

## CONFERENCE PROCEEDING

*Has the Papacy 'Owned' Vatican Guilt  
for the Church's Role in the Holocaust?*

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Given my reflections in this presentation, it is perhaps appropriate to begin with a confession. What I have written on the subject of the papacy and the Shoah in the past was marked by a confidence and even self-righteousness that I now find embarrassing and even appalling. (Incidentally, this observation about self-righteousness would apply all the more, I am afraid, to those defenders of the wartime pope.) In any case, I will try and smother those unfortunate qualities in my presentation. Let me hasten to underline that, by and large, I do not wish to retract conclusions I have reached, which, in preparation for this presentation, have not essentially changed. But I have come to perceive much more clearly the need for humility in rendering judgment, even harsh judgment, on the Catholic actors, especially the leading Catholic actors of the period. As José Sanchez, with whose conclusions in his book on understanding the controversy surrounding the wartime pope I otherwise largely disagree, has rightly pointed out, "it is easy to second guess after the events."<sup>1</sup> This somewhat uninflected observation means, I take it, that, in the case of the Holy See and the Holocaust, the calculus of whether to speak or to act was reached in the cauldron of a savage world war, wrought in the matrix of competing interests and complicated by uncertainty as to whether acting or speaking would result in relief for or reprisal. Fair enough.

At the same time, we must never forget, nor must we shrink from honest and, let me add, well-researched judgments about the conduct of the institutional church during the Holocaust. Nor must we fudge on the question, as Elena Procaro-Foley put it well to me in her letter of invitation, whether the church has completely "owned" its responsibility for errors and sins and whether subsequent prelates and popes, in their speeches and theology, have truly faced their responsibility for the treatment of Jews and Judaism. As each of you knows all too well, the bulk of commentary on these questions has, not wrongly, focused on the conduct of Pius XII and on the Vatican document *We Remember*, the long-awaited statement on the Catholic church and the Holocaust released in March of 1998. But it is also true that some European national Episcopal conferences released their own statements of atonement. What I want to attempt today is to place *We Remember* against the backdrop of the statement issued by the French bishops; and what I shall argue is neither that the institutional church as a whole succeeded nor failed in facing its responsibility for the teaching of contempt and its catastrophic outcome. Rather, what I wish to suggest is that, if the Vatican statement of apology, in many respects, has been deeply disappointing to both Jewish and Catholic readers, the same cannot be said of the

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<sup>1</sup> José Sanchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust: Understanding the Controversy* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002). Parts of this essay have previously appeared in "A Survey of Jewish Reaction to the Vatican Statement on the Holocaust," *Cross Currents* 50/4 (Winter 2001): 488-505; reprinted in *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, 3 vols. (Palgrave: 2001), 2:425-37.

episcopal statements—and these include statements made, with varying degrees of success, by the German, Hungarian, Polish, Dutch, Italian and Swiss national Episcopal conferences. Accordingly, I want to argue today that the response to the questions posed to me must be framed in shades of gray, or to put it more concretely, that the bishops in Germany and especially France have indeed “owned” their responsibility while the crafters of *We Remember* in the Vatican curia have largely failed to do so. I conclude with some reflections on the short pontificate of Benedict XVI (2005-), which, in my judgment, has damaged Jewish-Christian relations at the highest levels, even when on the lower echelons of this relationship, like ours, dialogue thrives, and the two parties remain committed to one another in an indefectible covenant of friendship and mutual respect and support. In order to establish the historical background to the recent Episcopal and papal reactions to the Shoah, and to lay out the material that will launch our discussion on the essentially moral question Professor Procaro-Foley put to me, I would like briefly to summarize what I take to be established historically about the controversial wartime pope.

Let me begin with a narrative from the wartime sources the Vatican has published. In the early months of 1942, the newly-formed state of Slovakia entered negotiations with the government of Germany, and in particular with Adolf Eichmann. The negotiations centered on logistical issues surrounding the deportation to Galicia and the Lublin district of the roughly 90,000 Jewish citizens of Slovakia. As the negotiations proceeded, Eichmann demanded that Slovakia send only Jews capable of labor. While the Slovak government, which represented a population that was almost entirely Catholic, initially complied, it was not happy to be left with the care of the elderly and of children. Accordingly, it proposed to Eichmann that, “in the spirit of Christianity,” families not be separated but instead be deported together. Though he first complained about the “technical” problems this plan would cause for Germany, Eichmann relented. By the beginning of March 1942, he had agreed to plans for the deportation of all the Jews of Slovakia.<sup>2</sup>

As news of the plans for deportation spread, it naturally panicked the Jewish community in Bratislava. About to be swallowed in the maw of deportation, the Jewish leaders there turned first to the Vatican *chargé d'affaires*, Monsignor Giuseppe Burzio. Because he happened to be absent, the leaders of the community composed an anguished letter of appeal to the Pope himself. This they entrusted to the Nuncio in Budapest, Archbishop Angelo Rotta, through whom the letter reached the Vatican on March 13, 1942. “Most Holy Father,” it stated. “No one [else] can help us.” Not only had everything—businesses, houses, funds, even clothing—been taken from them in a ruthlessly efficient act of Aryanization. But “as we surely know,” the community declared, “we are to be shipped out to Lublin, Poland.” The authors of the letter were under no illusions about what this meant: “We are,” they stated simply, “condemned to annihilation” (*Wir sind zum Untergang verurteilt*). Would the Holy Father, in the name of humanity and fellow feeling, admonish the President of Slovakia, a Catholic priest, to block their expulsion and certain massacre? “We place all our hope and confidence in Your Holiness,” it says, “as the safest refuge of all the persecuted” (*als die sicherste Zuflucht aller Verfolgten*).<sup>3</sup> Less than two weeks later, a transport of 1000 young Slovakian citizens boarded a train. The first transport sent by Eichmann’s Section IV B 4, the train was bound for Auschwitz. Six weeks later, more than 40,000 of their countrymen and women had also been deported.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press) 139-40; Nora Levin, *The Holocaust: The Destruction of European Jewry 1937-1945* (New York: Crowell, 1968), 531.

<sup>3</sup> *Actes et Documents* 8:458.

<sup>4</sup> See Yehuda Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust* (New York: Franklin Watts) 310-11; and Livia Rothkirchen, “Vatican Policy and the ‘Jewish Problem’ in ‘independent’ Slovakia (1939-1945),” in *Yad Vashem Studies* 6 (1967): 27-53.

*The safest refuge of all the persecuted.* Those words were loaded, then, with impossible pathos and, now, with an irony its desperately sincere writers could not have intended. Surely they could not have foreseen that, sixty years later, the recipient of their letter would be excoriated by critics for near-criminal passivity in crisis and even, by some, for complicity in Judeocide. Nor could they possibly have imagined that, far from being celebrated as a haven for the tyrannized, the Vatican and the Pope in particular, had been so severely criticized for cold and craven wartime conduct that one writer, a Catholic at that, would dare to christen him “Hitler’s Pope.”<sup>5</sup>

Actually, so harsh a judgment was unthinkable not only in 1942 but through the early 1960s. In fact, for the fifteen years after the war, Pius was almost everywhere celebrated as a courageous antagonist of Nazi racial theory and policy, a benefactor of victims of war and compassionate collaborator—indeed, leader—in resistance and rescue efforts on behalf of Jewish civilians threatened with deportation. On the occasion of his death, no less a figure than Golda Meir, then Foreign Minister of the State of Israel, eulogized him thus: “When fearful martyrdom came to our people in the decade of Nazi terror, the voice of the Pope was raised for the victims. The life of our times was enriched by a voice speaking out on the great moral truths.”<sup>6</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed at the same time by others, including President Eisenhower and Moshe Sharett, the first Foreign Minister of Israel, as well as Albert Einstein. (Let me just observe incidentally that Pius’ wartime defenders have made much of these Jewish and Israeli statements, which hardly justify their claim, often heard, that they prove that Pius saved hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives.) If opinion among leaders of the Allied governments during the war was not nearly so univocal or enthusiastic, the chorus of praise after the war and into the early 1960s was virtually unqualified.

