

Flashpoints of Catholic-Jewish Relations

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There have been more positive encounters between Roman Catholics and Jews since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 than there were in the first 2000 years of the Christian Church. The Council's Declaration, *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Time") that focused on Jews and Judaism, gave extraordinary impetus to building constructive relations between two of the world's oldest faith communities.

Yet, serious flashpoints have always remained, carrying with them the potential to weaken or even expunge some of the historic gains that have been achieved since 1965. It is important to recount several of these because they directly impact upon the latest crisis in Catholic-Jewish relations: the role and activities of Pope Pius XII during the Second World War.

Catholic conversion efforts aimed at Jews was an issue of contention after 1965, but in the years following the Second Vatican Council, the Church eschewed the 'targeting' of Jews as candidates for conversion. Especially important was Pope John Paul II's 1986 address in the Grand Synagogue of Rome in which he respectfully described Jews as "our elder brothers in faith." The lack of formal diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel was another source of friction until 1993, when the Vatican and the Jewish state signed the "Fundamental Agreement" that led to full mutual recognition.

In June 1987, just three months before his scheduled visit to the United States, John Paul II warmly received Austrian President Kurt Waldheim at the Vatican. Many Jewish and Catholic leaders expressed profound disappointment and the meeting became a *cause celebre* because of the serious accusations that personally linked Waldheim to war crimes that took place while he was a German army officer stationed in the Balkans during the Second World War.

The intense negative reaction to the Waldheim meeting threatened to cancel a major meeting in Miami between the Pope and American Jewish leaders scheduled for September 1987. It required a "summit conference" at Castel Gandolfo involving John Paul II, other Catholic officials and representatives of the American Jewish community to repair the damage.

Perhaps the most toxic flashpoint was the Auschwitz convent crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. The issue centered on the presence of a small number of Carmelite nuns who established a convent in one of the Auschwitz death camp's original buildings. Indeed, the nuns chose the very site where the Germans had stored the lethal Zyklon-B poison gas used to murder over a million Jews at Auschwitz and nearby Birkenau during the Shoah.

In 1995, after a long, painful and public clash of religious symbolism and historical memory, the nuns finally left the building and moved into a nearby structure that was newly constructed for use as a convent. However, the satisfactory resolution of the crisis came only after the Pope directly intervened and urged the Carmelites to move.

This brief overview of earlier flashpoints is important in seeking to understand the controversy swirling around the role and record of Eugenio Pacelli whose nineteen-year pontificate as Pius XII began in 1939 on the eve of the Second World War.

The most serious charge made against Pius XII by his critics, both Catholic and Jewish, is that the wartime Pope was inactive, indifferent, and ineffective in confronting Nazi Germany during the Holocaust when 6,000,000 Jews were murdered. Critics further charge that Pius XII's 'silence' in effect 'sealed the fate of the Jews' in Europe.

Criticism surfaced as early as the mid 1960s when *The Deputy*, a play by the German Protestant playwright, Rolf Hochhuth, presented a thinly disguised account of the Pope's activities during the Second World War. *The Deputy* created such a furor that Pope Paul VI ordered that over 5000 pages of official Vatican records of the wartime period be released to counter Hochhuth's claim that Pius XII failed to respond adequately to the murderous anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime.

The eventual release of the Vatican documents, which was concluded in 1981, did not silence Pius XII's critics. In fact, just the opposite happened. Because the 5000 pages represented only a carefully chosen partial record, demands intensified in the 1980s and 1990s that all pertinent Vatican records be made available to appropriate scholars for study.

The demands were consistently rejected even when made by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago in 1992. Vatican officials cited a long-standing policy that 75 years must pass before records can be released. Some Catholic leaders also asserted that the 5000 released pages were sufficient in any analysis of Pius XII's record during the wartime period. Clearly, the potent issue of the Shoah, the Vatican, and the "silent" Pope will not go away. Indeed, with each passing year it has intensified, and it seems few people are neutral about Eugenio Pacelli's actions. Many Catholic leaders throughout the world have vigorously defended him. Under John Paul II's leadership, the process leading to Pius XII's beautification and canonization has commenced as it also has for John XXIII who succeeded Pacelli as Pope in 1958.

In March 1998, the Vatican released "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah." In the brief sixteen-page document there is a spirited defense of Pius XII vis-à-vis the Jewish people during the Holocaust. To buttress its case, the Vatican authors cited positive remarks made about Pius XII by four post-war Jewish leaders, including the late Golda Meir, a former Israeli Prime Minister. But just as with the release of selected Vatican documents, the pro-Pius XII material contained in "We Remember" only intensified the controversy. I strongly believe it was an error to include a specific defense of Pius XII in "We Remember," a document that was intended to be a spiritual reflection on the Shoah.

By citing only carefully selected sources to bolster Pius XII's reputation, the authors of "We Remember" have, perhaps unwittingly, permanently opened the debate and moved all future discussions of Pius XII into the realm of historic analysis and documentation. Just as the Vatican can muster its version of "truth," so can the critics of Pius XII.

A striking example of this predictable phenomenon was the publication in 1999 of John Cornwell's highly critical *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (Viking) and Pierre Blet's *Pius XII and the Second World War. According to the Archives of the Vatican* (Paulist Press). The latter volume attempts to support the claim that the Pope undertook positive steps to combat Nazism and save Jewish lives.

Sadly, neither Cornwell nor Blet, both Catholics, had access to all the key records of Pius XII's pontificate. Both sharply contrasting books are based upon incomplete data, but one thing is certain; the campaign to obtain all the relevant documents regarding Pius XII will only escalate.

This is bound to happen in the post-Cold War period when previously closed records from the former Soviet Union, East Germany, and a host of other countries have recently become available. It is bound to happen because a collective "Heshbon ha-Nefesh" (Hebrew for "inventory of the soul") is currently underway that includes a critical analysis of the roles played during the Holocaust by Switzerland, other neutral nations, the Allied governments, as well as by business, educational, and religious bodies. No institution, least of all the Roman Catholic Church, will be exempt from that kind of careful scrutiny. Hopefully, the Vatican Archives and other centers of primary source material will be soon made available to teams of competent Catholic and Jewish scholars who, together, will finally bring closure to the vexing question of Pius XII and his wartime activities.

Until and unless this takes place, this issue will fester and foment continual friction. Indeed, the controversy can undo many of the extraordinary gains that have been achieved in Catholic-Jewish relations since 1965. Hopefully, this will not happen.

When other Catholic-Jewish flashpoints surfaced in the past, constructive steps were taken by the Vatican that successfully addressed the particular problem, and the same kind of action is needed now. The well-known cliché rings true: "The ball is in the Vatican's court," and the whole world awaits the Holy See's response.

Source: Carrol Rittner Stephen D. Smith and Irena Steinfeldt, *The Holocaust and the Christian World*, Yad Vashem 2000, pp. 217-219