The German bishops in the World War

Statement on the end of the Second World War 75 years ago

April 29, 2020

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Preface

The Second World War in Europe, which National Socialist Germany had unleashed in 1939, ended on 8 May 1945, by which time it had caused the deaths of more than 50 million people. The War in the West of the continent was a war of subjugation, whilst in the East – and in Poland in particular as well as vis-à-vis the peoples of the Soviet Union – it was waged as a war of enslavement and annihilation. The National Socialists committed the crime against humanity known as the Shoa in the shadow of the combat operations: Six million Jews were murdered. Systematic genocide at the hands of the "Third Reich" also cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Sinti and Roma. By the time the War finally came to an end and the National Socialist tyranny had been broken, untold numbers of towns and cities, particularly in the East of the continent and in Germany, had been reduced to rubble.

Whilst for decades people all over Europe have remembered the 8 May 1945 as a day of happiness and rejoicing, we in Germany had difficulties with this date for a long time. It was the date of capitulation, of defeat, and it took place at a time when Germans had suffered the consequences of the war that they had caused in a manner that they themselves had never previously had to experience: This came in the shape of the occupation as well as hunger, but particularly as expulsion and displacement from the Eastern territories of the Reich. That having been said, Germans have gained a more and more profound understanding as time has passed that the 8 May was also *primarily* a day of liberation for us: liberation from the scourge of war, of National Socialist suppression, and of genocide.

The development of Europe has not proceeded in a straight line in the decades that have ensued since the World War. Separated

as they were by an “Iron Curtain”, East and West regarded one another as enemies for a considerable time. But the integration of Western Europe, which finally led to the creation of the European Union, to reconciliation between Germany and its Western neighbours, and to the policy of détente towards the East, and reconciliation with Poland in particular, helped ensure the growth of trust and make sure that conflicts did not culminate in the use of military force. This was the prerequisite for the transformation which gave birth to a new Europe at the end of the 1980s.

Christianity has made a considerable contribution towards the success of these processes. Officials within the Church, as well as many organisations and groups motivated by the Christian spirit, have promoted the cause of reconciliation between the peoples, have battled against prejudices and stereotypes, and brought people together across the boundaries separating the Blocs that formed in the “Cold War”. Even though they were subject to considerable repression, the Churches in Europe’s East defended the values of freedom, justice and non-violence, and thus helped to bring about change.

Today, 75 years after the end of the Second World War, we have reason to be thankful. Thanks should go to everyone who helped to break the power of National Socialism, as well as to all who helped in the ensuing decades to bring about peace and international understanding, reconciliation and the law, democracy and dignified conditions. The grateful remembrance goes hand-in-hand with the mandate to bring this legacy into the future. It appears that Europe is not currently in good shape. The old demon of division, of nationalism, of “nationalistic-patriotic (*völkisch*)” thinking and authoritarian domination, is raising its head in many places, including in Germany, and in fact has become the dominating force in some countries. Those who have learned from this bloody history must take a decisive stance against these tendencies. The Church, which is under an uncon-

ditional obligation to the Gospel of justice and of peace, is also called on here.

We know here that we as a Church are also not immune from learning from history. Many discussions have been carried out in the past decades on the conduct of the Churches, and of their officials in particular, during National Socialism. Many things have been revealed which provide grounds for considerable gratitude, but there have been aspects which we have found to be shameful. As painful as such experiences are, the more they are needed in order to renew the Church. Truthfulness is an indispensable part of the path taken by Christians.

Whilst many aspects of this topic have now been well illustrated, it is only in recent years that the question as to the relationship between the German bishops and the Second World War has increasingly reared its head. Our Bishops' Conference decided to respond to the critical enquiries by drawing up this statement on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. The German Commission for Justice and Peace, the Commission for Contemporary History, and several commissions of the German Bishops' Conference, were involved in its preparation. We German bishops know that it does not fit well for us to take on the role of judge over our predecessors. No generation is free of the judgments and prejudices of its time. There is nevertheless a need for subsequent generations to face up to history in order to learn from it for the future and for the present.

