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John M. Oesterreicher

THE SWASTIKA REAPPEARS

IN THE fall of 1959, the rebuilding of Cologne's Synagogue, ravaged like so many others by Nazi hands, was completed. For that festive though sad occasion, Zvi Asaria, its rabbi, wrote a history of Jewish life in that city,¹ to which the Archbishop of Cologne wrote one of the forewords:

Cologne, September 1, 1959

Nothing, perhaps, has brought so much shame on the civilization of our century as the persecution of Jews by Hitler's government and the destruction of their houses of worship.

Understandably, the German people wishes to make amends, insofar as amends can be made. But the stain of having been capable of such deeds of horror cannot be entirely wiped away.

With all our hearts, we wish our Jewish brethren the blessing of the Most High.

✠ Joseph Cardinal Frings

Only a few months later, the same Synagogue was defaced. The swastika and the slogan *Juden raus!*, Out with the Jews!, were smeared on its walls. Within a brief time, Jewish and Christian houses of worship in several parts of the world were similarly soiled. The incidents were widely reported, and article upon article was written on the possible origin of this infamy: whether it was the work of an international organization, a youthful craze, or some sort of mass hysteria. But little or no mention was made of the concern and protest of Christians. So that they will not be entirely forgotten, I should like to record two of them: one German, the other French; one the observations of the archdiocesan weekly of Cologne, the other a pastoral letter by the Bishop of Lille.

1. Zvi Asaria, *Die Juden in Köln* (Cologne: Bachem, 1959).

I

IN SEVERAL of its issues, the *Kirchen-Zeitung für das Erzbistum Köln* denounced the "revolting profanations" of synagogues and churches. The editors saw the reappearance of the swastika as a menace not only to the physical life of Jews but also, and even more so, to the moral life of Germans. It was not enough to identify and prosecute the delinquents, they pointed out; the real evildoers were those who glorified the unhappy past in speech and print. "We ask those charged with the appropriate judicial responsibility to exhaust all possibilities the law offers to protect us from the scribblers [who praise the Nazi era]. We may then also be preserved from the disfigurement of synagogues and churches" (January 17, 1960).

The issue of January 24, 1960, devoted its leading article, "The Premature Balance," to the fact that violations against justice, if unrepaired, continue to defile a society and, no matter how well-masked, will spill out their poison at an unexpected moment. To speak of the years under Hitler, the author complained, had become a social, and often a political, taboo. "One has to draw the line somewhere" was the byword of public opinion. But now the swastika and *Juden raus!* had reappeared beneath that line. Obviously, it had been drawn too soon. "A people unready to learn from its past may easily be condemned to repeating it. And our people will have learned nothing unless we teach our youth what really happened, honestly and without 'double-talk.'" The writer concluded:

Even though the Nazis be dispersed throughout many lands and subterranously keep up their troublemaking, they are not the only source of infection. The possibilities of madness and crime are not confined to one people. In all men and nations there dwells a frightening disposition toward evil. Hitler and his German hangmen were only evil's ghastly instruments, by no means predetermined instruments without will, rather instruments by their own choice. Here the realm of politics ends, for every moral decision is between God and Satan. This inner freedom to choose between good and evil erects the real iron curtain dividing the world; it alone assures man's dignity as His image, be he black or white, Jew or Christian.

On February 7, Cologne's Catholic weekly returned to the threat that the re-emergence of the swastika—symbol of death to everything

human, everything Jewish, everything Christian—meant to the whole of society. It quoted from the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*, "With Deep Anxiety," Pius XI had issued on Passion Sunday, March 14, 1937. In it, the Pope had warned:

Whoever exalts race or the people or the state or a particular form of government or the bearers of political power or other fundamental values of the human community—however necessary and honorable be their function in the temporal order—whoever dislodges any one of them from its proper place in the earthly hierarchy of values, making it the supreme norm of all others, particularly those of religion, and thus turning it into an idol, perverts and distorts the God-given and God-commanded order of things. (See *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 29, 1937, p. 149.)

The same article recalled messages of Pius XII in which he indicted the merciless deportation of men, women, and children, the terror of concentration camps, the murder of many out of racial hatred, the superstition of race and blood—that ideology of pride which sought to take the place of the gospel—and in which he asked all men of good will to pledge their service to man and to a community whose nobility is in God. The friendship Pope John XXIII has shown toward Jews crowned the article which then brought the papal statements and actions together under one thought: The earth is the Lord's; it has room for, indeed, it is the home of all races, all peoples, all men.

A final article, dated February 14, 1960, was entitled: "Condemnation is not Enough." The frequent clamor that court and school right the wrongs of the past seemed to its writer the voice of ease, an attempt to place upon others the burden of counteracting the devilry of a Hitler in slaughtering millions of Jews, or of a Khrushchev in slaying Hungary's freedom fighters, even the very young ones. An adequate teaching of history, for instance, good though it would be, will not suffice. The stratagems of Satan cannot be conquered "except by true values and ideas, by values so curative, so vigorous, that nothing will be able to prevail against them." To say this, the author held, was not to entertain illusions. For a Christian remembers that Satan is like a roaring lion, ever in search of his victims. Evil will always reappear, in one form or another. The best instruction, then, is to implant in children humbleness of heart, reverence for all men, and praise of God the Creator.

