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# The Pius XII Controversy: John Cornwell, Margherita Marchione, et. al.

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Few would dispute that Eugenio Pacelli, better known as Pope Pius XII, remains one of the most controversial figures of this century. Although his reign lasted twenty years (1939-1958), the debate swirls around his career as a papal diplomat in Germany from 1917 to 1939 (the year he became pope) and the period of his papacy that overlapped with World War II. Questions surrounding his relationship with Hitler's Third Reich (1933-1945) and his policy decisions with respect to the Holocaust extend far beyond the realm of calm historical research to the point of acrimonious polemics. In fact, virtually all the studies which have emerged about Pius XII after the controversial play *The Deputy* (1963) by Rolf Hochhuth range between histories with polemical elements to outright advocacy works for or against. Any works previous to this date fell habitually into the category of hagiography. The following series of observations does not aspire to resolving the debate; only time offers promise for such a hope. I wish simply to lift up the current controversial biography of Eugenio Pacelli by John Cornwell, called provocatively *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (London: Viking Penguin, 1999), and compare and contrast its case with that of historian Margherita Marchione's apologia *Pope Pius XII, Architect for Peace* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000). As well, I propose to note some additional material from other historians which I hope will assist readers who seek to find some light in the midst of the heat.

## I. Setting the Context:

Why bother? Certainly, as an historian I might argue that antiquarian interest alone and good old human curiosity justify such a search for resolution. However, that scarcely scratches the surface of my interest in the debate. A chief axiom that drives my life both as a Christian and historian is that insight by the philosopher who said, "those who do not learn their history are doomed to relive it". And the concerns surrounding the rise of Nazism, World War II and the Holocaust remain issues which shape and divide our world, even though they are over half a century old. When I was a Ph.D. student at the University of Pittsburgh in the early 1970s I was struck by the fact that historians of the French Revolution (by then, over one hundred and eighty years old ) debated with each other as if life and progress itself depended on the outcome of that debate. Also, I remember when Luther's five hundredth birthday was celebrated in Waterloo (1983) via an academic conference, and I witnessed scholarship roll over into polemical outbursts as paper presenters and the audience made war with each other.

The career of Eugenio Pacelli from 1917-1946 has generated similar conflagrations which have now come to a head with Cornwell's *Hitler's Pope*. Before examining the content of the book it is important to highlight the various contexts out of which it emerged and now has its impact. As a passionately involved historian, I have expressed perhaps more critiques of Pius XII and his reign than I have against any other figure in twentieth century church history. His triumphalist papacy, his devotion to hierarchy and a traditionalist austere piety, his rabid anti-communism, his links to the Nazi regime, his alleged silence with respect to the treatment of European Jews, and his condemnation of the worker-priests in France and Belgium have entrenched me in this critique. The subsequent positive witness of both John XXIII and Paul VI underscored this negative opinion all the more. Thus, when Cornwell's *Hitler's Pope* appeared I was eager to grab it up and plumb its pages, which I did. Not surprisingly I found my opinions confirmed by Cornwell. Soon thereafter, the book review editor of *Consensus*, David Jacobsen, approached me with the challenge of doing a review essay comparing Cornwell's book with the pro-papacy historian Sister Margherita Marchione's *Pope Pius XII: Architect for Peace*. Without much thought I agreed and set to work immediately on Marchione's book. As I read it and as I considered the wider context out of which these two appeared, I decided to struggle

with all my heart to give both books a fair hearing. By this I do not mean impartiality nor some kind of mythical objectivity which is habitually only a cover for some underlying ideology.

However, what I do intend is to urge those interested in the subject to read both books with strong awareness of the authors' assumptions (what we in the "theo" business call hermeneutics) as well as their *Sitz-im-Leben* in the wider context of church and society. My task is to undertake a comparative critique of both works in light of my own research on the subject. Having clarified my personal view of the papacy of Pius XII, I turn now to the wider context of the appearance of both books as well as the standing place of the church at the brink of a new millennium. Our own Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) has committed itself to formal and intentional dialogue with both the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches. Also, both Anglicans and Lutherans have intensified pro-unity dialogue with Roman Catholicism independently of each other, witnessed in part by the joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic statement on justification. Because of this, any widely published controversial work on the papacy impacts of necessity on the delicate dialogical process any church has with its Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, especially if such work proves embarrassing to the Vatican. Cornwell's work has certainly accomplished that.