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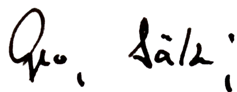

Bishop Dr. Georg Bätzing
President of the German Bishops' Conference

I. The present of remembrance

75 years after the end of the Second World War, which was caused by National Socialist Germany, we are still facing the many consequences of this war for our country, for Europe and for the world. War and its victims, losses and deprivations, guilt and shame, has affected many families over a number of generations. The German bishops too have experienced these effects, and continue to do so. They have therefore addressed National Socialism and its consequences repeatedly and critically since 1945. This reflection was frequently painful since it was of necessity often a matter not only of acknowledging the victims, but also of discussing guilt and failure.

The Second World War in Europe ended on 8 May 1945. This signalled capitulation and defeat for the vast majority of Germans. The end of the War was associated with feelings of humiliation and fear of what was to come. But it also meant shame and guilt, and this day was furthermore shaped by relief that war and National Socialism had come to an end. For many, the end of the War also meant painful displacement experiences and the loss of their homes. It was not until the next generations came along, and reconciliation with our neighbours was achieved, that the 8 May was perceived by a majority in society as a day of liberation. This process was one of many conflicts in the open society in the Federal Republic in which a controversial debate was carried out regarding the way in which society was to regard itself.

The GDR followed a different path when dealing with the end of the War than did the Federal Republic of Germany in the sense that it instrumentalised remembrance for political purposes in the service of the alliance with the Soviet Union. The SED leadership came down on the side of the Soviet victors, and this

prevented it from dealing suitably with the ambivalences and caesuras of its own experience. This did more to hinder than to help Germans to reconcile properly with their neighbours and with themselves.

It is in the change of remembrance that Germany's political and cultural transformation has been mirrored since the Second World War and down to the present day. The German culture of remembrance is characterised in the majority by an awareness that the 8 May is to be placed in a European context and to be commemorated in a manner that does justice to the developments that have taken place since 1945. These developments include the fact that Germans have largely become reconciled with themselves, with their guilt-laden past, and with their neighbours. The willingness of our neighbours to reconcile is a lasting gift in this regard for which we are humbly grateful. The critical debate on our past forms part of the self-perception of the Federal Republic of Germany today. The change in remembrance of the 8 May 1945 forms an expression of this process. It is therefore no coincidence that those who wish to see a fundamentally different society and a different sort of republic fundamentally question this broad consensus.

We have observed with concern that commemoration of the Second World War – in particular in the Eastern half of Europe – leads to frequently undignified disputes, also outside of Germany. This is rooted in the continuing wounds left by the Second World War, but also in the ensuing experience of injustice and violence in the Communist era. Not everyone is evidently able to resist the temptation to use transparent simplifications in order to misuse social sensibilities for political purposes. To name but one example, there is no doubt that the peoples of the Soviet Union made immense sacrifices in order to obtain victory over National Socialism. But it is also a part of the truth of the Second World War that the Soviet Union facilitated the

German attack on Poland by concluding the Hitler-Stalin Pact, and itself played a role in the breaking up of Poland. What is more, victory over National Socialism in Eastern Europe was accompanied by the establishment of a Communist tyranny lasting decades. These memories too arise on the anniversary of the 8 May 1945. In order to enable us to live together in peace, the European House needs a culture of dialogue and of respect for people's suffering. The sound of empathy, sorrow and reflectiveness should be more determining for us than the shrill tones of mutual accusations.

It is particularly in the vein of such reflectiveness that we approached the conduct of our predecessors in office during the Second World War on the occasion of this anniversary. We were encouraged in this approach not lastly by the complaints levelled at the Catholic bishops in Germany that they had left Catholic soldiers alone in their moral conflicts, and worse still that they had taken part in the War. In reality, taking a look at the historical material gives rise to considerable critical questions. We are therefore concerned to critically observe this period of history, and also to point to errors. Our stance here is determined by respect for the victims, as well as by efforts to recognise the reasons why our predecessors acted in the way that they did, and to take lessons from this for our own actions. We see ourselves strengthened by the witness of His Holiness Pope John Paul II, who, in his acknowledgement of guilt in the Holy Year 2000, called on the Church to renew and to cleanse Her memory.

