

The Private Conscience and Legitimate Authority

188

by Gordon Zahn

Let me begin with a joke, a rather grim joke attributed to a popular Bavarian folk comedian named Weiss Ferdl. It seems that he would innocently inform his Munich audiences that the Nazi regime had just opened a new camp at nearby Dachau, and he would proceed to describe the elaborate security measures taken there – the armed guards, the dogs, the encircling rings of barbed and electrified wire. And then, when he felt the moment was right, he would deliver the punch-line: ‘But no matter what they do, they can’t keep me out if I really make up my mind to get in’.

It takes nothing away from the thousands who did ‘get in’ to Dachau or from the millions who ultimately peopled the other camps like Dachau to state the obvious fact that the great majority of individuals in Nazi Germany did not ‘make up their minds to get in’ but, quite the contrary, did what they were told to do so that they might be sure of staying out.

This obvious fact led many to embrace the doctrine of ‘collective guilt’ that was so popular as World War II drew to its close with the total collapse of Hitler’s ‘Thousand Year Reich’. This was the time when the question of the form of peace would take was already engaging the attention of the political and intellectual leaders of the Allied World. The prevailing tone was one of stern vindictiveness. The enthusiasts of the so-called Morgenthau Plan in America had their counterparts in the followers of Vansittart in England. The defeated Germany was to be reduced to the permanent status of a pastoral nation, forbidden ever again to develop an industrial potential. Popular writers gave even more drastic expression to the ‘punish-the-Teutonic-beast’ line. It was the moment before the unconditional surrender that had already cost so much in blood and sacrifice. One might say that these expectations of a thoroughly Carthagian peace was the logical extension of the thinking that had given birth to so questionable a military goal in the first place.

To their undying credit, there were some voices raised in protest against the nonsense with which these vicious proposals were clothed, the thesis that Germans *as a people* were collectively responsible for the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazi regime. In the long run, these voices prevailed.

The vindictive ‘responsibility of the whole German people’ thesis – though it did play some part in the early stages of the Occupation

(especially in the somewhat indiscriminate 'de-Nazification' and overly strict 'non-fraternization' policies) – was soon abandoned. It was reflected, perhaps, in the *tone* if not in the formal proceedings of the Nuremberg trials; but whatever other criticisms may be made of these trials, the judgments passed there were directed against individuals and not against any national collectivity as such.

Maybe it was a natural reaction to these early excesses, but by some irony of fate later events and changes in attitudes have since brought us to the point where this 'responsibility of peoples' issue has been reversed and turned inside out. Instead of demanding that *all* Germans be forced to accept the responsibility (and pay the penalty) for the Nazi actions, the prevailing idea today – and, indeed, for some time now – is that *no* Germans (other than Hitler, of course, and the others sentenced by the victor court at Nuremberg) are to be held responsible for them; that, moreover, it is bad taste to suggest that individuals who served Hitler in any lesser capacity can, or should, be criticized for doing so.

Guilt and Obedience

This new attitude, I submit, is just as wrong and even more dangerous than the old. The 'responsibility of peoples' issue of 1945 was, in essence, a kind of retaliatory racism that would ultimately lose its hold on the minds of reasonable men. The new formulation, however, is based on something that appears far more reasonable and is, therefore, much less likely to disappear of its own accord. I refer to the exaggerated notion it incorporates of the proper scope of state authority and the quality of obedience to be required of the individual citizen.

The whole issue found its clearest statement in the defence offered by Adolf Eichmann, in particular in his statement to the court after it reached its verdict: 'I did not *will* the murder of human beings. This mass slaughter is *solely* the responsibility of the political leaders. *My guilt lies in my obedience* . . . Obedience is praised as a virtue, and *I would therefore request that my having obeyed be the sole fact that is taken into account*'. The words and phrases I have emphasized represent the essential points in the general defence that has been advanced – and accepted! – in far too many instances involving direct and active complicity in Nazi programmes and policies.

