

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DB - 8  
When in Giessen do as the Romans:  
The City's Catholics. Part I

Flockstrasse 8  
Giessen, Germany  
May 29, 1957

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Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The middle-aged priest knifed his eyebrows and spoke in an earnest tone: "We have to watch out for the Socialists and some of the Lutheran combat organizations - they have their horns out. The Catholics in Giessen had their backs against the wall for a long time."

A few days later, a young priest added: "The Socialists say that church and state should be separated. That is impossible. If that happened, we would be pushed into a corner where we would starve. There is a fair amount of tolerance between the confessions now. But the matter is in a state of suspension. There's an air of expectancy. It could get worse."

The Reformation erased Catholicism in Giessen. Not until the 19th century did the local Catholic community gain a foothold again. And then it was only under severe limitation by the Protestant-dominated city government.

Now there are 12,000 Catholics in Giessen - nearly 20 per cent of the population. Today the Church plays a major role in the religious life of the city. Moreover, the Catholics have experienced no out-right persecution or intolerance by Giessen's Protestant majority for nearly a century.

Nevertheless, local Catholics seem to view Protestants and the Socialist-dominated city government with muffled suspicion.

The young priest was right in remarking the church-state question. It lies at the heart of the historic conflicts between the Roman Catholic Church and the Germans.

One wintry morning almost 900 years ago a German emperor knelt in the snow before the Catholic Pope and begged his mercy. The year was 1077. The place was Canossa. Two years before, Emperor Heinrich IV had begun his struggle with Rome over the right of investiture. Heinrich was the first German leader to try limiting the Church's power. Pope Gregory VII retaliated by excommunicating the youthful sovereign, in 1076. Heinrich journeyed over the frozen alps into Italy to ask forgiveness. The Pope made him wait three days in the snow.

Less than a century later another German emperor crossed the alps into what Dante called "the hostelry of pain" and chased the Pope out of Rome. The aim of Friedrich Barbarossa, like that of Heinrich, was to strip the Church of secular power.

Then in 1520 a German theologian, Dr. Martin Luther, wielded his pen and his tongue to stir up the German princes against Rome. The Reformation which he began was nearly a mortal blow to the Church.

Some 800 years after Heinrich IV had wended his penitent way to Canossa, an outstanding German bishop knelt imploringly before the Roman Pope. The bishop, Emanuel von Ketteler, pleaded with Pope Pius IX to defer issuing the famous decree of papal infallibility. Ketteler and many of his colleagues realized that the authoritarian dogma would do great harm to the position of the Church in Germany and other countries. In tears, Ketteler begged: "Good father save us, and save the church of God." But Pius IX was adamant. The decree was issued five days later, July 18, 1870. The Pope followed up by excommunicating some of the major German opponents to the dogma. The decree nearly split German Catholicism wide open.

A year and a half later, the Prussian Government opened its Kulturkampf against the Catholic Church in Germany. There appears to be no historical connection between the infallibility decree and Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's subsequent siege of Catholicism. Yet the Kulturkampf (fight for culture) may never have come to pass if the Church had not asserted itself in the manner of the infallibility declaration. Bismarck signalled the anti-Rome aspect of Kulturkampf when he announced in a debate: "We shall not go to Canossa..." Bismarck's siege lasted 16 years. During that time, the Jesuit order was banned from Germany, bishops were imprisoned, the priesthood was subjected to state inspection, schools were withdrawn from church supervision, civil marriage laws were introduced, and church funds were confiscated. Yet Bismarck had not been so concerned by the power of the Roman Church as much as he had by the Catholic Center Party. That the Center Party emerged from the Kulturkampf stronger than ever was one of the ironies of Bismarck's chancellorship.

The most recent threat to the Catholic establishment in Germany came from Adolf Hitler. This onetime Catholic cynically signed a Concordat with Rome in 1933 which protected the Church's position under the New Nazi regime. The Concordat did not prevent the Fuehrer's minions from closing the church press, Catholic schools, and cloisters as well as throwing Catholic churchmen in concentration camps.

An institution acutely aware of its history, the Church recalls only too vividly the troubles it suffered at the hands of Heinrich IV, Friedrich I, Luther, Bismarck, Hitler, and other Germans. Little wonder then that a contemporary historian speaks of "the old Roman distrust for Germany." The feeling, apparently, is mutual. Even in the present halcyon atmosphere of post-war Germany, one can hear a prominent Protestant clergyman make a remark like this:

"The Bundesrepublik - conceived in Rome and born in Washington."

