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Is now the time to beatify and canonize Pope Pius XII?

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 8, 2007 All Things Catholic

Editor's Note: *June 7-10, John Allen is covering the annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America in Los Angeles, the theme of which is "Bishops in the Church." You can find his daily stories here:*

http://ncrcafe.org/blog/2682[1]

I want to float a counter-intuitive idea this week, which is that from the point of view of Catholic-Jewish relations, the best thing the Vatican could do right now would be to beatify and canonize Pope Pius XII immediately.

For purposes of fleshing out this argument, I'll prescind from whether Pius XII actually merits sainthood. Instead, I want to remain in the realm of observable facts, which in this case seem to me to be the following:

- A significant block in the Catholic church, including much of its senior leadership, has a strong conviction that Pius XII is a saint and should be formally recognized as such;
- In other sectors of opinion, including much of the Jewish world, there is an equally strong conviction that Pius XII failed in his moral responsibilities during the Holocaust;
- No new evidence, or new historical perspective, is likely to alter those convictions;
- The primary force keeping this debate alive in the media, and making it a source of turbulence in Catholic-Jewish relations, is the question of possible sainthood.

Assuming those four premises are accurate, it seems to follow that there are only two ways out: Either Catholicism renounces sainthood for Pius XII, or we get it over with. Since the former is unlikely, the latter may be the best available option -- and the sooner, the better. The alternative is allowing an endless cycle of point/counter-point exchanges to coarsen conversation and harden feelings.

These thoughts were stimulated by a speech delivered on Tuesday at Rome's Campidoglio (roughly "City Hall") by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, meaning the number two official in the church after Pope Benedict XVI. Bertone spoke during the launch of a new book by Italian journalist Andrea Tornielli about Pius XII.

The gist of Bertone's address was that Pius has been the victim of a "black legend," and that the wartime pope conducted a policy of "prophecy in action," rather than potentially counter-productive public statements, which

saved the lives of countless Nazi victims. All that was clearly understood at the time, Bertone argued, but has been subsequently obscured because of ideological manipulation of Pius' memory.

My translation of Bertone's speech can be found here: **http://ncrcafe.org/node/1154[2]**

Most observers saw the speech as a "preemptive strike" ahead of beatification. In early May, the Vatican's Congregation for the Cause of Saints voted to approve a "decree of heroic virtue" for Pius XII. If signed by Pope Benedict XVI, the move would leave only the need to document a miracle before Pius can be beatified, and another miracle before canonization. Knowing that beatification will put the question of Pius and the Holocaust back in the headlines, maybe Bertone wanted to redefine the terms of debate, making the question not, "Did he do enough?" but rather, "Has he been the victim of a smear campaign?" Framing it that way would already be a gain for the supporters of Pius.

In any event, the Bertone speech seems a clear signal that sooner or later, beatification is coming.

My unscientific survey of experts and advocates on the Pius XII issue, however, suggests that nothing Bertone said on Tuesday is likely to move opinion. In the end, I suspect Jose Sanchez, emeritus professor at Saint Louis University and author of 2002's *Pius XII and the Holocaust: Understanding the Controversy* (Catholic University Press), has it about right.

"Nothing is going to change," Sanchez told me on Wednesday. "The same arguments will go back and forth. It's going to go on forever. I really have no hope for the future on this one."

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Critics of making Pius XII a saint have reiterated their claim that it's "too soon" for beatification, especially because the Vatican's archives from the period of Pius XII's papacy, 1939 to 1958, are not yet fully open.

"There is not yet enough evidentiary material on either side of the controversy," said Rabbi Yehiel Poupko of Jewish United Fund in Chicago. "Not all the diplomatic pouches between the Vatican and dioceses in Europe are open. The American archives are not open. It's just too soon."

Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League said much the same thing.

"I wish they'd spend a higher percentage of their time in efforts to open the archives, and less in spinning what they're selectively presenting," Foxman said. "We are willing to withhold our judgment, and the Vatican should withhold its, until scholars have been able to openly examine the material and see what's there."

From a pro-Pius point of view, some believe new evidence could seal the deal for sainthood.

Bertone, for example, suggested that currently restricted archival material could shed new light, pointing to "thousands" of individual cases where the Vatican responded to requests for help from all over Europe, records of which are not available to scholars because they have not yet been catalogued. Those materials, Bertone said, illustrate Pius XII's policy of "action, not lament," meaning behind-the-scenes efforts rather than noisy public statements.

Eugene Fisher, the longtime expert on Jewish-Christian relations for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, agreed that the "final assessment of historians" would have to wait until "after the archives come out."

