

## Chapter 2

# Reaping the Whirlwind: The Christian Churches and the Killing

*On Christmas night 1943, the Einsatzkommando IIb received an order to kill 3000 Jews and Gypsies in Russia. The order was executed doubly quick in order to enable the soldiers to go to Midnight Mass.<sup>1</sup>*

In the summer of 1944, a German army chaplain named Walter Höchstädter, deeply distressed by reports of mass killings of Jews, circulated a powerful protest among his fellow troops. He wrote:

The anti-Jewish madness which in the Middle Ages raged in all its fury has now entered its acute stage. The Church, the congregation of Jesus Christ, has to make confession. If she does not do so, then she has failed in her trust, just as she failed when she encouraged the persecution of witches. The blood of millions of slaughtered Jews, men, women and

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1. The incident is reported in Didier Pollefeyt, 'Auschwitz, or How Good People Can Do Evil: An Ethical Interpretation of the Perpetrators and Victims of the Holocaust in Light of the French Thinker Tzvetan Todorov', in G. Jan Colijn and Marcia Sachs Littell (eds), *Confronting the Holocaust: A Mandate for the 21st Century* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), p. 98.

children cries aloud to heaven. The Church must not remain silent.<sup>2</sup>

It would be good to write that Höchstädter was typical and that, despite its dismally anti-Semitic history, the Church offered brave resistance when the supreme moral test came. He was not and the Church did not. There were indeed brave individuals who either spoke out against the genocide or quietly took action to save Jews from it. Often, they acted from deep Christian motives. As Martin Gilbert observes, the rescuers:

are central to the story of a Nazi-dominated Europe within which righteous acts testified to the survival of humane values, and to the courage of those who saved human life rather than allow it to be destroyed. In every country under Nazi rule or occupation, the desire to help remained strong, despite widespread hostility or resistance. Six million Jews were murdered, but tens of thousands were saved.<sup>3</sup>

However, as those numbers suggest, the rescuers were the splendid exception rather than the rule. The murder of six million people was not possible without the direct involvement of tens if not hundreds of thousands of Germans and their allies, and the acquiescence or support lent them by the surrounding culture – that of Christian Europe. Henry Huttenbach writes:

it must be remembered that those who did escape camps ran away into societies poisoned by anti-Semitic sentiments. The vast majority perished at the hands of collaborators with Germany's scheme to exterminate the Jews, whether Swiss border guards refusing entrance to anyone over sixteen, or the French police arresting foreign Jews, or Poles refusing to hide escapees from ghettos, or Russian partisans who killed Jews seeking to join them in their fight against the Germans.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Cited in Richard Gutteridge, *Open Thy Mouth for the Dumb: The German Evangelical Church and the Jews 1879-1950* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), p. 248.

3. Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust* (London: Black Swan, 2003), p. 15.

4. Cited in Gilbert, *The Righteous*, p. 14.

Nor should the refusal of many other nations, the United Kingdom included, to grant asylum to the vast majority of German Jews be forgotten.<sup>5</sup> The likes of Höchstädter are pinpricks of light in a sea of darkness.

It is simply impossible to give a fully adequate account of the Church's role during the killing years in a book of this nature. One inadequate way is that chosen here: to focus on the statements and action of the official representatives of Christianity – the clergy, both Protestant and Catholic. That is not wholly unreasonable, insofar as these are representative figures charged with the moral and spiritual leadership of their communities. However, it does carry the risk that the 'big picture' is lost and the big picture is terribly simple: people raised in a broadly Christian culture either killed or failed to stop six million people being killed for no reason other than being Jewish. Nearly all the killers were baptised; many of them were believers. As historians such as Christopher Browning and Daniel Goldhagen have shown, they were not forced to become murderers, indeed many took grim pride in their work.<sup>6</sup> Beyond the killers themselves, millions more stood by approving – or, at least, not disapproving enough to do anything to stop it. These too were Christians.

The central conclusion of this chapter is therefore inescapable even from the start. At the very least, the Holocaust marks a catastrophic failure of Christianity. The failure is so catastrophic that a later chapter must face the question: is the Gospel itself disproved? Can the Church be so poisoned and poisonous that the Gospel itself becomes incredible? We postpone that question for the moment and turn to the evidence. How did the leadership of Christianity, Protestant and Catholic, respond to the supreme moral crisis of the Holocaust?