The chorus did not exactly stop singing in the 1960s. But its numbers were depleted and its performances unceremoniously interrupted by the loud dissenting voice of the German playwright Rolf Hochhuth. In 1963 Hochhuth staged a play entitled *Der Stellvertreter*. (Translated as *The Deputy* or *The Representative*, the title is a sarcastic twist on the papal claim to be *vicarius Christi*, i.e., representative of Christ on earth. Recently, Hochhuth has inexplicably befriended David Irving, the infamous British holocaust denier).<sup>7</sup> In the play, Pius appears on stage pontificating about the wickedness of the Allies, whose bombing had ruined parts of the artistic patrimony of Rome. The Germans, he observes, were friendlier than the cold Allies whose bombs had demolished San Lorenzo, an ancient basilica in Rome. Then, while the pope is murmuring about how the Allied invasion had depreciated the value of stocks the Vatican had invested in, an emissary of Kurt Gerstein<sup>8</sup> bursts into the room to tell the Holy Father about the death camps in Poland. Pius waves him off and continues to execrate the Allies.

While perhaps successful literarily, this picture of the pope even Pius’s critics find crude; and, in fact, the picture Hochhuth draws cannot, without considerable misrepresentation, or dramatic license, be reconstructed from the documents and from eyewitnesses. Not to mention that, as Michael Novak once observed, “the play drew moral attention away from Hitler and moral pressure away from Germany.”<sup>9</sup> Be that as it may, the play was simply a smashing popular

<sup>5</sup> John Cromwell, *Hitler’s Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York: Viking, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Michael O’Carroll, *Pius XII: Greatness Dishonoured* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1980) 149 n. 76.

<sup>7</sup> *Der Stellvertreter* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1963); *The Deputy*, trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Gerstein, discussed below, pp. XX-XX, was the SS Colonel who attempted to inform ecclesiastical authorities in Berlin of the death camps.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Novak, “Pius XII as Scapegoat,” *First Things* 105 (August/September 2000): 20-22, 20.

success. Aside from being staged in virtually all of the countries of the West and translated into more than 20 languages, it inspired more than 450 reviews and articles in English alone, the best of which have been anthologized in a volume whose title says it all about the impact of the play: *The Storm over the Deputy*.<sup>10</sup> More importantly, the Pius that most people knew in the 1960s—and, I think, the one still known today—is the one that is traceable to the play or its influence: a cold, calculating pope, scandalously callous in the face of unspeakable suffering, cynical and supine in the face of crimes that, had he intervened with moral force and courage, he might have prevented. As Hochhuth, in an article he wrote on his own play, put it, severely: “Perhaps never before in history have so many people paid with their lives for the passivity of one single politician.”<sup>11</sup> (Pretty cheeky for a German playwright.) In 1958, then, Pius enjoyed a reputation as a moral hero; five years later he had transmogrified, as one of his defenders has said, into the hero of a black legend (*légende noire*).<sup>12</sup>

In 1963, the Church had just entered a new and unprecedented phase of self-examination and doctrinal and institutional reconstruction. It was a time when the bitter criticism expressed by Hochhuth and felt by millions was allowed to sting, a time at which such criticism was no longer reactively dismissed as the venom of the hostile and unchurched. For many, the Hochhuth play had raised painful questions about the role of the Catholic church at all levels—papal, diplomatic, episcopal, clerical, religious and lay—during the Holocaust, questions which led to even more agonizing reflections on the credibility of Christianity itself. If Christianity, or at least Catholicism, could be so passive in the moment of truth—if, indeed, two millennia of ecclesiastically-sponsored anti-Judaism had paved the way for the kind of nonchalance that allowed Catholics to observe without pity the spectacle of “non-Aryan” neighbors being cruelly expropriated and deported to God knew where—well, how could it answer for itself?

In this new atmosphere of self-criticism—and also undoubtedly with the self-interested hope that the caricatures of Vatican activity during the war would be disciplined by historically-verifiable data—Pope Paul VI, who had been a second-in-command in the Vatican Secretariat of State during the war years, waived the usually-mandatory 75-year delay in granting access to the Vatican archives and appointed a team of four Jesuit scholars resident in Rome to select and publish the acts and documents of the Holy See connected to the Second World War. The result was an eleven-volume collection of documents, mostly dispatches and telegrams sent between the Vatican and its international network of nunciatures and legations; it also contains memoranda and some extremely valuable private notes written by the upper-echelon staff in the Secretary of State’s office.<sup>13</sup>

While not without their flaws—the editors regrettably chose not to publish a number of crucially informative documents, and there have been questions about their principle of selection that only the unlikely opening of the Archives is now capable of quieting—the volumes are an immense contribution to scholarship and a positively indispensable foundation for any scholar or writer wishing to address the questions of what the Vatican knew about the Final Solution and when, what it did with this knowledge and why it acted as it did. It is all the more perplexing, then, that over the fifteen or so years during which these documents were published and in the

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<sup>10</sup> Edited by Eric Bentley (New York: Grove Press, 1964). See also the extremely perceptive essay of Leonidas E. Hill, “History and Rolf Hochhuth’s *The Deputy*,” in *From an Ancient Modern Theatre*, ed. by R.G. Collins (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1972) pp. 145-57.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Anthony Rhodes, *The Vatican in the Age of Dictators*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston), 348.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Blet, S.J., *Pius XII and the Second World War: According to the Archives of the Vatican* (N.Y. and Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1999) 1.

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 1 for bibliographical information.

three decades since the last of the eleven volumes came out, they have been largely unused by those who have entered the debate, both by Pius's defenders and critics. Many of the latter—especially those who have, not without justification, demanded that the Vatican open its archives—are, I am convinced, simply unaware that these volumes exist. It is little wonder that Judah Graubhart was moved to comment, as early as 1975, that there were “few issues in the historiography of the Holocaust that are colored by more emotion and based on less knowledge than the Vatican's response to the ‘final solution to the Jewish Question.’”<sup>14</sup> Too true.

Hardly predictable then, and all the more regrettable now, is that the debate has turned, in the past ten years, not just emotional but venomous; some of the least measured and even vindictive discussion has come from restorationist Catholics and Catholic organizations and periodicals commonly recognized as “right-wing” or “conservative” and those using the debate over Pius as a transparent attempt to reverse the reforms of Vatican II. Meanwhile, the number of detractors and defenders has multiplied wildly.<sup>15</sup> Neither side, with notable exceptions, has distinguished itself by deep immersion in—or even superficial familiarity with—the published documents upon which any informed historical or moral judgment must be made.

Among the very most passionate participants in the debate have been those who, since the publication of the Hochhuth play, have indignantly risen to the defense of Pius, whom they regard as the victim of ignorant polemicists and shoddy scholarship. “In the twenty-two years since Pius XII died,” the Spiritan priest Michael O'Carroll could write in 1980 in a volume subtitled *Greatness Dishonoured*, “the falsehood and misrepresentation published about [Pius XII] are possibly unique in biographical literature of the same years.” If it is obvious that Carroll could not have read the countless publications defending Pius published in the 90s, Carroll and others have argued that Pius did and said, if, admittedly, *sotto voce*, more on behalf of imperilled Jews than is ordinarily known or admitted; could not have done more than he did for fear of reprisal, not just against the Holy See but especially against the victims whose suffering he was presumptively attempting to relieve; and, most dubiously in my view, did not know the full truth about the massacres in the Soviet Union and especially the Polish death camps until after the war.”<sup>16</sup>

In 1998, John Paul II published a document, which was actually written by a committee headed by Edward Cardinal Cassidy, President of the Holy See's Commission For Religious Relations With the Jews. It was entitled *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*. In a preface to the document, Pope John Paul II expressed his hope that it would “help to heal the wounds of past misunderstandings and injustices.” Ten years after the publication of the document, it seems now possible to conclude that, however sincere the Vatican's intentions, the pope's hopes will almost certainly not be realized. Indeed, far from healing, the document succeeded largely in reopening, if not actually deepening, old wounds. Not only did it divide the Catholic intellectual and journalistic communities; more importantly it bewildered and frustrated many Jewish readers and bitterly disappointed others. It also called forth a literary response from Jewish intellectuals and organizations that, while especially vigorous in the immediate wake of the document's

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<sup>14</sup> “The Vatican and the Jews: Cynicism and Indifference,” *Judaism* 24 (1975): 168-80, p. 168.

