

Pope Pius XII **“a man of heroic virtue”**



THE GORGEOUS LADS in the Swiss Guards that protect the Pope in Rome are one of the wonders of the Vatican. Not to be compared, of course, with Michael Angelo's *Pietà*, the *Laocoön and His Sons*, or the vast libraries and archives, but one of the city's marvels nevertheless.

The most significant marvel, however, the one that tops all the others, is the Pope, the absolute monarch secretly elected from time to time by the cardinals. Of course, the cardinals, two-hundred odd at the moment, are appointed by the Pope. These Princes of the Church began to make their appearance during the eighth century and it is a real wonder that they and the popes whom appoint them (and who are in turn elected by them), are regarded as having any sacred significance at all.

This is not the result of some Dan Brown conspiracy, but a form of corruption instituted to

perpetuate the unchallenged power of popes, and to protect and proclaim in public, the secrecy essential to the maintenance of the absolute authority of the Church in matters relating to the relationship of men and women to God. It is, no doubt, a wonder, to many readers, that anybody should continue to endorse or support this state of affairs, but millions of Roman Catholics do. They do so because the hocus pocus embodied by priests, bishops, cardinals, and popes, is without doubt compelling, tied as it is, to the virtual presence of Christ realised as a matter of routine in the miracle of the mass, and the rational faith espoused by Roman Catholic thinkers for many centuries.

There is nothing frail or insubstantial about the beliefs jealously guarded by these priests and their acolytes. They can even recognise miracles and award them the imprimatur of the Church, as a guarantee of the truth of *the sacred violation of the laws of nature*, a procedure vitally necessary to the survival of the institution and the faith. Accordingly, the Pope from time to time proclaims the sainthood of special men or women, with the assertion that they performed, or were directly responsible for at least two miracles, during their lives or after their deaths. These miracles are, of course, a sign of the particular favour in which they are held by God, and which justifies their special veneration by the Church and the Laity.

The Congregation of the Causes of Saints is in charge of assessing the veracity of claims concerning the miracles essential for the recognition of saints. At least two per saint are required. In the case of Pius XII two have concerned the role played by his intercession in the miraculous cure of Burkitts lymphoma in one case, and prostate cancer in another. Others may emerge for the Congregation to consider.

Pius XII, who was Pope from 1939 to 1958, was declared a Servant of God in 1990 by Pope John Paul II. He was acknowledged as 'Venerable', because he was said to be a man of heroic virtue, in 2009 by Pope

Benedict XVI. These announcements are steps along the way to the investigation of the necessary miracles and the final determination of sainthood.

However, Pius XII is a hard case for the Vatican because as, Eugenio Maria Giuseppe Giovanni Pacelli, he was the Papal Nuncio (ambassador) to Hitler's Germany and was involved in framing and endorsing the *Reichskonkordat*. This was the agreement signed in 1933 between the Holy See and the Nazi state. It recognised the authority of the fascist state over German bishops. Consequently, it guaranteed the silence of Germany's Catholic hierarchy in the actions of the Third Reich, including the promulgation of the regime's race laws in 1935.

At the outbreak of the Second World War Pius XII asserted the cultural unity of humanity in his encyclical of October 1939, *Summi Pontificus*. In 1943 he issued a second encyclical, *Mystici corporis Christi*, in which the Church is identified with the body of Christ, and in some interpretations with all of humanity. Although Pius XII opposed the destruction of Poland, an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic country, he continued to remain silent on the murder of Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals.

In the home of 'National Catholicism'

Austria March 1938

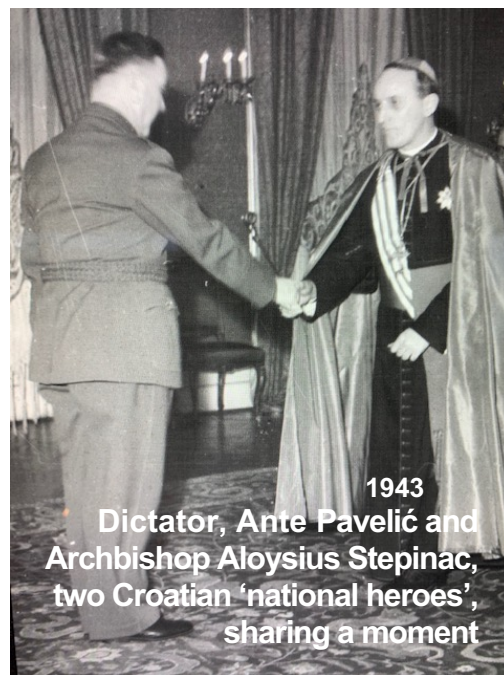
"From their pulpits, priests called upon the faithful to vote Nazi, and the churches bedecked themselves in swastika banners."

