

Hitler's Pope Was No Saint

January 19, 2010

By Douglas Bloomfield

Pope Benedict XVI's appearance at Rome's Great Synagogue on Sunday 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."

One prominent Italian rabbi and a number of Holocaust survivors boycotted the pope's visit in protest of 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 Tiber 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 told his audience on Sunday 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 pre-war 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.

Pius, who as Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, 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 Fuhrer'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 publicly condemn Hitler's extermination of the Jews and refused to meet the Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Palestine, Isaac Herzog, who came to appeal for his help in saving Jewish lives.

Although 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, Deputy Premier Silvan Shalom said he raised it Sunday when he was at the Rome synagogue, but he gave no indication of any response.

Israel and the Vatican currently are involved in a dispute over church ownership of property in Israel and its tax treatment.

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. The continued refusal to open archives lends credence to charges against the pope and undermines the credibility of the church.

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 Ustasche delivered large quantities of gold to the Vatican in exchange for help in the escape of high ranking Nazis. Other materials discovered at the U.S. 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, critics insist.

A driving force behind the canonization are church conservatives opposed to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

Sunday was Benedict's third visit to a synagogue, an important move in healing relations between the Church and the Jews; his predecessor, John Paul II, was only the first pontiff ever to make such a visit when he went to the Rome synagogue in 1986.

The German-born Benedict, 82, was warmly received, but his relationship with the Jews has not been without problems. Just a year ago he revoked the excommunication of four bishops of the anti-Semitic Society of St. Pius X, including one notorious Holocaust denier. Last year the Pope went to Israel and in a speech at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial, never mentioned Germany or the Nazis, as his predecessor had done.

Rabbi Yisrael Lau, a former Israeli chief rabbi, urged Benedict, "Don't make [Pius XII] holy," 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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