In Eichmann's case, the offences with which he was charged were so gross that it was unthinkable that they could actually be covered by the mantle of 'virtuous action', but others have fared much better than he. We had the case of General Heusinger, a man who served as master planner for Hitler's military aggressions. Not only was his slate wiped clean, but he was later appointed to one of the most responsible military posts in the NATO military establishment. Attempts to build him up as one of the background figures in the July 20 plot against Hitler were not too convincing. Under the

circumstances, the best explanation for the clean slate he was given is that he had been cleared of responsibility for his actions and their consequences, that his only guilt was found to lie in his obedience to his superiors.

One of the closest advisors of former Chancellor Adenauer, Dr Hans Globke, was charged with similar complicity in Nazi evil. His major contribution seems to have been his work in connection with the codification of the Nuremberg racial laws – which laws, be it remembered, had more than a passing importance for the programme of harassment and persecution of Jews which was to culminate in that same ‘Final Solution’ for which Eichmann was put to death. But all the protests issued by Adenauer’s political opponents on this score were turned down on the grounds that the work Globke did was not willed by him but by his political superiors. In fact, his defenders went further and insisted that, had Globke not taken on the job, someone else would have taken his place and worked with greater enthusiasm towards the shameful goal. Thus, not only is he not to be held accountable for the work he did on the racial laws, but he is to be thanked for keeping some more fanatic Nazi out of so important a post.

There is no intent here to stir old resentments or to suggest that these men and the others all along the line who directly and actively supported the Nazi regime out of too automatic or too extensive a spirit of obedience should now be called to justice and punished. To do this would serve no instructive purpose. One might even argue that the Eichmann trial was a failure in this regard; for by focusing attention upon this one man and convicting him of the horrors of the extermination camp, we tended to lose sight of the far more important question of *the frame of mind* – and the ethical and theological principles which have produced and still maintain that frame of mind – which permits any individual to rationalize his personal conformity to and even participation in unjust actions or regimes.

In a moving essay entitled ‘Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and the Hopes of Mankind’, a German writer strips this question to its bare essentials.¹ Horrible as the totals were, he insists that the real horror of the extermination camps is not to be read in the calculations of how many people were burned by other people over how long a period in how many ovens operating for how many hours a day. The arithmetic loses all significance, he feels when confronted with the other facts: that human beings designed those ovens for this specified purpose; that business men contracted to produce and deliver the poison gas; that workmen who must have had some knowledge of what they were doing built the ovens; that doctors, with full knowledge, selected the victims; that locomotive engineers drove the transports to their awful destination; that soldiers guarded

¹Christian Geissler writing in *Werkhefte*.

these transports to prevent escape. And all with some knowledge of what was going on.

But this author does not stop there. Instead, as his title suggests, he parallels this with a blazing indictment of all who knowingly participated in or contributed to the atrocities at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What Auschwitz and Hiroshima have in common, he declares, is the proof they offer of a frightful human capacity for 'justified' inhumanity. '*Any* mind which can formulate justifications for the wholesale liquidation of men, that mind is corrupt.' – and he immediately adds the dismal, but probably accurate, judgment that 'This corruption is general'.

Geissler's solution, wherein he sees the 'hopes' for mankind', is a restoration of the ideal of individual responsibility under which the demand is made of every individual that he renounce for himself (and reject for others) those easy loopholes that have served so well in the past: the escape through the formal justification of what is substantially unjustifiable; the escape into a sense of resignation and helplessness; the escape into a rationalization in terms of some more exalted ideals of duty and sacrifice.

Certainly such a restatement of individual responsibility need not, and should not, fail to allow for the operation of human weakness and the effect of outside pressures and controls; but such allowance must never be permitted to extend to the point where explanation and understanding become confused with excuse and justification.

Few of us are prepared to accept the full implications of this admittedly rigid definition of the responsibilities of the individual citizen. For one thing, it is generally accepted that the individual is helpless before the massive power of the state and, therefore, cannot be held responsible for its decisions. Every now and then someone does break the pattern, however, and he usually reaps a harvest of notoriety for his pains – whether as a newsworthy curiosity or, if the matter is deemed more serious, as a dangerous radical.

