

Nazi Pope Ignores War/Holocaust

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What About the War, Benedict?

Pope Benedict XVI arrived in the U.S. last week against a macabre backdrop featuring reports of torture, execution and war. He chose not to notice.



God bless hypocrisy

Fresh reporting by ABC from inside sources depicted George W. Bush's most senior aides (Cheney, Powell, Rumsfeld, Ashcroft, Rice and Tenet) meeting dozens of times in the White House during 2002/03 to sort out the most efficient mix of torture techniques for captured "terrorists."

When initially ABC attempted to insulate the president from this sordid activity, Bush abruptly bragged that he knew all about it and approved. That comment and the action memorandum Bush signed on Feb. 7, 2002, dispelled any lingering doubt regarding his personal responsibility for authorizing torture.

Execution: Meanwhile, the U.S. Supreme Court, with a majority of judges calling themselves Catholic, was openly deliberating on whether one gram, or two, or perhaps three of this or that chemical would be the preferred way to execute people.

Always colorful prominent Catholic layman Antonin Scalia complained impatiently, "Where does it say in the Constitution that executions have to be painless?"

Scalia did not seem at all concerned that the Pope might remind him and his Catholic colleagues about the Church's teaching on capital punishment, i.e., the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity "are very rare, if not practically nonexistent." (Evangelium Vitae 56).

It was enough to bring this student of German history (and five-year resident there) vivid memories

of frequenting those places where precisely these kinds of torture and execution policy reviews were conducted at similarly high levels by Hitler's inner circle -- yes, including judges.

War: Can the Pope possibly be so suffused with his peculiar brand of theology that he is oblivious to what happened when he was a young man during the Third Reich?

Is it possible that papal advisers forgot to tell him that the post-WWII Nuremberg Tribunal described an unprovoked war of aggression, of the kind that the Third Reich and George W. Bush launched, as the "supreme international crime, differing from other war crimes only in that it contains the accumulated evil of the whole?"

Could they have failed to tell the Pope he would be hobnobbing with war criminals, torturers and the enabling cowards in Congress who refuse to remove them from office?

For this Catholic, it was a profoundly sad spectacle -- profoundly sad.

Not since WWII, when the Reich's bishops swore personal oaths of allegiance to Hitler (as did the German Supreme Court and army generals) have the papacy and bishops acted in such a fawning, un-Christ-like way.

With very few exceptions, the bishops (Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran) collaborated with the Nazis. Meanwhile, Hamlet-like Pius XII kept trying to make up his mind as to whether he should put the Catholic Church at some risk, while Jews were being murdered by the thousands.

Albert Camus

In 1948, in the shadow of that monstrous world war, the French author/philosopher Albert Camus accepted an invitation from the Dominican Monastery of Latour-Maubourg.

To their credit, the Dominicans wanted to know what an "unbeliever" thought about Christians in the light of their behavior during the '30s and '40s. Camus' words seem so terribly relevant today that it is difficult to trim them:

"For a long time during those frightful years, I waited for a great voice to speak up in Rome. I, an unbeliever? Precisely. For I knew that the spirit would be lost if it did not utter a cry of condemnation ...

"It has been explained to me since, that the condemnation was indeed voiced. But that it was in the style of the encyclicals, which is not all that clear. The condemnation was voiced and it was not understood. Who could fail to feel where the true condemnation lies in this case?

"What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out, loud and clear, and that they should voice their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could rise in the heart of the simplest man.

"That they should get away from abstraction and confront the blood-stained face history has taken on today.

"It may be ... that Christianity will insist on maintaining a compromise, or else on giving its condemnations the obscure form of the encyclical. Possibly it will insist on losing once and for all the virtue of revolt and indignation that belonged to it long ago.

"What I know -- and what sometimes creates a deep longing in me -- is that if Christians made up their mind to it, millions of voices -- millions, I say -- throughout the world would be added to the appeal of a handful of isolated individuals, who, without any sort of affiliation, today intercede almost everywhere and ceaselessly for children and other people." (Excerpted from *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Essays*)

Sixty years ago!

Perhaps the Dominican monks took Camus seriously; monks tend to listen. Vatican functionaries, on the other hand, tend to know it all, and to urge the Pope to be "discrete."

