

In the Wake of the Holocaust: Massimo Vitale, Pius XII, and the Battle over the Good Friday Prayer for the “Perfidious Jews”

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While the Good Friday prayer, with its reference to *perfidis Judaeis*, had long been a source of unhappiness in the Jewish community, the Holocaust triggered new efforts to have it changed.¹ The recent opening of the Vatican archives for the papacy of Pius XII (1939-1958) now permits a much fuller understanding of these pressures and how the pope and those around him dealt with them. Previous examinations of this question have given considerable attention to the role of the French Jewish historian Jules Isaac, who, in meeting with Pius XII in October 1949, expressed his unhappiness with the prayer and who, in his influential 1956 book, *Genèse de l'antisémitisme*, portrayed it as part of the larger demonization of Jews that had recently had such catastrophic consequences.² The newly available documents highlight the key role in this campaign played by Massimo Adolfo Vitale, leader of Italian Jewry's efforts to determine the fate of the thousands of Jews who had been deported from that country to Nazi concentration camps in the war. The case offers insight as well into the larger question of how the Vatican confronted the legacy of the Holocaust.³

The Good Friday Prayer

The Good Friday liturgy, commemorating the anniversary of the death of Jesus, is one of the holiest ceremonies of the year in the Roman Catholic Church. For centuries it has entailed the reading of New Testament accounts of the crucifixion and, inter alia, the reciting of a series of nine *orationes solemnes* [Prayers of the

¹ The authors would like to thank Kevin P. Spicer, C.S.C. for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article, as well as thank the journal's two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

² Jules Isaac, *Genèse de l'antisémitisme* (Paris : Calmann-Lévy, 1956); Pierre Pierrard, *Juifs et catholiques français* (Paris : Cerf, 1997), 358. See also Isaac's *Jésus et Israël* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1948).

³ For an earlier study of efforts to change the Good Friday prayer which examines Vitale's role, based on materials found in Italy's Jewish organizational archives, see Ombretta Pisano, "A cinquant'anni dalla soppressione del 'perfidis judaeis': Note storiche alla luce di materiali inediti," *Rivista liturgica* 96 (2009): 937-67.

faithful]. Of these, one focuses on Jews. While the prayer has a much earlier origin, its modern form was defined in the seventeenth century. The Latin text calls for praying “pro perfidis Judaeis” and refers to “judicam perfidiam.” Vernacular translations differed and were under the control of local archbishops. A common translation, as found in the 1946 English language edition of *Holy Week Masses*, bearing the imprimatur of Samuel Cardinal Stritch, Archbishop of Chicago, reads: “Let us pray. Also for the perfidious Jews: that our God and Lord would remove the veil from their hearts that they also may acknowledge our Lord Jesus Christ.” In other prayers in the series directed at non-Catholics, that initial call to prayer is followed by the priest’s instruction for all present to genuflect. In the case of the call to pray for the “perfidious Jews,” however, a different instruction is found: “The genuflection in the prayer for the Jews is omitted to signify their refusal to believe in the Divinity of Christ.”⁴ The prayer then continues: “Almighty and everlasting God, who drivest not away from Thy mercy even the perfidious Jews, hear our prayers, which we offer for the blindness of that people: that acknowledging the light of thy truth, which is Christ, they may be rescued from their darkness.”⁵

As observed by Church historian Daniele Menozzi, the prayer for the Jews expresses “in effect the double reference to the “perfidy,” a vocabulary not found in the New Testament lexicon, designed to view the Jews not in terms of difference, but hostility.” He points out that this hostile attitude is reinforced by the instruction not to genuflect.⁶

The Friends of Israel

While Jews had long resented the Good Friday prayer and it had prompted occasional expressions of concern from Catholic theologians as well, the first major

⁴ The other prayers in the series call for congregants to genuflect.

⁵ *Holy Week Masses* (Chicago: Paluch, 1946), 61. On the early history of the prayers and on the controversy over the “perfidious” characterization of Jews, see Robert Anchel, “La prière *Pro judaeis*,” *L’univers israélite*, 21-28 août 1936, 711-12; David Assael “‘Giudaica perfidia’. Uno stereotipo antisemita fra liturgia e storia,” *Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 81 (2015): 161-64; Annibale Bugnini, “Una particolarità del messale da rivedere. La preghiera *Pro iudaeis* al Venerdì Santo,” in *Miscellanea Giulio Belvederi* (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1954), 117-32; Louis Canet, “La prière *pro judaeis* de la liturgie catholique romaine,” *Revue des études juives* 32 (1911): 213-21; Paul Démann, “Les modifications de la prière pour les juifs du Vendredi saint,” *Évidences* 2 (1959): 78, 25-30; Andrea Nicolotti, “*Perfidia iudaica*. Le tormentate vicende di un’orazione liturgica prima e dopo Erik Peterson,” in ed., *Erik Peterson. La presenza teologica di un outsider*, ed., Giancarlo Caronello (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012), 477-514; Daniele Menozzi, “*Giudaica perfidia*”. *Uno stereotipo antisemita tra liturgia e storia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014); Marino Ruzzenenti, *Preghiamo anche per i perfidi giudei. L’antisemitismo cattolico e la Shoah* (Roma: Derive Approdi, 2018); Sacra Rituum Congregatio, “Variationes in Missali et in Rituali Romano in precibus pro Iudaeis,” *Ephemerides liturgicae* 74 (1960): 133-4; Lorenzo Tabarrini, “Alle origini del ripensamento sulla ‘perfidia giudaica’: Ebrei, Cristiani e Chiesa nella storiografia di Félix Vernet (1863-1942),” *Rivista di storia del cristianesimo* 11 (2014): 1, 161-88. On the history of the Roman Missal, see <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09296a.htm>.

⁶ Menozzi, “*Giudaica perfidia*,” 18-19. See also Marina Caffiero, *Legami pericolosi. Ebrei e cristiani tra eresia, libri proibiti e stregoneria* (Turin: Einaudi, 2012), 296-33.

attempt from within the Church to have the language changed came only in the 1920s as a result of the efforts of the Friends of Israel. The international organization, composed of Roman Catholic clergy centered in Europe, was founded in 1926. In January 1928, its president called on Pope Pius XI to eliminate the words “perfidis” and “perfidiam” from the prayer. Contending that these phrases connoted “something hateful and hated,” he argued that they interfered with the Friends of Israel’s goal of encouraging Jewish conversions.⁷

The pope passed the request on to the Liturgical Commission of the Vatican’s Congregation of Rites. The Commission endorsed the change, but to go into effect it would need the support of the Holy Office. That Office, under the direction of the notoriously antisemitic Cardinal Rafael Merry del Val,⁸ rejected the proposal, and asked that the Friends of Israel be dissolved and its leaders summoned to Rome to make Vatican displeasure with their work known. As the pope’s approval was required before the Holy Office’s recommendation could be acted upon, Cardinal Merry del Val met with Pius XI on March 8, 1928, to discuss the matter. In his internal Holy Office memo, the cardinal explained, “Hebraism with all its sects inspired by the Talmud continues perfidiously to oppose Christianity.”⁹ The pope agreed with the Holy Office recommendation, rejecting any change in the Good Friday liturgy. Moreover, as Merry del Val observed, “the Holy Father, after due consideration and taking into account the alarming, mistaken and dangerous turn which the committee in its deliberations has taken in this matter. . . has decided to disband this body.”¹⁰

Offering a public explanation for the decision, Enrico Rosa, S.J., the director of the Vatican-supervised Jesuit journal, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, following a request from the pope, published an article in the journal’s May issue titled “The Judaic danger and the ‘Friends of Israel’.” Rosa argued that the Friends had failed to recognize the “danger emanating from the Jews.” Ever since Jews had been given equal rights to Christians in the previous century, he wrote, the Jews had become “bold and powerful,” seeking world domination.¹¹

⁷ Hubert Wolf “The Good Friday supplication for the Jews and the Roman Curia (1928-1975),” in *The Roman Inquisition, the Index and the Jews*, ed. Stephan Wendehors (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 240-43; Wolf, “‘Pro perfidis Judaëis.’ Die ‘Amici Israel’ und ihr Antrag auf eine Refrom der Karfreitagsfürbitte für die Juden (1928). Oder: Bemerkungen zum Thema katholische Kirche und Antisemitismus,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 279 (2004): 611-658; Wolf, *Pope and Devil. The Vatican’s Archives and the Third Reich*, translated by Kenneth Kronenberg (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁸ On Merry Del Val’s attitudes toward Jews, see David I. Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews* (New York: Knopf, 2001), 219-20 et passim.

⁹ Quoted in John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother, the Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933-1965* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 170.

¹⁰ Kertzer, *The Popes*, 249-50.

