

FURTHER VINDICATION OF POPE PIUS XII

Ronald Rychlak

January 27 marked the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Nazi-occupied Poland. That day, the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust, was observed at the United Nations with a symposium entitled: "Remembering the Holocaust: The Documented Efforts of the Catholic Church to Save Lives."

It was co-sponsored by the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations, and Pave the Way Foundation. The conference brought together international experts on Catholic rescue efforts during the Nazi persecution. I was happy to be one of them.

Gary Krupp, who heads the Pave the Way Foundation, kicked off the event with a personal statement about his father's role in liberating the camps. He is the most vocal supporter of Pope Pius XII in the Jewish community. He asked the scholars many questions.

"During the rise of Adolf Hitler from the early 1920s, was the future Pope Pius XII (Eugenio Pacelli), as Holy See Ambassador to Germany, and the Catholic Church silent about the coming dangers?"

The scholars noted that neither the future pope nor the Church itself was silent. Pacelli recognized the dangers of National Socialism and warned others about them early on. At first he did this in reports to his superiors, and later he did so both publicly and in diplomatic messages to other nations. He also had a significant hand in the strong condemnations (including the encyclical published in German, *Mit brennender Sorge*) issued by Pope Pius XI. The Church was by no means silent.

“Did the Holy See officially recognize the Nazi regime by signing a concordat with Germany in 1933?”

It was pointed out that the agreement signed by the Holy See with Germany was not a recognition of the regime. It was made with the nation, and it remained in effect after the fall of Nazism.

The concordat ended up being very important in helping the Church continue to function during the war. It also provided a basis for protecting Jews with baptismal certificates, because it defined Jewishness as a faith and not a race. It is important to note that the concordat came after the regime had reached agreements with France, England, Italy, the Soviet Union, and had been recognized by the League of Nations. Clearly, the concordat was not an endorsement of the regime or mark of approval from the Church.

“What was the Nazi opinion of the Catholic Church and, consequently, why was it targeted by Hitler for destruction?”

All of the speakers set forth reasons why Hitler and the Nazis hated the Catholic Church. The Church sheltered victims, cooperated with the Allies, regularly filed diplomatic protests, used both its radio and newspaper to warn others about the Nazis, and Pope Pius XII joined in the plot to oust Hitler by any means necessary. The Nazis despised the Church and Pius XII, and they had good cause to do so.

“Was Pope Pius XII an anti-Semite? Was he silent during the Holocaust? Why didn’t he protest with a forceful public condemnation of the killing of the Jews?”

Pius learned early in the war that public words would not influence the Nazis in a positive manner. In fact, as several of the experts explained, those closest to the matter – including the Allied military and bishops in occupied territories – often asked him to withhold public statements lest they lead to greater harm.

As for his actions, Pius provided the Allies with information about German troop movements, was deeply involved in the plot to overthrow Hitler, and he mandated that those who could shelter Jews from Nazi persecution do so. No, he was not an anti-Semite.

“Was Israeli diplomat Pinchas Lapidé right when he estimated that the Catholic Church saved between 847,000 and 882,000 Jews during the Holocaust?”

The scholars all agreed that Lapidé’s estimate is accurate as a minimum. With new archives opening and new information being found, many think the number is significantly higher. As Krupp noted, about a quarter of the Jews alive today can trace their fate back to ancestors who were saved by the Vatican of Pope Pius XII.

“How, why, and when did the esteem for the lifesaving actions taken during the Holocaust by the Holy See and Pope Pius XII begin to change? Was this the result of scholarship or propaganda?”

I took the opportunity to note the massive disinformation campaign run by the Soviets. They sought to discredit the pope, the Church, and religion itself. It was disinformation, not honest scholarship, that changed Pius XII’s reputation after his death.

“Pope Francis has ordered that Vatican Archives be opened eight years early, on March 2, 2020. What can we expect to learn from each archive and why did it take so long to open them?”

All the speakers said they were convinced that the new documentary evidence will only strengthen their cases. Indeed, the opening of the Archives in March will shed further light on the truth of Pope Pius XII and the Church during the Holocaust.

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