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## Capitulation or Resistance? The Response of the Catholic Church to Nazi Mistreatment of Jews

Dabo Li

*The College of Wooster*

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Over the past two decades, controversy has raged over the Vatican edict to canonize Pius XII, the pope whose reign coincided with the Second World War and the Holocaust. Debates over his wartime conduct perdured despite the want of ecclesiastical sources. Until the turn of the century, historians had been slow to research the role of the Vatican in the Holocaust, but now they come with determination.<sup>1</sup> Grating on Catholic sensitivities, the topic has become a centerpiece of historical scrutiny. This paper explores and explains the response of the Catholic Church to Nazi racial persecution of Jews.<sup>2</sup> For a fair and thorough appraisal, it is essential to chart—and give a sense of chronology to—the history of Vatican diplomacy with the Third Reich. Just as key is to use *some* evaluative criteria on the Church based on its pyramidal structure. This paper centers its gravity of analysis on the Vatican’s

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<sup>1</sup> To be sure, there had been excellent literature that interrogates the wartime conduct of the Church. In the 1960s Guenter Lewy and Saul Friedländer supplied between themselves important early perspectives that continue to shape today’s conversation. But the catalyst for later interest came as the Vatican prepared to ordain its own verdict on its role in the Holocaust, or Shoah. Amid expectancy for contrition and apology, in 1998 the Vatican published a brief requiem, “*We Remember: A Reflection on Shoah*.” Essentially a self-exculpatory instrument, it drew an avalanche of criticisms from Jewish and Catholic circles. Quickly, library shelves began to serve up titles that confronted the role of the Church in relation to Nazi Germany. In addition to strictly historical accounts of the Vatican’s role in the Holocaust, there also has been attention from journalists and political scientists. See, for instance, British journalist John Cornwell’s *Hitler’s Pope* (Viking Adult, 1999), a work of popular history that is still Exhibit A in the discourse of Vatican Holocaust blame. See also *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair*, (Alfred Knopf, New York, 2002), by Harvard political scientist Daniel Goldhagen. This genre of literature is marked by efforts to re-curate the history of Vatican vis-à-vis Hitler’s racial war against European Jewry. Armed with critical—which means fair—and non-hagiographical assessments of Pius XII, they rebut Church apologists who have spoken with a political or religious agenda.

<sup>2</sup> Here, “Nazi persecution of Jews” refers not only to industrialized mass murder, but also the underlying racial politics that made it possible. As such, this paper looks beyond Rome in the spatial sense and before the Final Solution chronologically. In regards to sources, this complex historical question cannot be comprehensively addressed without eyeing the wartime archives of the Vatican, which would clarify the decision-making processes of the Church hierarchy. However, given that for decades the Vatican has refused to make accessible its key wartime archives, this paper makes heavy use of historiography in addition to primary sources to synthesize a view of its own.

institutional response to Hitler's "Final Solution to the Jewish Question."<sup>3</sup> But more than sit in judgment on the Church, it seeks to understand and explain its conduct.<sup>4</sup>

The historiographical debate shares one important concord. Most historians of repute argue that, in regards to the Final Solution, the Church hierarchy tolerated or emboldened the Hitler regime with considerable diplomatic and moral impunity. Although some Church defenders protest by citing private papal beneficence towards Jews, the consensus in professional discourse is that the papacy remained voiceless.<sup>5</sup> Broadly speaking, the canons of scholarship can be divided into three camps. There are, on the one hand, church or papal apologists who are fundamentally closed to a secular, pluralist view of history. Such people do little more than pronounce the rectitude of the Church. They generally dismiss criticisms of Pius XII as symptoms of anti-Catholicism.<sup>6</sup> In diametric opposition, inquisitors of the Church pummel the Supreme Pontiff for his putative anti-Semitism. Finally, there are those who undertake the project of *historia* in the spirit of intellectual honesty. It is the last act to which this paper aspires.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In making references to general facts and their interpretations, this paper builds extensively on the work of the esteemed Catholic historian Guenter Lewy, but also spotlights the Vatican position, which is explicated in Michael Phayer's *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust* and Hubert Wolf's *Pope and Devil; The Vatican's Archives and the Third Reich*. In particular, Wolf's collection of letters sent by the Jewish-turned-Catholic Edith Stein to His Holiness illuminates early Vatican perspective toward anti-Semitism in Germany. For the actual letters and their translations, see Hubert Wolf, *Pope and Devil, The Vatican's Archives and the Third Reich*, trans. Kenneth Kronenberg, (Harvard University Press, 2010), 185-189.

