

THE GERMAN CATHOLICS OF
THE UNIVERSITIES (1)

First of all I would like to thank the Executive Committee of Pax Romana and the Chairman for allowing me to address you here to-day and to speak to you about the position in Germany. You know that the German Catholics are not officially represented at this Congress, and I would like to stress the point that my credentials to speak on their behalf consist in nothing but the simple fact that I am a German Catholic myself, and that I was in Germany and in contact with some of the most eminent German Bishops, priests and laymen until the end of 1943.

The theme of our discussion to-day is Relief and Reconstruction. It concerns the tasks, with which Pax Romana will have to deal in the near future. I must, therefore, ask your indulgence if, before talking about what lies before us, I shall refer at some length also to the past. There are two reasons why I should like to do this: first, that if you want to find the remedy, you must first know the disease. The problems of Relief and Reconstruction are thus of necessity to some extent retrospective. Second: Pax Romana will have to decide—and I hope that will be some time soon—whether it is going to re-admit as constituent members German University Federations. Monsieur l'Abbé Gremaud has told me—and I am painfully aware how right he is—that the spirit of Pax Romana has found only very few faithful witnesses among the Germans—students and graduates—and that the great question of the future would be how to make sure about the trustworthiness of any new federations that might be formed. Here too, I suggest, in connection with this particular problem facing Pax Romana in the near future, the past must be taken fully into account, and I would ask you to allow me to give you a brief outline of what these past twelve years have meant to us in Germany—these twelve years of religious persecution, of martyrdom and apostasy, which have inflicted such deep wounds on the body of our Catholic community.

Most of you will have heard the deeply moving account, which Père Riquet gave of his life in Dachau and Mauthausen, and you will remember that he twice referred to the German members of that truly international community of suffering. And I would like to remind you, that most of these Camps in Germany were pre-war foundations, and that before the beginning of this war their inmates consisted exclusively of Germans, of Jews and German political prisoners. And among the latter, there were many Catholics—and their number increased, also proportionately, in every year. It was indeed the usual thing for us in Germany that those, who by the very fervour of their faith attracted the attention and the ill-will of their local Gestapo, would in due course be taken into "pro-

1- An address delivered at the Pax Romana Conference in London, August 27th, 1945.

pective custody" and then be sent off to one of these Camps, where they were meant to rot away, to die from torture or disease, or else to stay until their moral backbone was so thoroughly broken that they would be no longer a "menace" to that grave-yard peace of terror-bound conformity and to that prosperity of rape and plunder, which were the Nazi's solutions of the social and political problems of our age. Let me give you one example: in 1937, the Encyclical "Mit Brennender Sorge" was read one Sunday from all pulpits in the country. So great was the interest aroused by this magnificently outspoken papal letter, that many people—and among them thousands of Protestants—asked for copies, and it fell to the individual Catholics to prepare and distribute duplicates. When the Gestapo got wind of this, they intervened immediately, and one day several hundreds of Catholics were arrested. The charge against them was high treason. At that time, however, the German judiciary was still sufficiently independent to resist the pressure put upon them, and no Court was prepared to hear this preposterous charge. So, after weeks of anxiety and ill-treatment in prison-cells, some of the arrested were released, but only those, whose arrest had created a stir among the general public. The others, and there were hundreds of them, were sent to Concentration-Camps for months and even years.

