

GLOBAL

The Holocaust and the Catholic Church

Some in the Vatican want to make Pius XII a saint. If they succeed, “the Church will have sealed its second millennium with a lie.”

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“It is appropriate that, as the Second Millennium of Christianity draws to a close”—this is John Paul II, in his 1994 apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*—“the Church should become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children,” recalling all those times in history when they “indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly forms of counterwitness and scandal.” The sinful “children” of the Church, spokesmen insist, can include its leaders, even bishops and popes. Yet when the long-awaited Vatican document examining the record of the Church in relation to the Holocaust, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, was published last year, it singled out for special praise “the wisdom of Pope Pius XII’s diplomacy.” This seemed to be a direct rebuttal to an oft-raised criticism of the wartime Pope, whose “silence” in the face of the Jewish genocide had become for many an emblem of the Church’s own “counterwitness and scandal.” The

Vatican pronouncement came as reports surfaced that the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints was preparing to advance the cause of Pius XII toward sainthood. At the end of the millennium Pope John Paul II, in the words of an observer writing in the periodical *Inside the Vatican*, “is preparing, not to denounce Pius, but to canonize him.”

The process of canonization is secret, and there is no official word that Pius XII is about to be beatified, the penultimate step toward sainthood. But it seems to signal something that his positive prospects are being openly discussed—even by the Vatican official in charge of promoting his cause. If Pius XII were to be named a saint of the Roman Catholic Church, more than the restoration of his reputation would result. His policy of silence about Nazi atrocities would be justified. He would be credited with the secret rescue of Jews that was carried out by many individual Catholics across Europe. (*We Remember* honors Pius XII for what he “did personally or through his representatives to save hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives.”) By extension, Hitler’s hatred of Jews would be defined as rooted in “neo-pagan” atheism, not in Christianity. The Catholic Church, and the Vatican in particular, would be listed as among Hitler’s mortal enemies, and exonerated from charges of at least passive collaboration in Nazi crimes. The Church’s sinlessness would be confirmed. The papal absolutism of which Pius XII was the avatar, and which faltered under John XXIII and Paul VI, would be vindicated as John Paul II’s lasting legacy. If Pius XII were to be named a saint, in other words, the Catholic Church could enter the new millennium with its timeless claim to moral transcendence intact.

In this context the arrival of the first serious and complete biography of Eugenio Pacelli, Pius XII, could not be more timely. Its author, John Cornwell, a contributor to Britain’s distinguished Catholic publication *The Tablet*, embarked on the project, as he says in the preface, “convinced that if his full story were told, Pius XII’s pontificate, and the Catholic Church, would be vindicated.” Cornwell, it seems, is a conventional Roman Catholic with an instinctive wish to defend the Church from accusations of malfeasance and worse regarding the twentieth-century fate of the Jews. As such, he says, he gained access to heretofore unavailable sources within the Vatican—documents from the Secretariat of State and, especially, sworn depositions gathered decades ago in the early stages of Pius XII’s promotion to sainthood. “By the middle of 1997, nearing the end of my research,” he writes, “I found myself in a state I can only describe as moral shock. The material I had gathered, taking the

more extensive view of Pacelli's life, amounted not to an exoneration but to a wider indictment."

That indictment is made explicit in the title Cornwell has given his book: *Hitler's Pope*. His criticism, rooted in a painstaking examination of Pacelli's record as the Vatican's point man in dealing with the rise of Hitler in the 1930s and of his maneuvering as Pius XII during the war years, is a devastating refutation of the claim that this Pope's diplomacy can in any way be characterized as wisdom. Instead of a portrait of a man worthy of sainthood, Cornwell lays out the story of a narcissistic, power-hungry manipulator who was prepared to lie, to appease, and to collaborate in order to accomplish his ecclesiastical purpose—which was not to save lives or even to protect the Catholic Church but, more narrowly, to protect and advance the power of the papacy. Pacelli's personal history, his character, and his obsession with Vatican prerogatives combined at the crucial hour to make him "the ideal Pope for Hitler's unspeakable plan," Cornwell writes. "He was Hitler's pawn. He was Hitler's Pope."

