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Christian Century; 12/14/94, Vol. 111 Issue 36, p1207

M.E.M.O: ORAL CONFESSION

Martin E. Marty

FEW TOPICS addressed in this column have drawn more sustained interest than (a) the origins and use of "the Christian flag" and the place of flags in the church sanctuary; (b) the source of the Serenity Prayer attributed to either Reinhold Niebuhr or a German pietist; (c) the Martin Niemoller saying that is the subject this week.

The saying attributed to Niemoller is so relevant, so telling and so well crafted that it is often quoted in books and speeches and reprinted on greeting cards and stitched samplers. The only problem is, no one can find it in any of the mountains of published Niemoller materials. Still, everyone believes he originated it.

This week's final, definitive, absolute comment on the matter comes from Ruth Zerner, who teaches at Lehman College in the Bronx. She gave me an offprint of a chapter she contributed to *Jewish-Christian Encounters Over the Centuries*, edited by Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer (published by Peter Lang). In "Martin Niemoller, Activist as Bystander: The Oft-Quoted Reflection," Zerner calls the churchman's famous phrase about being a bystander instead of a responsible actor "the most frequently quoted and misquoted of [Niemoller's] statements."

Zerner cites Franklin Littell as one of those who has publicized the quotation. "Franklin Littell has assured me that he verified his recollection of these words with an American church official who organized Niemoller's speaking engagements in the United States after the war." But no tape recorder caught it, so it was not transcribed or published. "Therefore, like biblical tales," says Zerner, "this biographical confession has its genesis in oral tradition." Niemoller's daughter Brigitte Johannesson told Zerner that Niemoller first made the remark in England between 1955 and 1969.

Who was included in the famous passage about persecuted people for whom Niemoller, a typical bystander now confessing, failed to act? All

witnesses agree that he did not include Catholics, who are mentioned in later quotes, but did include communists. "Inevitably, Martin Niemoller's faith was Protestant, with more than a hint of anti-Catholicism," wrote James Bentley, Niemoller's British biographer.

In 1956 he answered a Jew:

I have never concealed the fact and said it before the court in 1938 that I came from an "anti-Semitic" past and tradition I believe that from 1933 I truly represented the Lutheran-Christian outlook on the Jewish question ... but that I returned home after eight years' imprisonment [by the Nazis] as a completely different person.

Zerner probes all the reports she can find of what Niemoller may have said (but never wrote) and, seconded by second wife and widow, Sibylle Niemoller, comes up with the following as the textus receptus. We will use it until some more definitive version arises.

First they came for the communists,
but I was not a communist--
so I said nothing.

Then they came for the social
democrats,
but I was not a social democrat--
so I did nothing.

Then came the trade unionists,
but I was not a trade unionist.

And then they came for the Jews,
but I was not a Jew--
so I did little.

Then when they came for me,
there was no one left who could
stand up for me.

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by Martin E. Marty