but most power was now vested in Parliament. Bitter party rivalry in this new democracy, led to ineffective governments at a time of chronic problems.

Hitler formed his Nazi Party and with great oratory called for policies against foreign domination and for firm leadership to end the rule of bickering politicians. The Catholic party, in power in the local Bavarian parliament, saw Hitler's oratory inspiring a dangerous political movement. It wished to deport Hitler back to his native Austria, but feared the civil unrest such action would provoke amongst the armed nationalists. It asked for the support of the Socialists, but they refused because they said deportation would be a denial of free speech.

Hitler aimed to achieve power by the ballot box so refrained from publicly attacking Christian teaching. But the Catholic bishops realised Hitler's long-term aims, and the Nazis as well as the Communists were firmly attacked from pulpits. The Nazis did gain support in a suburb of Munich and some smaller towns in Bavaria. But in every case these were Protestant districts. In 1931 the Nazis won the elections to the National Student's Council. It was noticeable that they gained large majorities in Universities situated in Protestant areas but were heavily defeated in the Catholic.

The Reichstag (Parliament) needed to make difficult decisions, but the Communists, Socialists, Liberals and Conservatives refused to take part in governments for fear of becoming unpopular. So in March 1930 the Catholic party, with 16% of the seats, took sole responsibility for forming a government. President Hindenburg, a Protestant, had to use his emergency powers to put legislation into effect.

In this way Parliament, and party political democracy, became discredited. Many came to see Hitler as the only leader able to secure a stable government which could cure raging inflation, massive unemployment and social injustice.

In February 1931, the German bishops excommunicated all active Nazi party members. This included Hitler. This penalty was not imposed on those who merely voted Nazi. It was hoped to persuade them by argument. The same policy was in operation against the Communists.

Rule by the small Catholic party could not go on indefinitely and in 1932 the president dismissed Heinrich Brüning, the Catholic leader, as Chancellor (Prime Minister) and appointed Franz Von Papen. Papen was a Catholic and some years previously had held a local government seat for the Catholic Party. But he was so out of tune with its policies that he was not on any party committee. When appointed Chancellor, he was not a member of Parliament, but the President hoped his independence might enable him to find a solution to the deadlock.

The Nationalists were willing to govern with the Nazis, but such a coalition would still lack a majority. So Papen and the President urged the Catholic party to abstain on key votes so as to enable the coalition to rule. But the Catholics refused and, when Papen joined the coalition, he was expelled from the Catholic party.

In March 1933 new elections were held. Orthodox Jews had normally voted for the Catholic party while the liberal and less religious preferred the Socialists, Liberals or Conservatives. But by now being pro-Jewish was a vote loser and the Liberals and Conservatives had embraced anti-Semitism. As an act of solidarity, the Catholic Party nominated a Jewish candidate and very many more Jews voted for the Catholic Party.

The Nationalist-Nazi coalition led by Hitler gained 52% (Nazis 44%, Nationalists 8%) of the votes and seats. On a turnout of 88.5% Hitler was now the legal democratically elected ruler of Germany. In the 21 Protestant constituencies his coalition won 19. In seven of them Hitler obtained over 60%. He failed to gain a majority in any of the eight Catholic constituencies. Of the eight highest votes for democracy (i.e. Not Nazi or Communist) seven were Catholic and one of mixed. Religion.

Soon after this victory, Hitler asked for a Concordat with the Holy See to regulate the rights of Church and State in Germany. The Holy See signed Concordats with 40 states between 1919 and 1939, so this was not an unusual request. Germany promised freedom of religion, including in publishing and the running of schools, whilst not making any unreasonable demands in return. There was no reason to refuse.

Before it was signed on 20th July 1933, all political parties and Trade Unions, including the Catholic ones, had been suppressed. The world, including the League of Nations, Britain, France, America and Russia had recognized Hitler's government as legitimate. On the day the Concordat was being signed, Clement Attlee and other Labour and Liberal MPs at Westminster, voted for a trade agreement with Hitler's Germany. On August 25th. The German Zionist organization signed the Haavara agreement for economic co-operation with the new Nazi government including the promotion of German exports. (World Zionism endorsed this agreement in 1935).

By 1937 all Catholic newspapers, organizations and schools had been suppressed. So Pope Pius XI issued an Encyclical: *Mit Brennender Sorge* (With Burning Sorrow), condemning the Nazi regime's treatment of the Church. It was smuggled to every church in Germany and read out simultaneously on Sunday 14th March 1937.

On May 18th 1937 the American Cardinal Mundelein viciously attacked Hitler and other Nazi leaders. When the German government protested, the Pope refused to reprimand the Cardinal. The Cardinal's attack swung the views of many Americans in favour of help for Britain when the Second World War started.

In the late '30s the Holy See tried by diplomatic means to prevent a war breaking out between Germany and Poland. When the war did come, in September 1939, the Holy See remained neutral but tried in 1940 to stop Italy joining Germany. At this time Communist Russia was an ally of Hitler.

When Hitler invaded Russia some Americans considered that, as Catholics, they should oppose aid to Russia because it would help Communist tyranny. The Pope asked an American bishop to explain that a distinction could be made between Communism and Russia. It was not wrong to help the Russians defend their country.

During the war, the Vatican concentrated on providing humanitarian aid to all in need. Both sides called for the Pope to condemn atrocities allegedly committed by their opponents. The Holy See was not able to carry out detailed local investigations even if it had wanted to, and the Pope was determined not to allow his words to be misused as propaganda by either side. There were clear condemnations of evil policies and attitudes but a careful avoidance of appearing to pass judgement on specific acts.

By 1942/3 several German generals, realising they were not winning the war, hoped to depose Hitler and negotiated a cease-fire with the Allies. The Vatican, having preserved its strict neutrality, was able to facilitate contact. But, contrary to the wishes of the Vatican, the Allies demanded 'unconditional surrender'. In doing so they prevented the generals gaining wider support within the army, and the bloodshed, including the Concentration Camp killings, continued for two more years.

As Hitler accepted he was losing, his hatred of Jews intensified. At any criticism, regarding his Jewish policy, he would fly into a rage and likely order the speeding up of the killings. Throughout Europe Catholics had networks of escape routes and safe houses. Jews and others were hidden in convents, other Church buildings and private homes. In 1967 Pinchas Lapide, a Jewish author who had been Israeli Consul in Milan, estimated the Church had saved 700000 - 860000 Jewish lives.

During this period, the allies wanted the Church to publicly condemn the killings, so as to help their propaganda war. But the Pope remained silent; fearing that Hitler in a rage would order increased raids on the convents and monasteries where so many were hiding. Also, to maintain his impartiality, he would have had to condemn the Soviet Union for killing millions in its Concentration Camps. If a cease-fire had been achieved in 1942, millions of Jews and others would have survived.

Millions suffering under Communist terror welcomed the German army when it freed their lands. But they found the Nazis as brutal as the Communists. As the war ended, huge numbers of people, not wishing to exchange one dictator for another, swarmed into Italy to escape the advancing Soviet army. Catholic charities assisted them.

Mixed with the refugees were individuals under assumed names, allegedly guilty of war crimes. British and American Agencies were responsible for detecting them, but some slipped through to escape to South America. This was not the fault of the Church's aid workers. Church officials had no reason to hide those who had spent years torturing and killing Catholic priests and laity.

For more detailed information see booklets on: www.churchinhistory.org