

Pope Pius XII, the Holocaust, and the Identity Question in the Catholic Church

Written by Daniel D. Trifan

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DANIEL D. TRIFAN, MAR 26 2013

The controversy caused by Pope Pius XII's (r. 1939-1958) failure to condemn the Holocaust in anything but the most vague and nonspecific terms at the time when it was occurring has not truly diminished over time, and still excites feverish passions among supporters and detractors. The proposal to canonize this most controversial of recent popes fanned this debate again during the 1990s.[1] While it is admittedly difficult to remain dispassionate regarding this subject, this is precisely what is needed for us to learn from this controversy and to recognize the larger issues implicit in it, such as the ongoing search for identity in the Church not centered on one doctrinal preposition or another, but what the Church means, or is supposed to mean, in the modern world.

It is not the purpose of this essay to revisit the debate over the more extreme motives ascribed to Pius XII for his actions, or lack thereof, during the Holocaust, since this topic has been addressed at length in the ensuing decades following the pope's death.[2] Moreover, this debate has been clouded considerably by wildly conflicting claims, mostly false, inspired by passionate beliefs ranging from pietistic hagiography to near demonization, and frequently tainted by attributing the certain knowledge of what actually happened during World War II to a period where such certainty could not be guaranteed.[3] At the same time, it is necessary to examine potential reasons for these actions, and to address whether these actions were good for the Catholic Church as a whole.

The scholarly consensus is that Pius XII sought to be an impartial mediator during World War II, and tempered his statements accordingly; and this view is certainly supported by the historical record.[4] Whether this was a realistic or even a justifiable position is a more complex question, which will be addressed in due course.

The pope's personality certainly lent itself to such an approach. While many sources speak of his personal warmth, this was not readily apparent in the public sphere, where he appeared distant and detached. He was not a man governed by his passions, quite the contrary—the term is virtually never applied to him. Instead, he tended to reach decisions logically and rationally, often after extensive consideration. He was so private an individual that it's difficult to determine how or why he arrived at certain conclusions, and what little is known draws frequently on the conclusions of those around him. His scholarly detachment was virtually academic, where one conclusion clearly outweighs the others based on a multiplicity of factors.

Unfortunately, it is possible to reason your way into virtual paralysis when the aforementioned multiplicity of factors reaches staggering proportions, and it is for this reason that sometimes any action is preferable to no action, a proposition familiar to any politician. According to those around him, Pius XII had many factors to consider: would speaking out too bluntly cause a split in the Catholic Church, between "Axis" and "Allied" Catholics? Would doing so obviate his usefulness as an impartial mediator? Would alienating Italian dictator Benito Mussolini bring about dire consequences for the Vatican and its location in Rome, the vital central location of the Church? After all, less than a century before, the papacy had controlled all of central Italy, and political disputes with the emerging Italian kingdom had reduced the papacy's territory to the few acres of Vatican City in the space of ten short years. After more than fifty years without formal relations, the Church and Mussolini signed the Lateran Treaty in 1929, in which the sovereignty of the Vatican was guaranteed in return for a pledge of allegiance to the Fascist government by the Church in Italy. In consequence, an overly aggressive stance could potentially result in the Church's exile from

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Rome, a grim reminder of the “Avignon exile” six centuries before, when the Church was forced to relocate to southern France for nearly seventy years.

While impartiality is not the same as neutrality, a position that Pius could never have countenanced because of its implicit moral relativism, at times the pope’s dedication to impartiality reached virtually grotesque proportions, as when he admonished the murderous regime of Ante Pavelic in Croatia to behave correctly and with kindness at a time when Pavelic’s *Ustashe* were slaughtering Jews, Gypsies, and Orthodox Serbs with appalling brutality.[5]

Another argument frequently heard is that Pius XII muted his comments on the Holocaust because then he would have had to criticize the Soviet Union for their dismal record in the area of human rights, something that would not have pleased the Allies. While this may well have been a concern for the pope, it must be remembered that despite the escalating hostility shown to Jews by the Nazis, the final decision to implement a policy of mass extermination of the Jews was not made until the summer of 1941. Moreover, once this decision was made, it was implemented with glacial thoroughness and a high degree of secrecy, so that there were virtually no survivors among the victims and few eyewitnesses except among the perpetrators, and those eyewitnesses were frequently so terrorized by what they had seen that they refused to speak about these events for decades. Even Allied governments had only sketchy information until 1943, and what they learned at that point was so monstrous that many could not bring themselves to believe it, preferring to accept that the witnesses had somehow misinterpreted the evidence.

The real question here, though, is not “what did the pope know and when did he know it,” but whether any of this is relevant when asking whether Pius’ impartiality was good for the Church? For that matter, what is the primary responsibility of the Church? This is a question which the Church has asked itself for a very long time, most notably for the seven centuries since the beginning of the Avignon exile in 1308. Is the Church a spiritual and temporal empire whose survival is of paramount importance for the millions of faithful, or is its primary responsibility to emulate Christ, and do what he taught? One thing that cannot be said about the Christ of the Bible is that he was impartial in the face of evil—he was outspoken, and he was absolutely fearless when confronted with the power of the world. Extremes in behavior can be found in the Church during World War II, from some Catholic priests in Croatia who actively participated in *Ustashe* massacres, to Father Maksymilian Kolbe, the “Saint of Auschwitz,” who volunteered to be starved to death in another man’s place in 1943. Kolbe had originally been sent to Auschwitz for sheltering Jewish children in a Catholic orphanage in Krakow in Poland, an activity also being done by another Krakow priest, Father Karol Wojtyla, who as Pope John Paul II canonized Kolbe in 1982. In an ironic twist, John Paul II was an active supporter of the controversial proposal to canonize Pius XII, a pope he deeply admired.

