

July 20, 1944

By Gary Potter

It is a date that means nothing to most Americans, but this July 20 there will be commemorated in Germany, especially by the nation's remaining Catholics, the sixtieth anniversary of an act that possibly could not have been committed by anyone except the man who performed it. That he could do it, when others could not, made it for him a duty he was bound to try to fulfill, a mission he had to accomplish, or die trying. At least that is how he viewed it. If he failed in his mission, as he did, his effort still has made him in the eyes of his countrymen today a Catholic and national hero.

That few others were in a position to attempt the act of July 20, 1944, is not all that made him the man for it. In the life of any man there is likely to be a moment towards which all that he is, everything he has done, his entire being, has brought him. It is the culminating moment of his life — even if it is let pass unrecognized for what it was. Everything about our man, his birth and upbringing, his education, love of literature and music, military training, temperament and, not least, religious faith brought him to July 20, 1944, as perhaps no one else in Germany just then could have been. Further, all that background — everything he was and had done — also fused in him to form a fearless resolve that enabled him to set aside any thought of the consequences for himself if he failed. In a word, he understood that the culminating moment of his life was at hand, and he was determined not to miss it.

We have referred to his religious faith, to his being Catholic. It needs to be said that there arose from his faith a vision of what Germany, his Fatherland, should be. Though it will differ in details from place to place, the vision was one that Christian men everywhere, in every country, ought to have for their homeland: that of a commonweal whose life is that of the Faith lived. Our hero saw that the Germany of his day was being led, not towards, but radically away from any possible realization of the vision.

In a West that has become far less Christian than it already was by 1944, and is instead nearly totally under the sway of a liberalism born of the Revolution that began to unfold in 1789, where is realization of the vision promised today? There is no place left where virtue is safe. Compliance with evil is compulsory everywhere, even if much of the evil has become so “banal,” in Hannah Arendt's phrase, that it often goes as unrecognized as the culminating moment in unreflective men's lives. Anti-Semitism, after all, is not the only evil that exists.

In our part of the formerly Christian West, the United States, we have

never had a *Kristallnacht*, but a landlord will be compelled to furnish a home to a couple obviously living in sin, a teacher to instruct 11-year-olds in the techniques of contraception, an anesthesiologist to attend a woman having a tubal ligation, an employer to provide a job to someone clearly living what used quaintly to be called an “alternative lifestyle.” So much else could be cited. How much would be seen by very many for the evil it is? In those who still do see, who still are sensitive to the promptings of a well-formed conscience, July 20, 1944 ought to find resonance.

The man who performed the act of that day, the one of whom we have been speaking, was Claus Philip Schenk Graf (Count) von Stauffenberg. He was the brilliant and handsome scion of a wealthy noble family, a husband, father and, at age 36, a colonel in the German army, the *Wehrmacht*. His future should have been limitless, but he did not flinch in the face of the consequence he had known would be inevitable following failure: summary death, as noble as it could be in the circumstances (before an improvised firing squad in a War Ministry courtyard in the glare of a military vehicle’s headlights).

What he had tried to do was kill



Adolf Hitler.

In due course we shall speak more of Stauffenberg and what he attempted sixty years ago, but there is much to talk about in advance of that, including some of the other many Germans who together constituted a veritable Catholic Resistance to Hitler and Nazi rule. Of them, one in particular, a bishop, will be of special interest if only because the public protests against the Nazis for which he is best known are very relevant to our day. However, before we speak of him and the others, there is something that needs to be grasped, and grasped in terms of