

Michael Phayer, 'The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965'

1. Catholic Attitudes toward Jews Before the Holocaust

What was Pius XI's attitude toward fascism and racism in the last years of his pontificate? Characterize "Mit brennender Sorge" 1937.

What was the attitude of Pius XII right after his election in 1939? How important was opposition to racism and anti-semitism to Pius XII?

How strong was anti-semitism among central European Catholics in the 20s and 30s? How does religious anti-semitism differ from racial anti-semitism? How might you say that Jacques Maritain was prophetic?

How prevalent was anti-semitism among the German bishops between 1933 and 1939?

How fateful was it that Pius XII became pope just before the beginning of World War II?

2. Genocide Before the Holocaust: Poland 1939

What were the Nazis' intentions toward the Catholic Poles? How were they treated by the Germans 1939-42? Why did German treatment of Poles improve beginning in 1942?

Describe Pius XII's reaction to the pleas of the Polish bishops. Did the Poles have the right to feel totally abandoned?

3. Genocide Before the Holocaust: Croatia 1941

Pavelic and the Ustasha Party in Croatia: Catholic Fascists. Describe their policy toward Jews and Serbs living in Croatia.

Archbishop Stepinac appears to disapprove of the Ustasha and chastises their leaders. What was the Vatican's attitude in 1941?

Vatican's position: it wants the Croatian Catholic state to succeed, but disapproves of the slaughter; they knew what was happening; however, the Vatican never speaks out, but acts discreetly, quietly and through diplomacy.

4. The Holocaust and the Priorities of Pope Pius XII

Define the Holocaust. When did it start: preliminary in Russia summer 1941; Wannsee decision taken in January 1942.

1941 – the Vatican and its nuncio in Berlin, Orsenigo, resist finding out about the murder of Jews. There can be no reasonable doubt that the Vatican was fully aware of the German campaign to murder Jews by 1942 at the latest, and yet the pope did little to nothing.

Pius XII tries to keep the news about the Holocaust under wraps; his resistance to the demands of the insistent German bishop Preysing, who wanted the pope to break off diplomatic relations with Germany, that he speak out on the issue.

The bottom line: Pius feared Communism above all other threats, and he wanted a strong (non-Nazi) Germany to survive after the war to oppose Marxist expansion. He thought he could promote this end through diplomacy, while not speaking out about the Holocaust and run the danger of alienating the German Nazi government.

Another top priority of the pope: protection of the city of Rome against all threats, especially the possibility of Allied bombardment. While Roman Jews were carted off to Germany for death in October 1943, he was obsessed with the possibility of destruction in Rome and didn't do as much as he could have for the arrested Jews.

Sum: Pius' priorities are the well-being of the Church, resistance to the Communists, preservation of the city of Rome intact; the fate of the Jews is pretty far down the line.

Since Pius was a diplomat by profession, he preferred to operate quietly behind the scenes rather than make dramatic public declarations.

5. In the Eye of the Storm: German Bishops and the Holocaust

Bishop Preysing as the German bishop who wanted to do something about the Holocaust.

Through Margarete Sommer the German bishops already knew about the Holocaust in February 1942.

German bishops were reluctant to speak out partly because of their fear of breaking the Concordat of 1933 that forbade the German Church to be involved in politics; but mainly because they were patriotic and did not want to speak out against the Nazis while Germany was at war. Preysing essentially failed in his campaign to get the pope to put pressure on the German bishops; he wrote to the pope about 15 times, and all the pope would do was to give the German bishops permission to do something individually on their own initiative.

Although some individual German bishops spoke out modestly against the genocide, the German bishops never mustered the courage to speak out with force to raise the conscience of Catholics; Catholics were not informed by their Church of the crimes of their government.

6. European Bishops and the Holocaust

The record of the pope and of his diplomatic service (the nuncios) was mixed in dealing with the Jewish question: there were some effective interventions, but many distressing failures due in large part to inaction and lethargy.

In **Croatia** Archbishop Stepinac did speak out against the Ustasha government, usually to little effect (the Italians were mostly responsible for saving some Jews); he got little help from the Vatican that did not want to undermine the possible success of this Catholic government.

The Germans were determined to deport and murder the Jews in **Slovakia**. The Vatican used diplomacy to try to delay and minimize the deportations; they had some success in protecting the Jews who had converted to Christianity; largely because of Vatican and local protests there was a lull in the deportation of Jews in 1943 and 1944; but the rest of the Jews in Slovakia were deported at the end of the war. At no time did the Vatican or the Slovakian bishops protest.

