



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

F – 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain

February 11, 2007  
Our Lady of Lourdes

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

**J**ULY 1941. The German Third Reich was at the height of its power. Hitler had just unleashed an attack on the U.S.S.R., and it seemed nothing could stop the Wehrmacht. It was then that a German bishop decided to raise his voice against the massive euthanasia of the mentally ill, which had just been decided on in Berlin. Sixty thousand people had already been rounded up to be discreetly eliminated in extermination camps. Bishop Clemens August von Galen was not under any illusions; he knew that if he spoke up, he risked arrest and execution as an “enemy of the German people.” He spoke up nevertheless, starting the very next Sunday, from the pulpit of his cathedral. This courageous pastor, who would be called the “Lion of Münster,” was beatified on October 9, 2005.

### *Noblesse oblige*

Clemens August was born on March 16, 1878 in Dinklage Castle, in the diocese of Münster (in Westphalia, western Germany). He was the eleventh of thirteen children of count Ferdinand Heribert von Galen and his wife Elizabeth. Life in Dinklage was primitive—no heat or running water. But this austere upbringing was enlivened by an ardent Catholic faith. The family attended daily Mass and the countess taught her children the catechism herself. She taught them to imitate JESUS CHRIST and to regard this life on earth as a preparation for eternal life. In this aristocratic family, which had been in Westphalia since the thirteenth century, participation in public affairs was a tradition. For thirty years, Ferdinand von Galen had been a member of the imperial parliament, representing the *Zentrum* Catholic party. For him as for all the family, this was not a privilege but a responsibility : *noblesse oblige*.

Clemens August did most of his studies with the Jesuits in Feldkirch. In October 1897, during a retreat at the Abbey of Maria Laach, he heard God’s call to the priesthood. After completing theological studies in Innsbruck, he was ordained a priest by the bishop of Münster on May 28, 1904. In 1906, he was sent to Berlin, a diocese with a shortage of priests, where he carried out various pastoral ministries. During the financial crisis of 1923 that ruined millions of German families, Father von Galen went to great lengths to assist his parishioners in trouble, and established a mutual aid association for them. He often helped the neediest by drawing on his personal income. “It would be truly pointless,” he used to say, “if I still had anything after my death.” In all things, his ultimate goal was the salva-

tion of souls. The thought of eternal life, which was ever present to him, would be the unshakable foundation for the battles he would have to fight.

At the beginning of 1929, Clemens August was called back to Münster to be pastor of the church of Saint Lambert there. Seeing a certain lukewarmness, in 1932 he published a brochure, “The Plague of Secularism and its Manifestations,” in which he vigorously exhorted the laity to fight against the secularization and dechristianization of society. Germany was undergoing a very serious crisis. On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was named Chancellor. Clemens August had no confidence whatsoever in the head of the NSDAP (the National-Socialist, or Nazi, Party), whose doctrine and violent methods had been condemned by the German bishops. However, Hitler, who needed Christians, courted them. On July 20, 1933, a concordat was signed between the Holy See and Germany. Pope Pius XI had no illusions at all about Hitler’s sincerity, but he wanted to try, by signing the treaty, to preserve some liberty for the Catholic Church. Von Galen fully agreed with this strategy. Nonetheless, on April 3, during the Mass to install the city council of Münster, before a congregation that included a number of Nazi dignitaries, he spoke of the two foundations of Christian social order : justice and brotherhood.

The diocese of Münster had been vacant since January 1933. On July 18, the cathedral chapter unanimously elected Father von Galen after two other priests had recused themselves, one for reasons of poor health, the other out of fear of difficulties. In his first pastoral message, the new bishop commented on his motto *Nec laudibus, nec timore* to the 1.8 million members of his

diocese : “ *Neither the praise nor the fear of men will keep me from transmitting the revealed Truth, from distinguishing between justice and injustice, between good and evil actions, nor from giving advice and warnings whenever necessary.* ”