Such were the observations of the Catholic weekly of Cologne.

II

THE second voice, more specific, more passionate than the first, was that of Cardinal Liénart in a Lenten pastoral on racial prejudice and misconceptions about Jews.² The pastoral was clearly a theological document, yet its directions, given by the Bishop of Lille to his own diocese, were couched in simple language, quite often in the idiom of the people. At times he spoke simply of "the Jews," without making any distinction between Jewish officialdom and Jewish people, so as to destroy more effectively the false notions or generalizations that in the past made Christians susceptible to the disease of anti-Semitism.

Lent, 1960

My Brethren:

Recently, acts of hostility were perpetrated against the Jews in various countries: in Germany, in England, in Belgium, in Italy, and in France, too. Swastikas, Jewish stars, and anti-Jewish slogans were put on the walls of synagogues; one synagogue was even set on fire. We cannot but deplore these acts, particularly because they are the disquieting signs of a returning anti-Semitism, the height of whose outrages we witnessed during the last war. In those days, Jewish families were deported en masse under frightful conditions, and several millions of men, women, and children were put to death in the gas chambers of Germany—men, women, and children whom their tormentors could charge with no other crime than that they were of Jewish stock.

Christians must be clear of complicity with so dangerous a state of mind, despite the religious pretexts behind which it occasionally takes cover. Now that this frame of mind has made its reappearance, it seems timely that we warn you against it and, with the help of this letter, explain to you the little known doctrine of the Church on the destiny of the Jewish people. This doctrine obliges us to reject anti-Semitism absolutely, from the human as well as the religious point of view, and to adopt toward the Jewish people an attitude that is the very opposite of anti-Semitism, the attitude of respect and love.

2. See *La Documentation Catholique* (Paris, 1960), col. 299–300.

Looking at it from the human point of view, anti-Semitism exploits the evil instinct that so easily sets the various families of mankind against each other. There are those for which we feel a natural attraction and there are others which arouse in us antipathy or contempt.

Such antipathy is evident in the way we look at the black or the yellow peoples, at the North Africans or even at some of the European nations beside us. More often still, such antipathy brands our relationship toward the Jewish people who, dispersed among all the nations, yet preserve in our midst their ethnic characteristics, their own mentality, their customs, their religion.

Let us be on guard against this blind racism, the source of so much injustice and enmity. When we experience it within ourselves, as everyone does, we must rid ourselves of it; we must do so, chiefly because of our Christian faith. We know that all men, despite the diversity of races, are members of the same humankind created by God in unity; that all men are our brothers; that they all have a right to our respect and our love. Moreover, we believe in a universal redemption: In and through it, Christ Jesus, our Saviour and Head, calls all men without distinction to form but one single people of God. Within its ranks there is, according to St. Paul, no longer Jew or Greek, man or woman, slave or freeman (see Gal 3:28) but one single humanity wholly joined in Christ and summoned to realize its common, supernatural destiny.

In such a perspective, there is no room for anti-Semitism; the religious pretexts some try to invoke cannot alter this truth.

Hence we must defend ourselves against the ready-made, far too simple idea that the Jewish people have become a people cursed by God because, through their responsible leaders, they rejected the promised Messiah in the person of Jesus; worse still, that they are a nation of deicides because they made the Son of God die upon the cross. From premises like these the conclusion may easily be drawn that they deserve the contempt and hostility of Christ's faithful disciples. And from there, it is only a short step to the assumption that anything is permitted to make them pay for their crime.

The true doctrine of the Church is entirely different; the attitude she demands toward the Jewish people is exactly the opposite of this spirit of reprisal.

It is not true that the Jewish people bears the first and only responsibility for the death of Jesus. The deepest cause of His death upon the cross is the sins of men. Consequently, we are all responsible; the Jews were only our delegates.

Nor is it true that the Jews are deicides, for had they been aware of His divinity they would have believed in Him and would not have made Him die.

This unawareness earned for them Jesus' own forbearance: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). His apostles, too, proclaimed this unawareness in the presence of the people of Jerusalem, immediately after Pentecost. "You disowned the Holy and Just One," St. Peter told them in one of his first sermons. "The author of life you killed. . . . And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But in this way God fulfilled what He had announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, namely, that His Christ should suffer. Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Ac 3:14-19).

It would be even more unjust to hold the entire Jewish people responsible, those of today as those of Jesus' day, and to forget our debt to them. Through them the whole revelation of God's plan in the Old Testament came to us, and through them we inherited the divine promises. Their prophets are our prophets. Their psalms have become our prayer. They are the stock to which our divine Founder belongs as man: Jesus, Son of David, our Saviour. And so does the Blessed Virgin Mary, our Mother; so do St. Joseph, the Twelve, St. Paul, and the infant Church of Jerusalem. "Spiritually, we are Semites," said Pope Pius XI. Lest we deny our origin and commit an injustice, we must not turn the Jewish people over to a collective reprobation.

