

The Catholic Moment



Volume 6 Number 2

Second Sunday of Lent

March 8, 2009

Abortion and Catholic hospitals in Nazi Germany

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The proposed legislation in Congress known as "FOCA" (Freedom of Choice Act), which, if passed, would threaten to shut down Catholic hospitals for refusing to kill children prior to and during birth, is not the first time in recent history that the Church has been faced with the prospect of such pressures.

In 1939, Adolf Hitler ordered officials of his governing National Socialist ("Nazi") Party to strike down all laws that prohibited the killing of children through abortion in all countries that were occupied by the German Army, but these same Nazi officials soon complained of resistance to the Nazi abortion policy from "reactionary Catholic physicians."

According to Nazi documents captured after the war, the Catholic physicians protested that they could not perform abortions

because it would be contrary to their moral obligations as physicians to protect life.

In response, one Nazi official demanded that action be taken against such Catholics: "After all, these scruples are in most cases nothing but ridiculous prejudices originating in the time of liberalism. ... It also seems a shame that in a territory like that in the lake-district, that is to say in the whole district around the Lake of Constance, not a single interruption of pregnancy can be made because there are nurses belonging to religious societies in all hospitals who sternly refuse to collaborate. One is tempted to ask: Where does State authority come in in these cases, or else, is the State, perhaps, not anxious to assert its authority in this particular instance?"

These captured Nazi docu-

ments also reveal that some Catholic physicians also objected to the Nazi abortion policy on the basis that they might be prosecuted after the war if they were to perform abortions.

Their objections proved to be well-founded, for these above-quoted Nazi documents were introduced by international prosecutors after the war at the trial of the major war criminals at Nuremberg.

During the trial, one American prosecutor decried the Nazi orders that struck down abortion laws in Nazi-occupied territories as a "horrid" act, and an equally emphatic Russian prosecutor denounced how "the German fascist criminals even attempted to murder babes in the womb."

In one of the official court opinions that followed, the Nuremberg Tribunal recounted

the sad history of how the Nazi abortion policy, which began with allowing liberal access to abortion in foreign territories, eventually led to abortions being coerced in some cases.

It is therefore disturbing to witness the extraordinary intolerance already being articulated by the new U.S. administration toward people who in conscience would choose not to have abortions promoted with their tax dollars.

In an official statement revoking the Mexico City policy, and thereby directing U.S. tax dollars for use to fund abortion programs in foreign countries, the new U.S. president declared: "For too long, international family planning assistance has been used as a political wedge issue, the subject of a back and forth debate that has served only to divide us ... I have no desire to continue this stale and fruitless debate."

If Catholic doctors, nurses

and hospitals should be forced to choose Church over state, faith over obedience to government dictates, they will be standing in good company with their earlier German counterparts, the Catholics in Nazi Germany who refused to perform abortions under threat of persecution.

They also will be in good company with those Americans who not so long ago fought and gave their lives to secure the very freedoms in other lands that are now threatened from within here at home.

Michael Parkinson is an attorney in private practice in Lafayette. He holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in history from Purdue University where he was involved in Holocaust studies. While obtaining his Juris Doctor from Regent University School of Law, he conducted extensive research into the Nuremberg Trials at the National Archives in Washington D.C. He also has taught American history in college.