¹¹ Enrico Rosa, “Il pericolo Giudaico e gli ‘Amici d’Israele,’” *Civiltà Cattolica* 79 (1928): 2, 335-44. For a fuller examination of Rosa’s article, see Kertzer, *The Popes*, 270-72; Wolf, “The Good Friday supplication,” 253-54; Daniele Menozzi, “‘Perfidie judaïque’: un débat sur l’accueil de la modernité dans l’église,” in *Le pontificat romain dans l’époque contemporaine*, ed. Giovanni Vian, (Venice: Edizioni Ca’Foscari, 2018), 90; Maria Paiano, “Il dibattito sui riflessi dell’antisemitismo nella liturgia cattolica,” *Studi storici* 41 (2000): 3, 661-71. The Holy Office file dealing with the Friends of Israel affair is found at Archivio del Dicastero per la Dottrina della Fede (ADDF), R.V. 1928, n.2, prot. 0125/1928.

Catholics would continue to pray for the conversion of the “perfidious Jews” on Good Friday for decades to come.¹²

Immediate Postwar Years

The Third Reich’s attempted extermination of Europe’s Jews prompted new attention to the Good Friday prayer. In his March 1945 audience with Pius XII, Israel Zolli, the recently baptized former chief rabbi of Rome, urged the pope to put an end to the prayer’s “Jewish perfidy” language. Menozzi, in describing that meeting, observed that whether the pope’s refusal to do so could be linked to his anti-Jewish sentiments could only “be verified at the moment when the archive for his pontificate becomes accessible.” With the opening of the Vatican archives for the pontificate of Pius XII in 2020, that moment has now arrived.¹³

Zolli’s plea appears to be the first to come to the pope as the Holocaust came to its end, a sign of a burgeoning interest in the Church’s history of vilifying Jews, which would soon lead to many other appeals for the pope to act. In September 1945, Leon Kubowitzki, secretary general of the World Jewish Congress, met with Pius XII and asked that he issue an encyclical denouncing antisemitism.¹⁴ A year later, Kubowitzki met with the then French ambassador to the Holy See, Catholic theologian Jacques Maritain, who had similarly become concerned about the role that Church demonization of Jews had had in making the Holocaust possible.¹⁵ Kubowitzki recalled their conversation in his diary:

I told [Maritain] of my interview with the pope and my ideas about an encyclical on the Jewish question. He smiled and told me that he had urged a similar proposal on the pope and on Monsignor Montini. Both had been very friendly though his impression was that they were afraid to carry out the idea. He reminded me how much he had been saddened by the pope’s silence during the war concerning the persecution of the Jews and by his attempts to evade any direct mention of the matter, confining himself to roundabout statements. I asked Maritain whether the pope would not be interested in having his name connected with such an important document, which would be of considerable

¹² Perhaps the most significant dissenting voice in these years came from the theologian Erik Peterson, expressed in an article published in 1936 in *Ephemerides liturgicae*, the organ of the Pontifical Liturgical Academy and regarded as the authoritative interpreter of the deliberations of the Vatican’s Congregation of Rites. Although he did not advocate changing the Latin text of the prayer, he argued that a more authentic translation of the words *perfidia* and *perfidus* would be “disbelieving” rather than “perfidious.” He was conscious, however, that his was a minority opinion (Paiano, “Il dibattito,” 674).

¹³ Menozzi “*Giudaica perfidia*.” On Zolli and his conversion, see Gabriele Rigano, *Il caso Zolli* (Milan: Guerini, 2006).

¹⁴ Archivio Apostolico Vaticano (AAV), Segr. Stato, an. 1945, Istituti, pos. 181.

¹⁵ On Maritain and his lobbying of the pope to publicly condemn antisemitism, see also Archivio Storico della Segreteria di Stato – Sezione per i Rapporti con gli Stati, Vatican City (ASRS), AA.EE.SS., Periodo V, Parte Asterisco, Stati Ecclesiastici, pos. 575*, “Aiuto e assistenza ai profughi per motivi di razza e di religione,” ff. 2404-2409, 2433-37.

historical significance. He replied, "I would not hesitate to answer in the affirmative, if we were speaking about his predecessor."¹⁶

Maritain's contrast of a cautious, diplomatic Pius XII with his outspoken predecessor, Pius XI, was one shared by a number of the foreign diplomats at the Vatican who had known both men.¹⁷

As the reference to Maritain suggests, these concerns about age-old Christian demonization of Jews were now coming not only from Jewish sources but from important voices among Catholic intellectuals.¹⁸ Among the examples now accessible due to the recent opening of the Vatican archives for these years is a long letter sent in April 1946 by the theologian Vincenzo Barale, secretary to Turin's archbishop. Two years earlier the Germans occupying Turin had arrested Barale, charging him with hiding Jewish and other refugees.¹⁹ Barale's letter, which made its way to the Congregation of Rites at the Vatican, was prompted, he explained, by the Easter season. He had long been "obsessed" by the anti-Jewish language of the Good Friday prayer and, he wrote, he would only regain his tranquility "when you tell me that there is nothing to be done, or you let me know that what I say here will be taken into consideration." Since he had been a child, he recalled, he had been upset by the prayer's anti-Jewish language. "Naturally," he added, "I never took the liberty of correcting the Holy Mother Church."²⁰

Three months later, Jacques Maritain, having only two months earlier presented his credentials as the new French ambassador to the Holy See, wrote to Monsignor Giovanni Montini.²¹ As Sostituto, Montini was one of the two prelates overseeing the major divisions of the Vatican secretary of state office, the Sostituto overseeing "Ordinary" affairs, those dealing with internal Church relations. Maritain had known Montini for two decades. Maritain's appeal was much like Kubowitzki's of the year before, a direct reaction to the recent slaughter of Europe's Jews. He wrote, he explained, because he felt "impelled as a Catholic to

¹⁶ Quoted in Michael Marrus, "The ambassador and the Pope." *Commonweal* 131 (2004), 18-19.

¹⁷ On this contrast, see Giovanni Miccoli, *I dilemmi e i silenzi di Pio XII* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2000); Emma Fattorini, *Pio XI, Hitler e Mussolini* (Turin: Einaudi, 2007); David I. Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini* (New York: Random House, 2014).

¹⁸ See in particular Connelly, *From Enemy*, chapter 7. Also see Elena Mazzini, *L'antiebraismo cattolico dopo la Shoah. Tradizioni e culture nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra (1945-1974)* (Rome: Viella, 2012).

¹⁹ A Jewish Telegraphic Agency obituary of Barale (dated January 24, 1979) recalls that he was honored with a Gold Medal by the Italian Jewish community for his aid to Jews during the German occupation (<https://www.jta.org/archive/msgr-vincenzo-barale-dead-at-75>).

²⁰ Vincenzo Barale to Monsignor Rosso, April 18, 1946, Archivio della Congregazione delle Cause dei Santi (ACCS), Positiones Decr. et Rescr. Liturgica, 1948 R 29/48.

²¹ On Montini's relation with Maritain, see Philippe Chenaux, *Paul VI et Maritain. Les rapports du 'montinianisme' et du 'maritainisme'* (Rome: Studium, 1994); Robert Royal, *Jacques Maritain and the Jews* (Mishawaka, Indiana: American Maritain Association, 1994). On Maritain and the Catholic response to antisemitism see Daniele Lorenzini, "Jacques Maritain on Anti-Semitism and Human Rights." *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 10 (2018): 536-545; and Maritain's own writings on the subject: "A propos de la question juive," *La vie intellectuelle*, 4 (1921), 2, 305-10; *Les juifs* (Paris: Plon, 1937) *Antisemitism* (London: Centenary Press, 1939); *Contro l'antisemitismo. Dignità della persona, mistero d'Israele, sionismo*, ed. Daniele Lorenzini (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2016).

present an appeal at the feet of the Holy Father.... During the war six million Jews have been *liquidated*, thousands of Jewish children have been massacred, thousands of others torn from their families and stripped of their identity.... Nazism proclaimed the necessity of wiping the Jews off the face of the earth." After adding an obligatory reference to the pope's "tireless charity" and his efforts to "protect the persecuted," Maritain came to his point: "However, what Jews and also Christians need above all is a voice—the paternal voice, the voice par excellence, that of the Vicar of Jesus Christ—to tell the truth to the world and shed light on this tragedy. This has been, permit me to say it, greatly lacking in the world today." The pope had argued that out of fear for provoking even greater dangers he "had abstained from speaking directly to the Jews and from calling the solemn and direct attention of the whole world to the iniquitous drama that was unfolding." Yet, Maritain wrote, "now that Nazism has been defeated, and that the circumstances have changed, could it not be permitted, and that is the reason for this letter, to transmit to His Holiness the appeal of so many anguished souls, and to beg him to make his voice heard?"²²

Four days after sending his letter, Maritain met with the pope to discuss his appeal. The pope said he had already spoken on the matter and gave no indication he planned to do anything further. Maritain, after meeting with Montini a few days later, expressed his frustration in his diary: "Visit to Montini. I speak to him of Jews and anti-Semitism. The Holy Father never even *named* them (emphasis in original). Catholic conscience is poisoned, something has to be done." Following up a month later, Maritain wrote to Montini, this time specifically asking him to do something about the antisemitic language in the Good Friday prayer.²³

The immediate postwar years saw interest among other Catholic theologians in eliminating the anti-Jewish language in the Good Friday prayer.²⁴ Most notable was an article by John Oesterreicher, an Austrian priest who would later become a significant figure in drafting the 1965 Vatican statement, *Nostra aetate*, which would finally bring the Church's demonization of Jews to an end. In his 1947 article in *Theological Studies*, Oesterreicher argued that the translation of the term "perfidus" in the Good Friday prayer as "perfidious" was an error: "It is our contention that *perfidus* denotes neither 'perfidious' nor 'faithless' nor 'unfaithful' in their present connotations, but 'unbelieving' or 'disbelieving'. The liturgy does not pass moral judgments, nor would it label the Jews 'treacherous' or 'wicked'." Viewing the Latin text of the prayer as sacrosanct, Oesterreicher limited his appeal to a

²² Quoted by Marrus, "The ambassador," 16. The recently opened Vatican archives contain a record of Maritain's meeting with the pope to discuss his plea for the pope to speak out against antisemitism and an indication that Pius XII read Maritain's letter to Montini (ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Periodo V, Parte Asterisco, Stati Ecclesiastici, pos. 575*, ff. 2404-2409, 2433-2437).

