



Pope Pius XII's Refusal to Publicly Condemn the Holocaust

01.05.2020 | Zaina-Sophie Salibi

In 2007, the beatification process of Pope Pius XII was met with protests by Jewish and Catholic leaders alike. The point of contention was the controversy over the Pope's public silence on the Holocaust both during and after the Second World War.

If one is to follow the popular line of several journalists and scholars, Cardinal Eugenio Maria Pacelli, known as Pope Pius XII, was an anti-Semite who refused to intervene or even denounce the killing of Jews during the Holocaust. While the beatification process of Pope Pius XII has been halted to this day, the controversy over the Pope's silence is far from settled: indeed, some scholars—and even prominent Jewish intellectuals—not only refuse to condemn the Pope's silence over the treatment of the Jews during the Holocaust, but argue that Pope Pius XII's public silence over the matter led to the salvation of thousands of Jews in Europe during the War.^[1]

Guilt and complicity?

Some historians such as Frank Coppa^[2] argue that the reputation of Pope Pius XII was largely intact—and positive—immediately after 1945. Others have noted small but significant pockets of dissatisfaction over the Pope's lack of public denunciation of the Holocaust both during and after the War. However, most agree that: “After the production of Rolf Hochhuth's play *Der Stellvertreter* (*The Representative* or *The Deputy* in English) in 1963 in Berlin and London, and a year later in New York, it became a “hot topic” for a time”.^[3]

Hochhuth's award-winning play characterized Pope Pius XII as a cold and scheming diplomat whose only concern was to protect the power of the Catholic Church in Europe at a moment when Nazi and Fascist governments seemed poised to govern Europe. By doing so, the Vatican calculatingly chose to sacrifice the lives of countless of Jews. Hochhuth also wrote an essay twenty years after the publication of *The Deputy* entitled “The Vatican and the Jews” in which he further details the research behind his play and questions how the Pope could remain silent in such a time of tragedy: “(...) it remains incomprehensible that His Holiness did not bestir himself to protest against Hitler when it was clear that Germany had lost the war, while at the same time Auschwitz was just beginning to reach its highest daily quota of killings”.^[4]

The Deputy was followed by the publication of other works which had considerable commercial reach, such as: *Hitler's Pope: the secret history of Pope Pius XII* by John Cornwell (1999) and *Pope Pius XII: the hound of Hitler* (2009) by Gerard Noel. Similar works published by academics include Harvard's Daniel Goldhagen's *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty to Repair* (2002) and Hubert Wolf's *Pope and Devil: the Vatican's Archives and the Third Reich* published in 2012 by Harvard University Press.

The proponents of Pope Pius XII's guilt and complicity with the Nazi regime have several years of historiography and narratives upon which to draw upon given this Pope's role as *nuncio* to Bavaria in 1917 and then to Weimar Republic of Germany in 1920, when he was still known as Cardinal Eugenio Maria Pacelli. Archival and anecdotal evidence demonstrate frequent and often severe disagreements with his then superior, Pope Pius XI. While Pope Pius XI authorized the release in

1937 and clandestine distribution in Nazi Germany of [Mit Brennender Sorge](#) a papal encyclical denouncing the rise of racial theories in both Germany and Italy, his Secretary of State Pacelli warned him one year afterward, in 1938, of the consequences of the breakdown of possible dialogue with the rising fascist and Nazi governments.

This resulted in a breakdown of trust between Pope Pius XI and his Secretary of State. As Frank Coppa relates: "In June 1938 [Pius XI] asked to see the American Jesuit John La Farge (...). The pope secretly commissioned him to draft an encyclical demonstrating the incompatibility of Catholicism and racism. Gustav Gundlach, who collaborated with La Farge in producing the encyclical *Humani Generis Unitas (The Unity of the Human Race)*, was convinced that the Secretary of State, who became the next pope, was not informed of their project."^[5] Secretary of State Pacelli became Pope Pius XII before his predecessor could publish *Humani Generis Unitas*. This "lost encyclical" which is said to have further and more explicitly condemned race theories and specifically anti-Semitism, was dismissed by Pope Pius XII.