<sup>4</sup> To explain is not to exculpate. But a complete understanding of history remains impossible unless the link between causality and effect is understood.

<sup>5</sup> Neither the Catholic Church nor church apologists have been able to point to a papal speech, oral or in writing, in which Pius XII condemned Nazism or anti-Semitism by name. While they try to exculpate him in other ways—such as decorating his wan and glancing statements as ringing denunciations—it is a matter of established historical understanding that there is no record of *public* papal condemnation of Nazism.

<sup>6</sup> One of these persons is Father Peter Gumpel, the Vatican *relator* tasked with curating the history of wartime Vatican and with advancing the cause for Pius XII's canonization. Father Gumpel has lashed out at John Cornwell, author of *Hitler's Pope*, describing him as "a rank amateur in the field of history, canon law, etc., has produced a shoddy, superficial and totally untrustworthy book which, to say the very least, is objectively biased, tendentious and so unilateral and one-sided that one wonders what really prompted this man to write this book." Quoted in Peter Gumpel, "Hitler's Pope: A Nasty Caricature of A Noble and Saintly Man," in *A Zenit Daily Dispatch* <http://www.ewtn.com/library/issues/zpius12a.htm> (Accessed September 13, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Although judiciousness is the aim, it is the author's view that that historical analysis cannot be strictly partitioned from historical judgment. Against those who think historians cannot judge—or that the Catholic Church cannot be judged—this paper attempts to broach a *rapprochement* between dispassionate historical analysis and historical judgment of the kind that is necessarily subjective but assuredly *not* relativistic.

Since John Cornwell's *Hitler's Pope* reinvigorated public interest in 1999, the locus of the historical debate has shifted over time. In the main, Vatican wartime conduct has been analyzed in three ways. Personality-based narratives, such as Cornwell's papal profile, give primacy to the personality of the pontiff in the *modus operandi* of Vatican diplomacy. Depicting him as an autocrat, they tend to view Pius XII as the Catholic Church. More commonly appreciated are theories of contingency that explain the reserve of the Church in the language of *realpolitik*.<sup>8</sup> But, citing the Church's very own anti-Semitic legacies, those anchoring for a diachronic view of history impress logical entailment over contingency to explain its reticence.<sup>9</sup>

Upon close reading of important sources, this paper first establishes the complicity of the Catholic Church in Nazi persecution of Jews. For the Church to be complicit, it would have to mean that i) the Church had—whether or not it meant to have—intelligence of industrialized mass murder of Jews and failed to treat it with attentiveness; ii) the Church hierarchy, with pope at the helm, acquiesced or assented to the genocide when it had the *capacity* to intervene and save lives; iii) as the self-crowned only true bulwark against evil, the Church conducted itself in manners incommensurate with an institution of higher calling. To speak of the complicity of the Church is not to condemn all Catholics, nor does the indictment imply a charge of collective guilt against the implicating Church personnel. To be sure, beyond the confines of the Holy See, *some* lower levels of Catholic clergy tried, with varying degrees of success, to aid their local Jews. At the apex of the Church hierarchy, Pius

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<sup>8</sup> Proponents of this view provide a dizzying array of reasons to explain the silence of the pontiff. According to these accounts, Pius XII was leery of Bolshevism, keen to safeguard the rights of Catholics in Europe, bent on preserving Vatican neutrality in the midst of war, or even wary of his personal safety. It is therefore often assumed that anti-Semitism, if it existed in the Vatican hierarchy, was an appendage to the affair.

<sup>9</sup> Of late—particularly after the obfuscations the Church made in "*We Remember*"—a growing body of literature has come to view the Holocaust as the culminating point of Christian anti-Semitism over time. For thorough expositions on the history of Vatican anti-Semitism—and the ways in which it laid the groundwork for the Holocaust—see two international bestsellers: David Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews*, (Alfred Knopf, 2001) and James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword*, (Mariner Books, 2002). One caveat: neither author argues for a deterministic, teleological view of history that impresses on the inevitability of the Holocaust. Rather, the message is that Nazi racial anti-Semitism grew out of the consecrated religious anti-Semitism of the Church, of which the Crusades and the Inquisition had been logical outgrowths.

XII did voice concern for Jewish converts to Catholicism in specific instances. But these qualifications, hardly redemptive, do not alter the overall drift of the historical verdict. More than a few Vatican bureaucrats, the Catholic Church was a pan-European agglomeration of peoples and institutions that, in numerous instances of the Nazi exterminationist era, behaved badly towards Jews.

