News



The gate that reads "Arbeit macht frei" ("Work makes you free") is seen Jan. 27, 2025, at the Nazi German Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp in Oswiecim, Poland. In an Oct. 31, 2025, statement, Bishop Timothy C. Senior of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania., apologized for a replica of the Auschwitz gate that appeared on a float presented by St. Joseph Catholic School in Hanover at the town's Halloween parade. (OSV News/Reuters/Grzegorz Celejewski)

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A Pennsylvania bishop has condemned a local Catholic school's use of a prominent Nazi symbol on a float in a community Halloween parade.

"I was shocked and appalled to learn that the Halloween parade float from Saint Joseph Catholic school in Hanover included a replica of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp gate, bearing the words 'Arbeit Macht Frei,' " said Bishop Timothy C. Senior of Harrisburg in an Oct. 31 statement.

The statement was issued shortly after a float representing St. Joseph Catholic School in Hanover, Pennsylvania, displayed the symbol while participating in that town's 2025 Halloween parade.

Video of the parade, which lasted more than 90 minutes, showed the school's float — drawn by a truck, and also appearing to include a swing set with ghosts and a jukebox — framed by a gate replicating the one at Auschwitz-Birkenau, one of several extermination camps used by the Nazi regime to systematically murder 6 million Jews during the Shoah, the preferred Hebrew term for the Holocaust.



This is a screenshot of a St. Joseph Catholic School float in the Hanover Halloween Parade held Oct. 30, 2025 in Hanover, Pennsylvania. The float includes what appears to be a replica of one of the main gates at Auschwitz concentration camp, including the phrase "Arbeit macht frei." Bishop Timothy C. Senior of the Diocese of Harrisburg apologized for the float in a statement dated Oct. 31, 2025. (OSV News screenshot/Community Media of South Central PA via YouTube)

The gate to the camp — located in then-German occupied Poland, and now the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum — was made by Polish political prisoners under German orders. The phrase "Arbeit macht frei," German for "Work makes you free," was used in other concentration camps as well. At Auschwitz, prisoners deliberately inverted the "B" in "Arbeit" in protest.

More than 1 million Jews were slain at Auschwitz alone. St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis all visited the memorial during their respective papacies.

