

# Two Popes, One Holocaust

Rather than canonize the controversial Pius XII, perhaps the church should be honoring his more courageous predecessor Pius XI

By Kevin J. Madigan

**D**URING THE FIRST four years of his pontificate, Pope Benedict XVI put the beatification proceedings of the controversial World War II-era pope, Pius XII, in abeyance. It was, Benedict announced, a time for “reflection”—not yet the time to grant sainthood. At the end of last year, however, the pope apparently decided that the time for “reflection” should draw to a close. In a Mass commemorating the 50th anniversary of the wartime pontiff’s death, Benedict moved Pius XII closer to canonization by declaring him “blessed” and “venerable.” Born Eugenio Pacelli, Pius XII presided over the church from 1939 until his death in 1958. In the mysterious, intramural language of the Vatican, *venerabilis*

is a posthumous recognition that designates one who, in his lifetime, achieved acts of heroic virtue. Yet even if one puts aside the contentious debate over what he did or did not do for Jews being deported during the war, Pius XII’s reign was, in fact, conspicuous for its lack of heroism. Seen in that light, Benedict’s declaration of Pius XII as venerable made one wonder how different, in his relationship with the Jewish community, Benedict XVI would be from his beloved predecessor John Paul II.

As it happens, there are interesting questions involving Pius XII and his immediate predecessor, Pius XI. Born Achille Ratti, the elder Pius served as pope from 1929 to 1939. New research by Father Hubert Wolf, a distinguished church historian at the University of Münster, in the Vatican Secret Archives and those of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith has cast new light on the two popes who found themselves having to cope with the rise of fascism in Western Europe and Marxism-Leninism to the East. These materials, released only in 2006 and described in Wolf’s *Pope and Devil: The Vatican’s Archives and*

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## Pius XI's story is one of moral evolution, from acceptance of dangerous anti-Semitic stereotypes to decisive, vigorous denunciation of the Nazi persecution of the Jews.

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*the Third Reich*\*, are, as he observes, “informative particularly as they relate to the person of Eugenio Pacelli” both in his diplomatic and early papal offices. They also allow us to wonder whether the right Pope Pius is being considered for canonization.

In terms of his attitudes to Jews and Judaism, Pius XI was, at the start of his service to the Vatican, certainly no saint. In traditional Christian hagiography, saints are often depicted as exceptionally holy from birth—even sometimes in utero. Pius XI does not fit this canonical model. His is a story of moral evolution, from an initial, unreflective acceptance of common but deplorable and dangerous anti-Semitic stereotypes to profound reflection on, and rejection of, his early opinions, and, finally, to decisive, vigorous denunciation of the Nazi persecution of the Jews. That is, he began, with respect to his attitudes toward Jews, as a moral mediocrity; but he ended his life, with respect to those self-same views, as a heroic if not prophetic and saintly critic—and one whose heroism is to this day largely unknown by Jews and Catholics alike.

Pius XI served as papal nuncio to Poland from 1919 to 1921, once the Polish state had been re-created after having disappeared from the map of Europe since the late 18th century. Ratti initially tolerated some of the crude anti-Semitic stereotypes of the day. As nuncio, he shrank from direct condemnation of violence against Polish Jews by a Catholic population that largely took its cues from the church. Like many others in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, he saw a direct link between the Bolsheviks and the Jews. Later, as pope, he concluded concordats with fascist regimes that had openly anti-Jewish aims: in 1929 with Italy and in 1933 with Adolf Hitler's Germany. Critics have argued that these concordats legitimized racist, expansionist, despotic governments and, finally, in the case of Germany, a genocidal power. His motivation for these decisions can be found in that, like many associated with the Vatican, Pius XI was convinced that liberalism had led to socialism, which, in the ecclesiastical mind of the day, led ineluctably to “Judaeo-Bolshevism.”

Even after he became pope, Pius XI still clung to many of his anti-Jewish biases while distinguishing Jews in general from Italian Jews, with many of whom

he was quite friendly. In 1933, for example, he invited a delegation of distinguished Jewish religious and intellectual leaders to the Vatican to express his disgust with the persecution by Hitler of Germany's Jews. Pius XI's anti-Communism did not entirely blind him to the dangers of racism, which he perceived to be contrary to the Catholic faith—that is, a dogmatic heresy—and thus a danger, by definition, to the claims of the Catholic magisterium. It has been plausibly argued that Pius's position on racism initially may have dissuaded Mussolini from pursuing a racial policy analogous to that engineered by the Nazis (though such laws would eventually be promulgated in Italy during the last years of his papal reign).

