

'Hitler's pope' doesn't deserve sainthood

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by Douglas M. Bloomfield

Pope Benedict XVI's appearance at Rome's Great Synagogue on Jan. 17 did nothing to quell the controversy over plans to confer sainthood on Pius XII, the wartime pontiff who has been called "Hitler's pope." In fact, he may have made matters worse when just two days earlier he took a further step in the process by declaring Pius' "heroic virtues."

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One prominent Italian rabbi and a number of Holocaust survivors boycotted the pope's visit to protest the beatification of Pius. Riccardo Pacifici, the president of Rome's Jewish community, did attend and declared, "The silence of Pius XII before the Shoah still hurts because something should have been done."

To this day, the Vatican has produced no hard evidence that Pius uttered a word or lifted a finger to help when, on Oct. 16, 1943, the Germans rounded up 1,021 Roman Jews and held them for two days just across the river from the Vatican before sending them to Auschwitz. Only 17 returned after the war.

"The cries of the victims were met by Pius with silence," said Elan Steinberg, vice president of the American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors and Their Descendants.

Benedict, 82, told his audience Jan. 17 that the church had aided Jews in a "hidden and discreet way" during the Holocaust, but he offered no specifics about Pius' own involvement.

If there is evidence, it lies buried deep in the Vatican vaults. For a decade the church has been promising to open its wartime records to scholars "soon," but the latest word is it will be at least another five years. When some prewar archives were opened to a handpicked Catholic scholar, John Cornwell, to write a Vatican-sanctioned biography of Pius, he was shocked by what he found.

As Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, Pius was the papal nuncio in Germany in the 1920s, the Vatican's secretary of state in the 1930s and became pontiff in 1939. He drew the church "into complicity with the darkest forces of the era," Cornwell wrote. Pius "was the ideal pope for Hitler's unspeakable plan. He was Hitler's pawn. He was Hitler's pope ... [He was] not only an ideal pope for the Nazis' Final Solution, but a hypocrite ... to his everlasting shame and to the shame of the Catholic Church."

Tad Szulc, Pope John Paul II's biographer, called Pacelli "the Führer's best imaginable ally."

Pacelli even betrayed Catholic leaders who might have challenged Hitler and his extermination policies. "He prevented Catholic protest in defense of Jews, even if they'd converted to Christianity," Cornwell wrote. Pius also rebuffed a personal plea from president Franklin D. Roosevelt in late 1942 to condemn publicly Hitler's extermination of the Jews and refused to meet the chief rabbi of Jerusalem, Isaac Herzog, who came to appeal for his help in saving Jewish lives.

Israeli governments have largely avoided the dispute, calling it an issue between the Jewish people and the Vatican and not a diplomatic matter involving the two states.

Pius' defenders say he worked quietly and behind the scenes, and had he spoken out forcefully, it would have only made matters worse for Jews and Catholics in Nazi-controlled countries. It is difficult to imagine how much worse conditions could have been for the Jews had he acted.

If Pius really was helpful, it should be easy enough to prove. The 65 years since the fall of the Nazis are enough time to sort through the archives for evidence of the pontiff's saintly efforts to help the Jews. The Vatican is the only country that has not opened its wartime archives to

scholars, Steinberg said.

The Vatican's failure to produce hard evidence that Pius did anything to help, however, should not detract from the heroism of many individual nuns, priests and other Catholics who risked their own lives to rescue thousands of Jews. If anything, their behavior demonstrates how much the Vatican could have done.

Researchers also believe documents hidden deep in the Vatican can shed light on information found in the U.S. National Archives indicating the pro-Nazi Croatian movement Ustasche delivered large quantities of gold to the Vatican in exchange for help in the escape of high-ranking Nazis. Other material discovered at the archives indicate assets looted by the Nazis and their allies from the Jews and others may have wound up in Vatican vaults, or at least evidence of where they went. U.S. government pleas to open the Vatican archives on that subject have been rebuffed.

The Vatican's insistence there is no "smoking gun" is a "specious argument which turns the burden of proof on its head," Steinberg said. "The known historical record confirms Pius' silence."

The Vatican insists sainthood is based on his "Christian life," not his historical record, but popes have been important political and diplomatic players, and the two elements cannot be separated. A driving force behind the canonization are church conservatives opposed to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

During the pope's visit to the Holy Land last May, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, a former Ashkenazi chief rabbi, urged Benedict, "Don't make [Pius XII] holy," saying that it will only "hurt ... deeply" survivors "knowing that the man who could save, could do much more and did not do it."

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