A very tall man, Bishop von Galen was unaffected and warm in his private life, but full of majesty when he celebrated pontifically. He loved the processions in which the Church could, with religious pomp, oppose the neo-pagan mystique of Nazi demonstrations. In 1934, the bishop condemned a work by Alfred Rosenberg, *The Myth of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. The official ideologue of the Nazi party exalted German blood as the source of a superior humanity to be built through vital strength. In his pastoral letter for Lent 1934, the bishop of Münster called this doctrine “ the devil’s deception ” and reminded his readers that only the Precious Blood shed by JESUS CHRIST on Calvary had the power to save us, because it was the Blood of God made man. This stance excited the enthusiasm of the Catholics of Westphalia. The bishop repeated it the following year, proclaiming, “ We cannot fail to profess that there exists something higher than race, people, or nation—the all-powerful and eternal Creator and Lord of peoples and nations, to whom all peoples owe fidelity, adoration and service. He alone is the final end of all things. ”

### ***The roots of Christianity***

The bishop of Münster’s attitude was unequivocal in the face of the persecution of the Jews. As a priest, he had never blamed the Jews for Germany’s difficulties. In denouncing, from 1934 on, the exaltation of the “ Aryan race ” at the expense of other races, he refused any legitimacy to anti-Semitism. As a bishop, he missed no opportunity to point out that Christianity is rooted in the religion of Israel. He preached that the duty of fraternal charity extends to all men, whatever their race or religion. After the pogrom of November 9-10, 1938, *Kristallnacht*, “ the Night of Broken Glass, ” during which the Münster synagogue was set on fire by the police, Bishop von Galen offered his help to the wife of the city’s rabbi, who had been put in jail. After the rabbi was freed a few days later, he gave up the idea of intervening, so as not to make the Jews’ situation worse.

Hitler’s regime wanted to secure a monopoly on the education of youth by suppressing religious education, which at that time was mandatory in all schools. The bishop of Münster successfully opposed this suppression, basing his arguments on Article 21 of the Concordat of 1933. In November 1936, the Minister of Education in Oldenburg (north of the diocese of Münster) demanded that all crosses and religious insignia be removed from schools and public buildings. This measure triggered a veritable “ crusade ” of ser-

mons, prayers, and petitions to keep the crosses, initiated by Bishop von Galen. In the end, the *Gauleiter*, or Nazi political governor, of Oldenburg was forced to withdraw the proposed measure, to avoid more trouble.

From 1933 to 1937, the Holy See protested forty-four times against violations of the Concordat. In the face of the uselessness of these efforts, the Cardinal Secretary of State Pacelli (the future Pope Pius XII) called to Rome five German bishops, including Bishop von Galen, for consultation. Then, on March 14, 1937, the Pope published an encyclical in German, titled *Mit brennender Sorge* (“ With Burning Concern ”). In it, Pius XI condemns the deification of people and race. The encyclical was immediately published by the bishop of Münster in his diocesan newspaper. In the greatest secrecy, he had 120,000 copies of the encyclical printed, which was 40% of the total the Church would manage to distribute in Germany. On Sunday, March 21, every parish priest, by order of the bishop, read this text from the pulpit during High Mass. The Gestapo ( the political police ), caught by surprise, took their revenge with retaliation. Nevertheless, the encyclical evoked a favorable echo in Protestant circles. Bishop von Galen then conceived a plan to form a common front of all German Christians against Nazi neo-paganism, which would be fought on a larger field, the defense of the natural rights of the human person—the right to life, to integrity, to religious freedom, to follow one’s conscience, and the right of parents to educate their children.

### ***Against the pagan school***

At the start of 1939, the Nazi powers felt the moment had come to suppress all denominational teaching and all religion courses in schools. On February 26, in his cathedral, filled to overflowing, the bishop of Münster asked all the members of his diocese to vigorously protest, with a petition, “ the pagan school. ” In response to his call, tens of thousands of people signed the petition, thus risking their security, their property, and even their lives. On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, provoking France and England to declare war. Bishop von Galen, far from echoing the warmongering propaganda, prescribed that his faithful pray for the country and for peace, ending with the wish that “ all peoples be given the chance to live in the security of peace in justice and liberty. ”

Beginning in the second half of 1940, measures to persecute the Church followed one after another : churches could not open before 10 A.M. because of the “ danger of aerial attacks, ” many priests were arrested and deported, and monasteries shut down and their occupants expelled. Bishop von Galen felt the urgent duty to raise his voice. After a moment of interior struggle, on July 13, 1941, he gave in his cathedral the first of

three great homilies that would go around the world. After condemning the expulsion of monks and nuns, he protested the despotic regime and the terror that reigned, and demanded justice. The following Sunday, he exhorted his people to stand firm in the face of persecution. "Like the anvil that does not lose its strength despite the violence of the hammer's blows, the prisoners, the outcasts, and the innocent exiles receive the grace from God to maintain their Christian strength, when the hammer of persecution strikes its harsh blows and inflicts unjustifiable wounds on them."

