To speak or not to speak: that was the Question

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The forthcoming opening of the Vatican Archives on March 2 is an event of worldwide significance to historians and scholars, especially those interested in clearing the mystery of Pius XII's proverbial "silence" regarding the ongoing annihilation of Jews during the War years of his papacy (1939 - 1958).

Two equally passionate but opposing camps have been wrestling with each other for decades. One is composed of those who claim Pope Pacelli did his utmost to save Jewish lives while necessarily taking precautions to safeguard the Catholic populations of Europe. They want him to be declared a Saint, contrary to the opposing group who claim he failed as a moral leader and could well have raised his voice to be heard publicly and stopped the persecutions without endangering the Catholic Church which was then still regarded by Germany as a power to be respected. And finally, there is a third - a growing middle ground that discerns shades of grey rather than black and white, weighing all factors of that tragic, complex era when the war to be fought according to Pius XII was twofold: against the German Nazis and against the Soviet Communists considered as mortal enemies of the Catholic Church. However in this context we must necessarily also consider that the global Church was still infested with pre-Vatican Council II anti-Judaic ideology, wherein antisemitic canards abounded in the pages of the Vatican's official publication, "Civiltà Cattolica", and attitudes reflecting the deep imprinting of religiously inherited prejudices infected even some of the most highly admired moral leaders of world Catholicism. St. Maksymilian Kolbe is a case in point. A Polish priest canonized as Saint by Pope John Paul II, he was deported to Auschwitz where he offered his life to save that of a fellow prisoner. Nonetheless he was also known for his antisemitic opinions and belief in a Jewish - Masonic world conspiracy, a belief he expressed verbally while simultaneously acting with kindness to Jews, guided by his faith in the duty of Christian charity for all.

The middle ground of opinion makers might well agree to describing Eugenio Pacelli as a papal "Hamlet" who instead of confronting the existential choice of "to be or not to be" was forced to face the terribly portentous and consequential question: "to speak or not to speak".

It is well known that immediately after the war Pius XII received visits and letters of gratitude from various Jewish individuals and leaders who whose lives were saved by the charitable hospitality of churches, convents and monasteries. They felt they owed thanks to the Pope himself. Some even found refuge within the walls of the Vatican. A great number of priests and nuns, including Father Rufino Niccacci of the famed "Assisi connection" were proclaimed to be among the "Righteous" honored by Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum, along with civilians who risked their lives to save Jewish people. Yet the Catholic Church also harbored (or at least failed to excommunicate) antisemitic clergy such as Jozef Tiso, a Catholic priest who was the President of the Fascist Nazi collaborationist government of the Slovak Republic from 26 October 1939 to 4 April 1945 and was executed in Bratislava for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

What were the Pius XII papacy's relations with these two opposite poles of the Catholic reality during World War II? Perhaps this is one of the questions that will be explored by the scholars planning to research the Archives.

Another key question that has never received definitive clarification is whether or not Pope Eugenio

Pacelli gave specific orders to save Jews or just generic instructions to save all persons in need. To date not a single document even within Vatican internal communications has been shown to prove the thesis that Pius XII issued orders to save the Jews of Europe from genocide. In Italy the Vatican and the Italian Catholic Church did not protest against the 1938 antisemitic "racial laws" against all Italian Jewish citizens, but limited themselves to requesting mercy for Jewish converts to Catholicism or Jewish marital partners of Catholics. This subtle form of collaboration was not due to a tacit agreement with Nazi-Fascism's "racial" ideology but rather to the surviving, still potent age-old Christian conviction propagated widely for centuries that Jews were contemptible and destined to be shunned because of their refusal to accept Jesus as their Messiah.

The Jewish community of Rome still vividly recalls Pius XII's public silence after the October 16, 1943 Nazi raid on the ghetto area just before the deportations to Auschwitz of 1023 Jewish women, men and children during the two days following their round-up when they were detained in a military college just a few blocks from St. Peter's in full view of the Pope - specifically "under his very windows" as reported to Berlin by German Ambassador Ernst von Weiszàcker.

The letters, reports, telegrams and notes on conversations and reactions surrounding these highly sensitive days will now be available to all qualified students and scholars making formal requests.

At a Vatican "Study Day" in view of the forthcoming March 2 opening, organized by the Secretariat of the Vatican "Apostolic" Archives (no longer denominated as "Secret" since the October 2019 order of Pope Francis), explanations of contents and guidelines for doing research in the 85 km (53 miles) of shelves stacked with files of over a million papers were given by the speakers. The panelists were among the most expert and knowledgeable: Vatican historians and chief archivists of the Central Archives of the Holy See together with those of the First and Second Sections of the Secretary of State - respectively the Catholic Church's Central Government and its section for Relations between States plus five others: the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (of notorious fame for its past as the Inquisition's "Holy Office" and then for its role as censor, thus guardian of the doctrine); the "Propaganda Fide" today known as the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples; the Congregation for Eastern Churches which includes those of Eastern Europe and the Middle East; the Apostolic Penitentiary and the Fabric of Saint Peter - responsible for the conservation and maintenance of Saint Peter's Basilica.

It was remarkable to discover that each of these archives contains important information pertinent to Jewish history.