<sup>15</sup> John S. Conway, “Records and Documents of the Holy See Relating to the Second World War,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 15 (1983): 327-45, p. 332.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Carroll, *Pius XII*, p. 11. For a contrary view, particularly of that last point, see Kevin Madigan, “The Vatican and the Final Solution: What was Known and When?” in *Ethics in the Shadow of the Holocaust*, ed. John Pawlikowski (Chicago: Sheed and Ward, 2001): 175-209; slightly revised version reprinted in *Commentary* 112/3 (October 2001): 43-52.

publication, had force and feeling to last more than a year. Why this should be the case may be traceable to the hope generated by the document issued by the French bishops.

### The French Bishops' Statement

One way to interpret the Vatican document and isolate what was distinctive and disappointing about it for so many is to compare it to prior ecclesiastical statements on the Holocaust and the Church. Probably none of the many documents issued by the various national episcopal conferences of the Church better allows us to appreciate by contrast the reaction to the Vatican document than the one issued in October of 1997 by France's Roman Catholic clergy.<sup>17</sup> The impact of this strongly worded and, it certainly seemed to both Catholic and Jewish auditors, strongly felt apology was magnified both by the place and time at which it was given, as well as by the identity of those present at the declaration.

The place was the grounds of Drancy, memorialized in a plaque there that calls it "the ante-chamber of death." In 1942 it began serving as the transit camp from which many of the seventy-six thousand Jews who would ultimately be deported from France boarded cattle cars destined for Auschwitz. Among the thousand Jews and Christians present at Drancy for the French Declaration of Repentance was Jean-Marie Lustiger. The late Lustiger was a Catholic; he was, in fact, the Cardinal-Archbishop of Paris. Seventy years ago, however, he was a young Jewish boy menaced by the pro-Nazi government of France, which separated him from his mother. She, once detained, would pass through Drancy on her way to the gas chambers in Auschwitz.

The timing of the apology was also carefully planned in several ways. Aside from coinciding with the celebration of the Jewish New Year, its delivery came fifty-seven years after the passage of Marshall Petain's so-called "Jewish Laws," which not only banned Jews from the major professions and discriminated against Jews in a variety of other ways—indeed, in some ways more harshly than the Nuremberg Laws had against the Jews of Germany—but also facilitated census-taking by Vichy officials, which in turn made it easy for police to track down French Jews for detention and deportation.<sup>18</sup> Second, the apology virtually coincided with the trial of Maurice Papon, a former police supervisor from Bordeaux charged with signing the orders that led to the deportation of some seventeen hundred Jews, including hundreds of children.<sup>19</sup> Thus, at the very moment the French government was trying the highest-ranking Vichy official ever accused of complicity in crimes against humanity, the French bishops were, in effect, delivering a verdict on self-imposed charges that ecclesiastical docility (their word) in the face of catastrophe had caused the church not just to be complicit in these crimes but, in so doing, to have violated divine laws and to have failed in its divinely ordained mission.

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<sup>17</sup> "Declaration of Repentance," in *Catholics Remember the Holocaust*, 31-37. Page numbers for quotations from this document will be cited in parentheses in the text. For the French original, see, "Les évêques de France et le statut des juifs sous le régime de Vichy," *La Documentation Catholique* 21/68 (October 19, 1997). Statements by the Hungarian, German, Polish, Dutch, Swiss and Italian bishops are also included in the volume *Catholics Remember the Holocaust*.

<sup>18</sup> See Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

<sup>19</sup> Papon was later elevated to Budget Minister under Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. This naturally, did much to embarrass the Republic's pretenses to being a wholly distinct entity from Vichy, a distinction that had been exploited by both church and state to avoid an honest confrontation with the past. Papon also made international headlines on October 20, 1999 for having fled France rather than serve his ten-year prison sentence. He would soon be discovered hiding in Switzerland.

To these serious charges, the French bishops plead, with sober and quite unambiguous clarity, guilty. In fact, the French episcopal document is—especially for those accustomed to the genteel circumlocution of many Roman episcopal documents—almost shockingly direct, self-critical and precise in responding to the question: exactly who in the church was guilty of moral dereliction? Throughout, the guilty parties are identified as "priests," "leaders," "church officials," "the hierarchy," and "the bishops of France."<sup>20</sup>

If the French bishops were blunt about the identity of the guilty ecclesiastical parties, they were no less direct on the issue of how their predecessors had failed. In their view, the French bishops generally failed—they say sinned (36)—above all by their silence (a word used many times in the document), especially in the immediate wake of the publication of the anti-Jewish laws. "Silence," the bishops confess, "was the rule" and words "in favor of the victims the exception" (35). If the bishops' preoccupation with institutional continuity in a time of insecurity was legitimate in itself, their "docility," "conformity," and "loyalism" caused them to ignore the biblical imperative to respect every human creature in the image of God (32). "Ecclesiastical interests, understood in an overly restrictive sense," the bishops say, "took priority over the demands of conscience" (33). The moral and political consequences of this silence were profound. Their predecessors' silence, the bishops declare, made them "acquiescent" in "flagrant violations of human rights" and left an open field for the spiral of death (33). Their predecessors failed to recognize that they had "considerable power and influence" (32) when the anti-Jewish laws were promulgated. Although there were "countless acts of courage later on," they should, they admit, have offered help immediately, when protest and protection were possible and necessary (32). Among other things, the impact of a public statement from them would have been amplified not only by their moral position in French society but by "the silence of other institutions" (32). Indeed, the impact of a public statement, the bishops conclude, might have forestalled an irreparable catastrophe.

It is important to observe here by way of brief anticipation that this is precisely the kind of confession the Vatican document did not make. Some Jewish commentators, including Robert Wistrich and Roger Cohen, observed that this move is even more remarkable when it is remembered that several French bishops, including Archbishop Jean-Geraud Saliège of Toulouse (who declared in August 1942, "the Jews are our brothers...and no Christian can forget this fact"), Cardinal Gerlier of Lyon, and Bishop Pierre-Marie Théas of Montauban, spoke out strongly against the Vichy regime in the wake of the roundup of Jews by the French police in July 1942.<sup>21</sup> Their stand, Cohen observed, stimulated French resistance activity and contributed to the survival of three-quarters of France's Jewish population, many of whom were sheltered by French Catholics. In general, Wistrich has observed, the record of the French episcopate is, while far from unimpeachable, favorable compared to that of the German bishops. News of the declaration led television newscasts and made the front page of many French newspapers. If Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of France's rightist National Front Party, was heard to comment (not unpredictably) that the statement was "absolutely scandalous," and if Bishop Jean-Charles Thomas of Versailles, who was present at the ceremony, complained that "Old sensibilities were going to be severely ruffled,"<sup>22</sup> Jewish reaction to this document was overwhelmingly positive. Cohen, for example, called the French episcopal declaration "an expression of remorse more complete, more uncompromising and anguished than anything previously pronounced by the

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<sup>20</sup> See "Declaration of Repentance," *passim*.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Wistrich, "The Pope, the Church and the Jews," *Commentary* 107, no. 4 (April 1999); R. Cohen, "French Catholic Church Apologizes for Silence on the Holocaust," *New York Times*, October 1, 1997.

