

German Bishops at Fulda – Pastoral Letter by the Conference of Catholic Bishops (August 23, 1945)

Abstract

During the Third Reich, anti-church propaganda, the closing of Catholic schools, and the dissolution of Catholic youth organizations put the Catholic Church under great pressure. After the war, the first pastoral letter of the Conference of Catholic Bishops began by emphasizing the Catholic Church's oppositional role under the Nazi regime. But it also acknowledged that many Catholics knew about the crimes of the regime, tolerated them, or even actively participated in them. The bishops called for a return to basic Christian values in Germany, with help coming from the reopening of Catholic Schools.

Source

The following is a translation from the German of the joint Pastoral issued by the Hierarchy of Germany after their meeting at Fulda on August 23, 1945. N.C.W.C. News Service.

For two years the raging war had made it impossible for us to convene for joint deliberations. At this first meeting after the end of the war we painfully miss the permanent chairman of our conference, Adolf Cardinal Bertram, Archbishop of Breslau, who died in the Lord on July 6 of this year at Castle Johannesberg. He had presided over our conferences for 25 years; he had administered the Archdiocese of Breslau for 31 years and had been a Bishop for almost 40 years. When the time comes for publication of the memoranda concerning all pending questions, submitted by him during the last 12 years alone to government offices, the world will marvel at the farsightedness and sagacity with which he kept watch and fought for the rights of God and His Church and for the benefit of all suffering and oppressed. We tender a tribute of our gratitude and remember him in our prayers.

Despite all changes in the events of our times we convene at the old holy spot, at the tomb of St. Boniface, the apostle of the Germans. We convene in the same Faith which he had preached to our ancestors, in the same loyalty to the Roman Pope with whom he had linked the German Church insolubly. In this Faith and in this allegiance we have the firm conviction to stand on a rock against which the waves may smash but which they can never undermine, or uproot.

Let our first word be an expression of deepest gratitude to our clergy and to our flock for the unshakable loyalty which they have maintained for the Church through difficult times.

We know that for many of you it had not been without danger to listen again and again to our episcopal pronouncements, which spoke out against the errors and crimes of our times. With deep interest and inner sympathy, millions and millions have followed our remarks, when we upheld the rights of the person, when we rejected the interference of the State with Church life, when we spoke of the unheard-of oppression by State and party in all spheres of spiritual and religious life, when we raised our voice against racial arrogance and hatred of other nations. We know well that informers were ready everywhere to hinder you in your progress and in your career once it had been discovered that you had listened to such sermons.

From the bottom of our heart we thank you, Christian parents, that you courageously stood up for the Catholic schools, despite all intimidations and threats, even though finally the fight for your parental rights was not successful. We remember with a holy pride how in so many districts the Cross was brought

back to its old place after it had been removed from the class rooms by wicked hands. You all had no earthly power, only the power of your faith and your courage.

THANK CLERGY AND LAITY

We offer special thanks to you, beloved young people. You have stood up for your ideals even to the shedding of blood and your stand has given us consolation and strength in a battle that appeared humanly hopeless.

We thank all the priests and the members of the laity who have fearlessly stood up in large numbers for the Divine law and the teachings of Christ. In prison and through mistreatments many of them have become true confessors and many have given their lives for their convictions.

How it warms our hearts to remember that time and again Catholics of all walks of life and of all ages were not afraid to protect fellow-Germans of another race, to defend them and to show them Christian charity. Many perished in concentration camps because of such charity. They have received their "extraordinary reward," and we all have the comforting assurance that Christianity has been practiced in our nation, despite all oppression and persecution.

Deeply moved we remember all those who shared their meager daily bread with innocent persecuted non-Aryans, while they had to fear, day after day, that they might have to face terrible retribution together with their wards.

Catholic people, we rejoice that you have refrained to such an extent from the idolatry of brutal power. We rejoice that so many of our Faith never bent their knees to Baal. We rejoice that these God-less and inhuman doctrines were also rejected far beyond the circle of our fellow-Catholics.

And yet, terrible things were perpetrated even before the war in Germany and during the war by Germans in the occupied countries. We deeply deplore that many Germans, even of our own ranks, allowed themselves to be misled by the false teachings of National Socialism, remaining indifferent to the crimes against human freedom and human dignity; many abetted crimes by their attitude; many became criminals themselves.

A grave responsibility rests upon those who because of their position could have known what was going on in our midst; who because of their influence could have prevented such crimes and have not done so and even made them possible, thereby manifesting their solidarity with the criminals.

