

# STATEMENT TO THE DULUTH COMMUNITY: UNIV. OF MINNESOTA DULUTH HOLOCAUST EVENT

*Bill Donohue*

It has come to my attention that the University of Minnesota Duluth is hosting a series of events on the Holocaust; they are scheduled to run between April 12 and April 19. Because many of the events address the religious response to the Holocaust, it is of great interest to the Catholic League. For example, we have a wealth of information on our website about the Catholic response to Hitler. Moreover, we have raised funds for books and articles on the subject, and we even have a reader on Pope Pius XII that covers the Jewish reaction to his noble efforts.

It is our hope that these events will foster an intellectual dialogue that is both educational and productive of good interreligious relations. But I am less than confident that this will happen. Unfortunately, some of what I have learned is very disturbing. There appears to be an effort to cast the Catholic Church in the role of an enabler, if not worse, of Nazi efforts. This is not only historically inaccurate, it is scurrilous.

The first sign that the Catholic Church will be treated in a villainous role is the postcard that was mailed to the public flagging the events: on the front there is an invidious drawing featuring a Nazi soldier and a Catholic prelate standing on a Jewish man. The drawing is nothing new: it was created to demonstrate the Catholic Church's alleged support for Hitler that the 1933 Concordat supposedly represented.

The second disturbing sign is the April 15 performance of "The Deputy," a play based on the work of Rolf Hochhuth. It is

described in the promotional material as a play “which indicts Pope Pius XII for his failure to take action or speak out against the Holocaust.”

The third disturbing sign is the April 19 event, “Religious Institutions Responses to the Holocaust.” One of the panelists will address what is called “the role of the Confessing Church and the Holocaust.”

My response to these issues is taken from my own book, *Why Catholicism Matters*, which will be published on May 29 by Image, an imprint of Random House; one part of my new book deals with the role of the Catholic Church and the Holocaust, citing the primary research on this subject that has been done by other scholars.

### ***First Complaint***

Pope Pius XI signed the concordat to protect German Catholics from prosecution. Rabbi David Dalin, who has written a ground-breaking book, *The Myth of Hitler's Pope*, demonstrates that this agreement was a protective measure; it was not an endorsement of Nazism. Essentially, the agreement allowed the Church to continue to exist in Germany as long as it did not interfere with Hitler's regime. Not only was it violated by Hitler almost immediately, according to Zsolt Aradi, a Jewish writer who covered Pius XI, “the little freedom that the Concordat left for the clergy and hierarchy was widely used to save as many persecuted Jews as could be saved.” In any event, the pope didn't have a whole lot of options to choose from at the time. It is important to note that the pope never gave even tacit support to Hitler's agenda.

This same pope issued an encyclical in 1937, *Mit Brennender Sorge*, that condemned the Nazi's violation of the concordat, and took aim at the Nazis' racial ideology (it was written by the man who would become his successor, Eugenio Pacelli—Pope Pius XII). An internal German memorandum dated March 23, 1937,

called the encyclical “almost a call to do battle against the Reich government.” Indeed, the encyclical was roundly attacked in the German newspapers, which wrote that it was the product of the “Jew God and His deputy in Rome.” In fact, some media outlets said the encyclical “calls on Catholics to rebel against the authority of the Reich,” a conclusion that was entirely warranted.

In short, to mail postcards smearing the Catholic Church, as if the concordat was a vote of support for Hitler, is inexcusable. It is also inexcusable to learn that the *Duluth News Tribune* featured the agit-prop drawing as an advertisement for the event.

### ***Second Complaint***

“The Deputy” previewed in Berlin and London in 1963 before coming to New York City in 1964. Prior to that time, the overwhelming consensus in the Jewish community was that Pope Pius XII was a hero. To wit: the pope is credited by former Israeli diplomat Pinchas Lapide of saving approximately 860,000 Jewish lives, far more than any other leader in the world, secular or religious. Indeed, it was proposed in the 1940s that 800,000 trees be planted as a testimony of the pope’s contribution; they were planted in Negev, in southeast Jerusalem. And when Pope Pius XII died in 1958, Leonard Bernstein of the New York Philharmonic stopped his orchestra for a moment of silence. Among the Jewish organizations that praised the pope were the following: the Anti-Defamation League, the Synagogue Council of America, the Rabbinical Council of America, the New York Board of Rabbis, the America Jewish Committee, the World Jewish Congress, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and the National Council of Jewish Women.

