

# Confronting the Nazi War on Christianity

---

The *Kulturkampf* Newsletters,  
1936–1939

The Definitive English-Language Edition of  
the *Kulturkampf* Newsletters

Edited and translated  
by Richard Bonney

## Preface

On the seventieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, it is a sad fact to record, but true, that a not insignificant number of Catholic priests<sup>1</sup> and many more Lutheran ministers<sup>2</sup> sided openly with Hitler and the aims of National Socialism. Many other priests were quiescent. In a totalitarian system such as Hitler's Third Reich, how would we have reacted? The *Kulturkampf* newsletters document the extraordinary lengths to which the Nazi regime was prepared to go in order to secure its control over, and the compliance of, the Catholic and Protestant churches. This book, however, is dedicated to that minority of priests who openly resisted and suffered the consequences for their commitment to the prophetic witness of the Christian Church. In many cases, we do not know the precise theological or practical reasons for their resistance.

This book is dedicated in particular to Bernard Lichtenberg who stands as the personification of that Christian witness and about whom we are much better informed than many other resisters of Nazism. Following the events of *Kristallnacht*, on the night of 9–10 November 1938 – when Jewish shops and synagogues were systematically vandalized by the Nazis and the murderous assault on the Jews began in earnest throughout Germany – Lichtenberg entered his pulpit and pronounced these words: ‘we know what happened yesterday. We do not know what tomorrow holds. However, we have experienced what happened today. Outside, the synagogue burns. That is also a house of God.’ From this time on, he prayed daily for Jews and Christians of Jewish descent, and also concerned himself actively with their plight. In 1941, two visitors to his church overheard his prayers for the Jews and reported him to the Gestapo.

- 1 Kevin P. Spicer, *Hitler's Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).
- 2 Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

When the Gestapo searched his house, they found an annotated copy of *Mein Kampf* – in Nazi Germany, this was akin to desecration of the State Bible – and a statement Lichtenberg had prepared denouncing a declaration of Goebbels against the Jews which he had planned to read from the pulpit the following Sunday: ‘this pamphlet states that every German who supports Jews with an ostensibly false sentimentality, be it only through friendly obligingness, practises treason against his *Volk*. Let us not be misled by this un-Christian way of thinking but follow the strict command of Jesus Christ: “you shall love your neighbour as ... yourself.”’<sup>3</sup> Lichtenberg, under interrogation, stated that he opposed the deportation of the Jews ‘with all its consequences’ (that is, their extermination) for spiritual reasons because ‘it goes against the chief rule of Christianity: “you should love your neighbour as ... yourself”, and I consider the Jews also my neighbour who have immortally created souls after the image and likeness of God.’ When further questioned, Lichtenberg supported Clemens von Galen, Bishop of Münster, in his condemnation of euthanasia, a bishop whom many Nazis considered a traitor to Germany.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, he stated ‘Hitler is not an infallible prophet ... I do not consider Hitler as a prophet sent by God.’ National Socialist ideology, he stated with ‘steadfast conviction’, was ‘incompatible with the teaching and commands of

- 3 The pro-Nazi priest Josef Roth reached a diametrically opposed view of the Christian command of love of neighbour, arguing that it was a ‘distortion’ for Jews to be included: Spicer, *Hitler’s Priests*, 43. Similarly, the pro-Nazi priest Lorenz Pieper argued that ‘a committed Christian and Catholic must be an anti-semite’ (ibid., 48). This was also the view of Bernhard Stempfle, who was murdered by the SS on 2 July 1934 (ibid., 76). For the Nazi-supporter Philipp Haeuser’s ‘narrowly defined understanding of “neighbour”’, see ibid., 133.
- 4 Clemens August Graf von Galen (1878–1946) was beatified on 9 Oct. 2005 by Benedict XVI. His three great sermons of 1941, particularly that of 3 Aug. against euthanasia, were reproduced and sent all over Germany (the future John Paul II read one that reached as far away as Krakow) and resulted in protests bringing an end to the euthanasia programme Aktion T4. Bormann suggested to Hitler that the bishop should be taken into custody and hanged. The Nazi command, however, feared that in such a case the population of the diocese of Münster would have had to be written off as lost for the duration of the war. The bishop was deeply dejected when in his place 24 secular priests and thirteen members of the regular clergy were deported into concentration camps, of whom ten lost their lives. The sermons have been made available in English by his diocese via the internet.