Like Ratti, the future Pius XII also made his name in the church as a nuncio—in his case, perhaps fatefully, in Munich from 1917 to 1925 and then in Berlin from 1925 to 1929. Pacelli, in his time in Munich, consistently linked Jews and Communism and, as Father Wolf observes, even credited notions of a “Jewish-Bolshevik world conspiracy.” These, of course, played a poisonous and then deadly role in the propaganda of the German Reich. Exuberance for his Mercedes-Benz is not all Pacelli took back with him from Germany to Rome when he became Pius XI's cardinal secretary of state in 1930. Among other things, he feared a revived Kulturkampf, the “culture war” in late-19th-century Germany engendered by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's fears about the extent of Catholic political and social influence, which led to severe discrimination against the church and its adherents. This historical lesson led Pacelli to conclude that the church must avoid political involvement at all costs and that it should, if need be, as Father Wolf puts it, “withdraw completely from society into the sacristy.” He was also deeply affected by the prescient but failed appeal for peace in the middle of World War I by the sitting pope, Benedict XV, who urged all parties in May 1917 to “avoid the suicide of civilized Europe.” Benedict's failure to alter the trajectory of the war persuaded the future Pope Pius XII that direct papal intervention in or speeches on international conflict or tragedy would achieve little or nothing in the way of social and humanitarian consequence.

While Pacelli was still nuncio in Germany, a furious debate unfolded within the Vatican over

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the Catholic Good Friday liturgy, which contained a particularly ugly anti-Semitic prayer. In 1926, an organization called "Friends of Israel" (Amici Israel) was established. The Amici was a philo-Semitic sodality that included, by 1928, around 20 cardinals, 300 bishops and archbishops, and 3,000 priests among its members. Its main objective was to achieve good relations with Jewish communities and organizations. A second aim was to supply a counter-voice to the openly anti-Semitic stance of the secretary of Pius XI's Holy Office, Merry del Val (1865-1930), a Spanish cardinal whose beatification process is also ongoing.

Liturgically speaking, the Friends' aim was ultimately to purge the Catholic rite of elements that were flagrantly anti-Semitic. They had also agreed to avoid all anti-Semitic expressions and practices not only in the liturgy but also in their everyday lives. In context, this meant refusal to refer to Jews as deicides or to Jerusalem as the city of God-killers. They also explicitly rejected the vicious falsehood generated by, above all, Christian clerics: the blood-libel myth—that Jews yearly abducted and killed Christian children for religious purposes. (Though born in the Middle Ages, the blood libel was still widely credited in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s.) In addition, the Friends avoided the term "conversion," as it was offensive to Jews. All this occurred in the context of a European Catholic liturgical life in which sermons were regularly embroidered with anti-Semitic vituperation.

In 1928 the Amici issued a pamphlet entitled *Pax Super Israel* (Peace Upon Israel). The pamphlet provoked a fierce debate within the Roman curia that revealed a wide spectrum of attitudes toward the Jews, ranging from what Father Wolf calls "hard-core" anti-Semitism to thoroughgoing philo-Semitism. At the time, and all the way until the liturgical reforms enacted by the Second Vatican Council, the eighth prayer of the Good Friday liturgy included a plea for the "perfidious Jews." Members of the Friends of Israel understood that talk of "perfidious Jews" could easily be appropriated by racial ideologues, whose views were gaining ascendancy in Europe. That Catholics furnished Jew-baiters with such language was understood to be particularly dangerous, as it supplied them with an anti-Semitism based in liturgy and sanctioned by the authority of the church.

For his part, del Val tried to place *Pax Super Israel* on the Index of Forbidden Books. He also rejected the Friends' recommendation that the "perfidious Jews" language be purged from the liturgy, arguing that in Matthew 27:25 the Jews had explicitly accepted responsibility for Christ's crucifixion and dismissed the Friends' petition as "nonsensical." For del Val, this Jewish people were simply stiff-necked as well as cursed.