II. The conduct of the Catholic bishops in Germany during the Second World War

National Socialist Germany started its ideological war of annihilation when it attacked Poland in September 1939. The first of untold numbers of crimes committed during the Second World War was the deportation and murder of the Polish intelligentsia, including large numbers of Catholic clergy. Almost two million Poles were taken away and forced to work in German companies – including in large numbers of facilities belonging to the Catholic Church in Germany. It was when the Soviet Union was attacked in 1941, finally, that the exterminatory phase of the Holocaust began. Auschwitz, Treblinka, Warsaw and many other places became synonyms of the life-destroying force of the National Socialist ideology, and in particular of the genocide committed against the Jews as well as the Sinti and Roma.

Despite Her distanced internal stance towards National Socialism, and at times even open opposition, the Catholic Church in Germany was part of the war society. The increasing repression against Christianity, the war of annihilation, as well as the growing German losses that had been incurred since the tide of the war had turned, and with the bombing campaign against Germany, changed little in this regard. Despite the Church being a victim of massive tribulations carried out by the State and the NSDAP – as had already been the case in the First World War – the patriotic willingness to mobilise the material, staffing and spiritual resources of the Church for the war effort was unbroken up to the end. Hundreds of military chaplains provided pastoral care in the Wehrmacht's theatre of operations, serving as chaplain for a division, military hospital or prison. Priests, seminarists and religious were involved in the army as paramedics as part of their compulsory military service. Several thou-

sand monastic and church facilities were used as hospitals; tens of thousands of nuns fulfilled their "duty to the fatherland", particularly in hospitals. Untold cases of pastoral and human care were part of everyday life in war, both at the front and on the "home front". But there were also culpable failures. A particularly problematic, negative role was played by Field Bishop Franz Justus Rarkowski. Not affiliated with the Bishops' Conference, and a German-nationalist outsider in the Church, he sought to mobilise soldiers' religious and spiritual energies entirely in the interests of the Wehrmacht leadership.

The attack by German troops on Poland, which was in breach of international law, posed the question to the bishops as to what stance they were to take with regard to this war. After the experience of the First World War, it was possible to recognise tangible reticence in their sermons and pastoral letters. But entirely in line with the Church's traditional point of view with regard to war, they called on soldiers and the faithful to be loyal, to carry out their duty, to prove their value, to atone and to be willing to make sacrifices. That said, the tone of the individual statements certainly permits differences to be perceived, albeit the melody was still the same. It was only Berlin Bishop Konrad von Preysing who did without such admonitions, and spoke of the "dangers of the time", revealing ways of dealing with the impending reality of dying.

Given the experience of 1914 to 1918, the bishops no longer legitimised the war that was started by Germany explicitly as "just". But the painful sacrifice that was required to be made and – the longer the more – also to be suffered, was accepted as it had previously been on the basis of national, "patriotic" thinking. The bells rang out in the Reich after the victory over France in 1940. The attack on the Soviet Union was associated with the idea of a "crusade" against "godless Bolshevism", which lent an additional religious emphasis to the War. True, the bishops did

not share the racial ideological reasoning of the War held by the National Socialists, but their words and images strengthened both soldiers and the warring regime by lending it an additional meaning.

The outlook that was taken up in the bishops' statements changed in the shadow of the many crimes that were committed at the front, in the occupied territories, and in the Reich. The ultimately euphemistic idea of war as a sincere, honourable struggle with one's opponent increasingly gave way to horror at the massive suffering and death suffered by the soldiers. It was also shaken by the bombing campaign against the civilian population at home. There was however only an inadequate focus on the suffering of the others, by contrast.