the Catholic Church'. Lichtenberg died on 5 November 1943 on his way to Dachau concentration camp.<sup>5</sup>

That there was no comparable prophetic statement from Pope Pius XII is now well known. His personal theology precluded it.<sup>6</sup> While exercising – in his own words – a ‘necessary restraint’ in his own public utterances, Pius XII encouraged the German episcopate in September 1941 to ‘stand up for

- 5 Kevin P. Spicer, *Resisting the Third Reich: the Catholic Clergy in Hitler's Berlin* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), 178–81. Lichtenberg was beatified by John Paul II in 1996. Eva Fleischner writes: ‘no matter what we, or any number of archivists and historians, may find out about Pope Pius XII, the archival findings will come up short. We already know that we shall not find genuinely prophetic words or actions, except in the cases of some remarkable individuals – Bernard Lichtenberg is a shining example’ (Eva Fleischner, ‘The Spirituality of Pius XII’, in Carol Rittner and John K. Roth (eds), *Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust* (original edn London: Leicester University Press, 2001; repr. Continuum International Publishing, 2004), 135). Fleischner was one of three Roman Catholic members, and the only woman, who served on the International Catholic–Jewish Historical Commission. Its task was to examine critically the eleven printed volumes of Vatican archival material (1965–81) relating to the Holy See’s role during the Holocaust. See *ibid.*, 133, where she quotes Gershon Greenberg’s question at a conference in April 2000: ‘did the question of martyrdom never arise? Did the pope, and those around him, ever consider that he should perhaps be ready to be killed if he spoke out publicly against the evil of Nazism and in defence of the Jews?’ Lichtenberg provides us with the clearest response to Greenberg’s retrospective question; but, one might ask, how many martyrs have there been in the Church’s history compared to the numbers who remained silent? The fear was that Nazi retaliation would be directed against others, as in the case of the priests arrested in place of Bishop von Galen.
- 6 Michael Phayer stresses that the Church’s teaching of supercessionism – the theology advocating the belief that Christianity’s covenant with God has replaced Judaism’s Mosaic covenant – enabled Pius XII to place the welfare of the Catholic Church far above the plight of European Jews. As Phayer writes, ‘if Jews did not convert, their destiny lay out of the reach of the Church because they had broken the covenant.’ Although Pius ‘deplored the murder of the Jews’, Phayer concludes, ‘for Pope Pius, Hitler was not killing God’s chosen people, for the Jews had long since given up their birthright’ (Michael Phayer, *Pius XII, the Holocaust, and the Cold War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 255–6. The key text for this is Pius XII’s 1943 encyclical *Mystici Corporis* (para. 29): ‘The New Testament took the place of the Old Law which had been abolished.’ <[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_29061943\\_mystici-corporis-christi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi_en.html)>.

the causes of God and the Holy Church ...’ His words are worth quoting in full:<sup>7</sup>

The three sermons of the bishop of Münster and the pastoral letter of the joint episcopacy furnish proof of what can still be achieved within the Reich through public and resolute acts. We stress that because the Church in Germany is all the more dependent on your own public actions because the general political situation in its difficult and often contradictory nature imposes on the head of the entire Church in his public statements a necessary restraint. However, that the bishops who wish such courage and at the same time in such irreproachable form stand up for the causes of God and the Holy Church, as did Bishop von Galen, will always find Our support, of that We do not specifically need to assure you and your brothers.