As Father Wolf acutely observes of del Val's response, "echoes of a *völkisch* interpretation are obvious" and would become "even sharper as the opinion proceeded." Indeed, he argues that some of the arguments advanced by del Val's colleagues in the Holy Office about "the Jewish peril" could well have been lifted from the writings of racial anti-Semites of the time. As the Nazis would later state, del Val suggested that just as Jews had secretly infiltrated all modern societies, they were now attempting to do the same with the Catholic Church by insinuating themselves into the Friends of Israel. To his credit, Pope Pius XI was so shocked by del Val's assertion that he summoned him for a dressing-down.

Pius XI's response to this controversy revealed a still-evolving conscience and less than appropriate alacrity in responding to the potentially lethal consequences of anti-Semitism. He rejected the Friends' petition, dissolved their organization, *and* publicly condemned anti-Semitism. He did so in the face of opposition from some of the cardinals of the Holy Office, who objected to the pope's emphasizing that the Catholic Church had always rejected all forms of anti-Semitism. Their reason is telling. Those cardinals argued against Pius's declaration that "the church condemns anti-Semitism," because they wanted to leave room for an anti-Semitism that was "permissible" or even "necessary." Still, for the first time ever, the magisterium, in the person of Pope Pius XI, had authoritatively repudiated modern anti-Semitism. Granted, the pope rejected the suggested reform of the Good Friday prayer. Yet racial anti-Semitism he presciently rejected with disgust.

Despite the wide-ranging nature of this internal debate, Father Wolf demonstrates that on major issues, Vatican decisions taken during this period were made by just two men: Pacelli and the man who made him secretary of state, Pius XI. Pacelli was the central figure in the deliberations between the Vatican and Germany,

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discussions that resulted in the 1933 Concordat between the church and the Nazi regime. Pacelli and Pius XI both hoped to preserve the capacity of Catholic churches, schools, and other institutions to function unmolested by Hitler's henchmen, a desire that eventually proved to be futile. As the Germans began to pass laws designed to isolate Jews economically, socially, and culturally, the Vatican remained silent. This was so even though the Vatican nuncio in Germany issued frequent and faithful reports on the deteriorating situation of the Jews. At the same time, it should be noted that the two men at the top were not always so silent; they were quite vocal when Catholic priests and institutions were harassed. This two-man-show arrangement, too, was to have fateful consequences. When Pacelli became pope, he acted, by and large (especially on the issue of denouncing Hitler and the Final Solution), without seeking the advice of underlings.

As Father Wolf concedes, the Concordat was a pact with the devil. The unsavory covenant was motivated by a desire to protect Catholic, and only Catholic, peoples, practices, and institutions. It was this same mindset that, fatefully, Pacelli took with him to the office of the papacy during the war and the Shoah, at which time he regarded imperiled Jews as, at best, lying outside his universe of moral concern or obligation. He was also convinced that Nazi atrocities ought to be challenged locally by German bishops. This proved a miscalculation. During the war, the nationalism of the German bishops effortlessly overcame their ethical obligations to object to mass murder—except in the case of the “euthanasia” program, which targeted handicapped German Gentiles.

**I**N the spring of 1933, immediately after Hitler's successful grab for power, Pius XI asked Pacelli to look into the possibilities of Catholic intervention against anti-Semitic excesses. Pacelli complied and actually stated his reasons for doing so, in words that would come back to haunt him, as follows: “it is in the tradition of the Holy See to fulfill its universal mission of peace and love for all human beings, regardless of their social status or the religion to which they belong.” With these words, Father Wolf observes, Pacelli had acknowledged the principle, which he proceeded in the hour of greatest Jewish agony to

ignore, of the responsibility of the Catholic Church as the primary European “advocate for and protector of human rights.”

This was a period when persecution of German Jews intensified from boycott to legalized social, economic, educational, and cultural segregation, to Aryanization of businesses, and finally to the horrors of Kristallnacht. At this time, discussions were held in the curia about the possibility of denouncing Nazi atrocities. In the end, these came to naught, with Pacelli declaring, with characteristic “diplomacy,” that it would be “very delicate” to condemn Nazi atrocities.

Yet these very enormities (especially Kristallnacht) began to persuade Pius XI that accommodation with so evil a regime was unacceptable for the Vicar of Christ or for the religious communities over which he presided—and that the general public and ordinary Catholics might interpret supine quietude on the part of the Holy See with respect to Nazi racial doctrine as acceptance or even approval of this ideology. It was only after Kristallnacht drew no general ecclesiastical response in 1937 that Pius XI began to have pangs of conscience about the Holy See's silence in the face of this escalation of anti-Semitic violence. From that point on he ceased to behave with the moral mediocrity of a typical curial diplomat and started to act more like a Christian saint.

