

COLUMNISTS

Holocaust document does not go far enough

This week's column is devoted to the recent Vatican document on the Holocaust, as a way of marking the Jewish feast of Passover, which begins at sundown on Good Friday.

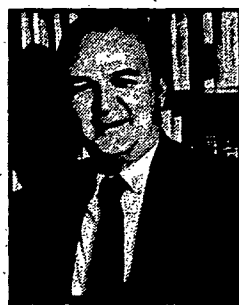
The document, entitled "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah," was issued March 16 by the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, whose president is Cardinal Edward Cassidy, an Australian.

The initial reaction to the document has been mixed. Several Jewish leaders have expressed disappointment, suggesting that the statement doesn't go far enough. Catholics, especially those involved at official levels in the Catholic-Jewish dialogue, have tended to be more positive. I would suggest, however, that the weight of the evidence favors the critics.

Had this document appeared 20 or even 10 years ago, the reaction to it by the Jewish community would have been much warmer. There are many fine things to be found in the statement. Anti-Semitism is soundly condemned, guilt is acknowledged for the silence and even compliance of many Catholics during the Nazi persecution of the Jews, and a spirit of repentance and a firm purpose of amendment pervade the text.

But when measured against earlier statements by the bishops of Germany and France, this latest Vatican document seems less impressive.

On January 23, 1995, the German



essays in
theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Catholic bishops' conference issued a statement commemorating the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. Unlike the Vatican statement, which only acknowledges the guilt of individual members of the church, the German bishops place blame on the church itself, and on its leaders in particular.

Those leaders, the German bishops wrote, "looked too fixedly at the threat to their own institutions and therefore remained silent about the crimes committed against the Jews and Judaism." We must now confess this guilt and "painfully learn from this history of guilt of our country and of our church as well."

The French bishops also acknowledged the guilt of the church as such, and not just of individual members. The apology issued by the bishops came on September 30, 1997, the 57th anniversary of the promulgation of the first of more than 160 anti-Semitic laws and de-

crees passed by the collaborationist Vichy regime.

Even the title of the French bishops' statement, "Declaration of Repentance," contrasts sharply with the more cautious title of the Vatican document, "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah." The French bishops, like their German counterparts, conceded that church leaders, and not just rank-and-file members of the church, were also seriously at fault during the Holocaust.

Their sense of loyalty and obedience to the civil authorities went "far beyond the obedience traditionally accorded those authorities." These pastoral leaders "remained stuck in conformity, prudence and abstention."

"They failed to realize that the church, called at that moment to play the role of defender within a social body that was falling apart, did in fact have considerable power and influence, and that in the face of the silence of other institutions, its voice could have echoed loudly by taking a definitive stand against the irreparable."

The same observation could apply to the posture adopted by Pope Pius XII himself during the Holocaust. However, this Vatican document concedes nothing regarding the wartime pope. Indeed, it attempts to exonerate him completely, without acknowledging the possibility that there may be legitimate grounds for at least some of the criticisms and questions that have been raised by people of

good will, Jews and non-Jews alike.

"In the face of so great and utter a tragedy," the French bishops declared, "too many of the church's pastors committed an offense, by their silence, against the church itself and its mission ... this failing of the church of France and of her responsibility toward the Jewish people are part of our history. We confess this sin. We beg God's pardon, and we call upon the Jewish people to hear our words of repentance."

No sentences in the Vatican document approach the depth of the French bishops' admission of guilt, contrition, repentance and their appeal for forgiveness, not only from God but from the Jewish people themselves. The Vatican statement, by contrast, is too subtle, too cautious and too restrained; its voice is passive.

But it is not too late for the church to overcome the deficiencies of the commission's work. John Paul II could issue a statement of his own that is more direct, more heartfelt and more powerfully prophetic — something akin perhaps to his speech during his historic visit to the chief synagogue of Rome in 1986 when he implicitly acknowledged the anti-Jewish behavior of some of his own predecessors in the papal office.

Such a statement would be warmly and gratefully received.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

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