

# CNN'S SKEWED COVERAGE OF WARTIME POPES

*University of Mississippi law professor Ronald Rychlak, one of the world's foremost scholars of the Catholic Church's role during the Holocaust, was included in the April 8 episode of the CNN series on the papacy. He serves on the board of advisors of the Catholic League. We posted his analysis of the program online. Here is an excerpt from that article:*

CNN avoided the pop journalists who too often populate such debates, but even among serious scholars, there is debate and confusion. Given the time constraints, it was necessary for the producers to make cuts and avoid many details. Of course, when that happens, the tendency is to raise the controversial point, ignore the details and the nuance, and leave the viewer to assume the worst. That happened quite a bit in this episode.

One such instance related to the 1929 agreement between Italy and the Holy See, the Lateran Treaty. This agreement reconciled a difficulty that had existed since the fall of the Papal States in 1870. In it, the Vatican recognized the kingdom of Italy, received compensation for property that had been seized, and defined the rights and obligations of the Church and State. According to CNN, it also set a precedent that the Vatican would be willing to negotiate with dictators for sovereignty. That is simply not correct.

In reaching accord with Italy, Pius XI treated it the same way he treated other nations. Even if a state might stand to gain in the short term, governments do not last, and eventually the Church would be better positioned if it had a relationship with the people. Moreover, the Lateran Treaty provided that the Church reserved "the right to exercise her moral and spiritual power in every case." So, while the Holy See was

officially neutral, it did not relinquish the right to speak on moral truths. None of this was seen on CNN.

Similarly, the 1933 concordat with Germany was portrayed as a capitulation to Hitler. In reality, it was a defense mechanism that permitted the Church to save souls. Naturally, the Church insisted on a provision permitting it to speak to moral issues. Hitler, who first thought he could exploit the concordat, soon saw it as being used by the Church to protect Jews (with real or forged baptism certificates), and he vowed to end it immediately after the war. That was not mentioned on CNN.

The show did a nice job of explaining the importance of Pius XI's anti-Nazi encyclical, *Mit brennender Sorge*, but it ended by saying that this was the only time he spoke to all of Germany about the Nazis and the horror faced by Jews. Not only does that overlook numerous statements by the Vatican's radio and newspaper, it also fails to explain that the encyclical was immediately suppressed, doing no actual good for the victims; only leading to more persecution. In fact, two other messages – one from Poland and one from Holland – urged the pope not to speak, lest he cause more suffering. Neither was mentioned on the show.

CNN told of Pius XII's 1942 Christmas message, but omitted the most important passage in which he said mankind owed a solemn vow "never to rest until valiant souls of every people and every nation" arise and "devote themselves to the services of the human person and of a divinely ennobled human society." Mankind owed this vow to "the hundreds of thousands who, through no fault of their own, and solely because of their nation or race, have been condemned to death or progressive extinction."

Listeners on both sides of the war understood that this was a direct reference to the Jews. A Christmas Day editorial in the *New York Times* praised Pius XII for his moral leadership in

opposing the Nazis: "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 Nazis also understood.

CNN included Mark Riebling and his important work showing Pius XII's involvement with the plot to assassinate Hitler. Unfortunately, the show suggested that this was an unsettled proposition because there was no written evidence. As Mark explained, there are tape recordings proving his involvement!

Similarly, after explaining that the pope knew that written evidence could get people in trouble with the Nazis, a commentator questioned the papal role in sheltering Roman Jews because there are no surviving written papal orders. Some mention should have been made of the numerous eyewitnesses who testified to receiving or overhearing orders from the Vatican.

CNN should have noted that Jewish groups from around the world praised Pius at the end of the war and at his death. Also unmentioned was that Pope Francis – an apparent favorite of the producers – has often praised Pius XII. Just last June he asked: "How many, beginning with Pius XII, took risks to hide Jews so that they wouldn't be killed, so that they wouldn't be deported? They risked their skin!"

While there is much to learn about the popes of World War II, viewers should not think that they have learned the full story just by watching this series, much less a single episode. Even well-intended producers and commentators are limited by the constraints of the clock.

*For more on the Catholic Church's role during the Holocaust, see professor Rychlak's authoritative book, **Hitler, the War, and the Pope**.*