

The Catholics: Excerpts from the Debate at the General Assembly of the Catholic Associations of the Rhineland and Westphalia (April 18, 1849)

Abstract

The General Assembly of the Catholic associations of the Rhineland and Westphalia was held from April 17–20, 1849. The assembly discussed whether Catholic associations should devote themselves solely to religious concerns or should also engage with purely political questions. By that time, Catholic groups were already active in various parliaments, including the [1848 Frankfurt National Assembly](#). Concern with social questions and, later, the defense of church rights against state interference, led to more political involvement. Excerpts from the debate on April 18, 1849 appear below.

Source

The proceedings of the second section began with a discussion of the preliminary question of whether so-called purely political questions from the current assembly of Catholic associations of the Rhineland and Westphalia should even be heard. On one side there was a motion proposing that the assembly should explicitly resolve not to concern itself with such questions. This motion, however, was rejected by a majority of the section, by 29 votes against 12. Now since, according to the rules of procedure, a motion rejected in the section can only avoid reintroduction in the General Assembly when a majority of more than 3/4 of those voting have spoken out against it, and since such a majority is not present in the current case, then the first question is whether the petitioner, Professor Dieringer from Bonn, wants to reintroduce the motion in question.

Professor Dieringer (from Bonn) states that he does in fact want to present his motion for a decision in the General Assembly, which he herewith submits as rapporteur for the minority in the following version:

“The Pius Associations declare that they are concerned only with those political questions which are directly and necessarily connected with the ecclesiastical-social purposes of the Pius Associations,” and in the event that this declaration should not become popular, he submits the sub-motion:

“It should be left up to the individual Pius Associations in the Rhineland and Westphalia as to whether and to what extent they want to concern themselves with purely political questions.”

Public reading of the motions referred to the political section, not reproduced in their wording:

Mr. Rübsahmen provides a short overview of the arguments advanced by both sides of the section in the above-cited dispute over principles, which concerns whether purely political questions [should be] excluded.

On one side, it was maintained that, if this exclusion did not take place, an assertion of many different political views could soon endanger the continued existence of the Pius Associations; the Pius Associations, it was further maintained, were to be viewed as church-related associations, and should therefore not be concerned with purely political questions.

In opposition to this, the other side stated that the danger of the schism that one wished to avoid by excluding political questions would be more easily induced by such an exclusion, as experience in

Cologne, Werden, and other places has already shown. The Pius Associations are actually not church-related associations. From the outset, they have admittedly, and as a matter of preference, taken on the task of maintaining and promoting religious freedom and freedom for the church. Nevertheless, they have also had to concern themselves with political questions in order to teach people clear ideas and sound judgment. Either one has to attempt to educate the people in Catholic political associations, where everyday questions are treated from a Catholic standpoint, or leave it up to the agitators, who would soon rob them [the people] of all religious and church principles. The people today want to participate in political discussions. If one does not grant any satisfaction to their need for instruction on contemporary political questions within the Pius Associations, they would soon steer clear of them and go over to other, “purely political” associations in which their Catholic convictions would necessarily be drowned out.

After hearing this report, the above-mentioned motion of Mr. Dieringer was discussed.

Mr. Dieringer as minority rapporteur:

I appeal not to your hearts, gentlemen, but to your minds, and I hope for your good will, so that you follow me when I address a dry subject in prosaic language. First of all, I must emphasize that the motion does not read in such a way as to exclude all political questions from the purview of the Catholic associations. It would be out of the question to prevent regular meetings of the associations from dealing with political matters; we have nothing against individual members using clear insights there to contribute to instructing others about the political situation, to imparting specific and consistent views.

At the moment, it is a question of principle: whether political questions should be a subject of the Pius Associations, whether the Pius Association should publicly admit to being a political association. The Pius Associations must be, as the name and their previous history imply, not political, but rather clerical-social welfare societies. It remains only to examine what stands in direct proximity to their actual task. If the words church and state are to mean two different things, then the Pius Associations are not intended for politics; one has to take them as they are. The first Pius Congress held the [same] view that we have advanced concerning the subject of associations; the statute designates them as Catholic associations. They have not only found attention of the church, but also the approval of church authorities; the Holy Father himself has registered his approval, indeed owing to the statute. That the bishops have taken up patronage at this suggestion is a fact; the task of the Catholic associations is thereby a given.

