

“60 Minutes” on Pope Pius XII

by Ronald Rychlak

(Catalyst 5/2000)

The March 19 broadcast of CBS Television's "60 Minutes" profiled *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*, by John Cornwell (Viking Press, 1999). As the title suggests, that book presents a very cynical portrait of Pope Pius XII.

Like many print reviews, "60 Minutes" started by discussing Cornwell's claim that he was convinced of Pius XII's evident spirituality and thought that the full story would vindicate him. So, assuring Church officials that he was on the Pope's side, Cornwell claims to have obtained special permission to look at the Vatican's archives.

By the middle of 1997, after having worked on the project for five years and having studied the Vatican files, Cornwall claims to have found himself in a "state of moral shock." He was now convinced that Pius XII had a soaring ambition for power and control that had led the Catholic Church "into complicity with the darkest forces of the era." He concluded that Pacelli was "an ideal Pope for the Nazis' Final Solution."

Crucial to his self-promotion is Cornwell's claim to have been a good, practicing Catholic who set out to defend his Church. His earlier books, however, were marketed as having been written by someone who had left the Church. According to a 1989 report in the *Washington Post*, Cornwell "was once a seminarian at the English College in Rome and knows the Vatican terrain, [but] he has long since left the seminary and the Catholic faith, and thus writes with that astringent, cool, jaundiced view of the Vatican that only ex-Catholics familiar with Rome seem to have mastered." At that time Cornwell described himself as a "lapsed Catholic for more that

20 years.”

In *The Hiding Places of God* (1991) he declared that human beings are “morally, psychologically and materially better off without a belief in God.” He also said that he had lost his “belief in the mystery of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.” Reviews of that book called Cornwell an agnostic and former Catholic. As late as 1996, when he was supposedly trying to vindicate Pius XII, Cornwell called himself a “Catholic agnostic,” who did not believe in the soul as an immaterial substance.

Perhaps more revealing are Cornwell’s prior comments about Pope Pius XII. In his 1989 book, *A Thief in the Night*, Cornwell mentions the “alleged anti-Semitism” of Pius without offering any explanatory comment. Then, on page 162, he mocks Pius, saying that he was “totally remote from experience, and yet all-powerful-a Roman emperor.” He goes on to call Pius an “emaciated, large-eyed demigod.” In 1995 in London’s *Sunday Times*, Cornwell described Pius as a diplomat, a hypochondriac and a ditherer. The next year, when he was supposedly working on his defense of Pius XII, Cornwell wrote in the *New York Times* of Pius XII’s silence on Nazi atrocities” as an example of a failing by the Catholic Church. In light of this evidence, his claim to have had nothing but the slightest regard for Pius XII up until 1997 is simply not believable.

As to his claim to have received special assistance from the Vatican due to earlier writings which were favorable to the Church, a simple call to the Vatican would have revealed that he received no special treatment. Any competent scholar can obtain access to the archives that he saw without promising to be “favorable” to the Church. Moreover, a quick consultation of Cornwell’s earlier books (or easily-available reviews thereof) reveals that he has never been friendly to the Holy See.

In *A Thief in the Night*, Cornwell rejected rumors of a Vatican

conspiracy to poison Pope John Paul I, but his conclusion that a cold-hearted bureaucracy let the Pope die was almost as bad. Cornwell, voicing sentiments that sound exactly like what he now says about his new book, wrote: "The Vatican expected me to prove that John Paul I had not been poisoned by one of their own, but the evidence led me to a conclusion that seems to me more shameful even, and more tragic, than any of the conspiracy theories."

Cornwell's 1993 novel, *Strange Gods*, is about a Jesuit priest who keeps a mistress on whom he lavishes caviar and champagne, goes on golfing holidays in Barbados, and takes lithium for manic-depressive swings. He supports his lifestyle by absolving a wealthy Catholic benefactor from his own sins of the flesh. *The Independent* (London) called the priest "a cut-out model of a sexually tortured Catholic." Driven by fear and desperation, the priest deserts his pregnant mistress in favor of a dangerous, immoral venture in an obscure part of Latin America. When he returns to England, his faith is transformed into what one reviewer called "a soggy Christian humanism."