On the other hand, we also know that in the case of those who were in dependent positions, especially civil servants and school teachers, membership in the Nazi Party often did not mean an inner assent to the awful acts of the Nazi regime. Many joined, knowing little of the activities and aims of the Nazi Party. Many were forced to join and others joined with the good intention of preventing evil. It is, therefore, a demand of justice that the guilt be investigated in each individual case lest the innocent have to suffer with the guilty. For this we Bishops have always stood and we shall stand for it in the future.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

But we shall also do everything so that the concepts of Divine and human rights, of human dignity, of freedom of conscience, take root once more among our people, particularly the younger generation, and that preventive measures be adopted in our midst against the return of such conditions and the outbreak of another war.

We want to build anew and we are grateful for any assistance in our religious mission. We hope that Catholic parents will again be enabled to send their children to Catholic schools. There is no better

guaranty for the recovery of the spiritual situation than a truly religious education, which is assured in the confessional schools. For this reason, and in full accordance with the direction laid down by His Holiness Pope Pius XI in his magnificent encyclical on education, we insist upon *Catholic schools for Catholic children* [italics in original].

Wherever there is no possibility of public Catholic schools, the Church must retain the liberty of opening private Catholic elementary schools. At the same time we demand Catholic private secondary schools, particularly those conducted by religious Orders, as they existed and prospered before 1933. We base this demand upon our rights guaranteed by law and the Concordat. We expect all the Faithful to assist energetically our endeavors to bring about a genuinely Catholic education of the children.

Beloved flock: In making a new start after the frightful catastrophe, in preparing to reconstruct the house of our national (*voelkisch*) and political life, let us bear in mind the lessons of the immediate past. Was it not the intention to build the house without the help of the Lord? Is that not the reason why it finally became a tower of Babel? Was it not the intention to build in disregard of the *one* cornerstone laid by God Himself, Jesus Christ, through Whom alone the walls are kept together for all times? The primary consideration in the work of reconstruction will have to be this: *To assign once more to God that position in the life of the individual and of society due to Him as the highest Lord* [italics in original], but which had been assigned to other, secondary values: to the State, the race, the nation.

Once again, our people, even all humanity, are faced with that “either or” which was spoken of for the first time by Simeon in the temple of Jerusalem: “Behold this child is destined for the fall and for the rise of many. . .” (*Luke 2, 34*). The alternative for us today is: either with Christ upwards to a better future, or without, and even against, Christ, downwards to utter collapse.

We must find our way back to a vivid belief in God in order to be granted again the postulate of all human social life: *Respect*. Respect alone can make possible and bearable human social life on this earth. Respect for God, the Creator and Master, respect for His Holy Will, as it is manifested to us in the holy Ten Commandments! And also respect for our fellowman! Was not this very lack of respect in the past the source of all evil and the root of all sins which we deplore and under which we have suffered? Only on the basis of respect can be built a good family life, only respect can regulate and sanctify the relations between the sexes.

There must be respect for the life that God alone can give and take away again. Man may not dispose of his life, because it is a loan of God. Suicide, no matter whether it be inoffensively termed “voluntary death” (*Freitod*), or called by any other name, remains a serious interference with God’s supreme rights, one of the most dreadful sins, fraught with gravest consequences if committed with full, clear consciousness.

Life must not be deliberately and consciously destroyed—even when it has risen from fraud or violence. From a purely human point of view such situations are, no doubt, among the most tragic to be faced by a woman, and great moral strength is needed to bear such suffering. All those who have to deal with such situations—relatives, perhaps her own husband or fiancé, father or mother, doctors or priests, social workers, members of women’s and girls’ societies—will assist with deepest sympathy those unfortunate persons and strive to alleviate their lot.

If necessary, institutions will have to be built with public assistance, or existing institutions will have to be enlarged where such children can find a home to be brought up in Christian charity. *It can, however, never be countenanced, and nobody can grant the right to interfere with the supreme rights of God and to kill maturing life*. Every physician aware of the Hippocratic oath will deem it beneath his honor as a physician to abet such activities. Difficult as they may find it, mothers will have to endeavor to remember less the wrong done to them than the innocent life maturing in them. God, in Whose eyes they are

guiltless, will grant them the strength to bear their lot with Christian fortitude.

