

Two responses to the Holocaust

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

On January 23, the Catholic bishops of Germany and Poland issued separate statements commemorating the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. A careful reading of both statements (Origins 2/16/95) discloses key differences.

The German bishops' statement is almost breathtaking in its honest self-criticism. It does not hide behind convenient distinctions between "good Germans" and "bad Germans," nor does it dilute the uniqueness of Jewish suffering by insisting that non-Jewish Germans suffered, too. Moreover, the German bishops acknowledge that anti-Semitism was part of German life even before the rise of Nazism, and that this "anti-Jewish attitude remained also within the church."

"This was one of the reasons why, during the years of the Third Reich, Christians did not offer due resistance to racial anti-Semitism. Many times there was failure and guilt among Catholics. Not a few of them got involved in the ideology of National Socialism and remained unmoved in the face of crimes committed against Jewish-owned property and the life of the Jews. Others paved the way for crimes or even became criminals themselves." The German bishops admit that many Christians were not strong enough to raise their voices in protest against the disappearance of their Jewish neigh-



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bors and that those who did render aid frequently did not receive support.

Indeed, there were no public protests following the pogroms of November 1938 when hundreds of synagogues were vandalized and burned, cemeteries desecrated, thousands of Jewish-owned shops demolished, Jewish homes looted and damaged, and individual Jews ridiculed, ill-treated, and killed.

"The failure and guilt of that time," the German bishops continue, "have also a church dimension."

They cite a 1975 statement by a joint synod of German dioceses which chastised "a church community who kept on living their life in turning their back too often on the fate of this persecuted Jewish people, who looked

too fixedly at the threat to their own institutions and who remained silent about the crimes committed against Jews and Judaism."

The German bishops call for a "confession of this guilt and a willingness to painfully learn from this history of guilt of our country and of our church as well," and asks "the Jewish people to hear this word of conversion and will of renewal."

"In the church," the German bishops conclude, "there must not be any room for or consent to hostility toward Jews... Whenever such an attitude comes to light, (Christians) have the duty to offer public and express resistance."

The Polish bishops issued their own statement the same day. Although in many ways the statements overlap, there is a discernible difference in their spirit and tone.

First, the German bishops make clear that "Auschwitz has become the symbol of the extermination of European Jewry, which is called Holocaust ... " The Polish bishops prefer to include the Jews with others (Poles, Gypsies, Russians, and other nationalities), even though 10 Jews were exterminated for every person in the category of "others."

Indeed, the Polish bishops tend to dwell on the non-Jewish Polish victims, insisting that almost every Polish family lost someone close at Auschwitz or another camp. The bishops praise these non-Jewish victims, for their acceptance "in a deep Christian spirit"

of their "infinite suffering."

When referring to the numbers who died at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Polish bishops choose a very curious form of expression: "even though members of other nations also perished at this camp, nevertheless, Jews consider this camp a symbol of the total extermination of their nation."

Compare those words — and especially the Polish bishops' use of the verb "consider" — with the way the German bishops characterize the symbolism of Auschwitz.

Second, the German bishops criticize German Catholics during the Nazi era for their failure to speak and to act in protest against the treatment of their Jewish neighbors. The Polish bishops refer to Catholic Poles of that same era as "involuntary witnesses to the extermination of Jews."

Third, in the German bishops' statement there is frank self-criticism of the church itself. Not one line or word of criticism of the church appears in the Polish bishops' statement.

Finally, in the German bishops' statement there is a call for a confession of guilt, for conversion, and for renewal. In the Polish bishops' statement there is a defensive tone, rising at times even to the self-congratulatory (pre-war Poland is referred to as "a Jewish paradise"). The original plan was to have both bishops' conferences issue a joint statement for this anniversary, but the plan was canceled and separate statements were issued. One need not ask why.

Spiritual books for secular people

By Gregory Pierce
Syndicated columnist

Henri J. M. Nouwen is arguably the most popular author writing on the spiritual life today. Recently, he was challenged by a fellow writer, Fred Bratman, to "write something about the spiritual life for me and my friends."

Bratman told Nouwen, "You have something to say, but you keep saying it to people who least need to hear it. ... What about us young, ambitious, secular men and women wondering what life is all about after all? Can you speak to us with the same conviction as you speak to those who share your tradition, your language and your vision?"

To his credit, Nouwen tried. He sat down and wrote a long essay — "as I would in a personal letter" — to Bratman, which was published recently un-



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der the title, "Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World" (Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992).

*What Fred had expressed so clear-

ly was coming at me from many other directions as well," Nouwen explains. "I heard it from people in my community who had no religious background and for whom the Bible was a strange, confusing book. I heard it from members of my family who had long ago left the Church and had no desire ever to return. I heard it from lawyers, doctors and businessmen whose lives had taken up all their energy and for whom Saturday and Sunday were little more than a brief respite to gain enough strength to reenter the arena on Monday morning."

After he finished "Life of the Beloved," Nouwen sent the manuscript to Bratman. He was surprised that his friend was not deeply touched. "Fred convinced me that this book was not as radically different from my previous books as I had assumed. ... For him, it was writing for the 'converted' and not for truly secular people."

"You speak from a context and tradition that is alien to us," Bratman explained, "and your words are based on many presuppositions that we don't share with you. You are not aware of how truly secular we are."

There is a humorous ending to this story. Nouwen at first did not know what to do with his manuscript. But then he showed it to several religious professionals. They convinced Nouwen that his manuscript was great and should be published, which it was.

"You might not have been able to write all that Fred needs to hear," they told Nouwen, "but Fred certainly enabled you to write what we need to hear!"

You guessed it, "Life of the Beloved" has since sold "very well" according to the publisher (which probably means in excess of 50,000 copies). There's a lesson to be learned here, but I'm not sure what that lesson is.

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