²³ The lack of a papal response to Maritain's pleas appears to have affected the Frenchman's view of the pope. In a letter to a friend written two years later, he contrasted the growing personal affection he felt for the pope with his "growing disappointment with regard to his actions." Marrus, "The ambassador," 18.

²⁴ On the Christian-Jewish dialogue in the postwar years, see Anna Foa, *Diaspora. Storia degli ebrei nel Novecento* (Rome: Laterza, 2011), 224-28.

change in the vernacular translations employed in the Good Friday liturgy.²⁵ The Austrian theologian at the same time took aim at the liturgy for the baptism of Jews, as specified in the *Rituale Romanum*, which directed the officiant to address the Jewish convert with the words: “Horresce Judaicam perfidiam, respue Hebraicam superstitionem.” This, the theologian argued, should not be translated as was currently the practice, “Abhor Jewish perfidy, reject Hebrew superstition,” but rather: “Abhor the Jewish unbelief, reject the Hebrew error [the vain conviction that the Messiah has yet to come].”²⁶

In fact, concerns about the language in the Good Friday prayer had led to a change in the vernacular of the New York edition of the Roman Missal initially published in 1937 with the imprimatur of Patrick Cardinal Hayes, Archbishop of New York. There, alongside the Latin text, the phrase “perfidis Judaeis” was translated “the unfaithful Jews,” and “Judaicam perfidiam” as “Jewish faithlessness.” The absence of an instruction to kneel following the prayer for the Jews remained, but no explanation for that absence was offered in the missal.²⁷

Massimo Adolfo Vitale

In the wake of the Holocaust and the controversy over the pope’s actions—and inactions—as the Germans went about their systematic attempts to exterminate Europe’s Jews, Italy’s Jewish community registered its displeasure with the continued Church use of what it viewed as an antisemitic Good Friday liturgy. The attempts to sway Pius XII were spearheaded by the head of a new national Italian Jewish organization formed to identify the fate of the thousands of Italian and non-Italian Jews who had been deported from Italy by the Germans. The Comitato Ricerche Deportati Ebrei (CRDE) [Committee to Locate Jewish Deportees], sponsored by the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCII), had been formed in September 1944, three months after the liberation of Rome. In May 1945, Massimo Adolfo Vitale was appointed president. Indefatigable in tracking down Italy’s Jewish deportees, Vitale took special interest in combatting what he saw as the vilification of Jews spread by the Roman Catholic Church. Among those efforts was his campaign to convince Pius XII to end the negative portrayal of Jews in the Good Friday prayers.

Born in Turin in 1885, Vitale was a university graduate in law. He then trained as a military pilot, and in Italy’s Libyan campaign in 1911 was one of the first pilots in the world to fly a plane in war. Following his subsequent service in the First World War, he served in Italy’s African colonies, first in the military, and then as a civilian in the Ministry of the Colonies. In all, he spent a quarter century in Africa before being dismissed from his government post in March 1939 following the imposition of Italy’s racial laws. He went into hiding during the war, but both his

²⁵ John M. Oesterreicher, “Pro Perfidis Judaeis,” *Theological studies* 8 (1947), 1, 80, 82.

²⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 84-85.

²⁷ *The New Roman Missal in Latin and English*, eds. Rev. F.X. Lasance, Rev. Francis A. Walsh, and Rev. William R. Kelly (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1937/1942).

elderly mother and his sister were arrested by Italian police in Turin in May 1944 and deported to their death at Auschwitz. On his return to Rome following the city's June 1944 liberation, Vitale was reintegrated into Italian government service and appointed director of the Italian African Museum.²⁸

While in the wake of the war Italians crafted a narrative of the basically good Italian people which would absolve them of responsibility for the war's horrors, Vitale insisted on Italian—and Vatican—responsibility.²⁹ In 1947 he presented a report, "The persecutions against Jews in Italy, 1938-45," at a European conference on the Holocaust held in Paris, linking the experience of the Shoah to the Italian Fascist regime's antisemitic campaign.³⁰ But it was Vitale's brother, Enrico Vitale, a lawyer, who in a 1947 article in *Le monde juif* first publicly focused on the Good Friday prayer, portrayed as part of the centuries-long Church demonization of Jews that helped make the Holocaust possible. The article highlighted the use of the terms "perfidis Judaeis" and "Judaicam perfidiam" contained in the prayer.³¹

In February of the following year Enrico Vitale wrote directly to Pope Pius XII, attaching a copy of his article. He explained that he had initially been planning to publish an open letter to the pope but, on advice of friends, decided instead to send his letter privately. He called on Pius XII to intervene both to have the Good Friday prayer changed and to offer a public denunciation of antisemitism. He cited by way of example of continued Church responsibility for the vilification of Jews a recent Italian national radio broadcast by a Catholic priest that was clearly antisemitic. "A benevolent statement by Your Holiness would prove dear to all those who now have long faithfully waited for...the comfort to the families of the innumerable victims of the Nazi-Fascist monstrous cruelty and would assure the success of the speedy and enthusiastic work of the various international Committees of Christians and Jews which require the highest support of an intervention by Your Holiness."³²

The pope referred Enrico Vitale's letter with its accompanying article to the Vatican's Congregation of Rites, which in turn sent it for an opinion to a theological consultant, Father Giuseppe Lörn. As the theologian's analysis of Vitale's article

²⁸ For biographical details on Massimo Vitale, see Roberto Bassi "Ricordo di Massimo Adolfo Vitale," *Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 45 (1979), 1/3, 8-21; and Costantino Di Sante, *Auschwitz prima di «Auschwitz»*. *Massimo Adolfo Vitale e le prime ricerche sugli ebrei deportati dall'Italia* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2014). Information on his work in Africa is found in Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Ministero Africa Italiana, Direzione Generale Affari Generali e personale, fasc. del personale, b. 288.

²⁹ On the attempts by Italians to craft a history of their participation in the war that casts them in a good light, see, among other works, Filippo Focardi, *Nel cantiere della memoria. Fascismo, Resistenza, Shoah, Foibe* (Rome: Viella, 2020); David Bidussa, *Il mito del bravo italiano*. (Milan, Saggiatore, 1994); Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano* (Rome: Laterza, 2013).

³⁰ Anna Koch, "'But there is always hope in the human heart': Italian Jews' Search for the Deported in the Immediate Aftermath of the Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 34 (2020), 2, 306.

³¹ The article appeared in the September 1947 issue of the journal (n. 12).

³² The letter, dated February 16, 1948, is found in ACCS, Positiones Decr. et Rescr. Liturgica, 1948 R 29/48. The International Council of Christians and Jews had been founded the previous year.

explained:

The author, readily dramatizing the fact of the solemn recitation of these prayers on Good Friday in all of Christendom and for many centuries, sees in them a perennial source of hatred against the Jews which imbues every Christian from early childhood.... The author calls in his article for an authoritative intervention by the Holy Pontiff so that on the one hand the word *perfidia* be substituted in the liturgical texts with a less offensive word, and on the other that Catholic sermons forever stop spreading the above-mentioned interpretation of the Evangelical text cited [Matthew 27:25 on the divine curse lodged against the Jews for the death of Jesus].

Lörn offered a detailed historical analysis of the wording of the Good Friday prayer for the Jews, which he traced back to the fifth century. He advised that, as the words of the prayer reflected long-held Church doctrine, they could not be changed. He added: "It is necessary to warn those overly zealous partisans of an innovation on the grounds of an inopportune antisemitism to be eliminated that the Catholic church, notwithstanding the deplored *perfidia iudaica*, PRAYS for these same misguided Jews, and calls on the Christian people throughout the world and at all times, NOT to hate the Jews, but to pray in a Christian manner for their conversion."³³

The month after Enrico Vitale sent his letter to the pope, Massimo Vitale wrote to Jacques Maritain. There were two issues raised by the recently formed International Council of Christians and Jews, reported Vitale, that required immediate Church intervention. One involved removing depictions of Jewish ritual murder still found in some Catholic churches in Poland.³⁴ The other concerned the Good Friday prayer. Vitale, enclosing a copy of his brother's *Le Monde juif* article, told Maritain that his brother had sent it to the pope but had yet to receive a reply. Maritain wrote back immediately, and after expressing confidence that the Polish ritual murder depictions were being looked into, expressed caution about efforts to change the Good Friday prayer "You are not unaware of the fact that it is always difficult to obtain a change in a liturgical text that has been in use for centuries." What might be hoped for, wrote Maritain, is that "the translations in local languages cease being in the odious sense," but rather follow what Maritain took to be the correct historical interpretation, referring to Jews as "unbelievers" rather than "perfidious."³⁵

³³ ACCS, Positiones Decr. et Rescr. Liturgica, 1948 R 29/48. Lörn's seven-page analysis is dated September 8, 1948. The capitalizations are in the original.