## **Pius XII: Hitler's Pope?**

If it is inadequate to assess Christian behaviour during the Holocaust with reference to the clergy only, it may seem even more illegitimate to focus on one man – even if he was Pope. Many Protestants would

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5. Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews 1933-1948: British Immigration Policy and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

6. See Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (London: Penguin, 2001), and Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. The two disagree sharply on whether a uniquely German anti-Semitism caused the Holocaust but agree that the killers required little coercion.

strenuously deny that the Pope in any sense represents them. Furthermore, the Roman Catholic Church itself is vastly complex and, papal fantasies notwithstanding, has never been utterly defined by the policies and personalities of Peter's successors.

Nevertheless, the exercise is not futile. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian Church in the world, and the Pope holds an utterly central place in its self-understanding. Moreover, this particular Pope, Pius XII, was deeply immersed in the European conflict of which the Holocaust formed part – and the Holocaust came right to his doorstep, as the Nazis rounded up the Jews of Rome. Given the claims Catholics make for the papacy, how he acquitted himself is of critical importance for them at least. Moreover, other Christians should be realistic: globally, the Pope is Christianity's foremost representative. They, too, have a stake in the verdict on Pius XII. Did he deserve the eulogy of Golda Meir, Israel's then foreign minister, who said on his death in 1958 that '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'? Or was he, as the title of one damning indictment puts it, 'Hitler's Pope'?<sup>7</sup>

## The Case for the Defence

The central charge against Pius XII is that, *pace* Meir, he was silent in the face of genocide unfolding all around him. Popes have been famously good, throughout history, at denouncing things – especially the wicked ways of secular governments. Yet, during the Holocaust: silence. This was, admittedly, not absolute. Pius' defenders point to his Christmas broadcast in 1942, in which he lamented 'those hundreds of thousands who, without any fault of their own, sometimes only by reason of their nationality or their race, are marked down for death or gradual extinction'. When he spoke those words, the Pope knew in broad terms what was happening at Auschwitz and the other camps.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the broadcast seems oblique: could there not have been a much clearer denunciation of the Nazis? Interestingly, at least one official in the main

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7. John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (London: Penguin, 1999).

8. See Kevin Madigan, 'Appendix A: The Vatican and the Final Solution: What Was Known, and When', in Judith H. Banki and John T. Pawlikowski OSM (eds), *Ethics in the Shadow of the Holocaust: Christian and Jewish Perspectives* (Chicago: Sheed and Ward, 2001), pp. 175-210, pp. 199-200.

security office of the German Reich thought otherwise, noting furiously that 'in a manner never known before, the Pope has repudiated the National Socialist New European Order ... here he is virtually accusing the German people of injustice towards the Jews, and makes himself the mouthpiece of Jewish war criminals'.<sup>9</sup>

It is not clear how representative this note is of wider Nazi reaction to the Pope's remarks. Certainly, no forceful retaliation followed. On other occasions, such as the deportation of Rome's Jews in September 1943, the Pope earned plaudits from the German ambassador to Rome for doing 'everything he can in this delicate matter not to strain relations with the German Government'.<sup>10</sup> Pius was ever the diplomat (having served as papal ambassador to Germany and as Vatican Secretary of State before becoming Pope). As Michael Marrus observes, his Vatican did not even condemn Nazi Germany directly 'for the imprisonment of hundreds of priests in Dachau, Mauthausen, Sachsenhausen, and elsewhere; and it refrained from criticising the Germans by name for their genocidal policies in Poland, with the attendant murder of some twenty percent of the Catholic clergy there'.<sup>11</sup> Fiery denunciation was simply not Pius' style.

This restrained, delicate approach might also be attributed to fear: of how the Nazis might retaliate against a more interventionist Pope personally, against the Church more widely and, indeed, against the Jews. Frank Coppa notes the contrast that is frequently drawn between Pius XII's post-war ferocity against Communism (imposing instant excommunication on any who supported or joined the Party), and the delicacy of his approach to the Nazis. Simple geography, Coppa judges, played its part 'in permitting Pius to take a more fervent stance against the Soviet Union, which was hundreds of miles away, while Hitler's Germany was next door and its Italian ally virtually surrounded Vatican City. ... [W]as Pacelli's boyhood fear of martyrdom a factor in the papal decision?'<sup>12</sup> Michael Phayer suggests that Pius' principal fear was for the

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9. Gilbert, *The Righteous*, p. 434.