Further, we currently face an increasing number of historical revelations about the Holocaust. Jewish groups and survivors are becoming more vocal as Holocaust deniers and neo-fascist movements multiply both in North America and Europe. As well, Christian-Jewish dialogue has grown, and Christian theologians and activists involved in these conversations put pressure on their churches to break their complicity of silence regarding their long history of anti-Semitism and massive shared guilt in the Holocaust. Our recent ELCIC statement of repentance over Lutheran anti-Semitism fits into this wider context. So also do the current activities of Pope John Paul II. Few would dispute that the current Pontiff has done more for Jewish-Christian relations than any previous pope. His dealings with Jews since his childhood in Poland through the Holocaust period and thereafter bear no signs of the ruthless anti-Semitism characteristic of both Christian history and Nazism. Recently, his statement of Roman Catholicism's official repentance over the anti-Semitism found within its history and his trip to Israel represent milestones toward healing the deep wounds and facing the atrocities heaped



upon Jews by Christians over the last two millennia. This is cause to celebrate. Nonetheless, we must emphasize that these are just steps in a long-term process that is just beginning. So much more needs to be done.

Both within the Jewish and Christian communities one can find numbers of important voices urging a deeper look at both anti-Judaism within the Christian tradition and the complicity of European Christian churches in the Holocaust. In such an investigation, the papacies of both Pius XI and Pius XII come into focus, and the light has fallen chiefly upon the person of Eugenio Pacelli, who was secretary of state for Pius XI and then himself Pope Pius XII. Three events over the last decades have brought to the fore the issue of Pacelli's pontificate. 1) In 1963 Rolf Hochhuth produced a controversial play entitled *The Deputy*, which portrayed Pius XII as a distant austere pope who placed narrow ecclesial interests above justice and human compassion toward the victims of the Holocaust. 2) At the same time a series of studies began (continuing to the present) regarding the German Protestant and Catholic churches' complicity with the Third Reich. 3) Finally, in our own day the Roman Catholic Church has begun the process of canonization to sainthood of controversial figures whose ties with fascist groups or governments have yet to be clarified: for example, in 1998 Pope John Paul II announced the beatification of Croatian Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac, who had supported the collaborationist Croatian regime with its connection to the notorious Ustashe death squads. Most importantly, Pius XII himself has been put forward as a candidate for canonization, and this action has stirred up old controversies surrounding the relationship of Eugenio Pacelli, both as Vatican bureaucrat and pope, with the authoritarian regimes of Italy and Germany. This latter move demands answers to questions surrounding Pacelli's relationship to the Jews and Hitler's practice of genocide against them.

John Cornwell's controversial bestseller *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* brings all these contexts to the fore in an explosive mix. To examine this work remains a must in an age of increasing ecumenical dialogue and continuing struggles within Roman Catholicism, in particular as to its identity. At the same time, sorting truth from myth and clarity from passion feels much like trying to clear a mine field. First of all, let me underscore the respective driving forces behind Cornwell and Marchione, as well as the sources that they used. John Cornwell,

researcher, journalist and practising Catholic, sought to investigate and write "a fair appraisal of Pacelli" over against the storm of controversy unleashed by the Hochhuth play and subsequent historians. To do this he proposed to write a full biography, being "convinced that if his [Pacelli's] full story were told, Pius XII's pontificate would be vindicated." With this in mind, Cornwell informs us, key Vatican archivists assisted him by opening up previously inaccessible documentation. Two newly available archive collections proved especially helpful to Cornwell's query: 1) the collection of sworn depositions collected for Pius XII's beatification process, and 2) diplomatic documents deriving from Pacelli's career from 1913 to 1922, including his work as papal nuncio in Germany. Using this new as well as other documentation, Cornwell reached a startling conclusion: "By the middle of 1997, nearing the end of my research, I found myself in a state I can only describe as moral shock. The material I had gathered, taking the more extensive view of Pacelli's life, amounted not to an exoneration but to a wider indictment." Cornwell speaks of "the story of a bid for unprecedented papal power that by 1933 had drawn the Catholic Church into complicity with the darkest forces of the era." He indicates that "from an early stage in his career Pacelli betrayed an undeniable antipathy towards the Jews, and that his diplomacy in Germany in the 1930s had resulted in the betrayal of Catholic political associations that might have challenged Hitler's regime and thwarted the Final Solution" (p. x). Cornwell's conclusions represent a chilling indictment: "Eugenio Pacelli was no monster; his case is far more complex, more tragic, than that. The interest of his story depends on a fatal combination of high spiritual aspirations in conflict with soaring ambition for power and control. His is not a portrait of evil but of fatal moral dislocation – a separation of authority from Christian love. The consequences of that rupture were collusion with tyranny and, ultimately, violence" (pp. x-xi).