³⁴ See AAV, Segr. St., Commissione Soccorsi, b. 456, fasc. 2291, "Varia 1948," which lists as subject: "Col. Massimo Adolfo Vitale, a nome del Comitato Ricerche Deportati Ebrei, scrive ai Cardinali HLOND e SAPIEHA circa un quadro mostruoso di ebrei che assassinano una ragazza cristiana e ne accolgono il sangue."

³⁵ Maritain to Massimo Vitale, March 27, 1948, Unione delle Comunità Israelitiche Italiane (UCII), CRDE 16. The Maritain-Vitale correspondence is in French.

The Vitale brothers did what they could to keep up the pressure on the Vatican, as two days after Massimo's letter to Maritain, Enrico wrote a long letter to Cardinal Clemente Micara, prefect of the Congregation of Rites. He had learned from "authoritative friends" that his letter to the pope, along with the attached documents regarding the Good Friday prayer, had been sent on to the cardinal. "Of utmost gravity," wrote Vitale, "beyond any doubt, appears the failure to accede to the hoped for and long-awaited measures...the clear condemnation of antisemitism."³⁶

Several weeks after receiving Vitale's letter, Cardinal Micara received the letter on the same subject that Jacques Maritain had sent to Monsignor Montini. Apparently in reaction to Vitale's appeals regarding the Good Friday prayer, the pope had not only sent the Vitale material to the Congregation of Rites, but also asked Montini to look into the matter. Knowing of Maritain's interest in the question, Montini had asked him to send a bibliography of relevant publications. On April 12, Maritain did so, and Montini then sent it to Cardinal Micara.³⁷ After he had sent the bibliography to Montini, Maritain wrote back to Massimo Vitale. He wanted to let him know that he "had been assured at the Secretariat of State that the questions about which I had directed their attention were being looked into, such that I have good reason to believe that a favorable solution will be brought about."³⁸

Montini and Maritain continued to be in close contact about the Good Friday prayer. On June 3, 1948, Montini sent the Frenchman an update: "The question of the Good Friday liturgy is on a good course. Instructions will be given regarding its translation. And in the next edition of the Missal, they are willing to replace 'perfidis' with another word. Cardinal Micara is favorable."³⁹ Immediately on receiving Montini's letter, Maritain wrote Vitale, taking issue with Vitale's characterization in his previous letter of the Vatican as pervaded by an "antisemitic attitude." Your assertion, wrote Maritain, "greatly wounded me.... I would very

³⁶ Enrico Vitale to Cardinal Micara, March 29, 1948, ACCS, Positiones Decr. et Rescr. Liturgica, 1948 R 29/48.

³⁷ Montini's cover note to Micara, dated June 9, 1948, and the bibliography sent by Maritain are found at AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, ff. 2r, 8r. The titles included on Maritain's list included both Peterson's 1936 article and Oesterreicher's 1947 article among others.

³⁸ Maritain to Massimo Vitale, April 21, 1948, UCII, CRDE 16. In these immediate postwar years, Massimo Vitale was also actively following the efforts to bring Axis war criminals to justice, and in 1947 he served as Italy's official observer at the war crimes trial of Rudolf Hess in Poland. Di Sante (*Auschwitz*, 93-117) has published the reports Vitale wrote on his visits to various concentration camps and to the Center for the Study of German Criminality in Cracow during that trip. When, in April 1948, Italy's newspapers published an appeal by Pius XII which, as Vitale phrased it, "asked that the war crimes committed by the Nazis in Poland be forgotten and forgiven," he sent a letter to Rome's left-wing newspaper *Il Paese*. Undoubtedly at his request, the letter was published unsigned. In the pope's appeal, wrote Vitale, "one would search in vain for any mention of any criticism of the guilty or any thought of mourning for or concern for the victims." His letter was published on April 26, 1948. Vitale sent the clipping to the Union of Italian Jewish Communities on that same day: UCII, Fondo Attività dal 1934, b. 80, fasc. 44 A2.

³⁹ Quoted in Pisano, "A cinquant'anni," 947.

much regret it if you thought you had to adopt such a polemic attitude toward the Holy See, one that would be as unjust as it would be inopportune.”⁴⁰

The *Declaratio*

In fact, on June 10, 1948, Vitale’s repeated pleas, as mediated by Montini and Maritain, would have their effect. The Congregation of Rites issued a Declaration in response to what it termed various requests regarding the authentic meaning of the Latin expressions in the Good Friday prayer for the Jews. The declaration concluded: “This Holy Congregation of Rites, interrogated in this regard has decided the following: In translating these words use of the expressions “disbelief” and “unbelievers” is not to be faulted.” The document was signed by the Congregation’s prefect, Cardinal Micara.⁴¹

Vitale’s initial reaction to the Vatican declaration was positive, indeed triumphalist, as he claimed credit for the change. Writing to Rome’s chief rabbi in September, Vitale recounted the efforts he and his brother had been making since 1945 to have the Good Friday prayer changed. They had brought pressure through articles written for foreign journals and “then we began the ‘campaign’ with letters, pressure, discussion. A plea was made to His Holiness Pius XII, letters were repeatedly written to Cardinal Micara, to Ambassador Maritain, to various other Cardinals, and finally....[sic] ‘victory’ was reached!”⁴²

Vitale’s initial elation over the Vatican *Declaratio* would soon turn to disillusionment, as it became clear that the Congregation of Rites statement had not mandated any change in the translation of the offending words, and few churches were making any such change. By early 1952 Vitale was again complaining to Montini about the prayer.⁴³ In December of that year Vitale decided to write directly to the pope. He sent his letter, as he would for his many future appeals to the Vatican, on the stationery of the Comitato Ricerche Deportati Ebrei. The Vatican’s 1948 decision to issue the *Declaratio* regarding the Good Friday prayer had been greeted with great joy, wrote Vitale. “Unfortunately, however, the advice expressed in the above-cited ‘Declaratio’ has not been followed by anyone, at least from what one can see in Italy where more than one recent edition of the Roman Missal has reproduced identical version of the phrases involved.”

Vitale’s letter in the Vatican archive bears the stamp: “*Ex Audientia SS.mi*” indicating it was shown to and discussed with the pope on December 17, 1952, along with the handwritten instruction from the pope: “Verify.”⁴⁴ Following up, three days later, the secretariat of state, most likely in the person of Monsignor

⁴⁰ Montini to Massimo Vitale, June 5, 1948, UCII, CRDE 16.

⁴¹ The Latin text is found on the stationery of the Sacra Congregatio Rituum at AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, f. 15r. It was published in the official acts of the Vatican: Sacra Rituum Congregatio. “Declaratio,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 40 (1948), 342.

⁴² Vitale to Rabbino Capo Davide Prato, Roma, September 20, 1948, UCII, CRDE 16.

⁴³ In February 1952 Montini prepared a response to Vitale’s new protests, which can be found at AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, ff. 16r-17v.

⁴⁴ Massimo Vitale to Pius XII, December 11, 1952, AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, f. 12r.

Montini, who continued to coordinate the question for the pope, sent a letter to the secretary of the Congregation of Rites along with a copy of Vitale's letter.⁴⁵

The Congregation of Rites' reply came the following month in the form of a letter addressed to Monsignor Montini from Enrico Leonida Dante, the congregation's *sostituto*. The Congregation, Dante reported, had authority only over the Latin text of the Roman Missal, and that ancient text, praying for the conversion of the Jews, "solemnly recited every year on the sacred day of the death of the Lord," could not be changed. The translations into local languages of the text were not under the supervision of the Congregation, but rather "were placed by canon laws under the authority of the individual [local] bishops." This letter too bears the stamp of having been shown to Pius XII.⁴⁶

In March, having apparently not received any response to his December 1952 letter to the pope, Vitale wrote a joint letter to Monsignor Montini and to Domenico Tardini, head of the other major division of the Vatican secretariat of state office, that dealing with relations with foreign states. Vitale attached a copy of his December letter. Vitale's new letter was provoked not simply by the lack of a reply to his earlier letter, but by a recent incident, one of many such manifestations of anti-Jewish animus in the Church he would complain about over the following years. A Catholic publication in Turin had reprinted the advice that a parish priest had given in his parish bulletin. Vitale included the clipping, quoting the priest as advising his parishioners "Do not rent to or host in your home Protestants or Jews. We must keep those of a different religion far from us in order not to endanger our Faith."⁴⁷

Monsignor Angelo Dell'Acqua

Since the beginning of his papacy, when matters regarding Jews had come up Pius XII had regularly turned to a man who was initially a junior member of the secretariat of state staff, Monsignor Angelo Dell'Acqua.⁴⁸ The pope's confidence in Dell'Acqua was evident from his increased stature over the following years, and in February 1953 the pope appointed him as the *Sostituto* of the secretariat of state, appointing Montini to the new position of deputy secretary of state. In dealing with Vitale's latest letter, the pope, shortly after appointing Dell'Acqua *Sostituto*, requested his opinion. It came in the form of a memo, the first of many as Dell'Acqua became the pope's primary intermediary in dealing with Vitale.

