

Martyrs: Remembrance, the sine qua non for a reconciled future

I The generation with personal experience

There was no doubt whatever among those witnesses who were able to give a first-hand account of the Third Reich in 1945, the “terrible year of grace” (Reinhold Schneider), both inside and outside Germany, that the period of National Socialism had left behind it a massive amount of guilt. The question, which was and is disputed, is who had what share of it. The religious sister Isa Vermehren, who herself was incarcerated in a concentration camp, described the dilemma as follows in her “Witness from a dark past”: “It was not easy to remain innocent in the Nazi period. If you were innocent in the eyes of the Nazis, you were hardly innocent in terms of your own conscience – if you retained a clear conscience, you were hardly innocent in the eyes of the Nazis.” At that time, the Church and Catholics regarded themselves – to a highly prevalent degree – as standing together on the side of the victims. The spectrum of self-perception ranged from the assessment of the concentration camp inmate and later Munich Auxiliary Bishop Neuhäusler

“Resistance was powerful and dogged, at the top and at the bottom, coming from the Pope and the bishops, from the clergy and the people, from individuals and whole organisations.” (ideological resistance), to the examination of conscience of Albrecht Haushofer, who for many years was friends with Rudolf Heß, and who was arrested after 20 July 1944 and later shot by the SS:

Haushofer wrote in a sonnet from prison in Moabit:

“I bear lightly what the court
will call my guilt...”

I am guilty, but not in the way you think.
I should have recognised my duty earlier
I should have more sharply called evil evil
I reined in my judgment far too long
I indict myself in my heart:
I deceived my conscience many a year
I lied to myself and others
I knew early the path this woe would take
I did warn - But not enough, and not clearly enough
And today I know what I was guilty of.”

It is thanks to contemporaries such as Werner Bergengruen or Romano Guardini that a merciless debate on the past took place among German Catholics straight away in 1945 and in the first years after the War, the scope of which was however highly restricted. They had to look the personal format and the spiritual preconditions, and the past, in the eye. They were concerned to clarify fundamental existential questions, to gain an insight into the longer-term courses of the unique human catastrophe. “This frightful destruction did not drop down from heaven; in truth it rose up out of hell! [...] Monstrosities of such conscious design [...] come from processes of agitation and poisoning which have been long at work.” (Guardini).

It is astonishing at first sight that, at the end of the Hitlerian dictatorship, the resistance fighters and the martyrs of the Third Reich were not particularly popular, even among those who had their reservations. Resistance fighters did not enjoy a good reputation among those who had not put up any resistance, solely because they preserved the memory that resistance would have been possible. Those who had survived frequently felt guilty because they had opted for elasticity in individual matters and reserved loyalty for the fundamentals.

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Kommentar [1]: Translator's note: alternative reading of the last line: And today I know what could have been expected of me.

The martyrs ensured that there was an alternative, but one which was potentially fatal.

II The descendants

In relation to the Third Reich, we have now experienced the transition from the generation with personal experience to a culture of commemoration, from the “present” past of the contemporaries to the “pure” past of the descendants (Reinhart Koselleck). The representatives of the generation with personal experience had up until then demanded for themselves an empirically-secure, more colourful remembrance than that which they granted their descendants, who had not personally experienced this period.

As the “third man”, academic research into contemporary history for its part took on a more comprehensive, more objective quality of knowledge than the individual experience of history on the part of contemporaries can offer.

The debates within the of politics history are about the authority to interpret between contemporary remembrance and academic knowledge.

The tension between history, history research and the of politics history, or between the claim to truth, the search for justice and interest-led judgmentalism also characterises the various phases and interpretations, since 1945, of the role played by German Catholics in the “Third Reich”.

III Solidarity with one’s forefathers

In his 1940 treatise entitled “Theses on the Concept of History”, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) linked the present and the past via the “experience of mindfulness”; the living are thus in a moral community with the unreconciled victims of history, and what is completed, what is historically over, becomes something unfinished. Benjamin speaks of the “solidarity of descendents with

their forefathers”, and states that “this solidarity can only be created and put into effect through mindfulness.”

Benjamin’s consideration borrows much from the Jewish adage: “The secret of reconciliation is remembrance.” This adage played a major role in the Christian commemoration of the Holocaust, influencing the speech of Richard von Weizsäcker on 8 May 1985 and the spectacular Vatican acknowledgement of guilt on Palm Sunday 2000.