10. Guenter Lewy, 'Pius XII, the Jews and the German Catholic Church', in Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel, *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 129-48, p. 146.

11. Michael R. Marrus, 'We Remember: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Historical Perspective', in Banki and Pawlikowski (eds), *Ethics in the Shadow of the Holocaust*, pp. 117-32, p. 128.

12. Frank J. Coppa, *The Life and Pontificate of Pope Pius XII: Between History and Controversy* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), p. 256.

physical integrity of Rome. He could not invite the destruction of the Eternal City, of which he viewed himself the guardian.<sup>13</sup>

These speculations seem unconvincing. After all, at one point, Pius actually involved himself in seeking Allied support for a putative German generals' plot against Hitler, which would have seen the latter deposed and peace terms struck.<sup>14</sup> More publicly, he also strongly urged American Catholics not to oppose Roosevelt's extension to the USSR of the Lend-Lease programme of military aid.<sup>15</sup> This contravened the clear teaching of his predecessor, Pius XI, who in *Divini Redemptoris* (1937) had said bluntly: 'Communism is intrinsically wrong, and no one who would save Christian civilisation may collaborate with it in any undertaking whatsoever.' The fact that Pius XII nonetheless did so (appealing to the distinction between aiding the Russian people and aiding the Communist state) disproves any charge that he was 'Hitler's Pope' and shows that he was not averse to running huge risks.

What of fear for the Jews? Would papal denunciation have sparked even fiercer Nazi violence against them? After the event it is easy to respond that nothing could have made the persecution worse. However, as Michael Burleigh notes:

As long as [Pius XII] did not know that the intention was to kill every Jewish man, woman and child in Europe – and that intention was not clear at the start – then the desire not to make matters worse may have been a crucial consideration. It is easy, with hindsight, to object that matters could not have been much worse, but this is an utterly unhistorical approach to events that for Pius were either in the present or the future rather than sixty years in the past.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, perhaps even with hindsight things are not entirely clear: because – awful as they were – things *could* have been worse. The

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13. Michael Phayer, 'Ethical Questions about Papal Policy' , in Carol Rittner and John K. Roth (eds), *Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust* (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 221-32, pp. 224-26.

14. Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes: Religion and Politics from the European Dictators to Al Qaeda* (London: Harper Collins, 2006), pp. 225-26.

15. See Harold H. Tittman Jr, *Inside the Vatican of Pius XII: The Memoir of an American Diplomat during World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), pp. 56-68, for a full account of this.

16. Burleigh, *Sacred Causes*, p. 252.

deportations from Rome have already been mentioned: the most striking thing about these, however, is that four out of five Roman Jews escaped, either into the Vatican or religious houses across the city.<sup>17</sup> That is why, after the war, the Jews of Rome raised a statue to Pius XII and (controversially) the chief rabbi of the city converted to Catholicism and took the Pope's name in baptism. What if the Pope had chosen instead to confront Hitler with all rhetorical guns blazing? Quite possibly, the SS would have launched an assault on the Vatican, those Roman houses, and all the other refuges across Western Europe where Jews were hiding. There were some – very fragile – political and diplomatic constraints on how the Holocaust unfolded: unequivocal papal condemnation might have finally thrown these off.

Defenders of the Pope point to an example which weighed heavily on Pius. In the summer of 1942, the Catholic Archbishop of Utrecht led the denunciation of the deportation of Dutch Jews. The Nazi response was to expand the programme: Jewish converts to Catholicism, hitherto exempted, were now deported. Hindsight tells us that, ultimately, they would have been killed anyway, but all Pius could see was that dramatic ecclesiastical intervention had made things worse.<sup>18</sup> It is also worth noting that two years later, when the full scale of Nazi intent was even more clearly visible (and, arguably, the Nazi ability to retaliate was diminishing) Pius' envoy in Hungary, Archbishop Angelo Rotta, was dramatically more active in seeking to prevent deportations than had been the case previously in other countries. As John Pawlikowski notes, 'there is no doubt that if one is to point to a bright spot in the official Catholic response to the plight of the Jews under the Nazis, Hungary would be it'.<sup>19</sup> If we are charitable and say that Rotta's actions should be considered as the Pope's, then there may be grounds for thinking that, when Pius thought he really could make a difference, he was eager to do so.