Dell'Acqua wrote that he could see nothing wrong with the advice the parish priest had given regarding dealing with Jews, although, he added, "perhaps he might have been a bit gentler." Contact between Catholics and Jews was to be

⁴⁵ AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, f, 13r.

⁴⁶ Enrico Dante to Montini, January 20, 1953, AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, ff. 14rv.

⁴⁷ AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, ff. 27r-29r.

⁴⁸ See David I. Kertzer and Roberto Benedetti, "Pope Pius XII's Advisor on Dealing with Jews: Monsignor Angelo Dell'Acqua and the Holocaust," *Revue d'Histoire de la Shoah* 218 (2023), 125-146.

avoided. As for Vitale's continued complaints about the Good Friday prayer regarding the "perfidii judei," added Dell'Acqua, "with all humility permit me to say that I would not be of the opinion to send anything in writing to Signor Vitale: It is too delicate a matter and it is well known that the Jews are ready to exploit everything." Dell'Acqua proposed that instead he invite Vitale to the Vatican to meet with him and he would attempt to calm him down. Reviewing Dell'Acqua's memo, Pius XII indicated his approval and on March 31 Vitale was sent a secretariat of state note card inviting him to confer with Dell'Acqua the following day.⁴⁹

As Dell'Acqua described it in an internal office note, Vitale seemed satisfied with the explanation he gave in their subsequent meeting in the Apostolic Palace regarding both the Good Friday prayer and the parish priest's advice column. Immediately following their meeting, Dell'Acqua contacted the Congregation of Rites to ask if any new Italian-language prayer book had recently been published. The reply informed him that the last such publication was from 1943. Dell'Acqua in turn had an assistant phone Vitale's office leaving word of this report.⁵⁰

Vitale did not wait long before sending the new Sostituto a long, impassioned letter objecting to his explanation of the status of the Good Friday prayer. "I have reason to believe," wrote Vitale, that the news he had received by telephone from Dell'Acqua's office "must have been imperfectly transmitted to me because it gave me assurance that 'no edition in translation into modern languages of the Roman Missal had been published or even planned after 1943'." In conducting his own rapid and incomplete inquiry, wrote Vitale, he found four Italian, French, and English editions published since 1950 and all contained the "perfidious/treacherous" Jews wording. To these four, he asserted, one could add a Florentine edition of the past year, "and who knows how many others in the world." Given the number of years that had passed since the *Declaratio*, argued Vitale, he could not see any reason for the delay in mandating the change, "thus avoiding the incommensurable damage of a universal and capillary antisemitic propaganda." Having now recognized the "baleful consequences and the complete uselessness of the 'Declaratio'," wrote Vitale, "there can be no doubt that His Holiness will now want to ensure, with His high sense of justice, that an end is put to a bitter situation which provokes not unfounded resentment on the part of the victims who have already been so unjustly affected."⁵¹

⁴⁹ Dell'Acqua's memo is dated March 20, 1953. He notes that he had previously had occasion to meet with Vitale "back during the time of the campaign against the Judaics." AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, f. 11r. The secretariat of state invitation to Vitale, dated March 31, is found at Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea (CDEC), Fondo Vitale, b.4, fasc. 157.

⁵⁰ Dell'Acqua's note on Vitale's visit, dated April 3, 1953, is found at AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, f. 23r. For Dell'Acqua's request to Monsignor Dante, dated April 3, and Dante's reply, see AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, f. 24r. The next day, Dell'Acqua also sought information from Monsignor De Marchi on publication plans for the new Roman Missal (*Ibid.*, f. 25r). Dell'Acqua subsequently sent word on April 9 to Vitale of what he had learned (*ibid.*, f. 26r).

⁵¹ Vitale to Dell'Acqua, April 14, 1953, AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, ff. 31r-32r. For the state of concerns over antisemitism in the Catholic liturgy at the time, see Paul Démann and Renée Bloch, "Formation liturgique et attitude chrétienne envers les juifs," *Cahiers sioniens* 7 (1953), 115-78.

When a month later Vitale had still received no reply from his latest complaint, he wrote again to Dell'Acqua, offering additional evidence: a 1951 French prayer book, bearing the Imprimatur of the archbishop of Paris, contained the offending Good Friday phrases.⁵² On receiving the letter, Dell'Acqua, clearly tiring of Vitale's insistence, sent instructions to a secretariat staff member to phone Vitale and assure him that he was taking his letter into consideration.⁵³

Yet Vitale kept pressing, following up a few weeks later with another letter asking Dell'Acqua whether any progress had been made toward a new pontifical edict on the Good Friday prayer.⁵⁴ Again, Dell'Acqua decided it best not to offer Vitale any written document he might make use of. He directed a staff member to respond by phone to Vitale: "Could you explain to the interested party that the matter is present in the Secretariat of State but that it cannot be resolved in the span of just a few months?" Clearly exasperated by Vitale's ceaseless pleas, Dell'Acqua added in his note to his assistant: "A little patience!"⁵⁵

The duel between Dell'Acqua and Vitale would continue over the next months. In early October, Vitale again wrote to the monsignor, thanking him for his July telephone message which, he said, "gave me the hope of a happy resolution in the near future of what all 'men of good will' desire." Yet, he added, any further delay "could give the impression of a hostility that, I am certain, is far from existing." At the bottom of Vitale's letter, Dell'Acqua sent another message to his assistant: "Please (by voice) tell him to remain patient."⁵⁶

For Vitale, the urgency of making the change in the Good Friday prayer was intimately bound to the larger issue of the Church's centuries-long demonization of Jews, and after hearing nothing more from the Vatican over the next months, he again wrote to Dell'Acqua.⁵⁷ He had been told to be patient, he said, but it had now been five years since "unfortunately, the unobserved 'Declaratio'" had been issued, giving the relevant Vatican offices more than enough time to prepare a new statement. To illustrate the larger problem caused by the failure of a stronger papal condemnation of Church vilification of Jews, Vitale cited a recent case that a close, Catholic friend of his had brought to his attention. While attending a Sunday mass on the Italian island of Giglio, his friend heard the parish priest, in praising the

⁵² Vitale to Dell'Acqua, May 10, 1953, *Ibid.*, f. 37r.

⁵³ Dell'Acqua's instructions are found in a note dated May 12, 1953, *Ibid.* f. 36r. Vitale's note of the phone conversation, bearing the same date, is found at CDEC, Fondo Vitale, b.4, fasc. 157.

⁵⁴ Vitale to Dell'Acqua, July 3, 1953, AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, f. 38r.

⁵⁵ Dell'Acqua's memo, dated July 6, 1953, is found at *ibid.*, f. 40r. Vitale's memo recording the subsequent phone message, dated July 16, is at CDEC, Fondo Vitale, b.4, fasc. 157. The Secretariat staff members account of that conversation, carrying the same date, is at AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, f. 35r.

⁵⁶ Vitale to Dell'Acqua, October 6, 1953, *ibid.*, f. 41r. That the telephone message came through as instructed is evident from Vitale's secretary's own account of the resulting call: "This is the Vatican speaking, Monsignor Dell'Acqua asks that Colonel Vitale be told to remain patient for a little longer." *Comunicazioni Telefoniche*, October 8, 1953, CDEC, Fondo Vitale, b.4, fasc. 157.

⁵⁷ Also of note in these years in the battle to get the Roman Catholic Church to come to terms with its centuries-long demonization of Jews was the work of Jules Isaac. For his analysis of the problem, see his *The Teaching of Contempt* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964).

“regality of Christ,” speak of “the evil Jewish people.” “One cannot say,” argued Vitale, “that the matter has no importance for facts of this kind may be repeated in every part of the world, through the infinite number of priests who are in contact with the uneducated masses.” It was just such teachings that produced hatred “toward these Jews whom many know only second hand.” Such hatred, argued Vitale, is what made the Holocaust possible.⁵⁸

For Vitale, whose mother and sister had been murdered at Auschwitz, and who had dedicated the previous several years of his life to learning the fate of the thousands of Jews in Italy who had been deported to the death camps, the link between the Christian demonization of Jews and the Holocaust was fundamental. A January 1954 request from a Roman political weekly asking for his thoughts on whether there existed in Italy “an initiative destined to demolish the barrier of prejudices that divide Christians from Jews” prompted an emotion-laden response. Along with his reply, in March, he sent a cover letter explaining that “for personal reasons,” his note, if published, would have to remain anonymous. He did not want to do anything that might antagonize his interlocutors in the Vatican as he was engaged in his attempts to have the Good Friday liturgy changed. His text read:

During the tragic years of the Nazi-fascist persecution, the Vatican did NOTHING in defense of Judaism; the voice of the Head was NEVER raised, and the rare episodes of hospitality offered to the persecuted, served only to save the life of some hundreds of people when MILLIONS had already been murdered in the gas chambers or in the rigors of the death camps in Germany and in Poland, while a timely action at the beginning would have changed the course of the most tragic event, probably also in Germany, but certainly in Italy and in France.