<sup>22</sup> "French Catholic Church Apologizes," *New York Times*, October 1, 1997.

church.<sup>23</sup> "Your words of repentance constitute a major turning point," said Henri Hajdenberg, president of the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions, who was present at the declaration. "Your request for forgiveness is so intense, so powerful, so poignant, that it can't but be heard by the surviving victims and their children."<sup>24</sup> However, other Jewish observers present at Drancy, such as Serge Klarsfeld, president of the Sons and Daughters of Deported French Jews, perceptively observed that so candid and heartfelt a statement of repentance would "put pressure on the Vatican" to make "its public declaration on the Holocaust" and to make it good.<sup>25</sup> Six months later, the Vatican did indeed publish its own declaration of repentance, though to far less enthusiastic reviews.

### We Remember

The document begins by describing the Nazi genocide as "an unspeakable tragedy"(48), one which the church is urged never to forget. The church is especially to remember it "by reason of her very close bonds of spiritual kinship with the Jewish people" (48) and also because of "her remembrance of the injustices of the past"(48). The document also acknowledges right at the start that the Shoah took place in "countries of long-standing Christian civilization" (49) and so it immediately raises the question of the relation between the Holocaust and Christian attitudes to Jews over the centuries. The tormented relations of Jews and Christians through the ages the document ascribes to "erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament in the Christian world" (49). It then hastens to distinguish these interpretations from those held by "the Church as such" (49) and observes that these interpretations "have been totally and definitively rejected by the Second Vatican Council" (49).

The document also distinguishes, with a sharpness Jewish commentators almost unanimously found objectionable, between the anti-Judaism of which many Christians have historically been guilty and modern anti-Semitism. The latter, it argues, is a nineteenth-century development more sociological and political than religious in origin. Indeed, it owes its genesis in part to "a false and exacerbated nationalism" (50) and to theories which "denied the unity of the human race" (50) and were used in Nazi Germany to distinguish between the so-called Nordic-Aryan races and other supposedly inferior ones. Nazi anti-Semitism, refusing to acknowledge as it did any transcendent reality as the source of life and the criterion of moral good, was "the work of a thoroughly modern neo-pagan regime. *"Its anti-Semitism had its roots outside of Christianity"* (50; emphasis mine), the document proclaimed. Indeed, in pursuing its aims, it did not hesitate to oppose the church and persecute her members also.

Nonetheless, the document does ask if the Nazi persecution wasn't "made easier by the anti-Jewish prejudices imbedded in some Christian minds and hearts" (52), rendering Christians "less sensitive, or even indifferent" (52) to persecutions launched by the Nazis. "Did Christians give every possible assistance to those being persecuted and in particular to the persecuted Jews?" (52) To the bewilderment of some, the document states that "many people" were "altogether unaware of the 'final solution'" (52)—a statement whose inclusion in the document can now be questioned on historical as well as diplomatic grounds. Still, it goes on, if "many" individuals gave every possible assistance even to the point of placing their own lives in danger, the behavior of the rest "was not that which might have been expected from Christ's followers" (53). Passing from the individual to the collective level, the document is cheekily critical of "the

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Marilyn August, "French Bishops Make Unprecedented Apology for World War II Silence," *Associated Press*, October 1, 1997.

<sup>25</sup> "French Catholic Church Apologizes," *New York Times*, October 1, 1997.

governments of some Western countries of Christian tradition" (52) which hesitated to open their borders to persecuted Jews, even though the "leaders of those nations were aware of the hardships and dangers to which Jews living in the Greater Reich were exposed" (52). The church therefore deeply regrets "the errors and failures of those sons and daughters of the church" (53). This, the document says, is to be understood as an act of *teshuvah* (54).

At the same time, the document insists that those individuals and institutions that heroically resisted Nazism must not be forgotten. In one sentence that actually has not elicited much comment, the document observed of the German church's response to Nazism, that "it replied by condemning racism" (50)—surely one of the cruder and even erroneous statements in the document. It singles out Cardinals Bertram of Breslau and Faulhaber of Munich, as well as regional episcopal conferences, for criticism of Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda and celebrates Bernard Lichtenberg's public prayer for Jews in the wake of *Kristallnacht*. (Lichtenberg would pay for his courage by being shipped to Dachau; he died en route.) Similarly, it acknowledges Pius XI's encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*,<sup>26</sup> read in German churches in 1937, and quotes his famous assertion, delivered to Belgian pilgrims in September 1938, that "[spiritually we are all Semites" (50-51).

Much more controversially, the document celebrated Pius XII not only for warning, in his very first encyclical (*Summi Pontificatus*),<sup>27</sup> against theories which "denied the unity of the human race and the deification of the State," but for "all that he had done" either personally or through representatives to save hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives" (53). Then, in a footnote, roughly ten times longer than the next longest footnote, *We Remember* documents the praise by Jewish leaders given to "the wisdom of Pius XII's diplomacy," quoting, among others, Golda Meir (55-56, note 16).<sup>28</sup>

### Positive Jewish Reaction

A number of Jewish commentators, even those who were critical of certain elements of the document, nonetheless praised it as a whole and for its good intentions. Wistrich spoke for many in observing that "whatever one's final judgment" on the document, "one cannot but commend both its tone and its basic aims."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Michael Berenbaum, then of the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation remarked: "Jews didn't get everything they wanted, but what they got was so significant."<sup>30</sup> Yehuda Bauer, head of the Holocaust Research Institute at Yad Vashem and professor of Holocaust studies at Hebrew University, concluded: "The document has to be evaluated positively."<sup>31</sup> Contradicting the sentiments of many Jewish commentators, who called the Vatican document a step backward,<sup>32</sup> Dr. Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Britain, celebrated *We Remember* as "a step forward."<sup>33</sup> These sentiments were

<sup>26</sup> Dated March 14, 1937. See *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 29 (1937): 145-67.

<sup>27</sup> Dated October 20, 1939. See *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 31 (1939): 413-53.

<sup>28</sup> The Vatican was also presumably relying on the testimony of the former Israeli consul Pinchas E. Lapide, who estimated that the Church under Pius was instrumental in saving the lives of 860,000 Jews, or at least in preserving that many from Nazi detainment in the camps. See *Three Popes and the Jews* (New York: Hawthorn Books), 214.

<sup>29</sup> "The Pope, the Church and the Jews," 24.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas O'Dwyer, "Vatican's Struggle to Save the Church's Soul," *Jerusalem Post*, March 23, 1998.

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

<sup>32</sup> To give just one example: Rabbi Leon Klenicki, director of the Department of Interfaith Affairs of the Anti-Defamation League, commented, "The document falls short of the mark; it's taking a step backward." BBC News, March 16, 1998.

