

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DB - 9
The Motorized Minority:
Giessen's Catholics. Part II

Flockstrasse 8
Giessen, Germany
May 31, 1957

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The casual observer who glances at the imposing nave and spire of Giessen's Bonifatiuskirche might think that the Catholic establishment in this city ended there.

Far from it. Just next door is the St. Joseph Hospital, which is managed by 28 Niederbronn Sisters. A couple of houses further up the Liebigstrasse is the Saalbau, a combination restaurant and meeting hall housed in the former Catholic church. Down the block is Kettelerhaus, named for the social-minded 19th century bishop. Now occupying this building are five Jesuits who help out in Catholic religion classes at the local schools and tend congregations in outlying towns. A thousand yards south on the Frankfurterstrasse is the Caritashaus (charity organization home) St. Stephanus. It houses 170 aged and infirm people plus 85 young men. A few blocks east of the Caritashaus is Haus Elisabeth, a transit center for refugee girls and young mothers, staffed by the Catholic Welfare Organization.

In addition to these physical establishments, most of them post-war creations, the Church has no less than 21 separate lay organizations active in Giessen. Seven of these are youth groups. The rest include prayer societies, two building associations, a choir, an academic society, Catholic Action, and a group which is working for the purchase of a new organ.

Most of these groups meet at least once a month. All of them need at least the occasional attention of a priest. As a result, Giessen's ecclesiastics are kept on the run. It is no surprise to find that every one of them is motorized.

One of the mobile ministers in Kaplan Walter Seidel, a bushy-haired Silesian with soft skin and a resonant voice. Besides giving religious instruction 18 hours a week in Giessen professional schools, he has two suburban congregations to attend on weekends. He also has a heavy schedule of baptisms, burials, confessions, and hospital visits. Finally, he teaches a converts' class once a week and runs the local Kolping--familie, a young men's discussion group.

Two weeks ago he cracked up his car while under way from one appointment to another.

"The vital problem," said the 31-year-old Seidel, "the problem that weighs us down most is time. How are we priests to get away from our administrative duties long enough to meet with individual parish members. If I want to see people individually, I have to meet them at 11 p.m. Then I'm too tired, and so are they."

There are seven young women and three young men in Kaplan Seidel's current convert-class. It was a cold Tuesday evening when Seidel met with his group recently in an over-heated room on the Frankfurterstrasse. He wore a black windbreaker over his clerical vestments. His cheeks were rosy as he began: "The decisive experience is the sacrament at the altar - the transmutation of God into man and man into God."

Seidel talked on softly and ceaselessly for the next two hours, his voice running like a mountain stream. He spoke with wit and intelligence: "You have to learn to pray with your whole person - even your feet. Otherwise they'll hang out of heaven." He cited the early church: "There was no Latin, no chorus, just a priest who broke bread. Now we have splendid churches with every sort of decoration. You might explain it this way: if God can show even the most primitive type of people His love then man should give God something in return. Jesus was poor when he walked the earth. The decoration is there to make Jesus rich in an external and visible way."

He concluded: "Catholicism is an endless secret. Just as you can't 'do' a great museum in a half hour, you can't 'do' religion in a half hour. That's why you should keep going to church every Sunday."

About half of these converts are persons who intend to marry Catholics. The rest have chosen to enter the Church for other reasons. In Giessen the number of converts to Catholicism seems to run about equal to those who become Protestants. In recent years the local parish has lost an average of 15 Catholics annually to other denominations. The loss is made up for in converts.

A couple of weeks ago, Kaplan Seidel ran a successful concert at the Saalbau. The aim of the production was to collect money towards construction of a church for his congregation at the suburban town of Garbenteich. About 200 guests showed up and payed up to hear singers and players perform classic and modern pieces - everything from Mozart to Moussorgsky. Afterwards, Seidel urged the guests to purchase potted flowers as "a little remembrance of the evening for 40 pfennigs." He sold out.