Vitale recalled the mass roundup of Rome’s Jews by the SS on October 16, 1943:

A word of the Head would have sufficed, and the innocent Roman victims would have been saved; and on every other occasion the word of the Head would have had a similar result. AND IT WAS NOT UTTERED! And the ferocious persecutors themselves were certain they would hear it, they feared it, and they marveled at the silence, which was so useful to their monstrous projects and their evil-doing.

Vitale then turned to the common argument of Vatican defenders who pointed to the testimony of Jews who had survived the war: “And so, the numerous testimonies of gratitude of those few, very few, who were saved, have little value, if placed aside the monstrous figure of six million, for whom there was not even the attempt to devote that most authoritative word that, I repeat, would have probably changed the course of that which was such a tragic event.” This then led Vitale into

⁵⁸ Vitale to Dell’Acqua, December 10, 1953, CDEC, Fondo Vitale, b.4, fasc. 157.

a long discussion of “the vain efforts of these last six years on the part of Jewish organizations” to change the Good Friday prayer. He asked that the letter be signed “A Faithful Reader.”⁵⁹

In May 1954 the lack of any further response from the Vatican regarding the Good Friday prayer led Vitale to write directly to the pope. He had been told by phone many months earlier to be patient, he told Pius XII, yet since then he had heard nothing. “We cannot and the Jewish World will never again allow itself to fail to interest itself in this matter; it is too important given the pernicious value of the propaganda flowing from the erroneous widespread translations.” “Such an error,” Vitale told the pope, “has certainly contributed and continues to contribute each day to spreading hatred and contempt.”

Dell’Acqua discussed Vitale’s letter with the pope on May 22, and the pope agreed with him that written correspondence with the Jewish representative should be avoided.⁶⁰ As a result, Dell’Acqua summoned Vitale to the Apostolic Palace, where they met on June 24. Vitale subsequently recorded their conversation in a memo. After the usual pleasantries were exchanged, Dell’Acqua told Vitale he had nothing new to tell him. Vitale complained that he had learned of new editions of the Roman Missal containing the much-deprecated Good Friday verbiage. Dell’Acqua responded that these were not new editions but rather the reprinting of old editions, for which Vatican authorization was not required. It was necessary, insisted the monsignor, that he be patient.

Upon getting Dell’Acqua’s assurances many months earlier that the matter was being swiftly dealt with, responded Vitale, he had spoken with many Italian and foreign journalists telling them that the Good Friday prayer change would soon be announced, and he now felt embarrassed that nothing had yet happened. He went on to complain that continuing recitation of the prayer was promulgating hatred of Jews among a new generation of the faithful. It was all, he argued, part of the larger Church practice of spreading hatred toward Jews. Recognition of this fact should prompt the Vatican “to change all that it is possible to change, while so many priests continue to incite the believers from the pulpit against the Jews and write in publications that go into the hands of the masses of people and are ruinous.”

All he had to do was bring such cases of the wayward priests to his attention, replied Dell’Acqua, and he could be sure that the matter would be dealt with. It was necessary, he repeated, to have a little more patience, and the Good Friday matter would be resolved.

Vitale refused to give up. In December, he wrote Dell’Acqua yet another reminder, expressing his hope that the coming new year would see at last the

⁵⁹ The request from the magazine, *Epoca*, to Vitale, dated January 18, 1953, and Vitale’s letters in response, dated March 21, are found at CDEC, Fondo Vitale, b. 4, fasc. 164.

⁶⁰ In Dell’Acqua’s own brief note on their meeting, the monsignor wrote: “I recommended that he be patient...The Jews too are often very agitated with regard to Catholics” (Vitale to Pius XII, May 11, 1954, AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, f. 44r, 43r).

resolution of the Good Friday question.⁶¹ In April 1955, Vitale wrote again, and again referred back to their most recent conversation, of ten months earlier, reminding the prelate as well of his subsequent letter on the subject in December.⁶² As he had in the past, Dell'Acqua replied by having an assistant telephone Vitale: "By voice," instructed the Sostituto, "repeat to him to still have a little patience!"⁶³

The duel between Vitale and Dell'Acqua continued, as Vitale peppered the Vatican with his pleas. Vitale's new appeal to Dell'Acqua in October 1955 led to a remarkably similar response, as the monsignor had his assistant again phone the Jewish leader and urged patience.⁶⁴ In fact, the next month the Congregation of Rites issued a document devoted to the revision of the Holy Week rites, bearing Pius XII's approval. *Maxima redemptionis nostrae mysteria* offered many new instructions for the proper performance of Holy Week ceremonies, including those for Good Friday, but did not address the prayer for the Jews.⁶⁵

The following year the battle continued. In April 1956 Vitale wrote Dell'Acqua complaining of the recent publication in Milan of a "New Holy Week Liturgy," bearing the archdiocesan imprimatur and distributed to all the Catholic churches of the archdiocese, still containing the phrases "perfidious Judaics" and "Judaic perfidy."⁶⁶ "If this is to be found," wrote Vitale, "I would say practically under the eyes of the Holy Father, what will they be doing further away?"⁶⁷ This time, rather than have an assistant phone Vitale and ask that he be patient, Dell'Acqua responded in a brief note to Vitale reporting that he had brought his letter to the attention of the relevant office, the Congregation of Rites. In fact, discussions in the Congregation of Rites regarding the Easter Friday prayer for the Jews were continuing, marked by considerable differences of opinion regarding both the appropriate vernacular translations of the Latin language and the question of whether the Latin wording itself might be changed.⁶⁸

Vitale's next letter came to the monsignor the following month, prompted by the appearance in a Catholic bookstore of a new antisemitic volume titled *Tragic Triangle*, referring to the presumed triangle linking Judaism, Communism, and the

⁶¹ Vitale to Dell'Acqua, December 18, 1954, *ibid.* f. 48r. Dell'Acqua this time responded simply in the form of a printed card of new year's best wishes on December 27, CDEC, Fondo Vitale, b.4, fasc. 157.

⁶² Vitale to Dell'Acqua, April 6, 1955, AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, f. 49r.

⁶³ Dell'Acqua note, *ibid.*, f. 50r. For Vitale's account of their conversation see CDEC, Fondo Vitale, b.4, fasc. 157.

⁶⁴ Vitale to Dell'Acqua, October 23, 1955, AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, f. 53r; Vitale notes, October 27, 1955, CDEC, Fondo Vitale, b.4, fasc. 157.

⁶⁵ The English text of *Maxima redemptionis*, dated November 16, 1955, is found at <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=11136>. Further explication is offered by the prefect and secretary of the Congregation of Rites: Gaetano Cardinal Cicognani and Alfonso Carinci, "Regulations concerning Easter Ceremonies," *The Furrow* 8, (1957), 3, 198-202.

⁶⁶ The question of changes in the Holy Week liturgy in these years is discussed, *inter alia*, in Annibale Bugnini and Carlo Braga, *La liturgia della settimana santa* (Rome: Edizioni liturgiche, 1957); Giovanni Berti, *La settimana santa. commento storico, dogmatico e pastorale al nuovo Ordo* (Milan: Opera della regalità, 1957).

⁶⁷ Vitale to Dell'Acqua, April 9, 1956, AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, f. 55r.

⁶⁸ Dell'Acqua to Vitale, April 14, 1956, CDEC, Fondo Vitale, b.4, fasc. 157. On the discussions in these years in the Congregation of Rites regarding the prayer for the Jews, see Paiano, "Ebrei italiani," 685-89.