The Church assumed complicity just as Nazism took root. It all began when Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, the would-be Pius XII, negotiated for the Vatican an international treaty with Hitler's fledgling regime. Consummated in the seemingly innocuous circumstances of July 1933, *Reichskonkordat* represented Nazism's first diplomatic triumph. Despite the well-publicized savagery of Nazism, the Concordat made the world sit up and take notice: the moral hub of Christian Europe was now its official partner. Within Germany, the Concordat broke the backbone of Catholic resistance: In exchange for such concessions as the unfettered control in the schooling of Catholic children, the Church agreed to dissolve the Catholic Center Party and to withdraw its clergy from German political affairs.<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, a vote for Nazism in 1933 was not a vote for the Final Solution. Back then, neither Pacelli nor the Church hierarchy could have fully discerned the malevolence of Hitler's ambitions. But the Concordat was a recipe for disaster. By consigning the Center Party to oblivion the Rome-Berlin pact cleared the way for Hitler's rise to total power. It demoralized German Catholics who might have dissented.<sup>11</sup> It legitimized the regime in the eyes of the world.<sup>12</sup> It sealed a sorry preface to what was about to come. Indeed, there were immediate clues—cues, in fact—that should have put the Church on red alert. In the aftermath of scoring his first diplomatic victory as Chancellor of the Third Reich, Hitler made the chilling declaration during his cabinet meeting that the Concordat “created an atmosphere

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<sup>10</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 91-92.

<sup>11</sup> Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, 139 & 149 & 218.

<sup>12</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 90.

of confidence that would be significant in the urgent struggle against International Jewry.”<sup>13</sup> Here was an opportunity to discredit Hitler, and to awaken those deceived by him. Instead, the subtext of Hitler’s speech went under the radar of the Church.

But there would be more, and worse. Taking the papal throne in March 1939, Eugenio Pacelli, now Pius XII, helped turn a new page in the foul history of Nazi-Vatican collaboration. Prior to Pacelli’s accession, the papacy occupied by Pius XI had begun to express its misgivings about Nazism. The ailing but headstrong Pius XI first complained in his March 1937 encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* (“With Burning Anxiety”) of Nazi violations of *Reichskonkordat*.<sup>14</sup> In May of the following year, he snubbed Hitler’s first visit to Rome by relieving himself out of town.<sup>15</sup> A month later, the pontiff commissioned a further encyclical, *Humani Generis Unitas* (“The Unity of Humankind”), to decry Nazi racism.<sup>16</sup> But such was the cruel irony of history that, shortly after he died of heart attack in February 1939, the new pontiff shredded the encyclical.<sup>17</sup> Reversing Vatican’s position, upon his inauguration Pacelli paid personal homage to an all-powerful Hitler, crafting the following message,

To the Illustrious Herr Adolf Hilter! Führer and Chancellor of the German Reich! Here at the beginning of Our Pontificate We wish to assure you that We remain devoted to the spiritual welfare of the German people entrusted to your leadership... During the many years we spent in Germany, We did all in Our power to establish harmonious relations between Church and State. Now that the responsibilities of Our pastoral function have increased Our opportunities, how much more ardently do We pray to reach that goal. May the prosperity of the German people and their progress in every domain come, with God’s help, to fruition!<sup>18</sup>

A Germanophile,<sup>19</sup> Pacelli demonstrated throughout the course of the Final Solution his lassitude to the paroxysms of the Third Reich. Upon being urged by Myron C. Taylor,

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Cornwell, *Hitler’s Pope*, 152.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Goldhagen, *A Moral Reckoning: The Catholic Church In the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair* (Alfred Knopf, 2002), 46.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust*, (Indiana University Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Cornwell, *Hitler’s Pope*, Preface to the 2008 Edition, xvii.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Cornwell, *Hitler’s Pope*, 208.

<sup>19</sup> Prior to his rise to Cardinalship Pacelli had served in Germany as papal nuncio from 1917 to 1929. In his papal reign he appointed an entourage of German advisers, exciting them with his knowledge of German language and culture. See Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust*, 55.