Before Hungary in 1944, however, what would dramatic intervention against the Nazis really have accomplished? The risk was only worth running if, by speaking, the Pope could actually change things. The Nazis did not pretend to be Catholics: there was no prospect that Hitler would simply bend the knee to papal authority. Nor could the broad

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17. Gilbert, *The Righteous*, p. 442.

18. Burleigh, *Sacred Causes*, pp. 249-52.

19. John T. Pawlikowski, 'Reflections on Pope Pius XII: The Known and the Unknown', in Rittner and Roth (eds), *Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust*, pp. 56-69, p. 60.



mass of German Catholics be relied upon. To come out unequivocally against Nazism, when this would have been understood as condemning a Germany fighting for her life against Stalin, and to do so on behalf of the Jews, whom the Church had denigrated for centuries, this might provoke a great withdrawal of German Catholics from the Church.<sup>20</sup> Far better, some would say, to do all one practically could behind the scenes to actually save Jews, and not say anything to jeopardise this work. If the cost is being branded ‘Hitler’s Pope’ by those with little historical understanding – so be it.

## The Case for the Prosecution

There is however a darker possibility. Whilst the Nazis may not have owed Catholicism any kind of allegiance, many of their collaborators did. The leaders of Vichy France, for instance, approached the Vatican for endorsement of their anti-Semitic legislation and were relieved when it was given (though it is worth noting that the Vatican drew the line at approving deportations from France – which, nevertheless, continued apace).<sup>21</sup> The collaborationist government of Slovakia, notable for its vigorous participation in the annihilation of the Jews, was actually headed by a priest, Monsignor Jozef Tiso, upon whom no kind of papal discipline was ever imposed.<sup>22</sup> There *were* politicians, policemen, soldiers, civil servants and ordinary citizens who might have paid heed to a clarion call to resistance from Rome – or even to a discreet papal instruction. Why did it never come?

Daniel Goldhagen voices the suspicion in devastating terms:

I am not saying that the Pope and the clergy in general actively wanted the Jews to die. But aside from the small percentage of clergy who aided the Jews, we cannot be sure that the Catholic clergy in general opposed the mass annihilation. We cannot be sure that if they did, then they opposed it unequivocally and with all their hearts. We cannot be sure that they beheld the killing of the Jews, whom many of them deemed guilty of the greatest offences, unambiguously as a crime and a sin. And we have such doubts because of the widespread antisemitism

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20. Harold Tittman recalls Pius XII effectively admitting this to a group of Allied diplomats, *Inside the Vatican of Pius XII*, pp. 124-25.

21. Sergio I. Minerbi, ‘Pope Pius XII: A Reappraisal’, in Rittner and Roth (eds), *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, pp. 85-104, p. 96.

22. *Ibid.*



among them, and because of the things that many of them did. We can be sure that a significant number of bishops and priests willingly contributed to the annihilation of the Jews. We can also be sure that the Pope and the clergy's stunning lack of public sympathy for the Jews, their aid for critical acts of criminality, their support for so many more, and their extensive political blame and guilt definitively implicate the Catholic Church broadly and deeply.<sup>23</sup>

The case for the prosecution of Pius XII might begin by taking seriously the context within which he was formed. He was marinated in the long tradition of Christian anti-Semitism traced in our last chapter, which had reached a particular intensity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This period is characterised by the Church's fierce struggle against the ideas and energies of revolutions, first French and later Russian. The tone is best caught by Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) which, amongst many other things, condemned the proposition that the Pope should reconcile himself to ideas of 'progress, liberalism and modern civilisation'. Goldhagen notes that anti-Semitism was a key weapon in the Church's armoury for this struggle: 'appealing to all people beholden to embattled institutions, practices and traditions, the Church sought to mobilise the vast reservoir of European anti-semitism in its political battle against modernity ... if modernity could be identified with Jews, then half the battle against it was won'.<sup>24</sup>

It was not, of course, difficult to identify Jews with progressive and revolutionary forces in the early twentieth century: unsurprisingly, they were prominent in movements that promised liberation from the oppression of *ancien régime* Christian anti-Semitism. Pius XII came up against this personally in 1919, when he was based in Munich as papal nuncio to Germany. Power in Bavaria had been briefly seized by Communists. In his report to Rome, Pius described the scene when his deputy went to negotiate with the revolutionaries for the protection of diplomatic residences:

