

Understanding the Vatican During the Nazi Period

Michael R. Marrus

It is not always appreciated that the Vatican was neutral during the Second World War, having committed itself from the very outset to a policy of conciliation that marked church diplomacy in the inter-war period. To the Vatican, neutrality meant remaining apart from the two power blocs and, most important, maintaining an environment in which the church could operate as freely and openly as possible. Particularly since the presentation of Rolf Hochhuth's angry play, *Der Stellvertreter* (The Deputy) in 1962, this posture has been subjected to withering criticism. The Vatican has responded with the publication of a voluminous collection of documents on the role of the Holy See during the war, generating one of the most extensive historical discussions of the many ethical questions associated with the history of the Holocaust.

Historians generally see the policy of Pius XII as consistent with a longstanding tradition of Vatican diplomacy. During political storms of the depression years, this tradition was interpreted by Eugenio Pacelli, cardinal secretary of state under Pius XI and later to become the wartime pope. Pacelli exemplified a profound commitment to the spiritual and pastoral mission of the Holy See; he saw his role as avoiding association with power blocs and forging diplomatic links with conservative or even fascist regimes. As fascism extended its influence in Europe during the 1930s, the Vatican remained aloof, occasionally challenging fascist ideology when it touched on important matters of Catholic doctrine or the legal position of the church, but unwilling to interfere with what it considered to be purely secular concerns. Beyond this, the Vatican found most aspects of right-wing regimes congenial, appreciating their patronage of the church, their challenge to Marxism, and their frequent championing of a conservative social vision.

The Vatican quarreled with both Hitler and Mussolini on race, but hardly out of concern for the welfare of Jews. Throughout this period the church seldom

opposed anti-Jewish persecutions and rarely denounced governments for discriminatory practices; when it did so, it usually admonished governments to act with “justice and charity”, disapproving only of violent excesses or the most extravagant forms of oppression. Much more important for church policy was the clash between the pseudobiological bases of racism and the fundamental principles of Catholicism and church authority. The tendency of fascist movements, especially Nazism, to use race as a foundation of their regimes directly challenged the church’s claims in the fields of baptism, marriage, and, more broadly, the definition of who was and who was not a Catholic. The Holy See sometimes muted its opposition, usually preferring conciliation and diplomacy even on fundamental questions such as these. Nevertheless, conflict could break through the surface. One notable occasion was March 1937, when the papal encyclical “Mit brennender Sorge” (With Burning Concern) condemned the false and heretical teachings of Nazism. The Holy See openly protested Mussolini’s turn toward racism the following year. Yet at the same time the Vatican strove to avoid an open breach – as it was to continue to do throughout the war. As always the goal was political neutrality and the safeguarding of the institutional interests of the church in a perilous political world.

Church policy toward Jews during the war can be seen in this historical perspective. For the first few years persecution seems to have caused few ripples at the Vatican and awakened no more interest or sympathy than in the 1930s. Church diplomats continued to speak in favor of “justice and charity”, but were largely unconcerned about the persecution of Jews by Nazi or collaborationist governments. A striking illustration comes from the autumn of 1941, when the French ambassador to the Holy See, Leon Berard, sent an extensive report to Vichy on the Vatican’s views. According to this diplomat the Holy See was not interested in the French antisemitic laws and worried only that they might undermine church jurisdiction or involve occasional breaches of “justice and charity”. So far as the French were concerned, the Vatican essentially gave them a green light to legislate as they chose against Jews.

When mass killings began, the Vatican was extremely well informed through its own diplomatic channels and through a variety of other contacts. Church officials may have been the first to pass on to the Holy See sinister reports about the significance of deportation convoys in 1942, and they continued to receive the most detailed information about mass murder in the east. Despite numerous appeals, however, the Pope refused to issue explicit denunciations of the murder of Jews or call upon the Nazis directly to stop the killing. Pius determinedly maintained his posture of neutrality and declined to associate himself with allied declarations against Nazi war crimes. The most the Pope would do was to encourage humanitarian aid by subordinates within the Church, issue vague appeals against the oppression of unnamed racial and religious groups, and try to ease the lot of Catholics of Jewish origin, caught up in the Nazis' net of persecution. And with distinguished exceptions, the corps of Vatican diplomats did no better.