This, as I say, was the usual thing. It commended itself to the authorities by its simplicity and by the fact that it was, so to speak, extra-judicial, a matter of mere police administration. But there was, apart from this, yet another form of punishment and persecution, and it was used increasingly against the German Catholics: we could be tried and sentenced by the Courts. Again an example: you all remember the famous letters, which the Bishop of Muenster, Count von Galen, wrote to Herr Himmler as Chief of the Gestapo, denouncing the innumerable acts of injustice, violence and murder, which had been committed by the Gestapo against the religious orders, the clergy and the laity in the Bishop's diocese. These letters, which the Bishop himself read out on three successive Sundays from the pulpits of the three oldest churches in his see, were privately copied; and innumerable manuscript reproductions soon went round from hand to hand among the Catholics all over Germany and even in the Occupied Countries. Now in my native town we had three very ardent young priests. They thought that it was their pastoral duty to send these copies also to some of their parishioners who were serving in the army at the front. This was a risky thing to do, since all the letters sent through the army-post were rigidly censored. They knew the risk; they braved it; and they got caught. They were arrested and brought to trial before one of the innumerable "Special Courts" that had been set up mainly for dealing with political offences, and against whose judgment there was no appeal. The charge: high treason. The sen-

tence (a foregone conclusion): death through decapitation. Their Bishop tried to intervene, with no avail. He was not even allowed to see them before the execution, while they were told that he had washed his hands of them. And so they died, true martyrs of the faith, true knights in the cause of justice, of truth, and of liberty, true shepherds of their flock.

I heard this tragic story from the Bishop of Berlin who, in the first six months after Himmler's appointment as Minister of the Interior, had lost in his own diocese more than sixty priests, many of them condemned to death, the rest to anything from five years penal servitude upwards. Life, and especially Catholic life, was so cheap in Germany in those days of the insatiable "Justice of the People", and denunciation was a common-place. Not that we could not practice our faith without immediate danger, not that belief itself was a crime. But to profess it in the face of the open contempt and hostility shown to it by the party-leaders; to defend it wherever its rights were infringed; to obey its commands, even when that meant openly to disobey the orders of authority; to remain loyal to it not only in one's heart and mind, but also in one's speech and action, that was indeed a perilous way of life, which called for the steadfastness and courage of the Confessor Saints.

And where could we get these virtues from, where could we find that clear and concrete direction, that consciousness of a common effort, which are so necessary if these virtues are to be sustained? The Orders, in whose great Abbeys we had formerly come together for discussion and retreats, had been disbanded after sham trials for crimes against the currency-regulations or against morality, or without any juridical proceedings whatsoever; their property had been seized, their monks dispersed or arrested, and their wonderful old churches, in which the very air seemed to be fragrant with the incense of so many centuries of unceasing devotion, these churches were now empty and almost derelict, and the holy symbols which adorned their noble facades were the objects of scorn and derision from the godless and misguided youths, who strutted about the silent cloisters in shameless arrogance. Our religious secondary schools had been closed as early as 1937, and religion itself was banned from the secular curriculum during the war. At the Universities, the Chairs for Catholic Doctrine had given way to Chairs for Racial Biology and Politics. All Catholic newspapers had been suppressed, even the Parish-magazines; all books subjected to rigorous censorship. All Catholic Societies had been disbanded, their leaders murdered, interned, or driven into exile; their funds, and libraries, their buildings and card-indexes had been confiscated. Pilgrimages and Processions were finally prohibited when the war broke out. There was then, in the end, only the parish left as a source of strength and direction, as a rallying point for common endeavour. And there? Even there all associations had been suppressed; the priest had to be silent on the most crucial topics; the

children could not go to instruction since their time was taken up by their duties in the compulsory Hitler-Youth; the church had to be closed until 10 o'clock in the morning after air-raids, so that no employee could go to Mass; the priest was not allowed to visit the hospital, unless a patient had specially asked for him. And then the raids began, and one church after the other was destroyed or damaged, one school after the other laid in ruins; the children were forcibly evacuated into Children's Camps, where grossest paganism was their only spiritual diet; the parishes were disrupted, families were broken up, until in the end there were places where thousands of Catholics were assembled as evacuees or war-workers without one priest and without one church, whereas elsewhere the Church would stand in lofty impregnability amid a vastness of deserted ruins.