Father Wolf presents us with compelling evidence that in the last two years of his pontificate, Pius XI decided to intervene more decisively against National Socialism's racial ideology and the persecution of the Jews. Even before Kristallnacht, he issued the encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge* (With Burning Anxiety). Written in the vernacular rather than in Latin, it was delivered on Palm Sunday to large German congregations, and it condemned more than just the many brazen breaches of the Concordat that upset the Vatican. It also criticized Nazi racial ideology and Hitler himself. The Nazis were infuriated and responded in their typical racist fashion: they absurdly charged that the pope had been critical of Nazi activities because he was half-Jewish.

In 1938, Pius XI attempted to do more than speak; he tried in concrete ways to assist persecuted Jews in Germany, Austria, and Italy. Late that year, he attempted to have diplomatic representatives of the Vatican in the Americas and Australia ask those

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governments about the possibility of accepting Jewish immigrants. He also had the infamous writings of the Nazi chief ideologue, Alfred Rosenberg, placed on the Index of Forbidden Books. Pacelli did not prevent this even though four years earlier he had termed it politically inopportune.

Angered by the course of events in Hitler's Germany, the suddenly fearless Pius XI charged an American Jesuit, Father John LaFarge, who had criticized American racism publicly, to write an encyclical to condemn all forms of racism, especially anti-Semitism. Intriguingly, he did so without consulting Pacelli. In fact, when summoned to the pope's private summer residence, the Jesuit priest met with the pope alone. In the meeting, the Jesuit was instructed by Pius XI to "say simply what you would say if you yourself were pope." Pius XI, who had read LaFarge's book on America's treatment of blacks, told the Jesuit that he believed God had sent LaFarge to Rome, providentially, at a moment when Europe needed desperately to hear a message on race.

With two colleagues working outside of Paris, LaFarge quickly produced the document, which he entitled *Humani Generis Unitas* (The Unity of the Human Race). This came to be known as the "lost" or, more precisely, "hidden" encyclical. On the very day LaFarge submitted it, in December 1938, Pius XI tearfully explained to a group of Belgian pilgrims that anti-Semitism was not reconcilable with the Catholic faith. Indeed, he declared it "a repulsive movement with which we Christians can have nothing in common." Speaking of Jews and Catholics, he concluded, famously, "Spiritually, we are all Semites."

Soon, Pius XI began to consider placing Hitler's own *Mein Kampf* on the Index and to use the occasion to condemn the racial errors of the time. He ordered the Holy Office to proceed with a critical examination. Ultimately, a document was produced, distilling 37 propositions, mostly from *Mein Kampf*, many of which had to do with the dangerous doctrine of the superiority of the Aryan race and the heretical notion that humanity was divided by race. Jesuits again led the charge, arguing for an open confrontation with Hitler. There was also a conciliatory faction. Pacelli led that group.

Despite the lack of support from his secretary of state, Pius XI planned to use the 10th anniversary

of the formal independence of the Vatican city-state to denounce fascism. The now critically ill pope dedicated the final hours of his life to writing this text. But Pius XI died on February 10, 1939, the day before he was scheduled to give the speech. On February 15, Pacelli ordered all printed copies of the speech and plates in the Vatican printing office destroyed; too delicate, again.

LATER that year, Pacelli was elected Pope Pius XII. The choice of name is not insignificant. Pacelli clearly intended not only to honor Ratti but also to signal continuity with his predecessor. Yet German fears of renewed diplomatic conflict with the Vatican quickly turned out to be unfounded. Monsignor Domenico Tardini, who served Pacelli as one of the top two men in the secretariat of state, observed, in masterful understatement, that he lacked the "pugnacious spirit" of Pius XI. The Jesuit priest Robert Leiber, one of Pius XII's closest advisers, came to the conclusion that while "Pius XI was in general not easy to dissuade from taking public positions on burning questions," Pius XII "was not easy to move toward that end." When one considers the burning issue of the time, one cannot but ask an agonizing question: would the fate of many of the 6 million Jews slaughtered by the Nazis and their collaborators have been different had Pius XI lived or Pius XII been more like him?