If we were to say that purely political questions should not be excluded, we would be departing from history. If the associations get involved in political discussions, the danger would arise that the episcopate, which has assumed patronage over the associations, would disapprove of their efforts and that they would fall into an unfavorable position. If the associations want to be political, then they will have to become a political party, but then they will get into an objectionable and dangerous position and be opposed by all the other parties. But not all sincere and honest Catholics can be reconciled to the same political view, not all of them have enough energy, endurance, and spirit of self-sacrifice, and instead of mutual respect, hostilities would result; rather, a member must be able to belong to this or that party, irrespective of the question submitted.

There can be no denying the fact that the behavior of some associations has already produced an unpleasant and embarrassing impression among other associations. As well-intentioned as this was, it nevertheless caused offense. It would therefore be easy for the associations, although essentially united, to split over politics. Taking up politics might easily plant the seed of destruction and discord. These are the reasons that have guided the minority in proposing the sub-motion just read.

Mr. v. Fürth, Jr., for the majority motion:

Gentlemen! The previous speaker has jumbled the real point of the question. It did not occur to the Cologne association to invite you here so that the Catholic associations of the Rhineland and Westphalia could constitute themselves as a political party. I therefore refer to the letter of invitation we released, where the only subject is agreeing on the political questions that are important for Catholics as such, and on the standpoint that Catholics as such have to assume vis-à-vis the existing political parties.

In refuting what the spokesman for the minority expressed, the speaker relied chiefly on the following arguments:

First: The majority of political questions, and also the most important of them, are such that their solution is also of importance for the future of Catholicism in Germany. The Pius Associations must oppose any political endeavor which, if it reached its goal, would endanger the independence of the Church.

Secondly, those who increasingly recognize that the state can only be returned to the Church and regenerated by the Church must strive to ensure that a type of politics appropriate to Catholicism and thoroughly pervaded by its spirit is acknowledged by the people as the only correct policy. In their meetings, both the adherents of the so-called constitutional party as well as the radicals tended to speak long-windedly about what the people would need to do for their own advantage, but never do they investigate whether a type of political endeavor corresponds to the principles of justice and morality as well as the dictates of the Church. Accustomed to treating political questions this way, the people increasingly lose their sense of justice. The Pius Associations must combat what is un-Catholic where they find it, hence also in the political movements of our time. Currently the people long for political freedom, and one has to prove to them that one has a heart for their freedom, and then one gains their trust and can lead them back from political aberration.

Third and lastly, experience has proven that, when political questions are effectively excluded from the scope of the Pius Associations, its members largely join the democratic or constitutional associations at the same time, and it then becomes impossible to lure them away from these associations and unite Catholics as a single mass for political activities, such as elections. The latter, however, is necessary, for whoever does not communicate today is as good as dead. The members of the minority fear that handling political questions will give rise to disunity in the associations; during the last elections alone it was precisely those Pius Associations which did the most to handle politics that displayed the greatest unity among their members.

Finally, the speaker characterized as groundless the expressed misgivings about the episcopate disapproving of the Pius Associations' political activity, and he closed with the admonition that if one is held back by the fear of causing offense to any side, then one cannot accomplish anything at the present time.

[...]

Mr. Privy Councilor Buß (from Freiburg): Gentlemen! For a long time, and from different sides, I have encountered expressions of concern from the Rhine about a split in the Catholic associations over their participation in politics. One such misgiving was even expressed in the friendly invitation that summoned me to your hospitable city, and this is mainly what governs my participation in this current assembly. Similar misgivings are emerging not merely in the Rhineland and Westphalia; they are emerging everywhere in Germany where Catholic associations have stepped into the realm of political engagement.

This is easily explained. Catholics are intrinsically patient and have practiced peace and the peacefulness of patience for centuries; it has been centuries since they have constituted a political force in history. It is

natural now, when necessity and duty pulls and drags them over into politics, that many very good Catholics see in this a denial of Catholic ways.