These were the conditions in which we lived, we, the German civilians. And for those millions of Catholic men, who served as soldiers in the army, things were far worse. There was, at best, one Catholic Chaplain per division, that is for roughly 15,000 men, of whom at least one half was nominally Catholic. What could this one priest do for them, how could he counteract effectively the undermining influence which the regular courses of Nazi-doctrine at which they had to attend, was bound to have on their minds; how could he prevent their consciences to be blunted by the sight and the contaminous touch of so much evil around them, of so much wanton destruction, of so much savageness and so much immorality?

And it was under these conditions of terror and disruption, that the German Catholics were faced with the most tragic problem that man has ever had to solve: the problem of the two masters, of the conflict between two loyalties. For you, the Catholics from the Occupied Countries, and from the other United Nations, the issue was a fairly straight and simple one: Christianity and Patriotism both pointed in the same direction, and what you did for the first, was in most cases also a service to the latter. For us in Germany, things were less clear. The war in which we were involved, was not simply an enterprise of the Nazi-party, from which we could dissociate ourselves with an easy conscience. It was a national war, national in the sense that our future as a nation was at stake in it. And however much we hated and despised our leaders as the promoters of that godless neo-paganism, from which our Church had already suffered so much and which was still further encroaching upon our Christian rights and liberties, it was not as such that they demanded our obedience, but as the factual leaders of the German people in a national emergency.

Thus, while as Christians we might have wished to oppose them and to bring about their downfall, we were yet, as patriots, obliged to obey their orders and actively to further their national policy. At least this was the way in which the issue presented itself to the

great majority of our German Catholics. Now, I have no doubt that if these two loyalties had been in deadly opposition, if one had excluded the other altogether, and if this opposition had been obvious and clearly perceptible to everyone, I have no doubt that then the German Catholics, and especially the Catholic Students and Graduates, would not have been found wanting. But the Nazis were very careful to avoid at any rate the appearance of such incompatibility. They did not persecute the Church as a whole, only the individual priest and benefier, only one Order, one abbey or convent at a time. They did not proscribe against the faith, they only made it difficult for the individual Catholic to remain faithful. Difficult—not impossible. Thus, for the great majority of the German Catholics, it seemed as if the two loyalties could still to a large extent be harmonized, that they could go to Church and fight for Germany under Hitler, that they could believe in God and obey his commandments and still be bound by their oath of allegiance. This is a very debatable proposition, I fully admit that. But I would still like to submit to the judgment of your charity the suggestion that the German Catholics took up much the same attitude as would have been found with Catholics in any other country, had they ever been faced with this most intricate problem under exactly similar conditions of duress, of physical and psychological terror.

But I must add this: we too had our resisters, our Catholic Opposition, if not a Resistance-Movement. We too had among our Catholics men and women of ardent faith, whose conceptions of right and wrong were more distinct than those of the rest; who saw more clearly what was for the ultimate good of their country and what was not; and in whose hearts the love for truth and for justice burnt with a purer flame. They were among the priests and other prisoners whom Père Riquet met at Dachau and Mauthausen; among the batches of convicts who were executed daily in the courtyards of German penitentiaries; among the people murdered in connection with the abortive Coup d'Etat of July 20th of last year. These men and women saw, as clearly as their fellow-Catholics in Poland, in France, in Belgium and in all other countries of Occupied Europe, that for us Germans too there was only one way; that for us, too, true Patriotism meant, first of all, to be truly Christian; and that only through Christendom could we save ourselves and our country, through the Peace of Christ in a Christian Europe. One day, the story of their fight will be told; that story of frustrated efforts, of vain sacrifices, of unglorified heroism. And I wish that the document in which this story is laid down, could be the epitaph of a past truly dead and buried, buried also in the minds of those who are still among us as living witnesses of its horrors, and on whose readiness to forgive all our future depends.

Let me now turn to the future, and to its most immediate needs: Relief and Reconstruction. I would like to mention here four points which, to us German Catholics, seem to have a direct bearing on these problems.

