THE SILENT PARTY

The Vatican and the Holocaust

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Thesis Statement: The response of the Vatican to the Holocaust can be examined by reviewing the pertinent events leading up to the war, those during the war, and those in the aftermath of the war.

I. Events Leading up to the War
    A. Concordat between the Vatican and Germany
    B. Failure of the Concordat
    C. Response to *Kristallnacht*
    D. Unpublished encyclical of Pius XI
II. Events during the War
    A. Pius XII promotes peace
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    A. John XXIII, Vatican II, and *Nostra Aetate*
    B. Paul VI
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Concluding Statement: In retrospect, the Vatican did all it could have been expected to during the Holocaust, given its past and its then current leader.

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Between 1939 and 1945, the world was enveloped by a Great War. Historians have come to call it the Second World War, for not only did all the great powers take part, but the smaller nations as well, either with their words or their actions. This war forever altered the course of history, while affecting every aspect of human life.

It was, though, a certain people whose lives were affected in a most all-encompassing way. They were the Jews. The scars on the Jewish people inflicted during the war years will probably never heal. The war had created the possibility of something that might never have occurred otherwise. It concealed a darkness greater than even the horrors of that very war. In Germany and its occupied territories the Nazis planned and attempted to carry out the extinction of the Jews.

When one ponders the history of the Holocaust, he usually thinks of the atrocities committed by the Nazis and their collaborators against the Jews. But, what about the inactivity, indeed silence, of certain parties in the face of such events? The Catholic Church, for instance, seems to have rarely spoken out about the events that comprise the Holocaust.

The Catholic Church itself bears a great responsibility in the Holocaust, even if it will not admit to it. For two thousand years it has been official church doctrine that Jews were guilty of deicide, or of killing Jesus. Jews were referred to as ‘lost,’ ‘wretched,’ or ‘perfidious,’ and prayers were offered for their souls at mass on Good Friday. Canon law increasingly sought to isolate Jews from Christians.

The problem arises of how the Catholic Church chose either to act or not to act in regards to the events of the Holocaust. The response of the Vatican to the Holocaust can be examined by reviewing the pertinent events leading up to the war, those during the war, and those in the aftermath of the war.

The Nazis came to power in 1933 through the election of Adolf Hitler as chancellor of the German Republic. He lost no time in flooding Germany with his policies and propaganda of anti-Semitism. After all, he had made his feelings and plans abundantly clear in his own work, *Mein Kampf*, or *My Struggle*.

Hitler was a Catholic by birth, and although he did not practice the religion of his parents, he did not immediately set out to oppose the Church. On the contrary, he actively sought Church support early in his administration. To this end, within a few months of coming to power, Hitler signed a concordat with Pope Pius XI, which guaranteed the free exercise of Catholicism in Germany. The Vatican yielded only small concessions to the Nazis; significantly, though, the concordat recognized the legitimacy of the Nazi regime in Germany (Botwinick, 101).

However, the pope's attempt at safeguarding the Catholic faith in the increasingly totalitarian German State ended in failure. Within years of the agreement the Nazis were already breaking provisions of the concordat. Hitler's program of racial superiority, which included the euthenization of 'undesirables,' did provoke outcries from the Catholic Church. This protest did succeed in halting the killings, but only temporarily (101).

The Nazi regime applied increasingly greater pressure to the church to conform to state sponsored programs and doctrines. Worshippers were harassed while priests were

censored. When it became clear to the pope that Hitler had no intention of honoring the concordat, Pius XI issued the encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge*, or *With Deep Anxiety*. In it, the pope decried the persecution of the Catholic faith in Germany, as well as Hitler's promotion of a cult of race and blood.

The following year the world got a taste of things to come. On the thin pretense of revenge for the murder of a German diplomat by a Polish Jew, Hitler's chief propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, set into motion a massive pogrom against German and Austrian Jews. November 9 and 10 of 1938 saw the frenzied destruction of every synagogue in Germany, in addition to 7,500 Jewish owned businesses (122). Gestapo storm troopers searched the countryside for Jewish men between sixteen and sixty years of age. In all, 30,000 men were arrested and deported to the concentration camps at Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen, supposedly held in 'protective custody' (123). The majority was eventually released in preparation for their possible emigration.

As in most of the world, the response in Rome to the events of what came to be known as *Kristallnacht* was lukewarm at best. The pope issued only a vague statement of sympathy for the Jewish victims (125). Pius explained that, "spiritually, we are all Semites (Duffy, 261)."

As the pope's health began to fail, so did any chance of a condemnation of Nazi anti-Semitism. His assistants drafted one final encyclical, *Humani Generis Unitas*, or *The Unity of the Human Race*, which denounced anti-Semitism unambiguously (261). Alas, Pius succumbed on February 10, 1939, and the document would never be proclaimed. Unfortunately, it was the former policy of Pius XI, characterized by appeasement, which set the tone for future pronouncements against Nazi actions by the pope's successor.