The double-edged remark was, among other things, a sardonic cut at the ties between Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and the Church.

There were, however, in the post-war period, members of both confessions who felt that the common experience of persecution by Hitler had drawn them closer together. Lutherans and Catholics joined in reviving the pre-war Una Sancta (one faith movement) which sought to bridge the gap between the confessions. It was the Pope himself who poured icewater on this idea. In an address to German Catholics at the Mainz Church Conference in September, 1948 he said:

"The Catholic Church is inflexible before all that might have the appearance of a compromise or adjustment of Catholic life with other denominations."

These last two quotations, admittedly taken out of context, are contemporary examples of that ancient mutual mistrust between Germany and Rome. And that mistrust devolves on the historic interpretations of the rights of church versus the rights of state.

The city of Giessen was never downstage center during the dramatic struggles between Rome and the Germans. But it did play a couple of bit parts.

Catholic chroniclers like to emphasize the fact that the Reformation landgrave, Philipp the Magnanimous, kept two wives. This, they say, goes a long way in explaining why Philipp broke with the Catholic Church in the 1520's and cast his lot with Luther. The Hessian ruler became one of the champions of the Wittenberg scholar's cause. On October 19, 1526 he convened a synod at nearby Homberg which declared Upper Hesse for Luther. The fiat followed the law "cuius regio eius religio" - the ruler's choice determines the religion of his territory.

With few exceptions, the inhabitants of Giessen became fervent followers of the new creed. So fervent in fact, that in 1560 some Giesseners martyred a barefoot Catholic friar just outside the city wall. According to the chronicle, a certain Melchior Meyer was innocently gathering alms on his way to Marburg when a couple of Lutheran preachers set upon him. They cursed the mendicant roundly, scourged his naked feet with switches, and then clubbed him senseless with their staves. Melchior expired soon after in a Wetzlar infirmary.

Itinerant Catholics gave Giessen a wide berth for the next two centuries.

Then in 1791, Landgraf Ludwig X gave permission for Catholic students at the University of Giessen to acquire their own pastor. A Benedictine, Bonifaz Carl Sigmund Schalk, arrived from Fulda to tend the little congregation. However, the well-intrenched Lutheran prelates made things hard for the new minister. Schalk was not even allowed to baptize Catholic babies. Discouraged, he decamped from Giessen after only two years. He died in utter poverty.

His successor, a Frenchman named Carl Basilid de la Broisse, fared little better. He had come here to escape the French Revolution. Unfortunately for Carl, citizen-soldiers of the Revolution occupied Giessen in 1796. The priest was so frightened by their sudden appearance that he renounced the cloth and became a layman. The next pastor, Johann Jacob Belner, was so poorly payed that he often went hungry. The Lutheran consistory obliged him to turn over all monies acquired from baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

Up to this time, Catholic services had been held in a room at the University. In 1804, the congregation was allowed to move in to the dilapidated Ballhaus chapel (DB - 6) which had already been condemned for use by Protestants. The Ballhaus was sold out from under them in 1817 and the Catholics moved to a dank room in the old Liebigstrasse kaserne. The new pastor, Peter Leopold Kaiser, determined that his congregation should have a church of its own. He laid plans for a new building.

Kaiser left the Giessen parish in 1830, the same year in which Catholics were freed from subservience to the Lutheran Consistory. He spent five years in Darmstadt and then was elected bishop of Mainz. Kaiser had not forgotten his beleaguered little Giessen parish. In 1840 he returned to consecrate the new Catholic church - the city's first in 314 years. It was a homely building, soon to be blackened by smoke of passing locomotives on the new Upper Hesse Railway. But it was a beginning. There were about 340 Catholics in the Parish - 4 per cent of the city's population.