Several years ago, for instance, an American attorney (a Republican no less!) won nationwide notice for refusing to sign a state loyalty oath on the grounds that he could not commit himself in advance to support a regime of the extreme left (or right) which might conceivably come to power and which he would feel obliged in conscience to oppose. This was a most interesting case, especially when we consider the number of well-intentioned Germans who refused to take part in resistance activities because of the oath of allegiance they had sworn to Hitler and his regime.

More dramatic refusals, like the recent draft card burnings by young men protesting against the war in Vietnam, might encounter more stringent reprisals; yet even these are seldom treated in terms of the broader principles to which the objectors are trying to testify.

Theologians on Responsibility

The indifference, scorn, or retaliation stirred by such acts of dissent and disobedience are, I am sorry to say, supported by the traditional theological definitions of the citizen-ruler relationship offered by our major religious communities. Since all authority is seen to originate in God, the authority of the secular ruler has been divinized to the point that he can command the obedience of the citizen as a *moral* obligation. This may not hold, of course, when the act commanded is certainly immoral – but here, too, there is a convenient escape-hatch which combines recognition of one's 'limited access to all the facts' with the proviso that one is to give the 'presumption of justice' to the state where doubt is present. Is the citizen perhaps troubled by the form of government or by the obviously irreligious or openly anti-religious behaviour of its leaders? Then let him remember that all forms of government are morally indifferent and that the sinfulness of the evil ruler does not free the citizen from his obligation to render him obedience. The dice are always loaded in favour of 'legitimate authority', and the faithful are assured that whatever actions they perform out of obedience in good faith will be viewed as meritorious and any evil that may be involved will be charged against those who gave the orders.

This necessarily condensed statement of the traditional moral teachings concerning the nature and scope of civil responsibility will, I am confident, be supported by the standard moral guidance handbooks. One may take some hope in the recent discussions of Schema 13 in which Abbot Butler and other distinguished Fathers of the Vatican Council registered their dissatisfaction with the traditional formulation; but we must also remember that there were others, Cardinals Florit and Spellman to mention only two, who were equally vocal in its support.

That the formulation has served – and still serves – as an active guide to individual behaviour is clearly illustrated by the support given by both major Christian communities to Hitler's wars and by the indignant reaction I (and others) have received for suggesting or implying that such support should not have been given. It is not possible to go into this issue to any great detail at this point, but one specific example of how it relates to the topic under discussion might be offered.

Franz Jaegerstaetter

In 1943 an Austrian peasant was beheaded in Berlin for his refusal to serve in a war that he, as a Catholic, believed to be unjust. While still contemplating the prospect of such a refusal and its certain consequences, he had sought moral guidance from local priests to whom he often turned for spiritual direction and, finally, from his bishop. After his arrest he was attended by a succession of chaplains serving the various prisons in which he was held pending trial and

execution. All gave him the same answers – and they followed the pattern I have described. He was to quiet his doubts; he was to remember that he was not responsible for the actions of the secular ruler; he had no basis on which to reach a judgment as to the justice or injustice of the war; his only responsibility was to fulfill his obligations to his family and to his nation.

Even more significant is the fact that these same advisers would give him the same advice today under the same circumstances. In fact, in the case of the bishop, I learned that he intervened personally, and twice, *after the war was over*, to block publication of what he felt were over-laudatory accounts of the peasant's action: prudent care must be taken, he insisted, lest that action be presented as a model for others to follow. To the bishop's mind, 'the greater heroes' were the men who fought and died in fulfilment of their duties as citizens, even as the early Christians had fought and died in the armies of Imperial Rome.

Recently, of course, this man has been presented to the Vatican Council as just such a 'model' in a written intervention submitted by Archbishop Roberts. I can also say that he was finally honoured by his home diocesan paper on the twentieth anniversary of his execution – and I take some pride in the probability that this was due to the fact that I had prepared a book about this case of modern martyrdom (*In Solitary Witness: the Life and Death of Franz Jaegerstaetter*).²

That this peasant and his spiritual leaders were Catholic is purely incidental. I have no doubt but that the same course of events would have taken place if he had been a Protestant. After all, Pastor Niemoeller, for all his heroism as an opponent of the Nazi regime, did volunteer from his concentration camp to resume his World War I military service at the outbreak of war in 1939.

