NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Pius XII & the Jews

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 9, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

My friends at The New Republic ran an unfortunate review [1]of a recent book about the Vatican's dealings with the Third Reich. I do not come to praise Pius XII and there is no need to bury him, as he already lies interred in the grotto of St. Peter's Basilica. But, the review suffers from some claims that show a woeful lack of historical accuracy.

For example, when the reviewer, John Connelly, a professor of history at the University of California at Berkeley, writes that, "Pius XI watched as storm troopers arrested priests and nuns for offenses to ?morality,? and wondered whether to condemn Nazism?but neither he nor Pacelli found the right words, and a pattern of reticent neutrality set in," he is evidently unaware of Pope Pius XI's encyclical Mit Brennender Sorge, written in 1937 and smuggled into Germany, with the help of the future Cardinal Spellman, which clearly denounced Nazism.

Connelly dismisses Pope Pius XII's comments about the persecution of the Jews, noting that "Thus Pacelli objected to people being killed 'because of their nationality or race'?for example, in the fifty-sixth paragraph of his Christmas address in 1942..." but he fails to note that those words in that fifty-sixth paragraph warranted the attention of all the major newspapers of the day. Pius XII spoke in abstract, stilted ways always: He had an inflated notion of himself as the oracle of God and he was, by nature and training, a diplomat, a papal diplomat no less, with all the caution such training could impart. I wish he had spoken out more forcefully. I am suspicious of the claims that Pius thought anything more explicit would only bring further suffering to the Jews - how could they suffer more? But, the historical record is decidedly mixed and Connelly does little to strike a balance.

Oddly, Connelly does not discuss the encyclical that was on Pius XI's desk when he died, unsigned and never issued, which was even more forceful in its denunciation of anti-Semitism. Pius XII chose not to issue that encyclical, a piece of evidence that would support claims that Pius XII was less willing to engage the moral authority of the papacy on behalf of the Jews than was his predeccesor. It is a glaring omission on Connelly's part.

Connelly does call our attention to the rampant anti-Semitism within the Vatican of the day. No one should feel the need to make excuses for Cardinal Merry del Val and others who harbored such bigoted ideas. And, it is the task of moral leadership to rise above the prejudices of those who surround one, a task in which Pius XII failed. His actions on behalf of the Jews of Rome are well known, but they were insufficient to the demands of the time. Maybe if he had spoken out more forcefully, the Jews would have suffered more, and more Jews would have suffered. The failure to speak out insulted not only the dignity of the Jews but the dignity of the Church. That was the thing Pius XII failed to grasp.

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[1] http://www.tnr.com/book/review/pope-devil-hubert-wolf