Any open protest on the part of the German bishops against the National Socialist war of annihilation was conspicuous by its absence, both in September 1939 and after that period. The Church's traditional view of war and the national awareness clashed with the doubts that had arisen. Virtually no one in the Church in Germany raised a voice against the outrageous crimes committed against Others who were the object of discrimination as "racially alien", and were persecuted, these being Jews in particular. It took the impetus arising from murders committed against patients and the "suppression of the cloisters" for individual bishops to depart from their practice, which they had been engaging in for far too long, of writing submissions, and to dare to engage in open contradiction. The best known is the fierce criticism expressed by the bishop of Münster Clemens August Graf von Galen against the euthanasia crimes. It was not until 19 August 1943 that the Bishops' Conference managed to issue a joint pastoral letter ("On the Ten Commandments as a Law of Life of the Peoples"), in which they called publicly for all state order to be bound to the truth and to divine law, for the protection of marriage and the family, for obedience to be ac-

countable to conscience, for the unconditional right to life, and for the protection of property. This however changed nothing with regard to the fact that soldiers continued to be called upon to loyally do their duty. Those soldiers for whom the experience of war and unfettered violence came together to pose existential questions as to meaning and to God were left largely alone. Also those who doubted, who were considering deserting, or who actually did desert, found no support in the statements of the bishops. They were left alone with their moral dilemmas.

In the final analysis, the bishops failed to find a way out of the conflict emerging from, on the one hand, the divided idea of patriotic obligation in war, the legitimacy of state authority, the resulting obligations to obey, and on the other hand the manifest crimes. The Christian standards for categorising war obviously no longer applied. This left the field open for the questions of German soldiers and for the sufferings of others. The statements of the bishops, with all the nuances that need to be defined in the face of all the respective personalities, failed in the face of the reality of criminal violence. They continued to strive to bring about the (illusory) change in conduct of the political leadership, to ensure compliance with the legal agreements, as well as to lead to the virtuous performance of duty on the part of those who were led, to a certain degree therefore to a “right life in the wrong one” (Adorno). They failed to address the diabolic entanglements in the crimes and the resulting hardships. What is more, they share in the guilt for the War, given that the bishops did not say an unambiguous “No”, but that most of them strengthened the will to persevere.

III. Ways to start understanding

As difficult to understand, if not indeed wrong, as the conduct of our predecessor bishops may seem today, this does not absolve us of the need to attempt to reach a historical understanding. This is the only way that we can escape from the temptation to not take a sufficiently close interest in the events of that age. We ultimately owe it to the victims to investigate the question regarding how such approaches were able to develop, and how they were justified.

We would therefore like to point below to several factors which were typical of the Church as a whole, and of the Bishops' Conference in particular. They help to make their stance towards the War comprehensible, without however seeking to excuse it. The specific significance of these individual factors for the respective bishops may differ widely here. It is also a matter here of avoiding making snap generalisations.

The degree to which the ideas of the bishops were characterised by traditional ideas of order which originated in Ancient philosophy and theology, and which interpreted and shaped the world of the Middle Ages, appears to us to be almost alien today. Also referring to the Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Romans (13:1-7) and to 1 Peter (2:13-14), the Church viewed state powers and physical force as being given and desired by God. This did not rule out criticism of those who were responsible. The order was however not questioned per se, since resistance to the state order was simultaneously understood as resistance to the divine will. Under the conditions prevalent in modern times, this traditional form of legitimisation of domination engendered greater affinity to monarchist, authoritarian state forms than to freedom-based, democratic ones, since the realisation of human rights only slowly started to determine church thinking as a goal

and a foundation for the legitimisation of all state force. After the seizure of power by the National Socialists, whose ideology the bishops clearly rejected, the German State was hence still regarded as a force for order which had to be respected and protected. Given the conditions that prevailed in the unjust National Socialist state, this led to an ambivalent and partly also problematic position on the part of the Church.