You saw that this past week with the Pope in Washington and New York, as he forfeited the opportunity to follow the biblical injunction to speak truth to power -- to speak out clearly, as Camus suggested, with moral authority.

Catholics all around

Think back to last week and all the prominent Catholics who flocked to see the Pope -- many of them officials with considerable influence in the judiciary and legislature, with some important players in the executive branch as well.

There they were, with their families, the five Catholic Supreme Court justices, fresh from detailed deliberations on how best to implement state-sponsored killings, executions that are banned by virtually every civilized country.

Justice Scalia audibly salivated over how much noxious chemical should be shot into the veins of a "condemned," and how quickly. (For those with strong stomachs, C-SPAN captured the proceedings.)

I am embarrassed to acknowledge that, like me, Scalia is the product of a Jesuit education (Xavier H.S. in Manhattan and Georgetown College). Despite his advocacy of "soft" torture techniques like driving nails under fingernails, Scalia continues to be lionized by many Jesuits and bishops alike.

In the House? Speaker Nancy Pelosi, erstwhile doyenne of the Archdiocese of Baltimore and now San Francisco, and minority leader John Boehner, R-Ohio -- Catholics both -- are about to allocate another hundred billion dollars to death and destruction in Iraq and Afghanistan for the most reprehensibly crass of political purposes -- the coming election.

Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., last week tried to guild the lily, noting that Pelosi now insists that, in McGovern's words, "We're an equal branch of government; we're no longer a cheap date." Right.

Sadly, it appears that Pelosi's key functionaries on House Appropriations (both of them Catholics) will cave in once again.

It is not as though they do not know the right thing to do. Just six months ago, Appropriations chair Dave Obey, D-Wisconsin, declared, "I have no intention of reporting out of committee anytime in this session of Congress any such [funding] request that simply serves to continue the status quo."

Subcommittee chair John Murtha, D-Pa., put it even more strongly a year before Obey did, and came close to calling the occupation of Iraq a lost cause -- which, of course, it is. But it is not politic to say that before the election. Never mind the troops on the front lines.

Obey and Murtha caved last time. I will find it particularly devastating if Obey caves again now, for I have always considered him among the best legislators in Congress.

And since he is from Wisconsin, Obey recognizes better than others the McCarthy-ite demagoguery coming from the likes of Texas Republican Michael Burgess, to the effect that anything short of giving the president all the war funding he demands is "basically giving aid and comfort to the enemy."

Pelosi also has been unusually candid in admitting that it is electoral politics, pure and simple, that explain her resistance to holding President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney accountable for high crimes and misdemeanors via the orderly procedure given us by the Founders for precisely this purpose -- impeachment in the House, trial in the Senate.

If, as widely expected, the war funding goes through, several hundred more American troops are likely to die before some common sense can be injected into U.S. policy next year -- not to mention how many Iraqis.

Iraq is a shambles. Two million Iraqis have fled abroad; another two million are internal refugees. Am I the only one who finds macabre the raging debate as to whether the attack and occupation of Iraq has resulted in a million or "only 300,000" Iraqis dead?

Apparently, the Pope did not have any opinion on the Iraq War.

But torture?

Surely the Pope would speak out against the kind of torture for which our country has become famous: Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, CIA "black sites" -- the more so, since Jesus of Nazareth was tortured to death.

The Pope chose silence, which presumably came as welcome relief to four-star torturer's apprentice Gen. Michael Hayden, now head of the CIA.

The White House has made clear that Hayden is ready to instruct his torturers to waterboard again, upon Caesar's approval.

Hayden proved his mettle when he was head of the National Security Agency. He saluted smartly when the president and vice president told him to disregard the Foreign Intelligence and Surveillance Act and his oath to defend the Constitution.

One of Hayden's predecessors as NSA director asserted that Hayden should have been court-martialed. Pelosi was briefed both on the illegal surveillance and the torture, but did nothing.

Having demonstrated his allegiance to the president, Hayden was picked to head the CIA. The general likes to brag about his moral training and Catholic credentials. At his nomination hearing, he noted that he was the beneficiary of 18 years of Catholic education.

All the while it was quite clear he was positively lusting to be in charge of waterboarding and other torture techniques -- whatever you say, boss.

I was somewhat crestfallen after adding up my own years of Catholic education -- only 17. Clearly I missed "Enhanced Interrogation Techniques 301."