### ***Defending the "unproductive"***

Soon thereafter, in his August 3 sermon in his cathedral, Bishop von Galen denounced the massacre of the mentally ill. He exclaimed, "These are men and women, our neighbors, our brothers and sisters! Poor ill human beings. Maybe they are unproductive,... but does that mean that they have lost the right to live?... If one adopts and puts into practice the principle that men are entitled to kill their unproductive fellows, then woe to all of us when we become aged and infirm!... Then no man will be safe: some committee or other will be able to put him on the list of 'unproductive' persons, who in their judgment have become 'unworthy to live.' And there will be no police to protect him, no court to avenge his murder and bring his murderers to justice. Who could then trust his doctor? He might decide that a patient is 'unproductive,' condemning him to death! One cannot even imagine the moral depravity, the universal mistrust that would spread even in the bosom of the family, if this terrible doctrine is tolerated, accepted, and put into practice. Woe to man, woe to the German people, if the divine commandment, *Thou shalt not kill*, which the Lord gave at Sinai amid thunder and lightning, which God our Creator wrote into man's conscience from the beginning, if this commandment is not only violated, but violated with impunity!"

Alas, euthanasia did not disappear with Nazism. It is practiced in many countries today. Its legalization is demanded in the name of the "right to die with dignity." Pope John Paul II gave the following judgment on euthanasia: "Here we are faced with one of the more alarming symptoms of the 'culture of death,' which is advancing above all in prosperous societies, marked by an attitude of excessive preoccupation with efficiency and which sees the growing number of elderly and disabled people as intolerable and too burdensome. These people are very often isolated by their families and by society, which are organized almost exclusively on the basis of criteria of productive efficiency, according to which a hopelessly impaired life no longer has any value... I confirm that euthanasia is a grave violation of the Law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person. This doctrine is

based upon the natural law and upon the written word of God" (Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, March 25, 1995, nos. 64-65).

### ***Fetal euthanasia***

What is more, many human beings today are killed even before their birth by "fetal euthanasia," on the pretext that, according to medical examinations, they run the risk of having a serious handicap. "It not infrequently happens," wrote John Paul II, "that [prenatal diagnostic] techniques are used with a eugenic intention which accepts selective abortion in order to prevent the birth of children affected by various types of anomalies. Such an attitude is shameful and utterly reprehensible, since it presumes to measure the value of a human life only within the parameters of 'normality' and physical well-being, thus opening the way to legitimizing infanticide and euthanasia as well" (*Evangelium vitae*, no. 63). Parents are often pressured by doctors who want to force them to abort in order to avoid the birth of a handicapped, or possibly handicapped, child. The doctors themselves are threatened by lawsuits if they allow an "abnormal" child to be born. These facts reveal the hold that the eugenic mentality has on our society, a mentality not unlike that of the Nazis. As Pope Benedict XVI has underscored, the Nazis were guided by "an ideology which valued only the empirically useful; everything else, according to this view, was to be written off as *lebensunwertes Leben* - life unworthy of being lived" (Speech at Auschwitz, May 28, 2006). Parents and doctors must not allow themselves to be unduly influenced, but must place their trust in God and remember that every human being, created in the image of God and called to live in His divine life for all eternity, possesses an inviolable and sacred dignity.

Bishop von Galen's homily against euthanasia was secretly published and widely distributed both in Germany and abroad. It earned its author a reprimand from Goering who accused him of "sabotaging the German people's strength of resistance in the middle of war, with his diatribes and pamphlets." Hitler considered having the bishop who dared resist him hanged, but Goebbels advised him to wait until after the final military victory, to avoid provoking unrest in Westphalia. However, about 40 priests from the diocese of Münster were arrested, 10 of whom died in internment. In 1944, the bishop's own brother, Franz, would be deported to the camp in Oranienburg.

