PIUS XII AND THE JEWS IN WORLD WAR II

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Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version updated edition.

Some time ago I watched a PBS documentary entitled “Holy Silence” (2020). It was about the papacy’s failure to denounce the Holocaust.

In 1938, Pope Pius XI (1922-1939) summoned to Rome an American Jesuit priest (John La Farge Jr.) who had written against racism in America. Pius XI instructed him to draft an encyclical that would denounce Nazism and anti-Semitism.

Pius XI was on the verge of publishing the encyclical when he died in February 1939. Pius XII (March 1939-1958) decided not to publish it. (Pius XII had been papal nuncio to Germany from 1917-30 and Vatican secretary of state [head of the Vatican’s diplomatic corps] from 1930-39. So perhaps hoped for a more diplomatic approach.)

According to the webpage for “Holy Silence” (pbs.org/show/holy-silence/): “President Franklin Roosevelt hoped that Pope Pius XII would take a strong stand in favor of the Allies during World War II. [But] Pope Pius XII insisted that the Vatican remain neutral throughout World War II and pleaded with the Allies not to bomb Rome. . . . the Nazi roundup of Jews in Rome [occurred] in October 1943. Pope Pius XII did not protest the deportation of Jews to Auschwitz.”

So the documentary ends up condemning Pius XII for maintaining neutrality.

On the other hand, here is a summary, by two Catholic historians, of Catholic efforts on behalf of Jews during World War II. (From: Holmes, J. Derek, and Bernard W. Bickers. *A Short History of the Catholic Church*. London: Burns and Oates, 1983. 276-77.)

[By October 1943,] more than half the Jews in Rome, it has been estimated, were being sheltered in ecclesiastical buildings opened to them on the instructions of the pope himself. Another 3000 Jews were in hiding elsewhere in Rome but the last one thousand were deported and exterminated. [The German ambassador to the Vatican Ernst von] Weizsäcker clearly knew what was happening, that many Jews had escaped with Vatican credentials and that he himself had even been approached by the Secretariat to secure the release or the safety of individual Jews.

Jewish delegations, such as the American Jewish Welfare Board, thanked the pope for his efforts on behalf of the Jews. At the end of the war the World Jewish Congress expressed its gratitude and gave twenty million lire to [276] Vatican charities. When the Chief Rabbi of Rome was received into the Church in 1945, he took the name ‘Eugenio’. [Pius XII’s name was Eugenio Pacelli.] A former Israeli consul in Italy claimed that, “The Catholic Church saved more Jewish lives during the war than all the other Churches, religious institutions and rescue organisations put together. . . . The Holy See [and] the entire Catholic Church saved some 400,000 Jews from certain death.”

According to Brockhaus and Dulle, the Nazis occupied Rome for 9 months (10 Sept. 1943 to 4 June 1944). During that time, they deported almost 2000 people (including children) to Auschwitz, where they were murdered. In 1944-45, however, the bursar of the Pontifical Biblical Institute (Gossolino Birolo, SJ) wrote of 4300 persons who were hidden in Rome by 100 women’s religious orders and 55 men’s religious orders. The bursar even listed 3600 by name; and two Jewish organizations—the Jewish Community of Rome, and Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem—have, by their archives, confirmed that 3200 were Jews.

Brockhaus, Hannah. “Documents Identify Thousands of Jews Hidden by Catholic Religious during Nazi Occupation of Rome.” *CatholicNewsAgency*.*com*. 7 Sept. 2023. 8 Sept. 2023. <catholicnewsagency.com/news/255301/ documents-identify-thousands-of-jews-hidden-by-catholic-religious-during-nazi-occupation-of-rome>.

Dulle, Colleen. “Catholic Orders in Rome Sheltered More Than 3,000 Jews during Holocaust, Rediscovered Document Shows.” *AmericaMagazine*.*org*. 7 Sept. 2023. 8 Sept. 2023. <americamagazine.org/politics-society/2023/09/07/vatican-religious-orders-rome-shelter-jews-holocaust-246019>.