The time demands a thorough re-assessment by all our Churches of the relevance of these traditional theological formulations in a world of nations no longer governed by 'the Christian prince' (if, indeed, they were ever relevant), a world which has experienced totalitarian forms of government which leave no room for the preservation of the essential rights and dignity of the person. Of course all authority comes from God; but now that we have learned how easily the authority exercised by man can be abused and how disastrous are the effects of that abuse, we need a moral theology which would require that every exercise of this authority be exposed to the test of the enlightened moral conscience of the individual subject to it.

In a sense, such a rule is what we have already applied to Eichmann in rejecting his plea – and I am sure it would have been rejected even if people believed it to be sincere – that he was only doing his duty and performing the tasks assigned to him by his

²Holt, Rinehart and Winston Ltd. New York 1965

'legitimate authority'. Why, then, is it so hard to apply the same rule to the locomotive engineer and the train guards who took their orders from him? Why should it not apply to those responsible for the incineration of hundreds of thousands of victims at Hiroshima? . . . or for the calculated and 'allowed-for' spoilage or destruction of life associated with atmospheric nuclear tests (whether in Siberia or Christmas Island in the past, or in Outer Mongolia and the French Sahara today)? . . . or for the virtually unimaginable price we are apparently willing to contemplate and pay should our elaborate facade of 'deterrence' crumble and leave us with the reality of the nuclear war for which we are preparing? The next time we shudder in horror over the toll taken by the Nazi extermination camps, let us give some thought to the nuclear optimists in America (and their supporters here) who are somehow able to take comfort in the fact that an all-out nuclear war would probably destroy 'only' 17 millions of their own countrymen – or, extended to a world-wide calculation, 'only' 700 million lives!

The general tendency is to dismiss these as academic estimates of the probable effects of something that could never happen. I am not so sure. We must always remember that, however, satisfactory its ultimate outcome may have been, the American-Soviet confrontation over Cuba did find one of the major nuclear powers at least ready to pursue a course of action which specifically included the possibility of escalation into full-scale nuclear war.

There are, of course, differing degrees of responsibility. The men who make the plans, give the orders and press the buttons bear a greater share of the guilt than do those who merely help make it all possible by paying the taxes or who do nothing more than add their applause from the sidelines as the parade goes by.

But all – even those who contribute nothing more than their prudent silence in the face of policies and actions which trouble their consciences – must bear some share of the responsibility. To this extent, the point made in that controversial play, *The Representative*, is quite valid: those who remain silent in the face of evil cannot escape some share of the guilt for that evil.

Competence to Decide

Objection to this admittedly harsh formulation of the problem may take the form of the familiar escape from responsibility by reason of ignorance or, as it is usually expressed, by reason of 'limited access to all the relevant facts'. Nor can it be denied that this is an important consideration. In fact, once we make allowance for the innumerable ways in which the ruling authority can and does manipulate, distort and even suppress essential facts to suit its purpose, this objection takes on even more compelling validity. In America we have heard it proclaimed from a very responsible level of governmental authority that a government has 'an inherent right to lie to save itself'. And,

as we have seen far too often, this 'right' can be, perhaps usually is, exercised against its own citizens!

It would seem to follow, then, that the more the ruling authority does assume control over the dissemination of news, even to that point of outright falsification, the more difficult it will become for the individual to form a correct conscience about co-operating with that government's policies. Yet instead of permitting the individual to make a *carte blanche* suspension of moral judgment, this situation constitutes no more than an argument in favour of being ready to forgive in charity the mistakes he can, and will, make because he acted upon such inadequate and even distorted information. It should certainly not reduce in the least the obligation of each to seek out all the facts that are available and to form his own responsible judgment on the basis of those facts. If anything, it should make him seek all the harder for such facts and fill him with a healthy tendency to view with cautious suspicion the superficial accounts of the situation offered him by his government in its official releases or in obviously 'inspired' stories in the press.

In other words, if the citizen does make a wrong judgment because those in authority have blocked his access to the true facts, then and only then would it be permissible to assign responsibility for his actions to those superiors. This is a vastly different interpretation from the one usually advanced in which the citizen tries to load the responsibility for his personal actions on the shoulders of the ruler by a general 'presumption of justice'.

