

Since the end of tragic Holocaust, the institutional Catholic Church has been heavily criticized for its lack of action taken to combat the horrific mistreatment of Jewish communities, but what prevented the Catholic Church from adequately condemning Nazi Germany? This essay argues that though there were a number of reasons for the Catholic Church's inadequate response to the Holocaust and rise of Nazi Germany, two prominent factors weighed most heavily in the institution's decision-making. Leading up to the Holocaust, the Church had a long history of anti-semitism, which in turn prevented true solidarity with Jewish communities who faced cruel treatment under the regime of Adolf Hitler. Along with negative views on Jews, the Catholic Church found itself in a vulnerable state when it came to international political affairs during the years of the Holocaust. This defenseless institution became more preoccupied with maintaining its longevity rather than criticizing the evil occurring at the hands of tyrants. The Catholic Church's ideology on anti-semitism and its state of political weakness were the factors that most heavily influenced the Church's lack of response and action taken during the Holocaust.

Before examining the two factors that led to the Catholic Church's actions during the Holocaust, it is important to distinguish common misconceptions. The first is that during the rise and rule of Nazi Germany there were two different popes, Pope Pius XI and Pope Pius XII. Similar to all other transitions between popes, when Pius XII took office in 1939, he entered with contrasting priorities and motives for his papacy than did Pope Pius XI. Pope Pius XI was far more concerned about individual relationships than Pope Pius XII whose main focus was on international powers and politics. Both popes played an important role in the overall scene of the Holocaust, but the Church's actions during the height of conflict are accredited to Pope Pius XII. Another important distinction to be made comes in the different responses of the institutional Catholic Church and those of individual Catholics themselves. Though the Catholic Church itself

may have failed in its response to the events of the Holocaust, many individual Catholics took proactive steps to shelter and nourish Jewish people who had faced conflict and suffering brought by the Nazi regime. Catholics such as Edith Stein and Father Maria Bendetto, for example, gave aid, offered sacraments to Jewish people, and were even willing to die in solidarity with Jewish communities, showing a direct dissimilarity between action taken by the Catholic Church and individual Catholics. More on this can be found later in the essay but with these distinctions in mind, let us examine the two factors that influenced the Catholic Church's response to the Holocaust.

Leading up to the Holocaust, the Catholic Church had maintained a very anti-semitic view of their Jewish neighbors, which became a pivotal factor in the lack of response during the Holocaust. After the defeat of Napoleon's France in 1814, the papal state took control of Italy and took away many of the liberties and rights that Jews experienced while under French occupation. Under the authority of the papal state, from 1814 until 1870, "The Jews of Rome were not allowed to own real estate or practice any of the liberal professions"<sup>1</sup> and were forcefully moved back to the ghettos where they were prohibited from any contact with Christians. These inhumane laws were in effect until the fall of the last papal states in 1870; but even after they were abolished by the new authority, King Victor Emmanuel II, Jewish citizens experienced little to no increase in equal treatment. The Church continued to officially maintain that 'The Jews killed Jesus', and this ignorant idea resonated throughout the hierarchy of the Catholic Church through the end of the Holocaust. Though the Church permitted the longevity of this anti-semitic idea, many scholars point to an unpublished encyclical by Pope

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<sup>1</sup> Rossi, Mario. "Emancipation of the Jews in Italy." *Jewish Social Studies* 15, no. 2 (1953): 113–34.

Pius XI in 1938 as evidence of the Church abolishing its hostile views on Jewish communities<sup>2</sup>. This encyclical, however, used very weak language in its condemnation of anti-semitic views, and as Dr. Peter Kent notes, official Catholic newspapers *Osservatore Romano* and *Civiltà Cattolica* “frequently condemned Jewish emancipation as a product of misplaced liberalism and social modernization”<sup>3</sup>. In the decade leading up to the Holocaust, the Catholic Church officially was against anti-semitism, but realistically sustained their belligerent views on Jews. The persistence of negative institutional views was a prominent factor for the Church’s lack of response during the Holocaust and a mixed support from some Catholic individuals. Catholics were warned by the Church that Jews were “deemed members of a secret world conspiracy responsible for not only capitalism but also communism”<sup>4</sup>. At a time when the Catholic Church was transitioning to no longer being an international political power, anti-semitic views were supported by another important factor in the Church’s response: fear of being politically powerless.

