

RECAPPING HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY

Ronald Rychlak

January 27 marked the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Nazi-occupied Poland. That day, the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust, was observed at the United Nations building in New York City with a symposium entitled: "Remembering the Holocaust: The Documented Efforts of the Catholic Church to Save Lives."

It was co-sponsored by the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations, and Pave the Way Foundation. The conference brought together international experts on Catholic rescue efforts during the Nazi persecution.

The experts included Edouard Husson (France), Michael Hesemann (Germany), Ronald Rychlak (USA), Mark Riebling (USA), Limore Yagil (France), Matteo Luigi Napolitano (Italy), and Johan Ickx (Holy See). Msgr. Fredrik Hansen of the Holy See mission moderated the event.

Gary Krupp of Pave the Way Foundation kicked off the event with a personal statement about his father's role in liberating the camps. Gary set forth ten questions that he wanted answered. By the time it was over, they all were.

The first question Krupp asked was: "What was the approach of the Holy See and the Catholic Church to the horror of the Holocaust?" To some extent, all of the panelists addressed this question, but the presentations by Hesseran, Yagil, and Riebling particularly focused on how the Holy See provided sanctuary to victims, gave information to the Allies, and the pope was willing to go so far as to be involved in the

attempted overthrow of Adolf Hitler. That is a great deal more than the Church is typically given credit for, but these scholars are doing their best to bring forth the truth.

Krupp's second question was: "During the rise of Adolf Hitler from the early 1920s, was the future Pope Pius XII (Eugenio Pacelli), as Holy See Ambassador to Germany, and the Catholic Church silent about the coming dangers?"

Hesserman, Napolitano, and Ickx showed that neither the future pope nor the Church itself was silent. Pacelli recognized the dangers of National Socialism and warned others about them early on. At first he did this in reports to his superiors, and later he did so both publicly and in diplomatic messages to other nations. He also had a significant hand in the strong condemnations (including the encyclical published in German, *Mit brennender Sorge*) issued by Pope Pius XI. The Church was by no means silent.

The third question was: "Did the Holy See officially recognize the Nazi regime by signing a concordat with Germany in 1933?" Napolitano answered this question most completely, though it was also touched on by others. The agreement signed by the Holy See with Germany was not a recognition of the regime. It was made with the nation, and it remained in effect after the fall of Nazism.

The concordat ended up being very important in helping the Church continue to function during the war. It also provided a basis for protecting Jews with baptismal certificates, because it defined Jewishness as a faith and not a race. As was pointed out, the concordat came after the regime had reached agreements with France, England, Italy, the Soviet Union, and had been recognized by the League of Nations. Clearly, the concordat was not an endorsement of the regime or mark of approval from the Church.

Krupp's fourth question was: “What was the Nazi opinion of the Catholic Church and, consequently, why was it targeted by Hitler for destruction?” All of the speakers set forth reasons why Hitler and the Nazis hated the Catholic Church. The Church sheltered victims, cooperated with the Allies, regularly filed diplomatic protests, used both its radio and newspaper to warn others about the Nazis, and Pope Pius XII joined in the plot to oust Hitler by any means necessary. The Nazis despised the Church and Pius XII, and they had good cause to do so.

For his fifth question, Krupp rolled three into one: “Was Pope Pius XII an anti-Semite? Was he silent during the Holocaust? Why didn’t he protest with a forceful public condemnation of the killing of the Jews?” As several experts made clear, while Pius made important statements over the course of the war, and was noted by the press for doing so, he favored concrete actions.

Pius learned early in the war that public words would not influence the Nazis in a positive manner. In fact, as several of the experts explained, those closest to the matter – including the Allied military and bishops in occupied territories – often asked him to withhold public statements lest they lead to greater harm.

As for his actions, Pius provided the Allies with information about German troop movements, was deeply involved in the plot to overthrow Hitler, and he mandated that those who could shelter Jews from Nazi persecution do so. No, he was not an anti-Semite.

The sixth question was about a well-known estimate by Israeli diplomat Pinchas Lapide, who worked on it in the archives at Yad Vashem for six months. He estimated that the Catholic Church saved between 847,000 and 882,000 Jews during the Holocaust. Krupp asked whether the figure was accurate, and if so, whether the lifesaving actions of Catholic clergy, religious, and others were connected to directives of the Vatican and Pius XII?

The scholars all agree that Lapede's estimate is accurate as a minimum. With new archives opening and new information being found, many think the number is significantly higher. Moreover, as both oral and written testimonies confirm, Vatican and papal directives were indeed behind these initiatives. Thus, as Krupp noted, about a quarter of the Jews alive today can trace their fate back to ancestors who were saved by the Vatican of Pope Pius XII.

Krupp's seventh question related to the events of October 16, 1943, when 1,259 Roman Jews were rounded up for deportation to Auschwitz. Krupp wanted to hear about the actions of the Pope on that terrible day. Ickx and others explained that the Vatican went into high gear that morning, pursuing three different diplomatic avenues to try to stop the roundup. Unfortunately, these initiatives were largely unsuccessful. While some people were freed (or escaped), 1,030 were deported. All but 16 of them died in captivity.

It seemed unlikely to the experts that any other course of action could have saved those who were deported. It may well be, however, that the Church's approach shaped Nazi action in the future. There were no more mass roundups in Rome after that date. Moreover, many Roman Jews survived the war in the Vatican or other Church properties. Firsthand accounts show that this was done by order of Pope Pius XII.

The eighth question was whether the Holy See was complicit with aiding Nazis to escape punishment? Not all Catholics are saints, and there seem to have been a couple notorious churchmen who did indeed help some Nazis escape justice after the war. The evidence also shows, however, that these were rare exceptions and such activities did not reach to high levels in the Church.

Krupp's ninth question was "How, why, and when did the esteem for the lifesaving actions taken during the Holocaust by the Holy See and Pope Pius XII begin to change? Was this the result of scholarship or propaganda?" Rychlak spoke about the massive disinformation

campaign run by the Soviets in order to discredit the pope, the church, and religion itself. Rychlak co-authored a book with Ion Mihai Pacepa, former head of foreign intelligence in Communist Romania and the highest ranking Soviet-bloc officer ever to defect. Pacepa directed parts of that campaign, and has long wanted to set the record straight. Disinformation, not honest scholarship, changed Pius XII's reputation after his death.

The tenth and final question Krupp asked was: "Pope Francis has ordered that Vatican Archives be opened eight years early, on March 2, 2020. What can we expect to learn from each archive and why did it take so long to open them?" Each scholar noted some point that they hope or expect to learn from the new archives. As a whole, they are convinced that the new documentary evidence will only strengthen their cases. All of them are anxious to see the archives opened. They understand the reason for the time it has taken, though. There were literally millions of pages to be summarized and catalogued.

The opening of the Archives in March will shed further light on the truth of Pope Pius XII and the Church during the Holocaust.

The first day's United Nations event is now available online. Soon the second day will be added. <http://webtv.un.org/search/remembering-the-holocaust-the-documented-efforts-of-the-holy-see-and-the-catholic-church-to-save-lives/6127031085001/?term=2020-01-27&sort=date>