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On Pius XII, somebody needs to explain why

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tNews that Pope Pius XII is now a step closer to sainthood has reignited debate over the wartime pontiff, and non-experts could be forgiven for thinking there?s a pretty big hole in most discussion. Whether or not Pius was ?silent? on the Holocaust, the obvious question is: Why would the church want to make him a saint in the first place?t

tThere is, of course, an abundant literature on the role of Pius XII during the Second World War, and plenty of reasonably neutral observers believe the evidence doesn?t support an indictment. To say that Pius XII was not ?Hitler?s Pope?, however, is hardly the same thing as placing a halo on his head.

tLacking any clear sense of what the positive case might be for canonizing Pius XII, many people might reasonably ask that if sainthood is sure to offend a broad swath of Jewish opinion, and to create yet another black eye for the church in PR terms, why do it? At least, why do it now?

tNaturally, those who believe Pius XII was a saint have their reasons, but so far they?ve been more successful at rebutting criticism than presenting a positive picture of the man. While there are many reasons for that ? including the fact that for the last fifty years, they?ve been largely on the defensive ? I suspect part of the problem also lies in generational dynamics.

Here?s what I mean: For Catholics now in their seventies (perhaps especially for many Europeans of that generation, since TV had not yet made the pope a household figure everywhere), Pius XII was their John Paul II ? a virtually superhuman figure who reigned for almost twenty years, and who profoundly shaped their religious imagination. At the time, it wouldn?t have occurred to them that it would ever be necessary to explain why they regarded Pius as a hero.

Just as it?s conventional wisdom today that John Paul helped bring down communism, Pius XII in the Catholicism of the late 1940s and 1950s was almost universally seen as the pope who saved the church from annihilation during the war. He had faced down the gates of Hell, what then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger once described as the ?Moloch of power.? Pius XII was *il Pastore Angelico*, the ?Angelic Pastor,? a once-in-a-lifetime blend of worldly savvy and almost ethereal spiritual depth. His teaching was considered profound and innovative in almost every area of Catholic life, from liturgy to Biblical studies to the intersection of faith and science.

tThe comparison with John Paul II is instructive, because technically the Vatican hasn?t yet offered any formal explanation of why he should be a saint either. In reality, however, nobody?s clamoring for it, because warm-and-fuzzy popular memories of John Paul are still fresh, and there hasn?t been time for a rival narrative to emerge. The people most intimately connected with the cause of Pius XII can sometimes seem stuck in the immediate post-war era, when the same thing was true for their man.

tUnderstanding this can also help explain the ?why now? in the push for Pius? sainthood. If you were twenty when Pius XII died in October 1958, you?re 72 today. During your twenties, you probably took it for granted that Pius would one day be a saint, and there didn?t seem to be much rush. By the time you reached thirty, and might have been in a position to move things along, the debate over Pius XII?s wartime record had reached a boil. In both the ecclesiastical and secular climates associated with 1968, canonizing a pope now seen as embodying institutional self-preservation over moral courage was a no-go.

tThose who remember Pius XII as their John Paul II thus have been waiting for four decades to get back on track. Now in their seventies, they face the serious prospect that it may not happen in their lifetimes ? hence the present sense of urgency.

tTo try to appreciate the psychology, consider all those twenty-something ?John Paul II Catholics? today in the priesthood, in religious life, in lay movements, and so on. Imagine that for whatever reason, John Paul?s progress towards canonization was delayed, and in the meantime some critical new school of thought about him arose ? perhaps related to his failure to head off the sexual abuse crisis, perhaps something else, so that today?s most ardent devotees were forced to cool their heels for four decades.

Entering their seventies, how compelled might those folks feel to make a final push on behalf of the pontiff with whom they have such a powerful personal bond? To return to where we started, how much might they too struggle to make a positive case for their pope, since they?ve spent their entire lives taking it for granted?

tAs understandable as all that may be, of course, it doesn?t really solve the current problem ? because while Pius XII may be John Paul II to his devotees, to most people he?s just a pope with an image problem.

tBy the way, the eventual unsealing of the Vatican archives from the era of Pius XII is unlikely to change that dynamic. The controversy really isn?t over what Pius did, but what he either could or should have done. Since the terms of debate are counter-factual, no new bit of historical evidence, assuming there?s anything that isn?t yet known, can resolve things one way or the other.

tThe bottom line is that if the canonization process is to go forward, somebody needs to step up and present a compelling case for Pius XII to the world, helping the average person appreciate why Catholics might look upon him as a model of holiness. Merely knocking down his critics isn?t enough. To be fair, there have been numerous attempts to offer just such a presentation, and many of them are quite good, but their appeal hasn?t really extended beyond an ?insider? crowd.

If that case isn?t made for Pius XII, in a fashion persuasive not just to experts but to the street, too many people will be left asking the most basic question of all: ?Why??

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