The first is, that the idea of the Christian Europe which for so long has been no more than a treasured remembrance, has now again become our most fervent hope. There is, however, one great difficulty. For many years now, the great majority of our German Catholics has been excluded so completely from all knowledge of developments abroad and from all participation in the life of the Church as a whole, that to-day they do not know whether this hope is shared by anybody else. Their own experience with godless Totalitarianism has taught them how effectively whole nations can be alienated from the ideal of the Christian Family of Nations. Worse still, they see around them the same pernicious doctrines and practices, to which they were themselves subjected for so long, rear their heads again in arrogant defiance of the laws of God in many other countries. There will be, in the near future, a serious danger, that the German Catholics give up their hope, to which to-day they cling so fervently, and that they will lose confidence in the practical applicability of this sublime idea of the Christian Unity of Europe and of all countries of the European tradition. It is, therefore, urgently necessary—and it seems to me that this necessity should be a special concern of Pax Romana in its work in intellectual relief—that the German Catholics should be helped to realise, that this idea is still, or rather again, most vitally alive all over Europe and America; that it is guiding the efforts of so many sincere and active Catholics abroad; and that it is indeed the only conception on which the delicate structure of European and World-Peace can be built up. It is necessary that they should be enabled to hear and to see, how much, and what precisely, is thought and done among the Catholics everywhere to further and promote this idea; and that eventually, when the German Catholics have worked out what contribution they themselves could make, they should be allowed and indeed be given every opportunity, fully to participate in this great and truly Catholic effort.

The next thing is our anxiety, that the idea which to-day is so much in vogue among people from Western Europe, namely, that the Continent is irremediably involved in a process of partition, of division into West and East with Central-Europe as a sort of no-man's-land in between, that this idea may be here to stay, and that it may gradually be accepted as the only realistic basis for our Catholic work and policy. I need not explain to you why we are so afraid of such a development; the reasons for our fears are all too obvious. But I would like to submit that this idea of a hopelessly divided Continent does not commend itself for adoption by us Catholics. We are, as Catholics, the guardians of certain

fundamental principles of national and international community-life, which regard, and justly so, political combinations based on such things as power, race, or an exclusive political doctrine, as wholly unnatural and therefore bad. We are, moreover, the heirs to the century-old tradition of the Christian Unity of Europe and of all countries of the European tradition. And if we are puzzled and bewildered at the sight of so many real differences between the East and the West, of so much tension and apparent incompatibility between the cultural ideals and political ideologies around which these two regions have at present grouped themselves—then we ought to remember that the principle of unity in Europe was not simply Rome, but the Roman tradition—*traditio et pax romana*—and that means: Rome and Byzantium. Byzantium is still the keynote of the East; and although it may to-day seem overshadowed by the power of Moscow, we have as yet no reasons to suppose that the spiritual strength and resources of Byzantium will be insufficient to absorb and to make more “orthodox” this new type of barbarism. It seems to me then that Pax Romana, by its very name, has an important role to play in the defence of the idea of the Christian Unity of Europe, and that one of its reconstruction-tasks should be to prevent the present tensions and divisions between East and West from becoming, so to speak, institutionalized, too firmly embedded in the minds of Europeans, too readily accepted as a *fait accompli* and as the practical frame into which our future work has to be fitted. Pax Romana should see to it that, whatever reconstruction-work is done in and for the West, is based on that broader conception of the European tradition, which takes into account quite consciously the contribution which Byzantium has always made and which it will yet make in the future if we invite it to do so. And in this connection, I would like to support most emphatically the suggestion made by the Polish delegate, that one of the chief concerns of the Catholic Institute for International Relations should be to study the question of the Reunion of the Churches—or at any rate of their active co-operation; also with regard to the Protestants, since we in Germany will in all probability witness in the near future a vigorous revival of Protestantism to which, as Christians and in view of common interests, we Catholics should be guided to take a positive attitude.

