



Volume 7. Nazi Germany, 1933-1945

Excerpt from the Minutes of a Conference of Ministers (July 14, 1933)

In 1933, Hitler promised to protect the rights and authority of the churches, but in actuality he pursued their “coordination” [*Gleichschaltung*]. The Catholic Church ultimately gave in to the Hitler regime by agreeing to the terms of the Reich Concordat; and the Church’s most influential political organ, the Center Party, dissolved in order to avoid the ban on political parties. With the signing of the Concordat on July 30, 1933, Hitler scored a great propaganda victory, both in Germany (whose Catholics were initially critical of National Socialism) and abroad. The Vatican saw common ground in the Nazis’ vehement anti-Bolshevism and hoped that by refraining from political statements and activism the Catholic Church would be spared total subordination to the Nazi regime. This proved wrong, however.

The following protocol of a cabinet meeting on July 14, 1933 (six days before the signing of the Concordat) shows that Hitler was more or less amazed by the speed with which he had managed to silence the Catholic Church in the political arena.

Excerpt from the Minutes of the Conference of Ministers on July 14, 1933

30. (Point 17 on the Agenda)

Reich Concordat

The Reich Minister of the Interior [Wilhelm Frick] presented the content of the proposal that Article 1 of the draft had omitted.

With regard to the proposal, the Vice Chancellor [Franz von Papen] stated that it had been necessary to define the functions of the Reich and state on the one hand and the Church on the other. The Church ought to have some freedom of movement. On the other hand, the sphere of authority of the state ought to be clearly worked out in the Concordat. Various parties had presented the Pope with objections to the conclusion of the Concordat. However, he had insisted on its conclusion, since he wanted to arrive at an agreement between Italy and Germany, the countries that in his mind represent the nucleus of the Christian world. He himself had also brought the distinct impression from Rome that the Curia was agreeable to creating a new concordat law after some time, utilizing the experiences made in the meantime. Mussolini, too, had always urgently recommended the conclusion of the Concordat, because he felt that this would represent a considerable strengthening of the German position.

The Vice Chancellor pointed to the particularly noteworthy passages in the Concordat, those in which the Church stated its willingness to entrust all associations to the state (Reich), with the exception of purely religious-moral and charitable associations. The removal of the clergy from politics, the introduction of independent pastoral care in the armed forces with an independent Army Bishop, the reference to possible general compulsory military service, and the treatment accorded to German minority rights were particularly noteworthy provisions of the Reich Concordat.

[. . .]

The Reich Chancellor rejected a debate on the particulars of the Reich Concordat. He was of the opinion that one should see only great success in it. With the Reich Concordat, Germany had been given a chance and an area of confidence had been created that was particularly significant in the urgent fight against international Jewry. Possible shortcomings in the Concordat could be rectified later when the foreign policy situation was better.

The Reich Chancellor saw three great advantages in the conclusion of the Reich Concordat:

1. that the Vatican had negotiated at all, considering that it operated, especially in Austria, on the assumption that National Socialism was un-Christian and inimical to the Church;
2. that the Vatican could be persuaded to bring about good relations with this purely national German State. He, the Reich Chancellor, would have thought it impossible even a short time ago that the Church would be willing to obligate the bishops to this state. The fact that this had now been done was certainly an unreserved recognition of the present regime;
3. that with the Concordat, the Church withdrew from activity in associations and parties, e.g., also abandoned the Christian labor unions. He, the Reich Chancellor, would have also thought this impossible even a few months ago. Even the dissolution of the Center Party could be termed final only with the conclusion of the Concordat, now that the Vatican had ordered the permanent withdrawal of priests from party politics.

That the objective which he, the Reich Chancellor, had always been striving for, namely an agreement with the Curia, had been attained so much faster than he had imagined even on January 30; this was such an indescribable success that all critical misgivings had to be withdrawn.

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