

A Friend in Word and Deed Pope Pius XII and the Jews

by Thomas J. Nash

ISSUE: During and after World War II, and again upon his death in 1958, Pope Pius XII was praised by secular and Jewish leaders for his efforts against the Nazi-induced Holocaust. During the last three-and-a-half decades, however, many people, including some Catholics, have accused the Pope of “silence” and even criminal negligence, saying that he could have said and done much more to lessen the genocide that claimed six million Jews. Both before and after he became Pope, what was Pius XII’s record regarding the Jewish people and the Nazis? How and why did his policies continue and change after the onset of World War II?

RESPONSE: As a papal envoy to Germany from 1917-29, Vatican Secretary of State in the 1930s, and Pope during World War II, Pius XII established a clear record of supporting the Jewish people against the German National Socialist Workers’ Party, more commonly known as the Nazis. Because of a defamatory drama in the early 1960s, Pius XII’s wartime record has been unjustly tarnished. By their own testimony, the Nazis knew they had an enemy and Jewish leaders a faithful ally in Pius XII. To maximize Church efforts and minimize Nazi backlash, Pius XII modified his tactics during the war, but his pro-Jewish efforts continued unabated. As former Israeli diplomat and historian Pinchas Lapide says, the Jews saved by the Catholic Church under the Pope’s direction—an estimated 700,000 to 860,000—“exceed by far those saved by all other churches, religious institutions, and rescue organizations combined.”¹

DISCUSSION: When the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued its long-awaited document on the Holocaust earlier this year, the general response was international criticism. The Vatican reaffirmed its longstanding condemnation of Nazism and the Holocaust; sought forgiveness for many Catholics, including bishops, who failed to speak out and intercede for the Jews in other ways; and lamented how, since the time of Constantine, Jews have been “isolated and discriminated against” in the Christian world.

All the News That’s Fit to Print?

The document’s defense of Pius XII irked and outraged many members of the media and Jewish leaders. The New York Times March 18, 1998 editorial was typical, announcing that “a full exploration of Pope Pius’ conduct is needed. . . . It now falls to [Pope] John Paul and his successors to take the next step toward full acceptance of the Vatican’s failure to stand squarely against the evil that swept across Europe.”

The Times fails to note that the Vatican has already issued an enormous 11-volume work that addresses, in large part, the very subject of Pius XII’s wartime conduct. The Times also fails to note that, for almost three decades, the Pope did indeed “stand squarely against” the evil of Nazism. For example, in his 1942 Christmas message, Pius XII denounced the growing Holocaust. He cried out for the “hundreds of thousands who, without any fault of their own, sometimes only by reason of their nationality or race, are marked down for death or progressive extinction.” In fact, in a 1937 encyclical against Nazism drafted for his papal predecessor Pius XI, the prospective pontiff warned against the potential of a Jewish genocide.

In an exercise of culpable journalistic amnesia, the Times further fails to recognize its own praise for the Pope’s Christmas messages in 1941 and 1942: “No Christmas sermon reaches a larger congregation than the message Pope Pius XII addresses to a war-torn world at this season,” the Times editorialized in 1942. “This Christmas more than ever he is a lonely voice crying out of the silence of a continent.”

Given the praise he received after the war and upon his death in 1958, particularly from many Jewish leaders, the continued campaign to distort and even defame Pius XII’s record would seem unthinkable. Mainly by providing false birth certificates, religious disguises, and safe-keeping in cloistered monasteries and convents, the Pope oversaw efforts that helped save hundreds of thousands of Jews from deportation to Nazi death camps. The Chief Rabbis of Jerusalem and Rome, the World Jewish Congress, and Jewish leaders from Hungary, Turkey, Romania, and the United States all praised Pius XII. Golda Meir, then Israel’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, delivered a eulogy on behalf of the nation of Israel to the United Nations, stating:

We share the grief of the world over the death of His Holiness Pius XII. During a generation of wars and dissensions, he affirmed the high ideals of peace and compassion. During the 10 years of Nazi terror, when our people went through the horrors of martyrdom, the Pope raised his voice to condemn the persecutors and to commiserate with their victims. The life of our time has been enriched by a voice which expressed the great moral truths above the tumults of daily conflicts. We grieve over the loss of a great defender of peace.²

From Hero to “Criminal”: A Calumny Takes Shape

While acknowledging his many wartime efforts, some criticized the Pope for not denouncing the Nazis strongly enough during the war. These included prominent Jewish writer Dr. Leon Poliakov, who addressed the subject in *The Jews Under Italian Occupation* and elsewhere.

The criticism became calumny, though, with Rolf Hochhuth’s 1963 play *The Deputy*. To bolster his argument, the German playwright appended 46 pages of documentation, including citations from Poliakov and French Catholic writer Francois Mauriac. But Hochhuth distinguished himself with his defamatory thesis, summarized in the words of his main protagonist, the young Jesuit Riccardo Fontana: “A Vicar of Christ who sees these things before his eyes and still remains silent because of state policies, who delays even one day . . . such a pope is a criminal.”

