

## Pius XII and the Jews

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The letter by Robert Alpert about Pius XII and the Jews (Correspondence, November 1999) reveals some serious misunderstandings. He criticizes Eugenio Pacelli (Pius XII) by comparing him unfavorably with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who was executed for taking part in attempts to eliminate Hitler. Mr. Alpert states that “the proper Christian response was Bonhoeffer’s not Pacelli’s. The call for Christians during the period of the annihilation of European Jewry was witness and resistance even if it involved martyrdom.”

The criticism is that Pacelli failed to make explicit, unequivocal, public condemnation of this Nazi campaign of annihilation during World War II. Mr. Alpert dismisses the reasons given in defense of Pacelli as “hollow and ignoble.” He has no grounds, however, for holding up Bonhoeffer as a model for what Pacelli failed to do. During the war, Bonhoeffer never gave public condemnations of the Nazis. On the contrary, he feigned public approval. The reason, not to draw attention to illegal activities, is the same reason given by Pacelli. It is as valid for Pacelli as for Bonhoeffer.

From the very beginning of the war, the Roman Catholic Church was involved in illegal actions to rescue Jewish people. About one million Jews survived Nazi occupation because of rescue actions. About 85% of these were carried out by Roman Catholics. Eugenio Pacelli feared that more forceful public statements would have invited more severe Nazi reprisals. Mr. Alpert regards this argument as “the most disingenuous and disturbing of all. More severe? . . . For the Jewish community *nothing* could have been more severe.” But Nazi reprisals would inevitably have hindered rescue work. The resulting annihilation of yet more Jews would indeed have been more severe.

Mr. Alpert sees Oskar Schindler as another model for what Pacelli failed to do. In fact, however, Schindler performed the type of rescue action that Pius XII was fostering all over Europe. Like Bonhoeffer, Schindler did not speak out publicly against the Nazis, but feigned agreement while engaging in rescue activities.

In 1939, the year Eugenio Pacelli was elected pope, Dietrich Bonhoeffer joined the German resistance movement. From then on, Pacelli was kept informed about the resistance. This made him the more likely to refrain from forceful public statements. Nothing indicates that Bonhoeffer or the resistance disagreed. Dr. Joseph Müller, a Catholic lawyer, served as the contact between the resistance and Pius XII. He and Bonhoeffer developed a deep mutual respect. They were arrested together in April 1943.

The implicit comparison of Pacelli with Roosevelt and Churchill, presumably because they also failed to speak out, is not appropriate. Bonhoeffer wanted Roosevelt and Churchill to encourage the resistance and to publicly discuss peace aims. They refused

to do either. Pius XII is the only leader who took the resistance seriously and publicly discussed peace aims. Pacelli understood, as Roosevelt and Churchill did not, the significance of the German resistance and the murderous nature of the Nazi regime.

Bonhoeffer's path led to martyrdom. No one who has followed carefully the career of Eugenio Pacelli, however, can doubt that he would have risked martyrdom for the defense of the Jews. His decision against a forceful public stand was not taken out of unwillingness to risk martyrdom but rather for the purpose of saving more lives. For his part, Bonhoeffer never sought martyrdom. He was exceedingly skillful in misleading his interrogators. Up to the day before his execution, he expected to survive the Nazis. When martyrdom did come, though, Bonhoeffer accepted it in full submission to the will of God.

The "witness and resistance" of Eugenio Pacelli and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are similar. Both were important figures of Christian resistance, motivated by a desire to prevent further destruction, especially of the Jews. Both engaged in clandestine activities and avoided direct public statements that might draw attention to these activities.

Mr. Alpert states that "the people of Israel have every right to comment on a man whose actions were intimately bound up with their survival during World War II." Indeed. Under his direct leadership, 12% of the Jewish population under Nazi occupation was successfully rescued. The puzzle is not, as Mr. Alpert would have it, why John Paul II would attempt to beatify Eugenio Pacelli, but rather why anyone, especially leaders of Jewish organizations, would oppose it.