

Renewed Attacks on Pius XII

by Father David Q. Liptak

Recently, sporadic attacks upon the relationship of Pope Pius XII and Nazi Germany were sharply brought into focus in October with the publication of John Cornwell's *Hitler's Pope: The secret History of Pius XII* (Viking). Prior to this book, the major objection was Pius XII's alleged silence with respect to the Holocaust. Now the charge is (according to an advertising blurb) that Pius XII was actually "the most dangerous churchman in modern history." Mr. Cornwall's assault on Eugenio Pacelli (Pius XII's given name) begins with a photograph on the dust jacket of the book. It shows the then Archbishop Pacelli, who was the apostolic nuncio at Berlin, being saluted by two soldiers at a government building. The caption indicates that the year was March 1939, almost six full years after Hitler became chancellor. Yet, as Jesuit scholar Peter Gumpel notes, in the December 1999 *Crisis* magazine, Pacelli left Germany in 1929, never to return. In fact, he was already pope by March 1939.

Kenneth Woodward, reviewing the book in the 27 Sept. issue of *Newsweek*, referred to "errors of fact and ignorance of context" on "almost every page." Pope Pius XII's first encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus*, condemned aggression against small nations; at the time it was clearly understood to refer to Russia's aggression against Finland, and Nazi Germany's aggression against Poland. The Nazi's disallowed the publication of this document in Germany. They knew that it referred to Hitler and the Nazis. So did the Allies. Allied planes showered 88,000 copies of the encyclical over Germany. Obviously it was read correctly among the Allies.

As for specific charges of anti-Semitism on the part of the pope, consider these words of Nobel laureate Albert Einstein, published in the 23 Dec. 1940 *Time* magazine, and cited by Dr. Gumpel in the *Crisis* article mentioned above:

Being a lover of freedom, when the revolution came in Germany I looked to the universities to defend it, knowing that they had always boasted of their devotion to the case of truth; but no, the universities immediately were silenced. Then I looked to the great editors of the newspapers whose flaming editorials in days gone by had proclaimed their love of freedom. But they, like the universities, were silenced in a few short weeks. Only the Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler's campaign for suppressing truth. I never had any special interest in the Church before, but now I feel a great affection and admiration because the Church alone has had the courage and persistence to stand for intellectual truth and moral freedom. I am forced thus to confess, that what I once despised, I now praise unreservedly (*Italics added*).

Moreover as Dr. Gumpel adds, Israel's first foreign minister (and its second prime minister), Moshe Sharett, personally told Pius XII that his "first duty was to thank him [Pacelli], and through him the Catholic Church, on behalf of the Jewish public, for all that they had done in various countries to rescue Jews." It is especially interesting to refer to a *New York Times* editorial of 25 Dec. 1941 as an indicator of Pius XII's rejection of Hitler and the Nazi party. The Catholic League reran a section of this editorial on 22 Dec. 1997. It read:

The voice of Pius XII is a lonely voice in the silence and darkness enveloping Europe this Christmas...In calling for a 'real new order' based on 'liberty, justice and love,' to be attained only by a 'return to social and international principles capable of creating a barrier against the abuse of liberty and the abuse of power, the pope put himself squarely against Hitlerism. Recognizing that there is no road open to agreement between belligerents 'whose reciprocal war aims and programs seem to be irreconcilable,' he left no doubt that the Nazi aims are also irreconcilable with his own conception of a Christian peace.

A host of scholars can be summoned to defend the fact that Pius XII saved the lives of countless Jewish people. Thousands of Jews were given hiding places in the Vatican and in more than 150 Church buildings in Rome. Most of the historians who have reviewed the record suggest that hundreds of thousands of Jews were saved through Pius XII's policies. Pinchas Lapide, a Jewish Scholar, estimated that the pope may have saved 860,000 Jews. At the time of Pius XII's death in 1958, Israel's Golda Meir, who was to become prime minister, telegraphed Rome: "...When fearful martyrdom came to our people in the decade of Nazi terror, the voice of the pope was raised for the

victims. The life of our times was enriched by a voice speaking out on the great moral truths above the tumult of daily conflict."

Mr. Cornwell's book cannot alter the truth of the historical record. It appears to be but another absurd attempt to vilify the memory of a strong moral leader. Why? One editorial writer has raised the possibility that the recent attacks upon Pius XII are really directed against Pope John Paul II for supporting Pius XII's cause. Once Pius XII is discredited, it is thought, the Church could be "coerced" into following polls and contemporary values instead of perennial doctrinal and moral norms.

With the election of a new Roman pontiff, the theory goes, "those who hate the Church expect that if they keep up their agitation there is an excellent chance of influencing cardinals to choose a pontiff who would not challenge the ages dominant powers, nor battle against [the] anti-life spirit of a morally impoverished world" (*Inside the Vatican*, op.cit.). Hence, renewed attacks on Pius XII are really not about Pius XII but about the next papal conclave. There is no evidence to support the thesis that Pius XII somehow declined to reject Hitler or the Nazis, or that he can be accused of anti-Semitism. Likewise, the "Hitler's Pope" allegation is worthless.

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