<sup>33</sup> "Vatican apology to Jews 'Rings Hollow'," *The Times*, March 17, 1998.

echoed in substance by France's Grand Rabbi Joseph Sitruk, who observed that his disappointment was blunted by his excellent rapport with the bishops of France and their courageous statement.<sup>34</sup> More specifically, some Jewish groups, like the American Jewish Committee and the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, hailed the Vatican document, one hopes not too optimistically, for rendering impossible the obscenity of Holocaust denial among Catholics in the next century. Rabbi A. James Rudin, who was at the time interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee and a member of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations, remarked that "50, 75, 100 years from now, there can never be any doubt that the Holocaust took place, because here is a definitive statement from the Catholic Church by a pope from Poland."<sup>35</sup> Finally, David Gordis, then president of Hebrew College, argued that "the statement must not be read in isolation but in the context of an extraordinary and epochal change in the Catholic Church's teaching and behavior...if read in the context of history, the document 'represents both a true act of Xn repentance and an act of *teshuvah*'"—sentiments echoed by Rabbi David Rosen, director of the Anti-Defamation League in Israel, who read the document as a step in a continuing process of ecclesiastical self-criticism and repentance.<sup>36</sup>

### Critical Jewish Reaction

Despite these expressions of generalized approval, Jewish reaction to this document was largely negative. Lord Janner, of Britain's Holocaust Educational Trust, confessed that he was "deeply disappointed" and denounced *We Remember* as an "unworthy document."<sup>37</sup> Ignatz Bubis, chairman of Germany's Central Council of Jews, likewise condemned the document as "completely unsatisfactory."<sup>38</sup> Many Jewish commentators expressed frustration that the document as a whole was so nebulous, so equivocal, so partial, and so euphemistically formulated that it amounted to a lower-order sort of denial. Robert Rifkind, president of the American Jewish Committee, commented: "It only begins to address many issues and questions concerning the role of the Catholic Church in the evolution of antisemitism throughout the ages and its culmination in the Holocaust."<sup>39</sup> Phil Baum, executive director of the American Jewish Congress, likewise observed: "Without derogating from the Church's efforts at atonement, some of the most troubling questions of responsibility and complicity in those horrendous events still have not been addressed."<sup>40</sup> And Israel's Chief Rabbi, Israel Lau, said: "We expected a more specific apology," one that was less equivocal about "the silence of the Christian world and those who headed it during the Holocaust."<sup>41</sup>

As these comments suggest, the problem here really is the diplomatic and legalistic character of the document. Indeed, one of the main reasons this document touched such a nerve is undoubtedly that many Jews sensed, as Holocaust survivor Pierre Sauvage tells us he did, in its feebleness and vagueness an expression of diplomatic hesitation, equivocation, and timidity all too painfully redolent of papal attitudes toward Nazi policy during the war.<sup>42</sup> As Efraim Zuroff,

<sup>34</sup> "Leading Rabbi Defends Vatican on Holocaust," *The Irish Times*, March 18, 1998.

<sup>35</sup> "World Jewish Group Chastises Vatican's Shoah Stance," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, September 4, 1998. This is a point Rudin made in an interview on *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, April 8, 1998.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Owen, "Vatican Apology to Jews 'Rings Hollow'," *The Times*, March 17, 1998.

<sup>37</sup> *BBC News*, March 16, 1998.

<sup>38</sup> "Leading Rabbi Defends Vatican on Holocaust," *The Irish Times*, March 18, 1998.

<sup>39</sup> W. Drozdak, "Vatican Gives Formal Apology for Inaction during Holocaust," *Washington Post*, March 17, 1998.

<sup>40</sup> American Jewish Congress Press Release, March 16, 1998.

<sup>41</sup> Anton La Guardia, "Jews Cool on Apology," *The Age*, March 18, 1998.

<sup>42</sup> "An Equivocal Apology Hurts more than it Heals," *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1998.

director of the Israel office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, has bluntly put it, "the statement still lacks the guts that would make it satisfactory."<sup>43</sup> Some commentators felt particularly and painfully surprised by these features of the document, ironically in part because of the perceived excellence of John Paul II's record on Jewish-Christian relations. Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League and a Holocaust survivor, for example, observed, "We expected more from this pontiff, who has been so courageous in reconciling the church with the Jewish people."<sup>44</sup> Other commentators noted that expectations had been heightened by the French Catholic Bishops' document. Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress argued, that *We Remember* compared unfavorably both with it and with the apology issued by the German Bishops' Conference.<sup>45</sup>

In terms of specific criticisms, virtually all Jewish commentators faulted the document for failing to acknowledge the deep connection between ecclesiastically sponsored anti-Judaism and the anti-Semitism that achieved such disastrous expression in the Shoah. Foxman, for example, observed: "Two thousand years of teaching contempt of Jews by the church was part of the underpinning of the Holocaust. The people who killed Jews during the day," he observed pointedly, then went to church on Sunday...They were not aberrations. They were part and parcel of what Western civilization was."<sup>46</sup> Bauer noted that, despite the examples of Catholic heroism, "it is still true that the vast majority of individual priests and Catholic faithful were completely indifferent, or downright hostile to Jews" and that this indifference is traceable to the two-thousand-year-old tradition of contempt for the Jews.<sup>47</sup> Zuroff added that doctrinal anti-Semitism "enabled Catholics" not simply to be passive or indifferent but to participate in the Holocaust, not only in Germany, but "more especially in places like Lithuania and Croatia," where the Nazis almost effortlessly found enthusiastic collaboration.<sup>48</sup> In short, Nazi ideology, policy, and genocide all presupposed a cultural framework that had been fashioned," as Wistrich has summarized the matter, "by centuries of medieval Christian theology, ecclesiastical policy and popular religious myth."<sup>49</sup>

However, it was over *We Remember's* flawed portrayal of the hierarchy as ever-heroic and compassionate that created the most profound frustration for Jewish commentators. While most of them focused on the picture of Pius XII, a few, though very few, found unconvincing and even offensive the portrayal of the German bishops lionized for their heroism. If the document was surely right to honor the memory of Bernard Lichtenberg, they thought, for speaking out from his Berlin Cathedral pulpit against anti-Jewish atrocity—actions that eventually led to his perishing on a train en route to Dachau—it attempted to distort the facts by mentioning Cardinals Faulhaber of Munich and Bertram of Breslau in the same breath with the martyred Provost Lichtenberg of Berlin Cathedral. Robert Wistrich talks at some length about the ambiguous legacy of both of these princes of the church, and then, widening his scope to the German episcopate in general, observes that their elevation is anomalously accompanied in the document by "utter silence about the German church's acquiescence and, at times, complicity in the

<sup>43</sup> "Vatican's Struggle," *Jerusalem Post*, March 23, 1998.

<sup>44</sup> Diego Ribadeneira, "Vatican Falls Short of Jewish Hopes," *Boston Globe*, March 17, 1998.

<sup>45</sup> *BBC News*, March 16, 1998. This was a point made from the Catholic point of view by Notre Dame theologian Richard McBrien in an interview on *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, April 8, 1998: "The bar has been raised in recent years. This document does not 'acknowledge the guilt of the Church as such'."

<sup>46</sup> "Vatican Falls Short," *Boston Globe*, March 17, 1998.

<sup>47</sup> "Vatican's Struggle," *Jerusalem Post*, March 23, 1998.

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

<sup>49</sup> Wistrich, "The Pope, the Church and the Jews," 24.

Shoah."<sup>50</sup> Unlike their counterparts in France, Belgium, Italy, and Holland, Wistrich observes, leaders of the German Catholic Church, "rather than attempting to guide their flock, tamely chose to follow it."<sup>51</sup> They accepted the Nuremberg race laws and offered virtually no protest in the wake of *Kristallnacht*. Worse still, the German Catholic Church collaborated with the Nazis in helping to establish who in the Third Reich was of Jewish descent.<sup>52</sup> At best, Wistrich concludes, the German bishops were disastrously naive; at worst, they were complicit in genocide. Either way, they should not have been candidates for glorification in *We Remember*.

Still, the criticism of the Vatican document for its portrayal of the German bishops was rare—and mild compared to the ubiquitously critical response evoked by its image of Pope Pius XII. Virtually no Jewish commentator, even those who responded favorably to *We Remember* as a whole, applauded the document for its representation of Pius, and very, very few spoke favorably of his activities on behalf of menaced Jews during the war. In fact, the responses to these aspects of the document were, for all intents and purposes, uniformly negative. The only complexities and distinctions came in the degree of criticism, ranging from the view that, in this respect, the document was soft, defensive, or partial to the view that it was mendacious and insulting to readers, to historical memory, and to the victims.

