

The Truth about Pope Pius XII

By Sr. Margherita Marchione, Ph.D.

Pope Pius XII was not a German collaborator nor was he pro-Nazi. Neither was he inactive nor silent. As a member of the Catholic Church, I resent the blatant accusations against the diplomacy of the Pope and the Church during World War II. This is not only indecent journalism but it also an injustice toward a man who saved more Jews than any other person, including Oscar Schindler and Raoul Wallenberg. Unfortunately even in the new Holocaust Museum at Battery Park in New York City the Pope is unjustly criticized. It is historically inaccurate to charge him with “silence.”

Should the media be allowed to perpetuate such falsehoods? Documents prove that these misrepresentations are untrue. Pius XII spoke out as much as he could, and was able to do more with actions than with words. To the very end, he was convinced that, should he denounce Hitler publicly, there would be retaliation. And there was. Whenever protests were made, treatment of prisoners worsened immediately. Robert Kempner, the American who served as deputy chief of the Nuremberg war-crimes tribunal, wrote: “All the arguments and writings eventually used by the Catholic Church against Hitler only provoked suicide; the execution of Jews was followed by that of Catholic priests.”

Pius XII—through his public discourses, his appeals to governments, and his secret diplomacy—was engaged more than any other individual in the effort to curb the war and rebuild the peace. Documents show that Pius XII was in contact with the German generals who sought to overthrow Hitler. Documents also show that the Jewish community received enormous help: Pius XII’s personal funds ransomed Jews from Nazis. Papal representatives in Croatia, Hungary, and Romania intervened to stop deportations. The Pope called for a peace conference involving Italy, France, England, Germany, and Poland in 1939, in a last-minute bid to avert bloodshed.

An interesting document is the testimony of Albert Einstein who, disenchanted by the silence of universities and editors of newspapers, stated in *Time* magazine (December 23, 1940): “Only the Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler’s campaign for suppressing truth. ...The Church alone has had the courage and persistence to stand for intellectual truth and moral freedom.” Indeed, executing the directives of Pope Pius XII, religious men and women opened their doors to save the Jews.

Never were the Jews and the Vatican so close as during World War II. The Vatican was the only place on the continent where they had any friends. Pope Pius XII’s response to the plight of the Jews was to save as many as possible. Yet little has been done to stop the criticism of Pius XII that began in 1963, when Rolf Hochhuth portrayed him as a Nazi collaborator in the play “The Deputy.” In contrast to the image suggested by this play, Vatican records indicate that the Church operated an underground railroad that rescued 800,000 European Jews from the Holocaust. After a careful study of available documents, whoever is interested in the truth will no longer condemn the actions of Pope Pius XII’s words and the Catholic Church during this tragic period.

An honest evaluation of Pope Pius XII’s words and actions will exonerate him from false accusations and show that he has been unjustly maligned. The Pope neither favored nor was favored by the Nazis. The day after his election (March 3, 1939), the Nazi newspaper, *Berliner Morganpost* stated its position clearly: “the election of Cardinal Pacelli is not accepted with favor in Germany because he was always opposed to Nazism.”

The *New York Times* editorial (December 25, 1942) was specific: “The voice of Pius XII is a lonely voice in the silence and darkness enveloping Europe this Christmas. He is about the only ruler left on the Continent of Europe who dares to raise his voice at all.” The Pope’s Christmas message was also interpreted in the Gestapo report: “in a manner never known before...the Pope has repudiated the National Socialist New European Order [Nazism]. It is true, the Pope does not refer to the National Socialists in Germany by name, but his speech is one long attack on everything we stand for. ...Here he is clearly speaking on behalf of the Jews.” Perhaps the rest of the world should interpret the Pope’s words as they were meant and, undoubtedly, correctly understood by the Nazis, i.e.: **POPE PIUS XII WAS ALWAYS OPPOSED TO NAZISM.**

The Jewish Community publicly acknowledged the wisdom of Pope Pius XII’s diplomacy. In September 1945, Dr. Joseph Nathan—who represented the Hebrew Commission—stated “Above all, we acknowledge the Supreme Pontiff and the religious men and women who, executing the directives of the Holy Father, recognized the persecuted as their brothers and, with great abnegation, hastened to help them, disregarding the terrible dangers to which they were exposed.” In 1958, at the death of Pope Pius XII, Golda Meir sent an eloquent message: “We share in the grief of humanity. ...When fearful martyrdom came to our people, the voice of the Pope was raised for its victims. The life of our times was enriched by a voice speaking out about great moral truths above the tumult of daily conflict. We mourn a great servant of peace.”