Eugenio Pacelli became Pius XII when he was elected on March 2, 1939 at the first ballot of the conclave following the death of Pius XI. Having served as papal nuncio in many nations the world over, including Germany, Pacelli had been trained by his predecessor. “He seemed born to be pope (263).”

In character as a diplomat, Pius XII began his pontificate attempting to prevent the inevitable outbreak of war. According to the pope, “Nothing is lost by peace; everything may be lost by war (263).” All his efforts were to no avail, though, and declarations of war were exchanged following the German invasion of Poland.

After hostilities had begun, the pope did what he could to promote peace and prevent atrocity (263). He staunchly avoided taking sides, to the point where his neutrality became intolerable. Personally, his timid indecision and constant weighting and counter-weighing of plans often stifled his action.

Nowhere could this better be seen than in his actions regarding atrocities committed against the Jews. During the war, the Vatican acquired an immense amount of information in reference to Nazi anti-Jewish actions. This caused not only the Allies, but also the pope’s own advisors, to put pressure on Pius to denounce the Nazis. His own convictions, as well as his early career as a diplomat, precluded him from issuing such a denunciation (263). “The Vatican was later criticized for its silence on the fate of the Jews, while defenders of the pope responded that his protests could only have harmed Catholics without benefiting the persecuted Jews (Botwinick, 101).”

The pope’s official actions tended to translate into the actions of his nuncios, or the Vatican diplomats. “Pope Pius XII did not instruct his diplomats or priests to denounce the racial laws or the deportations (Rosenberg, 186).”

A nuncio functioned like a civil diplomat, concerning the situation of the Church in the country to which he was assigned, while the Vatican repeatedly claimed that the nuncios represented all the people of the country. Therefore, a nuncio's mission was one of a humanitarian nature, not only to Catholics, but to anyone who resided in that country (Morley, 195).

However, the representatives of the church only seemed to react when Nazi racial laws threatened converted Jews. Particularly offensive to the Church was a regulation forbidding the conversion of Jews to Catholicism. This law struck at the very heart of evangelism in the Church, in whose eyes all those baptized are equal before God. When the nuncios did speak out in support of these baptized Jews, they were, in effect, denying the validity of any racial theories (197). Directly, though, nuncios rarely spoke out against the basic injustices that motivated such measures. Some of them even felt that anti-Jewish laws were beneficial to Christian society, in that they reduced Jewish influence in countries where it was considered harmful (198). Vatican sources, corroborated by Jewish sources, have revealed that nuncios rarely acted in the humanitarian interests of the Jewish people (196). "The nuncios…did not bring the full weight of their offices and position to these efforts. Their interventions were sporadic and reluctant, at times apologetic, and lacking the face of condemnation that the circumstances required… As a result, they missed the opportunity, not to save the Jews, which would have been impossible in any case, but to give witness to the humanitarian commitment which they proudly claimed as the hallmark of Vatican diplomacy (201)."

It must also be noted that the ability of the Vatican representatives to intervene on behalf of the Jews was limited to countries where the Jewish population was

proportionately lower than that of the Eastern European nations. If not one Jew in these countries perished, millions would still have died in the east. It is unrealistic to believe that a few words or actions on behalf of the Vatican could have saved the Jews of Europe (205).

The pope himself deemed it wise to rely upon diplomacy, but chose not to fully utilize its power. In so doing, he not only failed the Jews, but those Catholics who suffered under Nazi brutality. His desire not to offend any nation, especially Germany, made a mockery of the Vatican's vaunted claims to justice and brotherhood in the field of diplomacy.

Not all Catholics, though, agreed with Pius. A Dutchman explains his view thusly, "Anybody who takes part in the persecution of the Jews, whether voluntarily or against his will, is looking for an excuse for himself. Some cannot give up a business deal, others are doing it for the sake of families; and the Jewish professors must disappear for the sake of the university. I have to go through these difficult days without breaking, but in the end my fate will be decided and I shall go like a man (Bauminger, Intro)." He would die a martyr at the hands of the Nazis.

Those churchmen who did risk their reputations, and indeed their lives as the above example shows, usually did so as a personal choice, not an official one (Rosenberg, 185). In the main, though, the bishops usually echoed the sentiment of the pope, who "expressed concern over the fate of the non-Aryans, but…declared he could offer no other succor than prayers (Botwinick, 101)." The response of a Lithuanian bishop is typical of most churchmen. When approached by Jews from the city of Kovno for help, the bishop responded, "I can only cry and pray myself; the Church cannot help

you (Friedman, 416).” However, there were bright spots, such as the bishop of Vilna in Lithuania who encouraged the monasteries in his charge to aid Jews (Rosenberg, 185). All this transpired in the Baltic region of Europe where “the attitude of the overwhelming majority of the local population…ranged from hostile indifference to active hostility…(Bauer, 77)”

Since its very inception, the Church has tried to convert the Jews. Churchmen often used moral and physical pressures in achieving their goal. Many welcomed Jews who feared for their livelihood, while some ecclesiastics recognized the incongruity of such conversions and condemned them. When the Nazi persecutions began, most priests welcomed Jews wanting to convert, even if it was solely to save their lives. Such churchmen saw in the persecutions the hand of God pushing the Jews toward the Church (Morley, 197). This can explain why so many priests were less inclined to act or speak out on behalf of the Jews.

