

Pope Pius XII and Jews

by Michael Curtis



Pope Pius XII

How do you keep the music playing? How do you make it last? Vatican relations with Jews have been uneven, and the subject of a virtual library of works but in general are improving. One sign was that while in Israel in March 2000 Pope John Paul II, while dealing with political and religious issues, also apologized for sins committed by Christians against Jews. He acknowledged that the Catholic Church is deeply saddened by the acts of persecution and displays of antisemitism directed against the Jews by Christians acts of persecution at any time and in any place.

However, recent books, polemical, partisan, and scholarly, have revived the assessment of the papacy of Pope Pius XII and the validity of charges against him that he had not tried to help Jews against the Nazi regime. Any Pope is difficult to decipher because of the fact that when speaking from the

throne he is ex cathedra on issues of faith or morals and infallible. Pius XII is particularly difficult partly because of his secretive and private nature, partly because of his refusal, and those of his successors, to open the archives of his papacy and earlier years, and partly because of the continuing controversy over the general orientation of his political opinions, and whether he had done enough to stand up to Hitler and the Nazis. The Vatican had recognized Francisco Franco as legitimate ruler of Spain; it called Mussolini a "man sent by Providence;" it did not oppose the Enabling Act 1933 that legally changed Germany into a dictatorship.

On March 4, 2019, the present Pope Francis announced that the Vatican would on March 2, 2020 open its archives on the reign of Pius XII, 1939-1958. Francis believes that Pius has been criticized with some prejudice and exaggeration, and that Pius was a "great defender" of Jews. But Francis admitted the archives would include moments of grave difficulties, tormented decisions of human and Christian prudence, that to some could appear as reticence.

For 50 years critics of Pius XII have called for an examination of the relevant papers to assess his behavior during his tenure as Vatican Secretary of State in Berlin in 1933 and during the years of occupation of Rome by the Nazis. The date is the 81st anniversary of the election of Eugenio Pacelli to the papacy. In Berlin on July 20, 1933, Pacelli signed the Concordat, that guaranteed the rights of Catholics in Germany. In December 17, 1942 he refused to sign the western Declaration condemning the Nazi extermination of Jews.

During the war years he was accused of remaining silent about the Holocaust decisions of the time, moral and political, especially the Nazi round up of 1,035 Jews in Rome on October 18, 1943.

The decision of Pope Francis is a welcome move since it will

help assess the difficult war time political and moral problems facing the Papacy which was officially neutral during World War II. It is evident that disagreement on policies and actions is still acute, and the central issue, could Pius have done more to resist Hitler, may never be adequately answered. The issue remains, was he too silent as many claim, or did he save Jews by ordering his priests to assist them.

The custom has been for the Vatican to open archives of a pontificate 70 years after it ended, but the intensity of interest and concern concerning Pius led to the opening after 62 years. It will take years to examine all the papers available. Pope Francis has said the Catholic Church is not afraid of history. On the contrary, he said, the Church loves it.

The Church will once again go through the explanation and defense of its behavior. Previously, criticism came to a head with the publication in 1963 of Rolf Hochhuths' play *The Deputy, a Christian tragedy*. Hochhuth features a sanitation engineer employed in the SS Hygiene Institute who tries and fails to inform Pius that lethal gas Zyklon -b was being used to kill Jews in concentration camps. Vatican response in releasing some of the documents was regarded as insufficient. Critics wanted full access to all the records. The play was made in 2002 into a powerful movie, *Amen* by Greek-French director Constantine Costa-Gavras.

The archives will throw light on the charges and the responses. Among the charges are: Pius XII in March 1939 did not support priests who opposed persecution and did not intervene when Jews were rounded up in Rome; he did not condemn Hitler in clear, direct, unambiguous terms; Pius was anti-communist, and thought Hitler was a bulwark against the Soviet Union.

Catholics responses: Pius used back channels and diplomacy; Vatican intervention would hurt Catholics in Nazi countries;

the Vatican did hide Jews; in October 1943 Pius asked churches and convents in Italy to shelter Jews; 155 institutions did so and sheltered 5,000 Jews; 3000 Jews fled to the Pope's summer home in Castel Gandolfo; the Vatican was not silent. Vatican radio, established in 1931 provided information about the Nazi groups in Poland.

The issue is linked with proposed canonization of Pius. The first step was launched by Pope Benedict XVII in 2009, but was stalled because it was seen as inopportune and premature. Perhaps it will do better in view of the public praise by prominent Jews. It was Albert Einstein who said the Catholic Church was the only German entity to stand up against the Nazis. And Golda Meir in October 1958 when Prime Minister of Israel said of Pius that he raised his voice to condemn the persecutors and commiserate with their victims.

The agree, Pius XII was not Hitler's pope, He may not have done certain desirable things, but according to Jewish authorities he was not indifferent to the fate of Jews. It would be profoundly ironic if their view was the determinant factor for canonization of Pius XII.