Only it was not always thus, gentlemen, and so shall, so dare it not be in the future. I admit that, at a time like the present, when everything is getting out of joint, aberrations might also turn up here, will turn up, have even already turned up; only, these can, these should be dismissed, but one should not only keep what is healthy about this direction, one should continue with it. It is possible to draw the line: the Catholic associations have to regulate this subject. Having arrived in the city and at the assembly too late, I am not acquainted with the state of deliberations; only, according to everything I have gathered about the status of the question from the illuminating report of the gentleman speaker, I should have to confess from the outset to being a sinner against the intentions of the minority. For I myself, seizing the initiative after serious reflection, have recently called upon Baden's Catholic associations to exercise their political duties. This happened just before my departure hither and with regard to those tremendous interests, which do not spare the breast of any German, the conscience of any Catholic, in whatever tribe or estate he may be settled. With what success I have initiated this political movement in my dear fatherland I do not know as of this hour, but this much I do know, that I have thereby satisfied my duties toward my fellow countrymen, toward my brethren in faith, toward my fatherland, and toward my Church.

Not according to the fleeting exigencies of the day, not according to the counsel of erring hours – no, gentlemen, according to the eternal principles of justice, according to the unvarying aims of the history of a people, and according to the stars which the Church of God sets up for the tribes of humanity through history as a sign for their great, wide walkway and which radiates its guiding light down into the conscience of every human being – [that is how] the Catholic conducts politics. And these politics, about which admittedly the cabinets and the princes and the halls of the legislative assemblies hear but very little, I shall carry into the Catholic associations and would like to gather the diverging convictions of my brethren around it. And if I were not to do this with conviction about the fruits, about the necessity of this action, I could not answer to my conscience, not to the great fatherland, not to my Church and the eternal God.

Actually, it seems to me that there are major misunderstandings about the participation of the Catholic associations in politics, however, these prevail more in the teachings than in life. The life of the nation, the life of the individual does not lend itself to demarcation. Who can show me the boundary where the Christian stops and the patriot starts, I believe instead that both fit together. (Bravo) Therefore we must accept transitions, abandoning the principle does not help us, instead what matters is its practical application. Even the minority is partly in favor of incorporating political questions, only it wants to see that these are limited by the words “immediate” and “purely political.” It [the minority] is only looking at participating in political questions that relate immediately to the Church; naturally, this eliminates every purely political question.

It is self-evident that clerical freedom, the autonomy of clerical corporations, independent administration of wealth etc. are questions immediately connected to the Church. Only, I shall go further: I count even those political questions that are indirectly related to Catholic aims as part of the sphere of activity of the Catholic associations. Practical reason knows with considerable certainty how to find the boundary, how far this “immediate” can be extended. But this boundary can even be found through doctrine, for it establishes the principle that all political rights which are either exclusively means for achieving purely church-related aims or just partly means for achieving freedom for the church are, along with those rights purely relating to the church, indirectly connected with the church. Attaining these rights and liberties therefore properly belongs to the activity of the Pius Associations. Whoever wants the goal must also want its exclusive means.

Do you really believe it would be enough for the constitution to guarantee the independence of the

Catholic Church? The independence of the Church rests on the freedom of the church corporations. But this is only secured when all corporations are free. It is therefore this purely political freedom, which merely has an indirect relationship with the Church, that is necessary for the maintenance of clerical freedom. One may ask: What does freedom of the church have to do with a free provincial and local government constitution? Freedom of the church has lots to do with it, since schools are constitutionally in the hands of local government, and when the local bylaws are bad, schools will be bad as well. It has just as much to do with the provincial constitution, since its greatest enemy is bureaucracy; this needs to be reined in by autonomous provincial administrations. In these provinces there are a number of clerical foundations; they are all under the guardianship of bureaucracy, and many have gone lost in their hands. (Bravo) But a free constitution will pluck each one out of the clutches [of bureaucracy] (Bravo) and force control to be yielded back to the foundations.

I could list a number of political questions that are essentially, even if indirectly, connected to the freedom of the Church. One example is the great question that now touches every heart in Germany: the question of the head [of state], which is to be viewed as purely political. As you know, they agreed in the Paulskirche to a hereditary imperial rule^[1]; I can take no credit for this accomplishment from March. (Sustained applause.) Those who voted for it did not know what imperial rule is; they were simply giving their vote to a Prussian super-monarchy.