The presentations and conclusions -- by such authoritative Church officials as Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin, the Prefect of the Archives Bishop Sergio Pagano and the Vatican Archivist and Librarian Cardinal Josè Tolentino de Mendonça -- amounted to quite balanced and academic assessments regarding the enormous stacks related to World War II papers and Pius XII's papacy, not at all reflecting the heated campaign by other sections of Catholic opinion urging speedier action for proclaiming Pacelli's sainthood.

"The Church is not afraid of history" said Cardinal Mendonça, echoing Pope Francis. "It regards with confidence the work of freely carried out scientific study by researchers, in the certainty that the essence and spirit of its actions will be understood in good time."

The issues regarding Jews that surface in the papers of every dicastery include, among other topics, discussions regarding Zionism and the birth of the State of Israel; discussions on correspondence regarding the Nazi persecutions of Jews, on relations between Catholic and Jewish charities, on mission and Jews (within the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), and Vatican diplomacy regarding the balance between relations with the Arab Catholic churches and those with Jews and Israel (Congregation for Eastern Churches) etc.

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It was announced that a CD is available regarding the meeting at the time of the Nazi raid on Rome's Jewish ghetto, between Pius XII's emissary, Cardinal Secretary of State Luigi Maglione and Germany's Ambassador Ernst von Weiszàcker. Of course, much is already known about this fateful conversation but perhaps the shelved files will reveal more telling details.

According to research by Liliana Picciotto of the Contemporary Jewish Documentation Center in Milan (CDEC), Maglione, in his official Vatican notes on the meeting, wrote that he told the German Ambassador he had been asked to "intervene by appealing to the ambassador's sentiments of humanity…" and had reminded him "that the Holy See has been so attentive, as the Ambassador himself had pointed out, not to give the impression to have done or wanting to do the slightest thing against Germany during this terrible war." Maglione said it was "painful to the Holy Father, painful beyond words that in Rome, under the eyes of the Common Father, so many people are made to suffer because they belong to a particular ancestry…" Yet in reply to the Ambassador's question, "What would the Holy See do if things were to continue?", Maglione replied "The Holy See does not want to be put in the position to pronounce words of disapproval." Maglione continues his report with the observation, "But I had to tell him that the Holy See should not be put in the position to protest. Should the Holy See be obliged to do so, it would rely on Divine Providence for the consequences."

It is therefore not surprising that the occupying German forces proceeded with the round-ups and deportations. Weiszàcker reported to his Foreign Minister 12 days later that the Pope "has done everything, in this delicate situation, not to jeopardize the relationship with the German government and German authorities in Rome."

Two observations could be made in the context of what is known today.

Most certainly as the Pope's emissary Maglione's exasperatedly cautious diplomacy found justification for him in the consequences of the recent tragic conflicts between European Catholic Churches and Hitler's henchmen. Only one year earlier on July 20, 1942.

the Dutch Bishops led by Archbishop Johannes de Jong read in public a Pastoral Letter openly condemning Nazi deportations of Dutch workers and Jews. The protest was immediately followed by a Nazi retaliation in which 40,000 Catholic converts from Judaism including Edith Stein were sent to concentration camps. Reportedly, Sister Pasqualina Lehnert, Pope Pacelli's "housekeeper and confidante", stated that the fear of massive retaliation on Catholic communities in Europe was the main reason for Pius XII's restraint.

A second observation can evidently be deduced from Maglione's underscoring the highly diplomatic conduct of the Vatican towards Germany and by the contents of Ernst von Weiszacker's notes to his Nazi government regarding the Pope's overall attitude of compliance. Pius XII was most concerned to maintain equidistant, bordering on "neutral" relations between the Vatican, Germany and the Allies, in its overriding fear of Russian Communism, which was considered a mortal enemy of the Catholic Church.

That these concerns cast all else under the shadow of a silence that blacked out all other considerations over the desperate plight of the suffering and dying Jewish millions in Europe, was confirmed to me by Father Pierre Blet, SJ. in 1999 at the presentation in Rome of his book, "Pius XII and the Second World War". "The Vatican was intent on winning the war but also winning over Communism" he told me in answer to my question regarding the Holocaust. "This was the priority; there was no other", he said.

As of March 2, the now fully available Vatican Apostolic Archives regarding the papacies of the two World Wars and their aftermath reaching up to 1958, will provide fascinating opportunities for endless research into a history that will probably forever result in contradictory verdicts.

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Michele Sarfatti, a renowned Italian Jewish historian and former director of CDEC, after listening to the presentations said he was convinced that new, meaningful details will emerge that will fill in gaps and subtly influence and change historical interpretations in the future. He was impressed by the great professionality and seriousness of the speaker-scholars. It will take months and years to tie together the interconnections on single events between the various departments involved, he feels.

Among the myriads of questions and thoughts that could stimulate historians to enrich our knowledge of the lights and shadows of a tragic past, we might include the contents of archived correspondence with Jews seeking help during the War and letters from Church officials reporting on local circumstances, reports from nuncios about the persecutions and responses from the Vatican, Pacelli's doubts regarding fascism, Mussolini and Hitler, all contained in letters, notes, reports and recorded conversations, mostly digitalized.

Future research might well also shed more light on the true reasons for Pacelli's continued silence on the subject of the Holocaust, a silence that was inexplicably protracted into the postwar years of his long papacy.

*Lisa Palmieri Billig is the Representative in Italy and Liaison to the Holy See of AJC, American Jewish Committee. Source: Vatican Insider, February 27, 2020.

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