Typical of this latter view was the opinion of Meir Lau, who, perhaps too harshly, commented of the pope that, "[h]is silence cost millions of human lives."<sup>53</sup> Zuroff described *We Remember* as "a total cop-out" on the role of Pope Pius XII and also adds he "could have saved millions."<sup>54</sup> B'nai Brith international president Tommy Baer remarked that the document "sadly attempts to varnish the controversial wartime conduct of Pope Pius XII."<sup>55</sup> If the American Jewish Congress does not go that far, it certainly was not alone in finding the portrait of Pius as a tireless and heroic laborer on behalf of menaced Jews wildly exaggerated and even false. So far from being tireless, it observed, he was virtually passive. As Phil Baum put it: "The historical record does not allow us to disregard the harsh fact of the refusal of important church leaders to take even those minimal steps of compassion and rescue that were clearly within their power to provide."<sup>56</sup> As for the claim that Pius XII saved hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives, many called for at least some documentary evidence to support that claim.<sup>57</sup> Robert Wistrich was certainly not alone in observing that, while we may never know exactly how many Jewish lives he was responsible for saving, "the number is almost certainly far smaller than that implied by the Vatican."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> "The Pope, the Church and the Jews," 25. Wistrich observes that Cardinal Bertram of Breslau, ranking prelate in German Catholicism throughout the period of the Third Reich, condemned Nazism in print in 1931, but after Hitler rose to power his objections became "increasingly timid and inaudible." Never did Cardinal Bertram speak out (as Lichtenberg had) from the pulpit, and he celebrated a solemn requiem mass for Hitler shortly after his suicide.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> The supply of genealogical records was crucial to the Nazi genocide and continued through the war years, a fact that has led some historians to place certain ecclesiastical officials in the category of "perpetrator."

<sup>53</sup> "Vatican Gives Formal Apology," *Washington Post*, March 17, 1998.

<sup>54</sup> "Vatican's Struggle," *Jerusalem Post*, March 23, 1998.

<sup>55</sup> Rabbi Marvin Hier, head of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, also remarked: "To take 10 years to study the critical question of the Vatican's role in the Holocaust and not to criticize Pius XII is in my view incredible." See "Vatican Apology 'Too Little, too Late,' Jews Say," in *The Salt Lake Tribune*, March 17, 1998.

<sup>56</sup> "Vatican Falls Short," *Boston Globe*, March 17, 1998.

<sup>57</sup> See, e.g., Rudin, "Reflections," 521.

<sup>58</sup> Wistrich, "The Pope, the Church and the Jews," 26.

If few Jewish commentators portrayed Pius either as criminally complicit with the Nazis or altogether passive in the face of atrocity, and fewer still as courageously heroic and active, many faulted him for extreme and naive caution and timidity. While acknowledging that Pius's Christmas message of 1942 does, in general terms, deplore the condemnation to death of hundreds of thousands solely because of their nation or race, Wistrich, for one, has noticed that this was the protest that lasted "for the duration of a breath and mentioned neither Jews, nor Nazis nor any Nazi ally."<sup>59</sup> Given the obvious ambiguity of this record, Wistrich observes, it is odd that not only the Vatican but many Catholics have felt the need to defend him at all costs. After all, he notes (though not quite accurately), "no one is blaming the wartime Pope or the Catholic Church for the destruction of European Jewry, or even suggesting that Pius XII could have done much to stop the slaughter. Nor can one reasonably object to his quiet diplomacy where it did actually save the lives of Jews and other victims of the Nazis." But what is undeniable, he argues, is the "paucity of moral courage displayed by the Vatican when it came to the fate of the Jews."<sup>60</sup> Many Jewish commentators have deplored Pius's prudence and discretion. It was not a time, they agreed, for diplomats but for prophets.<sup>61</sup>

Susannah Heschel, in an article published in *Dissent*,<sup>62</sup> has argued that the Vatican statement failed to come to grips with "the most damning piece of evidence" regarding the Vatican: namely how it, or at least some of its priests, behaved at the end of the war. "Pius XII might have been intimidated before the spring of 1945, but why did he remain silent after Hitler's defeat?" The "most incriminating insight" into the Vatican's real attitudes is its effort to secure safe passage out of Europe for former SS officers being hunted by the Allies. "No less a figure than Franz Stangl," former commandant at Treblinka, wanted for the murder of nine hundred thousand people, was, Heschel points out, "spirited to South America by an underground railroad of Catholic priests, under the guidance of the Vatican's own bishop, Alois Hudal." The "intriguing question is what might have motivated the Vatican to assist those murderers. Could it be that the Vatican felt closer ties to the Nazis than the Jews? Which lives did the Church really want to save?"<sup>63</sup>

Other commentators deplored the document's decision to point out that Nazi hostility was expressed toward Christianity as well as Judaism. Some saw it as a Catholic attempt to appropriate the Holocaust, a literary analogue to installing crosses outside of Auschwitz. Again, some perceived in this a subtle form of denial, for it cannot be forgotten that, if thousands of Catholics died in the Holocaust, the Shoah was overwhelmingly a Jewish, not a Christian, catastrophe.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Still, the process of beatification, the penultimate step to sanctification or canonization, has been going on for several years, under the leadership of the Vatican's Father Gumpel. A recent report, however, suggested that the Church had decided to slow down the process toward sainthood. See "Vatican Slows Beatification for Pius XII—Group," *Reuters*, October 27, 1999. The timing of this decision coincided with the widespread publicity given to the British journalist John Cromwell's controversial book, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York: Viking, 1999).

<sup>62</sup> See Heschel, "The Vatican and the Holocaust," *Dissent* (Summer, 1998): 113-14.

<sup>63</sup> On this story, see Gitta Sereny: *Into that Darkness* (New York: Vintage, 1983); Phayer, "Pope Pius XII," 233-56; and Mark Aarons and John Loftus, *Unholy Trinity* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991). In the November 15, 1999, issue of *U.S. News & World Report*, an article was published that suggests a soon-to-be-released Argentine government report has confirmed the involvement of the Vatican in seeking Latin American visas for fleeing Nazis, many made by the Vatican Secretariat of State. Some were also made for Vichy collaborators, and much intercession occurred on behalf of the Ustasha criminals. The Argentine report has not, however, yet been published.

Finally, virtually all Jewish commentators called on the Vatican to open its archives to historians.<sup>64</sup> Baer declared: "We therefore call again on the Vatican to tear down [its] archival wall and let the light of truth in for the world to see," adding that while not presuming to suggest what the archives may disclose, "suspicions can only continue to grow about what they may contain." "Only when the Vatican archives are opened to historians," Heschel has said, "and the record set straight in all honesty, can a genuine Catholic reflection on the Shoah take place."<sup>65</sup>

In short, the overwhelming majority of Jewish commentators expressed disappointment, ranging from mild to severe, with the document. Their disappointment had several sources.<sup>66</sup> First, both the perceived excellence of John Paul II's record on Jewish-Catholic relations and the candor and contrition expressed by the various national episcopal documents raised expectations that the Vatican would issue a document which fully came to terms with its conduct during the War. Few Jewish commentators thought it did. Many of them found themselves in agreement with Catholic journalist Peter Steinfels, who remarked that the document read as if crafted by lawyers "whose job it was to protect Catholicism from the theological equivalent of civil suits."<sup>67</sup> Indeed, it seems to many to be, in the most literal sense of the term, a *jurisprudential* document which constantly forced its genuine expressions of remorse to compete with its less honorable impulse to self-exoneration.