Imperial rule is a historical institution, it died; the renewed version must be earned and granted by the will of the entire nation; it is not so much the upper strata of the population as the mass of the people, and I abide by them, who want the old imperial rule. (Bravo) I do not only want to include in the German Empire those who speak German; I also want to raise up other peoples and have them delight in the German spirit, education, and character.

This requires a *Kaiser* (emperor) who has the power to draw these other peoples closer. By way of the German spirit, the Slavic peoples of the Austrian monarchy need to be removed from Russian influence. But even those ruined fragments of states that used to belong to the German Empire and still belong to the German tribe, they lead an ephemeral life; they will not find permanent rest until they are drawn toward Germany again. So it is with Switzerland, Holland, and others. The German nation needs to recover the greatness that is historic, that previously lived in it, and of which it is still capable. (Bravo) Imperial rule was based on the stewardship of the Church, whose protector was the *Kaiser* as *advocatus ecclesiae*. German imperial rule was rooted in Catholicism, it was the greatest Catholic idea in history. And should we behave just negatively toward this imperial rule, should we have no sympathy for it? We dare not, this would be betrayal of the fatherland. (Bravo) Imperial rule dare not be mutilated, it dare not sink down to the level of a half Germany, rather it will be just as it lives in the hearts of the people. (Bravo)

It is the duty of every Catholic to legally prevent the idea that imperial rule should not be carried out at the cost of Germany as a whole, [and] thus have the renewal of genuine imperial rule hindered. If the Catholic associations participate in bringing about this [imperial rule], they will certainly be violating neither the spirit nor the statutes of the Catholic Association as they were concluded in Mainz.

It is said that we can expect an exclusivity to enter, from which hostilities will follow that will separate one association from another. But the Catholic spirit is not divisive, but rather reconciliatory, and if politics in a Catholic sense is going to be practiced, its scope should likewise be reconciliatory.

In a certain respect, I am a Legitimist; I have not accepted any of the principles that are used to mislead the people. I do not believe that public authority proceeds from the individual, i.e. not even from the collectivity which results when one adds up the individuals. Whoever wants to impose his authority on me, to him I say: You are not to rule over me, and if ten come, if a thousand or a million, then the principle has not changed, and I say: I will not obey you. I have, rather, a higher view of the source of

public authority; I say: All authority comes from God. (Bravo)

But I am also a democrat, for I say: Everyone is equal to everyone else before God, and the authority delegated from a higher power lies in the calling of the people; authority therefore rests not on two or twenty or two hundred million votes added up. The legitimist therefore resides in the same house as the democrat.

I am also an aristocrat; the aristocracy of spirit and virtue is what I revere. I am therefore a legitimist, democrat, and aristocrat, yet from this union of three there arises no animosity, on the contrary, they complement each other. As Paul said to the Church: it is a mysterious body wherein different activities and spiritual gifts work together, and so is it, as well, with the Pius Associations. (Bravo) Among Catholics there is no compulsion, but only freedom of conviction and strength in fraternal union. We have fallen to ruin because of isolation, therefore we must flock together in order to fight the ingratitude and betrayal of the fatherland. (Bravo)

In politics I am an allopath, and I try to cure all ills with contrary measures. Previously, Germany had the rule of the world; the chronicles from those times spoke a great deal about the coarseness of the Germans. Now this has been transformed into humility, and Germany has played a sad role, or rather no role at all, since the so-called reformation of the church and the Peace of Westphalia. There and then they threw the Church out of public life; but now the rancor of the people has majestically come to the fore, it has taken sword in hand in order to recapture, on behalf of the Church that represents the people, the helm that was iniquitously wriggled away from it. (Bravo)

After that era, the nation's energy was demolished, the people were weak and unprincipled, for there was an absence of rule according to principles; but now, finally, the people must be torn away from the sleep of false tolerance, pastoral cleverness, and emotional sputtering. In ordinary politics, there is only relative good; politics for Christians must, however, rest on principles and therefore be absolutely good, or else it will elicit absolute bad; the rule of principles is also one of life's necessities.

We must therefore, in order to regain principles, put the Church at the helm, for only the Church has eternal principles. The state has no eternal principles; where, now, are those principles that existed prior to March of the previous year? We can be sure, however, that we will see them again in the months to come! (Bravo) Misfortune is rooted in the cowardice of public life, in how nobody dares to show his true colors. In our era, whoever does not put his mind to defending the principle of freedom is not worth being free.

