

Association of German Catholics, Founding Manifesto (July 8, 1872)

Abstract

The anti-church legislation passed by the German national and state governments led to the further politicization of Catholics and their organization in various associations. Though stressing patriotic loyalty, the founding manifesto of the Association of German Catholics (1872), “To German Catholics,” demands defensive action against anti-church measures. It calls on all Catholics, in the name of truth and justice, to join the struggle against the state, against the liberal press and liberal parliamentarians, and against all those who threaten “the overall existence of the Catholic Church in Germany.” The manifesto offers familiar counsel: “to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and unto God that which is God’s.”

Source

The situation of German Catholics has without doubt become very serious. Anyone who until now has suffered delusions on this point must at last have learned something from the most recent events. Dark days have befallen Catholic Germany, ones that could not have been imagined by the loyal sons of the church who bled for the Fatherland in the last war; Catholics have experienced things that necessarily introduced a lamentable note of discord into the victory cheers of the new German Reich. We are living in conditions that can justifiably be called persecution of the church, even if anti-church newspapers were not already speaking daily of the “battle of extermination” to be conducted against the church.

[Our adversaries] favor division and apostasy within the Catholic Church, even at the risk of causing serious offence to faithful parishioners—offence for which it is difficult to atone and which virtually authorizes sacrileges likely to bring forth divine judgments more horrible than those looming already. These people meddle with the teaching activities of the church in the name of the state and arrogate for themselves the authority to decide on the essential content of Catholic doctrine: They describe a dogma—which we Catholics adhere to as a divinely revealed truth, solemnly announced by the church in the ecumenical council—as being contrary to human law, contrary to the requirements of the times, contrary to state laws, and thus subversive. They treat those bishops who resist such action by state authorities with apostolic courage as violators of the law; they seek to thwart or at least weaken the effects of their judicial authority; and they threaten these allegedly recalcitrant subjects with the prospect of legal proceedings or the freezing of temporalities.^[1] In this way, these adversaries twist the Christian state’s duty to protect the church into absolute power over it.

However, lest we remain uncertain about the scale of anti-church efforts, the church is being deprived of its thousand-year-old privileges in the field of schooling, of which it is an original founder; even the church’s divine mission regarding education in general is being encroached upon. Moreover, emergency laws against the clergy are being passed. The Reichstag itself stirs up justified outrage among millions of Catholics by persecuting the venerable orders of the Catholic Church—one of the genuine ignominies of the century and a mockery of the law. Above all it does so by exposing the worthy Society of Jesus to the most unfair hatred and to new slander that has been refuted long ago. Without the slightest sense of propriety it aims to drive from German soil the celebrated preachers of truth, the splendid educators of youth, the comprehensively trained scholars, the spotlessly pure priests, and the good Samaritans of the last war, labeling them the dangerous dregs of society.

In all this, the anti-clerical press is being publicly organized for battle against us; it is granted the most outrageous latitude to incriminate and slander Catholics, to mock the papal father, to hurl abuse at the most venerable institutions of the church, to heap scorn on all that is sacred to us!

Thus, even if our adversaries were not shouting it out from parliamentary rostrums and repeating it incessantly in fanatical daily newspapers, we are becoming more aware day by day that the current struggle is directed against the overall existence of the Catholic Church in Germany.

The state—that is, the state that the enemies of revealed religion and the church are seeking to construct and invest with authority by arbitrary and passionate means—does not tolerate within its secular sphere any [spiritual][2] power that tells it the truth when it errs, that censures its injustices when it sins.

We, on the other hand, stand firm behind our ecclesiastical-political principles, which reason and faith teach us. We adhere to the conviction that there are two powers on earth, which God has appointed for the salvation of mankind. We also believe, however, that it is the will of God, to whose divine providence the worldly order in the form of the state owes its existence, and whose grace has founded the order of salvation within the church, not to view the two orders as separate, but rather as united, so as to establish the great Christian community that is destined to extend across the entire globe. We discern the proper relationship between state and church, however, in the goals set for each: here, a goal in the earthly realm that necessarily takes a subordinate role to the higher, eternal goals of man; there, that eternal goal that extends infinitely beyond this finite existence, treating it like the means to an end. For that reason, we abide by the instructions of the divine founder of our holy religion: to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's. And just as we know that faith is the secure guiding light for the actions of each individual, we also revere as part of the apostolic pedagogical duties of the church the authority that teaches the nations and rulers the truth of Christian moral law and that reminds and fortifies us to speak in the manner of the apostles: One must obey God more than the people.

If people in high places, where the reins of secular power rest, no longer recognize these principles, this true foundation of all civic and state order, then we have to work even harder with all legal means at our disposal to win that recognition: on the one hand, in order to preserve for the church the freedom and independence given to it by God and thus the purview of its divine mission; on the other hand, to try with all our might to establish a bulwark against the dissolution and disintegration of civic order, which will inevitably occur if the opposing principles gain the upper hand.

“For God and the Fatherland” shall be our motto in the struggle that we are taking up at this critical juncture.

But we can only hope to prevail if we present a united front; therefore, all Catholic men in Germany have to come to an understanding about the principles that will guide their public activities. They have to unite for common action in order to exert the appropriate influence on political life.

Only by means of solid and comprehensive organization will we be able to support our press against the superior influence of our adversaries, to make our voice count in political elections, and to force governments to pay attention to our interests.

For the purpose of bringing about such unity among all German Catholics, an association has recently been founded in Mainz, whose statutes are being published by the undersigned executive committee. All Catholic men in Germany who cherish freedom of the church no less than the welfare of the Fatherland are invited to join.

The most sacred values are in danger. Let us rise as loyal sons of the church and the Fatherland. Let us fight tirelessly and courageously for justice and truth. Justice must remain justice, and the ultimate

victory is the victory of truth.

Mainz, July 8, 1872.

The Executive Committee of the Association of German Catholics; Baron Felix von Loë [...], President, and 20 additional signatories.

NOTES

[1] The secular property and assets of the church—ed.

[2] Note: “günstige” here should almost certainly be “geistige” [spiritual]—ed.

Source: Emil Friedberg, ed., *Aktenstücke, die altkatholische Bewegung betreffend, mit einem Grundriss der Geschichte derselben*. Tübingen: H. Laupp, 1876, pp. 85–88. Available online at <https://opacplus.bsb-muenchen.de/Vta2/bsb11332500/bsb:BV003152498?page=9>. Original German text reprinted in Wilfried Loth, *Das Kaiserreich. Obrigkeitsstaat und politische Mobilisierung*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997, pp. 174–77.

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