Given the "diplomatic" instincts attested to by friendly contemporaries, it cannot be surprising, as historian Frank Coppa has observed, that Pius XII's "first priority" upon donning the papal tiara in 1939 was "to conciliate Nazi Germany." In fact, following his accession to the papacy, relations between the Vatican and Germany became less fraught. One of Pius XII's first letters was to Hitler, announcing his accession. He addressed it to the "Fuehrer," a salutation that it is hard to imagine his predecessor using. In the spring of that same year, French diplomats expressed anxiety that in the face of the impending invasion of Poland, the new pope was somehow content to remain silent. To them, his impassivity seemed like indifference. But instead of speaking, he asked Catholics on all sides to begin a "crusade of prayer" for peace, a tactic not likely to deter Hitler from the war he craved. The difference between his attitudes and actions toward Germany

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when compared with those of Pius XI was pronounced. Later, when war had broken out and persecution had evolved into extermination, no less a figure than the devout Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain told Aryeh Kubovy of the World Jewish Congress that he guessed Pius XI would have issued a statement of the church's position toward the Jews but was quite sure Pius XII would not. His guess was tragically right.

Pacelli himself supplied evidence of even more profound reluctance to alienate Germany. When Pius XI expressed his intention to terminate relations between the Vatican and the Third Reich, Pacelli boasted that he had persuaded him not to do so. As the war began and wore on, and as news of the mass murder of the Jews regularly reached the Vatican—often supplied by Vatican diplomats and Axis military chaplains who had witnessed firsthand the atrocities of the SS's "mobile killing units," or Einsatzgruppen, in Eastern Europe—it would have been possible to excommunicate the National Socialist dictator or those of his associates who were nominally Catholic. Father Wolf has concluded, however, that there is "no trace" in the Vatican archives of any effort to initiate excommunication proceedings against Adolf Hitler. Pronouncing a reich chancellor and head of state anathema was simply out of the question. Hitler remained a member of the Catholic Church until the day he died. "Like the Pope," Father Wolf ruefully concludes, "even the devil could be Catholic."

**T**HOUGH Pius XI was, by egregious contrast to his successor, ultimately bold and unshrinking in the face of the Vatican's fascist and totalitarian conversation partners, including Mussolini and

Hitler, there is no sign that the Roman curia has any intention of promoting him to sainthood. Perhaps the reason is that it would weaken Pacelli's historically wobbly case. Yet when one compares the record of the two popes, the question of who is more deserving of recognition and celebration, if not canonization, may not be all that hard to answer. Unlike Pius XII, Pius XI "understood that the dehumanization of Jews was anti-Christian, destructive and dangerous long before he recognized that it might culminate in genocide," as Coppa argues. Even when it did culminate in genocide, as Father Wolf notes, "in exchange for a promise of spiritual freedom," the church under Pius XII was willing "to renounce worldly engagement in politics and public affairs, and literally withdraw" to its liturgical dressing chambers. Pius XII let the demand to serve as supreme shepherd of his flock completely trump "his duty to advocate for all human beings formed in God's likeness."

The church has devoted a great deal of effort in recent decades to defending Pius XII against accusations of indifference about or even complicity in the Holocaust. As such, proclaiming his innocence and downplaying the unhappy facts about his reluctance to take on the Nazis has become something of an article of faith for many Catholics. Indeed, the movement to grant him sainthood is seen by many of the faithful as an appropriate response to charges they have come to see as a blanket accusation against their entire church. But rather than focusing on attempts to burnish the tarnished reputation of Pacelli, perhaps it is time to re-evaluate his largely forgotten predecessor, a man who ultimately lived up to the moral responsibilities of his office in ways that his successor namesake did not. 

But with only two years to go before Christianity closes the books on its first 2,000 years, the Pope has yet to ask forgiveness of the Jews for the violence they have suffered over the centuries at the hands of the church, its followers and, in some cases, its leaders. Most particularly, he has yet to make a reckoning of what many have condemned as the silence of the Vatican during the systematic slaughter of Europe's Jews by the Nazis during World War II.Â Many Jewish leaders see the long-awaited papal statement on the church, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust -- being prepared by the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism -- as the conclusive test of the willingness of the church to confront its share of guilt for the tragedy that befell the Jews.