I don't for a moment question the sincerity of Poupko, Foxman, Bertone, and Fisher, all of whom I know and respect. Nevertheless, I'm dubious that any material waiting to be discovered in the Vatican archives will do much to alter the basic battle lines over Pius XII.

Consider the following instances of new historical material which have come to light over the last four years alone, and which is arguably far more interesting than anything likely to be left in the Vatican archives, especially after the publication of eleven volumes of material by a team of Jesuit scholars:

- In 2003, Tornielli, the author of four books on Pius XII, produced documents suggesting that Pius XII at one point had prayed that Satan might "leave" Hitler, dubbed in the papers a "long distance excommunication."
- Also in 2003, Robert Katz published *The Battle for Rome*, drawing on just-released files of the Office for Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA. Those files, Katz said, show that Pius XII urged the Allies to drop their insistence upon an unconditional surrender and to reach a separate accord with Nazi Germany, in order to form a common Western bulwark against Communism. Katz also said the files show that Pius XII knew well in advance of the German intent to round up Rome's Jews, but said nothing. Katz called Pius "a saint of silence."
- In December 2004, Italian scholar Alberto Melloni published a document in *Corriere della Sera* which appeared to suggest that the post-war Vatican under Pius XII had a policy of not returning Jewish children who had been given to Christians for safekeeping, if those children had been baptized. Such a policy, to critics, seemed to suggest a striking insensitivity to Jewish suffering even after the full extent of Nazi war crimes had begun to emerge.
- In January 2005, Tornielli published a longer Vatican document on the question of returning baptized Jewish children in *Il Giornale* which suggested that the problem was not turning children over to their relatives, but to Jewish institutions -- the idea being that children who were currently in the care of loving Christian families should be able to stay, if no Jewish relative claimed them.
- In 2005, Rabbi David Dalin of Ave Maria University published *The Myth of Hitler's Pope*, adding new details to the story of the friendship between the young Eugenio Pacelli, who would become Pius XII, and Guido Mendes, a Jew who later became a distinguished Roman physician. On the strength of that friendship, Pacelli was apparently the first pope in modern times to have shared a Sabbath dinner in a Jewish home. Later as pope, he helped the Mendes family escape into Switzerland when Mussolini enacted his racial laws in 1938. Eventually, most of the family moved to Israel.
- In January 2006, Dina Porat of Tel Aviv University published previously unknown correspondence between Archbishop Angelo Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII, who at the time was Pius XII's ambassador in Turkey, and an agent of Jewish Rescue Agency in Istanbul. In general, the correspondence shows that Roncalli forwarded information about the suffering of Jews to his Vatican superiors, and occasionally lamented the lack of a more forceful response from Pius XII.
- In August 2006, excerpts from the diary of a religious sister who lived during the war in Rome's Convent of Quattro Santi Coronati were published in Italian newspapers. In the diary, which had sat untouched in the

convent's archives since the war, the sister recounts how Pius XII personally ordered convents and monasteries in the city to protect Jews.

- In January 2007, a former lieutenant general for the Soviet-era secret police in Romania named Ion Mihai Pacepa revealed that Nikita Krushchev had approved a plan in February 1960 to weaken the moral authority of the Catholic church by painting Pius XII as a cold-hearted Nazi sympathizer. According to Pacepa, three Romanian secret police agents disguised as priests spent two years foraging the Vatican archives for negative information about Pius XII, but came up empty-handed. Nevertheless, Pacepa said, a senior KGB official took credit for the play "The Deputy" by Rolf Hochhuth, which launched the modern debates over Pius XII. (Hochhuth has denied Communist influence on the play.)
- In March 2007, *La Reppublica* unearthed documents from the archives of the Stasi, the East German secret police, showing that Nazi spies in the Vatican during World War II had reported that the Catholic church under Pius XII was aiding Jews, including financial assistance, and that Pius hoped for the "obliteration" of the Nazi regime.
- In June 2007, Dan Kurzman published *A Special Mission: Hitler's Secret Plot to Seize the Vatican and Kidnap Pope Pius XII*. Though the fact that SS General Karl Wolff was ordered by Hitler to kidnap Pius in September 1943 had been known since Wolff was released from jail in 1974 and told the story, Kurzman's book added new details, suggesting that the Nazis clearly understood Pius XII to be a serious foe.
- Also in June 2007, Tornielli's latest book contains passages from correspondence between Pacelli when he was the nuncio in Germany and his brother Francesco, which clearly reflect Pacelli's distaste for Hitler and his Nazi movement.