The young priest Eugenio Pacelli was trained not as a theologian but as a canon lawyer. He was ordained in 1899 and appointed to the Vatican bureaucracy in 1901, during the pontificate of Leo XIII, who is remembered as a social liberal (his 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum* was read as an endorsement of the labor movement) but who ruled the Church as a rigid authoritarian. To Leo XIII the Church was "a perfect society," and the Vatican was to be the living embodiment of that perfection. In his vision, the papacy would not only exert spiritual sovereignty over the religious lives of Catholics but also control Church activities in every nation—from the licensing of schools to the appointment of bishops. Such a vision required nation-states to relate to the Church through the Vatican rather than through local institutions.

Leo died in 1903, and was succeeded by Pius X, whom no one would mistake for a liberal. Famous for his condemnation of "modernism," Pius X continued the program of centralizing Church authority in an absolutist papacy. Two strategies served him well in this. One was the Oath Against Modernism, which every candidate for ordination in the world was thenceforth required to swear (it was still in force when I was ordained, in the late 1960s), and the other was a new Code of Canon Law, which would give the Pope unprecedented power over every aspect of Church life. Pacelli was one of two Vatican priests who spent more than a decade

developing the code, which was finally promulgated in 1917. As Cornwell points out, Canon 218 defines the Pope's authority as "the supreme and most complete jurisdiction throughout the Church, both in matters of faith and morals and in those that affect discipline and Church government throughout the world."

In Europe, where the structures of Church and State were traditionally intermingled, with much overlap of political and religious authority (those schools, the appointment of those bishops), the implementation of this new Code of Canon Law required the cooperation of governments, which led to Pacelli's next assignment. The task of negotiating treaties—concordats—that recognized the freshly claimed prerogatives of the papacy fell to him. His first success, concluded in 1914, before the code was formally published, was in Serbia, where he negotiated a concordat that served the Pope's purposes but undercut the Catholic hierarchy in Austria. "The treaty implied the abrogation," Cornwell explains, "of the ancient protectorate rights of the Austro-Hungarian Empire over the Catholic enclave in Serbian territory." This change in Church-State relations effectively supported Serbia's political effort to move away from Austrian dominance. The concordat was signed on June 24, 1914. Four days later Archduke Franz Ferdinand, of Austria, was assassinated by an independence-minded Serb in Sarajevo. Cornwell comments,

The emotions prompted by the Serbian Concordat became part of the general groundswell of anti-Serbian anger.... There is no indication that Pacelli questioned the dangerous implications of the Serbian negotiations after the event. From this point of view, the episode marks the ominous beginning of Pacelli's pattern of aloofness from the far-reaching political consequences of his diplomatic actions on behalf of the Pope.

The most important Catholic nation in Europe in the period of the First World War, even with its Protestant majority, was Germany, and in 1917, shortly after his consecration as bishop, Pacelli went to Munich as papal nuncio. Cornwell writes that his "principal task in Germany was now nothing less than the imposition, through the 1917 Code of Canon Law, of supreme papal authority over the Catholic bishops, clergy and faithful." To that end he set out to renegotiate existing concordats with the German regional states. Ultimately he hoped for a concordat with the German nation itself, one that would solidify Vatican authority, especially in the matter of the appointment of bishops. The anti-Catholic suspicions of

Protestants and Weimar liberals were not the only obstacle to the new definition of Church authority. Germany's Catholic bishops were accustomed to holding sway in their own sphere, and the Catholic Center Party—a political organization that dated back to the nineteenth century, when it was formed to resist Otto von Bismarck's anti-Catholic Kulturkampf—was one of the most powerful institutions in Weimar. In 1919 the Center Party drew six million votes, second only to the Social Democrats. The Center Party, occupying the crucial middle ground in the mounting chaos of the Weimar era, would provide five chancellors in the ten governments that came and went from 1919 to 1933. Catholic leaders of the party consistently rejected Pacelli's—and the Pope's—"urgings," in Cornwell's word, to stay out of coalitions with the left-wing Social Democrats. Once it was imposed on German Catholics, with the approbation of the German state, the new Code of Canon Law would end such defiance. That is the fateful background to what followed the rise of Adolf Hitler. Cornwell writes,

The acquiescence of the German people in the face of Nazism cannot be understood in its entirety without taking into account the long path, beginning as early as 1920, to the Reich Concordat of 1933; and Pacelli's crucial role in it; and Hitler's reasons for signing it. The negotiations were conducted exclusively by Pacelli on behalf of the Pope over the heads of the faithful, the clergy, and the German bishops.

