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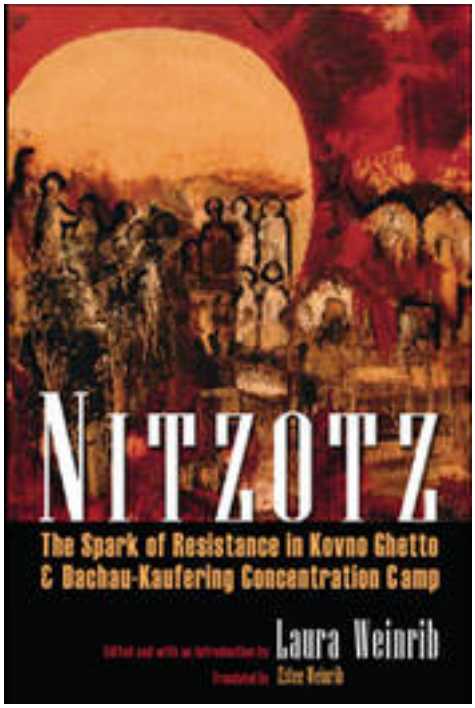

The Popes Against the Jews

John T. Pawlikowski, OSM

David I. Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews: The Vatican"s Role in the Rise of*

Modern Antisemitism. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.

David Kertzer adds yet another selection to what is becoming a virtual

"book-of-the-month" club on institutional Catholicism, antisemitism and the

Holocaust. A professor at Brown University and author of the much discussed *The*

Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara (a baptized Jewish boy forcibly taken from his parents by

church officials), Kertzer presents a detailed account of the significant role of the Popes

and other senior church leaders in fomenting societal antisemitism in the two centuries

preceding the II Vatican Council and its historic declaration on the Church and the Jewish

People.

Some

of the information in the volume has been exposed by other authors such as Ronald Modras.

But Kertzer has probed newly available archival material from Vatican sources more

thoroughly than any previous author on the subject. He actually does himself a disservice in this regard by having his volume associated with John Cornwell"s *Hitler"s Pope* through an endorsement by Cornwell on the book"s dustcover. Unlike Cornwell"s superficial volume, whose notoriety has been based largely on misleading publisher"s hype, Kertzer has presented us with a substantive volume generally based on sound scholarship even if one takes issue with some of his arguments, especially towards the end of the book. This is a serious work that deserves significant attention by Catholics as part of the honest self-assessment of the church that Pope John Paul II made a core component of the recent Jubilee celebration.

Kertzer begins his narrative with a discussion of the 1998 Vatican document on the Holocaust "We Remember." This document, while well-intentioned, illustrates the problem with the way Catholic leaders have traditionally handled the issue of Catholic antisemitism. While "We Remember" does acknowledge, according to Kertzer, some

personal complicity in the spread of antisemitism by members of the Catholic Church, it argues that the antisemitism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was essentially a secular (even anti-Catholic) phenomenon and implies that the church in fact opposed such antisemitism.

I share some of Kertzer"s criticism of "We Remember" on this score. It did fail to highlight that popular preaching, catechesis, as well as church art, had a decisive hand in aiding the growth of modern antisemitism which "We Remember" is correct in attributing primarily to non-religious factors such as the new genetics and its biological racism. But Kertzer has failed to note the expanded interpretation of "We Remember" offered by Cardinal Edward Cassidy, the document"s principal author. Nor does he fully understand the theology of the church that is present within the document.

While Cardinal Cassidy"s interpretation of "We Remember" does not fully answer

Kertzer"s or my criticisms, it certainly does move us in the direction of a closer

connection between traditional Catholic and modern forms of antisemitism. Kertzer is either

unaware of Cassidy"s writings, as well as other commentaries, on "We Remember" or

simply chooses to ignore them. Neither represents sound scholarship on his part.

The main thrust of *The Popes Against the Jews* is the argument that the profound

inability of the popes and other Vatican leaders to deal with the challenge of political and

cultural modernity in Europe led to an active campaign, often employing classic Christian

antisemitic themes and activities, against the Jews who were seen as significant proponents

of modernism and liberalism, often referred to as Freemasonery. Here Kertzer is on solid

ground in my judgment, even if one might disagree with this or that particular point. I have

argued this thesis in some of my own writings. But Kertzer"s work on the newly available

Vatican archival documents solidifies this contention beyond question. Catholicism"s hundred

years" war with modernity, led by the popes whose administrations Kertzer examines in this

volume only came to an end at the II Vatican Council. In light of the papal activities cited by Kertzer

such as a resurgence of the ritual murder charge, the dogged anti-Judaism campaign by the semi-official Vatican newspaper *Civilta Cattolica*, and the active encouragement of antisemitic political parties in Austria in particular the approval of *Nostra Aetate* at Vatican II appears as even a greater about-face than we previously imagined. The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin called for total honesty in dealing with church history in such matters. Kertzer"s volume should help the church confront its shadow side more profoundly than it has. Only in this way can it retain moral integrity today.

While I believe the central thesis advanced in *The Popes Against the Jews* is on target, the latter part of the book has definite flaws. I found the chapter on "race" overly simplistic as Kertzer strains to make a direct connection between

Catholic antisemitism and biological racism. Kertzer is generally to be critiqued for failing to address the continuity-discontinuity issue in terms of Christian antisemitism and racial antisemitism far more thoroughly. He gives some indication throughout the book that he does not see a simple straight line connecting the two. But the question needs a far more direct airing than he provides.

Part three of the volume with its chapters on "A Future Pope in Poland" and "Antechamber to the Holocaust" is poorly done. He skims through the papacy of Pius XII in a few pages while offering a clear indictment. Either he should have stopped his narrative with the papacy of Pius XI or done a far more extensive analysis of Pius XII. Obviously he did not have the kind of archival material available to him for this period as he did for the earlier papacies. This part of the book does not reflect sound scholarship.

In sum, *The Popes Against the Jews* is a challenging volume. While significantly

flawed at the end, it presents us with a basically accurate picture of direct, active involvement of the papacy in the spread of antisemitism in the modern world. It is a history that Catholics today need to integrate into their faith perspective rather than bury in a cave.

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