Some of this material cuts in favor of Pius, some against him. On balance, these revelations have probably helped his image, if only because the portrayal of the pope in books such as *Hitler's Pope* was so cartoonishly villainous. None of it, however, has done much to persuade either critics or detractors to reconsider their positions. Given that immobility, why should we hope that that the Vatican archives contain a "magic bullet" that could persuade one side or the other to quit the field?

That's the view of John Conway, an Anglican expert on Pius XII in Canada.

Opening the archives "will not do much to change things," he said. "The evidence is fairly clear from what we've already got. The suggestion that there are documents lurking in the archives which prove conclusively what the Vatican could have done, or would have done under somebody else, just doesn't hold up."

"When the archives are entirely open," Conway said, "we'll be more or less where we are right now."

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In reality, the case against Pius XII is a classic example of an axiom which is not really amenable to empirical falsification. (The same could be said of the case *for* Pius XII, of course, but by and large its adherents are not the ones clamoring to open the archives.) There are three reasons why this is so.

First, the heart of the indictment is that Pius XII failed to issue a straightforward public denunciation of National Socialism, or an unambiguous public appeal for Christians to rescue Jews. (Again, I prescind from the merits of these charges.) The nature of the case, therefore, depends upon the pope's public record, which is already well

known. By definition, nothing contained in the archives about his private views, or his behind-the-scenes action, can bear upon the crux of this charge. His critics are usually willing to concede everything the pope did in private to help people, but they maintain that it does not redeem his failure, in their eyes, to speak out more clearly in public.

Poupko put the charge eloquently:

"If a situation in which six million Jews, of the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth, are marched off to their deaths, is not a moment for public Christian witness, what other time in the last 2,000 years would be?" he asked. Whatever one makes of that question, it is highly unlikely anything in the archives could answer it.

Second, another plank of the anti-Pius XII platform is based on counter-factual history, meaning speculation about what might have happened if Pius XII had zigged rather than zagged. What would have happened, for example, if Pius had publicly excommunicated Hitler? Critics say the Nazi machinery might have ground to a halt, while defenders say greater persecution would have been unleashed upon both Jews and Catholics. No one can say for sure, and nothing in the archives can resolve such a hypothetical question.

Third, even after the archives have been scoured, if that examination yields nothing negative about Pius XII, there will be lingering suspicion in some quarters that the Vatican might have destroyed records that could taint the pope's memory.

"The Jesuits who published the 11 volumes have already been in those archives," Sanchez said, reflecting a view widely held among some scholars. "They might have sanitized the records."

To be clear, I am all for opening the archives. If possible, I would fling the doors open tomorrow. My point is rather that it would be naïve to believe that doing so will resolve the debates over Pius XII.

* * *

A brief footnote on the archives.

In his speech on Tuesday, Bertone made a somewhat usual request. Referring to those requests for help from across Europe which have still not been indexed, Bertone said: "Maybe it would be possible, with the ad hoc help of some charitable foundation, to catalogue in a brief amount of time these papers which are stored in the Archives of the Holy See!"

According to experts in Jewish-Christian dialogue, it was the first time a senior Vatican official has publicly suggested one reason for the time lag in opening the archives is a lack of financial resources.

Fisher said, however, there is a precedent for Bertone's request.

After a commission of Jewish and Catholic scholars created to study the 11-volume set of material published by the Vatican fell apart over demands to see the rest of the archives, Fisher said that a fund-raising luncheon was held at the residence of Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore, head of the U.S. bishops' committee on relations with Jews. Argentine Cardinal Jorge Mejia, the Prefect of the Vatican library, was in attendance, and the idea was to raise money to be able to open the archives more quickly. In fact, Mejia was later able to raise the number of archivists working on the project from two to ten.

This time around, Bertone might find support from an unlikely quarter.

"If that's the issue," said Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League, referring to a lack of money in the Vatican to speed things up, "we should have an emergency meeting and figure out ways to make it happen."

* * *

Those with reservations about Pius XII's beatification often ask the rhetorical question, "What's the rush?" Their counsel is to wait until passions have died down, and his case can be considered more objectively.

While I understand that instinct, I think it badly underestimates the nature of the passions involved in this case. When a community invests a considerable portion of its identity in keeping alive the memory of some historical wrong, the passage of time often does very little to dim its passion. Anyone who has ever spent time in the Balkans or the Middle East understands the point.

For example, when Pope Benedict XVI said on May 13 in Brazil that the arrival of Christianity in the New World had not been an "imposition" upon native cultures, the passage of 500 years did not noticeably diminish the outrage of the descendants of those indigenous persons, or their sympathizers. To take another case, when Pope Pius IX was beatified in 2000, some 152 years had passed since Pius IX re-consigned the Jews of Rome to their ghetto after briefly liberating them in 1848, and 142 years had gone by since Pius IX took six-year-old Edgaro Mortara from his Jewish family and refused to give him back. The distance of a century and a half did little to dampen Jewish protest over those incidents.