The theological influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar also belongs in this context. Von Balthasar spoke of the “burden of the dead”, which we must bear as we advance in an ongoing responsibility. The subjective responsibility of each individual for or his or her acts was said to cease on his or her death, but future generations were said to continue to be liable for the acts of earlier ones. The critical debate on the past of a community to which one personally belongs was therefore said not to be an end in itself, but an important prerequisite for exculpation and reconciliation, which did not come about by themselves, and for which each individual had to actively and personally strive. “The solidarity of today’s Christians with the dead burdens them with penance for past mistakes which they are not to bear only grudgingly, but in fact patiently and – in a hidden place – even thankfully; who knows how they would have behaved had they lived in the ninth or fourteenth Century.”

IV The politics of history and research

Contemporary research into Catholicism has presented a unique number of scientifically-acknowledged studies in the past seventy years: editions, biographies, documentations, presentations on political history, on social and economic history, on theology and on Church history. The multiplicity of the contemporary research results is however only selectively perceived and received in a one-sided communication situation. The German Catholics have thus permitted themselves to be pushed in public opinion and in the academic

debate since the beginning of the 1960s into an ongoing image defensive in which they have gradually mutated from being victims to becoming perpetrators. Critics accuse the Church of having hardly enabled the faithful to act on their own responsibility as a result of Her proclamation and education. As a consequence of the Reich Concordat, the obligation of loyalty to the German Reich had taken precedence over encouragement to engage in political resistance.

Parallel to the transformation of the judgment on the role played by the Church in the Third Reich, and parallel to the growing influence of political theology, the make-up of the “martyrs barometer” also changed at the beginning of the 1970s. The representatives of the “perpetrator” Church were no longer as well-suited to serve as a shining example as were the critics – from Heinrich Böll, through Che Guevara, the “Godless Saint”, to Oscar Romero and the conscientious objector Franz Jägerstätter. The term “martyr”, which was initially only defined in theological terms, thus became politically charged, and in its later use was in fact provisionally reserved for the political arena. At the apex of its inflationary use, which has now ebbed somewhat, the “scene” even demanded martyr status for the terrorists on the RAF wanted persons posters.

V Managed forgetting and organised remembrance

The National Socialists tried to reserve the term “martyr” for the “martyrs of the movement”, those who died in the putsch on Hitler, and to criminalise the Christian martyrs. Head ideologue Rosenberg and Heinrich Himmler were particularly committed to this venture, as is already documented after the murder of the head of Catholic Action in Berlin, Dr. Erich Klausener, in 1934.

“The Church has raised to martyrdom each missionary who was cut down, and made saints of them. Even when Emmeram, who Christian narrative says was a Jew, raped the daughter of the Duke of Bavaria and was killed for his efforts, the infallible Church declared this ignominious end to be a death for the faith.

Today, Emmeram is a Saint to whom people pray in pious Regensburg.” (Rosenberg). “It is no longer possible today to become a martyr. We’ll take care of that. We’ll make sure that that sort of person is forgotten.” (Heinrich Himmler, 13 February 1941).

The *damnatio memoriae*, known since Ancient times, consisting of the condemnation of memory, was intended to erase an individual from memory for ever by no longer recalling them. Herostratos tried to make himself immortal in Ephesus by setting fire to one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the temple of Artemis. Before he was executed, the arsonist was informed that his actions had been in vain; it was forbidden to mention his name in public from then on.

“There is something eerie about people’s short memories”, “after only three years, they cannot remember”, Cardinal Faulhaber wrote in 1946. In order to document the “other”, “better” Germany and the anti-National Socialist stance of the Church, all German bishops had appropriate material collected in all the parishes as early as in 1945/1946.

A first memorial service was held in Berlin diocese on 9 September 1945, a pontifical Requiem Mass “for the priests and faithful of the diocese who died as victims of their convictions under National Socialism”. On the occasion of the 78th Catholic Convention held in Berlin in 1958, a collection was made in all churches in Germany which formed the foundation for the construction of “*Maria Regina Martyrum*”, the “Memorial Church of the German Catholics in honour of the martyrs for freedom of religion and conscience in the years 1933-1945”, not far from the execution site at Plötzensee in Berlin.

On 4/5 May 1963 – only a few weeks after the premiere of Rolf Hochhuth’s tragedy “The Representative” –, *Regina Martyrum* was consecrated as a memorial to Erich Klausener, Bernhard Lichtenberg, Alfred Delp and all martyrs who were denied a final resting place.