Something else occurred in the year 1830 which promised to strengthen Catholicism in Giessen. That year the University opened a Catholic theological faculty. Future priests in the Mainz Diocese were sent here for their first four semesters before finishing their studies at the bishopric seminar in Mainz. Moreover, the Giessen pastor was designated professor of theology. But the experiment of having a theological faculty in the diaspora soon came a cropper. Dr. Caspar Riffel, who became pastor of the Giessen parish in 1835, was a professor of church history at the University. He gave up his pastoral duties two years later and devoted his whole time to scholarly work. Dr. Riffel published a history of the Reformation in 1841. Its viewpoint upset the State government so much that they fired him without consulting the bishop. A few years later a Catholic theologian from the local university was named bishop of Mainz to succeed Kaiser. But Dr. Leopold Schmid was unsatisfactory to certain elements in the diocese capital. A new election was ordered by the Pope and the next bishop chosen was Emanuel Ketteler. He took office in 1850. At the instance of a majority of Hesse's Catholic deans, he transferred the Catholic faculty from Giessen to Mainz.

A decade later, one of the Catholic theologians who remained in Giessen wrote a monograph on the faculty which criticized Dr. Riffel. Bishop Ketteler demanded an explanation. In return the controversial theologian, Dr. Lutterbeck, published a personal attack on Ketteler. Dr. Lutterbeck was suspended from the Giessen faculty in November, 1860. The theologian turned up in 1873 as the leader of the dissident group of "Old Catholics" here. This was a movement begun by various German Catholic ministers as a protest against the papal infallibility decree. The Old Catholics denied the validity of the decree and were supported for a time by the Bismarck government. The movement gained more than 50,000 adherents in all of Germany by 1878, but its success was limited in Giessen. The Lutterbeck group apparently expired before World War I.

Meanwhile, the building of the new Giessen-Cologne railway in the 1860's brought a number of Catholic workmen and their families into this area. The Giessen congregation numbered 754 in 1870 - more than double its number in 1840. Parish activity increased

accordingly. Bells and stained glass windows were added to the little church. A convent was begun in 1886 by Alsatian nuns from the order of the All Holy Saviour in Niederbronn. The parish was made into a Dekanat (deanery) three years later.

By 1890, the Giessen congregation numbered 1,783. Already the new church was too small. In 1892, the new pastor, Johannes Bayer, began laying plans for a new church. A building association was founded and shortly after the turn of the century the cornerstone of the new St. Bonifatiuskirche was laid.

The St. Boniface Church, in imitation late-Gothic style, was far enough along by 1905 to be used. The old church was abandoned. However, parish activities had swelled to such a proportion that in 1910 it was decided to transform the earlier church into a meeting hall. In the meantime, the Niederbronn nuns had moved into the former parish house and begun an infirmary. This later became the St. Joseph Hospital - next to the new church.

World War I and the inflation period following it prevented the church fathers from continuing construction of the St. Boniface Church. Not until 1936 was the last brick in place. But the priest who had begun the building was on hand at the completion ceremonies. Pastor Bayer also saw to it that the church got new bells. Two years later, after 46 years of service in the Giessen parish, he died. The venerable priest was buried in the wall of his church.

Bayer was succeeded by Karl Joseph Deuster, who had come to Giessen in 1932 as Kaplan (chaplain). He was named dean of the parish in 1939. Now 58, Deuster is a tubby man with a wispy fringe of white hair springing from his nearly bald head. The son of a Mainz railroad worker, Deuster served at Verdun in World War I. He lives in the new parish house next to the church. His room is filled with books, quaint religious art, a handsome woodcarving of a saint, a bell clock, and a toy turtle. Deuster is not renowned for preaching ability or administrative genius. Concerning the latter, a story has it that the church board was astounded to find one day that Deuster had avoided opening or answering the parish bills for two years. When I needled the Dekan about this, he puffed out his cheeks and looked blank. Then he whistled, waved his hands, and said: "We aren't bank people. If there were time enough, I could sit down and do the accounts in beautiful Medieval script." Deuster is an appealing fellow.

He is also a diligent one. In the past ten years his congregation has doubled in size. Moreover, the arrival of refugee Catholics in the country towns around Giessen has created the need for more churches in the region. There are 46 such towns in Deuster's prescribed area of supervision. And the 12,000 Catholics in the city itself make Giessen the largest parish in the Mainz Diocese. It is a point of pride with the Dekan that five new churches have been built to serve these new congregations.