President Roosevelt's envoy to the Vatican, to speak out against the murder of the Jews in the Polish death factories in July 1942, he led the Holy See in shirking this moral imperative by casting doubt on the veracity of the genocidal campaign.<sup>20</sup> Among Pacelli's most ignominious silences was his refusal to heed the efforts of Bishop Konrad Preysing of Germany, who pressed him to intervene on thirteen occasions in fifteen months during the years of 1943 and 1944.<sup>21</sup> Even as the Nazi death squads threatened to round up the 8,000 Jews in Rome in the fall of 1943, the man in the Eternal City refused to protest.<sup>22</sup> To the 1,000 Roman Jews deported to concentration camps and whose fate one dares not speculate, Pacelli owed moral accountability for his detached silence.<sup>23</sup>

The Catholic Church prides itself as a moral institution. As Nazism threw Europe into moral abyss, what could possibly have dissuaded Pius XII from denouncing industrialized mass murder? It has been suggested that the pontiff wished to keep the Vatican from aerial bombing,<sup>24</sup> that he balked at the spectre of papal assassination,<sup>25</sup> that he feared for the safety of Catholics,<sup>26</sup> and that his enmity for communism clouded this judgment.<sup>27</sup> Even the constraints of geography have been brought forth on his behalf.<sup>28</sup> These imputed considerations might well have played into Pius XII's thinking, but they are not good advertisements for the moral properties of the Catholic Church. And as we shall see, the primary explanation—at least for the inactivity of the Church—lay elsewhere.

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<sup>20</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 298. See also, Phayer, 49.

<sup>21</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust*, 81.

<sup>22</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 300-301. For thorough treatment of Pius' reticence in Nazi round-up of Roman Jews, see Susan Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and The Holocaust In Italy*, (Yale University Press, 2002). Through painstaking research of local archives, Zuccotti, a professor of history at Columbia University, has studied the ways in which the Vatican responded to Nazi rounding up of Jews in Rome, under the nose of Pius XII.

<sup>23</sup> Of the 1,000 Roman Jews deported, fourteen men and one woman returned alive; the rest were killed at Auschwitz. See Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 301.

<sup>24</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust*, 43

<sup>25</sup> This argument is advanced by Dan Kurzman, *A Special Mission: Hitler's Secret Plot to Seize the Vatican and Kidnap Pope Pius XII*, (Da Capo Press, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows*, 313.

<sup>27</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust*, 19. See also Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows*, 314.

<sup>28</sup> Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows*, 318. Zuccotti writes, "Unlike parish priests who dealt with human frailty every day, the pope was sheltered not from political and diplomatic maneuvering but from unpleasant realities of cruelty and suffering. He lived in an unreal world."

Without the issuance of condemnation, could it not have been the case that the pontiff wished to secretly shelter Jews from Nazi seizure? The legend of papal beneficence has gained purchase, post-Holocaust. The myths have it that, with Nazi death squads closing in on Rome, Pius XII turned Rome's churches and monasteries into places of sanctuary. For some time, the historicity of papal beneficence was taken for granted.<sup>29</sup> But in her magnificent study of the Holocaust in Italy, Susan Zuccotti demonstrates that gratitude toward Pius himself—including that from surviving Jews—was misplaced.<sup>30</sup> According to Zuccotti, a great number of Roman Jews *were* saved, but evidence of a papal initiative was sketchy.<sup>31</sup> The Vatican statesman neither approved nor encouraged clandestine Catholic rescuing of Jews. Instead, prelates who sanctuarized Jews in their private residences were admonished to “use prudence and moderation.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, while the transgressions of Nazism failed to furrow his censorious brows, Pacelli did make his displeasure known to those who put their lives on the line to save Jews.

In reply to criticisms of papal reticence, church apologists cite Pacelli's 1942 Christmas address as one occasion where he did speak out against the Nazis. They claim, in addition, such was the exquisiteness of his denunciation that the Nazis took aim at the Church. Yet, reading between the lines of Pacelli's speech—altogether no less than 6,900 words when translated into English—is to shiver at the caginess with which the pontiff addressed the upheaval of his time. Pacelli barely gave mention to the attempted destruction of European Jewry, which had already been in full swing since January 1942, and which he knew all

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<sup>29</sup> Papal apologists cling to this conforming narrative, citing that postwar, Jewish leaders worldwide thanked Pius XII for what he personally did to save Jews of Europe. Even Lewy acknowledges the pontiff's personal role in saving Roman Jews in his *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 301. But Zuccotti says Jewish gratitude was “rooted in benevolent ignorance.” Given the perceived need to uproot anti-Semitism and to improve the fragility of Jewish-Catholic relationship, Pius XII was symbolically thanked—“Distinctions may have seemed petty.” See Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows*, 301-303.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.



along.<sup>33</sup> Where he did imply the gravity of the situation, he buried his words in a sea of verbosity. Nearing the very end of his long broadcast, Pacelli addressed the world as such,

Mankind owes that vow to the hundreds of thousands of persons who, without any fault on their part, sometimes only because of their nationality or race [*stirpe*], have been consigned to death or to a slow decline.<sup>34</sup>

By the time of his papal circumlocution, Pacelli had already been apprised of the irrefutable nature and scale of the Final Solution. Thus, speaking of “hundreds of thousands of persons” being “consigned to a slow decline” not only failed as utterances of moral denunciations, it could have also misinformed his audience, many of whom were less privy to the scale of Hitler’s racial culling. Throughout his speech Pacelli did not name either Jews, anti-Semitism, genocide or even the Nazis.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, this would remain the fullest extent of his protest.