Ironically, as a boy, Hochhuth was a member of the Hitler Youth and his father an officer in the German Army.

Examining the Pope’s Record

Pius XII’s work on behalf of the Jewish people predates World War II by more than two decades. As a papal envoy to Germany from 1917-29 and as Vatican Secretary of State from 1930 to his papal election in 1939, then Archbishop Eugenio Pacelli distinguished himself as a faithful ally of the Jews.

Pope Pius XI “had good reason to make Pacelli the architect of his anti-Nazi policy,” writes Lapidé. “Of the 44 speeches which the Nuncio Pacelli had made on German soil between 1917 and 1929, at least 40 contained attacks on Nazism or condemnations of Hitler’s doctrines. . . . Pacelli, who never met the Führer, called it ‘neo-Paganism.’”³ Many criticize the concordat that Secretary of State Pacelli helped negotiate with the Nazis in 1933, failing to recognize that the Church used the agreement as a means to promote the rights of all Germans, not just Catholics.

Besides Lapidé, the late Dr. Joseph Lichten has been one of Pius XII’s leading defenders. Lichten was a Polish Jew and diplomat who later served as director of intercultural affairs for the influential Anti-Defamation League of B’Nai B’rith. Along with Lapidé’s *Three Popes and the Jews*, Lichten’s monograph *Pius XII and the Jews: A Question of Judgment* remains required reading for anyone who wants a substantive counterpoint to Hochhuth’s and others’ distortions and defamations. Both authors ask why the Vatican is singled out, while the National Council of Churches, the International Red Cross, and others are left alone after having said and done much less. In contrast, writes Lichten, the future Pope was not afraid to severely criticize the Nazis, as he did on April 28, 1935, in addressing 250,000 pilgrims at Lourdes, France:

“They [the Nazis] are in reality only miserable plagiarists who dress up old errors in new tinsel. It does not make any difference whether they flock to the banners of the social revolution, whether they are guided by a false conception of the world and of life, or whether they are possessed by the superstition of a race and blood cult.”⁴

In addition, Archbishop Pacelli oversaw the drafting of Pius XI’s 1937 encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge* (With Burning Anxiety), which was uncharacteristically published in German, not Latin. It was read in German churches throughout the country on Palm Sunday. Drawing on a Gospel parable about the “enemy” who sows weeds among the wheat,

Editorial Flip-Flop

The New York Times, They Are a Changin’

Christmas Day, 1942: No Christmas sermon reaches a larger congregation than the message Pope Pius XII addresses to a war-torn world at this season. This Christmas more than ever he is a lonely voice crying out of the silence of a continent. The Pulpit whence he speaks is more than ever like the Rock on which the Church was founded, a tiny island lashed and surrounded by a sea of war. . . . [W]hen he assails violent occupation of territory, the exile and persecution of human beings for no reason other than race or political opinion . . . the “impartial judgment” is like a verdict in a high court of justice.

March 18, 1998: The [C]hurch’s attitude toward the Jews began to change three and a half decades ago under Pope John XXIII. . . . [Pope] John Paul, however, has resisted a critical look at the Catholic response to the Holocaust and has defended the silence of Pope Pius XII during the Third Reich. . . . The document does not even mention Pope Pius’ failure to speak out against Nazi atrocities. . . . A full exploration of Pope Pius’ conduct is needed. He did not encourage Catholics to defy Nazi orders.

Archbishop Pacelli added a historical introduction to the document. The introduction condemned the Nazis and their collaborators as doing the devil's work (cf. Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43) and warned of the Holocaust's imminence:

“The experience of these last years have fixed responsibilities and laid bare intrigues, which from the outset only aimed at a war of extermination. In the furrows, where We tried to sow the seed of a sincere peace, other men—the “enemy” of Holy Scripture—oversowed the cockle of distrust, unrest, hatred, defamation, of a determined hostility overt or veiled, fed from many sources and wielding many tools, against Christ and His Church. They, and they alone with their accomplices, silent or vociferous, are today responsible, should the storm of religious war, instead of the rainbow of peace, blacken the German sky.”⁵

Der Führer Is No Dupe: The Nazis Take Notice

As an apostate Catholic, the sober comparison to Satan was not lost on Hitler. The encyclical also called Catholic priests, religious, and laity to resist the Nazis' evil.⁶ Not surprisingly, the Berlin *Morgenpost* did not celebrate the new Pope in March 1939: “The election of Cardinal Pacelli is not accepted with favor in Germany because he was always opposed to Nazism and practically determined the policies of the Vatican under his predecessor.”⁷

“The new Vicar of Christ showed no softening after his election toward Hitler's brutal policies,” adds Lichten. His 1942 Christmas message provoked a Nazi counterpoint to The New York Times' analysis: “In a manner never known before,” conveys a Gestapo report, “the Pope does not refer to the National Socialists in Germany by name, but his speech is one long attack on everything we stand for. . . . Here he is clearly speaking on behalf of the Jews.” Six months later, Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda chief, expressed his own dismay: “Again and again reports reached us that the Pope is feverishly at work during this entire crisis.”