There must be respect once again for the personality of the neighbor. All of us still remember too vividly what happens to men who have been deprived of their rights, maltreated and robbed of their human dignity. The beneficent functions of a genuine society cannot unfold themselves among men as long as there is no respect for the other person, for his right to property, for his good name.

VIVID BELIEF IN GOD

Indeed, genuine national and political life can only be built upon a vivid belief in God. This belief is the only solid foundation. Let us rebuild on this foundation in the spirit of *charity*, that charity which our Lord and Redeemer has taught us: "By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (*John 13, 35*).

We can still hear how this charity has been reviled, how it has been outlawed as unmanly, only to be replaced by power and violence. Today we have to bear the terrifying consequences of this appeal to force. At all times, charity has proved itself to be the firmest cement in the construction of any human society. We need this charity, ready and strong in sacrifice, especially today in the midst of our almost boundless misery. A grave winter lies before us. It would not become any easier by despondent resignation or by abandoning ourselves to radical currents. No, with a firm belief in God let us courageously set to work, toil faithfully and steadily, help one another in unselfish love, stand to one another in true comradeship. Let us help out one another with clothing and household articles, and assist one another in rebuilding destroyed homes. In a spirit of charity, offer to those who have become homeless the shelter of your roof and a place at your table.

To farmers we direct the solemn request to sell food at just prices and to meet conscientiously their duties of delivering foodstuffs rather than keeping their products for themselves or reserving them for smaller towns in the neighborhood. No matter how great the misery that has come about us, in faith and in charity we shall be stronger than suffering and all wickedness of sin. No doubt, those persons called to public positions will find ways and means of distributing equitably and in social justice the load of remedying the tremendous damage caused by the war.

Beloved flock: A period of utter worldliness has collapsed and has left us its monstrous debris. Let us remove the ruins primarily in the spirit of penance and return to the Lord, our God. Let us go to work and build anew on the firm foundation of belief in the Triune God and in resignation to God's Holy Will. Let us trudge our weary way through labor, privation and anxiety, with our eyes on the eternal good, which God has promised us for faithful service here on earth. "For here we have no permanent city, but we seek for the city that is to come" (*Hebr. 13, 14*).

What a great consolation this thought is to us Christians amidst all our misery: this life, so serious and full of responsibility, is but a prelude and a trial. Only when this trial is over will true and eternal life begin. The all-just, all-wise and all-good God will then reward each one according to his works. Not even a drink of cold water given to a neighbor for Christ's sake will be forgotten. Then we shall be judged above all according to the measure in which we observed the great commandment of love, which especially in these times of need claims its royal place before all other commandments.

A glance at our eternal home, which God in His goodness has prepared for his children, is the sweetest consolation for us Christians, when we think of the many whom this fearful war has taken from us—no matter where in the wide world they have found their graves; whether the oceans have swallowed them or whether they were buried under the debris of their homes. The entrance to God's glory is open to all, provided they died in the peace of Christ, perhaps receiving the grace of reconciliation with God at the very last moment. Our Lord will know how to find even their bodies and on the last day He will restore

them in the eternal beauty of youth, incorrupt, rejuvenated and glorified.

GREET RETURNING SERVICE MEN

Our greeting, admonition and prayer is especially directed to you, dear men, who return home from the war and many a time face ruin. You were prepared to die for your people, now be prepared to live for them. Keeping faith in God which has not sunk in this huge collapse, in union with the wife who has been wedded to you, or with the girl whose hand you will accept at the Altar of God and whose most precious dowry is diligence, love of simplicity and union with God—so you will build a Christian home. You will count it to your honor to assist in true friendliness your less fortunate comrades who return maimed, and above all to help them in preparing for a new profession, so that they may soon earn their own bread again, being mindful of the word of the Apostle: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so you will fulfill the law of Christ” (*Gal. 6, 2*).

In His Holy Name we bless you, young and old, and we implore for you the fullness of God’s consolation and strength.

May the Almighty God bless you, the Father and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Source of original German text: Keesing’s *Archiv der Gegenwart*, August 23, 1945, p. 392; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann, *Die doppelte Staatsgründung: Deutsche Geschichte 1945–1955*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986, pp. 377–78.

Source of English translation: “German Bishops at Fulda,” *The Catholic Mind*, November 1945, pp. 691–96. Reprinted from *The Catholic Mind*, November 1945, with permission from America Press, Inc., www.americamagazine.org

Recommended Citation: German Bishops at Fulda – Pastoral Letter by the Conference of Catholic Bishops (August 23, 1945), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4454>> [April 28, 2024].