With regard to war, the doctrine of the "just war" added a further doctrinal tradition to the mix. This doctrine, which can be traced back to Cicero, Augustine and Thomas of Aquinas, and which exerted and continues to exert considerable influence on the development of international law – in contradistinction to its intention of limiting violence – had increasingly become a means of legitimising physical force in the modern era, and had contributed towards people becoming accustomed to the use of violent means. Even if doubts had became louder since the experiences of the First World War as to the established political approach towards this doctrine, it nonetheless contributed to the vast majority of Christians not yet fundamentally questioning war as a form of political conflict in the first half of the 20th Century.

The handed-down Christian ideas of state order and war were part and parcel of the broad societal acceptance of the presence of the military in everyday life that was taken for granted. The militarisation of society in the German Reich, as well as the effect of the experience of violence and military action of the First World War, still constituted an influence. The military continued to enjoy broad recognition and a high profile within society. There were quasi-military structures, forms of language and conduct in the civilian field too, both in youth organisations and in the political parties of the Weimar Republic. Ideas of honour, discipline and obedience that were connected to the life of a soldier were held high. This thinking took effect in the oath to

the flag which each soldier had to swear, and which was sworn to Adolf Hitler from 1934 onwards, in a form that was binding on many soldiers. Those who refused to take the oath and compassionate objectors could expect to suffer brutal persecution and draconian punishments during the War. This meant that the level of willingness to publicly question the actions and duties of soldiers was low. The peace movement which came about, such as the Peace Association of German Catholics, remained marginalised within society and in the Church.

The Catholic Church in Germany had come a long way when She had arrived in the nation after the "*Kulturkampf*" during the German Reich. The experience of the *Kulturkampf*, and the need to make national loyalty visible, continued to exert an impact on into the period of National Socialism. Particularly in war, it was understood as a patriotic duty that was taken for granted to stand up for one's fatherland. The needs and rights of the other nations were largely left out of the equation here. The Treaty of Versailles was also rejected and regarded as a humiliation in the Catholic Church in Germany and among the bishops, as it attributed guilt for the outbreak of the First World War to Germany alone. The extremely onerous conditions that the Treaty imposed on the country were regarded by many Catholics (including bishops) as unjust, and it was considered desirable for them to be revised. The overriding national thinking and perceptions prevailed in this context. This climaxed in approval of the invasion of Paris (1940).

In addition to the national thinking, the debate on Communism and the struggle against Bolshevism offered the greatest opportunity for establishing a link to National Socialist ideas. Communism particularly embodied the problems that had arisen with the Modern age. More than this: The Church's rejection of a competing, anti-religious social system found itself underpinned by Stalin's policy of systematically persecuting the

Churches and religious communities in the Soviet Union. The philosophical contrast had thus been made manifest in blood. The struggle against Bolshevism took on particular significance in National Socialist propaganda after the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941. Apart from the racial, ideological significance of this propaganda, it had considerable potential for approval. In light of this approval of the struggle against Bolshevism, the concrete realities of the war of annihilation came into view only dimly at best.

The situation of the Church had revealed itself to be increasingly precarious after the guarantees for the pastoral activities of the Church in the 1933 Reich Concordat. The National Socialist regime made efforts to push the Catholic Church out of the public domain and into a form of Sacristy-based Christianity on the basis of this Concordat. Whilst the National Socialists took a tactical view of the law and of contracts which fluctuated between instrumentalisation and breaking the law, the bishops continued to regard themselves as bound by the law. The boundaries of this defensive strategy became increasingly evident in light of the repression against the Church, which increased in particular as the war progressed, such as the detention of large numbers of priests, religious and lay people.

