

Tribute to Pope Pius XII

Sister Margherita Marchione (Catalyst, November 2008)

The career of Eugenio Pacelli ended when people were awakened in Rome soon after dawn, Thursday the 9th of October 1958. Pius XII died at 3:51 a.m., in a plain white iron bed, overhung with a white canopy, in his room on the second floor of the Papal villa in Castelgandolfo, his summer residence.

During the hours he lay in state in Castelgandolfo, mourners filled the main square in front of the building as well as roads leading from the countryside.

The Italian Government ordered three days of national mourning in Rome. Not only were Italian flags at half-staff, but all theatres and amusement places were closed.

A motorcade proceeded along the Appian Way. Pius XII's body was taken first to the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the Pope's titular church in his capacity as Bishop of Rome. Then it was taken in solemn procession to the Vatican where he laid in state for three days under Michelangelo's gigantic dome in the Basilica of St Peter.

Deep emotion was evident and many shed tears as mourners passed near Pope Pius XII's corpse.

People of all races knelt in prayer. Nine solemn funeral Masses were sung in St Peter's Basilica. On the 13th, the doors were closed at noon to prepare for the funeral ceremonies which began at 4 p.m. Diplomats accredited to the Holy See and representatives from governments around the world were present, as well as his family and Sister Pascalina, who served him for forty years. A final tribute was read and buried with Pius XII: "With his death a great light went out on earth and a new star was lit in heaven."

Fifty years later, in spite of five decades of misinformation and calumny, Catholics throughout the world continue to venerate Pius XII whose efforts during World War II saved thousands of Jews from the Holocaust.

Pius XII was not a "silent pope." He explicitly condemned the "wickedness of Hitler" citing Hitler by name, and spoke out about the "fundamental rights of Jews." The wisdom of his words and actions is supported by the evidence. In his testimony at the Adolf Eichmann Nazi War Crime Trials, Jewish scholar Jeno Levai stated: "Pius XII—the one person 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."

Pope Pius XII's peace efforts, his denunciation of Nazism and his defense of the Jewish people have been clearly documented. Albert Einstein concluded in Time magazine (December 23, 1940): "Only the Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler's campaign for suppressing the truth."

Countless expressions of gratitude, on the part of Jewish chaplains and Holocaust survivors, give witness to the assistance and compassion of the Pope for the Jews before, during and after the Holocaust.

Rabbi David Dalin states that "to deny the legitimacy of their collective gratitude to Pius XII is tantamount to denying their memory and experience of the Holocaust itself, as well as to denying the credibility of their personal testimony and judgment about the Pope's role in rescuing hundreds of thousands of Jews from certain death at the hands of the Nazis."

Personally and through his representatives, Pius XII employed all the means at his disposal to save Jews and other refugees during World War II. As a moral leader and a diplomat forced to limit his words, he privately took action and, despite insurmountable obstacles, saved hundreds of thousands of Jews from the gas chambers. Broadcasting in German in April 1943, Vatican Radio protested a long list of Nazi horrors, including "an unprecedented enslavement of human freedom, the deportation of thousands for forced labor, and the killing of innocent and guilty alike."

Throughout World War II, Pius XII so provoked the Nazis that they called him "a mouthpiece of the Jewish war criminals." Jewish historian and Holocaust survivor, Michael Tagliacozzo, wrote a letter to the daily newspaper *Davar* (Tel Aviv, April 23, 1985) which states: "Little known is the precious help of the Holy See. On the recommendation of Pius XII the religious of every order did their best to save Jews."

All experts who witnessed that era agree that if Pius XII had stridently attacked the Nazi leaders, more lives would have been lost. Fifty years later, I interviewed Carlo Sestieri, a Jewish survivor, who was hidden in the Vatican. In a letter to me he suggested that "only the Jews who were persecuted understand why the Holy Father could not publicly denounce the Nazi-Fascist government. Without doubt—he stated—it helped avoid worse disasters."

Pius XII's virtuous life speaks for itself. On December 13, 1954, a picture story entitled "Years of a Great Pope," appeared in *Life* magazine. The author states that Pius XII was deserving of the title "Great Pope" because he sought "peace for the world and the spirit" during World War II.

He was truly a "Great Pope," and it is high time everyone gave him his due.

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