

As the Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, it is the Catholic Pope's moral obligation to remain a beacon ever on the side of righteousness. The Pope's authority has the ability to bind the thoughts and deeds of faithful Catholics throughout the world, as he is the source of ecclesiastical power, decision making, and judgments. If ever there were a time to address his global congregation about injustices so heinous that they were likened to pure evil, it was during the events which have come to be known as the Holocaust. In a span of no more than seven years, the National Socialist German Workers' Party, more commonly referred to as the Nazi Party, was directly responsible for the systematic murder of more than eleven million individuals, the majority of whom were Jewish. The Catholic Church is criticized, as a whole, for its apathy towards the targeted victims of the Nazis, but many fail to see that it was, in fact, a single man who steered the Church towards inaction—Pope Pius XII. While the Nazis' industrialized killing machine thrived with no opposition in sight, Pope Pius XII had the resources and the ability to influence the hearts and minds of hundreds of millions of Catholics worldwide. Instead, he chose indifference disguised as diplomatic silence.

Pope Pius XII was nothing like his predecessor, Pope Pius XI, who disapproved of Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime when he "stressed the absolute incompatibility between [...] racist nationalism and universal Catholicism" (Coppa 295). Pope Pius XI made his opposition to Nazi anti-Semitism public in September of 1938 when he openly announced "that the Vicar of Christ could not remain silent in the face of grave errors and the violation of human rights" (Coppa 297). In fact, Pope Pius XI went even further when he ordered an encyclical to be published, under his Vatican, which thoroughly documented his sentiments on the matter. The pope's Cardinal Secretary of State,

Eugenio Pacelli, was asked to take large part in drafting the encyclical which would be critical of Nazi principles and policies; however, Pacelli, who had formerly served as papal nuncio to Germany from 1917 to 1929 was reluctant, as he “sought to prevent a break between Berlin and the Vatican” (Coppa 293). When Pope Pius XI passed away in 1939, almost immediately after the completion of his encyclical, it was Eugenio Pacelli who became Pope Pius XII. Despite the wishes of the former pope, Pope Pius XII chose “to shelve both [the encyclical] and Pius XI's address [which would have been] critical of Fascist Italy” (Coppa 298).

As World War II dawned, the Church was no longer in the hands of a moral champion. Defenders of Pope Pius XII have tried to claim ignorance as the reason for his response to the Holocaust, but between 1940 and 1941, it is recorded that the Vatican “received repeated reports of Nazi atrocities and was alerted to the genocide of the Jews” (Coppa 300). When ignorance is easily disproved as the cause, the next, most espoused explanation for the Pope's silence is that he had anxiety about “the consequences that might flow from his abandonment of political neutrality” (Coppa 301). When questioned in 1940, he attributed his restraint to “the fear of making the plight of the victims even worse” (Coppa 301). Though just a year later, in November of 1941, the Pope is quoted as having told the new Spanish ambassador, José Yanguas Messia, “that he had a ‘special love’ for the Germans, adding that he had ‘nothing against’ Germany, which he ‘loved and admired,’ nor against the Hitler regime” (Coppa 300). He acknowledged only that “he was saddened by some of [Hitler's] *measures* [emphasis added]” (Coppa 300). This shocking use of a euphemism not only substantiated that the

Pope, himself, was well aware of the horrors being committed by the Germans, but also that the plight of the victims was not actually something for which he cared a great deal.

Perhaps the most notorious display of Pope Pius XII's passive silence was during the Roman razzia wherein the Nazis rounded up twelve hundred of the four thousand Jews living in Rome on October 16, 1943. Those arrested "were forced to move from their homes and live in tiny quarters in the Italian Military College, which stood only a few hundred yards from Vatican City" (Stern 55). During this event, "there was no protest from the Church," proving that even when Nazi barbarity had reached the Pope's own city, he still could not be moved to convey public condemnation (Stern 55). Instead, he remained, once again, a cloistered spectator as the Roman Jews were transported to Auschwitz, where nearly all were murdered.

Works Cited

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