

POPE JOHN PAUL II: ENEMY OF ANTI-SEMITISM

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October 16 marks the 20th anniversary of the papacy of John Paul II. Already known to many as John Paul the Great, his list of accomplishments are as plentiful as they are monumental. Surely among them is his role in establishing strong relations between Catholics and Jews.

The Holy Father has not shied from roundly criticizing the actions of many Christians before and during the Holocaust. But he has also defended the role of Pope Pius XII during the war: "Those who don't limit themselves to cheap polemics know very well what Pius XII thought of the Nazi regime, and how much he did to help the countless victims persecuted by that regime."

October 9 marked the 40th anniversary of the death of Pius XII. When he died, Jewish organizations the world over congratulated him for his efforts in saving Jews from the Nazis (he is credited with saving the lives of as many as 860,000 Jews).

Expressing their gratitude when Pius died were the following: Anti-Defamation League; Synagogue Council of America; Rabbinical Council of America; American Jewish Congress; World Jewish Congress; New York Board of Rabbis; American Jewish Committee; Central Conference of American Rabbis; Synagogue Council of America; National Conference of Christians and Jews; National Council of Jewish Women; the Chief Rabbi of Israel; the Chief Rabbi of Rome; Golda Meir; and virtually

every major rabbi in New York City.

Given this historical fact, it is disturbing to read revisionist accounts blaming Pius for the Holocaust. The decision of Pius to authorize the shelter and protection of Jews, as opposed to making rhetorical flourishes denouncing the Nazis, was a wise one. When the Dutch Catholic bishops openly condemned Hitler in 1942, more Jews were deported to death camps than from any other nation.

Indeed, prior to the Dutch Catholic bishops' statement, the Nazis had exempted the deportation of baptized Jews. But not afterwards. Among those who died as a result was the Jewish born Carmelite nun, Edith Stein. She was canonized this week, showing once again the leadership of Pope John Paul II. As the Pontiff previously said, Stein died at Auschwitz because she was both Jewish and Catholic.

The beatification of Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac earlier this month was another courageous move on the part of the Holy Father. Cardinal Stepinac, who died in 1960, spent 16 years in prison for his defiance of Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia.

Unfortunately, there are those today who want to brand Stepinac a Nazi collaborator. Yet at the time of his farcical trial, the American Association of Jews protested the charge as "slander"; in 1985, Jakov Blazevic, the man who originally tried Stepinac, admitted that the trial was framed from beginning to end.

Pope John Paul II is the first pope to visit the Synagogue of Rome and he is responsible for formally recognizing the state of Israel. He knows that Catholic misdeeds have contributed to anti-Semitism and he knows as well how much more needs to be done to show true brotherhood between Catholics and Jews. But is there anyone who doubts that he has done more to address this issue, with honesty and fairness, than any other world leader?

Congratulations, Holy Father. You are an inspiration to the world.