The second factor that prevented the institutional Catholic Church from taking a firm stance in resistance to the horrors of the Holocaust was fear that emerged from its political vulnerability. After the fall of the last papal state in 1870, the Catholic Church occupied only the Vatican and St. Peter’s Basilica. Any substantial threat could have easily dismantled the Church of Rome, but communism was “the principal threat to the existence of the Church”<sup>5</sup>. In a 1937 encyclical written by Pope Pius XI, the Catholic Church declares that communism “aims at

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<sup>2</sup> Coppa, Frank J. “The Hidden Encyclical of Pius XI against Racism and Anti-Semitism Uncovered—Once Again!” *The Catholic Historical Review* 84, no. 1 (1998): 63–72.

<sup>3</sup> Peter C. Kent. “Pius XII, the Catholic Church, and the Holocaust”. *The International History Review* 24, no. 3 (2002): 616-621.

<sup>4</sup> Kertzer, David I. “The Roman Catholic Church, the Holocaust, and the Demonization of the Jews: Response to “Benjamin and Us: Christianity, its Jews, and History” by Jeanne Favret-Saada.” *HAU : Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 3 (2014): 329-333.

<sup>5</sup> Carrillo, Elisa A. “The Italian Catholic Church and Communism, 1943-1963.” *Catholic Historical Review* 77, no. 4 (Oct 01, 1991): 644.

upsetting the social order and at undermining the very foundations of Christian civilization”<sup>6</sup>.

Taking a harsher stance against communism than anti-semitism, the Catholic Church took steps to heavily criticize communism, even going as far as stating that it is impossible to be a Catholic and a Communist simultaneously. This institutional conception of threat influenced the Catholic Church to remain neutral because Nazi Germany fought against communism in Eastern Europe. Taking a neutral stance not only prevented the Church from being attacked, but it also helped fight off its biggest threat. As Dr. Peter Kent points out, “Pius XII’s main priority was to bring the war to an end by serving as a mediator and peacemaker in order to preserve a strong Germany as a bulwark against Communist expansion”<sup>7</sup>. This neutrality, though taken to preserve the Church against communism, allowed for numerous atrocious events in the institutional Church and misguidance for its hierarchies.

After explaining the two factors that led to the Church’s actions during the Holocaust, it is easier to understand why the Church largely remained silent during the Holocaust. As many historians and religious leaders have acknowledged, the Catholic Church’s response to the events during the Holocaust was not enough. In an attempt to remain neutral and play the role of peacemaker, Pope Pius XII “never issued an outright condemnation of the Holocaust”<sup>8</sup>. The Church remained inactive in condemning Hitler and in offering support for Jews afflicted by the Nazi Party. In some occasions, the Church even ordered Catholics to minimize their support of Jews, as best seen by the Church’s order that Catholics should strictly shelter baptized Christians<sup>9</sup>. Throughout the Holocaust, however, Pius XII offered little centralized leadership, resulting in many Catholic hierarchies in limbo on how they should be dealing with the events

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<sup>6</sup> Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, (1937)

<sup>7</sup> Kent, “Pius XII”, 216-621

<sup>8</sup> Kent, “Pius XII”, 216-621

<sup>9</sup> Kent, “Pius XII”, 216-621

taking place. Many parishes and pastors took responsibility to adequately support Jewish communities, but others took no action or became complacent with the crimes committed by Nazi Germany. With no instructions from the Pope or the Vatican, the hierarchies of the Catholic Church found themselves in chaos, reacting primarily to local social pressures rather than acting according to Christian morality. One striking example of radical individual responses accredited to the lack of direction from the Roman Church is Jozef Gašpar Tiso. Tiso was a Roman Catholic priest who became the president of the Slovak Republic. While in political authority, Tiso worked with Hitler and even supported the handover of 58,000 Jews to Nazi Germany<sup>10</sup>. Though the Church objected to this, there were no consequences for Tiso, and he died as a Catholic priest. Not only did the Church remain silent on the world stage, they also allowed their own priests to commit horrendous actions without repercussions or banishment. This lack of a firm response stemmed from their resistance to real solidarity with Jewish communities and the fear of inviting themselves into the conflict. Though the institutional Church chose not to react because of fear of assault and loathing of Jewish people, many individual Catholics had a contradictory reaction to the needs of those affected by the events of the Holocaust.