As Leon Papeleux makes clear, the Vatican's posture shifted during the course of the war, as did that of other neutrals: the Holy See gradually became more forthcoming in its demarches on behalf of Jews and more overt in its assistance to the persecuted. But the Pope remained reluctant to speak out almost until the very end. In the autumn of 1943, with Rome under German occupation, the Nazis began roundups of Jews virtually on the doorstep of the papal palace. On a knife's edge, the Pope seems to have balanced carefully, fearing at any moment that the SS might descend on the Vatican itself. In his signals to Berlin, the German ambassador to the Holy See, Ernst von Weizsaecker, portrayed a pro-German pope, alluding to his reluctance to protest the assault on the Jews. Was Weizsaecker delicately trying to subvert the intentions of the SS by suggesting the high price the Reich might have to pay for the persecutions? Was he trying to protect the Pope from direct Nazi moves against him? Or was he accurately reporting the perspectives of the Holy See? Interpretations of this episode vary widely—from those who see Pius playing a delicate, complicated game with Nazi occupiers, expressing himself cryptically, to those who read the incident as a further indication of church reluctance to take any risks on behalf of Jews.

Our understanding of church policy now extends considerably beyond Hochhuth's accusations and related charges of pro-German and antisemitic pressures at the Vatican. It is true that Pacelli had served many years as papal nuncio in Germany and feared mightily during the war that the defeat of the Nazis would lead to the triumph of Bolshevism in Europe. But Vatican documents do not indicate a guarded pro-Nazism or a supreme priority of opposition to the Soviet Union. Nor do they reveal a particular indifference to the fate of Jews, let alone hostility toward them. Rather, the Vatican's communications, along with other evidence, suggest a resolute commitment to its traditional policy of reserve and conciliation. The goal was to limit the global conflict where possible and above all to protect the influence and standing of the church as an independent voice. Continually apprehensive of schisms within the church, Pius strove to maintain the allegiance of Catholics in Germany, in Poland, and elsewhere. Fearful too of threats from the outside, the pope dared not confront the Nazis or the Italian Fascists directly. Notably, the papacy maintained its reserve not against Jewish appeals but in the face of others as well. The Holy See turned a deaf ear to anguished calls from Polish bishops to denounce the Nazis' atrocities in Poland; issued no explicit call to stop the so-called euthanasia campaign in the Reich; deeply offended many by receiving the Croatian dictator Ante Pavelic, whose men butchered an estimated 700,000 Orthodox Serbs; and refused to denounce Italian aggression against Greece. Beyond this, there is a wide-spread sense that, however misguided politically, Pius himself felt increasingly isolated, threatened, and verging on despair. With an exaggerated faith in the efficacy of his mediative diplomacy, Pius clung to the wreckage of his prewar policy—"a kind of anxiously preserved virginity in the midst of torn souls and bodies," as one sympathetic observer puts it.

Individual churchmen of course reacted otherwise, and there is a long list of Catholic clergy who saw their Christian duty as requiring intervention on behalf of persecuted Jews. Often the deportation convoys galvanized priests to action. In some cases, as with the intervention of the apostolic delegate Giuseppe Burzio in Catholic Slovakia, such appeals may well have made a difference. In Bucharest, Nuncio Andreia Cassulo pleaded with the Rumanian

government for humane treatment for the Jews and actually visited Jewish deportees in Transnistira. In Budapest, Nuncio Angelo Rotta intervened repeatedly with Admiral Horthy on behalf of Hungarian Jews and may have helped secure papal intervention in the summer of 1944. Angelo Roncalli, the apostolic delegate in Turkey and the future Pope John XXIII, was among the most sensitive to the Jewish tragedy and most vigorous in rescue efforts despite his reflection, at the time, of traditional Catholic attitudes toward Jews. Elsewhere, on the other hand, church leaders replicated the posture of the Vatican itself—or even deferred with greater or lesser sympathy to those directing the machinery of destruction. Outstanding in this respect was the timid and pro-Fascist Cesare Orsenigo, the nuncio in Berlin, who appeared wedded to the views of the German government. The pope did not dictate policy on such matters to his subordinates and allowed them to go their own way. His timidity in this respect may be one of the most important charges against him.

In retrospect, some historians have come to appreciate the tactical caution of the Holy See. Guenther Lewy, for example, suggests that a “flaming protest” by the pope against the perpetrators of genocide would almost certainly have failed to move the German public and would likely have made matters worse—especially for the half-Jews as well as for practicing Catholics in Germany. Others claim that much of the present condemnation of Vatican policy springs from mistaken assumptions about church doctrine. It may be quite correct to say, as does Father John Morley, that the Vatican “betrayed the ideals it set for itself”. But sincere churchmen at the time could certainly judge those ideals otherwise. As Leonidas Hill reminds us, “the theology of the Church lays far less emphasis on saving lives than on saving souls through the consolations of religion”. Seeing the institutional church as a supreme value in its own right, those in charge of its fortunes tended unhesitatingly to put these ahead of the victims of Nazism.

Source: Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith, Irena Steinfeldt, *The Holocaust and the Christian World*, Yad Vashem 2000, pp. 126-129