In occupied **France** a minority of bishops spoke out “valiantly” against the deportation of Jews; they were not encouraged to do so by the pope. When an archbishop in **Holland** spoke out, the Nazis responded by arresting all Dutch Jews converted to Christianity; this event has been used by defenders of Pius XII to show that it was more effective to operate quietly through diplomacy.

Italy – the Vatican played a modest role in efforts to help Italian Jews.

The famous events in **Rome** of October 1943. The pope did nothing to warn the Jews about the planned round-up although he knew about it; German diplomats in Rome and not Vatican officials were responsible for putting pressure on the German government not to do it (it was done anyhow); the Vatican sat on its hands. The Vatican made no protest to the Germans either before or after the round-up. No doubt however that thousands of Jews were hidden in Vatican buildings until the Germans evacuated Rome in June 1944; the pope must have at least known about and tacitly approved of these efforts.

1944-45 in **Hungary**. The reaction of the Catholic Church was a “patchwork quilt” – the usual lethargic pope who acts too late and too little, afraid of anything beyond timid diplomacy; papal Nuncio Rota is the hero acting aggressively to save Jews; local Hungarian bishops were indifferent or anti-semitic. The Vatican waited and waited...and most of the Hungarian Jews were carted off to Auschwitz and slaughtered.

In sum, the Vatican never instructed local bishops to make efforts to save Jews; and it did not even circulate reports to bishops of other bishops that made efforts. A sorry record of lethargy.

7. Catholic Rescue Efforts during the Holocaust

Catholics were among those in 1940s Europe who both slaughtered Jews (Catholics who converted to Nazism) and those who rescued them; much of the responsibility must be attributed to Church authorities, who left Catholics in moral ambiguity because they did not speak out and tell lay Catholics where their duty lay.

The heroic German Gertrud Luckner, who was however “a lonely crusader” with limited effectiveness.

Two nuns, Matylda Getter and Margit Slachta, used the convents of their organization to rescue at least 3000 Jews from extermination by the Germans in Poland and Hungary. They took the initiative entirely on their own; there was no encouragement or direction from Church authorities.

The diocesan structures of the Church in Berlin and Italy were fairly effective in saving thousands of Jews from the Nazis. Margareta Sommer organized rescue efforts in Berlin beginning in 1942. Father Maria Benedetto in Italy was the most aggressive Italian rescuer among many others. Nowhere else were the diocesan structures so effective.

Catholics who set up their own rescue organizations (not depending on Church organizations): Zegota in Poland and Germaine Ribièrè in France had limited success in rescuing, e.g., children.

Many more Jews would have been rescued if Church authorities (pope and bishops) had spoken out. Catholic individuals were left in a moral vacuum by Church authorities.

8. Answering for the Holocaust: the United States Confronts Germany

1945 – Pius XII at the least stretches the truth by declaring that German Catholics had always opposed Hitler during the war.

Despite the prodding of American occupational authorities bent on denazification, German Catholics generally refuse to take any responsibility for what happened during Nazi times; exceptions include Preysing, Kogon, etc.

Already in 1945 German Catholic authorities were lobbying for release of Nazi war criminals; the bishops even denounced the Nuremberg trials as illegal. Cf. the case of SS concentration camp doctor Hans Eiserle, who was released in 1952. Most war criminal sentences were commuted, often from the intervention of Catholics.

The German Church's new self-image was that the Church had been victimized by the Nazis just as much as the Jews. Bishops occupied themselves with denouncing the occupation authorities; with the usual exception of Preysing, few mentioned what happened to the Jews.

Far from abating, anti-semitism increased in postwar Germany – so many East European Jews had immigrated to Germany. American denazification efforts (promoted by Generals Eisenhower and Lucius Clay) were harmed by the anti-Semitic feelings of Pius' representative in Germany, Cardinal Münch.

With the Cold War active in 1948, the mood shifts. Now instead of punishing Germans, the tendency of the western allies was to let them off the hook to enlist their efforts in the struggle against the Soviets. Amnesia sets in; the world forgets about the concentration camps; war criminals are heard with sympathy.

9. The Holocaust and the Priorities of Pius XII during the Cold War

Pius in the years after the war enjoys an enormously positive image in the West. Anxious to create a strong, non-Communist Germany, Pius generally opposed severe punishment for German Nazis and asserted that German Catholics had been whole-hearted opponents of the Nazis.

Pius, always inclined to “micromanage” German affairs was basically opposed to the war crimes trials and favored clemency for convicted war criminals.