Observing Pacelli’s sin of omission, one cannot say with certainty that had he issued a flaming protest, or threatened Hitler, a baptized Catholic, with excommunication, the fate of European Jewry could have been overturned. It would be just as uncertain whether 23 million German Catholic faithful—or those 22% confessing Catholics in the army—might have suffered a conflict of allegiances, had Rome gone head-on with the German state. But one needs not derive the assurance of certainty to such questions. To say the pontiff’s inaction or passivity was a failure of nerve in decision-making is a masterpiece of understatement. His

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<sup>33</sup> Vatican officials—with a communication network second perhaps only to the Soviet Union—were among the first to learn about Nazi genocides, which began with *Einsatzgruppen*, or mobile killing units, massacring Eastern European Jews, before the death chambers of the Auschwitzs did the job with greater secrecy and efficiency. See Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust*, 41-42.

<sup>34</sup> Pius XII, *The Internal Order of States and People*, Christmas message, 1942.

<http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/p12ch42.htm>

There are many versions of translations of Pacelli’s Christmas address, which is not available in English on the Vatican’s website. This excerpt was taken from Global Catholic Network, or EWTN, which published Pacelli’s entire speech. One word in the excerpt merits especial attention. The Italian word “*stirpe*” has been more commonly translated by scholars as “descent,” rather than “race,” as EWTN did on its website. The distinction this makes is such that, while many scholars claim that Pacelli did not speak of a racially motivated persecution, papal apologists affirm that Pacelli did denounce racism.

<sup>35</sup> It is sometimes asserted that had a stronger statement of condemnation been made, Hitler would have killed more Jews as a matter of revenge. But this is patently false. There is no genocide in which the interests of the victims are better served by deliberately having the rest of the world not denounce it. Moreover, it cannot be plausibly demonstrated that papal non-intervention *saved* Jews.

Church, after all, possessed enormous wealth and international prestige, which could have been employed on purely humanitarian grounds.

Yet, important as Pius XII was to the Catholic Church, he was not all of it. While Pacelli's retreatism doomed the fate of European Jews, it was the *de facto* support of the Vatican that had ushered in the destruction of democracies and the empowerment of persecutionist regimes in Europe.<sup>36</sup> Four years previous to concluding *Reichskonkordat*, the Vatican had struck a copycat agreement, known as the Lateran Treaty, with Mussolini's Italy. Like it would to the Center Party in Germany, the Vatican ordered an end to Italy's Catholic Popular Party.<sup>37</sup> In his recent book on Italian fascism, David Kertzer has eviscerated the myth of Vatican resistance.<sup>38</sup> To the contrary, argues Kertzer, the Vatican collaborated with *Il Duce* ("The Leader," referring to Mussolini) in the passage of Italian anti-Semitic racial laws of January 1939.<sup>39</sup>

Many Catholic right-wing parties across the continent were also complicit in the spread of anti-Semitism. In France, Catholic organizations such as Charles Maurras' Action Française headed an extreme right that was memorialized by the tag "*Meilleur Hitler Que Blum.*"<sup>40</sup> The slogan—"better a racist German dictator than a French socialist Jew"—formed the intellectual backbone of collaborationist Vichy, where such anti-Semites as Marshal Pétain and Pierre Laval would offer up French Jews for deportation and murder.<sup>41</sup> In the heat of racial war, Catholic presses around Europe continued to engineer anti-Semitic canards, which maligned Jews as Christ-killers and as architects of Bolshevism, often in one breath.<sup>42</sup> In Eastern Europe, Catholic parties such as Hungary's Arrow Cross and Slovakia's Slovak

<sup>36</sup> Goldhagen, *A Moral Reckoning*, 132, 138.

<sup>37</sup> Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, 114.