It is a grave error to suggest that Pius XII believed that “the Nazi regime was as an indispensable bulwark against the advance of atheistic communism,” or that, “to the leaders of the Church, Hitler was clearly preferable to Stalin.”⁸ The Nazis knew they had a formidable enemy in the Church and so did the world. The Church prudently informed the world regarding the war's gravity without jeopardizing her own rescue efforts in the process. In 1942, an experience of the Dutch bishops affirmed this approach. Following the bishops' strong denunciations of Jewish deportations, the Nazis retaliated on the Jewish Catholic population of Holland, sending many converts to their death, including Edith Stein. The Pope promptly burned a related four-page protest he had written for the Vatican newspaper.

That another, more strongly worded encyclical on racism would have helped, as some suggest, is naive.⁹ Pius XII was not working with his own flock gone astray, he was dealing with a nefarious demagogue and the Third Reich's bloodthirsty associates:

“Would these neo-heathens, who shamelessly disregarded the divine law and the basic commands of Jesus, have listened to any appeal from Rome? And would Pius have been able to defy Hitler, with absolutely no power—and at the same time have been able to go on saving Jews? . . . Whoever is of the opinion that the situation could not have gotten any worse, should remember that after all far more than two million Jews—more than one quarter of the European Jews—did indeed survive Hitler's butchery, even if just barely—thanks to the help of the Church, bishops, priests, laymen. . . .”¹⁰

The Allies are also more deserving of criticism, adds Lichten, writing in 1987: “Only recently was the ‘terrible secret’ of Western complacency revealed. Only in the past few years have people begun to ask why Auschwitz was not bombed.”¹¹

Understanding Those Who Defame the Church

Hochhuth's calumny lives on in writers like James Carroll, a former Catholic priest who wrote against Pius XII and the Church in the April 1997 *New Yorker*. Like many others, Carroll is annoyed that the Church, despite her imperfect leaders and lay members, has the audacity to claim that she speaks infallibly for God on faith and morals. Carroll implies that any wrongdoing by her members necessarily disqualifies the Church as a moral authority. Such a view fails to recognize the divine origin and sustenance of the Church. For example, just as David's adultery couldn't abrogate God's covenant with Israel, so sinful Catholics can't nullify Christ's guarantee to preserve the Church (cf. Mt. 16:18; 28:18-20).

Deep down, the critics seem to understand this reality. They despise the Church, yet doggedly seek her approval or apology. If they can get the Church to discredit herself or approve their behavior, they apparently think they will somehow be set free. For Hochhuth, it could be his own family's guilt regarding the Holocaust from which he seeks liberation. For Carroll, he desires a repeal of the Sixth and Ninth Commandment proscriptions regarding “abortion, contraception, divorce, homosexuality, celibacy, women priests.” In any event, their need for validation from the Vatican indirectly substantiates

the Church's divine pedigree. No other institution in the world commands such attention.

But for those of goodwill—including most Jews—the pervasive defamation of Pius XII only serves as a stumbling block to their taking the Church and her divine claims seriously. In any case, may any attention focused on the Vicar of Christ ultimately lead all to Christ Himself, the God-man who alone can set us free, now and forever (cf. Jn. 8:32; 14:6).

¹ Pinchas Lapide, *Three Popes and the Jews* (New York: Hawthorn, 1967), 215.

² Dr. Joseph Lichten, *Pius XII and the Holocaust: A Question of Judgment* (Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1963); as reprinted in *Pius XII and the Holocaust: A Reader* (New York: The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, 1988), 129.

³ Lapide, 118.

⁴ Lichten, 106-07.

⁵ Pope Pius XI, *Mit Brennender Sorge* (1937), no. 4; emphasis added.

⁶ *Ibid.*, nos. 32-43.

⁷ Lichten, 107; emphasis added.

⁸ Dr. Marc Saperstein, "A Medieval and a Modern Pope"; *The Washington Post*, April 1, 1998. To his credit, though, Dr. Saperstein recognizes that "the fundamental responsibility for the Holocaust lies with its Nazi perpetrators," not the Church or her teachings.

⁹ See Georges Passelecq and Bernard Suchecky, *The Hidden Encyclical of Pius XI* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997). The authors repeat the charges that the Vatican did not do enough to fight Nazism and the Holocaust before or during the war. They ignore the fact that in October 1939 the Pope issued an encyclical (*Summi Pontificatus*) reaffirming the basic anti-racism, pro-Jewish message of *Mit Brennender Sorge*: "There is neither Jew nor Greek nor Gentile . . . all are one" (cf. Gal. 3:28). But the war's escalation and Nazi retaliations prompted subtler, yet still unmistakable criticism of the Third Reich.

¹⁰ Lapide, *Die Welt* (*The World*), July 16, 1966; as reprinted in Fr. Lothar Groppe, S.J., "The Church and the Jews in the Third Reich," *Fidelity*, November 1983.

¹¹ Lichten, 35.

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