The confusion totally chaotic, the filth totally nauseating; soldiers and armed workers coming and going, the building, once the home of a king, resounding with screams, vile

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23. Daniel J. Goldhagen, *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair* (New York: Vintage, 2003), p. 221.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

language, profanities. Absolute hell. An army of employees were dashing to and fro, giving out orders, waving bits of paper, and in the midst of all this, a gang of young women, of dubious appearance, Jews like all the rest of them, hanging around in all the offices with lecherous demeanour and suggestive smiles. The boss of this female rabble was Levien's mistress [Levien was the communist leader], a young Russian woman, a Jew and a divorcee. ... Levien is a young man, of about thirty or thirty-five, also Russian and a Jew. Pale, dirty with drugged eyes, hoarse voice, vulgar, repulsive, with a face that is both intelligent and sly.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps the Nuncio was simply passing on the impressions of his deputy, but there is nothing in the letter – which is, after all, Pius' own report – to distance himself in any way from the clear linking of Jews and revolution or, as Cornwell observes, from 'the repeated references to the Jewishness of these individuals, amid the catalogue of epithets describing their physical and moral repulsiveness, [which] gives an impression of stereotypical anti-Semitic contempt'.<sup>26</sup> Richard Rubenstein notes that the experience of the Bavarian Soviet Republic was seared into Pius XII's soul:

[for him] the Communist revolution was not something that happened in distant Russia. He experienced it directly. He also saw the right-wing nationalist forces that suppressed the revolution as defenders of Christian civilisation against the assault of rootless, godless Communists, many of whom were Jews. That lesson was never to leave him. If he had any doubts concerning the destabilising consequences of Jewish emancipation and the Jews' entrance into European intellectual and political life before Munich 1919, he had none thereafter.<sup>27</sup>

The Church's fear of revolutionary modernity, which in Russia and Spain had brought with it intense anti-clerical violence, 'all but guaranteed that, in Germany, Italy and elsewhere, the Nazis, Fascists

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25. Cited in Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, p. 75.

26. Ibid.

27. Richard L. Rubenstein, 'Pope Pius XII and the Shoah', in Rittner and Roth (eds), *Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust*, pp. 175-202, p. 184.

and rightist tyrannies would be greeted by churchmen with relief if not acclaim'.<sup>28</sup> The authoritarian right, of course, presented its own problems. Much of Pius' energies as Nuncio to Germany following the ascent of the Nazis would be devoted, for instance, to defending the independence of Catholic education and youth work against totalitarian pressure. However, it is not surprising that the Church shared in the general willingness of conservative Europe in the early 1930s to see the Nazis and those like them as not quite as bad as Communists and as a bulwark in that larger struggle. As Frank Coppa puts it, 'While the Holy See had few illusions about National Socialism, it had absolutely none about Bolshevism. The first persecuted the Church; the second prohibited its existence within its borders.'<sup>29</sup>

It is in this context that the Concordat signed between the Roman Catholic Church and Nazi Germany in 1933 should be understood. From the Vatican's point of view, this treaty was of vital importance in establishing a limited measure of freedom and security for the Church, especially in the field of education and youth work. However, a high price had been exacted. Essentially, the Church acquiesced in the 'political castration of Catholicism in Hitler's Germany'.<sup>30</sup> The Catholic Centre Party (still a formidable electoral force) was dissolved and Hitler left unchallenged as Führer. In the view of Cardinal Faulhaber of Munich:

At a time when the major nations in the world faced the new Germany with cool reserve and considerable suspicion, the Catholic Church, the greatest moral power on earth, through the concordat expressed its confidence in the new German government. This was a deed of immeasurable significance for the reputation of the new government abroad.<sup>31</sup>

Hitler himself said: 'one should only consider it a great achievement. The concordat gave Germany an opportunity and created an area of trust that was particularly significant in the developing struggle against international Jewry.'<sup>32</sup>

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28. Goldhagen, *A Moral Reckoning*, pp. 174-75.

29. Coppa, *The Life and Pontificate of Pope Pius XII*, p. 167.

30. Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 341.

31. Cardinal Faulhaber of Munich, speaking in 1937. Cited in Goldhagen, *A Moral Reckoning*, pp. 179-80.

32. Cited Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, p. 7.