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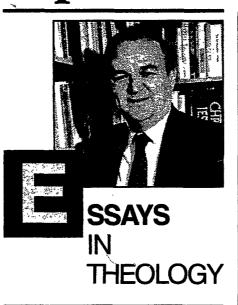
# Two responses to the Holocaust

### 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 selfcriticism. 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-



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.

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