When I stand under the flag of freedom and I collapse underneath it, then I fall more honorably than those who are bereft of principles. Victory will come only to those who have principles, even if it were just a handful of men opposing unprincipled minorities; the latter cannot put up any resistance over the long haul, since they have no higher principles. (Bravo)

The present is instructive for all who care to notice. The [various] German governments are not inclined to subjugate themselves to a Prussian super-monarchy, not a single one subjugates itself voluntarily, all are doing this out of fear of this one or that one. Just look at how this imperial rule came about. What party has not devastated itself thereby? The democrats have openly expressed their contempt toward hereditary imperial rule and its advocates, and yet they joined up with the reactionaries and the bureaucrats of the right in the Paulskirche. In opposition to this the reds called for help and are now going against the [various] governments. In the Katharinakirche they summoned the people to an act of rescue; and the peaceful citizens promptly hid themselves behind the curtains. Even those 28 governments subjugated themselves against their own will and out of fear, because they are bereft of principles. (Bravo) Only we, the Catholic party, we did not yield.

In our time, the only victorious ones will be those who act decisively. Just as the bad attains its goals boldly, so does the good; if those who are good stand together and act decisively, there will be great results. Many have sought to achieve the good daringly; who gives them the courage to do this? Political enthusiasm, perhaps? No, devotion to the Church. Only he who throws down his life like an old jacket and saves the soul, only he will attain his goal. (Bravo)

The Catholic associations should not form a political party as such; but they should practice the civic duties called for by the Church, and then they will be practicing the policy [politics] of their Church. Therefore I beg you, I implore you, in addition to taking up those questions that immediately affect the Church within your circle, also to take up those that are indirectly connected, otherwise they will go under. The people do not know where they stand, therefore they are sorrowfully asking how things are, what is happening, because they are worried about the fate of our great German fatherland. They are good and ready for everything, but the bureaucracy has deprived them of all moral greatness. The people need to be instructed and educated; in them there lies the seed of all that is great; therefore let them be educated by teachings from which they may derive esteem and respect, by the teachings of our holy Church. (Sustained applause)

Provost Döllinger from Munich:

I will appeal only to your reason, gentlemen, not to your emotion, not to your sympathies, as the speaker ahead of me did. If, in addition to the questions immediately related to clerical questions, one also invokes, as he does, political questions having an indirect relationship, then one can almost draw the entire field of politics into the realm of the Catholic associations. It would not be difficult to deduce some kind of connection with church interests regarding every political subject. I should like to challenge the previous speaker to name any contentious issue of high politics that is not at least indirectly connected with religious and church interests.

Gentlemen, I am describing the matter openly, as it is. On every political question the Church is basically participating up close or at a distance, on one side or the other; participation would therefore already constitute sufficient grounds for associations with church-related aims to draw all of the more important questions from daily politics into their sphere of activity if that assertion were founded. But where this would lead, what damaging influence it would exercise upon the entire position, yes, even the existence, of the associations, this we may assess by looking at that very question which is currently claiming the most anxious interest on the part of all Germans, the question of the imperial constitution and the selection of an imperial head of state. There is no doubt that the German nation is divided on this question, and at this hour nobody can yet say with certainty toward which side the overwhelming majority of the people is inclined. According to the remarks of the speaker who preceded me, it would now be the calling and purpose of the Pius Associations to throw their energies and the means they have at their disposal for popular instruction and popular persuasion regarding questions about *Kaiser* and Empire, and indeed we as Catholics, in the interests of our faith, should work toward the restoration of the old imperial rule, as it thrived during the Middle Ages, and for the return of the imperial crown to the old imperial house, that of the Habsburgs, and then, he says and wishes, the old stewardship of the *Kaiser* over the Catholic Church should be restored.