The third thing is, that we in Germany shall need, in the years to come, the continuous, intelligent and concentrated effort of the intellectual laity more than ever before. The hierarchy, the Orders, and the clergy—the two latter being sorely decimated—will be more than fully occupied with the gigantic task of reconstructing the ecclesiastical administration of the country; of rebuilding the more than 10,000 churches that have been destroyed or badly damaged; of repairing, and re-equipping, and restaffing

the schools and other educational institutions. They will have neither time nor strength to cope with the other needs and difficulties that face our Catholic Community. Relief and Reconstruction, both in the spiritual and in the material sphere, will be the responsibility chiefly of the laity. But the laity will only be able to tackle these immense tasks, if it is intelligently guided, and inspired with the spirit of sacrifice and co-operation by a sufficiently large group of exceptionally able and devout men and women. Most of these will have to come from among the Universitarians. And it seems to me of prime importance, that no time should be lost to reconnect the German Catholic Graduates and Students with their fellow-Catholics in other countries, where similar tasks are dealt with, so that they can learn from the experience of others, can copy useful patterns of relief-organisation, and can orientate their own efforts along well-trying and truly Catholic principles. Moreover, the supra-national outlook which they will gain through contact and co-operation with other national University-Federations in Pax Romana will help them to adjust their own ideas about the place which they as German Catholics and Germany as a whole have to take in the great family of Christian Nations; it will enable them effectively to guide the rest of the German Catholics and the whole of the German people in this immensely difficult and supremely important matter of national re-adjustment.

Finally, we German Catholics have a tremendous responsibility to fulfil in the reconstruction of our primary, secondary, and University-education. The degeneration wrought by the doctrines of Nazism has, in this most important sphere of our community-life, been more widespread and more thorough than anywhere else, and the difficulties which we have to face seem almost insuperable. We shall need all possible advice; we shall have to use all possible means and channels of participating in and learning from the similar efforts made by Catholics in other countries; we shall have to ask for generous facilities for our professors and students, and later also for school-children from the higher classes, to visit and to work at Universities and schools in all those countries, in which systems of education are established from which we could learn (I am thinking especially of the college-system in residential Universities and schools, as existing in England and America). Pax Romana would be the most suitable agent, through which we could keep ourselves informed, or re-inform ourselves, about what is successfully established, or being tried out, in other countries. Pax Romana might even help us to facilitate, psychologically and practically, the operations of exchange; the arrangements for scholarships and burses, etc. Through Pax Romana, students and graduates from all countries might be assembled in reconstruction-camps, where they would help to rebuild one or the other shattered University, and at the same time study problems of common in-

terest.

These are four of the most important practical tasks which, from the German point of view, present itself to Pax Romana in its future work of relief and reconstruction. The chief thing, however, on which the success of all other efforts will depend, is to re-establish that mutual trust which is the pre-condition of all sincere and genuine co-operation. And although we, as Germans, may not be justified to claim this trust, it should yet not be denied to us. We may have to be tested; but I am sure that we shall stand the tests, provided that we are given a fair chance. And if I may in conclusion make a very personal reflection, then I would like to say how very fair the chance was that you here have given to me, and I would like to thank you most sincerely for your good-will and for your patience. The proceedings of this Congress, about which I hope to be able to report to the German Bishops, will by virtue of the spirit of love which animated them and all those present, be like a message of hope to the German Catholics.

DR. ERICH M. VERMEEREN.

NOTICE.

The Archbishop of Birmingham has given his approval for a "Catholic People's Week" to be held under the auspices of the Association for Catholic People's Colleges at University House, Edgbaston Park Road, Birmingham, 15, from December 29th to January 3rd.

The main object of the "week" is to discuss the possibility of founding Catholic People's Colleges for Residential Adult Education.

The inclusive fee is £4.6s. 0d., payable at Birmingham on December 29th. Please apply at once to:

R. F. Trevett, 1 Bellevue, Wilton, Taunton,
Somerset.