Appearing shortly after the Cornwell book, Sister Margherita Marchione offers up her *Pope Pius XII: Architect for Peace* as an apologia for Eugenio Pacelli in response to the storm of criticism, academic and otherwise, that has emerged since the Hochhuth play. Following in the tradition of the Jesuit Father Pierre Blet's *Pius XII and the Second World War: According to the Archives of the Vatican* (1999 [1997]) Sister Marchione, a professional historian, seeks to vindicate the war-time pontiff over against his subsequent detractors. "There is great need to eliminate the false interpretations of the so-called 'silence' of Pope Pius XII

that has circulated for half a century. In his talks, Pius XII does not explicitly mention any specific group of victims. However, everyone understood his reference to 'Jews.' Pius XII's thoughts were expressed clearly and emphatically. His style was that of a diplomat who pondered over every word he uttered." She goes on to state that the "Vatican was the one major refuge for thousands of persecuted people and its Information Bureau was the sole means of communication available to prisoners of war and their families. It is my wish to make clear the role of the Church in this period, to defend Pius XII's actions, and to make the truth known (p. 9)." Sister Marchione remains determined "to put an end to the calumny" surrounding Pacelli's supposed silence in order to get on with the good work of Catholic-Jewish dialogue. The author is convinced that "any reader who is attentive to the narrative [of her book] and the documents in this volume will find ample evidence to dismiss the allegations of critics such as John Cornwell whose 1999 book...mixed facts and errors and speculation in a manner that casts doubt on any claim to be considered a work of serious historical scholarship" (p. 10).

In terms of this purpose her work proves less of a biography and more of a defence broken up into several manageable parts. The first section of her book provides an overview of the documentation, historical and otherwise, bearing on Pius XII's activities during the war. The next two parts (the main section of her work) cover in great detail the papal concern with prisoners of war (POWs) and the Holocaust. Then follows chronologies, sources, and an annotated bibliography about the issues under investigation. The last third of the book contains primary documentation from the Vatican and church leaders which Sister Marchione uses to defend her view of the war-time pontiff. In all of this she states quite openly her own personal stake in the research: "Few speaking or writing about Pope Pius XII today do so from a detached perspective. I am no exception. I am convinced that Pius XII was a wise and saintly man. I hope that the evidence I bring to bear concerning his work on behalf of victims of war, especially Jewish victims, will convince others of his wisdom and holiness" (p. 10). She describes with passion how she felt driven to undertake her task during her 1957 audience with the pope: "Pius XII's piercing eyes penetrated my soul and I still see his tall, dignified, and ascetic stature along with his penetrating glance, his loving smile, and animated gestures. He had a magnetic personality full of intelligence and nobility of spirit. When I think of Pius XII, I feel inspired. How can I not dedicate myself to him with the same fervor that



impelled me to write about [others]?" (pp. 8-9)

## II. Marchione and Cornwell: a Comparison of the Two Works:

Sister Marchione's *Pope Pius XII: Architect for Peace* draws sharper limits than the broader biography of Cornwell. She focuses her in-depth study upon the war years and Pius XII's relationship to the war, POW's and the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Using extensive documentation, she demonstrates how the Vatican and Pius XII strove to find a road to peace in the midst of war, how Pius XII and his church cared for refugees throughout and after the conflict, how they spoke out in defence of the Jews and against racism, and how they and Catholics throughout Europe hid Jews. As for the "silence" of Pope Pius XII, his refusal to speak out forcefully, she defends this as an act of humanitarian strategy employed by a Christian man of peace using his diplomatic skills to minimize the blood-letting of both war and Nazi massacres. She underscores the pope's consistently negative views toward Nazism, as well as the acclaim given to his rescue efforts by world leaders, both Jew and Gentile. Sister Marchione argues that Pius XII, along with Catholics throughout Europe, managed to save the lives of over half a million Jews. Her accumulation of data impresses the reader, and if one can focus the issue entirely upon Pius XII's diplomatic skills, his desire for peace, his vast humanitarian charity work, and his statements here and there against racism and overweening national pride with its attendant massacres, then her apologia rests upon a strong foundation, one that had been promoted earlier by historians such as Father Blet and Robert Graham.