VI Resistance, distance and cooperative antagonism

In a stocktake of research into the resistance, Klaus Gotto, Hans Günter Hockerts and Konrad Reppen created in 1980 a four-tiered definition of resistance – with two defensive variants: growing dissatisfaction combined with resistance and having to adjust, and two offensive forms: protest and active political resistance. Hockerts and Reppen have now re-introduced the term “distance” into the discussion. “The standards of the Catholic milieu did not necessarily arouse “resistance”, but did lead to a distance from which a stance of refusal, protest and active resistance could grow.” This however always necessitated personal faith and decisions on questions of conscience, which remained the preserve of a small convinced elite.

The intensive research regarding forced labourers in Catholic facilities that was carried out from 2000 onwards also opened up new prospects in terms of time and content for research into the resistance. Questions from the conflict situation of the war years can be only inadequately answered with the common vocabulary from the surveys on the years of peace. “Collaboration” is as inadequate as “resistance” to suitably judge the conduct of the Catholic Church in a society at war. The Church’s institutions, clergy, religious and Catholics took up a clear stance against the totalitarian dictatorship and the ideology of National Socialism, but at the same time were also part of a radicalising society that was at war. The suppression of the cloisters, covering more than 300 institutions all over the Reich, the eviction of more than 10,000 religious and the murder of more than 1,034 priests who had been interned in concentration camps took place at the same time as the establishment of infirmaries that were run on a commercial basis in empty cloister buildings, for which the Wehrmacht and the cloisters concluded care agreements. In order to ensure that the soldiers could be fed as per these contracts, the cloisters then asked for forced labourers who were to replace the cloisters’ own farm labourers who had been called up to serve in the Wehrmacht.

The cross was fighting against both the swastika and the Soviet star. The impression nonetheless arose of at least partial, mutual support afforded between National Socialism and the Catholic Church because, for tactical reasons, the Regime did not commence the elimination offensive that had been planned and decided on during the war years. In various crisis situations, Adolf Hitler decided in each case to postpone settling his accounts with the Catholic Church until after the final victory, and until then let Himmler, Bormann or Goebbels, who were radical when it came to the politics of religion, take the field. The cooperative impression was also able to arise because the Church omitted to emphasise the fundamental differences, for instance when it came to the understanding of loyalty and honour, fatherland or anti-Bolshevism also institutionally by taking up a clear distance. Calling in parish letters to love one's fatherland, show loyalty and be willing to make sacrifices hence anchored duties traditionally existing vis-à-vis a legitimate state authority, but towards a State that had completely forfeited this right by engaging in a racist war of destruction. The fundamental difference however consisted not only in the means, but also included the objectives. Referring to this strategy as "cooperative antagonism" lends a name and a weight to the shares of what was held in common, and of the contrasts, better than the terms that had been previously used.

VII A suicide-bomber is no martyr

With our interest in martyrs, we are operating in a grey area of human possibilities, in exceptional cases, not in standard reality, and we are also operating in the border area between various disciplines and competences, such as history and theology. Addressing the totalitarian regimes of the 20th Century, Christians became political opponents out of a Christian conviction, but their political resistance is not decisive for their exemplary role as martyrs, whilst their witness of faith is. This may create tensions. Such important distinctions are also shown in linguistic terms. A martyr does not defend himself or herself,

for instance, he or she also does not confess in court, but gives witness; he or she does not offer resistance, but is a witness to the truth. This theological definition of a “martyr” does not lead to a terrorist or to the “martyrs of the sky” who slaughtered 3,000 people in their attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001.

VIII Martyrs of reconciliation: Edith Stein and Maximilian Kolbe

As a result of the beatification of two witnesses to the faith in the Third Reich – Edith Stein and Bernhard Lichtenberg –, within the framework of the pastoral journey taken by the Pope to Germany in 1987, a kind of stocktake was carried out on the topic of the “Catholic Church and National Socialism”.

When welcoming the Holy Father in the Müngersdorf Stadium in Cologne before the beatification of the Carmelite Edith Stein, Cardinal Höffner had good reason to mention the Polish Franciscan priest Maximilian Kolbe, who had been beatified in 1971 and canonised 1982 by Pope John Paul II. “As the martyr of Auschwitz, Maximilian Kolbe, is an interceder before God for the reconciliation of Poles and Germans, may the martyr of Auschwitz, Edith Stein, be an interceder for reconciliation between Jews and Germans.”