So what new evidence turned up between 1958 and 1963 to indict the pope as an enabler of Hitler? None. Hochhuth, well known in radical circles at the time, made this charge in his play

absent any historical evidence. Recent scholarship, particularly the work of Professor Ronald Rychlak, shows that while Hochhuth operated alone, he was an “unknowing dupe” of the KGB. How do we know? Because of the 2007 testimony of Ion Mihai Pacepa. He maintains that Nikita Khrushchev approved a plan to discredit Pope Pius XII. Pacepa was in a position to know; he was a former Romanian intelligence chief and the highest-ranking official ever to defect from the Soviet Bloc.

No serious historian today views “The Deputy” as being anything other than propaganda. In fact, not a single historian has ever remarked on the factual accuracy of this play. But we do know that it nonetheless sparked a rash of anti-Pius books, most of which were written by ex-priests and ex-seminarians whose antipathy of the Church—on matters wholly unrelated to the Holocaust—is palpable. I would be remiss if I did not note that the Catholic League offered to pay for Professor Rychlak to go to Germany a few years ago to interview Hochhuth. Hochhuth declined.

### ***Third Complaint***

It is difficult to understand how the “Confessing Church” position can be maintained. What exactly is it that the Church is allegedly confessing? \*(The term “Confessing Church” in German history refers to a Protestant breakaway movement that opposed the Nazis.) We know this much: throughout the Holocaust, the *New York Times* ran a grand total of nine editorials critical of Hitler. Two of them were written to praise Pope Pius XII! To be specific, on Christmas Day 1941, the *Times* said, “The voice of Pius XII is a lonely voice in the silence and darkness enveloping Europe this Christmas.” On Christmas Day 1942, the *Times* said of the pope, “This Christmas more than ever he is a lonely voice crying out of the silence of a continent.” So much for the canard that the pope was “silent.”

It must be said, too, that many of those who elected to remain

silent did so with the best of motives. For example, when plans were made for an anti-Hitler parade in New York City on May 10, 1933, the American Jewish Committee and B'nai B'rith put out a joint statement condemning "public agitation in the form of mass demonstrations." They feared such actions would only "inflame" matters. In 1935, after the Nuremberg race laws were enacted, American Jews, led by Rabbi Stephen Wise of the American Jewish Congress, worked against legislation that would have made it easier for Jews to emigrate to the United States. Following Kristallnacht, the "Night of the Broken Glass" (Hitler's storm troopers went on a rampage killing Jews), several Jewish organizations came together saying "there should be no parades, no demonstrations, or protests by Jews." Again, they feared an even more vengeful Nazi response.

The author who made the accusation that Pius XII was "Hitler's pope," John Cornwell, has since retracted his charge. Do the panelists at these events know about this? Will it be mentioned? Will it also be mentioned that Hitler planned to kidnap the pope? Will the students learn that more Jews were saved in Italy—where the pope was actually in a position to affect outcomes—than in other any European nation? (Throughout Europe 65 percent of Jews were exterminated, but in Italy 85 percent of Jews were saved.) Will they learn that far more Jews were saved in Catholic countries than in Protestant ones?

"Only the Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler's campaign for suppressing the truth." Those were the words of Albert Einstein. Golda Meir offered similar praise. At the end of the war, the World Jewish Congress was so appreciative of the pope's efforts to save Jews that it gave 20 million lire to the Vatican. And after the war, the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Israele Anton Zolli, formally expressed the gratitude of Roman Jews "for all the moral and material aid the Vatican gave them during the Nazi occupation." In 1945, Zolli was received into the Catholic Church and asked Pius XII to be his godfather; he chose the pope's first name, Eugenio, to be his baptismal

name.

It is for these reasons, and many more like them, that I am disturbed to read how patently unfair the campus events on the Holocaust appear to be. In the interest of intellectual honesty, and goodwill between Catholics and Jews, I implore those in the Duluth community to weigh what I have said and give it a fair hearing. No matter what side anyone comes down on, the truth should never become hostage to political propaganda.