<sup>38</sup> David Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini: The Secret History of Pius XI and The Rise of Fascism in Europe*, (Random House, 2014)

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

<sup>40</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 12

<sup>41</sup> For discussions of Vichy collaboration with the Third Reich, see Robert Paxton's classic study—*Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*, (North Company, 1975)

<sup>42</sup> Goldhagen, *A Moral Reckoning*, 136-138. See also, Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust*, 7-8.

People's Party actively preached anti-Semitism.<sup>43</sup> To cite just one more example, Stanislaw Trzeciak, a Polish Catholic priest, hyped up *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* even though it had been shown to be a forgery.<sup>44</sup> In the midst of genocides, these and other offenses incur moral and political blame.

But the most sinister complicity of the Church betrayed its role as a perpetrator. From the outset of racial persecutions, the Church willingly surrendered its genealogical records to the Nazis, enabling them to trace the extent of one's Jewish ancestry.<sup>45</sup> Despite knowledge of what the racial profiling of Jews entailed, the Church performed this task without fail, complaining only of inadequate remuneration for its services.<sup>46</sup> It goes without saying that, like Vichy France, the Catholic Church was in these instances not just complicit but also culpable.

It is through the provision of genealogical dossiers—and the circulation of Catholic anti-Semitic presses in fulcrums of the Holocaust—that the elephant in the room is finally revealed. The Catholic Church abandoned Jews to the Nazis not because its popes were cowardly, or its diplomacy selfish; these were tangential, if relevant at all. Contingency or *realpolitik* does not explain why highly placed German bishops made visible and risky protests against Nazi euthanasia programs from as early as 1934.<sup>47</sup> It does not explain why they did so by way of saying the obvious: that murdering innocents offends the moral sensibility of Germans.<sup>48</sup> Nor does pusillanimity apply to the Church, a powerful, transnational institution that has historically adjudicated important political and moral

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<sup>43</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust*, 13-14.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>45</sup> See Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 282. "The very question of whether the [Catholic] Church should lend its help to the Nazi state in sorting out people of Jewish descent was never debated. On the contrary, 'We have always unselfishly worked for the people without regard to gratitude or ingratitude,' a priest wrote in *Klerusblatt* in September 1934. 'We shall also do our best to help in this service to the people.' And the cooperation of the Church in this matter continued right through the war years, when the price of being Jewish was no longer dismissal from a government job and loss of livelihood, but deportation and outright physical destruction."

<sup>46</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 282.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

questions. Lest we forget, the Church had stood tall and humiliated Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, whose ferocious, oppressionist *Kulturkampf* (cultural struggle targeted at the Church) backfired, to the consolidation of the Catholic Center Party in Wilhemine Germany.<sup>49</sup> The Catholic Church—to which desperate Jews entreated for help in their greatest hours of need—was not weak. At the most fundamental level, its reticence had to do with its perception of Jews—that is, Catholic anti-Semitism.

In fairness, the fact that Pius XII never explicitly deplored Nazi atrocities against Jews does not mean he legislated their destruction. To Catholic theologians at the time, Jews were redeemable by way of conversion. To Hitler—who hated Jews because of their genetic stock—such dispensations could not be made. Thus, Catholic and Hitlerian anti-Semitism represented different projects. Yet this distinction mattered little, because hatreds fed on and gave impetus to one another, producing a dark symbiosis that only endangered Jews. As Vicar of Christ on earth, the Supreme Pontiff was no “ordinary man.”<sup>50</sup> Nor was he “Hitler’s willing executioner”<sup>51</sup> or “Hitler’s pope.” Instead, Pacelli was Hitler’s *fellow traveller*.<sup>52</sup> No admirer of the *Führer*, Pacelli nonetheless found reasons to ride the journey with his conscience intact.<sup>53</sup> When push came to shove, Pacelli put in a word for Jewish converts to Catholicism to be spared, but never for Jews.<sup>54</sup> At the heart of the dichotomy in his attitude was his very own antipathy towards Jews *as Jews*.

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<sup>49</sup> Among its means of resistance, the Church threatened German Catholics who succumbed to *Kulturkampf* with ex-communication, which was never done to Nazis who participated in the Final Solution (other than Joseph Goebbels, who brought it on himself by marrying a Protestant). See James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword*, (Mariner Books, 2001), 488. See also, John Cornwell, *Hitler’s Pope*, 194.

<sup>50</sup> Reference to “ordinary man” is adapted from Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, (Harper Perennial, 1998)

<sup>51</sup> Reference to “Hitler’s willing executioner” is adapted from Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioner*, (Alfred Knopf, 1996).

<sup>52</sup> The fellow traveler analogy was first used by Cornwell in *Hitler’s Pope*. But it is “Hitler’s Pope” rather than “Hitler’s fellow traveler” that has registered impression.