The beatification and canonisation of the Franciscan priest Kolbe was a classic example of the successful culmination of decades of German-Polish efforts. In 1978, the first occasion on which a delegation of Polish bishops visited the Federal Republic of Germany, and only a few weeks before being elected as Pope, Cardinal Wojtyla selected the topic of: “Our common path” for a sermon. “If the Church ever raises Sister Benedicta from the cross to the altars, which is the striving of the German Episcopate, supported by Polish bishops, both Maximilian Kolbe and Edith Stein will call to us all, Poles and Germans alike, from the same place of their martyrdom that they suffered, without knowing of

one another: “Live worthily of the Gospel of Christ!”. The moving power of this call will then be much more powerful.”

On his first visit as Pope, John Paul II handed to the President of the German Bishops’ Conference a relic of Fr. Kolbe as a gift from the Universal Church to the German Catholics. Cardinal Höffner prayed on 5 June 1982 in the death cell of St. Maximilian Kolbe, “who we hope will soon be canonised as a martyr”. When he visited Poland in June 1982, he signed a joint request with the Polish Episcopate for Maximilian Kolbe to be canonised as a martyr. “We wish to act together for the renewal of Europe in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Crucified One. May Europe help to realise the message of love and justice in the world.” Höffner also headed the German delegation which travelled to Rome on 10 October 1982 to attend the canonisation of Maximilian Kolbe, and gave the sermon at a joint service of thanksgiving held in St. Peter’s Cathedral.

IX Witnesses of a better world

All his life, Pope John Paul II devoted considerable attention to the connection between the past and the future. For him, recalling the past meant engaging with the future. At the threshold to the new millennium, he called, for a “cleansing of the memory”, explicitly referring to Hans Urs von Balthasar, in order to be able to better recognise “the traces of God’s presence in our time”. “The recognition of the deviations in the past”, said the Pope, “also helps to reawaken our conscience in the face of today’s developments, and to open to all the path of reconciliation.” Because of the bond of faith which unites us to one another, said the Pope, “all of us, though not personally responsible and without encroaching on the judgement of God who alone knows every heart, bear the burden of the errors and faults of those who have gone before us.” (*Incarnationis mysterium*, 15).

The 2000 years of Christianity are not only a history of guilt, but are also characterised by the exemplary witness of those who have held on to their faith

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Kommentar [2]: Translator's note: Corrigendum: should read: *Incarnationis mysterium*, 11

in the face of hardship, and who had to pay for this with persecution, incarceration and their lives. Their example was recalled through annual commemorative celebrations on the anniversary of their deaths, their “birthday” for heaven. This led to a diverse practice of honouring the martyrs; the martyrs became an orientating example of an exemplary Christian. According to a saying of Tertullian, the blood of the witnesses of the faith turned into the seed for new Christians. Churches and altars were frequently built over the graves of martyrs, and these are among the most important sites of Christianity. “This century now drawing to a close”, wrote John Paul II, “has known very many martyrs, especially because of Nazism, Communism, and racial or tribal conflicts.” (*Incarnationis mysterium*, 18) “At the end of the second millennium, the Church has once again become a Church of martyrs. The persecutions of believers –priests, Religious and laity – has caused a great sowing of martyrdom in different parts of the world... This witness must not be forgotten.” (TMA, 33)

X The legacy for the future

The legacy for the future is ultimately a mandate for the respective present. Romano Guardini recalled when unveiling a memorial to Prof. Kurt Huber (White Rose) that such an honour is a mere gesture if we do not also seek to recognise where the demand for the same freedom lies for us and are willing to fulfil it. Erik Peterson wrote in 1937 in “Witness to the truth”: “Who does not think with a certain feeling of uneasiness of those warning voices that remind us of an obligation that we do not know whether we will be complying with it?” It was for good reason that Pope John Paul II called for martyrologies from every country at the turn of the millennium. 135 staff in Germany put together more than 700 biographies. Inclusion of the message is a precondition for keeping the memory alive. A person only lives as long as the last person is alive who remembers them. And: Remembrance is the secret of reconciliation.

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Kommentar [3]: Translator's note: Corrigendum: should read: *Incarnationis mysterium*, 13

NM 26.6.18 20:15

Kommentar [4]: Translator's note: Corrigendum: should read TMA, 37