As a sociologist, I am aware that the kind of behaviour I propose is quite out of keeping with the present state of our society and culture. It is not a characteristic of 'the organization man' to feel competent to make his own decisions in the more crucial areas of social concern. The 'other-directed man', to switch to Riesman's typology, is not at all prepared to take a stand against those 'others' who direct his behaviour by defining for him the values which should apply in each particular situation.

Nor have the social sciences stopped at discovering and describing the characteristics of our age of conformity; they have gone beyond this and developed an insidious technology by which that conformity can be intensified and manipulated. There are already some who speak in glowing terms of new utopias to be created through the technical mastery of human psychology and the development of appropriate social controls.

The matter is urgent, but before we can even hope to stop or reverse this trend two things are essential. The first is a clear re-affirmation of faith in the competence of the individual to decide for himself the moral licitness of actions he is ordered to perform or asked to support. The other follows from this: having such competence, he must recognize his personal responsibility to make such a decision – regardless of the consequences such behaviour may bring.

The Austrian peasant and the countless others who met their death because they could not, in good conscience, duplicate the patterns of conformity and obedience displayed by the Heusingers and the Globkes (not to mention the locomotive engineers, the train guards, and the sales representatives for the manufactures of Cyclon B) offer undeniable proof that man is capable of developing such competence and exhibiting such responsibility. In this, the same tragic era which plumbed the depths of human depravity in the acts for which Eichmann has been brought to judgment also provides us with the hopeful vision of the heights to which the human spirit can rise. It merely remains for us to read its lesson.

The lesson was spelled out for us by that same peasant in a remarkable little essay on 'irresponsibility' written in pencil in the pages of an ordinary exercise book. In it he offered as 'a little example' the hypothetical case of two men, each performing substantially the same political services for the Nazi Reich. One believed in the Movement and thought that what he did was right and proper; the other rejected the Nazi ideology and its goals and policies and unjust. Yet the latter considered himself the 'better' of the two simply because he did not share the other's commitment to National Socialism. It remained for this simple peasant to grasp a truth that eluded much more sophisticated men: in his eyes, the non-Nazi actually earned a greater measure of guilt for his actions; for he had the full awareness that what he was doing would be more likely to produce evil than good – whereas the other saw nothing wrong and honestly regarded his work as the performance of a meritorious duty. 'Naturally', the peasant observed, 'the words sound sweet to our ears when we are told that the responsibility is borne by others', but, as his own subsequent acts were to prove, he did not find those sweet assurances convincing.

The Risks of Responsibility

There are serious problems involved in what I am proposing here, and it would not do to ignore them or play down their significance. For one thing, it is, of course, a frank invitation to dissent and even disobedience in that it encourages the person who would go against the stream and, at the same time, calls for a restraint born of respect on the part of the majority. It is easy enough to praise the commitment evinced by my peasant in his refusal to serve in what he considered an immoral war – or by his counterpart in many respects, the young man burning his draft card before the television cameras; it becomes more difficult to permit the misguided supporter of the American (or English) Nazi Party, or the racist in the Ku Klux Klan, who is also 'convinced in conscience' of the 'moral rightness' of his stand to see it as his duty to speak out.

This is a risk we must recognize, and one which I think we can take without too much concern *if* we are all willing to get up on the

same soapbox and speak our piece. This implies, I confess, a rather romantic confidence that the evil and false, however appealing it may appear, cannot in the long run win out over the good and the true in an open battle of minds. Even where history is called to the test and seems to disprove my optimism, I would answer that the defeats recorded there are more likely due to the unwillingness of the supporters of truth to take an active part in the ideological competition of the market place of opinion than to the superior appeals of the enemies of that truth. All too often the champions of the good and true have tried to win the ideological struggle by suppressing discussion instead of winning the debate with the force of better arguments and deeper commitment.

It should not be necessary to stress at this point the special role to be played by our religious communities and the other institutions charged with the preservation and transmission of those values we hold to be objectively good and true. As far as the Christian Church in particular is concerned, this may mean (and I believe it would mean) that it must again become a 'church of prophecy' thundering its protest against every real or potential threat to the moral order it was created to serve and extend, so that its believers may form their civil and social consciences accordingly.

