

SINISTER ANNIVERSARY

The rise of Hitler 90 years ago and the price paid by Catholics

POLITICS

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Guido Villa



30 January 1933, is a decisive date in German and European history of the 20th century. It marks the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Reich Chancellor and the seizure of power of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* -

NSDAP). Hitler benefited from the crossed vetoes between the previous Chancellors von Papen, Brüning, and von Schleicher and was chosen to form a new government as an 'interim solution' pending a further and final showdown between these three politicians. Hitler was considered harmless, especially as his party would only occupy three ministries (Frick at the Interior, Gürtner at Justice, and Göring Minister without Portfolio and Special Commissioner for Prussia); However, he controlled the heart of the state and of Prussia, the most important Land, and took advantage of this to organise new elections that were no longer free because they were characterised by unprecedented violence provoked by the Nazi paramilitary formations, the *Hitlerjugend* and the SA (*Sturmabteilungen*), a true state terrorism that guaranteed the NSDAP 43% of the votes and a predominant position in Parliament, bringing about the consequent end of the Weimar Republic and democracy in Germany.

The German Catholic Church understood well the danger of National Socialism

and had already banned Catholics from joining Hitler's party in 1930. Even the former Apostolic Nuncio in Germany and Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, had said that he was not against a provisional alliance between the two German Catholic parties (the *Bayerische Volkspartei* in Bavaria and the *Deutsche Zentrumspartei* in the rest of Germany) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) to stem the National Socialist danger - a very courageous position at the time, as the SDP was a Marxist party to all effects and purposes, but which indicates how well Pacelli understood the very serious threat posed by National Socialism.

After winning the elections on 5 March, Hitler stood in Parliament, and in his programme declaration of 23 March, he clearly expressed his intentions, including those with reference to the Christian religion. On this occasion, the Chancellor affirmed, among other things, that the German Reich recognised itself in 'Positive Christianity', that the executive saw in the Christian denominations important factors for the preservation of the German national character, and hoped for a "sincere collaboration between Church and State", so as to implement the struggle against a materialistic world view and the re-establishment of a true community of the people". Recognition of the validity of the Concordats signed by the Holy See with the Länder of Bavaria, Prussia, and Baden was followed by the assurance that in education and training the Christian denominations would be granted "the influence they deserve". In a threatening tone, Hitler also stated that he expected the Church to appreciate "the work of moral and national uplift that the government had set itself". Moreover, the government itself could not tolerate "that membership of a particular denomination or race could represent an exemption from duties sanctioned by law, or carte blanche for crimes

committed to go unpunished or to be tolerated”.

The Catholic bishops viewed these words positively, and as a first concrete gesture of appreciation towards the new Reich Chancellor, they lifted the ban on membership of the NSDAP. With hindsight such condescension appears puzzling - so-called 'positive Christianity' had already been condemned by the bishops' statements in 1930 as representing a pseudo-Christianity adapted to National Socialist ideology. Moreover, granting the Churches the “influence they were entitled to” was an outright mockery, since according to Hitler the Churches in the public sphere were not entitled to any rights, especially if the Churches did not appreciate the regime's intention to form a community of people based on race and blood.

The bishops used to fighting against Communism, which made no secret of its radical opposition to Christianity, and firmly convinced of the concept of 'deutsche Treue' (German loyalty), trusted Hitler's words and were deceived by his smokescreens, convinced that as a result of this declaration the model of collaboration between regime and Catholic Church existing in Italy could be replicated. These illusions were not shared by the Holy See, and in June 1933 Cardinal Secretary of State Pacelli decided to bring the negotiations to a conclusion and sign a Concordat with the now National Socialist-led Germany at least to salvage what could be saved, without, however, having any illusions about the government's compliance with the treaty.

According to the Austrian envoy to the Holy See, Rudolf Kohlruss, in fact, Vatican diplomacy not only reiterated Catholicism's radical opposition to National Socialism, but was also certain that Hitler would not respect the Concordat and that difficult times of persecution awaited Catholics. Without fail, this began right from the start: the *Hitlerjugend* and the SA attacked the local clergy and Catholic associations, and immediately after signing the Concordat, the violence culminated with the squads' attacks on the participants of the *Gesellentag* (periodic meeting of the members of the Catholic German workers' associations founded by Blessed Adolf Kolping) in Munich in June 1933.

In the following years, the situation degenerated to such an extent that in 1937, the Cardinal Archbishop of Munich, Michael von Faulhaber, one of the bishops who had initially failed to grasp Hitler's real intentions, spoke of outright persecution by the regime against Catholicism in Germany. A few months later, Faulhaber himself drew up a draft document, which eventually, after some additions made by the Secretariat of State, took the form of Pius XI's well-known encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* (With deep anxiety).

After the initial disorientation caused by Hitler's falsely reassuring declarations, it was the Catholic Church that took over the reins of resistance to National Socialism in Germany. The Catholic Church did not act politically, but fought by strenuously attacking the heart of the regime represented by the national-socialist *weltanschauung* as theorised by the *Reichsleiter* of the NSDAP, Alfred Rosenberg, and was the factor that prevented the creation of a community of people based on race and blood, thus making a fundamental contribution to the defeat of national-socialism.

But, the Catholic clergy paid a very high price for this resistance. According to data published in 2020 by the University of Greifswald, 310 German priests were interned in concentration camps, of whom 65 died during their imprisonment or shortly after their release, while another 36 were executed or murdered in other circumstances; 790 priests were arrested (this figure does not include those who ended up in concentration camps), of whom 644 were sentenced to prison terms. In addition, 1510 priests were fined, 6593 interrogated, 855 had their rectories attacked and in three cases (Würzburg in 1934, Rottenburg in 1938 on several occasions, and Munich in 1939) even the bishop's curias were attacked by Hitlerjugend and SA in what were veritable anti-Catholic crystal nights. Finally, 419 Catholic priests were beaten up and 1006 suffered searches.

Appalling figures, which make even more strident the contrast with today's German Catholic Church, amenable to what the world wants and eager to conform to it, in this way betraying the sacrifice of so many of her sons who suffered and gave their lives during the years of the Third Reich to defend the Catholic faith and immortal souls.