So far as the theological flaws of the document are concerned, many Jewish commentators found the main problem with *We Remember* to be its reiterated distinction between "the church as such" and its sinful members. Cardinal Cassidy, in a reflection given two months after the publication of the document, and addressed to the vigorous and voluminous criticism that had already been published, insisted that the church as such did not refer to the hierarchy, and that the sinful sons and daughters of the church could include popes, cardinals, bishops, priests, and laity. But it is understandable that almost all Jewish (and many Catholic) readers felt—not only because of the intrinsically hierarchical and filial character of the sons and daughter language used here, but also because the heroes celebrated by name in *We Remember* are, without exception, popes, bishops, and priests—that this theological distinction was an attempt to absolve the institutional church of blame, as was the distinction between historic, ecclesiastically sponsored anti-Judaism and modern, secular anti-Semitism.

Finally, the deepest frustrations of many Jewish commentators come on historical grounds. Of course, all recognized that *We Remember* is not a historical analysis of the Shoah. Nonetheless, it did make historical statements, many of them shockingly selective and partial. In their eyes, nothing so undermined the credibility of the document as the selectivity and gross crudity of many of those statements, especially those connected with the behavior of the German episcopate and, especially, of Pope Pius XII. The historical statements made should either have been accurate and nuanced, many felt, or not included at all. The statements made created the

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<sup>64</sup> As did some prominent Catholics, including John Cardinal O'Connor, Archbishop of New York. See *The Jewish Week*, October 9, 1998. The Vatican responded by declaring itself the judge of the timing and scope of archive accessibility. See Eric J. Greenberg, "Vatican to U.S.: No Archives," in *The Jewish Week*, December 11, 1998. John Morley, who has worked with the eleven volumes of diplomatic documents related to the War published by the Vatican between 1965 and 1981 [*Actes et Documentes du Saint-Siège relatifs à la second Guerre mondiale*, éd. Pierre blet (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965-1981)] has observed: "I fear sometimes that this contribution of the Vatican to historical research has not been clearly appreciated. Moreover, I suspect that the very existence of these primary sources is not as well known as it should be." See Morley, "We Remember," 6.

<sup>65</sup> Heschel, "The Vatican and the Holocaust," 14.

<sup>66</sup> "Jews and Catholics: Beyond Apologies," *First Things* 89 (January 1999): 20-25. Page numbers for quotations from this article will be cited in the text.

<sup>67</sup> "Beliefs," *New York Times*, April 3, 1999.

impression that the church was primarily interested less in a courageous confrontation with its past than in prudent self-protection. Even more seriously, they seemed to involve the church in a subtle, lower-order form of denial. Worst of all, many perceived in the diplomatic waffling of the document a parallel to papal attitudes toward the Jews and to Nazi policy in the hour of extreme Jewish agony. For these reasons, especially, I have to agree with most Jewish commentators that a precious opportunity had been missed.

### Benedict XVI

We turn, briefly now, to the pope who has been in office for just over three years. But what a three years it has been. In September of 2006, Pope Benedict delivered a lecture in Regensburg, in which he quoted a fourteenth century Byzantine text, which said about Islam: "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman..."<sup>68</sup> Needless to say, that strained relations with the Muslim world, which quite naturally found it profoundly offensive.<sup>69</sup>

Benedict's relationship with worldwide communities of Jews started off auspiciously enough, though as prefect for the Congregation for the doctrine of the faith, Cardinal Ratzinger had written and signed *Dominus Iesus*. It said of non-Christian religions in general, and therefore of Judaism implicitly, that: other traditions "are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the church, have the fullness of the means of salvation."<sup>70</sup> Once reaction set in, John Paul II nimbly, if humiliatingly, had to backtrack once again and, in effect, to assert that the document did not mean to say what it had clearly meant to say. Nonetheless, the Holy Father visited a synagogue in the United States at Passover in 2008, and hopes were rekindled that relations between the Roman Catholic Church and worldwide communities of Jews would be repaired. Those hopes were dashed when, months later, Benedict gave every signal that he intended to proceed with the beatification of Pius XII.<sup>71</sup> It was not just individual Jewish leaders who balked at this idea, which made him appear, again, not fully sensitive to the sufferings of the victims of the Shoah and their descendants. Even his own cardinals urged Benedict to delay the beatification proceedings, as it would, or could, impair relations with Jews and the State of Israel. Finally, he did, but not without first sowing a seed of doubt that would soon grow into a great mustard tree of anger, betrayal and bewilderment.

Those feelings, actually, first stirred when Benedict circulated his Apostolic Letter *Summorum Pontificum*.<sup>72</sup> In it, he gave greater latitude for the saying of the Tridentine Mass. As is well known, the Tridentine rite contains a Good Friday prayer "for the Jews...that God may remove the veil from their hearts, so that they too may acknowledge Jesus Christ our Lord," and goes on to implore God to heal their blindness." Not surprisingly, and again, not unfairly, Jewish leaders and institutions were appalled. The ADL went straight to the point, characterizing Benedict's decision to restore the Tridentine rite, and thus the hurtful prayer, as "a body blow to Jewish-

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<sup>68</sup> The speech was given in September 2006 and was followed shortly by the customary apology, which emphasized that the pope was quoting Michael Paleologus, a 14<sup>th</sup> century emperor, as if that suggested the Holy Father did not agree with the quote.

<sup>69</sup> See *BBC News*, 16, September 2006.

<sup>70</sup> See *Dominus Iesus* 6.22 at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html).

<sup>71</sup> "Benedict backs Beatification for Pius XII," *Catholic News*, October 6-10, 2008.

<sup>72</sup> Complete text in Latin found at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_motu-proprio\\_20070707\\_summorum-pontificum\\_lt.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20070707_summorum-pontificum_lt.html).

Catholic relations."<sup>73</sup> Some Jewish leaders felt that this represented a reversal of Vatican II's landmark document *Nostra Aetate*,<sup>74</sup> which rejected the historic (and lethal) charge of deicide and inaugurated a new and increasingly flourishing relationship between the two communities.<sup>75</sup> Following concern expressed by Jewish leaders, a statement issued by the Holy Father attempted to assure Jews that the prayer did not indicate a change "in the Catholic Church's regard for the Jews." It also affirmed that *Nostra Aetate* "presents the fundamental principles guiding Catholic relations with the Jewish people."<sup>76</sup> That seemed to calm the waters. Nonetheless, it is frustrating for Catholics to witness their spiritual head constantly blundering and repeatedly back-pedaling.

No more serious blunder occurred than when in January 2009, a few days before Holocaust Memorial Day, Benedict chose to rehabilitate four schismatic bishops from the traditionalist (some say ultraconservative) Society of Pius X. As is well known, the Society was founded in 1970 by the French archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. He founded it in order to resist what he perceived to be the excessively liberalizing reforms of Vatican II. Estimates suggest the society's membership includes 600 priests and is nearing half a million followers. More importantly, they are not only opposed to the liturgical changes and collegiality promoted by the Council but also to its relations with other religious traditions, including Judaism. They are expressly opposed to the reforms of Vatican II. The four rehabilitated bishops had been excommunicated by Pope John Paul II after Lefebvre consecrated them irregularly, that is, with no approval or mandate from the papacy. Benedict declared that he had rehabilitated the bishops as an attempt at unifying the church and as a first step in welcoming them fully back into the church; but it was hard not to perceive it as an attempt to nudge it even further to the right or, using a chronological rather than a directional metaphor, back past the reforms initiated during the years of Vatican II. Initially, no concession was demanded of any of the four bishops. None would have to accept *Nostra Aetate*, nor liturgy in the vernacular, nor collegiality—in short, none of the reforms for which the Council had been called and achieved. But that would change as the curious thoughts on the Holocaust of one of them came to light.

One of the four bishops rehabilitated was Richard Williamson, a Briton, who had a history of holocaust denial—and as early as one month before the rehabilitation had denied the existence of Nazi gas chambers in an interview on Swiss television. He restated his conviction that no more than 300,000 Jews had died in the Holocaust. Williams was director of a seminary in, of all places, Argentina, that haven for Eichmann, Mengele and other Nazi war criminals. In the subsequent interview published in *Der Spiegel*, Williamson initially refused to distance himself from his views and refused an invitation to visit Auschwitz, where, as we all know, remains of the gas chambers exist. He would, he said, have to do more research before changing his views. Late in January, 2009 the Vatican announced that Williamson's history of holocaust-denying statements took them by surprise, and the pope from Germany in particular was unaware of that history.<sup>77</sup> He was not the only one surprised.