More than this. The recognition of a man's competence to reach his own moral judgment and the alert safeguarding of that competence by actively promoting the Christian value system is only part – and probably the easier part – of the whole task. Along with this must go a new recognition of personal responsibility to act according to such moral judgments in the manner exhibited in the life and writings of that Austrian peasant. In other words, this is to say that it may even be necessary for the Christian Church to become once again a 'church of martyrs'.

This brings us to an even more serious problem involving the place of prudence in all of this and, especially, the demands of what some have called 'the morality of vocation'. We need not pause too long on the distortion of prudence which is so often used to justify compromise or silence as a means of avoiding unpleasantness, hardship, or sacrifice. But prudence in the right sense, that is, as the virtue governing the choice of appropriate means to achieve a desired end is something quite different. One might argue, for instance, that a man holding professional status and influence that can be exploited to oppose some evil or advance some good might have to temper or even refrain altogether from some action that would deprive him of that status and influence. In my own case, if I may descend to the personal, I am sorely troubled by the fact that the taxes I pay are devoted in part to policies and weapons I consider immoral; yet, were I to refuse to pay these taxes, the opportunities I have to lecture and write against those same policies and weapons would be lost (or, at best, severely diminished). Balancing the two together, I have

thus far (and I emphasize that qualification) come to the conclusion that it is better to continue paying the taxes.

No one knows better than I that this is the same kind of reasoning that led many sincere Christians to remain silent under the Nazis or, even worse, to continue to hold responsible posts under that infamous regime. But I think it is false to exclude this morality of vocation from consideration on that account. Rather, we must set forth certain limiting conditions, which, if applied, can act as 'firebreaks' between permissible compliance and censurable collaboration.

The first and most obvious condition is that the time or the freedom thus purchased must be put to the use claimed. This means that the evil must be opposed by all the means available to the individual; it is not enough to take comfort, as so many did, in knowing that one is 'inwardly' dissatisfied with things as they are. Some effort must be made to change the situation, even if it is no more than expressing this dissatisfaction to one's friends and close associates. In a more democratic order than Nazi Germany's, much more would be required needless to say.

By the same token, the contribution one is forced to make as a price for continuing some degree of effective opposition must be involuntary and indirect. Planning military aggressions and codifying immoral racial legislation would obviously not meet this requirement. Finally, this same contribution, even though involuntary and indirect, must not outweigh the amount of effective opposition one can reasonably expect to register.

Disturbing the Consciences

All this is to say is that there are lines to be drawn, and each individual must recognize his obligation to draw these lines and to draw them according to his best judgment of his moral responsibilities. Much more has to be done in developing this notion of a 'morality of vocation', but its unfinished state should not be our excuse for avoiding the uncomfortable decisions that must be made by each of us alone. Nor can any of us (except, perhaps, those who make the heroic total refusal of that Austrian peasant) ever be fully satisfied with the lines we have drawn. They must always be tested and retested with each new challenge or opportunity that is presented to us.

In one sense this applies to the whole of our social behaviour. Certainly it applies to the question of Christian responsibilities and race as it has developed in my country in the past – and as it is developing here in the present. But the issue closest to my heart remains the issue of war and peace and the extent and quality of the obedience the state may legitimately require of the citizen.

My book analyzing the support given by German Catholics to Hitler's wars³ has been relevant to this, I feel, in two important ways. First, in the documentation it provides: statement after statement

³*German Catholics and Hitler's Wars*, Sheed and Ward, 1962.

issued by German bishops called for the kind of obedience to legitimate authority (in this case Hitler) which I consider uncritical and excessive. The second body of evidence, perhaps much more significant, is the reaction the book provoked in some quarters.

For example, a prominent German Catholic editor took issue with my suggestion that the Austrian peasant might serve as a model of the behaviour that should be expected of a Catholic ordered to fight in support of an unjust war – or, at least, of a war he is convinced in conscience is not just. According to this editor, the Church may never place demands upon its members which might alienate great numbers of them and drive them from the altar; nor, he went on, could bishops take a stand which would endanger the continued operations of the Church as an institution by provoking or risking retaliation on the part of state authority.