<sup>53</sup> Postwar, in a meeting with delegates of the Supreme Council of the Arab People of Palestine, Pacelli averred that “on various occasions” he “condemned the fanatical anti-Semitism inflicted upon the Hebrew People.” Cornwell concludes that Pacelli revealed himself to be a hypocrite in the process. Cornwell, *Hitler’s Pope*, Preface to the 2008 Edition, xxi.

<sup>54</sup> Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows*, 305.

Anti-Semitism—the historic curse of Christian Europe—was by no means a modern or strictly German phenomenon. It was an inheritance from medieval Christianity that preached that Jews consume the blood of Christian children and that Jews be held collectively sinful for the murder of Christ. The atavistic prejudice against Jews was pervasive in German and Eastern European societies. The Catholic Church was thus in a way a prisoner of its own teaching. Even though its brand of anti-Semitism was less genocidal than that of the Nazis, its thoroughgoing contempt for Judaism was hardly a motivating factor to criticize the diabolical clockwork that was Nazi eliminationist anti-Semitism. In considering the reasons for the silence of the Holy See, one must remember that two thousand years of Christian fulminating against the Jews conditioned Catholic perception of them. Lewy writes,

One is inclined to conclude that the Pope and his advisers—influenced by the long tradition of moderate anti-Semitism so widely accepted in Vatican circles—did not view the plight of the Jews with a real sense of urgency and moral outrage. For this assertion no documentation is possible, but it is a conclusion difficult to avoid.<sup>55</sup>

It was against this backdrop of racial revilement *and* religious demonization of Jews that the Jewish philosopher Edith Stein behaved herself to appeal to the Vatican for intervention back in 1933. Born into a Jewish family, and a convert to Catholicism, Stein was witness to the vehemence with which the Jewish people were being vilified by Hitler's nascent regime. She noted instances of suicide, highlighting the plight in which Jews were made to suffer by the regime—"for years the leaders of National Socialism have been preaching hatred of the Jews."<sup>56</sup> Stein's writing showed an unswerving loyalty to the teachings of the Church and yet a critical attitude toward the Church's silence during the early persecution of Jews.<sup>57</sup> Her writing was testimony to the ordinances Nazism afflicted

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<sup>55</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 305.

<sup>56</sup> Edith Stein, Untitled letter addressed to His Holiness, in Hubert Wolf, *Pope and Devil: The Vatican's Archives and the Third Reich*, trans. Kenneth Kronenberg. (Harvard University Press, 2010), 185.

<sup>57</sup> While it was the passage of the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 that marked the beginning of state-sponsored persecution, there had been dress rehearsals. On April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1933, barely having seized power, Hitler launched a nationwide assault on Jews. Even prior to that, the discourse of anti-Semitism had been key to Nazi electoral success. According to Daniel Goldhagen, author of the critically acclaimed international bestseller *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, (Alfred Knopf, 1996), anti-Semitism was widespread among ordinary Germans, many of

upon the Jewish people—“robbing people of their livelihood, civil honor, and fatherland.”<sup>58</sup> The historical significance of this primary source is better illustrated by the response—or the lack of one—from *Pius XI*, who himself shared the anti-Semitic culture of his age. One can infer from Stein’s letters that despite no lack of grassroots Catholic opposition, lay Catholics opposed to anti-Semitism enjoyed no recognition from the papacy. Thus the bulk of accountability appeared to lie not in the moral numbness of practicing Catholics, but in the Vatican leadership, which did not regard Jews as people worthy of patronage.

To be fair, it can be misleading to perceive the institutional Catholic Church as a monolithic organization devoid of diverse or dissenting voices. To be fair again, there were dissents of some kind from the German episcopate. These voices spoke with varying degrees of conviction and usually took the form of decrying the mistreatment of “the other” on a racial basis. German bishops who took the pulpits praised the *Führer’s* emphasis on racial purity, quibbling only that this goal be achieved “without immoral means.”<sup>59</sup> Cardinal Faulhaber, a nobler figure, proclaimed in 1933 that “the defense and love of one’s own race should not lead to the hatred of other nations, and the loyalty to one’s own race does not supersede the obligations to the Church.”<sup>60</sup> Echoing this sentiment years after was Archbishop Frings who, in the Christmas sermon of 1943, denounced the arbitrary racial murder of innocents.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, the empirical deficiencies of their methods of protest were excruciatingly obvious. For one, the bishops’ admonitions educated no one and made no difference to the Final Solution.<sup>62</sup> Nor did they provide usable information about the extent of mass murder. More to the point, critical vocabularies such as “Jew” and “non-Aryan” did not find entry to their scripts, the language of which was couched in generic terms, burdened with

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whom acquiesced to or collaborated in Nazi eliminationist anti-Semitism, making them “Hitler’s willing executioners.”