And last month, Seidel helped produce a reading of the post-war German play, Draussen von der Tur (translated into English as The Man Outside) by Wolfgang Borchert. Directing the performance and playing the leading role was the Volksschule teachers, Raimund Domogalla (DB - 2). The striking aspect of this production was that the Catholic Church backed it. Draussen von der Tur is a remarkable play about a returning veteran of the Russian campaign. It is a bitter and eloquent denunciation of modern society. In it, God is portrayed as a helpless old man who is scorned by the one-legged veteran. It would appear to be anti-Catholic insofar as it denies the value of God, if not his existence.

Seidel, himself a war veteran, led the public discussion of the play after the performance. Like others in the discussion, Seidel kept returning to the play's conclusion. The piece ends with the veteran shouting for "the old man who calls himself God."

He cries: "Why are you silent . . .Will no one answer?" Said Seidel: "The question is did he cry out to the Lord, or did he cry out into emptiness?"

It is hard for me to conceive of a Catholic group in a small American city producing something as controversial as Draussen von der Tur, much less having a discussion of it afterwards.

Kaplan Seidel has been in Giessen for three years. During that time he has cemented his views about the position of the Church in Upper Hesse. Here is what he has to say:

"We are troubled with the 'liberals' much more than with the Lutherans. It is not so much a matter of bad relations with the 'liberals' as it is a lack of knowledge on their part. Hesse is a showroom for the Social Democrats. It's radical. We have continual difficulties on the question of freedom of instruction in the schools. They (the Socialists) use the lack of room as an excuse for shortening the time of religious instruction. There are too many old Protestants in the schools. We need more priests from our side to take hold. We get along all right with the other confession, but remember, the churches were crushed together during the war - not welded together."

The other chaplain of the Giessen parish is Wolfgang Rolly, a 29-year-old native of Darmstadt. He is a skinny fellow with wavy brown hair, glasses, and the quiet voice of a modest person. Rolly has been here about a year. His main job is supervising the 350 youngsters in the parish youth groups.

However, he has in addition two congregations in Giessen suburbs to attend plus school instruction 16 hours a week. Like Kaplan Seidel, he complains of the shortness of time. "I've only had time to visit two private homes in the last 12 months," he said. Rolly estimates he has had eight days of vacation in the last four years.

His youth organizations include boy and girl scout groups, a young men's group and a young women's group, the New Germany League for high school boys and Heliand (the Saviour) for high school girls, and a Young Christian Workers group. Each has 40 to 50 members. Each meets once a week. Besides discussion, group singing, and religious devotions, the groups take camping trips and hikes.

Rolly says this generation of youngsters is "a bit more superficial than we were." He added: "They don't want to be serious. They have no cares. But they aren't as narrow-minded as previous generations. The main problem is finding enough leaders for the youth movements. Nobody wants to volunteer."

Although Giessen's Catholic theological faculty was dissolved a century ago, the University still has students who are Catholics. The man who is carrying on the work of the first Catholic pastors of the modern period (DB - 8) is Johannes Klever. He has the title of student pastor.

Klever is a vigorous, dry-voiced man with an unruly shock of stiff gray hair, a thick-set body, and deep circles under his eyes. A native of Duisburg, he came here five years ago. While his main job is with the students, he also spends a lot of time working as the parish "press secretary." In the latter capacity he acts as defender of the faith in questions of film, radio, and the newspapers.

The student pastor supervises the 180 Catholics enrolled at the Giessen Hochschule, the Engineering School, and the Agricultural School. Once a week he holds Mass for the students at the Bonifatiuskirche. He also runs student discussion groups, guides student tours to foreign countries, and acts as spiritual counselor to the four Catholic fraternities on the Giessen Hochschule campus.

"Our work here is mainly in cultural activities," Klever says. "That's twice as important at Giessen as it is elsewhere because the University only has scientific faculties. We try to fill in the cultural gaps for medical students and veterinarians. We encourage them to attend concerts, exhibitions, and the theatre so that culture doesn't disappear from their lives." The discussion groups take up such 'controversial' writers and painters as Sartre (on the Catholic Index) and Picasso (a Communist).