Not least because of its internal organisation, the Bishops' Conference, made up of Prussian, Bavarian and since 1938 Austrian bishops, revealed itself not to be up to the challenge of National Socialism, and in particular of the racist, ideological war of annihilation which it had set in motion. It proved to be institutionally too weak to reach an effective, joint line of action. Only unanimously-formulated resolutions had a binding effect, and even these were not actually legally binding on all the bishops. This latter point further reduced the scope for action. The diverging ideas regarding whether and to what degree the handed-down ideas of order, and the bishops' understanding of their

office, were to be transferred into an office that was to act as a guardian for society, conflicted with the need to take action in order to preserve inner decisiveness. The fact that the President of the Bishops' Conference, Cardinal Adolf Bertram, blocked a change of course despite the ever more dramatic experiences, and insisted on the policy of submissions being continued, rendered the Bishops' Conference unable to act at the very time when the regime decided, in 1941, to annihilate the Jewish people. It was not until in August 1943 that the bishops were able to agree, at their last meeting in wartime, on the abovementioned pastoral letter. This came after two years of controversial struggle, and produced a significant, fundamental statement which demanded that the Ten Commandments be the law of life of all peoples, and hence called for the validity of human rights.

IV. Lessons for the future

The Second World War in Europe ended on 8 May 1945 with the capitulation of Germany. It took a long time before the Church's own entanglements in the Third Reich and in the Second World War were discussed and regarded in a self-critical manner in the Catholic Church in Germany, and also among the bishops. The fundamental contradiction of the National Socialist philosophy, the reference to the many martyrs who perished in the concentration camps and at the execution sites, as well as the question of the bishops standing as an advocate for the German people, were regarded for a long time by the majority as an adequate response to the questions around the shared responsibility and guilt incurred in the war and in National Socialism. Today, we look back in sorrow and shame to the victims and to those whose existential questions did not receive an adequate response from faith in light of the crimes and of war. As the years have past, the fact that for quite some time no regard was had for the suffering and the sacrifices of the others – not to mention any open statements – is particularly shameful.

The exchanges and the paths of reconciliation with our neighbours, and with France and Poland in particular, have helped us to leave these constricted perceptions of avoidance, displacement and our own pain behind us. The Church in Germany was only gradually able to find Her place in the critical, frequently highly-conflictual and painful struggle to deal with the experience and suffering of the Others, in particular of the Jews. Our experience here has been that these encounters have also made a major contribution to the renewal of the Church, and that they continue to do so.

The conduct of our predecessors in office was rooted in an entanglement in the national spirit of that age and in the Church's

ideas about the relationship between the State and the Church which had been developed in a different historical framework, and which are not able to lay claim to general validity in theological terms. In 1933-1945, they were only inadequately questioned in terms of their boundaries and relationship with the era in which they took place, thus developing highly-problematical impacts. It took the shocking experiences of the modern age, and also the critical exegetic and theological questioning, for the Church to re-define the relationship between society and religion and to lend contours to the role of the Church in the State in the sense of critical contemporaneity. The Church today regards Herself as called on and obliged to demand the dignity of all peoples, created as they are in the image of God, to call for the inalienable human rights, for the moral principles regarding the social order, and for everything that serves the salvation of souls, from every state and from every government, and Herself to contribute to their realisation. The renewed form of military and prison chaplaincy is an exemplary testimony to the new interaction between the State and the Church. We have furthermore rediscovered that the message of the Gospel does not end at the borders of our country, and that solidarity in the Christian sense is not limited to one's own people. Overcoming all suffering worldwide is part and parcel of following Jesus.

Last but not least, we were able to make the central insights of the doctrine of a "just war" in the guiding principle of a "just peace" applicable in such a manner that they do better justice to the intention of containing violence. We consider our task to lie in helping to continue these learning processes, and hence render the Church's peace doctrine more profound in the light of new experiences. The updated version of our statement entitled "A Just Peace" (2000), which is in preparation, will be drawn up largely on the basis of this understanding.

Today we are able to gratefully observe that the willingness to face up to the unremitting questions and urgent problems has brought us closer to Christ and to a more profound understanding of the Gospel. Especial significance attaches here to the *memoria passionis,* the memory of the suffering of the victims. It is in them that we encounter Christ.