<sup>58</sup> Wolf., *Pope and Devil*, 185.

<sup>59</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 275.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

stipulations, too mild in tone, and received scant public attention.<sup>63</sup> With the exceptions of Bishop Preysing of Berlin, the German episcopate was generally apathetic to the endless racial persecutions of Jews, even in the wake of the proto-genocidal *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass) of November 1938.<sup>64</sup>

In contrast to the craven and blinkered acquiescence of the Catholic clergy in Germany, it was ordinary conscience and human solidarity that inspired resistance. Provost Bernhard Lichtenberg of Berlin was one such figure who died resisting the Nazis. From his pulpit he said a daily prayer for Jews amid the regime's increasingly strident anti-Semitic rhetoric, and was seized by the *Gestapo* in 1942 with his off-limits utterances of sympathy for Jews.<sup>65</sup> But such acts of good Samaritanism were few and far between, which was why the Vatican took so long to find candidates for beautification in the context of the Final Solution.<sup>66</sup> And while ordinary conscience did not always prevail, a collective display of human solidarity on the part of the German Aryans was enough to recover their Christian, non-Aryan spouses from the hands of the seemingly invincible *Gestapo*.<sup>67</sup> We will never know what would have happened if the man in the Vatican palace displayed similar mettle in times of need. Suffice to say, the Church need not have spent decades covering up—or explicating in vain—how a religion of love and compassion, and an arbiter of universal moral truths, did so little in the face of consummate evil.

In the final analysis, the Catholic Church responded to Nazi racial persecution of Jews with a diversity of attitudes that produced passivity and inaction at best and collaboration and

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 291 & 292.

<sup>64</sup> *Kristallnacht* has received treatment in most Church-Holocaust literature. See, for instance, Phayer, *The Catholic Church and The Holocaust*, 3.

<sup>65</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 284 & 293.

<sup>66</sup> Bernhard Lichtenberg of Berlin—and the Jewish philosopher Edith Stein, both of whom died nearing the end of the war—have been made into martyrs. Under the papacy of John Paul II, Stein was canonized and Lichtenberg elevated to saint status.

<sup>67</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 289. In February 1943, the *Gestapo* arrested and detained 6,000 non-Aryan Berliners, but their spouses protested in spontaneity for hours and, fearing the visibility of their demonstration, the *Gestapo* released the detainees. Lewy concludes, “Here was an example of what outraged conscience could achieve, even against Hitler’s terror apparatus.”

collusion at worst.<sup>68</sup> Pius XII's supine reaction to Nazi transgressions could have come down to his entrenched fear of communism, and his predilections for Germany might well have choked his tongue when he did speak. Yet, solely focusing on Pius XII removes the individual moral agency of cardinals, bishops and priests all over Catholic Europe, some of whom defended Jews in accordance to their conscience, many of whom did not. Owing to their anti-Semitism, their actions and inactions left dark memories on a persecuted people. Within the Eternal City, infected by the long and sorry tradition of consecrated anti-Semitism, Vatican bureaucrats spared little thought for the plight of the Jewish people. By the time the Second Vatican Council abolished in 1965 the deicide charge against all Jews of all time, too dear a price had been paid. Caught in between war, communism, and genocide, Vatican diplomacy was fraught with missteps. But so much more was amiss. The Concordat might have hamstrung the Church's ability to interfere in Nazi racial policies, but this alliance was in the first place a reprehensible one, and while the Vatican might or might not have succeeded in aiding Jewish survival later on, it simply did not have the conscience to attempt anything like it. There were no doubt devout Catholics who risked or gave their lives to the cause of helping the Jews—exemplified by Edith Stein and Bernhard Lichtenberg—but as a group they were statistically small, as was the likelihood that they did so on holy orders from the Catholic Church.

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<sup>68</sup> In accordance with its proposed chronology, this paper does not deal with the record of the Church *after* the Holocaust. But it was the Vatican—still under the papacy of Pius XII—that spirited Nazi war criminals at large to South America to escape prosecution. Thus, the complicity of the Catholic Church has another dimension, which readers can explore in Gerald Steinacher's *Nazis on the Run: How Hitler's Henchmen Fled Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2012).



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