

Some Catholic Thoughts on the Holocaust

The letters on these two pages seek to address some issues raised by recent Holocaust-related events. Our knowledge of the important role played by the Catholic Church in rescuing Jews during World War II continues to grow. The Catholic League will continue to address this issue from time to time as new research becomes accessible.

Two recent contributions to this discussion include the studies of Rev. Zygmunt Zielinski and the efforts of Mrs. Bozena Urbanowicz-Gilbride.

Father Zielinski, a Polish priest, recently presented a paper which revealed details of thousands of Poles who died as the result of rescues gone awry. Close to home, the tireless efforts of Mrs. Bozena Urbanowicz-Gilbride – whose story was told in our January-February issue – have been rewarded with a singular honor. On May 3, 1994 she received the Cavalier's Cross – the highest honor a Polish citizen can receive – for her extensive work in educating people about the suffering of Christians and Jews during the Holocaust and the heroism of the Polish people in the face of their Nazi oppressors.

To the Editor:

Like so many others in the media these days, *Newsday* finds it almost impossible to write an editorial about the Holocaust without somehow blaming the Catholic Church ["Coming Together," April 11]. Following the revisionists, *Newsday* charges that Pope Pius XII "could not summon up the courage or conviction to issue more than a pale, general statement of mild disapproval."

If this were true, then why did Golda Meir, the editors of the *New York Times*, leading rabbis, the World Jewish Congress, and

others, heap praise on Pius XII, both during and after the Holocaust, for his actions? And why did the chief rabbi of Rome, Israel Zolli, convert to Catholicism after the war? In short it is a distortion of history to suggest that Pius XII did nothing while Jews, and others, suffered.

William A. Donohue

President

Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights

[Published in *New York Newsday*, April 22, 1994.]

Dear Mr. Donohue:

At the very time the events dramatized in the movie, "Schindler's List" were taking place, I was in Auschwitz as a prisoner of Hitler's SS.

They sent me there in October, 1941 when most of the inmates were Polish Catholics like me. Many of them were priests and members of religious orders. In fact, Saint Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish priest canonized for offering his life to save another Auschwitz prisoner, was murdered there only two months before my arrival.

Oskar Schindler is now rightfully acclaimed for his heroic efforts on behalf of the Jews he saved. Hollywood spared no effort to make his story one of the most colossal extravaganzas ever.

Because I experienced much of the anguish and the trials to which St. Maximilian was subjected before his execution, I cannot help wondering if the motion picture industry would consider him in its next Holocaust film. After all, both men acted to save people the Nazis planned to murder.

While Schindler took some risks in doing so, altruism may not have been his primary motive since he derived some financial

benefit from it. But when Father Kolbe stepped forward and told the Nazi commandant of Auschwitz to take him in place of his fellow prisoner slated for execution, his only benefit was the knowledge he would carry out God's will by making the ultimate personal sacrifice of offering his life.

The contrast between these two men is stark. Schindler was a Nazi and an oppressor while St. Kolbe was a Catholic priest and a Pole. These two categories marked him, like the Jewish people, among Hitler's main priorities for liquidation. Only ten days before he invaded Poland, Hitler ordered his Nazis to kill "without pity all men, women and children of Polish race or language."

But because he was a priest and a Pole, I hold little hope he will be similarly remembered by the people in show business. He simply does not meet the standards Hollywood has set for a typical Holocaust hero. Even the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. has not found him acceptable for any recognition.

What troubles me about "Schindler's List" is the way it either ignores or misrepresents the tragedy of Poland's Catholics. As one of them, I can truly say we shared much of the suffering the Nazis inflicted upon the Jews even though it was not identical. Of the six million Polish citizens who perished after the German invasion, three million were Polish Jews and three million were Polish Christians.

Despite the fact the Nazis marked Jews and Poles for a similar fate, we frequently found it possible to assist and hide Jews escaping from the Germans. The help given became so widespread that the Nazis had to decree a death penalty for anyone in Poland giving such aid. In no other country the Germans occupied was such a brutal order ever given. Yet, it is estimated as many as 50,000 Poles were executed for helping Jews. Israel expressed its gratitude by designating Poles as the largest group of rescuers at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

Different audiences react in different ways to Holocaust films. As someone who survived 3 1/2 years of the terror at Auschwitz, whenever I see one I can only say, "St. Maximilian Kolbe, pray for us."

Sincerely yours,
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