As the tide began turning against the Nazi war machine, Hitler accelerated his plan “for bringing about a complete solution of the Jewish question in the German sphere of influence in Europe (Hilberg, 262).”In 1943, even as they began their retreat from Russia, the Germans intensified the deportation and extermination of Jews. As the bishops of Western Europe began actively assisting Jews and speaking in their defense, the German hierarchy remained in marked contrast, silent and apathetic (Lewy, 293). The Allied armies would soon overrun the concentration camps and liberate their prisoners. In May 1945 Berlin was encircled, and Germany surrendered unconditionally.

As painful as the war years had been, to the Jews of Europe the following years would offer little respite. Many of them lingered on for years in camps for displaced

persons, not knowing what to do or where to go. Coupled with their hardships was a general reluctance of most Christian leaders in beginning the work of reconciliation with the Jewish people (Rosenberg, 187).

It was not until Pope Pius XII had passed away that Catholic conduct towards the Jews could even begin to be examined. The cardinals who met to choose the next pontiff wanted a seat-warming pope, and the aging Patriarch of Venice, Angelo Roncali, was elected as John XXIII. As the cardinals, and indeed the whole world, were about to learn, "human calculation has seldom been more spectacularly mistaken (Duffy, 269)."

As pope, John called a great ecumenical council of Catholic bishops, inviting representatives of the Orthodox and Protestant Churches as well. Known as the Second Vatican Council, it offered reassurance of a 'new ecumenism,' not only to non-Catholic Christians, but to Jews as well (Rosenberg, 193).

One of the decrees of the council, *Nostra Aetate*, or *The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, included an entire section on the Jews alone. While the declaration did state that Jews and Christians were spiritually linked, it failed to address the persistence of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism in the Christian world. Most disheartening to the Jewish community was the declaration's amazing silence concerning the events of the Holocaust (194). Not only were Jews disappointed, but many Catholics were disillusioned as well. According to John Cogley, then religious editor of the New York Times, the declaration was "a reason for shame and anguish on the part of many Catholics and of suspicion and rancor on the part of many Jews (New York Times, October 16, 1965, 8)."

Pope John would not live to see the completion of the council he had inaugurated. His death in 1963 brought the election of one of his ablest advisors, Giovanni Montini, as Paul VI, who became the first reigning pope to visit the Holy Land in 1964. Paul continued the work of the council, and after its adjournment in 1965, he began to enact its decisions (Duffy, 275). But, Catholic ecumenism towards the Jews would have to wait for another man.

Karol Wojtyla of Poland became Pope John Paul II in 1978, the first non-Italian pope in almost five centuries. His personal relationships with Jews early in his life, as well as his lifelong friendships with Jews, have created an intense interest in Judaism in the pontiff (Duffy, 289). John Paul II has taken more steps toward the Jews than any other pope, including the recognition of full diplomatic relations with the young state of Israel (Elie, 37). He charged the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews to examine the history of anti-Judaism in the Catholic Church (34). In March of 1998 the Commission delivered its work in a document entitled “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah.” Even though it does not carry the weight of a papal encyclical, it is probably the most all-encompassing statement the Vatican will make on the Holocaust, urging all Catholics to examine past Jewish-Catholic relations (35).

In retrospect, the Vatican did all it could have been expected to during the Holocaust, given its past and its then current leader. For nearly the entirety of the last two millennia, churchmen have charged Jews with deicide and made demons out of them. How could one expect that these same men would stand up for the very ones they derided? It was only in specific, personal instances where priests and other clerics spoke out against Nazi policies and injustices.

The Catholic Church as a whole could not, and would not take a stand. The supreme head of the Church refused to definitively denounce Hitler and the Nazis. The very inaction of Pius XII begs the question asked by the historian Eamon Duffy, “How could the oracle of God remain dumb in the face of sins so terrible, so much at odds with the gospel of the Incarnate? (264)”

Simply put, Pius XII was the product of the same doctrine that had desensitized his fellow clergy to the plight of the Jews. It did not help that he had been nuncio to Germany, and was reluctant to take any move against the beloved land of Mozart and Bach, even if that land was being perverted by the likes of Adolf Hitler.

In the final analysis, it is the Catholics of today that must wrestle with the moral implications of Pius’ actions. The words of Cardinal John O’Connor ring true: “I cannot forget it as a Christian and I am grateful that it is our Jewish brothers and sisters who keep reminding us. ***It must be seared into our memories*** (New York Times, May 2, 1985).”

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