

REVIEW

Robert A. Ventresca

Soldier of Christ: The Life of Pope Pius XII

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In *Soldier of Christ: The Life of Pius XII*, Robert A. Ventresca offers a superb biography of the controversial pontiff who led the Catholic Church during World War II and the Holocaust and who is currently being considered for canonization. These efforts have added much fuel to “the incessant partisanship of the so-called Pius War” (p. 4). The author asserts that this fierce battle has often been waged at the expense of sound scholarship, producing little beyond competing, ahistorical caricatures of Pius XII that rely on “interpretive leaps, which are grounded on counterfactual or normative claims about what the pope could have or should have done rather than a reasoned assessment of what he did or did not do—and why” during World War II and the Holocaust (p. 6). Ventresca succeeds in his objective of presenting a nuanced scholarly assessment of the man who as Vicar of Christ during Europe’s darkest hour seemed more comfortable in the role of the cautious diplomat over that of the bold evangelist.

Pope Pius XII, born Eugenio Pacelli (1876-1958), emerges in the first chapter as a highly intelligent but frail scion of the Roman black nobility (aristocratic families that backed the Vatican in earlier disputes with secular rulers). According to the author, Pacelli was indelibly shaped by an era when the church was under siege as it struggled against the loss of temporal power and modernity. His clerical training therefore “tended toward pragmatism, moderation, and accommodation,” which suited his naturally cautious character (p. 37). Within months of Pacelli’s ordination, the young priest’s superiors selected him for a career in the nascent Vatican diplomatic corps that

was “to handle its often testy relationship with European powers” (p. 38).

Starting with his appointment as papal nuncio to Germany in 1917, Pacelli’s life and legacy became inextricably linked to Germany. Here the author highlights familiar themes such as Pacelli’s love for Germany and his fervent rejection of Communism. From the nuncio’s correspondence, Ventresca gleans that he shared the widespread prejudice that blamed the 1919 revolutionary unrest in Munich on “foreign Jews” (p. 55). In the chapters that follow, however, the author makes a convincing case that Pius XII’s silence during the Holocaust was not driven by antisemitism, nor did he choose, as has been suggested, Nazism over Communism as the lesser of two evils. Rather, in *Soldier of Christ* readers encounter an at times anguished man who could not or would not let go of his extreme, self-imposed restraint in his handling of Hitler and Mussolini, even long after the catastrophic futility of this approach became apparent.

As Cardinal Secretary of State (1929-1939), Pacelli struggled “to find an effective political response to increasing Nazi radicalism” (p. 128). He clung to diplomacy and neutrality, and within weeks of his elevation to the papacy in March 1939 this approach was tested when Italy invaded Albania. Critics immediately raised their voices against Pius XII’s “scandal of silence,” voices that only grew louder during World War II (p. 149). Ventresca writes later on that “it is commonly asserted that the accusation of papal silence during the Holocaust was an invention of the post-war era,” most notably “in the contrived historical fiction of Hochhuth’s play *The Deputy*,” but “criticism of Pius XII’s reluctance to speak out against the Fascists stretches back to the early weeks of his pontificate” (p. 186).

In his discussion of the pope’s repeated failures to speak out publicly against Nazi aggression and genocide, Ventresca is careful to point out that the pontiff’s silence must not be construed as inaction. In contrast to caricatures of the pontiff as

cold and aloof, the author argues that the well-informed Pacelli was not only deeply affected by news of mass killings and violence, he was at times capable of bold actions, such as when he acted as “intermediary between anti-Hitler factions of the German military and British authorities” (p. 162). Pius XII’s supporters have long claimed that the pontiff’s silence during the Holocaust becomes all but inconsequential when measured against these shrewd, mostly invisible actions that in their estimation saved countless lives. The author concedes that this approach worked sometimes, as in the well-known rescue of the four to six thousand Jews hidden in Roman convents. But, in what is a highlight of the monograph, Ventresca convincingly argues for the extreme limitations of the Holy See’s secret and diplomatic missions. The marginal success of Pius XII’s efforts to induce the Brazilian government in 1940 to issue visas to persecuted European Jews demonstrates the pontiff’s limited authority even over Catholic countries, which in turn raises the intriguing question how much political power Pacelli really yielded. But perhaps no other events highlight the catastrophic limitations of the Vatican’s wartime diplomacy like the deportations of Slovakian and Hungarian Jews. These limitations, Ventresca argues, were to a large extent self-imposed. In these instances too, Pacelli mostly exercised his trademark restraint and circumspection, and “courageous Catholic rescuers might be able to count on some measure of papal support, but when their efforts became too risky, papal support was attenuated if not withdrawn altogether” (p. 196).

Although Ventresca details Pope Pius XII’s impressive record of authoritative teachings over the course of his reign, the reader comes away with the distinct impression that the pontiff fell short in his role as Vicar of Christ when he refused to raise his voice against Nazi crimes. This impression of moral failure is reinforced in the chapter on the immediate post-war era when, freed from the fetters of Nazism, Pope Pius XII still did not heed calls to exhibit courage and leadership in the face of the singular catastrophe of the Holocaust and to speak out clearly and decisively against antisemitism. Instead, as was generally true for the post-war era, the Cold War and the

urgent need to rebuild Europe took precedence. Although Ventresca briefly discusses Pius XII as a Cold Warrior and his “heroic efforts to help rebuild the Continent after a cataclysmic war,” he offers few details (p. 270); too much of the chapter is taken up by discussions of ratlines and the Vatican’s purported shielding of war criminals. This is but a minor criticism of this otherwise outstanding biography of Eugenio Pacelli, whose path to sainthood “will always be dogged by a great imponderable that lingers over Pius XII’s policy of avoiding public confrontation with the Hitler regime” (p. 308).