Letter from Matthias Erzberger to Archbishop Michael von Faulhaber of Munich, Dec. 27, 1917

Source: L. Volk, ed., *Akten Kardinal Michael von Faulhabers, 1917-1945* [Faulhaber Papers] (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1975), vol. 1, pages 24-26, entry no. 12

Translation from the original German:

Your Excellency,

Please allow me to convey the following thoughts with the request that they be subjected to a thoroughgoing examination.

At the end of the terrible World War a great Catholic renaissance will and must be initiated. The nationalistic, egotistic, old-pagan power idea has collapsed; it plunged the countries into dire straits before the War and into a bloodbath during the War; the saying that war is the “last resort,” which the world believed for years, has been proven deceptive. Only godly, Christian justice can be the foundation for a more favorable development of peoples in the future. The power of war has raged for 3-1/2 years; its end, however, will be the triumph of justice. A real hunger for the concept of justice and precepts of justice will flow through mankind.

Who should and can take this hunger into account? Only Catholicism, which unifies authority in an auspicious way, which paves the way for true democracy, gives “a highway for all the righteous” and yet forms the foundation of all authority. Social Democracy with its general concepts of freedom and denial of authority cannot work constructively; the execution of the Social Democratic idea has failed in agriculture and industrial production, despite the military dictatorship. What today is called conservative party politics is not represented by the old saying: “Not majority, but authority,” rather it embraces the most open brutality that knows only oppression and ruthless power. Protestantism, as a force of the mind and the heart, has completely collapsed in the War, has accomplished nothing for reconciliation of peoples; it has died in its 400th anniversary year.

War, which represents lawlessness among countries, has had the natural result that lawlessness prevails also in the interior life. The terribly true phrase of the Englishman about “moratorium of the Sermon on the Mount” needs to be expanded: the War has made the 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th Commandments null and void. Humanity must be brought up anew. As far as I can survey the situation, this moral moratorium has really worked most devastatingly among the so-called “educated circles,” in which Mammon and power have appeared most strongly in place of self-sacrifice and justice; this mania on high has obviously spread and increased as it flows down.

It has been more than 100 years since the time when world-spanning Catholicism necessarily encompassed all fields, namely the powers of the cultural and intellectual world. New forms must be sought in order to make the old Catholic spirit alive after the War and transmittable into a hungry society. The exhortation of our reverend Bishops has shown the way here.

Please allow me to submit the further expression of the following thoughts:

1. As to what concerns the political organization of German Catholics, that will still be found after the War in the Center Party. It is completely obvious that the Center will be able to take in stride a sound and just democracy. The Peace Resolution [of July 19, 1917] was the pathbreaker for this. Today, when we are preparing the way for a provisional peace with Russia on its soil and for the proclamation of the Holy Father, the Peace Resolution stands undisputed as the champion of justice. Today millions of Catholics and Center Party voters will be grateful that the Party became the pathbreaker of inviolable justice through the Resolution of July 19th. What needs to be adjusted in the Center Party, if I may be allowed, is something that I will explain to Your Excellency verbally the next time I am in Munich.

2. For the academic endeavors of German Catholics there is the Görres Society, which I promise will have a great future after the War, especially since its Chairman has now become Reich Chancellor. Now, when so much money is at hand, there must be consideration of a direct increase in capital for the Görres Society.

3. The People’s Association for Catholic Germany will take public education in hand, after as before. It has proven itself during the War to be very adaptable.

4. The International Catholic Union, whose seat is in Switzerland, will render great service by the closer association of Catholics from various countries. Now that a Group for International Law has been established in Germany, the Union has already gained a broader field of action. It is precisely this group that has a highly promising future through representing the concept of justice.

5. The Committee for Defense of German and Catholic Interests Overseas will also find a great field of action after the War, in making clear to other peoples the distinctive German contributions to Catholicism.

6. What we are lacking, on account of which I turn to Your Excellency with a particular request, is: a creative center for the cultural-intellectual world, literature, theater, etc., a center that influences all the individual organizations, leading and directing them intellectually; the center of a great Catholic renaissance. The seat for this, in my opinion, can only be in Munich. There the royal court is Catholic, the representative of His Holiness the Pope is in Munich, the government ministers are overwhelmingly Catholic, the majority of the state population is Catholic. The acknowledged leader is Your Excellency. I have thought through the following for execution of the plan:

If Your Excellency would take the trouble to allow an open discussion among respected leading Catholics in cultural and intellectual life to take place, for instance, every Thursday evening in the Archbishop’s palace, then a seed would be sown that would yield hundred- or thousand-fold fruit. A short lecture could sometimes start off the discussion and have the effect of clarifying and deepening the exchange. Quite soon there would come to these conferences not only Munichers and Bavarians, but men from the entire German Reich, at Your Excellency’s invitation. I am strongly convinced that similar conferences could soon be introduced in most of the episcopal sees. An exchange of ideas and speakers would occur spontaneously. Thus we would have focal points for intellectual, religious and cultural life. Foreigners and non-Catholics would ask to be allowed into these conferences. The blessing of such an institution cannot even be imagined today. It is the introduction of the great Catholic renaissance.

Since I have only put these thoughts to paper briefly, may I be allowed to bring them before Your Excellency in more detail verbally the next time I am in Munich.

With sincerest best wishes for the New Year and with the expression of my highest esteem, I have the honor to be

Your Excellency’s entirely devoted

/s/ M. Erzberger

Member of the Reich Parliament