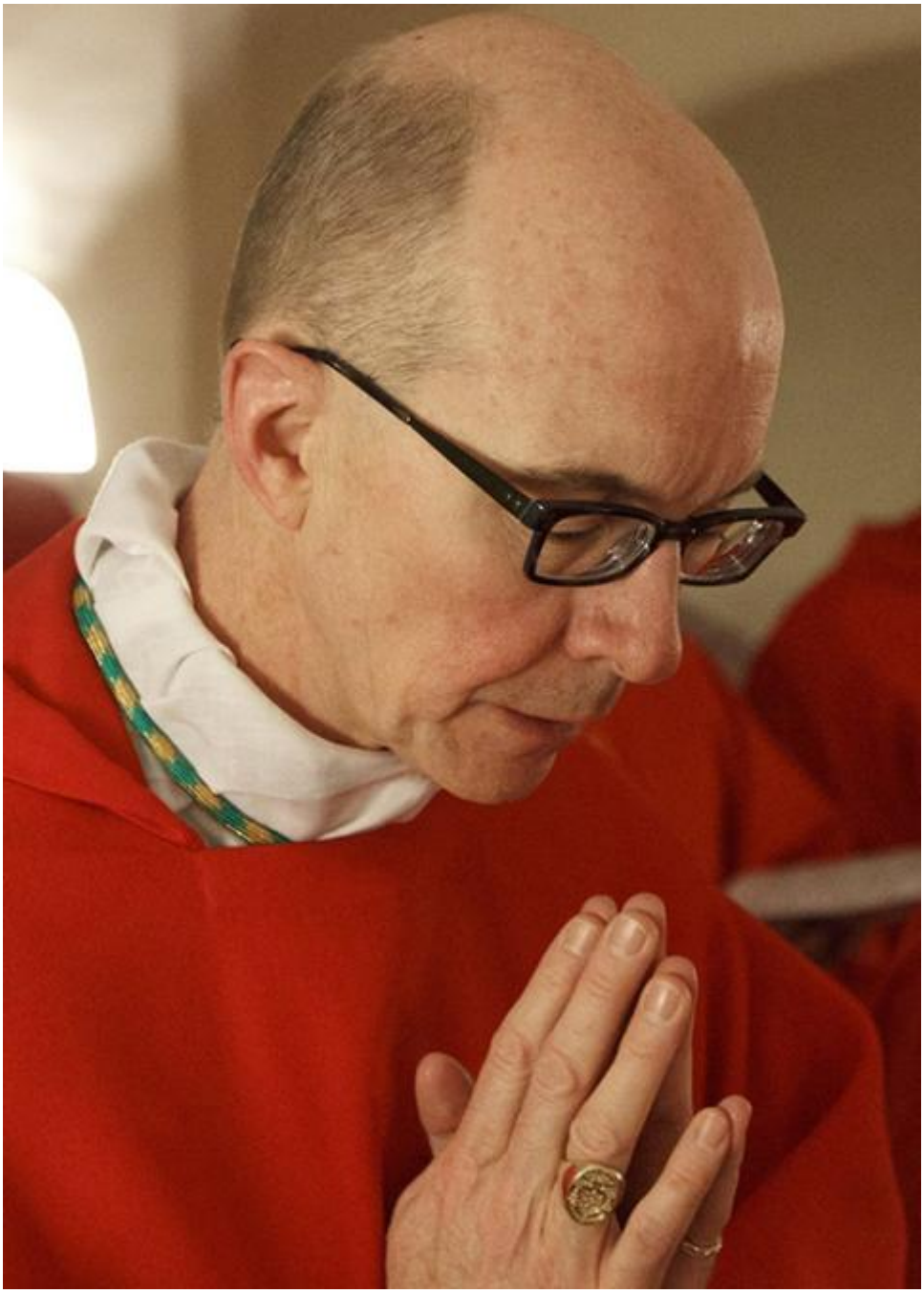
Backlash over the Catholic school's float comes days after extensive Vatican commemorations of the 60th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Time"), the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, in which the church formally denounced antisemitism.

Related: Explainer: What is 'Nostra Aetate'?

"The inclusion of this image — one that represents the horrific suffering and murder of millions of innocent people, including six million Jews during the Holocaust — is profoundly offensive and unacceptable," said Senior.

He said "while the original, approved design for this float did not contain this imagery, it does not change the fact that this highly recognizable symbol of hate was included."

"On behalf of the Diocese of Harrisburg, I express my sincere apology to our Jewish brothers and sisters and to all who were hurt or offended by this display. I strongly condemn the inclusion of this symbol on the float," said Senior.



Bishop Timothy C. Senior of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, is pictured in a file photo at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Echoing *Nostra Aetate*, Senior said, "As Catholics, we stand firmly against all forms of antisemitism, hatred, and prejudice, which are rampant in our society. The Church's relationship with the Jewish community is one of deep respect, friendship, and shared faith in the one true God."

OSV News is awaiting a response to its request for comment from the pastor of St. Joseph Parish, Fr. Michael Rothan, and the principal of the parish's school, Melissa Connahey.

According to the Hanover Evening Sun, the parish had issued an apology Oct. 31, after posting Senior's statement to its Facebook page. However, that apology was no longer visible on Facebook as of Nov. 3, although Senior's statement remains in place on the page.

The news outlet quoted extensively from the parish apology, which cited a "lack of vigilance" regarding the float and lamented the harm the design had caused.

"Although the float was not lit up yet I looked at it and saw how detailed it was, and had I been more vigilant I would have seen the sign and immediately recognized it," said the apology, which was unattributed to any individual on the staff, according to the Hanover Evening Sun.