Previously, Catholic students fended for themselves at Giessen. Klever's goal is to make them feel a part of the parish. Technically, every Catholic student is a "member" of the Giessen parish as soon as he enrolls in one of the colleges. Klever's work acquires significance when one remembers that German students move to different universities every couple of semesters. Says Klever, "We try to help them find their feet here and we attempt to round out their studies with a little general education in the arts."

Klever's other concern is the matter of duelling fraternities, which are very popular in Giessen. "They still seek 'honor' in the question of the slightest insult," he said. "They glory in blood and honor. That's pagan to us. We discourage Catholics from joining the duelling fraternities." Klever also would like to see the fraternities lose some of their exclusiveness. Through his student contacts he encourages inter-fraternity activities such as dances.

As press secretary, Klever has gained a fair amount of notice in Giessen. In recent months he has been fairly quick to leap into print when the Catholic faith was under attack. Last winter a local Protestant minister was quoted in the press as saying that Catholics payed relatively little attention to the Bible before the Reformation. Klever replied with a lengthy defence of the Church in the next issue.

When films of questionable moral content reach the local screen, Klever has a few words with the theatre manager. If the film is really objectionable for Catholics, he records a message to that effect for broadcast before the main feature.

And when Social Democratic speakers come to town, Klever is usually on hand to see that the Church is properly represented. "The Socialists give me a hard time," he laughed. "I've had battles with them in the press too. I'm all for understanding. But I say

'you drive on the left and I'll drive on the right - and don't come over on my side or there'll be a smashup.' Dekan Deuster is almost too conciliatory in some of these matters."

The Caritashaus St. Stephanus is the domain of Bernhard Itzel, a handsome, 42-year-old priest with light brown hair and piercing blue eyes. A native of Zipfen in the Odenwald, his father was a master tailor. Itzel came here in 1944 to serve as chaplain. He was not called for military duty because of a lame leg. During war-time he held Mass in a score of villages around Giessen. - sometimes in railroad stations, sometimes in the basement of a laundry.

In 1946, Itzel was designated head of the new Caritas organization in Upper Hesse. He began work with 47 marks. His first office was in a railroad barracks and his job was to attend the thousands of refugees who were pouring into Giessen every month from the East Zone. Starting from scratch, he built up overnight facilities at the railroad station, and found room for additional beds in a hotel, a hospital, and the cellar of a bomb-gutted military building.

By 1951 he was able to acquire permanent quarters in a building on the Frankfurterstrasse. There he inaugurated the welfare home called St. Stephanus. It was first used to house homeless boys from the East Zone. It now has additional facilities for old people and a nursing establishment. He has a staff of 50 plus five district social workers who recommend new cases to the home from Upper Hesse.

Caritas is supported by subscription and collections taken in Catholic churches. It is administered through the Mainz Diocese offices. The welfare home, like the Catholic hospital has about 50 per cent Protestant patients.

Itzel asked me to have lunch with him in his room at Caritashaus. We began the meal with some Mass wine. "Very pure," he said, "from Algeria." I asked him whether he ever thought of doing another kind of religious work. "Never," he replied. "I couldn't leave here." We dined on sausage, potatoes, and cabbage from a Church farm up in the country. Itzel drives up to this farm once a week to fetch foodstuffs for Caritashaus. The only thing he has to complain about is the multitude of demands put on him by his jobs. "I can't divide myself into 10 pieces," he said.

Another Caritas establishment is the Catholic Camp Service at the Emergency Refugee Camp across the railroad tracks. It is a combination of aid service, recreation center, and chapel for the 5,000 refugees who stream through Giessen every month.

The Camp Service just moved into an attractive new building at the north end of the camp last month. The building, which included a chapel used by both confessions, was constructed by Caritas.

One of the two young women who share in running the Service is an attractive 17-year-old Dutch girl named Netty van der Ven. A native of Java, Netty came to Holland with her family in 1947. Five years ago, she journeyed with a church group to West Germany to visit a refugee camp. "I went," she said, "and I didn't come back."

This tall, blackhaired girl was so impressed by the fate of the German refugees and returning war prisoners, that she stayed to work in the camps.

