



# Declaration of Repentance seeking forgiveness for the failings of the Church during the Holocaust period

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Issued at Drancy , France on September 30, 1997

## Declaration of Repentance

***The Roman Catholic Bishops of France issued the following declaration at Drancy on September 30, 1997, seeking forgiveness for the failings of their Church during the Holocaust period.***

A major event in the history of the 20th century, the Nazi endeavour to destroy the Jewish people raises formidable questions that no human being can sweep aside. The Catholic Church knows that conscience is stirred by remembrance and that no society or individual can be at peace if their past has been repressed or wrongly represented.

The Church of France is examining her record. With the rest of the Church she has been summoned to do so by Pope John Paul II at the approach of the third millennium. It is good for the Church to approach this transition by being clearly conscious of what she has undergone. To recognise the stumblings of yesterday is an act of loyalty and courage that helps us reinforce our faith, making us aware of today's temptations and difficulties and preparing us to confront them.

After the celebration this year of the 50th anniversary of the [declaration of Seelisberg](#) (August 5, 1947), the small village in Switzerland where just after the war Jews and Christians took the first steps toward a new teaching about Judaism, the Bishops of France, in view of the presence of internment camps in their dioceses and just before the anniversary of the first statute regarding Jews promulgated by Marshall Philippe Petain's regime (October 3, 1940), desire to take a new step.

### **Demands of Conscience**

They do so in response to the demands of their conscience as informed by the light of Christ. The time has come for the church to submit its own history, during this period in particular, to a critical reading, without hesitating to acknowledge the sins committed by its sons, and to ask forgiveness from God and from men.

In France violent persecution did not begin immediately. During the months following the defeat of 1940, state antisemitism became rife, depriving French Jews of their rights and foreign Jews of their freedom, as a result of decrees which were incorporated into the body of the nation's constitution.

In February 1941, approximately 40,000 Jews were in French internment camps. At a time when the country was partially occupied, demoralised and prostrate, the hierarchy considered the protection of its faithful and the assurance of the life of its institutions its primary obligation. Assigning top priority to these objectives, legitimate in themselves, they unfortunately neglected the biblical demand to respect every human being created in the image of God.

## Global Tragedy

In addition to this departure from a right understanding of the mission of the Church, the hierarchy also lacked understanding of the immense global tragedy which was taking place threatening even the future of Christianity. Yet, Catholics and many non-Catholics were longing for the word of the Church to remind confused minds and hearts of the message of Jesus Christ.

The vast majority of Church officials responded with loyalism and docility that went far beyond traditional obedience to the established powers. Their reaction was coloured by conformism, caution and abstention, dictated in part by fear of reprisals against charitable works and Catholic youth movements. They did not realise that they had considerable power and influence, and that given the silence of other institutions, the impact of a public statement might have forestalled an irreparable catastrophe.

It is important to remember that, at the time of the Occupation, there was a lack of awareness of the actual scope of Hitler's genocide. While it is true that many gestures of solidarity can be cited, it is necessary to ask if these gestures of charity and international aid were sufficient in light of the demands of justice and respect for human rights.

Anti-Semitic legislation enacted by the French government deprived a French social group of their rights as citizens, ruining them and imposing upon them an inferior status within the nation. Decisions were taken to inter in camps foreign Jews who believed they could count on the right to asylum and on the hospitality of France. Therefore, there is no choice but to admit that the Bishops of France did not speak out, acquiescing through their silence in these flagrant violations of the rights of man and leaving an open field for the spiral of death.

We are not passing judgment on the consciences nor the persons of that time. We ourselves are not responsible for what happened, but we must assess the attitudes and actions of the past. It is our Church and as demands of conscience were swept away by perceptions excessively restricted by ecclesiastical interests we must ask why.

## Religious Origins

Beyond the historical circumstances we have just recalled, we must ask ourselves in particular about the religious origins of this blindness. Why was secular anti-Judaism so influential? In the context of the debate which we know took place, why did the Church not hear its best voices? On several occasions before the war, through articles and public lectures, Jacques Maritain endeavoured to show Christians another way of perceiving the Jewish people. He also vigorously warned them about the perversity of the antisemitism which was developing. From the eve of the war Mgr Saliege recommended that Catholics of the 20th century find guidance in the teaching of Pius XI rather than in the edict of Innocent III of the 13th century. During the war theologians and exegetes in Lyons and Paris prophetically emphasised the Jewish roots of Christianity, highlighting that the root of Jesse blossomed in Israel, that the two Testaments were inseparable, that the Virgin, Christ and the Apostles were Jews, and that Christianity is linked to Judaism like a branch to the trunk which bore it. Why was so little attention paid to these words?