In *The Hiding Places of God* (1991) Cornwell wrote of his days in the seminary: "I took delight in attempting to undermine the beliefs of my fellow seminarians with what I regarded as clever arguments; I quarreled with the lecturers in class and flagrantly ignored the rules of the house."

"60 Minutes" skipped over these matters even though they were contained in the April issue of *Brill's Content* magazine, which was on newsstands at the time of the broadcast. Instead they interviewed Gerhard Riegner, who complained about Pope Pius XII's "silence."

Riegner wrote a memorandum to the Holy See, dated March 18, 1942, describing Nazi persecution. Cornwell describes this memo in his book and leaves the impression that the Vatican failed to take any action in response to it. Cornwell fails, however, to note the letter of thanks that Riegner himself

sent on April 8, 1942. In that letter, Riegner, on behalf of the World Jewish Congress, states:

We also note with great satisfaction the steps undertaken by His Excellence the Cardinal Maglione, with authorities of Slovakia on behalf of the Jews of that country, and we ask you kindly to transmit to the Secretariat of State of the Holy See the expression of our profound gratitude.

We are convinced that this intervention greatly impressed the governmental circles of Slovakia, which conviction seems to be confirmed by the information we have just received from that country...

In renewing the expressions of our profound gratitude, for whatever the Holy See, thanks to your gracious intermediation, was good enough to undertake on behalf of our persecuted brothers, we ask Your Excellency to accept the assurance of our deepest respect.

Ed Bradley asked about the numerous letters sent from various Jewish groups following the war, but there was no mention of Riegner's own letter of thanks.

In fact, the recently-released memoirs of Adolf Eichmann, chief of the Gestapo's Jewish Department, reveal the Nazis' knowledge that Pius was deeply offended by these arrests and that he worked hard to prevent the deportations. (Ironically, given complaints about secrecy within the Vatican, this important piece of evidence was suppressed by the Israeli government from 1961 until March 2000.)

On a different matter, Bradley said that Pius objected to having black soldiers garrison the Vatican following Rome's liberation because the Pope had heard reports of rape being committed by African-American troops. This clearly offended Bradley, and he used it to raise questions about the canonization effort.

Actually, confusion about this situation stems from a report the Pope received about French Algerian troops. The report said that these troops had raped and pillaged in other areas where they were stationed, and the Pope did not want these specific soldiers stationed in Rome. Pius expressed his concerns about these specific men to British Ambassador Osborne who broadened the statement in his cable back to London, saying that the Pope did not want "colored troops" stationed at the Vatican. Bradley said that Pius was talking about African-American troops, which is clearly not correct.

Cornwell expressed the opinion in the "60 Minutes" segment that things could not possibly have been worse for the Jews than they were. To say this is to ignore the hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of Jewish men, women, and children who were saved by Pius XII and those who were working at his direction. Those Jewish victims, however, were very thankful during and after the war.

Gerhard Riegner said that the numerous offers of thanks and praise at the end of the war were merely political maneuvers, designed to restore good relations between Jewish and Catholic people. However, 13 years later, at the time of his death, Pius XII efforts to save Jews from the Nazis was still the primary focus of attention. The Anti-Defamation League, the Synagogue Council of America, the Rabbinical Council of America, the American Jewish Congress, the New York Board of Rabbis, the American Jewish Committee, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and the National Council of Jewish Women all expressed sorrow at his passing and thanks for his good works. *The Jewish Post* (Winnipeg) explained in its November 6, 1958 edition:

It is understandable why the death of Pius XII should have called forth expressions of sincere grief from practically all sections of American Jewry. For there probably was not a single ruler of our generation who did more to help the Jews

in their hour of greatest tragedy, during the Nazi occupation of Europe, than the late Pope.

Then Israeli representative to the United Nations and future Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Meir, said: "During the ten 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." Nahum Goldmann, President of the World Jewish Congress, said: "With special gratitude we remember all he has done for the persecuted Jews during one of the darkest periods of their entire history."

Unfortunately, these voices were not heard on "60 Minutes," nor are they to be found in Cornwell's book.

Ronald J. Rychlak is Professor of Law and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs,

University of Mississippi School of Law. His book, Hitler, the War, and the Pope will be released this summer by Genesis Press.