The parish apology said that the motto on the gate was "a symbol that is not subject to the viewer but objectively evil."



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The float had unspecified "parameters" for its design, said the apology, which speculated that "most of the people at that parade probably did not even know what those words meant.

"I know that if any of our people knew what they meant they would have immediately pointed it out to me when I visited," said the parish statement as quoted by the Hanover Evening Sun. "Part of the outrage I think, having spoken to people about this, is that more people did not know what it was, and the reason they don't know what it was is because we've stopped speaking about the Holocaust and the atrocities that happened."

The parish apology added, "Perhaps we stopped speaking about them because we thought they were so horrific nothing like that would ever happen again, and yet we know those who do not remember history are destined to repeat it."

The Hanover Evening Sun also noted that a local resident named Galen Shelly of Littlestown, Pennsylvania, had named himself on social media as the float's designer and builder. The outlet said that Shelly had sought to use a lighted archway, and built the gate since he "could not find any new or used cemetery entrances available in time."

OSV News has messaged Shelly via his Facebook account and is awaiting a response.

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The outlet reported that Shelly, who said he was tapped by family members to work on the float, had envisioned the theme as an "eternal perspective about life."

Quoting from his social media post, the Hanover Evening Sun reported that Shelly had asked for forgiveness, explaining that his "artist statement" in the float's design had been misunderstood.

He said he had a "vision in my heart and knew exactly what it all meant to me, I did not know what it could mean to others."

According to the Hanover Evening Sun, Shelly said he interpreted the "Arcbeit Macht Frei" phrase — which he had seen during a visit to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington 35 years ago — as symbolizing the "lie" of working for material aims.

The news outlet said Shelly claimed the words had "struck a chord" and indicated "in all our 'work' we have no hope."

"Words misplaced or misunderstood and words within symbols can harm deeply and for that I offer my humblest apology to St. Joseph's Church," the news outlet reported Shelly writing.

Shelly also apologized to the school and to Metcalf Family Cleaning, a local business that had volunteered to pull the float by truck.

In a Nov. 1 Facebook post, the company extended its "sincere apologies" for the incident, saying that it was at the time "unaware of its meaning and significance.

"We recognize that we should have taken a closer look at the float prior to the parade, and we are truly sorry for that oversight," said the company. "The message displayed does not represent our company's beliefs, values, or the respect we hold for our community. We in no way condone or support any language or imagery that is disrespectful or harmful to others."

Metcalf said it took the matter "very seriously," adding that it was "reviewing our participation procedures to ensure greater oversight in future community events."

In a joint statement issued Nov. 1, the York Jewish Community Center, the Jewish Federation of Greater Harrisburg and the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia said the float's Nazi imagery was "another painful reminder that hateful symbols and rhetoric still find their way into public spaces.

"These acts, intentional or not, contribute to fear and anxiety among Jewish individuals and all who understand the devastating history those symbols represent," said the statement.

They said they were "deeply alarmed and concerned by the rise in antisemitic incidents across our nation, as well as in our own community."

The Jewish community leaders also said they appreciated "Bishop Senior's acknowledgment of the harm caused and his apology on behalf of the Diocese.

"Recognizing the impact of such imagery is an important step toward understanding, healing, and ensuring that incidents like this do not happen again," they said.

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Stressing the need for "unity and education," they called on "community leaders, educators, and neighbors to join us in standing against antisemitism and hate in all forms."

Senior pledged to "work with the school community to ensure that this incident becomes an opportunity for education and reflection, and review approval processes so that such a grievous incident is never repeated."

In its Oct. 31 press release providing Senior's statement, the Diocese of Harrisburg said those measures would include collaborating with "the Pennsylvania Jewish Coalition and the Anti-Defamation League to provide information to the local school community on the horrific suffering endured by the Jewish people during the Holocaust, and the continued antisemitism seen throughout our world today."

"Let us continue to pray for healing, understanding, and unity among all of God's people," said Senior.