To take a counter-factual example, if there were a serious move today to canonize Pope Urban II, who launched the Crusades and who was beatified in 1881, does anyone really believe the passage of 1,000 years would soften reaction in the Islamic world?

With Pius XII, we're talking about the Holocaust, the most horrifying crime in human history to date. It seems improbable that 100 years, or even 300 years, will do much to abate passions, in the same way that the memory of slavery remains a deep scar in America today. In that light, perhaps the real question is whether anyone gains by allowing those passions to fester, other than those who have made careers out of either vilifying or rehabilitating Pius XII.

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Bertone's 3,000 word speech on Tuesday centered on six arguments:

- Controversies over Pius XII's alleged silences have overshadowed other aspects of his pontificate, such as his contributions to liturgical reform, Scripture study, missionary efforts, and the church's engagement with culture. Bertone noted that Pius XII cautiously approved of the theory of evolution, and that he remains the pope who beatified and canonized the highest percentage of women.
- Those who attack Pius XII often do so for ideological reasons, and are guilty of what Bertone called an "attack on good sense and on rationality."
- Fascist authorities perceived Pius II as a foe, often denying the Vatican electricity to broadcast his radio messages or paper to print his documents.
- The "black legend" around Pius XII took shape in the context of bitter controversies over the creation of the State of Israel, and was manipulated, Bertone argued, by forces on both sides.
- Pius XII explicitly protested the persecution of Jews, but explained in 1943 that he could not speak in more dramatic or public terms without the risk of making things worse.
- Material in the Vatican archives documents thousands of instances in which the Holy See aided victims during the war who requested its help; Bertone said this enormous reservoir of material has still not been catalogued, and invited the help of charitable foundations to do so more quickly.

Reactions seemed to vary, according to how observers were already inclined to see Pope Pius XII.

"On the whole, I thought it was excellent," said Fisher of the U.S. bishops' conference. "Newspapers tend to pick up on the books damning Pius XII, while the ones defending him can't get reviewed. The restoration of some balance is therefore very helpful."

Nevertheless, Fisher quibbled with Bertone's assertion that the "black legend" about Pius XII took shape in the context of the creation of the State of Israel, saying it emerged only later with Hochhuth's "The Deputy" in 1963.

Fr. John Pawlikowski, an expert in Catholic-Jewish relations at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, said that Bertone's choice of scholars to support his position weakened the force of his argument.

"The problem with the Vatican generally, and certainly it applies to Bertone's statement, is that they try to critique the [anti-Pius] extremists such as John Cornwell by using some very questionable defensive 'scholarship,' such as that by Sr. Marchione," Pawlikowski said. He cited Sanchez, Conway, and Rabbi Michael Marrus as examples of more "credible" authorities to whom Bertone might have appealed.

"Until they are willing to engage in a wholesale discussion of Pius XII during the Holocaust," Pawlikowski said of the Vatican, "the attempted defense of Pius through reliance on shallow and limited scholarship will fall on deaf ears."

Conway said that, on the whole, Bertone made some good points. Part of the criticism of Pius XII, Conway said, is based on an unrealistic conception of the power of the papacy.

"People sometimes act "as if the pope is a wonder-worker who could move his papal staff and produce miracles, such as saving six million Jews," Conway said.

Poupko said that Bertone's speech did not persuade him to drop his request that the Catholic church delay the beatification of Pius XII, saying that he hopes Catholic leaders "can understand the Jewish people's ambivalence."

In part, Poupko said, sensitivities about Pius XII are high because in the meantime, Jews have become accustomed to "a much higher standard" from Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II.

Poupko's reservations were clear.

"World War II was a time when Christians were called to bear a new cross, the yellow star," he said. "They were summoned to a new Calvary, the ghettoes and death camps." Such moments, Poupko said, require "prophets," while Pius XII was more a "politician."

Sanchez said he generally agreed that Pius XII has been maligned, but said that there are elements in Bertone's argument that seem dubious. For example, he said he has not come across any reference to either the Italian or the German forces cutting off electricity to Vatican Radio or denying paper to *L'Osservatore Romano*, as Bertone suggested. Both Sanchez and Conway said they had never before heard the claim that Pius XII asked for permission from the Germans to enroll an extra 4,000 people in the Palatine Guard in order to save Jews.

Sanchez said there are "legends" on both sides of the debate.

"I think there is a 'black legend' about Pius XII," he said. "But others subject him to enormous praise for everything he did. The truth is in between."

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