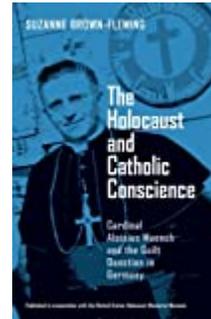


**Suzanne Brown-Fleming.** *The Holocaust and Catholic Conscience: Cardinal Aloisius Muench and the Guilt Question in Germany.* West Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. xii + 240 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-268-02187-0.



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### **Collective Guilt, Collective Responsibility, Collective Denial**

On June 2, 1945, shortly after the end of hostilities in Europe, Pope Pius XII gave a radio address praising millions of Roman Catholics who had not, in his mind, forsaken the basic teachings of the Catholic Church under the oppressive tactics of the National Socialist regime. He placed Catholics in a group with other victims of Nazism's murderous ideology and refused to condemn all German Catholics because of the "crimes of the few" (p. 18). Because he was the head of the Catholic Church universal, Pius's radio address was highly significant, for it set the tone for Catholic leaders everywhere. After its broadcast, it was clear that Pius had rejected the then-current view of collective guilt and collective responsibility for the German people. Following his lead, German bishops and cardinals reiterated his rejection of these concepts. Suzanne Brown-Fleming's book shows that it was not only German church leaders who adopted such views. Aloisius Cardinal Muench was an American Catholic Church leader who not only actively rejected collective guilt and collective responsibility for Nazi crimes but who also vehemently participated in a postwar culture of collective denial.

Brown-Fleming's work traces the ways in which Muench's career laid the basis for such denial. As a key member of the Catholic Church hierarchy, Muench played a formative role in fostering the early postwar environment for German Catholics. During the war years, Muench had written numerous critiques of the evils of Nazism, but he also was careful to differentiate between ruling Nazi officials and ordinary German citizens. In the uncertain atmosphere of a divided Germany and with the rise of the cold war, he became an ideal candidate to serve as papal emissary to Germany. He believed, much as Pius argued in his radio address, that the mass of German Catholics were not perpetrators of or even bystanders to Nazi criminal acts. Muench remained convinced that most German Catholics were, in fact, victims of Nazism. Between December 1945 and August 1946, he penned a critical Lenten pastoral letter, "One World in Charity." This text, which appeared in various versions over the following years, established Muench as a sympathetic and understanding leader among German Catholics.

Most of the book is focused on the content and re-

ception of the text, which has long been ignored by most historians. "One World in Charity" first appeared in North Dakota during Lent 1946, but excerpts were quickly disseminated in America and abroad, even without Muench's approval. In it, Muench stated what many German Catholics longed to hear: that they had remained true to the teachings of the Catholic Church and were, therefore, not responsible for crimes carried out in Germany's name. Moreover, it compared the postwar conditions of German POW camps with those in wartime concentration camps and ghettos. Calling upon the highest Catholic principle, charity, Muench argued that it would be colossally hypocritical to deny basic necessities to the conquered, defeated peoples of Germany: "What is terrible beyond all words, however, is that by a cold, calculated policy of revenge, suffering and death are brought upon millions of people, for the most part persons who are not responsible either for the outbreak of the war or its horrors.... Why must they suffer bitterly and die wretched deaths just because some policy-makers in top-levels have revived the Mosaic idea of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth?" (p. 143). Rejecting vengeance, Muench encouraged his audience to extend true charity to suffering Germans. If readers wanted to build "One World," then "[i]t will never be built by those who hate, and hating take their inspiration from the hard teaching of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. It will have to be built by those who believe in Christ's law of love. They shall be the builders of One World in Charity" (p. 144). This pastoral letter established Muench's reputation as a staunch pro-German Catholic Church leader. His writings also brought a great deal of comfort to German Catholics who could read in "One World" that true love of mankind belonged to followers of Christ, while followers of Judaism's teachings were depicted as lacking the capacity for true charity. This document portrayed German Catholics as victims of Nazism, denying reality: that many German Catholics had supported much of Nazism's ideology.

Even after Muench joined the College of Cardinals in Rome in 1959, he continued to enjoy the status of a beloved figure among German Catholics. His pastoral letter, along with his work with the Allied Occupation authorities and as a papal representative in Germany, furthered Pius's June 1945 message. Muench consistently rejected the notion that German Catholics needed to examine their consciences to see whether they had truly fulfilled the teachings of the Church. He absolved them of collective guilt and collective responsibility and instead provided them with a ground for denying their responsibility and seeing themselves as victims. Many German Catholics were thus encouraged not to see the full picture of the Catholic experience under Nazism—that cases of Catholic complicity in Nazism and indifferent to the fate of the persecuted stood side by side with Catholic resistance to and victimization under National Socialism. His work allowed many German Catholics to avoid questioning whether they had actually behaved as he now suggested they should: "Charity is world-wide in its scope; knows neither walls nor frontiers; is not race conscious; asks not who is friend or foe; is color-blind, inquiring not what is the tint of the skin of a person in need. Under its sway all men are brothers under the fatherhood of God and in the brotherhood of Christ. Men want to build one world in peace. It can be done, but it must be done in charity—One World in Charity" (p. 147). Brown-Fleming argues quite effectively that attitudes such as those espoused by Muench and so many others in the Catholic hierarchy gave rise to a culture in which German Catholics could deny involvement in Nazi criminality, thus providing fertile ground for Catholic denial.

Brown-Fleming has provided historians with a thoughtful reminder that leaders of the American church shared in the shaping of post-World War II German Catholic memory.

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