Evidence also suggests that Pacelli supported his mentor Cardinal Pietro Gasparri's calls for appeasement in the Vatican's relations with the German Nazi Reich. As Coppa continues: "Following the Nazi assumption of power, the old cardinal [Gasparri] drafted a memorandum in favor of an agreement with the Reich—advising the Church to cease its criticism of the Hitler regime. He advised that if the Nazis sought the dissolution of the Catholic Center Party, the Vatican should comply. Finally, he proposed that the Holy See and hierarchy remove the restrictions upon Catholics prohibiting their joining the Nazi party, which Gasparri believed reflected national sentiments."^[6] The Vatican's forfeit of the Catholic Centre Party is often cited by Pope Pius XII's critics as an example of Vatican's abandonment of Germany into Nazi hands.

The signature of the *Reichskonkordat* of 1933 is most often cited as proof of the complicity between the Vatican and Nazi Germany. It is seen at best as a mutual recognition of both regimes and, at its worst, a *carte-blanche* given by the Vatican to Nazi Germany to proceed as they pleased with their racial policies. It is also noted by historians that both Pope Pius XI and his Secretary of State Pacelli were anxious to sign the Concordat: "They worried in particular that the Nazis might turn their secular ideology into a substitute religion that would displace Christianity and become the equivalent of a German national Church."^[7]

To summarize, a majority of widely shared books, works of art, and other forms of commentary have interpreted the silence of Pius XII during the Holocaust in terms of guilt if not complicity. Upon this notion rests the evidence of Pacelli's seemingly initial appeasement of the Nazis via the sacrifice of the Catholic Centre Party, his ideological conflicts with Pope Pius XI, and the signature of the *Reichskonkordat* in which he played a central role.

Diplomatic pragmatism?

However, there also exists historical evidence which suggests that Pope Pius XII understood his silence on the matter was causing confusion and distress but nonetheless believed it was the appropriate way to act. In addition, there are Pope Pius XII's contemporaries who both praised his actions towards European Jews, and who were also confused by his alleged support of certain Jewish communities over Catholics.

Pope Pius XII knew his refusal to engage in a direct and explicit confrontation with Hitler's regime caused affliction amongst Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Hochhuth reports these words of Pius XII: "Do you think I don't know that people have said and written," he said to the journalist Morandi in 1946, "that I never should have concluded the Concordat with the Third Reich? If Hitler so severely persecuted the Catholic Church in spite of the Concordat, consider what he would have resumed to do without the Concordat? Do you think that his henchmen would not have smashed

right into the Vatican?"[\[8\]](#)

It is key to note that on at least one occasion, Pope Pius XII (upon being pressed to speak on the matter of Jewish victims by Father Rizzo Scavizzi) provided the following message to the Jews of Europe: "Tell everyone you can that the Pope is in anguish for them and with them! Say that many times he has thought of hurling excommunications at Nazism, of denouncing the bestiality of the extermination of the Jews to the civilized world. Serious threats of reprisal have come to our ears, not against our person, but against our unhappy sons who are now under Nazi domination. The liveliest recommendations have reached us through various channels that the Holy See should not take a drastic stand. After many tears and many prayers, I came to the conclusion that a protest from me would not only not help anyone, but would arouse the most ferocious anger against the Jews and multiply acts of cruelty because they are undefended. Perhaps my solemn protest would win me some praise from the civilized world but would bring down on the poor Jews an even more implacable persecution than the one they are already enduring..."[\[9\]](#)

Proof this public silence was a course of action backed not by irrational fear but by precedent can be seen in the case of 1942 reprisals against the baptized Dutch Jews of Utrecht: "Just what Pope Pius XII feared took place in Holland in July 1942. Without informing the Vatican, the cardinal of Utrecht issued a pastoral letter condemning the persecution of Dutch Jews. The Nazis responded by arresting all baptized Dutch Jews, including the philosopher-nun Edith Stein, and sending them to extermination camps. That was precisely the scenario that Vatican historians had feared and had resolved to avoid."[\[10\]](#)

It is to be noted that while Pope Pius XII did not directly name either the perpetrators (the Nazis) and their victims (the Jews as well as other groups) in order to remain an impartial mediator, he did provide what historian Kilian McDonnell calls "generic condemnations"[\[11\]](#). He further states: "Pius XII was fully convinced that, given the actual conditions of the war, he had denounced all of the Nazi war crimes in these generic condemnations while at the same time remaining technically neutral. Precisely because he was neutral and condemned in generic terms what was worthy of reprobation, applicable to both sides, he did not expose Catholics and Jews under German dominion to danger. He thus left open the possibility of providing a climate in which either side might approach him as a mediator, thus bringing the war to an end."[\[12\]](#)