The Vatican (the government under Pius XII) actively abetted the escape of potential war criminals from Germany and Croatia. Bishop Hudal apparently received Vatican funds to help former Nazis escape. The Vatican also supported Ustasha refugees who were wanted for war crimes in Croatia; the Vatican helped all these people to move on to relative safety in South America. Pius’ apparent motive is that these men would strengthen the anti-Communist movement. The most notorious escaped Ustasha was the notorious Ante Pavelic.

Pius opposed the efforts to move the remaining Jewish refugees to Palestine (soon to be Israel); he favored settling them in the USA.

The Frenchman Jacques Maritain urges the pope to speak out against the active outbursts of anti-semitism in postwar Europe. Pius and most of his bishops (exceptions Preysing and Faulhaber) refuse to speak out; they have other priorities for the Church.

10. Catholics and Jews After the Holocaust

Gertrud Luckner and her Freiburg Circle promote reconciliation with Jews after the war, and to make Germans aware of what the Nazis had done to the Jews in their name. She was able to recruit support for this among other German Catholic intellectuals.

She makes significant progress despite the indifference of most Catholic officials and the honest skepticism of Cardinal Frings.

Luckner and many others press for restitution (cash payments) to surviving German Jews. When she gets little sympathy from the Church hierarchy, she joins the campaign to put pressure on German political authorities. Restitution is finally decreed in 1957.

As always, Luckner et al. campaign to change the attitudes of Germans about Jews. She wins over important theologians like Romano Guardini and Karl Rahner, and perhaps more importantly the younger bishops in Germany, many of whom speak out in her favor after the death of Pius XII (1958). By early 60s the stage is set for important public developments.

11. The Holocaust Recalled, Anti-Semitism Renounced: the Second Vatican Council, 1962-65

The new pope John XXIII (1958-63) was determined to end official Catholic anti-semitism.

The extraordinary experience of the French Jew Jules Isaac, who was hidden by a member of the Catholic Underground in France during World War II. He wrote an influential book, *Jesus and*

Israel, that was influential in promoting Jewish reconciliation in Catholic circles. To everyone's surprise, he was sent by John XXIII in the early 60s to instruct the Vatican curia to include the Jewish question in the agenda of the upcoming Vatican Council.

At the beginning of the Vatican Council, the pope pushed hard for the drafting of a document that would renounce Catholic anti-semitism. It was tough going after the almost two millennia of religious anti-semitism in the Church. After the popes' death and the ascension of Paul VI, who was not as devoted to the cause as his predecessor, Cardinal Bea (of the curia) took charge of the campaign to push through the declaration. Some of the stronger language was taken out (there was no explicit apology), but the decree *Nostra Aetate* "deplores the hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews of any time and from any source." The 6 million Jewish dead "redeemed the Catholic Church and freed it from its sin of anti-Semitism."

12. Epilogue

Why did Pius XII react so inadequately to the problem of anti-semitism in the Church and to the Holocaust perpetrated outside it? 1) Part was his personality – he was retiring, very cautious, and quite inflexible, not willing or able to change with the times. 2) Part was his obsession with diplomacy, which had been his specialty all his life; he was sure that he could do more good by working diplomatically behind the scenes rather than speak out in public. His desire to preserve the Concordat of 1933 in Germany helps explain his weakness at dealing with the Holocaust during the war and reconciliation with the Jews after the war. 3) Pius was obsessed with Communism; according to him the greatest threat to the church in the mid-20th century was Soviet Communism. Thus, he went easy on Germany so that a strong Catholic force in Central Europe would be able to resist communist expansion; thus, his reluctance (refusal?) to challenge the Croatian Ustasha Party, since it was anti-Communist; hence his assistance to Nazi and Ustasha refugees so that they could bolster the anti-Communist cause in South America.

Craft: his priority was to the preservation of the Catholic Church against the deadly and complicated threats of the 20th century (the Supreme Pontiff); much more important than standing up before the world in defense of humanity (the Vicar of Christ). His defense of Jews or any other victim of injustice must not endanger the well-being of the Church.

If the Pope had instructed his bishops to let it be known (quietly) that the Church would do everything in its power to assist the Jews, many tens/hundreds of thousands more would have been saved. ("The ethical shallowness of his pontificate")

Credit however is due to the many well-intentioned Catholics outside the papal chain of command that worked to save Jews and to reconcile the Church with them after the war. Hence 'Nostra Aetate' in the Second Vatican Council.