Keep it general, focus on others' sins

Saturday at the U.N., the pontiff pontificated on "God-given human rights" and "massive human rights abuses," but pretty much left it at that. The Washington Post reported that the Pope was "short on specifics and long on broad themes."

But there was one specific. Here in the U.S., the Pope seemed to prefer to dwell on the pedophilia scandal -- to the exclusion of much else. He is to be applauded for meeting with victims of clergy sexual abuse and expressing deep shame, but he got a free pass from the media in disguising his own role in trying to cover the whole thing up.

While still Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he headed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith -- the Vatican office that once ran the Inquisition. In that capacity he sent a letter in May 2001 to all Catholic bishops throwing a curtain of secrecy over the widespread sexual abuse by clergy, warning the bishops of severe penalties, including excommunication for breaching "pontifical secrets."

Lawyers acting for the sexually abused accused Ratzinger of "clear obstruction of justice."

Very few American bishops have been disciplined. And when Bernard Cardinal Law was run out of Boston for failing to protect children from predator priests, he was given a cushy sinecure in Rome; many believe he should be behind bars.

In an interview with the Catholic News Service in 2002, Ratzinger branded media coverage of the pedophilia scandal "a planned campaign ... intentional, manipulated, a desire to discredit the church."

It is nice that the Pope has now changed his tune. Nicer still for him, he found himself mostly in the congenial atmosphere of Washington, where very few powerful miscreants are held accountable.

So what did you expect?

I do wish my friends would stop asking me that.

While it was good that the Pope addressed the pedophilia issue head on, it seemed as though he made a decision to devote time and energy to the issue.

The side benefit, of course, was being able to speak in glorious generality on other major issues -- war, torture, capital punishment -- in all of which, as we have seen, many of "the faithful" are deeply engaged -- embarrassingly engaged.

I had hoped -- naively, it turned out -- that the Pope might encourage his brother bishops to find the courage to state plainly what 88 bishops of the Methodist faith, George W. Bush's tradition, declared on Nov. 8, 2005:

"We repent of our complicity in what we believe to be the unjust and immoral invasion and occupation of Iraq. In the face of the United States administration's rush toward military action based on misleading information, too many of us were silent.

"We confess our preoccupation with institutional enhancement and limited agendas while American men and women are sent to Iraq to kill and be killed, while thousands of Iraqi people needlessly suffer and die."

I thought that perhaps the U.S. Catholic bishops could adopt the kind of resolution that 125 Methodist bishops signed on Nov. 9, 2007. It called for an immediate withdrawal of troops from Iraq and the reversal of any plans to establish permanent military bases there.

The Methodist bishops' resolution noted: "Every day that the war continues, more soldiers and innocent civilians are killed with no end in sight to the violence, bloodshed, and carnage." And Bishop Jack Meadors summed up the situation nicely:

"The Iraq war is not just a political issue or a military issue. It is a moral issue."

Holocaust museum in Jerusalem

Visiting Yad VaShem, the Holocaust museum in West Jerusalem last summer, I experienced painful reminders of what happens when the church allows itself to be captured by empire. An acquiescent church, it is clear, loses whatever residual moral authority it may have had.

At the entrance to the museum, a quotation by German essayist Kurt Tucholsky set a universally applicable tone:

"A country is not just what it does -- it is also what it tolerates."

Still more compelling words came from Imre Bathory, a Hungarian who put his own life at grave risk by helping to save Jews from the concentration camps:

"I know that when I stand before God on Judgment Day, I shall not be asked the question posed to Cain: 'Where were you when your brother's blood was crying out to God?'"

According to former President George H. W. Bush, George W. has "read the Bible straight through -- twice." Perhaps he skipped by that passage too quickly; or maybe he is highly selective as to whom he considers his brothers.

No excuse for Benedict, though; he knows better. And yet he opted to squander his glorious chance to speak out and make a difference.

Methodist Bishop Meadors is right; the war is a moral issue. But President Bush has refused, time and time again, to meet with his Methodist bishops. And now he has the imprimatur of the Pope.

The bottom line is challenging: to the degree that right and wrong, moral and immoral considerations are to be injected into discussions about war, executions, torture -- well, let's face it. There is only us.

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