Letter from Bishop of Limburg to the Reich Minister of Justice (August 13, 1941)

Abstract

Some Catholic Church leaders were among the most vocal critics of the Nazis' T4 Program, which started in 1938 and intensified in 1939 after the outbreak of war. While many in the Church shared the Nazis' antisemitic views, some (though certainly not all) Catholics objected to the Nazis' use of euthanasia to achieve their racial hygiene aims within Germany. The killing of vulnerable people with mental and physical disabilities violated Catholics' understanding of the sacred nature of life and conflicted with some of the Church's most fundamental principles, including the fifth commandment, "thou shall not kill." In this letter from the Bishop of Limburg to the Reich Minister of Justice, the Catholic Church's antipathy toward the T4 Program is clear. The bishop finds the program an injustice, and the lack of concern shown by local community members, who knew quite well what was happening, frightens his conscience. While the author is willing to criticize the regime for these "mercy" killings as a violation of Germany's criminal code, he does not take the opportunity to stand up for other victims of the regime. Criticism like that presented here, and the international attention it garnered, helped to reduce the T4 Program's operation after August 1941. It should also be noted that there were some attempts by Catholic theologians to justify the killings.

Source

The Bishop of Limburg
Limburg/Lahn, 13 August 1941

To the Reich Minister of Justice
Berlin

Regarding the report submitted on July 16 (sub. ZV, pp.6-7) by the Chairman of the Fulda Bishops' Conference, Cardinal Dr. Bertram, I consider it my duty to present the following as a concrete illustration of destruction of so-called "useless life."

About 8 kilometers from Limburg in the little town of Hadamar, on a hill overlooking the town, there is an institution which had formerly served various purposes and of late had been used as a nursing home. This institution was renovated and furnished as a place in which, by consensus of opinion, the above-mentioned euthanasia has been systematically practiced for months – approximately since February 1941. The fact is, of course, known beyond the administrative district of Wiesbaden because death certificates from the Hadamar-Moenchberg Registry are sent to the home communities. (Moenchberg is the name of this institution because it was a Franciscan monastery prior to its secularization in 1803.)

Several times a week busses arrive in Hadamar with a considerable number of such victims. School children of the vicinity know this vehicle and say: "There comes the murder-box again." After the arrival of the vehicle, the citizens of Hadamar watch the smoke rise out of the chimney and are tortured with the ever-present thought of the miserable victims, especially when repulsive odors annoy them, depending on the direction of the wind.

The effect of the principles at work here are that children call each other names and say, "You're crazy; you'll be sent to the baking oven in Hadamar." Those who do not want to marry, or find no opportunity,

say, “Marry, never! Bring children into the world so they can be put into the bottling machine!” You hear old folks say, “Don't send me to a state hospital! When the feeble-minded have been finished off, the next useless eaters whose turn will come are the old people.”

All God-fearing men consider this destruction of helpless beings a crass injustice. And if anybody says that Germany cannot win the war, if there is yet a just God, these expressions are not the result of a lack of love for the Fatherland but of a deep concern for our people. The population cannot grasp the fact that systematic actions are carried out which in accordance with paragraph 211 of the German Penal Code are punishable with death. High authority as a moral concept has suffered a severe shock as a result of these happenings. The official notice that N. N. died of a contagious disease and, therefore, his body had to be burned, no longer finds credence, and official notices of this kind which are no longer believed have further undermined the ethical value of the concept of authority.

Officials of the Secret State Police, it is said, are trying to suppress discussion of the Hadamar occurrences by means of severe threats. In the interest of public peace, this may be well intended. But the knowledge, and the conviction, and the indignation of the population, cannot be changed by it; the conviction will be increased with the bitter realization that discussion is prohibited by threats, but that the actions themselves are not prosecuted under penal law.

I beg you most humbly, Herr Reich Minister, in the sense of the report of the Episcopate of 16 July of this year, to prevent further transgressions of the Fifth Commandment of God.

[Signed]
Dr. Hilfrich

I am submitting copies of this letter to the Reich Minister of the Interior and to the Reich Minister for Church Affairs. [Initialed by the above]

Source of English translation: Letter from Bishop of Limburg to the Reich Minister of Justice (13 August 1941); reprinted in *Trials of War Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No. 10*, vol. 1. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1949, pp. 845–47 [Document 615-PS].

Source of original German text: Schreiben des Bischofs von Limburg an den Reichsjustizminister vom 13. August 1941 über die Vernichtung sogenannten „lebensunwerten Lebens“ in der Anstalt von Hadamar (Beweisstück US-717); *Der Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof. Nürnberg 14. November 1945 – 1. Oktober 1946*. Band XXVI, Amtlicher Text – Deutsche Ausgabe, Urkunden und anderes Beweismaterial. Nuremberg, 1947. Neuauflage: München, Delphin Verlag, 1989, pp. 165–67 [Dokument 615-PS].

Recommended Citation: Letter from Bishop of Limburg to the Reich Minister of Justice (August 13, 1941), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:document-5132> [October 07, 2026].