The record compiled by Cornwell establishes, for example, that Pacelli "patently lied" to Cardinal Michael Faulhaber, the archbishop of Munich, to keep him in ignorance. "When Hitler became Pacelli's partner in negotiations," Cornwell observes, "the concordat thus became the supreme act of two authoritarians, while the supposed beneficiaries were correspondingly weakened, undermined, and neutralized." The first true beneficiary was Hitler himself: the Reichskonkordat, agreed to on July 8, 1933, was his first bilateral treaty with a foreign power, and as such gave him much-needed international prestige, whether the Vatican intended it or not. (The Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* published a statement on July 2 saying that the concordat implied no moral approval of Nazism, and Pacelli would make the same point later.) Yet the price Hitler demanded for the concordat was stiff—the complete withdrawal from politics (and therefore from any possible resistance to the Nazis) of all Catholics *as Catholics*. On July 4 the leader of the Catholic Center Party, Heinrich Brüning, who had served as Germany's Chancellor from 1930 to 1932, had "agreed with bitterness in his heart to dissolve the party."

Hitler wanted the Center Party gone because it represented the last potential impediment to his program. It appears that Pacelli wanted it gone for the sake of his own program. (Defenders of the Vatican have argued that it did not want the Center Party dissolved, but Cornwell makes an opposite case, tied to Pacelli's maneuvering.) That month the Center Party ceased to exist.

The Reichskonkordat effectively removed the German Catholic Church—which had successfully rolled back Bismarck's Kulturkampf, and which had opposed the rise of Nazism, generally barring party members from receiving holy communion into 1933—from any continued role of opposition to Hitler. More than that, as Hitler told his cabinet on July 14, it established a context that would be “especially significant in the urgent struggle against international Jewry.” Cornwell comments, “This was the reality of the moral abyss into which Pacelli, the future Pontiff, had led the once great and proud German Catholic Church.”

Pacelli became Pope in 1939. As is well known, he did not openly denounce Nazi anti-Semitism as such, although he condemned Nazi racism in more general terms. Nor did he explicitly refer to the Final Solution as it unfolded, even though he was one of the first leaders outside German-controlled Europe to be informed of its full dimensions. On October 16, 1943, more than 1,200 Jews were arrested by German forces in the Jewish district of Rome, at the foot of the Vatican hill. Within a week more than a thousand of those arrested had been taken to Auschwitz and gassed. Critics of Pius XII's silence have pointed to this event as emblematic of his failure; his defenders, giving equal emphasis to it, insist that had it not been for the Pope's urgent behind-the-scenes intervention (he dispatched his Secretary of State, Cardinal Luigi Maglione, to protest to the German ambassador to the Vatican, Ernst von Weizäcker, and a German bishop resident in Rome conveyed the Pope's concern to German military authorities), thousands more Roman Jews would have been seized. The Vatican offered shelter to hundreds of Jewish fugitives, within Vatican City and in other Church institutions under Vatican control. Cornwell's examination of relevant documents, however, leads him to conclude that papal defenders exaggerate the significance of measures taken in behalf of Jews. Other scholars—notably John Morely, the author of *Vatican Diplomacy and the Jews During the Holocaust 1939-1943* (1980)—have asserted that characterizing Vatican action on this occasion as “protest” seems dubious. In a presentation to a group of Jewish and Catholic scholars last March, Morely offered a close reading of Maglione's own account of what took place in his October 16 meeting with

Weizäcker, summarizing it this way: “There was neither confrontation, nor criticism, nor a plea for justice.” According to Maglione, Vatican intervention led to the release of many Jews, and the Pope’s defenders have made much of that claim, but Cornwell dismisses it as “untruthful.” And as for Vatican pressure stopping the roundup of Jews, more than a thousand additional Jews were arrested after October 16. Neither Pacelli nor his Secretary of State openly protested any of this. “Their failure to speak or act,” Cornwell writes, “astonished the German leadership in the city.”