Her job is mainly to act as an adviser for the perplexed East Zone refugees. "The people who come from the East come as aliens," she said. "They are questioned exhaustively by the West German authorities. They are nervous. We give them tips on how to answer certain questions. We make a bridge for them."

The Jesuit order has had a commission in Giessen since 1955. The five brothers were sent here by the Diocese to help out with the growing school and village-congregation work of the Church.

The local group, headed by 64-year-old Wilhelm Kohlen, comes from the order's East District of Germany. They were given their walking papers from the Soviet Zone shortly after the war.

Father Superior Kohlen, a flat-headed, sleepy-eyed man with a raspy voice, is a native of Neuss in the Rhineland. He spent most of his life working in Berlin and the East Prussian city of Koenigsberg. He was bounced around in several jails by the invading Russians in 1945, but managed to slip into the West the following year.

The Society of Jesus has had some rough going in Germany. Originating as a counter-Reformation group, it did much to hold the dam against the flood of Lutheranism in Western and Southern Germany during the 16th century. This did not win the hearts of the Protestants. One of the first victims in the Kulturkampf persecution was the Jesuit order, which was banned from Germany in 1872. Not until the turn of the century was it allowed back.

However, the climate in Protestant Giessen after World War II has been friendly to the Jesuits and so far they have experienced none of the old German resentment against their work.

Besides their school instruction and suburban parish work, the Jesuits run workshops for Catholic teachers, lecture on history of religion, work at the Refugee Camp, and help out in Catholic youth work.

This summer the Giessen parish will lay the cornerstone of a new church on the north side of town. The Jesuits are scheduled to take over the future Albertus Magnus Church when it is completed.

Father Kohlen took time out to talk a bit about his church the other day. This is what he said:

"We are not carrying on the counter-Reformation now. We have too many ordinary problems to deal with. One has the feeling the confessions are more sharply divided now than before the war.

"Admittedly, the Catholic Church is monarchically organized. But it is a democracy. After all, Pius X was the son of a letter carrier.

"The duty of each church is to create room for the individual conscience. Man is an individual, but he must remember that he is a part of a community. Christianity seeks to find the balance between the individuality and the community.

"Things are going too well for us in the West. Man gets the idea that anything is possible. This is the great danger. In the East (Zone) they are all working in the service of the chimera of a future paradise. With things going so smoothly here we will be more and more the object of envy from the East. They will want to erase us. This is psychologically interesting, but dangerous.

"The Pope spoke out against nuclear weapons, but he meant it theoretically. It would be hateful if the enemy came at me with a revolver and I had to defend myself with a club."

The synthesis of reactions which I carry away from four weeks with Giessen's Catholics includes these thoughts:

Both laymen and clerics seem to be possessed of intelligence, common sense, and articulateness. And they balance these appealing qualities with a reverence for the sweet mystery of the faith. The Church's hard-driving commercialism in some parts of its American establishment is absent here. And so is the chip-on-the-shoulder attitude.

Seven years ago, Paul Blanshard published his controversial critique, "American Freedom and Catholic Power." The underlying theme of Blanshard's study was the conflict between Catholic and non-Catholic interpretations of "freedom" in the realms of politics, medicine, education, and communications.

Last year, a German Protestant theologian named Walther von Loewenich published a study of the church entitled *Der Moderne Katholizismus* (Modern Catholicism, Luther Verlag, 458 pp., Witten, 1956). Loewenich's thesis is that the Church's interpretations of "truth" often vie with the interpretations of the non-Catholic world. He saw great hope in the rapprochement of the confessions in the *Una Sancta* movement. To him, the Vatican's current emphasis on the celebration of Mary and recent Marian miracles is a slap in the face to those who would wish a rapprochement.

As far as the Giessen scene is concerned - and perhaps with it the German scene - the contemporary problem of the Church seems to me to be more political (ala Blanshard) than spiritual (ala Loewenich). The ordinary Catholic in Germany and other lands has perhaps rationalized the Church's relation to the modern state. But the Church itself has not. No Catholic in Germany is going to be able to do much about that. Because any changes in this direction must come from the Vatican.

David Binder
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