Within Giessen, the church establishment has grown accordingly. First, the Bonifatiuskirche had to have its bomb damage repaired. For it too had been struck in the 1944 air raid. Then the Catholic hospital had to be expanded. And Caritas, the Catholic charity organization, had to be introduced to care for refugees, exiles,

and the homeless. Finally, the post-war flood of Catholic children into the schools required additional attention from the clergy. These and other pressing matters have been the responsibility of Dekan Deuster. The Mainz Diocese is aware of its expanding mission in Upper Hesse, and it has sent priests to aid the Dekan. But he could use a lot more help.

Asked for an interview, Deuster searched his appointment book and proposed an evening in the coming week. His daylight hours were already committed - six hours of school religion classes, two funerals, a visit to an outlying parish... Here are some of the things he had to say that evening:

The Nazi Period -- "Preaching the Old Testament was prohibited. But I preached it whether they liked it or not. The Gestapo sat in on our services. To say that Jesus was a leader (Fuehrer) was already suspicious enough to them. My chaplain Sommer was arrested here one day for telling a political joke in a religion class. When the Pope criticized the Nazis in 1937 (Pius XI's encyclical "With Burning Anxiety") we were not allowed to distribute his message by post. We mimeographed it secretly and I took it around on a motorcycle. Yes, this was a Nazi nest - because it was largely Protestant. It was easier for them to join the movement."

American Catholics -- "German Catholics are more discerning than Americans. Yours seem to us to be childish - more slavish to the Pope. The German thinks over what the Pope says. We are loyal to the Holy Father, but the German knows his history and keeps it in mind. Our emphasis on relics is not as exaggerated as yours. We feel your religious art is sort of infantile - too sweet, too sentimental, too gaudy. In the Catholic (majority) areas, miracles are important. But our tone is soberer here. It is the same in worship services. I stick closer to the liturgy. Our Catholics participate much more in the Mass, in the singing and responses, than yours."

The Priesthood -- "There is a tremendous shortage of priests. We could use at least two more here. Many potential priests were killed in the war. The younger generation seems less prepared to produce priests, but their number is growing slowly now. There is also a terrific shortage of nuns. My parish produced one nun and two priests in 1955 - a typical year. It is not a favorable era - people just aren't willing to make sacrifices."

Church and state -- "The present system is good. The state should not be neutral in religious matters. It should work together with the church. The state should leave us alone. You can vote on roads and things like that - but not on religion. The tax scheme is a help. If we had to depend on voluntary contributions alone we would get money only from "good" Catholics. As for education, there are almost no confessional schools in Hesse. From the point of view of canon law we should have them. But we are not working on it now. It seems impossible. Confessional schools are desirable because it enables one to have a more unified educational aim.

Dictators -- "The Catholic Church has no law about forms of government. The Church uses that form that has been given to the people. Franco is an absolutist. The Church has it easy with Franco. But I wouldn't compare Franco to Hitler. Nations fall into extremes easily - especially the Germans. The Church leaves the matter of government

up to the individuals. Of course the Church is monarchically organized."

Education -- "Some (Protestant) teachers are not discreet enough, but that is strictly a matter of individuals. Kant and Hegel (German philosophers who are on the Catholic Index) are all right when they are taught historically. But distortion of history - that doesn't go. If you only collect the garbage from Catholic Church history and say 'that's the Church' - then it's pure bias."

Medicine -- "There's not one Catholic gynecologist in Giessen. The one we have at our hospital is Lutheran. But we have a good understanding with him. He doesn't ask the (Catholic) nurses to help on non-Catholic operations. When I counsel our married couples I tell them 'Women aren't unhappy about the children they have but about the children they don't have.'"

Tension between confessions -- "I know all the Lutheran pastors here. They are faithful and true Christians - not Catholic of course, but they are not extreme liberals ('liberal' in the German Catholic vocabulary denotes a whole range of things including socialist, communist, radical, and revolutionist). Niemoeller (DB - 7) is a thoughtless talker, but I don't take him seriously."

Politics -- "We look on most political parties as being weltanschaulich (having a social outlook which 'trespasses' on the social preserve of the Church). If a Catholic is konsequent (down to earth) he has to be Christian Democratic. The Socialists are godless - some are even marxists. We thought the Social Democrats would stick to their goal of trying to better the condition of the working class after the war. It's not necessary for a Socialist to be an atheist. But there are so many SPD people who are dissenters - so many who say religion is the opium of the people. (He chuckled) It's easier if you look upon them as individuals and not as people with party labels."

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Received New York 6/4/57.