One man's opinion? I am afraid not. Consider the unnamed 'council expert' who was quoted by the Rome correspondent of one of our New York papers as saying: 'We don't encourage vocations for martyrdom. To prevent this the church will make almost any adjustment'. Both of these men, I submit, seem to have missed an essential (perhaps *the* essential) point of the Christian revelation; but I suspect that both of them have caught the true spirit of what usually passes for Christianity in our conformist age.

A reviewer of my book⁴ reflects a similar approach and in a manner more closely related to my topic here. Noting my position that if the German bishops had access to information necessary to the proper formation of the individual Christian conscience regarding service in the Nazi war effort, they would have had an obligation to pass it on to the faithful, he disagreed saying:

That seems doubtful. If the bishop felt that through such communication the conduct of his flock – heretofore materially sinful – would now, because of a lack of heroic courage, commonly become formally sinful, why should the formed conscience be disturbed?

Why indeed? If German Catholics sincerely believed that it was their Christian duty to destroy 'enemy' cities and sink 'enemy' ships and kill 'enemy' soldiers, why 'trouble their consciences' by giving them information which might have caused them to reflect that this 'Christian duty' might actually constitute murder, just as such a violation of the Fifth Commandment as euthanasia and the extermination of the Jews?

We simply cannot wash our hands clean of all responsibility so easily just because we are given orders and choose to obey them. We must not permit ourselves, like the salt which has lost its savour, to lose our Christian identity and purpose in what we see as a 'prudential' surrender to the temptations of conformism and accommodation.

⁴John Coogan, S.J. in the *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*.

In *Pacem in Terris*, John XXIII put it most clearly. 'In social relations', he wrote, 'man should exercise his rights, fulfill his obligations and, in the countless forms of collaboration with others, act chiefly on his own responsibility and initiative'. Twenty years earlier, that simple peasant in Austria had put this principle into dramatic practice. And in one of the writings he left behind, he gave explicit affirmation of his belief that, even under Hitler's totalitarian regime, there is always something that the individual can do.

Admitting that for someone to speak out in Hitler's Germany 'would only mean imprisonment and death' and that any effort to change the course of world events, 'should have begun a hundred or even more years ago', he wrote, 'But as long as we live in this world, I believe it is never too late to save ourselves and, perhaps, some other souls for Christ'. He, too, was concerned about the tendency to run along with the crowd, and he asked:

Does one then not want to see Christians who are still able to take a stand in the midst of darkness in deliberate clarity, calmness, and confidence; who, in the midst of tension, gloom, selfishness, and hatefulness stand fast in perfect peace and cheerfulness; who are not like the floating reed which is driven here and there by every breeze; who do not merely watch to see what comrades or friends will do but only ask themselves 'what does our faith teach us about all this?' or 'can the conscience bear all this so easily that one will never have to repent of any of it?'

This, of course, is the question each of us will have to answer for himself. Like Thomas Merton,⁵ I am concerned that 'at the present moment' the United States (and her allies) and the Soviet Union (and hers) are committed to what he called 'a policy of genocide' in their commitment to nuclear deterrence. Since Merton's article appeared, the unjust war in Vietnam has added tragic new dimensions to the problem. The conclusion Merton drew at that time might well be taken as his answer to the peasant's question:

If we co-operate in these activities we share in the guilt they incur before God. It is no longer reasonable or right to leave all decisions to a large anonymous power elite that is driving us all, in our passivity, towards ruin. We have to make ourselves heard. Christians have a grave responsibility to protest clearly and forcibly against trends that lead inevitably to crimes which the Church deplors and condemns.

That, I think, would have to be my answer, too. But I would add this slight change: unless we reduce Merton's plural to the singular – unless the 'we' is converted by each and every Christian into the responsible 'I' – we are going to fail this test, just as the German Catholics under Hitler failed theirs.

An earlier version of this paper was published in *Commonweal*, Vol. LXXXVI, No. 1 (30th March 1962).

⁵'Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility,' *Commonweal*, 9th February 1962.