If we first take a look at this last point here, it already arouses major reservations for me. Should the duty of a special protective office be made incumbent upon the new *Kaiser*, then it cannot fail to be the case that he will also, following the rule that the obligation of one party toward another is always linked to corresponding rights and claims, [try to] gain influence over the Church he is protecting and want to participate in the management of its affairs, and one will have neither the right nor power to withhold this participation from the appointed protector of the Church. But then what about the status of that freedom and independence for the Church, which we view as such a fortunate, even if by no means completely secure, achievement of recent times? Will we not be conceding, or even be forced to offer

ourselves, that the paragraphs in the [catalogue of] basic rights [from the imperial constitution] and the new Prussian constitution that express this independence will be deleted again?

But, additionally, this restoration of the old imperial rule, and the advocacy for the church to be transferred to it, contains the demand that the *Kaiser* of the Germans can only be a Catholic. Here, gentlemen, I appeal to your sense of justice: Can we, dare we really make this demand in Germany given the unconditional parity of rights which is supposed to exist for the members of all religions, and specifically for Catholics and Protestants?

We Catholics already constitute, so long as Germany exists on the scale of the German Confederation, only a small majority; should Austria really leave the new Reich, then we would find ourselves very much in the minority in "Small Germany," and should we nonetheless be able to rightly demand of our Protestant fellow citizens that the head of the new nation could never belong to their confession, but only to ours? That would be an advantage that, at this moment, when all privileges and especially all preferential treatment of one confession over another are supposed to cease once and for all, would once more assume the form of a confessional privilege, and it would not fail to elicit ill-feeling and the spread of retaliation.

And, more particularly, a *Kaiser* vested with stewardship over the Catholic Church! Would the Protestants then not demand for their part that an imperial protector also be appointed for their church, in other words, that a Protestant *Kaiser* be set up alongside the Catholic one? You can see that, if we proceed along this path, we will certainly arrive at having two *Kaisers* and two kinds of imperial German rule. So dubious is the naked vulnerability we would allow ourselves with such demands, and so hard would it be to dismiss the accusation that we ourselves are now once more injuring, yes, even trampling upon, the legal equality of the denominations in Germany that we have only just achieved and that we believed to have made into reality.

But this conclusive example shows us on what slippery and dangerous territory the Catholic associations would inevitably fall as soon as they undertake to draw the political affairs of the day into their sphere of activity. Each departure from one's own territory and infringement upon a foreign one takes its revenge; but the Pius Associations are, by their nature and original program, church-related; politics is not their field.

To be sure, it has been said that the Pius Associations may only place solid principles rooted in the soil of the church at the top of their political activity in order to be on the safe side here as well and to operate fruitfully. Actually, though, it is right and proper to give precedence to principles; but the application of these principles in individual circumstances is usually not as clear and reasonable as the principle itself, and even in the political field struggles tend to be carried out not so much over the principle as over the consequences that are drawn from the principle. Where is there more doubt, wavering, and uncertainty as in the field of recent German politics? If anywhere, then it is necessary here and now to let everyone have his convictions, to permit everyone to draw his own conclusions from commonly accepted principles.

If the Pius Associations become intolerant here and grant, within their bosom, only a quite specially developed political creed and mode of operation corresponding to that creed, then great dissatisfaction will be the immediate consequence; from this schisms will develop, which will then lead to the dissolution of the associations. To be sure, one has been talking about a Catholic policy [politics] while entertaining the opinion that the associations only need to make this their guiding principle in order to remain united and develop flourishing activities; I confess, however, that I cannot form any clear view about this Catholic policy, that I do not believe I am capable of determining, on every given important political question, what is the Catholic and what is the non-Catholic solution.

Just as little would I dare – when partisan bickering ensues over some question, e.g. over a greater or lesser extension of the franchise or over the extent of repressive measures against abuse of the press – to immediately accuse the party advocating a view opposed to mine of indulging in anti-Catholic politics. One of the greatest theologians has indeed made the attempt to write a system of politics in the spirit of the Church, according to its principles; I am referring to the work of Bousset: *Politique tirée de l'écriture sainte*.^[2] But this very work shows in a conclusive manner how difficult it is to reach agreement in this field and how changeable the opinions and systems are, while everything asserting a claim to the validity of a Catholic principle would also have to assume the character of unchangeability peculiar to Catholic teaching. In his book, Bousset has put forward principles about the rights of monarchs and the duties of the peoples to [practice] unconditional obedience and passive nonresistance even against tyrants which the great majority of Catholics today, both in Germany and France, would emphatically repudiate; but he, and probably also millions of his contemporaries along with him, would really and honestly hold such ideas to be Catholic policy. The systems here are so changeable and so awkward that it would surely be irresponsible to try committing souls to things which the Church has always left open to the judgment of the individual.