In the course of preparing this book, I have come to owe a considerable debt to a number of individuals. First, to my wife, Margaret, who discovered 23 of the English-language *Kulturkampf* Newsletters<sup>8</sup> long forgotten among my research papers and for encouraging me to undertake this book project. (I believe that these newsletters were originally donated by the late Dr. David

- 7 Quoted by Kevin P. Spicer, review of Beth A. Griech-Polelle, *Bishop von Galen: German Catholicism and National Socialism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), in *Journal of Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 18/3 (2004), 494–5. The absence of prophetic statements from Pius XII is clear from Pierre Blet S.J., *Pius XII and the Second World War, according to the Archives of the Vatican*, trans. Lawrence J. Johnson (Hereford: Gracewing and Paulist Press, 1999). Blet was one of the Jesuits charged with editing the selection of documents chosen from the Vatican Archives. Had there been a prophetic statement, the Jesuit editors would assuredly have selected it for publication in the eleven volumes of evidence (technically 11 vols in 12 in cataloguing terms: *Actes et documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la Seconde Guerre mondiale*) on which Blet draws and which he co-edited. Instead (*ibid.*, 282–3), Blet quotes the ‘mission’ which Pius XII ‘pursued to the end’: ‘We will not cease to watch attentively so that We may give all the assistance within Our power and as opportunities allow: especially to motivate once again the people, today inflamed and divided, toward concluding a peace that is honourable for all ... and then, for as long as this is not possible, at least to alleviate the terrible wounds that have been or will be inflicted in the future.’ Churchill and Roosevelt, of course, were not interested a peace that was ‘honourable for all’ but in eliminating the Nazi threat once and for all.
- 8 See Appendix for the Concordance between the French, English and German Editions of the *Kulturkampf* Newsletters.

Rosenberg, a Jewish doctor who had married a Catholic lady, Patricia M. Keefe,<sup>9</sup> both of whom were committed to Holocaust education: my thanks and blessings for his memory in any event.) Secondly, my thanks are extended to Margaret as Chief Archivist for the assistance offered by the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland by the use of microfilm readers and printers and for her wisdom in judging that the *Kulturkampf* Newsletters were a matter of interest for the Record Office since they were printed by Samuel Walker and Sons of Hinckley, Leicestershire. This has meant that the project, unusually, has left a full documentary record at the Record Office. In the first instance my thanks are due to the British Library's Newspaper Library, to Stephen Lester's care, when providing a copy of the English *Kulturkampf* Newsletters for the French conference held in 1999, to secure a copy of the French edition for deposit in London, and to the British Library's Rights Department both for permission to republish the Newsletter and for waiving permission fees so that the project became viable.<sup>10</sup>

Above all, this book is dedicated in love to my family – my wife Margaret and my children Alexander, Katherine, Sarah and Christine – whose love helps sustain me in both my academic work and my ministry.

- 9 Patricia M. Keefe, 'Popes Pius XI and Pius XII, the Catholic Church and the Nazi Persecution of the Jews', *British Journal of Holocaust Education*, 2/1 (1993), 26–47.
- 10 'Photocopies of the Newspaper Library's unique run of the English edition of *Kulturkampf: News Bulletin on the Religious Policy of the Third Reich*, covering the period March 1937 to Aug. 1939, were supplied to the Institut Catholique de Lille in France in connection with their forthcoming symposium in Nov. 1999 about this periodical and its significance. In exchange, Stephen Lester, Collections and Bibliographic Systems Manager, arranged for the Newspaper Library to be supplied with bound photocopies of the complete run of the French edition (Feb. 1936 to Aug. 1939) from Lille' <<http://www.bl.uk/collections/nl26.html>>. The English Newsletter has the following call numbers: 1937 LON 226 [1937]; 1938 LON 804 [1938]; 1939 LON 363 [1939]. The French Newsletter has the call number FRMISC2580.