On the Church and the Holocaust

Excerpts from books and periodicals that have covered this subject:

- The foremost Jewish Scholar of the Holocaust at its height in Hungary, **Jeno Levai**, insisted some years ago that it was a “**particularly regrettable irony that the one person in all of occupied Europe who did more than anyone else to halt the dreadful crime and alleviate its consequences is today made the scapegoat for the failures of others.**”
 - The Israeli diplomat and scholar **Pinchas Lapide** concluded his careful review of Pius XII’s wartime activities with the following words: “**The Catholic Church under the pontificate of Pius XII was instrumental in saving lives of as many as 860,000 Jews from certain death at Nazi hands.**” He went on to add that this “**figure far exceeds those saved by all other Churches and rescue organizations combined.**” After recounting statements of appreciation from a variety of preeminent Jewish spokespersons, he noted. “**No Pope in history has been thanked more heartily by JewsSeveral suggested in open letters that a Pope Pius XII forest of 860,000 trees be planted on the hills of Judea in order to fittingly honor the memory of the late Pontiff (“Three Popes and the Jews” pp. 214–215).**” Levai in his own book did not hesitate to argue that the attacks on the Pope’s wartime record are “**demonstrably malicious and fabricated The archives of the Vatican of diocesan authorities of Ribbentrop’s foreign ministry, contain a whole series of protests—direct and indirect, diplomatic and public, secret and open. The nuncios and bishops of the Catholic Church intervened again and again on the instructions of the Pope,**” he wrote. Their interventions were just as unsuccessful as the demands and threats of the British and American governments. Moreover, the delicacy of the matter was often heightened by the fact that such protests could put Jews themselves and their protectors at additional corporal risk.
 - Hungarian Jews and the Papacy: The former **chief rabbi of Rome** during the German occupation, **Emilio Zolli**, concluded his firsthand account of wartime events thus: “**Volumes could be written on the multifiform works of Pius XII, and the countless priests, religious and laity who stood with him throughout the world during the war.**” “**No hero,**” he said, “**in all of history was more militant, more fought against, none more heroic, than Pius XII in pursuing the works of true charity . . . and thus on behalf of all the suffering children of God.**” Zolli was so moved by Pius XII’s work that he became a Catholic after the war and took the Pope’s name (*Before the Dawn*). Lapide acknowledged in his book that the Church “**in an endless flood of sermons, allocutions, pastoral letters and encyclicals was a clear and unrelenting foe to all forms of racism at the time, and everyone knew it—Jews, Poles, Russians and most ominously the Nazi secret police.**” Their files mention recalcitrant Catholic clergy in this regard more than any other group.
- The *New York Times* in its Christmas editorials of 1941 and 1942 praised Pius XII for his moral leadership as a “**lonely voice crying out of the silence of a continent**” and for, among other things, assailing “**the violent occupation of territory, and the exile and persecution of human beings, for no other reason than race.**” No other institution produced more heroes during the Holocaust than the Church: Italian, Slovak, French, Hungarian priests, nuns, and laypersons who risked and often gave their lives for the sake of persecuted Jews. This too deserves remembrance and respect.
- **Golda Meir**, Israel’s representative to the United Nations, was the first of the delegates to react to the news of Pope Pius XII’s death. She sent an eloquent message: “**We share in the grief of humanity at the passing away of His Holiness, Pope Pius XII. In a generation afflicted by wars and discords he upheld the highest ideals of peace and compassion. When fearful martyrdom came to our people in the decade of Nazi terror, the voice of the Pope was raised for its victims. The life of our times was enriched by a voice speaking out about great moral truths above the tumult of daily conflict. We mourn a great servant of peace.**”
- **Leonard Bernstein**, on learning of Pope Pius XII’s death while conducting his orchestra in New York’s Carnegie Hall, tapped his baton for a moment of silence to pay tribute to the Pope who had saved the lives of so many people without distinction of race, nationality, or religion.
- The great Jewish physicist, **Albert Einstein**, who himself barely escaped annihilation at Nazi hands, made the point well in 1944 when he said, “**Being a lover of freedom, when the Nazi revolution came in Germany, I looked to the universities to defend it, but the universities were immediately silenced. Then I looked to the great editors of the newspapers, but they, like the universities were silenced in a few short weeks. Then I looked to individual writers they too were mute. Only the Church,**” Einstein concluded, “**stood squarely across the path of Hitler’s campaign for suppressing the truth. . . . I never had any special interest in the Church before, but now I feel great affection and admiration and am forced thus to confess that what I once despised, I now praise unreservedly.**”