Critics of Pius XII have accounted for his failure to challenge Hitler more directly, even on the matter of the Jewish genocide, by charging him with cowardice, or with quietly held Nazi sympathies, but Cornwell shows that neither was the case. Pius XII’s courage, and his contempt for Hitler, were demonstrated by his active participation, early in his pontificate, in a plot to overthrow the German dictator. From late 1939 through March of 1940 Pius XII served as a channel of communication between a group of anti-Hitler German army chiefs, led by General Ludwig Beck, and the British government, represented by Britain’s Vatican minister, Francis d’Arcy Osborne. The Germans indicated their readiness to stage a coup and end the war, but only with assurances from London that the Munich settlement would be honored. For whatever reason, the British failed to pick up on the initiative. Nonetheless, the plotters and the Pope himself had acted in ways that Hitler, had he learned of them, would have savagely punished. This episode leads Cornwell to a firm conclusion about Pacelli: “Pusillanimity and indecisiveness—shortcomings that would be cited to extenuate his subsequent silence and inaction in other matters—were hardly in his nature.”

Then what accounts for the Pope’s wartime record—for his silence not only in the face of the Final Solution but also in full knowledge of the Nazi atrocities against Catholic Poland? For his repeated efforts to prevent the Allies from bombing Rome, alongside his relative inaction regarding the bombing of other cities, and also for his firm support for Catholic nationalism in Croatia, even after the Ustache regime revealed itself as grotesquely genocidal? The Pius XII that emerges from the pages of *Hitler’s Pope* was no coward and no crypto-Nazi. He was not indifferent to the suffering of innocents, nor was he unaffected by the murderous policies of the Nazis in occupied Europe. If the arguments that his defenders base on his secret maneuvering (“the wisdom of his diplomacy,” as *We Remember* deems it) fall short,

as in Cornwell's convincing account they do, what explains this Pope's historic failure?

Cornwell suggests that Pius XII's particular indifference to the fate of the Jews (he apparently never used the word "Jew" in any of his wartime pronouncements, apparently never once used the word "anti-Semitism") was related to his attitude toward the Jewish people.

Until now, it has not been possible to relate the full history of Pacelli's career as diplomat and as Cardinal Secretary of State. The new material made available in this narrative, however, reveals Pacelli's long-standing anti-Jewishness, indicating that he failed to be gripped with moral outrage by the plight of the Jews.

Certainly, from the Reichskonkordat forward (that treaty included an annex granting some protection to Jews who had converted to Catholicism but explicitly defining the fate of other Jews as Germany's "internal affair," about which the Church would have nothing to say) Pacelli showed no sign of seeing Jews as within the Catholic circle of concern. And there are other indications (he accepted the stereotypical association of the Jew with Bolshevism) that Pacelli regarded Jews as a contemporary as well as an ancient enemy of the Church.

But a factor more important even than anti-Semitism accounts for Pacelli's early failings as a diplomat and his later failings as a Pope, and that was his determination to put the accumulation and defense of papal power above everything else—above the fate of the Jews, and even above the fate of the Catholic Church elsewhere in Europe. "Was there something in the modern ideology of papal power," Cornwell asks, "that encouraged the Holy See to acquiesce in the face of Hitler's evil, rather than oppose it?" The answer to this awful question, it seems increasingly clear, is yes.

And that is why the unfinished story of Pius XII matters so much—especially to Catholics. Even though the ancient Christian anti-Semitism that fueled the Nazi program has been roundly repudiated by the Church, "the modern ideology of papal power" that helped to make the hatred of Jews so lethal in this century still marks Roman Catholicism. And that is the meaning of the campaign to make Pius XII a saint despite everything. It is apparently a cause dear to the heart of John Paul II, who has single-handedly restored the spirit of papal absolutism. Yet that

campaign contradicts John Paul's equally firm assertion of the moral meaning of the new millennium, and the Catholic Church's obligation to enter it in a spirit of repentance and truth.

The story of Eugenio Pacelli, and of the modern papacy, began with Pius X, whose condemnation of modernism and commissioning of the Vatican-dominated Code of Canon Law set the Catholic Church on its disastrous twentieth-century course. That Pope gave Pacelli his mission in life—the expansion of power, which became his moral undoing. It is an omen, perhaps, that Pacelli repaid his patron, and reified his view of the Church, by canonizing Pius X in 1954. *Hitler's Pope* makes it clear that if Pacelli himself is to be canonized now, the Church will have sealed its second millennium with a lie, and readied its third for new disasters.

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