The Order of the Day
Éric Vuillard

This "man of heroic virtue" when elected as Pius XII in 1939 managed to remain mostly silent on the conduct of the German state, of its police and soldiers throughout the Second World War. Although fluent in German, and fully acquainted with the deportation of

Europe's Jews [including those from Rome] and the wholesale massacre of innocents, Pius XII remained silent. It is often said in mitigation that he did much 'behind the scenes' to urge the Nazis to moderate their slaughter; evidence of these interventions may indeed come to light as historians are finally allowed, to begin the task of trawling through the millions of documents in the Pius XII Archive, held secret until now, by the Vatican.

However, whatever comes to light in the coming years we already know that Pius XII is guilty, as charged, along with the rest of the Roman Catholic Church, for remaining silent in the face of the Holocaust. Of course, some Jews were hidden in convents and monasteries, some priests proved heroic in their defence of the victims of Nazism, and many hundreds of thousands of Roman Catholics were indeed heroic in the fight against fascism throughout Europe – however, the hierarchy of the Church – its leaders – were more gripped by their fear of communism than anything else. This meant the Roman Catholic Church was active in the promotion and defence of the dictatorships of Dolfuss, Schuschnigg, Franco, Pavelić, and others.



The Roman Catholic Church, from Dublin to the Baltic States, while not committed to racism in any form, was prepared to turn a blind eye to the popular involvement of Catholics in the wholesale murder of Jews whenever it suited them. The Church was, and had been for centuries, deeply attached to arraiging the Jews for killing Christ. It was also committed to the defense of nationalist and patriarchal ideologies beloved by Catholic dictators. Despite tensions with the regimes of Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, Pius XII, his papacy, and his Church, were key players in the establishment of authoritarian dictatorships and the quiet endorsement of their crimes throughout the nineteen thirties and forties of the twentieth century.

Roman Catholicism's commitment to its own hierarchy and to the absolute authority of the Pope, the cardinals, and the secret machinations of the Holy See, is what lies at the root of Pius XII criminal silence or shall we call it his 'sin of omission', during the war of '39-'45. Indeed, this sacred belief in the necessity of their own survival, untrammled by secular authority, is what explains, to this day, the inability of the Church to recognize its responsibilities to the civil and criminal law in regard to the sexual abuse of children, and many other crimes committed by Catholic priests, decade after decade.

The efforts of historians in the Pius XII Archive will, I have no doubt, prove invaluable in establishing a clearer understanding of the behavior of the Pope and his officials during the Holocaust. However, the authoritarianism intrinsic to the Roman Catholic Church – its refusal of equality to women, its opposition to the rights of homosexuals, and above all, its refusal to acknowledge the prior claims of secular governments, and their courts, over the conduct of priests and prelates, will remain at the heart of the criminal lawlessness of the Church. While Pius XII did not find it possible to denounce Hitler's Nuremberg Laws in 1935, Pope after Pope has ever since found it possible to shield thousands of priests from criminal prosecution for the sexual abuse of children, from

acquiescing to murders carried out during military coup d'état, and even from their active involvement in intercommunal strife and massacres.

The right of people to believe what they like regarding God, the saints, or their miracles, is not at issue here. Freedom of religion should indeed be sacrosanct. Nor is the conduct of millions of Roman Catholics, their political courage, their charitable works, or other activities, in question. However, the legitimacy of the institutions of the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope and the hierarchy, cannot go unchallenged – we have no need to dwell upon the Inquisition or any other of its ancient doings – its conduct with regard to Jews in the nineteen forties, and to the equality of persons right now, and to the Church's, implicit, and often surreptitious, rejection of the rights of democratic governments, and the reach of their civil and criminal laws, is enough to condemn the hierarchy of the Roman Curia and Holy See outright.

No search of the archives is necessary for that.