

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE HOLOCAUST, 1930-1965

By Michael Phayer, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis (2000)

Reviewed by Robert P. Lockwood

Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) faced Nazi Germany, as Secretary of State to Pius XI and as pope, with a remarkable consistency. The Nazis considered him an implacable foe, and he was hailed both during and after World War II as the strongest voice – often the only voice – speaking out in Europe against the Nazi terror. Pius' combination of diplomatic pressure, careful but sustained criticism while maintaining an essential neutrality in war-torn Europe, as well as direct action through his nuncios and the local Church where possible, saved hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives.

Yet, in the face of this clear historical record, Pope Pius XII has come under attack since his death. Accused of an alleged “silence” in the face of the Holocaust, recent critics have gone further, insinuating that he may have been a crypto-Nazi sympathizer.

Michael Phayer, professor of history at Marquette University, has authored a new book on the Catholic response to the Holocaust. In *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965* (Indiana University Press, September 2000), Phayer states that his purpose is to go beyond the issue of the alleged silence of Pope Pius XII. His intent is to explore how the Church in various countries, and through various individual Catholics, responded to the Holocaust, and how that response eventually led to the Church's formal rejection of anti-Semitism during the Second Vatican Council. But throughout the book, he paints Pope Pius XII as a meek pontiff

unwilling to engage the Nazis. He sees the pope as driven by a desire for a negotiated peace that will leave a powerful Germany as a European defense against an aggressive communist Soviet Union.

Phayer does not examine the allegation of silence on the part of Pope Pius XII, but merely accepts it as a given, bowing to contemporary conventional wisdom rather than the historical record of what was accomplished for Jews by Pius and the Church during the horror of the *Shoah*. For a book that claims to go beyond the debate over the alleged papal silence, his indictment of Pius is draconian. He claims that Pius "did little for Jews in their hour of greatest need." While acknowledging that working through his papal nuncios he was able to save Jewish lives, his "greatest failure...lay in his attempt to use a diplomatic remedy for a moral outrage."

Phayer argues that if Pius XI had lived five more years, Church reaction would have been different to the Holocaust and to Nazi Germany. In doing so, Phayer ignores or downplays the important role played by Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pope Pius XII, in determining Vatican reaction to the Nazis in the 1930s. Phayer cites a series of events under Pius XI that he interprets as signaling a new direction under Pius XI that was reversed under Pius XII. He notes, for example, the 1937 encyclical of Pope Pius XI, *Mit brennender sorge*, which condemned racism and idolatry of the State. He makes no mention that it was Cardinal Pacelli who drafted the encyclical. In 1938, Phayer describes how Cardinal Theodore Innitzer of Vienna was called to Rome for a dressing-down after he publicly welcomed the Nazi *Anschluss* of Austria. He does not mention that it was Cardinal Pacelli who summoned Cardinal Innitzer to Rome and told him he must retract his statement. He states that when Hitler visited Rome on an official visit to Benito Mussolini's Fascist Italy, "the pope snubbed the dictators by leaving the city." He fails to mention that Cardinal Pacelli departed with the pontiff.

He charges that Pope Pius XII contributed by his silence in the Nazi slaughter of Catholics in occupied Poland, particularly from 1939 to 1941. Yet Phayer himself acknowledges that Vatican Radio was the first to inform the world of the depths of the Nazi atrocities in Poland just months after its occupation through broadcasts in January, 1940, broadcasts given at the direction of Pope Pius XII. The pope raised the issue in his Easter and Christmas messages in 1940 and 1941, in articles in the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, as well as in the first encyclical of his pontificate, *Summi Pontificatus*. In a March 1940 confrontation with Joachim von Ribbontrop, Hitler's foreign minister, Pius XII read to him in German a detailed report on Nazi atrocities in Poland aimed at both the Church and the Jews. That meeting received in depth coverage in the *New York Times*. The nuncio to Germany was also instructed by Pius repeatedly, as Phayer himself notes, "to plead for better treatment of Polish priests and lay people." Yet, Phayer proclaims papal silence and complains that "Pius XII chose a diplomatic rather than a moral approach," without citing what other approach would have been feasible or successful in the face of Nazi aggression.

In his annual Christmas message of 1942, Pius XII condemned totalitarian regimes and mourned the victims of the war, "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." The statement was loudly praised in the Allied world. German leadership was it as the final repudiation by Pius XII of the Nazis. Oddly, Phayer claims that this Christmas message was not understood and that "no one, certainly not the Germans, took it as a protest against the slaughter of the Jews." He states this despite the negative German reaction, Allied praise for the statement, and a prominent Christmas Day 1942 editorial in the *New York Times* lauding the pope for speaking out.

Phayer makes a number of broad statements that are at best open to contrary interpretation, and at worst seem to misstate the facts. Phayer claims that the Vatican “refrained from promoting a separate Italian peace with the Allies because it would necessarily weaken Germany.” Pius had, in fact, pressed Mussolini to negotiate a separate peace and advised the Badoglio regime that succeeded him to do so as well. Phayer states that while Archbishop Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII, engaged in the rescue of many Jews, he quotes another historian who claims that he may have done so without Vatican orders and “possibly even against them.” This would make Archbishop Roncalli a liar as he clearly stated that as nuncio he acted at the direction of Pope Pius XII.

The central thesis in Phayer’s book is that Pius wanted a strong Germany to face down the threat of Soviet communism. Yet, nowhere in the book does Phayer cite documented statements of Pope Pius XII to support that assertion. Pius XII did not change his position when Germany began its war with Russia, and he never spoke, even by means of allusion, about a “crusade” against Bolshevism or a holy war. There is no documented evidence of such a policy. But much is known to the contrary. It is known, for example, that Pius intervened to assure American supplies to the Soviet Union. Pius also agreed to an American request not to publicly raise Stalin’s past persecution of the Church after he joined the Allied cause.

There are elements in Phayer’s book that are interesting and worthy. He outlines well what the Church – and individual Catholics – were able to accomplish in rescuing Jews. He makes clear that the Church did not sit by idly as the Jews were taken to slaughter. Of particular interest is his overview of what the Church did and did not do within Nazi Germany itself.

Yet, rather than “go beyond” the issue of Pius XII as he claims to be the intent of his book, Phayer returns to him repeatedly. “To the extent that Pope Pius chose to intervene

at all, he did so through intermediaries, the nuncios, rather than by responding to the Holocaust publicly from Rome. In other words, when the pope chose to deal with the murder of Jews, he did so through diplomatic channels rather than through a moral pronouncement such as an encyclical." But that is precisely the point. There was no absolute "papal silence" on the Holocaust. Pius XII spoke carefully, certainly. But the Holy See and its representatives condemned Nazism and its atrocities long before any governments raised the issue. Yet Pius XII was primarily concerned with saving lives, rather than high-minded pronouncements that would have accomplished little or nothing.

The Church under Pius saved more Jews from the Holocaust than any other entity in that terrible time. That is the undeniable fact that critics of Pius, whatever their motivation, must answer. Phayer does not.

For a complete understanding of the role of Pope Pius XII in World War II, we strongly recommend Ronald Rychlak's *Hitler, the War and the Pope* (Our Sunday Visitor Press, \$19.95 plus shipping and handling. Call 1-800-348-2440). While there are a few good sections in Michael Phayer's book, his overall treatment of Pius XII is prejudiced and unconvincing.