Nor is it true that Israel, the chosen people of the Old Covenant, has become an accursed people in the New.

Actually, the religious destiny of Israel is a mystery of grace, and we Christians ought to ponder it with respectful sympathy.

No one experienced this drama more painfully than did St. Paul, the former Pharisee, the Jew who could say of himself that he had shown much more zeal for the traditions of his fathers than had many of his contemporaries (see Gal 1:14). By God's grace converted on the road to Damascus, he felt in his innermost being the

misfortune of his brethren dwelling in incredulity. With all his soul, he sought to understand God's mysterious designs for His chosen people. In chapters 9 to 11 of the Epistle to the Romans, he discloses the secret of His designs to us, and his teaching is so full of hope for the Jewish people, so full of instruction for us, that we can do no better than receive and follow it.

But what was Israel's fault, according to St. Paul? To have thought that she could save herself by observing the commandments of the Law, although salvation is God's free gift, a gift obtained by faith in His promises and in the Christ who made them reality. She was wrong not to believe and, since then, has left her road and is astray.

Does it follow, then, that Israel has been irrevocably rejected by God? Far from it, says St. Paul, for God is faithful and His gifts are without repentance (see Rom 11:29). He never takes them back. Israel has not become a people accursed but remains the chosen people. The thread of her destiny has not been severed; it is only suspended.

Has the straying of His people hindered the unfolding of God's work? Quite the opposite. It has given the redemptive work greater breadth. For a new phase has begun: the entrance of the pagan peoples into the Church of Jesus Christ. Now all the nations are admitted to membership in the new people of God and are summoned to extend it to the ends of the world and to the end of time. They have been grafted, as it were, upon the old trunk of Israel, deprived of its natural branches, in order to draw life from its sap and make it bloom even more richly. But when the full number of Gentiles have been grafted into the trunk (see Rom 11:25), the day will have come for Israel to be placed again by God on the tree of salvation and to resume the course of her providential destiny.

"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God!" St. Paul cries out before the splendor of this divine plan. "How incomprehensible are His judgments and how unsearchable His ways! . . . To Him be the glory forever" (Rom 11:33-36).

Since we are Christians because of Israel's momentary effacement, we must recoil from self-glorification at her expense. We must not set ourselves up against her, rather ought we remember that if God permitted the natural branches to fall so tragically, He could cut us off, too, should we be unfaithful. To understand this mystery is to be inspired to personal humility and to love for Israel.

Some may find, my dear brethren, that in today's world, beset by grave internal and external conflicts, the problem of anti-Semitism does not warrant that we engage your attention upon it. You, at least, will understand that the Church cannot suppress what she reads in holy Scripture. Besides, I believe that the conclusion to be drawn from the Church's teaching on this particular point is of sufficiently universal bearing. It tells us what attitude we, as Christians, ought to adopt toward the most serious problems of the present world and what immense service we may render, provided we remain faithful to the Gospel.

In a Christian soul the spirit of racism has no place. Not only must we not hate or disdain the Jews, the North Africans, the Negroes or any people of this earth—we must love them as brothers and respect their human dignity. For we are all created in the image of God, we are all called in Jesus Christ to the same destiny of sonship in God.

Nor can there be class hatred in the soul of a Christian for, as St. Paul says, there is now no longer slave, no longer freeman, but a single people of God. When legitimate interests between men or nations clash, a Christian is not permitted to resolve such differences simply by "the right of the stronger." He must resolve differences in the spirit of mutual justice and love, as is the way of brothers who respect one another. Above all things, we must never injure the dignity of persons, be it physically by violence to their bodies or properties, be it morally by treating them like inferior beings or subjecting them to offensive humiliations.

We must even be prepared to forgive our enemies.

It is not in the ranks of "antis," whatever their banners, that the Christian ought to combat, for though the Church fights error she does not fight men. On the contrary, she invites us to place ourselves at the service of universal love, which our Lord Jesus Christ made His supreme command. His disciples are obliged to love all men and all nations; they also have the mission of spreading throughout the world the meaning of the equality of all men before God.

Who cannot see how urgent this task is and how much it deserves our dedication? The world we live in is unhappy. The divisions and hatreds that rend it apart only multiply its sufferings, and this because men no longer know how to love one another. Let us, then, take the Lord's commandment seriously. Let us be of those who truly love one

another. Thus we shall draw men along the only road leading to that peace everyone longs for: the peace of Christ.

✠Achille Cardinal Liénart

Though written only for his flock, the letter of this great pastor and teacher speaks to Christians everywhere. Its language is so clear, so strong that added words would merely lessen its immediacy.

Abiding in the Light

*He who says that he is in the light,
and hates his brother,
is in the darkness still.*

*He who loves his brother
abides in the light,
and for him there is no stumbling.*

*But he who hates his brother
is in the darkness
and walks in the darkness,
and he does not know whither he goes;
because the darkness has blinded his eyes.*

(1 Jn 2:9-11)