CATHOLICS AND CATHOLICISM: CONFRONTING THE EVIL OF NAZISM

Donald J. Dietrich, Human Rights and the Catholic Tradition*. Transaction Publishers: To order, call (888) 999-6778.*

Hardly anyone disagrees today about how bad Hitler and the Nazi regime were for the world. Besides unleashing World War II, Hitler had plans to exterminate entire peoples—plans which he proceeded to carry out before the eyes of a too-long unbelieving world in his Holocaust against the Jews and others considered subhuman, and which surely did mark some kind of evil low point even amidst all of the other violence and horrors that characterized the unhappy 20th century.

Nazism was especially bad for the Germans themselves. They lived under it longer than anyone else and suffered greatly from it, even though as a people they also furnished the principal means by which Hitler was able to inflict it upon the rest of the world for a time. German Catholics, in particular, were placed in the unenviable position of living under a government run by elements who only later finally came to be seen as criminals and madmen. While these criminals and madmen were in power, however, they constituted for German Catholics "the governing authorities" to whom St. Paul teaches Christians must be "subject," since "there is no authority except from God and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom 13:1). The Church has generally interpreted this teaching to mean that good Christians must normally obey the duly constituted "powers that be" where they live—but obviously not to the point of falling into sin themselves.

Thus, living under the Nazi regime did constitute a genuine moral dilemma for Catholics and for the Church. This was

especially true at first, when it was not always as easy for people living at the time to see the evil of the regime as it is for us today looking back. As the regime's evils unfolded, many of them could be interpreted, at least for a while, as mere aberrations or excesses. If the Western powers themselves went on for years trying to "do business with Hitler," it is at least understandable that Christians living under the regime should perhaps have tried to do the same more extensively and for a longer period of time than we would consider to be wise or even moral today.

So while resisting pretty much from the outset some obvious evils—such as the Nazi takeover of the media, education, youth activities, and the like—the Church did also try to accommodate the regime in other ways. For example, the concordat which Pope Pius XI concluded with the Nazi regime in 1933—it was signed by the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, who would later become Pope Pius XII—is much criticized today, but nevertheless provided the legal basis for the Church to try to deal with the regime at all.

Donald J. Dietrich is a professor of theology at Boston College and a specialist in German Catholic history. He has written other books, notably on the subject of why some Catholics in Germany supported and others opposed the police state. In *Human Rights and the Catholic Tradition*, he focuses on the experience of German Catholics as they attempted, in the light of their faith, to deal with the barbarism of the Nazi era and the problems and conflicts brought about by Nazism and the Second World War.

One of the author's basic premises is the incompatibility of Catholic moral teaching with Nazism. Hence, as the true nature of the regime became clearer, both the Church and individual Catholics generally became more opposed to it and more inclined to mount various forms of resistance to it (although the penalties for resistance of any kind could sometimes be drastic!). But these developments were neither automatic nor

particularly rapid. As Dietrich notes, “until it was too late, most Germans…did not realize that the Nazis wanted something totally revolutionary.”

The incompatibility between the Catholic faith and the Nazi regime was real. Dietrich examines and documents how Catholic moral teaching came to be applied to what was actually going on in Germany. His main focus is not on what the Church or the Catholic bishops were doing or reacting to, but rather on what Catholics themselves were doing and reacting to. In particular, he covers in some detail how various Catholic theologians and thinkers gradually came to see, and hence to condemn, the evils being perpetrated by the Nazis.

Not only did these thinkers and theologians finally reject the tenets of the regime. In the course of the Nazi era, they succeeded in developing a new personal and existential theology of the human person—emphasizing the dignity of the human person—which became one of the pillars of the official teaching adopted on this subject by the Second Vatican Council. This new approach proved essential in enabling the Church to participate as a full partner in the debates and discussions concerning democracy and human rights that took place after World War II. Both the vocabulary and the concepts of this new theology were largely developed by German theologians in reaction to the brutality of the Nazis. Some of these same German theologians also proved to be very influential at Vatican II.

The major achievement and importance of this book, in fact, lies in Dietrich’s survey and analysis of the thinking of a number of major Catholic thinkers and writers who developed this new theology in reaction to Nazism. They include such still well known figures as Karl Adam and Romano Guardini, or, in the next generation, the Jesuits Gustav Gundlach and Karl Rahner as well as the latter’s student, Johannes B. Metz. The degree to which some of these writers at first thought they were obliged to come to some kind of accommodation with Nazism

was a surprise to this reviewer—although, of course, that stance did not endure.

The author also includes chapters on Nazi terror, sometime Catholic ambivalence towards the Third Reich (especially at first), the scope of Christian resistance, and resistance in the daily life of German Catholics. Dietrich is not uncritical of the overall Catholic record. He does not think the Church opposed Nazism as vigorously as she should have; this was because she continued to seek "institutional survival" instead. "Nazi ideology was critiqued by the Church when it affected the institution…but accepted when it focused on nationalistic patriotism."

"Since the churches sought institutional survival," he further generalizes, "meaningful resistance did not spring from Christian churches but from their members' attempts to uphold their faith." He includes an interesting chapter on how average German Catholics in practice often did act on their Catholic and Christian principles, contrary to what the Nazi regime was urging.

Dietrich is especially critical of what he sees as the inadequacy of the general Catholic reaction to Nazi anti-Semitism and aggression against the Jews in particular. He thinks Catholics and the Church tended to see and condemn only "pagan racism," and hence did not always take the full measure of the evil of the virulent and indeed lethal brand of anti-Semitism which, in the hands of Hitler's minions, led to Auschwitz and the Holocaust against the Jews.

Though he is critical, however, Dietrich's book is in no way an attack on Catholics or on the Church in the way that has become familiar in the anti-Pius XII books which have continued to appear; the authors of these books accuse the wartime pope as well as German Catholics of being sympathizers and even collaborators with the Hitler regime. On the contrary, Dietrich himself documents many instances of

Catholic resistance even as he also judges that the Catholic resistance could have been stronger. Nevertheless, his own focus is so narrow in this book that he scarcely touches upon the Pius XII question at all, even though this would seem to be almost inescapably related to his own chosen subject matter. The period of German Catholic history with which he is concerned is exactly contemporaneous with the period during which the pope and the Church in Germany have been accused by a veritable legion of critics of having been "silent" in the face of Nazi persecution, if not actually enabling of it.

Not only is all this scarcely mentioned or even referred to, but Dietrich actually includes references to such anti-Pius authors as Susan Zuccotti, Michael Phayer, David Kertzer, and even Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, as if the biased, inaccurate, and agenda-driven "scholarship" of these writers merited serious consideration. Meanwhile he seems totally unaware of the considerable and formidable body of work produced by Catholics over the past decade in defense of the unjustly slandered wartime pope. This is a serious deficiency, considering the author's subject matter.

Again with his narrow focus, Dietrich also seems oblivious to the fact that another Holocaust is currently going on before our very eyes in the current war on the unborn being waged by means of legalized abortion. He correctly draws the conclusion from the Nazi period that "dehumanization…does seem to be the crucial component needed for sanctioned murder." Yet he also refers at one point to what he calls "the pro-choice culture of today" as if this were a wholly neutral fact and not another case of "state-sanctioned murder." Yet the great value of this book lies in how it brings out the way German theologians grew in their understanding of the evil being done around them and reacted creatively. Should we not be doing the same in the face of the Holocaust that confronts us?

Kenneth D. Whitehead is a member of the Board of Directors of the Catholic League. His survey of the recent books on the

Pope Pius XII controversy can be found on the League's website: www.catholicleague.org.