<sup>73</sup> "Pope's Statements Raise Concerns About Interfaith Relations," *Forward* 20, July 2007.

<sup>74</sup> Online at the Vatican website at: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_deci\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_deci_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html).

<sup>75</sup> See *Jerusalem Post*, 16 April 2008 (online at [http://jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1208246578945\\_&page\\_name=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull](http://jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1208246578945_&page_name=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull)).

<sup>76</sup> "Some Jews still upset as Pope readies U.S. visit," *Jewish Journal*, 20 April 2008.

<sup>77</sup> It soon emerged that some of Williamson's German colleagues had also made antisemitic statements in the past. See *Spiegel International*, 26 August 2009. Some had said that the Jews had to convert to Christianity; another blamed the decay in moral values over the past centuries to the Jews.

Amazingly, Cardinal Walter Kasper, a German who is the director for the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and the Vatican liaison for Catholic-Jewish relations, was blindsided by events. He told the press that he had not been consulted before the decision of the pope. This enormous bureaucratic blunder, and insult to Kasper, the eirenic Cardinal labeled “management errors”<sup>78</sup> and blamed no one. As one followed this story, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish truth from face-saving falsehood, though I do not doubt that Kasper, at least, was staggered by the scandalous revelations.

The Vatican Secretary of State demanded that Williamson recant his views in an unequivocal and public manner. His apology, when it finally came, concluded: “To all souls that took honest scandal from what I said, before God I apologize.” The Vatican’s chief spokesman, Father Federico Lombardi immediately responded, saying that the apology had hardly fulfilled the conditions set for his readmission into the church. Quite obviously, his apology did not take back his view that the number of victims of the Holocaust had been grossly exaggerated, nor that millions of them had been asphyxiated in gas chambers. Nor did he specifically express regret for deeply hurting survivors and the Jewish community in general. Finally, Williamson was removed from his position as director of the Society’s seminary in Argentina in August 2009.

As it is illegal to deny the Holocaust in Germany and in several other EU countries, Germany has opened an investigation into his remarks. It is not impossible that he will be brought up on charges, convicted and punished. In an episode which would have been scarcely imaginable half a century ago, the head of the German government demanded that the pope clarify his own position on the Holocaust; his previous remarks had not sufficed. As it turned out, Williamson was not the only Society figure to have denied the Holocaust. In February of 2009, Floriano Abrahmowicz suggested that the gas chambers were used merely for purposes of disinfection.<sup>79</sup>

The German bishops were at least as appalled as Angela Merkel. Cardinal Karl Lehmann, former chair of the German bishops’ conference, and a hallowed figure in German Catholic society, pronounced the pope’s decision to rehabilitate Williamson “a disaster for all Holocaust survivors.” Once Williamson refused to retract, Bishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg, who is now president of the national conference, denounced Williamson as “impossible and irresponsible.” Bishop Gebhard Fuerst of Rottenburg-Stuttgart criticized Williamson’s remarks as “totally unacceptable.” The bishop of Regensburg, Gerhard Mueller, declared that, in his diocese, Williamson was *persona non grata*. Some called for him to be excommunicated again. Some will see in this a happy union of the bishops of Germany against a denier of the monstrous crime committed in the name of their country seventy years ago. Unfortunately, it’s a bit more complicated than that. Fuerst, in particular, feared that Williamson and the three other rehabilitated priests would tear away at ecclesiastical unity or even that some believers would walk away from the church, either literally or metaphorically. We know, in fact, from tax records that large numbers of parishioners are leaving the Church, many of whom have submitted forms to be struck from the Catholic rolls. In the wake of the Williamson scandal, two-thirds of the remaining Catholics in German admitted that they had thought that the church’s reputation had been sullied by the papal remission of the decree of excommunication.

One cannot help but be reminded of the demand, seventy years ago, by prelates and priests, that non-Aryan Christians ought to be spared deportation to the charnel houses of the East because they had been baptized. That is, the Holocaust was a danger because it failed to distinguish between Jews and baptized Jews, the latter of whom deserved not to be spirited off to the

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<sup>78</sup> “Vatican finger-pointing in Holocaust controversy,” *Christian Century*, 10 March 2009.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

East; one underlying fear was that their loss would reduce the number of European Christians. In fairness, though, most of the German bishops reacted with such indignation not out of fear for the future of the church but shame that one of them, however irregularly consecrated, had denied the most monstrous crime in German history, one for which the German church had been attempting to atone, and with whose victims, survivors and descendants, new bonds of understanding and friendship had been forged. It was the danger to those links, and to the successful, ecumenical dialogue between Jews and Christians, about which most German bishops, I think, were made anxious. At least, I hope that is the case, and so it seems to me.

Finally, in October of 2008, the anniversary of the death of Pius XII, Benedict took the opportunity to speak at Castel Gandolfo for an audience of participants in a conference dedicated to the memory of the wartime pope. Benedict may be a talented theologian, but he is no historian. This much is clear from the lavish praise he heaped on Pius for laboring "especially in favor of the Jews who in those years were being targeted all over Europe." To these imperiled Jews, he showed only "courageous and paternal dedication."<sup>80</sup> Present in the audience were Margherita Marchione of Fairleigh Dickinson University; Ronal Rychlak, a law professor at the University of Mississippi, William Doyno, a journalist and author of the book *The Pius War*, and Fr. Peter Gumpel, *relator* for the canonization cause of Pius XII. All seem to have accepted the proposal made at the colloquium, to which, apparently, no dissenting voices were invited, that roughly 900,000 trees be planted in Israel in memory of Pius. That is roughly the number of Jews saved by the heroic and courageous wartime pope, at least according to Israeli writer Pinchas Lapide.<sup>81</sup> In a visit to Israel five months ago, Benedict deplored the murder of six million Jews, though he failed to name the regime that murdered them, nor did he see fit to link that murder in any way with two thousand years of the teaching of contempt or complicity of church officials and Catholic soldiers and bystanders during the final solution itself.

In short, the restoration of the Latin mass, with its prayer for the conversion of the Jews, the rehabilitation of Bishop Williamson and the lionization of Pius XII all lead me to the lugubrious conclusion that Benedict has emphatically not "owned" Catholic guilt and that he has damaged the cause of Jewish-Christian relations and dialogue. "After centuries of prejudice and hostility, culminating in the murder of European Jewry," Robert Wistrich has observed, "the prospect has tantalizingly appeared of a day when anti-Semitism will no longer hold a place in Christian hearts." But, he adds, "the arrival of that day depends not only on repentance and a generalized will to change but, ultimately, on an honest reckoning with the past."<sup>82</sup> That honest reckoning will eventually come, I hope, not only because of widespread Jewish desire for it, and the influence of the radiant example of the French bishops, but also, one hopes, because of the eternal obligatory force of an ancient Jewish text binding on us Catholics too. I am thinking of Exodus 20:16: "Thou shalt not bear false witness."

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<sup>80</sup> Address available in its entirety at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2008/\\_September/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080918\\_pave-the-way\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/_September/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080918_pave-the-way_en.html).

<sup>81</sup> For a definitive repudiation of this absurd figure, or the picture of Pius as manager of a continental-wide campaign of rescue for the Jews, or even one in Italy, see Susan Zuccotti's extremely well-researched study, *Under His Very Windows: The Holocaust and the Church in Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). Lapide had compelling social and political reasons for inflating the number of Jews saved by the Vatican.

<sup>82</sup> "The Pope, the Church, and the Jews," 28.