From 1942 on, the war went against Germany, and the Allied bombings of the country became more and more frequent. The bishop did his utmost from that point on to lessen the horrors of war on the civil population. He warned his faithful not to give in to the thirst for vengeance, which was being inflamed by the official

propaganda. On July 4, 1943, during a Marian pilgrimage to Telgte, he declared, "I have the sacred duty to proclaim Christ's commandment to renounce hate and vengeance... Is it truly a consolation for a German mother whose child has been killed in a bombing to be told, 'Well, soon we will kill the child of an English mother?' No, the announcement of such a revenge could never be a consolation ; such an attitude would be neither Christian nor German."

***"Prick up your ears!"***

On June 29, 1943 during a homily in his cathedral, Bishop von Galen deplored that the German State was "ignoring and thwarting all the efforts of the Pope and bishops to work towards peace." Pope Pius XII had proposed to all the combatants a meeting in Rome, but Germany refused. On February 1, 1944, in his Lenten pastoral letter, the bishop of Münster underscored that the root cause of the present catastrophes lay in modern man's rejection of the authority of God. The solution was to submit to JESUS CHRIST. And the prelate ended with this plea: "German people, prick up your ears! Listen to the voice of God!" From October 1943 to October 1944, a series of aerial attacks destroyed the city of Münster, including the cathedral. Decimated by death and exile, the population fell from 150,000 to 25,000 inhabitants. The other large cities in the diocese suffered similar fates. Bishop von Galen, who had narrowly escaped death when his episcopal palace was bombed, had to take refuge in the countryside. In Sendenhorst, on March 31, 1945, he witnessed the victorious entry of the Anglo-American troops. The bishop then became the father of countless poor and unfortunate who were left homeless and unemployed. He stood up for them before the occupying Allied forces, who left the population fall prey to looting and famine, under the pretext of the "collective responsibility" of the German people.

Let us ask God, for ourselves and for all the pastors of the Church, through the intercession of Blessed Clemens August, for the courage not to allow ourselves to be intimidated in our Christian witness "by neither the praise nor the fear" of men. Thus will we be able to work effectively for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

*Dom Antoine Marie*  

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*O.P.*

*P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it. – Also available free of charge are: tract about the divinity of Jesus Christ; tract about the Truths of the Catholic Religion; scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, with explanatory notice; the promises of the Sacred Heart; the mysteries of the Rosary.*

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On December 23, 1945, it was announced that Pius XII had named thirty-two new cardinals, including Clemens August von Galen. In so doing the Pope wanted to pay homage to the most courageous voice of the German episcopate under Nazism. In elevating three Germans, the Holy Father also intended to demonstrate—and he publicly expressed this—that the German people as a whole could not be held responsible for the atrocities of the Second World War. After a difficult seven-day journey by train, the bishop of Münster received the cardinal's hat in Rome on February 21, 1946, during an awe-inspiring ceremony. Cardinal Spellman of New York arranged for an American military plane to take the three German cardinals back home.

On March 16, Cardinal von Galen made his entrance to a Münster in ruins, to an enthusiastic crowd of 50,000 who saw in him hope for a better future. He expressed his regret at not having been deemed worthy of martyrdom ; if he had not been arrested by the Gestapo, he owed it to the love and fidelity of the members of his diocese. "You were behind me, and those in power knew that the people and the bishop of Münster were united by an inseparable bond, and that if they struck the bishop, the people as a whole would consider themselves struck. That is what gave me strength and confidence." This was the last public act of the "lion of Münster." The next day, he would suffer a perforation of the intestine, from which he died on March 22, 1946.

On October 9, 2005, at the end of the beatification ceremony, Pope Benedict XVI declared, "For this very reason, the message of Blessed von Galen is ever timely : faith cannot be reduced to a private sentiment or indeed, be hidden when it is inconvenient ; it also implies consistency and a witness even in the public arena for the sake of human beings, justice and truth."