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Sociologist compares today's crisis to Nazi smear campaign

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 17, 2010 NCR Today

tPerhaps the most remarkable defense of Benedict XVI and the Catholic Church vis-à-vis the sexual abuse crisis to appear in recent weeks ironically never mentions the current pope, and it comes not from a senior Vatican official but a lay Italian sociologist of religion. In a nutshell, the suggestion ? never made explicit, but clear nonetheless ? is that today?s drumbeat of criticism of the church over ?pedophile priests? amounts to a replay of a Nazi smear campaign.

Massimo Introvigne, who directs the international Center for Studies on New Religions, published an essay in the April 16 edition of *L?Avvenire*, the official newspaper of the Italian bishops, about a Nazi campaign in 1937 led by Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels to discredit the Catholic Church following Pope Pius XI?s anti-Nazi encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*. Introvigne argues that Goebbels created what sociologists would later call a ?moral panic,? based on real facts, but facts which are distorted and amplified.

In the end, Introvigne says, the plan backfired ? Goebbels? attempt to smear the church generated more outrage than actual cases of sexual abuse in 1930s-era German Catholicism, which were reported in the German media and tried in German courts.

The following is an *NCR* translation of Introvigne?s essay, the Italian original of which may be found here: http://www.avvenire.it

Goebbels and the pedophile priests operation

In 1937 the Nazi propaganda minister organized a campaign to discredit the Catholic Church in response to the encyclical ?Mit brennender Sorge.? The head of the German military?s counter-espionage unit, Wilhelm Canaris, passed the documents to Pius XII.

By MASSIMO INTROVIGNE

t?There are cases of sexual abuse that come to light every day against a large number of members of the Catholic clergy. Unfortunately it?s not a matter of individual cases, but a collective moral crisis that perhaps the cultural history of humanity has never before known with such a frightening and disconcerting dimension. Numerous priests and religious have confessed. There?s no doubt that the thousands of cases which have come to the attention of the justice system represent only a small fraction of the true total, given that many molesters have been covered and hidden by the hierarchy.?
t
tAn editorial from a great secular newspaper in 2010? No: It?s a speech of May 28, 1937, by Joseph Goebbels (1897-1945), Minister of Propaganda for the Third Reich. This speech, which had a large international echo, was the apex of a campaign launched by the Nazi regime to discredit the Catholic Church by involving it in a scandal of pedophile priests.

tTwo hundred and seventy-six religious and forty-nine diocesan priests were arrested in 1937. The arrests took

place in all the German dioceses, in order to keep the scandals on the front pages of the newspapers.

tOn March 10, 1937, with the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*, Pope Pius XI (1857-1939) condemned the Nazi ideology. At the end of the same month, the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda headed by Goebbels launched a campaign against the sexual abuses of priests. The design and administration of this campaign are known to historians thanks to documents which tell a story worthy of the best spy novels.

tIn 1937, the head of the counter-espionage service of the German military was Admiral Wilhelm Canaris (1887-1945). He became gradually anti-Nazi, and at the time was maturing the convictions which led him to organize the failed assassination attempt against Hitler in 1944, following which he was hanged in 1945. Canaris disapproved of Goebbels? maneuver against the Church, and instructed a Catholic lawyer named Josef Müller (1878-1979) to carry to Rome a series of highly secret documents on the subject.

tIn different phases, Müller ? before he was arrested and sent to the Dachau extermination camp, where he survived, and later became the post-war Minister of Justice in Bavaria ? carried the secret documents to Pius XII (1876-1958), who asked the Society of Jesus to study them.

tWith the approval of the Secretary of State, the study of the Nazi plot against the Church was entrusted to the German Jesuit Walter Mariaux (1894-1963), who had inspired an anti-Nazi organization in Germany called ?Pauluskreis.? He was later prudently sent as a missionary in Brazil and in Argentina. There, as leader of the Marian Congregation, he exercised his influence over an entire generation of lay Catholics, among whom was the noted Brazilian Catholic thinker Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira (1908-1995), who attended his group in São Paulo. In 1940, in London in English and in Argentina in Spanish, Mariaux published two volumes on anti-Catholic persecution by the Third Reich under the pseudonym ?Testis Fidelis.? They contained over seven hundred pages of documents with comments, which aroused great emotion in the entire world.

tThe expression ?moral panic? was only coined by sociologists in the 1970s to identify a social alarm created as a kind of art, accomplished by amplifying real facts and exaggerating their numbers through statistical folklore, as well as ?discovering? and presenting as ?new? events which in reality are already known and which date to the past. There are real events at the base of the panic, but their number is systematically distorted.

Even without the benefit of modern sociology, Goebbels responded to the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* in 1937 with a textbook case of the creation of a moral panic.

tAs always in moral panics, the facts are not totally invented. Prior to the encyclical there were some cases in Germany of abuse of minors. Mariaux himself considered a religious in the school of Bad Reichenall guilty, as well as a lay teacher, a gardener and a janitor, who were condemned in 1936, although he believed that the sanction imposed by the Ministry of Public Instruction in Bavaria ? revoking the authorization to run scholastic institutes of four religious orders ? to be entirely disproportionate, and he linked it to the desire of the regime to undercut Catholic schools. Also in the case of the Franciscans of Waldbreitbach, in Rhineland, Mariaux was open to the hypothesis that the accused were guilty, although later historians have not excluded the possibility that they were framed by the Nazis.

tThe cases, which were few, but real, produced a very strong reaction from the episcopate. On June 2, 1936, the Bishop of Münster ? Blessed Clemens August von Galen (1878-1946), who was the soul of Catholic resistance to Nazism, and who was beatified in 2005 by Benedict XVI ? had a declaration read at all the Sunday Masses in which he expressed ?pain and sadness? for these ?abominable crimes? that ?cover our Holy Church with ignominy.? On August 20, 1936, after the events at Waldbreitbach, the German episcopate published a joint pastoral letter in which they ?several condemned? those responsible and underlined the cooperation of the Church with the tribunals of the state.

tBy the end of 1936, the severe measures taken by the German bishops in reaction to these very few cases, some of which were doubtful, seemed to have resolved the real problems. Submissively, the bishops also pointed out that among teachers in the state schools and in the very youth organization of the regime, the Hitler Youth, the cases of condemnations for sexual abuses were much more numerous than among the Catholic clergy.

tIt was the anti-Nazi encyclical of Pius XI that led to the great campaign of 1937. Mariaux proved it publishing highly detailed instructions sent by Goebbels to the Gestapo, the political police of the Third Reich, and above all to journalists, just a few days after the publication of *Mit brennender Sorge*, inviting them to ?reopen? the cases from 1936 and also older cases, constantly recalling them to public opinion. Goebbels also ordered the Gestapo to find witnesses willing to accuse a certain number of priests, threatening them with immediate arrest if they didn?t collaborate, even if they were children.

The proverbial phrase ?there?s a judge in Berlin,? which in German tradition indicates trust in the independence of the court system from the political power of the moment, applied ? within certain limits ? even in the Third Reich. Of the 325 priests and religious arrested after the encyclical, only 21 were condemned, and it?s all but certain that among them some were falsely accused. Virtually all of them ended up in extermination camps, where many died.

tThe effort to discredit the Catholic Church on an international scale through accusations of immorality and pedophilia among priests, however, did not succeed.

tThanks to the courage of Canaris and his friends, and to the persistence of the Jesuit detective Mariaux, the truth was already out during the war. The perfidy of the campaign of Goebbels aroused more indignation than the eventual guilt of some religious. The father of all moral panics in the area of pedophile priests blew up in the hands of the Nazi propagandists who had tried to organize it.

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