Before the entry of the United States in the Second World War, it was a clear possibility that Hitler and Mussolini could win the war. Thus, historians have noted that the pragmatism of the Vatican was also based on the fact that since modern times, the Pope is also at the head of a religion with clergy and faithful spread throughout the entire world, forming a geographic network of interests and possible tensions.[\[13\]](#)

It can also be revealing to read what prominent Jews and Israelis themselves have written on the subject of Pope Pius XII and the Second World War. We first read the words of Moshe Sharett, Israel's Second Prime Minister who met with the Pope during the War: "I told [the Pope] that my first duty was to thank him, and through him, the Catholic Church, on behalf of the Jewish public, for all they had done in various countries to save Jews, to save children, and Jews in general. We are deeply grateful to the Catholic Church."[\[14\]](#)

Another source, this time from Pinchas E. Lapide, who acted as Israeli consul in Italy: "The Catholic Church saved more Jewish lives during the war than all the other Churches, religious institutions, and rescue organizations put together. Its record stands in startling contrast to the achievements of the International Red Cross and the Western Democracies. (...) The Holy See, the Nuncios and the entire Catholic Church saved some 400,000 Jews from certain death."[\[15\]](#)

Historian Secler Bartlomiej also reports the telegram that Golda Meir, then Foreign Minister of Israel, sent after the death of Pius XII on 9 October 1958: "We join with all the humanity in

mourning over the death of His Holiness Pope Pius XII. During the times tormented by wars and conflicts he could remain faithful to the sublime ideals of peace and love. When, during the ten years of Nazi terror, our nation underwent the most terrible martyrdom, the Pope's voice was heard for the victims. The life of our times was enriched by the word, which, rising above the tumult of daily conflict, proclaimed the highest moral truths. We cry over the departure of a truly great servant of peace."^[16]

It seems, then, as though scholarship has begun to elucidate the public silence of Pope Pius XII and to clarify the role he played during the Holocaust. Far from being a Nazi sympathizer, he reluctantly put his reputation and legacy at risk so that the lives of both Jews and Catholics would not be. According to this view, the Pope's public silence was based on the true and reasonable fear of a backlash which would inevitably have led to the death of both a greater number of Jews and Catholics. Admittedly, his actions were shaped by his diplomatic pragmatism aimed to position the Vatican as a potential mediator of peace. They can—and should—be questioned. Hopefully the opening of Pope Pius XII's private archives in March 2020 and the subsequent investigations will shed more light on these sensitive issues.

[1] The author is a fourth-year undergraduate student in History at the University of Ottawa. Summary of a paper submitted to Prof. P. Anctil, April 2020.

[2] Frank J. Coppa, "Pope Pius XII: From the Diplomacy of Impartiality to the Silence of the Holocaust," *Journal of Church and State*, 55, 2 (Spring 2013): 286.

[3] Susan Zuccotti, "Reigniting a Controversy: Studies of Pius XII and the Shoah in the United States since 1999," *La Rassegna Mensile Di Israel*, Terza Serie, 69, 2 (2003): 681.

[4] Rolf Hochhuth, "The Vatican and the Jews," *Society* 20 (1983): 4–20.

[5] Coppa, "Diplomacy of Impartiality," 293.

[6] *Ibid.*, 292.

[7] John Rodden and John P. Rossi, "Was Pius XII 'Hitler's Pope'? The Concordat of 1933," *Society* 51 (2014): 409.

[8] Hochhuth, "The Vatican and the Jews," 4.

[9] Carlo Falconi, *The Silence of Pius XII*, trans. Bernard Wall (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1965) quoted in Coppa, "Diplomacy of Impartiality," 301.

[10] Rodden and Rossi, "Was Pius XII 'Hitler's Pope'?" 411.

[11] Kilian McDonnell, "Fear of Reprisals," *Gregorianum* 83, 2 (2002): 327.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Hugues Portelli, «Le pouvoir du pape et ses limites», *Pouvoirs*, 162, 3 (2017): 31.

[14] Ernest Evans, "The Vatican and Israel," *World Affairs*, 158, 2 (Fall 1995): 89.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Secler Bartłomiej, "Twenty Years of Diplomatic Relations between Vatican City State and Israel", *Przegląd Narodowosciowy* 2016, 6:118.