



A Critique of the Vatican Holocaust Document.

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A Critique of the Vatican Statement on the Holocaust

Although this is referred to in the title merely as “A Reflection” it is, as a document of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, the official Roman Catholic statement on the Church and the Holocaust. As such it commands universal attention and, may I add, scrutiny.

Without question this is a skillfully crafted, carefully worded and delicately nuanced presentation. In almost every other context such attributes as these would be commendable. The pity of the matter is that in this context they are not. In what follows, an attempt will be made to substantiate what may appear to be a harsh and ungrateful judgement.

In one of the longer and central sections of the statement, namely, “Relations between Jews and Christians”, we find the claim that it was “certain interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people as a whole” that incited, in much earlier times, “Christian mobs to attack the religious centres of others, including synagogues”. This is followed by these words of Pope John Paul II: “In the Christian world — I do not say on the part of the Church as such — erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability have circulated for too long ...”.

What is being said here, first, is that there is lacking in the New Testament itself any trace of those anti-Jewish and anti-Judaistic sentiments which have led to and fuelled the animosity that has divided so tragically the two communities, Jewish and Christian. The source is not the text of the New Testament itself but, rather, “certain interpretations” that have arisen among members of the Church. Then, in the quotation, even these “erroneous and unjust” interpretations have appeared within “the Christian world” and not “on the part of the Church as such”.

On the first point, one is left wondering how anything but an anti-Jewish interpretation could be placed upon those New Testament texts that so forcefully implicate “the Jews” in the death of Jesus and which equally forcefully promulgate the notion of a divine judgement upon and rejection of these same people.

The difficulty ought not to be presented as though it stems from “certain interpretations” only, and these on the part of members of the Church. The time when the writings of the specifically Christian Scriptures emerged was rife with argument and counter-argument, with accusation and counter-accusation. What would have been surprising and, indeed, impossible would have been a New Testament free of this sustained polemic and occasional acrimony. How the New Testament has been interpreted down through the centuries is not merely the responsibility of some members but of “the Church as such”.

This, indeed, is the most disconcerting feature of this document: its tendency to credit “the Church as such” with every good and noble action and to lay the blame for the tragic history of relations between Jews and Christians upon those described as “the erring sons and daughters of the

Church". Presumably numbered among the latter were those of episcopal rank such as John Chrysostom of Antioch and Mileto of Sardis who vilified Jews in their Paschal sermons, and others, like Ambrose of Milan who defied an emperor in support of a "Christian mob" that had destroyed a synagogue. The list could go on and on to the point where the question must arise: Who or what is at fault — the members, the bishops or "the Church as such"?

This same tendency, to claim and disclaim, is to be found also in the document's treatment of events nearer our own time. One pertinent example is what is said — and not said — about the November 1938 Pogrom, the so-called Kristallnacht. Reference is made to the courageous act of Bernhard Lichtenberg, Provost of Berlin Cathedral, who offered prayers for his country's Jewish population. But nothing more is said of this vicious attack upon Jews which resulted in much, much more than "broken glass". Apart from the destruction of property and the gutting of synagogues some 30,000 Jewish men were sent to concentration camps. Passed over very quickly in the statement is the response of "the Church as such", for the very reason that there was no response, only, as so often in recent and past history, silence. If a distinction is to be made between the Church and its "erring sons and daughters" why not also one between the Church and its righteous individuals? For it was as an individual churchman that Provost Lichtenberg acted then and later with the experience of imprisonment along the way and, in 1943, death in transit to Dachau. To what extent was he supported by the Church? That is an interesting question.

It is true, as the statement points out, that some bishops of the German Church did condemn "National Socialism with its idolatry of race and State" as early as February 1931. It is true also that the Encyclical Letter, *Mit brennender Sorge* (1937), on much the same theme, did result in "attacks and sanctions against members of the clergy" but one looks in vain for any formal statement that could be interpreted as unequivocal support for Jews as such, then or later. Official reaction was limited to those Jews who had converted to Catholicism. What was of chief concern to the Catholic Church, as it was to the Protestant churches, was the encroachment of the State upon the prerogatives of the Church. Indeed the Catholic authorities seemed to find it impossible to make mention of Jews as Jews. They were repeatedly subsumed under the amorphous category of "people of foreign races and origin".

Anyone at all conversant with the role of the Church and its leaders during the Nazi period might be surprised that the name of Cardinal Bertram, Archbishop of Breslau and President of the German Episcopal Conference, is mentioned once only, and that in a commendatory way. Whereas the consistently courageous Archbishop Preysing of Berlin, who was opposed and often thwarted in his anti-state efforts by the Cardinal, is passed over in silence.

It is understandable that a document of this nature and length should be selective in its use of material. However, when this eclecticism gives the unsuspecting reader a less than helpful appreciation of the events and attitudes of those times it should be questioned. One of the attitudes that weakened the response of the Church during the Nazi period was that of Cardinal Bertram, the senior churchman in Germany. It is difficult to understand such actions as his annual birthday greetings to Hitler except, perhaps, as some expression of hope that a Catholic Head of State was unaware of what was really happening in the Reich itself and its conquered territories. Meantime, many Catholics, both priests and lay folk, helped and sheltered Jews. Their numbers swelled those of the concentration camps from which many did not emerge. Who was it who truly represented the Church?

The other main section of the document deals with "Nazi anti-Semitism and the Shoah". At the beginning the point is made, quite rightly, that a distinction has to be made between Nazi racial antisemitism and what "we call anti-Judaism". What is then raised is "whether the Nazi persecution of the Jews was not made easier by the anti-Jewish prejudices imbedded in some Christian minds and hearts". In the response to this issue the reader is reminded of its complexity and of the "multiple influences" that were present. That is true. Yet one would have expected that

something might have been said at this point about the sheer weight of anti-Judaistic if not anti-Jewish teaching and preaching over many centuries and the way in which this moulded the attitudes and, often, dulled the consciences not only of ordinary church folk but of many ecclesiastical leaders and theologians. What of the effect of centuries of being informed that Jews, as such, were responsible for the death of Jesus? What of hearing over and over again that the perfidy of Jews had led to their divine rejection and their replacement by the True People of God, the Church? Certainly, as the statement suggests, a response to this issue “would need to be given case by case”; but is it not altogether too easy to leave the matter at that?

Nothing is said in the document of the common ground between the Church and the Nazi state, namely, their shared opposition to Bolshevism. Nor is there any mention of one serious dilemma that faced the leadership of the Church at this time, that is, the uncertainty as to the degree of support for the Nazi regime within the Church’s constituency, even before the outbreak of war.

In a lengthy footnote there is a list of positive Jewish responses to “the wisdom of Pope Pius XII’s diplomacy”. It is unlikely that this will be the last word on the topic.

In the final section of the statement, “Looking together to a common future”, there are words which remind all Catholics — indeed, all Christians — of the need for repentance when they reflect upon the Holocaust. Yet, somehow, the distinction that has been made, and used all too conveniently, between “the Church as such” and “the failures of her sons and daughters” is still maintained, and so too my own feeling of unease persists. Expressions like “deep respect and great compassion”, “our sorrow for the tragedy” and “awareness of past sins” are there, to be sure; but one nagging question remains. Perhaps it is no more than the question of one who, in the light of other Catholic Church statements, had come to expect much more. That question is: Has all been said that should have been said?

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