What seems most likely is that Pius XII sought to serve the Church the best he could, but that he was constrained by his personality and his intellect to serve the Church as edifice rather than the Church as idea. Several of the more controversial popes in history had done much the same thing, but less successfully: Alexander VI in the late 15th century, who served the Church as a Renaissance prince, and his successor Julius II, who served the Church as a warlord fighting in the Italian Wars to preserve and expand the papacy’s landholdings and political influence. The Church survived World War II relatively intact as an institution, perhaps a vindication of Pius XII’s cautious diplomacy; but what would have happened had his personality been a different one? What would have been the effect on the Third Reich if, with the issuing of the Jewish Star Decree in Italy in 1943, the pope had done what the king of Denmark had done in 1940 and worn the star openly? For that matter, what would have been the effect in Italy if when the Gestapo began rounding up Italian Jews to send them to the gas chambers of Birkenau the pope had placed himself at the front of the line and insisted on being sent first? What if Pius XII had exemplified the Church as the “suffering servant” of humanity as magnificently as did Saint Maksymilian Kolbe?

For the Jews of Italy, it may well have saved their lives. Mussolini was a fascist, not a racist; and until restored to power in 1943 under the thumb of Hitler he had just made the requisite anti-Semitic noises incumbent on any member of Hitler’s alliance. To confront the Church so blatantly, after the difficulties he had had with Pius XII’s predecessor, the obstinate and imperious Pius XI, would have been a very unappealing prospect, not to mention the outrage of ordinary Italians should any harm come to their pope.

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Such an act might also have saved the Jews of Hungary. The Hungarians, under their leader Miklos Horthy, had been notably uncooperative with Nazi measures in this area, and only after Horthy's son was taken as a hostage in Germany and a new government under the Nazi sympathizer Ferenc Szalaszi was installed did deportations of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau begin in 1944. Such a stance on the part of the pope may well have encouraged Hungarian Catholics to step up resistance to the point that this might have been prevented.

For the Jews of Poland, it was probably already too late. Nearly two-thirds of Poland's Jews had already been liquidated by the end of 1942. Had such a gesture been made in late 1941, the outcome might have been different, especially considering Poland's extraordinary devotion to the Catholic Church.

While such counterfactual examinations have their limitations, these remain poignant questions for the Church today, especially the dichotomy between the Church as edifice and the Church as idea. In the recent conclave to choose the successor to Benedict XVI, one Church commentator on CNN stated that this selection of a new pope was particularly important because the pope is the moral voice of the world.^[6] It seems that this question was very much on the minds of the cardinals in the conclave, because their choice of Jorge Cardinal Bergoglio of Argentina indicates a shift in the direction of the Church as idea. The first Jesuit pope and the first pope from the Americas, Bergoglio adopted the papal name Francis I, another indication of this shift, since St. Francis of Assisi exemplified the concept of the Church as servant, as well as being the model on which the Jesuit order was founded in 1540.

In many ways, the Church of today is still seeking its voice. While Pius XII, with his scholarly, almost Wilsonian detachment and his dedication to impartiality, may not have been the voice the Church needed during the dark years of World War II, when the world was faced with the most amoral and brutal regime the world had seen in more than two millennia, he could be no other than who he was; and there remains no serious factual basis on which to doubt his sincerity or his motives. In protecting the Church as an institution, he was clearly successful, but in protecting the Church as idea, his pontificate will remain controversial for a long time to come. Due to his intensely private nature, his deepest motivations may never be known to scholars, but the Church he served remains as the largest single Christian denomination in the world today, and it still has the potential to be just the moral voice that the modern world appears to need so desperately.

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^[1] The opening sentence in the introduction to Jose Sanchez's *Pius XII and the Holocaust* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), is "[w]hy another work on Pius XII and the Holocaust?" (p. vii).

^[2] See, for example, Saul Friedlander, *Pius XII and the Third Reich* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966).

^[3] The range of interpretation regarding Pius XII can be seen between the personal memoir of Pius' housekeeper, Sr. Pascalina Lehnert, and John Cornwell's *Hitler's Pope*, as well as in the writings of longtime anti-Vatican polemicists such as Paul Blanshard and Avro Manhattan.

^[4] Sources as diverse as Margherita Marchione's *Pius XII: Architect of Peace* and Cornwell's *Hitler's Pope*, as well as many others, support this conclusion.

^[5] Gerard Noel, *Pius XII: The Hound of Hitler* (London: Continuum, 2008), p.123.

^[6] Theodore Cardinal McCarrick, in an interview available at <http://startingpoint.blogs.cnn.com/2013/03/13/what->

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qualities-should-the-next-pope-possess-cardinal-theodore-mccarrick-weighs-in/.

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