Masonry, an old theme of Catholic anti-Jewish writings. Along with this complaint Vitale again raised the issue of the Good Friday prayer.⁶⁹ This time, in what Dell'Acqua clearly hoped would put an end to Vitale's missives, the monsignor decided to respond by letter. He adopted an impersonal tone: "Illustrious Signore, With reference to your precious letter of May 8 of the current year, I must clarify for you that a response to your requests regarding variations in the liturgical prayers of the Church is not of the competence of this Secretariat of State." It was instead a matter for the Congregation of Rites. As for the bookstore offering the offending publication, Vitale was informed, he should feel free to take the matter up with the "interested persons" there.⁷⁰

If Monsignor Dell'Acqua thought that this letter of dismissal would put an end to Vitale's repeated requests, he would quickly discover he was mistaken. In October 1956 Vitale sent a long letter to Dell'Acqua, recalling his postwar complaints to the Vatican about depictions in various Polish churches of Jewish ritual murder of Christian children. He wrote now, he said, because he had learned that such an image of ritual murder was still to be found in two Austrian churches. "In both," he wrote, "the shameful lie is offered as if it were a truth revealed in the Gospel." "As in Poland," continued Vitale, "it is well known that a good part of the Austrian population does not nourish favorable feelings toward the Jews and that, especially among the mass of the people of the countryside...these are sentiments of hatred and contempt that only the Church can extinguish."⁷¹

Dell'Acqua's reply was curt. Indeed it consisted not of a signed letter but an embossed Secretariat of State card accompanied by an unsigned response. After contesting the existence of a portrait of Jewish ritual murder in one of the Austrian churches cited by Vitale, it explained that the other church had "some that represent the martyrdom of Blessed Andrea, whose relics are conserved in that same Church. According to tradition, it is the case of a young boy who died at the hands of some Israelites." The note continued: "One can be certain, however, that such paintings do not cause any antisemitic sentiment, in the same way that no such sentiment is caused in Vienna's Duomo of Saint Stephen which portrays the Saint in the act of being stoned to death by the Judaics." At the bottom of the page Vitale penciled in his reaction: "This note is fantastic!!!"⁷²

Over the next months, Vitale continued to direct pleas to Dell'Acqua, combining his repeated calls for action to be taken in dealing with the Good Friday prayer with a series of reports of antisemitic images and sermons in Europe's churches. In one of these letters, in July 1957, he told of a report he had received from a Catholic friend from Turin. As she had recalled in her letter, at a Sunday mass she attended, "the priest gave a sermon that was an ode to antisemitism." Vitale added, "It is to be observed that facts of this kind are not rare" and he concluded: "Only

⁶⁹ Vitale to Dell'Acqua, May 8, 1955, AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, f. 59r.

⁷⁰ Dell'Acqua to Vitale, May 11, 1956, *ibid.*, ff. 61rv.

⁷¹ Vitale to Dell'Acqua, October 19, 1956, CDEC, Fondo Vitale, b.4, fasc. 157.

⁷² *Idem*. The secretariat of state to Vitale note is dated November 26, 1956. Vitale's underlining is in the original.

authoritative central intervention can avoid the repetition of this, and, certainly, the publication of the much desired “Decretum” would give a clear indication of the reality of these sentiments.” Dell’Acqua responded a few days later thanking Vitale for bringing the matter to his attention. He added, “Should this occur again be so good as to let me know and it will be my duty to inform the Most Eminent Cardinal Archbishop of Turin.” On receiving the monsignor’s reply, Vitale underlined his phrase “Should this occur again,” and in the margin penciled in four exclamation points.⁷³

Two months later Vitale again wrote Dell’Acqua to complain about yet another incidence of antisemitism in official Church publications. “The incredible fact involved bears the official sanction of a high Catholic Church Authority.” The heavily illustrated book in question, published the previous year, titled “I am the Life - The Gospel for Children,” bore the imprimatur of the archdiocese of Milan. “What Gospel,” asked Vitale, “can promulgate hatred, contempt, and lies?” Vitale offered a quote from its text recounting for children the crucifixion of Jesus: “The Jews retreated into their homes for dinner. Some are repentant. They beat their chests exclaiming ‘What have I ever done!’ Others no. They sneered. And their foul laughter has been passed down from generation to generation. And it has reached down to us. And we all know these traitors who every day with their evil works continue to kill Jesus a little.” Vitale asked that the Vatican take immediate action to prohibit use of the book in Church schools and to prohibit sale of the book in Catholic bookstores until such time as the offending language was removed.⁷⁴

Vitale’s complaint prompted Dell’Acqua to arrange to talk to him by phone. Our only record of that conversation comes indirectly, via Vitale’s follow-up letter to the monsignor, sent a week after his initial letter. “Your Excellency,” wrote Vitale, had argued that Vitale had given an “erroneous interpretation” to the children’s text. The reference in the text, Dell’Acqua had claimed, “refers to the stubborn sinners but not to all the Jews.” “Permit me,” replied Vitale, “to repeat what I said then.” Even if this were a volume to be read by well-educated adults, few would grasp the subtle distinction Dell’Acqua was making. “But instead this is a case of a volume destined for children, presented to them as the Gospel.” Reading the text, and having been taught the inerrancy of the Gospel, such children would have clearly called to their minds “that ‘the Judaics’ each day carry out evil works against He who in his spirit is the source of all light and all good; and from that can only deduce sentiments of horror, of hatred, of contempt.”

Dell’Acqua had told Vitale that he would see whether something might be done to “improve” the text in question, yet, argued Vitale, clearly more than some “improvement” was needed, but rather “a complete transformation.” In concluding, as he was wont to do in his now massive correspondence with the Sostituto, Vitale tied this latest instance of Church demonization of Jews to the failure to address the Good Friday liturgy. For the necessary transformation of the children’s text,

⁷³ Vitale to Dell’Acqua, July 3, 1957, AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, ff. 65r, 64r; and Dell’Acqua to Vitale, July 8, 1957, CDEC, Fondo Vitale, b.4, fasc. 157.

⁷⁴ Vitale to Dell’Acqua, September 12, 1957, CDEC, Fondo Vitale, b.4, fasc. 157.

wrote Vitale, "I trust in Your Excellency's high authority, as I still trust in it (still after so many years and so many requests...) for the publication of the much desired 'Decretum' in the exceedingly important question of the Good Friday prayer."⁷⁵

As 1957 was drawing to a close, and Vitale had still received no word of Vatican action on the Good Friday prayer, he sent another long, impassioned letter to Dell'Acqua. He began by reviewing the "innumerable verbal, telephonic, and written communications" he had exchanged with the Vatican's Sostituto. After all of them, he asked, "Does it not seem to you, Most Reverend Excellency, that very very little has been accomplished in reaching a better understanding between Catholics and Jews, a question which, given the monstrous events that have occurred in recent times against the Jews," should concern all honest men? Vitale reviewed the efforts he had made to have the language of the Good Friday prayer changed. From the time of the "Declaratio" by the Congregation of Rites in 1948, he wrote, "my communications with Your Most Reverend Excellency on the matter have been innumerable" yet the language in the Roman missals had remained unchanged. In 1956, "in Rome, under the eyes of the Holy Father himself, the "New Liturgy of Holy Week" was published still containing "the injurious and false phrase of 'perfidious Judaics' and 'perfidious Judaism.'" And while he had brought to the monsignor's attention the publication of the children's Gospel volume with its vilification of Jews:

What public criticism, what disciplining of those responsible was effected? How is it possible that the indescribable horrors perpetrated by the Nazi-fascists against the Jews do not inspire continuous, immediate, and severe sanctions against those who are guilty?... Does it not seem to you, Most Reverend Excellency, that these failures to act can appear as an incomprehensible deficiency in the high ministry of the Church?⁷⁶

Accompanying Vitale's letter in the Vatican secretariat of state archive is a note written by Antonio Travia. Travia, who had been Montini's secretary while he served as Sostituto, had subsequently come under Dell'Acqua's authority. It was Travia who had frequently made the phone calls to speak with Vitale at Dell'Acqua's request. Travia offered his characterization of Vitale's new letter: "Before kicking off the beginning of 1958, the President of the Union of Jewish Communities, Signor Massimo Adolfo Vitale, with semitic tenacity and stubbornness, proposes his usual requests once again for the new year."⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Vitale to Dell'Acqua, September 19, 1957, *idem*.

⁷⁶ Vitale to Dell'Acqua, December 30, 1957, AAV, *Segr. Stato*, an. 1950, *Popolazioni*, pos. 296, ff. 67r-69r.

⁷⁷ Travia's note is found at *ibid.*, f. 66r. He here mistakes the organization that Vitale headed, which was the Committee to Locate Jewish Deportees, not the Union of Italian Jewish Communities. A subsequent handwritten note on Vitale's letter indicates that copies were sent both to the Congregation of Rites and the Congregation of the Council. The latter was the office, dating from the sixteenth century,

A month later, on January 31, 1958, Vitale, frustrated by what he took to be the stalling tactic adopted by the pope's representatives, sent a letter in English to the heads of the principal Jewish organizations in the U.S. and England reviewing his efforts to convince Pius XII to do something about the Good Friday prayer. He began by describing the decision in 1948 to issue the "Declaratio" by the Congregation of Rites. "This," he explained, "was the result of my numberless interventions with the Vatican in order to eliminate the century-old incitement to anti-semitism which the incorrect and malicious interpretation of the Latin phrases produces in the Catholic masses." Ten years had passed since that time yet with few exceptions, "all the new editions of the 'Missale Romanus' in modern languages still have unvaried the insulting anti-semitic phrases." Vitale suggested that, to much of the Catholic world, the ambiguous language of the 1948 Declaratio had "concealed the [Vatican's] wish that the question be left unchanged!!!! And this was the interpretation of numberless Bishops whose 'imprimatur' gives formally sanction to the new anti-semitic editions of the wide-spread liturgical books." As a result, he had been battling for years to have the Vatican issue a "Decretum," which, unlike the *Declaratio*, would act as "an order to which the Catholic world must conform." He added, "As you can see from the enclosed letter addressed to the Vatican on December 30th, 1957, I[sic] continue my "fight"!!!!!!!"⁷⁸

A New Pope

The stalling action on the Good Friday prayer adopted by Monsignor Dell'Acqua in dealing with Vitale's efforts continued through the rest of Pius XII's papacy. It undoubtedly reflected the pope's own reluctance to have changes made in the Good Friday prayer or to take other public actions to alter centuries-long Church views of Jews.⁷⁹ While in his correspondence with the pope, Vitale always adopted a respectful tone, his views of Pius XII were far from benign. A month after Pius XII's October 1958 death, an editor of London's *Jewish Chronicle* wrote Vitale to ask his opinion on the new pope. Vitale's response is revealing:

The new Pope undoubtedly has a personality much different from Pio XII (who was among the worst enemies of the Jews) but we must remember that the Vatican policy was—is—and will be always the same: on the one hand good and friendly words and smiles; on the other hand (also at the same time) dislike and active opposition.

which oversaw the correct interpretation and application of the canons introduced by the Council of Trent and had responsibility for overseeing the secular clergy.

