



Volume 7. Nazi Germany, 1933-1945

Excerpt from Bishop von Galen's Sermon (August 3, 1941) and Government Correspondence Regarding the Sermon and the Charges Raised against Galen as a Result (August 12-13, 1941)

After the publication of the papal encyclical in March 1937, Catholic resistance was completely confined to the actions of individual representatives of the church. One of the best-known critics of the Nazis was Clemens August von Galen, Bishop of Münster (1878-1946). In the following sermon of August 3, 1941, he protested publicly against the so-called euthanasia program. The killing of the disabled at the hands of the state also prompted him to file murder charges. Galen's influence and popularity among the Catholic population made him a considerable security risk for the Nazi regime, which sought to shut him down but was afraid of public unrest, as the following governmental correspondence illustrates. Goebbels eventually prevailed in the matter and Galen went unchecked. General public outrage over the "euthanasia program" along with the vociferous protests of church representatives, in which Galen played a major part, prompted Hitler to suspend the T4 Action, although the murder of patients continued on a decentralized basis.

I. Excerpt from Bishop von Galen's Sermon (August 3, 1941)

[. . .]

I am reliably informed that in hospitals and homes in the province of Westphalia lists are being prepared of inmates who are classified as "unproductive members of the national community" and are to be removed from these establishments and shortly thereafter killed. The first party of patients left the mental hospital at Marienthal, near Münster, in the course of this week.

German men and women! Article 211 of the German Penal Code is still in force, in these terms: "Whoever kills a man of deliberate intent is guilty of murder and punishable with death." No doubt in order to protect those who kill with intent these poor men and women, members of our families, from this punishment laid down by law, the patients who have been selected for killing are removed from their home area to some distant place. Some illness or other is then given as the cause of death. Since the body is immediately cremated, the relatives and the criminal police are unable to establish whether the patient had in fact been ill or what the cause of death actually was. I have been assured, however, that in the Ministry of the Interior and the office of the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Conti, no secret is made of the fact that a large number of mentally ill persons in Germany have already been killed with intent and that this will continue.

Article 139 of the Penal Code provides that “anyone who has knowledge of an intention to commit a crime against the life of any person ... and fails to inform the authorities or the person whose life is threatened in due time ... commits a punishable offence.” When I learned of the intention to remove patients from Marienthal I reported the matter on 28th July to the State Prosecutor of Münster Provincial Court and to the Münster chief of police by registered letter, in the following terms:

“According to the information I have received it is planned in the course of this week (the date has been mentioned as 31st July) to move a large number of inmates of the provincial hospital at Marienthal, classified as “unproductive members of the national community,” to the mental hospital at Eichberg, where, as is generally believed to have happened in the case of patients removed from other establishments, they are to be killed with intent. Since such action is not only contrary to the divine and the natural moral law but under article 211 of the German Penal Code ranks as murder and attracts the death penalty, I hereby report the matter in accordance with my obligation under article 139 of the Penal Code and request that steps should at once be taken to protect the patients concerned by proceedings against the authorities planning their removal and murder, and that I may be informed of the action taken.”

I have received no information of any action by the State Prosecutor or the police. I had already written on 26th July to the Westphalian provincial authorities, who are responsible for the running of the mental hospital and for the patients entrusted to them for care and for cure, protesting in the strongest terms. It had no effect. And I am now told that 800 patients have already been removed from the hospital at Warstein.

We must expect, therefore, that the poor defenceless patients are, sooner or later, going to be killed. [. . .]

Source of English translation: Sermon by the Bishop of Münster, Clemens August Count von Galen, on Sunday, August 3, 1941, in St. Lambert's Church, Münster; reprinted in Beth A. Griech-Polelle, *Bishop von Galen: German Catholicism and National Socialism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 189-91. Translation attributed to Saint Lamberti Church in Münster: speech printed in a pamphlet distributed by the Saint Lamberti Church. Republished here with permission by the Diocesan Archives, Münster.

Source of original German text: Bistumsarchiv Münster, Fremde Provenienzen, A 8. Schreibmaschinenabschrift. Überschrift: Niederschrift der Predigt des Bischofs von Münster, Sonntag, den 3. August 1941, in der St. Lambertikirche in Münster; reprinted in Johann Neuhausler, *Kreuz und Hakenkreuz: Der Kampf des Nationalsozialismus gegen die katholische Kirche und der kirchliche Widerstand*. 2nd edition. Munich: Verlag Katholische Kirche Bayerns, 1946, part II, pp. 364-66.

II. Government Correspondence Regarding the Sermon and the Charges Raised against Galen as a Result (August 12-13, 1941)

Source of original German texts: Rev. Edmund A. Walsh SJ Papers, Box 7, Folder 449, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library, Washington, D.C.