Certainly, on the doctrinal level the Church was fundamentally opposed to racism for both theological and spiritual reasons which were strongly expressed by Pius XI in the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*, where he condemned the underlying principles of national socialism and warned Christians about the dangers of the myth of race and of the absolute power of the State. Since 1928 the Holy Office had condemned antisemitism. In 1938 Pius XI forcefully declared, "Spiritually we are Semites". But what weight could be given to such condemnations, what weight could be given to the thought of the above mentioned theologians in the context of constantly repeated anti-Jewish stereotypes that were present, even after 1942, in declarations which

otherwise were not lacking in courage?

### **Anti-Jewish Stereotypes**

It is important to admit the primary role, if not direct, then indirect, played by the constantly repeated anti-Jewish stereotypes wrongly perpetuated among Christians in the historical process that led to the Holocaust. Indeed, in spite of (and in part because of) the Jewish roots of Christianity, and the fidelity of the Jewish people to the One God throughout their history, the "original parting of the ways" begun in the second half of the 1st century lead to separation, then to animosity and multi-faceted hostility between Christians and Jews. While not denying the social, political cultural and economic influences in the long history of misunderstanding and antagonism between Jews and Christians, religion was a main cause of the conflict. That is not to say that a direct line of cause and effect can be drawn between these expressions of anti-Judaism and the Shoah, because the Nazi plan to annihilate the Jewish people had other sources.

According to theologians it is a well-attested fact that a tradition of anti-Judaism affected Christian doctrine and teachings, theology and apologetics, preaching and liturgy in various degrees and prevailed among Christians throughout the centuries until Vatican Council II. This soil nurtured the poisonous plant of contempt for Jews with its legacy of serious consequences, which until our century, have been difficult to remove. Wounds resulting from this contempt are still open and unhealed.

To the extent that the priests and leaders of the Church for so long allowed the teaching of contempt to develop and fostered in Christian communities a collective religious culture which permanently affected and deformed mentalities, they bear a serious responsibility. One can conclude that even though they condemned the pagan roots of antisemitic theories, they failed to challenge these secular thoughts and attitudes by not clarifying understandings as they should have.

As a result consciences were often lethargic, their capacity considerably weakened in face of the sudden appearance of national socialist antisemitism's criminal violence, a diabolic and extreme form of contempt for Jews based in categories of race and blood, openly directed at the physical elimination of the Jewish people - "an unconditional extermination... implemented with premeditation" according to the words of Pope John Paul II.

### **Courageous Actions**

Later, when the persecution increased and the Vichy authorities put the service of the police at the disposition of the occupying forces, some courageous Bishops knew that they had to speak up and forcefully protest the rounding up of Jews in the name of human rights. These public words, though few in number, were heard by many Christians. One must not forget the many initiatives by ecclesiastical authorities to rescue men, women and children in danger of death, nor the generous multi-faceted outpourings of Christian charity by the rank and file while facing the greatest risks in order to rescue thousands and thousands of Jews.

On their part and well before these interventions, without hesitating to use clandestine means, religious, priests and laity saved the honour of the Church often in an unassuming and anonymous manner. They also did it, particularly in Christian historical writings, by forcefully denouncing the Nazi poison which was threatening souls and spirits with all its neo-pagan, racist and anti-Semitic virulence and by recalling on every occasion the words of Pius XI: "Spiritually we are Semites". It is an established historical fact that due to these acts of rescue in Catholic milieux as well as in the Protestant world and through Jewish organizations, the survival of a large number of Jews was assured.

### Indifference Prevailed

However, the fact remains that, although courageous actions in defense of persons were not lacking, we must acknowledge that indifference largely prevailed and, in the face of the persecution of Jews, especially the multi-faceted antisemitic laws passed by Vichy, silence was the rule and words in favour of the victims the exception.

As Francois Mauriac wrote, "a crime of this proportion redounds in no small part on all the witnesses who did not protest and on those who were responsible for their silence."

The result was that the attempt to destroy the Jewish people, instead of being perceived as a central concern on the human and spiritual level, remained a secondary issue. In the face of the magnitude of the tragedy and the unprecedented nature of the crime, too many of the Church's priests, through their silence, offended the Church itself and its mission.

Today we confess that silence was a mistake. We also acknowledge that the Church of France at that time failed in its mission of educating consciences and that she thus bears with the Christian people the responsibility of not having helped rescue in the early stages when protest and protection were possible and necessary, even though there were numerous acts of courage later on.

We acknowledge this reality today because this failure of the Church of France and its responsibility toward the Jewish people are part of its history. We confess this sin. We beg God's forgiveness and ask the Jewish people to hear our words of repentance.

This act of remembrance calls us to increase vigilance on behalf of humanity in the present and for the future.