Pius XII

(Eugenio Pacelli; 1876-1958), Pope from 1939-1958. As Pope throughout World War II, Pius XII was controversial for his failure to publicly condemn the extermination of Europe's Jews.

During the 1920s, Pacelli was the papal ambassador to Germany. In 1933, while serving as the Vatican's secretary of state, he signed a pact with Nazi Germany. This was considered a diplomatic triumph for Hitler.

Cardinal Pacelli was elected Pope on March 2, 1939, and took the name Pius XII. Under his leadership, the Vatican was mixed about its attitude towards helping Jews. Right after his election, Pius XII stepped in to obtain 3,000 visas to Brazil (a Catholic country) for Jews who had been baptized. However, just a year later, the Pope ignored requests made by the Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Isaac Herzog, to intercede on behalf of Jews in Spain so that they not be sent back to Germany. A similar request was made concerning Jews in Lithuania; this was also neglected by the Pope.

The Vatican's Secretariat of State was one of the first groups in the world to receive reports about the extermination of the Jews. In early 1941 Cardinal Theodor Innitzer of Vienna told Pius XII about the deportation of Jews. A representative of the Vatican in Slovakia, Giuseppe Burzio, informed the Vatican about the systematic murder of Jews in his area. On October 7, 1942 the chaplain of a hospital train in Poland told the Vatican about "mass assassination," and mentioned the number two million as the count of those already killed. However, when in September 1942 the United States' representative to the Vatican, Myron Taylor, sent a note to the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Maglione, declaring that the Jews were being deported to the east to be murdered, Maglione feigned innocence. He innocuously replied that it was impossible to confirm such rumors.

Three months later, right before Christmas Eve, many advocates sent the Pope telegrams begging him to save the Jews of Eastern Europe. At that point, Pius XII decided to take something of a stand. On his December 24 radio broadcast, he hinted of the Jews' plight when he spoke about the

hundreds of thousands of Europeans being murdered simply due to their racial origin. However, he only hinted, and never mentioned the Jews outright. Although the Pope himself never spoke out against the atrocities being committed, other members of the Church did get involved in rescue work. Angelo Rotta the Nuncio did his part to protest the persecution of the Jews in Hungary. Angelo Roncalli, another Nuncio engaged in rescue work from Turkey; he later became Pope John XXIII. In addition, even though the Pope may not have issued protests and condemnations aloud when the Jews of Rome were deported, it is possible he ordered Catholic institutions to provide aid to Jews.

Why Pope Pius XII never spoke out publicly against the persecution of the Jews is a matter of great debate. Some say that he believed that nothing could stem the tide of the Nazis' violent plan, and in fact speaking out publicly could endanger other rescue activities still possible. Others say that the Pope actually wanted to help the Jews, and that speaking out could only end up hurting them. Perhaps he thought that the victims who could be saved would be best helped by private intervention. Some Catholic writers maintain that the Pope was afraid that public protest would cause a split among German Catholics, or even lead the Nazis to seek reprisals against him personally, against other Church leaders, or against Catholics in occupied countries. Some point to the Pope's terrible fear of Communism as a reason for not attacking Hitler. In the 1990s Pope John Paul II began the process of making Pius XII a saint.