



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. Grieb-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. Schreibmaschinenschrift. Überschrift: Niederschrift der Predigt des Bischofs von Münster, Sonntag, den 3. August 1941, in der St. Lambertikirche in Münster; reprinted in Johann Neuhäusler, *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)

Division Chief — Propaganda

Berlin, 12 August 1941

To the Reich Minister for Propaganda and Popular Enlightenment
Concerning: Catholic Action

At the end of July and the beginning of August several meetings of a rather select committee of the Bishops' Conference of Fulda took place. It was decided at those meetings to continue the line of increasingly sharp opposition. The execution of those decisions becomes evident in three pastoral letters of the Bishop Count von Galen of Muenster. In the pastoral letters of 13 and 20 July the bishop attacked the Gestapo with harsh words because of the closing of several Jesuit houses and convents of the Mission Sisters of the Immaculate Conception; he calls the officials of the Gestapo thieves and robbers. Then he connects those confiscations with several bombings of the city of Muenster and calls them just punishment from heaven for the misdeeds of the Gestapo. In these pastoral letters he glorifies Pastor Niemoeller and attempts to disprove the charge of disturbing the unity of the people by claiming that it is only the Gestapo which is destroying the unity of the people.

After such attacks against official organs of the state, stronger in form and tenor than the earlier mentioned, more hidden accusations, the Bishop of Muenster on 3 August in a sermon to his diocesans came out with the most severe attack against the leadership of the German government ever made during the past decades. After first dealing again with the closing of those religious houses and convents he turns against the execution of measures concerning Euthanasia for incurable cases of feeble-mindedness. He first sets forth the argument against Euthanasia and then goes so far as to claim the following:

"Yes, citizens of Muenster, wounded soldiers are being killed recklessly, since they are, productively, of no more use to the state. Mother, your boy will be killed too, if he comes back home from the front wounded." He closes with the remark that the inhabitants of Muenster had not understood God's vengeance which came in the form of English air attacks and he incites the faithful to open opposition, even if they should have to die for it.

For your information I enclose the original text of the sermon.

The allegation of the Bishop of Muenster that wounded soldiers are threatened by measures of Euthanasia was spread by several broadcasts of the London radio. The attitude of the bishop is treason of a definite quality.

It is to be feared that this sermon and the utterances of the bishop will get around by propaganda of mouth and will be believed in wide circles of the Reich, especially among the

Catholic population. Moreover it is to be feared that those treasonable accusations will find their way to the Protestant population, especially among families who have relatives at the front.

Measures taken by the state police against the bishop can hardly be successful, because in case of an arrest and judgment the bishop would be made a martyr by the Church, and other bishops and priest would repeat his claims anew. The most suitable measure would be the enlightenment of the population concerning our measures in reference to Euthanasia; I realized, however, that the present times are very unfit for that. The manner and the means by which the bishop prepared this action makes one fear that he will not relax with his attacks, unless we effect a fundamental change of attitude particularly in the Catholic population.

I inquired at the Reich Ministry for Church Affairs as to how they regard this matter over there. I was answered that the authentic text of the sermon unfortunately was not yet known in that Department. The sermon was on 3 August.

I beg the Reich Minister to decide whether or not the Fuehrer shall be asked by group leader Bormann whether the camouflage of Euthanasia thus far in practice ought to be modified so that a defense against the treasonable claims of the Bishop of Muenster can be inaugurated by launching a campaign of popular enlightenment.

Heil Hitler!

Enclosure

Berlin, 13. August 1941
Ti/Hu

Secret Proposal for Reichsleiter Bormann
Concerning: Sermon of the Bishop of Muenster

After the conference of Ministers, Dr. Goebbels discussed with me the sermon of the Bishop of Muenster. He could not say what effective measures could be taken at the moment.

I explained to him that in my opinion there could be only one effective measure, namely, to hang the bishop and that I already had informed Reichsleiter Bormann accordingly.

Thereupon Dr. Goebbels said that this was a measure upon which the Fuehrer alone could decide. He feared, however, that the population of Muenster could be regarded as lost during the war, if anything were done against the bishop, and in that fear one safely could include the whole of Westphalia.

I pointed out to him that it would only be necessary to expose properly that very vulgar lie through propaganda channels. In that way it ought to be possible not only to bring the population there to an understanding of that measure but to create among them rebellion against the bishop.

To that Dr. Goebbels answered again that the Fuehrer himself would certainly come to a decision in that question.

After that he observed that it would have been wiser, in his opinion, not to challenge the Church during the war but to try only to steer them according to our interests as far as possible. For that reason he had ordered the interview with party comrade Gutterer. But then he had not followed up the matter in this way because the Chancery of the Party had chosen the way of uncompromising refusal and open breach. As much as it was for him — (in contrast to other Reich's Leaders) — a matter of course to suppress the press of the Church, because in that regard he had proof and excuse concerning the Church. This preserved appearances. He maintained the stand, however, that it would have been better during the war to preserve appearances as far as the Church is concerned. It is permissible always to attack an opponent only if one is in a position to answer properly at the decisive counterattack of that opponent. But this was extraordinarily difficult in the case of the counterattack of the Church during the war, yes, nearly impossible. One should not enjoy a revenge with heat but coldly. In politics one should know how to wait. This the Fuehrer clearly and distinctly had proved again in the case of Russia. If he would have had his way one would have pretended during the war as if [the following line at end of page is missing].

I explained to him that the procedure employed so far had nevertheless accomplished this much, that the Church had opened up and in doing so played into our hands by documents valuable after the war for the struggle against it.

Dr. Goebbels said that in his opinion those measures would have been possible after the war, even without the documents, whereas the effect of the Church documents on the attitude of the people was extraordinarily troublesome now. In any case it is necessary now to establish an absolute and clear rule as to the road to be followed. In the deliberations which have to take place in this connection we should not allow ourselves to be guided by the heart but by completely cold logic.

I personally retain the viewpoint that, if the Fuehrer should agree with my proposal to hang the bishop, we could safely still continue along the lines used so far. However, should the Fuehrer reject this proposal and postpone a reckoning, and defer action in the present case also, until after the war, I herewith request that it be considered whether Dr. Goebbels should not try, as far as might be possible, to pursue the course he suggested.

Tiessler

Source of English translations: Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz, eds., INSIDE HITLER'S GERMANY: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE THIRD REICH. 1st edition. Lexington, MA, and Toronto: D.C. Heath & Company, 1992, pp. 486-90.

Materials from Sax, INSIDE HITLER'S GERMANY, 1st edition, displayed with special permission of Houghton Mifflin Company. All Rights Reserved.

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.