⁷⁸ Vitale's January 30, 1958, letter is found at CDEC, Fondo Vitale, b.4, fasc. 157. The numerous exclamation marks are in the original.

⁷⁹ The pope's reluctance to address the implications of Christian anti-Jewish teachings in the aftermath of the Holocaust is reflected in the larger disinclination to do so in the Church. "Through the 1950s," observed John Connelly, "the Catholic press— whether the French *Études*, the American *Commonweal* and *America*, the British *The Month*, the Polish *Tygodnik Powszechny*, or the German *Stimmen der Zeit* and *Hochland*— featured next to nothing on the Shoah, let alone suggested that this event should unleash soul-searching within the church about its past" (Connelly, *From Enemy*, 179-180).

Pius XII's death had occasioned a series of public statements by Jewish leaders praising the pope, and this clearly irritated Vitale. In his reply to the British publication, he enclosed a clipping of a long letter, bearing the title "Pius XII and the Jews," which had recently been published in a Milanese newspaper. The author, taking issue with the newspaper's positive editorial offering a tribute to the recently deceased pope, gave a detailed account of the pope's failures to oppose the Nazi and Fascist murderous campaign against the Jews. As for the words of praise coming in from Jewish organizations in the wake of the pope's death, Vitale remarked that they were "completely undeserved" and added, "Let Jewish and non-Jewish people in England know the truth."⁸⁰

On November 23, barely a month after John XXIII's election, Vitale decided to write to the new pope. He recalled the 1948 "Declaratio," and added: "Unfortunately, as was predictable, no result was forthcoming, which is to say, for over ten years we have been waiting for the requested 'Decretum' that would put an end to a clear, humiliating injustice."

Vitale went on to make the link for John XXIII between the Vatican's continued embrace of the Good Friday prayer for the Jews and the actions of his predecessor during the Holocaust and its aftermath:

The layman cannot understand the reasons that prevented the Holy See in that most troubled time from excommunicating Hitler, Mussolini, and their collaborators, for the evils they committed.... Equally laypeople cannot understand the reasons that led the Holy See to grant generous hospitality to the executioners of innocent victims.... But after such a horrible and painful past, one trusts that by Your Holiness's paternal benevolence the humiliating insult that continually results from an inevitable, widespread ecumenical propaganda of various Catholic liturgical texts... will finally be cancelled.

For further details on the question, Vitale suggested that the pope consult Monsignor Dell'Acqua, with whom he had had "very numerous contacts on the question from 1953 to 1958."⁸¹

With a speed that may have surprised Vitale, the new pope acted to make the change that his predecessor had long resisted. For the first Good Friday mass of his papacy, held on March 27, 1959, John XXIII directed Cardinal Micara, then cardinal vicar of Rome, to have the terms "perfidis" and "perfidia" stricken from the prayer for the Jews in the diocese of Rome. This was followed in May with a letter

⁸⁰ The request, dated November 19, 1958, came from the foreign editor of *The Jewish Chronicle*. Vitale's response is dated December 13. CDEC, Fondo Vitale, b. 4, fasc. 164. The clipping Vitale enclosed, "Pio XII e gli ebrei," by Giorgio Sabetti, was published in the November issue of *L'Incontro* (UCII, Fondo Attività dal 1934, b. 230).

⁸¹ Vitale to Pope John XXIII, November 23, 1958, CDEC, Fondo Vitale, b.4, fasc. 157. An unsigned letter to Vitale on Vatican Secretary of State stationery, dated December 11, 1958, informed him that his letter had been transmitted to the Congregation of Rites.

from the Congregation of Rites announcing the application of the decision worldwide.⁸² Indeed, the new pope went further, eliminating other negative references to Jews in the Catholic liturgy, including the invocation in the baptism of Jews, “Horresce Iudaicam perfidiam, respue Hebraicam superstitionem,” a request that neither Vitale nor any Jewish organization had been pressing.⁸³

Conclusions

Vitale’s tenacious efforts to have the Vatican end the Church’s negative depiction of Jews contained in the Good Friday prayer was, as we have seen, intimately connected to his belief in the role played by the Roman Catholic Church, and the Christian churches more generally, in the vilification of Jews that made the Holocaust possible. In the wake of the Nazi murder of his own sister and mother, and his ongoing attempts as head of the CDRE to ascertain the fate of the thousands of Jews in Italy who had been deported to death camps by the Germans, Vitale was incensed by Pius XII’s failure to show any sense of urgency in dealing with the Church’s ongoing casting of Jews as sources of evil.⁸⁴ In her book on Catholic antisemitism in the postwar years, Italian historian Elena Mazzini points out that the Vatican’s behavior reflected a larger “politics of memory” that characterized Italy. “The Shoah,” she writes, “became a matter of shared public memory only beginning in the 1960s. The Catholic world, then, did not behave differently from the rest of Italian society.” Italians took no more responsibility for their role in the Holocaust than the Church did for its role.⁸⁵

In his recent book on Pius XII and the Holocaust, Andrea Riccardi similarly calls attention to the Vatican’s resistance in the postwar years to the efforts of Catholic clergy to reach out to a Jewish people who had just suffered indescribable horrors and mass murder. When American and British elements of the Catholic church began to take part in the efforts of the new International Council of Christians and Jews, among whose honorary presidents was Jacques Maritain himself, the cardinals of the Holy Office urged great caution. Interfaith organizations and activities were to be discouraged. A Holy Office 1954 directive to a British bishop, approved by Pius XII, called on him to ensure that the Vatican policy was followed. A draft of the document contained the phrase—dropped however from the final

⁸² Menozzi, “Perfidie judaïque,” 106-107. Elena Mazzini has referred to the pope’s action as “far from expected” (“Aspetti dell’antisemitismo cattolico dopo l’Olocausto,” in *Storia della Shoah in Italia*, vol. 2, ed. Marcello Flores et al. (Turin: UTET, 2010), 320-35.

⁸³ Paiano, “Il dibattito,” 705-706. However, the Good Friday service continued to contain a prayer for the conversion of Jews. This would be changed only with the Second Vatican Council and reflected in the new missal in 1970 (Wolf, “The Good Friday,” 254).

⁸⁴ Along these lines, Connelly quotes the June 1949 comment by John Cogley, former editor of the *Chicago Catholic Worker*: “when one considers the enormity of the Nazi blood-carnival, it never ceases to be amazing that the Christian conscience has been so slightly disturbed” (Connelly, *From Enemy*, 180).

⁸⁵ Elena Mazzini. *L’antiebraismo cattolico*, 62.

draft—"the Catholic Church is currently suffering persecutions in countries where the Jews predominate in the government."⁸⁶

Much attention has been given to Pius XII's failure to speak out against the ongoing attempts of the Nazis to exterminate Europe's Jews during the Second World War. The question of the pope's reluctance, in the wake of the Holocaust, to confront the question of Church responsibility for casting Jews as threats to healthy Christian society has received much less attention. The path to such recognition in the years following Pius XII's papacy has been far from direct. John XXIII's rapid actions to alter the Good Friday prayer as well as the wording used for the conversion of Jews was followed in 1965 by Pope Montini's (Paul VI) issuing of the historic *Nostra Aetate*, calling for an end to Church demonization of Jews. Yet in 1998, the Vatican issued its "We Remember" statement, its preface written by Pope John Paul II himself, rejecting the claim that centuries-long Christian demonization of Jews bore any relation to the hatred of Jews that made the Holocaust possible.⁸⁷

The case of the efforts to alter the Good Friday liturgy offers a window into the pressures the pope faced in the immediate postwar years to deal with these issues. The recent opening of the Vatican archives for the papacy of Pius XII offers a much clearer view than previously available into how the pope, and his closest advisors, fended off such a reckoning. The resulting picture offers further evidence of just how dramatic were the actions taken by Pius XII's successor.

⁸⁶ Andrea Riccardi, *La Guerra del silenzio* (Rome: Laterza, 2022), 320-23.

⁸⁷ On this, see Kertzer, *The Popes*. By contrast, a number of national Roman Catholic Church hierarchies have issued statements recognizing their responsibility and offering apologies (e.g., for the German case, see the 2020 statement of the German Bishops' Conference at https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/presse_2020/2020-04-29_DB_107_Englisch.pdf, discussed in Mark Ruff, "The German Catholic Bishops and the Second World War: A Historic Reappraisal," *Contemporary Church History Quarterly* 26 (2020): 1/2.