For the clergy – who, after all, assume such an important position in the Pius Associations – activity devoted to the day's politics, which frequently assumes the character of political agitation, is tied to a very particular disadvantage. I recall here the answer given to me by a Catholic Englishman who was simultaneously a resident of Ireland. At that time, when O'Connell's^[3] agitation had reached its climax, I had asked him what he thought about the participation of the Irish clergy in this agitation. I fear, he replied to me, that permanent damage is being done in order to achieve a momentary advantage.

This was the view of a man who otherwise would be delivering a warm laudatory speech about the religious and ethical character of the Irish clergy, about their capacity for sacrifice and the unconditional trust the people places in them, but who thinks that the clergy's genuinely priestly and politically essential activity would inevitably be impaired and crippled in the long run; and if this kind of participation in politics on the part of the clergy can be excused or justified anywhere, then this would have to be the case in Ireland, where the Catholic people – abandoned by those of higher, largely hostile social standing – have nobody from whom they could expect advice, leadership, and help if not from its priests. Here one will retort that it is not the clergy but rather the (by and large) worldly associations from whom political activity is expected. But the clergy who are members of these associations would have to take part in this activity; they would certainly, at least in the rural local governments, have to do most of the work here, and is it not then a well-founded concern that the damage that would be caused thereby would frequently be greater and certainly more lasting than the benefit[?]. It is unavoidable that the position of the clergyman toward his parish, his priestly reputation, will be endangered and impaired thereby. Frequently the priest will get into a conflict with a section of his parish that is following a different policy or led by another political leader, a conflict that can only be settled with difficulty, and it is not to be expected that people will always or even frequently distinguish between the political character and the soul-tending pastor, that they will maintain the same trust in the latter that they have withdrawn from the former.

A previous speaker has quite rightly referred to North America and the example of the Catholic clergy there. There the clergy, as a matter of principle, avoids meddling in political struggles and partisan bickering. This does not, however, prevent the Catholic people as a whole from following their own political direction, and it is a fact already emphasized by Tocqueville that Catholics there are part of the great majority following the Democratic party in opposition to the aristocratic Whigs.

Permit me, gentlemen, to warn seriously and emphatically about the dangers, which unavoidably arise from mixing clerical interests with those that are merely political. Yesterday, in a circle of close friends, I already stated that I regard the rash adoption of a political principle by the associations as a misfortune. May he who has formed a sharply defined political opinion on the controversial questions of the day

defend it with all the honest means at his disposal; only may he not try to use an association formed for entirely different, higher purposes as an instrument for the realization of his political ideals and wishes.

When I referred to the danger that an association might vouch for a political form or structure that soon thereafter would be thwarted by events, and that the reputation, yes, even the existence of the association could be called into question, I was told in reply: Whoever falls under the flag of principle always falls with honor, even if the principle is not now acknowledged by the opponent. That would be appropriate if one were really dealing with the kinds of principles that might express eternal and unchangeable truths. But can this be said of forms of the new German constitution, with respect to which it is proposed that the Pius Associations take sides? Even in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt, the views of the Catholic members were and are divided on this question. The great majority of them voted for a directory [as the executive body of a united German nation-state] and regarded neither Austrian nor Prussian imperial rule as appropriate to Germany's current needs and conditions.

Let us take a look at the position of the clergy in France. There, during the political events that occurred as a result of the most recent revolution, the clergy has – without concealing their conviction and their sympathies – nonetheless behaved with great moderation and reserve. Had they intervened more intensely, e.g. followed the example of a certain bishop and appeared in favor of Cavaignac, the disastrous consequences of such a political activity would immediately have set in, and yet it cannot be denied that the election of the President also affected the Church very closely. This time, thanks to the caution of the great majority and its wisely well-tempered attitude, we have not heard, as during the July Revolution [of 1830], about the expulsion of individual bishops and pastors from their parishes. It was a well-intentioned, but in effect highly damaging, mistake that led the so many priests and missionaries at the time of Louis XVIII and Charles X to link, on almost every occasion, the name of the king with the name of God and to preach devotion to the Bourbons from the pulpit and the altar as if this were a clerical dogma. It is well known how hard this religious policy and political religion was avenged [!] on the clergy after the July Revolution.