Even though the Church remained silent during the Holocaust, many individual Catholics took extreme steps to care of the victims of the Holocaust. Numerous Catholics sheltered and hid Jews during German occupation, such as Miep Gies who hid the Frank family, and many Catholics offered their life in solidarity with Jewish victims. Thousands of clergy were martyred for their solidarity with Jewish communities and their resistance to cooperate with Nazi Germany. In the most touching example, Edith Stein, a Carmelite nun who was raised in a Jewish family, was sent to a concentration camp for opposing renouncing her Jewish heritage. Instead of developing anti-semitic views which would have prevented her from solidarity, Edith

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<sup>10</sup> Ward, James Mace. "No Saint: Jozef Tiso, 1887–1947." Order No. 3313682, Stanford University, 2008.

Stein sheltered and supported many Jewish refugees at her covenants in Germany and Holland. Walter Herbstrith, in his biography on Stein, wrote that she lived a “life of unbroken compassion with the millions caught up in the horrors of the war and blinded by its hatred”<sup>11</sup>, emphasizing her commitment to standing with her Jewish family until her death in 1942 at Auschwitz.

Another European clergy member, Father Maria Bendetto, provides a second strong example of individual Catholics reacting differently than the institutional Church. Father Bendetto risked his life daily by smuggling and sheltering Jewish refugees from danger, forging identity papers, procuring ration books, raising money to sustain fugitives in hiding, and interceding with friendly and hostile authorities<sup>12</sup>. Bendetto was also known for having long lasting friendships with all types of people, including communists. In an interview taken two years before his death, Father Marie Bendetto admitted “I love the Jews with all my heart” and that he “worked within the church on Judeo-Christian rapprochement”<sup>13</sup>. Bendetto, along with Edith Stein, responded entirely different to the horrors of the Holocaust than the insitutional Catholic Church did, even going as far as being willing to die alongside their Jewish brothers and sisters. Many Catholics acted not with anti-semetic views or fear of communism and external dangers, but in solidarity with all those affected, regardless of religious affiliation, heritage, or economic ideology. With examples of individuals reacting more strongly to the Holocaust than the centralized Church, many historians and religious leaders have heavily criticized the Catholic Church. However, similar to the individual disciples that composed the early Church, many independent Catholics agreed that “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables”<sup>14</sup>.

The same factors that restricted the Church’s reaction to the Holocaust, institutional

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<sup>11</sup> Herbstrith, Waltraud. “The Untold Story of the Philosopher and Mystic Who Lost Her Life in the Death Camps of Auschwitz”, Ignatius Press (1985)

<sup>12</sup> Marrus, Michael R. "Père Marie-Benoît and Jewish Rescue: How a French Priest Together with Jewish Friends Saved Thousands during the Holocaust. by Susan Zuccotti.: Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Marrus, “Père Marie-Benoît”, 2013

<sup>14</sup> *Acts of the Apostles*, English Standard Version, 6:2

anti-semitism and fear of political consequences, motivated thousands of Catholics to be the light of Christ in the world.

During the Holocaust, the institutional Catholic Church failed to properly respond to the atrocities occurring, but their reluctance can be traced back to two important factors. The Church's history with anti-semitic ideology and its anxiety of being dismantled influenced the neutrality taken by the Church and restricted their public support of those afflicted by the Holocaust. However, many individual Catholics took responsibility to care for the victims of the Holocaust regardless of the danger faced. It is incredibly easy to criticize the Catholic Church for their neglect, but perhaps it is better to praise the members of the Church who properly responded in accordance with true Catholic morality and teachings.

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