Yes, I will go even further: I view the link between clerical interests and daily political opinions and favorite wishes as something intrinsically unnatural, as if one would want to mix noble metal with common clay into a single piece, and in a mixture like this it is always the more noble that gets sullied and degraded. It is religion, then, that all too easily sees itself being degraded as the handmaiden of politics, and you should not hope, gentlemen, that you will succeed in safeguarding your pure intentions against every disadvantage, against every misinterpretation, by appealing to your good will.

Your political opponents – and they are not the only ones, but even all those who are neutral, all those who do not exactly belong to your party – will always reproach you, will always be telling the people that the well-being of religion, the maintenance of the Church is only a pretext and a cover, that you are attempting to exploit the love the people have for their faith, the trust the people have in their priests, only for the sake of selfish political endeavors.

But also do not misunderstand me, as if I were to regard a complete separation of the two areas, the religious and the political, as possible and practicable, like a separation between light and darkness, between good and evil. I gladly concede that associations like ours have the right and calling to take up questions that have a close relationship by dint of natural necessity with church-related matters.

If politics introduces itself into the arena of social concerns, then it is also the duty of the Catholic associations to be active, and in this case it is even their right to carry out

agitation – in the service of eternal truths, which form the foundation of all law, of every form of government and of church – is indisputable. May of these suggestions contribute to sketching the way that Catholic associations need to go in order not to get into dangerous conflicts.

But now, too, the kinds of political problems that are by no means of such great, far-reaching importance – problems concerning which there are very different views even among the best-educated – are supposed to be drawn into the realm of the associations' activities, e.g. the responsibility of cabinet ministers, a question on which, to be sure, a church-related interest could also be demonstrated. But if we want to talk about the responsibility of ministers, we need to analyze how far this responsibility extends, before what tribunal it is to be judged, etc. Are these not subjects that have great importance for the Church and church associations? One must leave it up to the conviction of the individual how Catholics should express political convictions; the associations cannot let themselves become instruments of political theories, and thus not dissipate their energies. The Catholic associations will have plenty to do with the matters [already] assigned to them even if they abandon the question of the *Kaiser* and the like to their fate.

And now, in conclusion, yet one more recollection; as a distant, impartial observer, I have frequently made the observation that ill-feeling toward the Prussian government exists, which is especially deep-rooted and widespread in the Rhine Province. The same [ill-feeling] exercises great influence, is biased against everything emanating from the government, [and] lends some things a certain tint. In these provinces, mistrust of the tendencies of the government appears, more than anywhere [else], to be influential and to block the way for an impartial appraisal of constitutional questions. (Quite true!) How dangerous it is, therefore, especially for associations in these provinces, to take on a particular political direction! How easy, as a result, it would be for the Church to be made to appear in systematic opposition against the government, against the cabinet ministry, even against more highly placed persons. And every attack elicits a corresponding resistance; incurable discord could result for years to come, the power of Catholicism [would] have to polish itself off in partisan battles. A third party that is pursuing its aims unscrupulously is now already strong, the prospects are that it will become even more powerful, and this very [party] is going to benefit from battles like this. Then it would always be the overly close link between Church and politics that would be sowing evil seed, and this seed would then overgrow the good that these associations are otherwise suited to endow.

[...]

NOTES

[1] The National Assembly agreed on this in March 1849 – ed.

[2] *Politics Taken from the Holy Scripture*, written by the seventeenth-century French bishop, Jacques Bousset, was an apology for the absolutist rule of Louis XIV – ed.

[3] Daniel O'Connell, Irish attorney who directed a successful mass agitation for the repeal for laws discriminating against Catholics in Great Britain, and an unsuccessful one in favor of autonomy for Ireland – ed.

Source: Heinz Boberach, ed., *Rheinische Briefe und Akten zur Geschichte der politischen Bewegung 1830–1850*, vol. 3, edited by Joseph Hansen. Düsseldorf: Droste, 1998, pp. 130–33, 134–45.

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