However, the Cornwell book moves significantly beyond these narrow parameters. His indictment of Pius XII centers on the overarching policies pursued by Pacelli both as a Vatican diplomat and as pope. He argues that from the beginning of his career this brilliant diplomat undertook a program to centralize Catholic power in the Vatican and to seek global influence for the Church through agreements (Concordats) with as many states as possible, as long as these were not leftist states. This policy, inaugurated by his predecessor Pius XI, was masterminded by Pacelli through his central role in the Vatican's diplomatic bureaucracy. In short, Cornwell argues, Pacelli never sought to promote Nazism, nor did he even come close to supporting the Holocaust. Cornwell even acknowledges that the Pontiff hid some Jews, engaged in mass support for refugees and spoke out in general terms against racism and ethnic



massacres. However, his main point remains that matters of ecclesiastical power and polity consistently took priority over resistance to tyranny and over justice toward oppressed and massacred people.

How does he make this case? First, he positions Pacelli in the socio-ecclesiastical context of his childhood and youth, that period in Italian and European politics when the nation states secularized and industrialized to the detriment of church power and prestige. In such an environment Catholicism, with few exceptions, developed a rather monolithic fortress mentality embodied by Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors*, the First Vatican Council, and the doctrine of papal infallibility. In this adversarial atmosphere, ultramontanist and papal centralism were in the air. As a young priest and Vatican diplomat Pacelli served under the ultraconservative Pius X, the father of the anti-modernist crusade, architect of various condemnations of Christian Democracy, and sympathizer with the pro-Catholic, anti-Semitic, right-wing *Action Française*. Meanwhile, the Vatican that helped shape the young Pacelli stood resolutely against the new Kingdom of Italy which had chased the papacy from its Roman rule in 1871. In this reality Eugenio Pacelli educated himself as a diplomat fixed on the goal of restoring the papacy to its previous glory as embodied in the High Middle Ages. This same Christian Church, whether Catholic or Protestant, was saturated with a long history of theological anti-Judaism which erupted all too frequently into violent excesses. The Catholic response to the Dreyfus Affair in France (1890s) stands out starkly in this respect. Cornwell links Pacelli with this overall goal of Vatican centralization and authoritarian episcopal power by highlighting his pivotal role in the publication of the 1917 Code of Canon Law which undergirded the centralized anti-modernist purges of Pius X. In this critique, Cornwell places himself squarely in the camp of Vatican II Catholics with their commitment to internal collegiality of authority and openness to progressive forces in the external world. During Pacelli's earlier career, these progressive Catholics suffered grievously under the forces of reaction unleashed by Pius X. From the beginning the young Father Pacelli joined the more conservative forces which dominated early twentieth century Catholicism. Cornwell argues (and in this, I agree with him) that this program predisposed the Vatican to find conservative, even more authoritarian, regimes more amenable to church goals than governments dedicated to democracy, social reform or social transformation.

According to Cornwell, this basic mind set led the Vatican and Pacelli

to make fatal and devastating compromises with brutal right-wing regimes, especially Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. This proved detrimental to democracy and social justice to the point of life-threatening danger to Jews and other minorities. In short, Cornwell asserts that war-time “complicity” with Nazism grew naturally out of the interwar diplomatic German policy pursued so assiduously by Vatican Secretary of State Pacelli. Put another way, Cornwell underscores what theologians call “structural sin” which can exist side by side with individual “charity” or “compassion”. Thus, Pacelli could be responsible for vital humanitarian gestures in a horrendous situation which he had helped bring to fruition. In my opinion, this remains the heart of Cornwell’s case, a case reflected in other major critiques of German Christianity during the interwar period (for examples, consult Guenter Lewy’s *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany* [2<sup>nd</sup>. ed., 2000] and the massive two-volume work by Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich* [1988]). The heart of the Vatican’s program during the interwar papacy of Pius XI (1922-1939) (a program intensified during Pacelli’s stint as Cardinal Secretary of State) revolved around direct official ties between the Vatican and national governments embodied in negotiated concordats. Habitually this included the direct undermining of grass-roots Catholic activists in these particular countries. This stands out especially in the cases of the Vatican treaties with Fascist Italy (1929) and Nazi Germany (1933): in both instances, the fascist states insisted upon the destruction of Christian Democratic parties and independent Catholic trade unions. Such an expectation was hardly inimical to papal policy as exemplified by Pius XI and his Secretary of State. Pacelli, as architect of the Concordat with the Nazi state, delivered on this agenda. In a series of rapid moves the Catholic *Zentrum* (Centre) Party was shut down and its former conservative leader Monseigneur Ludwig Kaas moved to the Vatican. This strategy proved especially tragic because it undermined a fairly strong German Catholic resistance against Nazism in the twilight years of the Weimar Republic. Unlike German Protestantism, which wholeheartedly voted Nazi in the critical 1932 elections, the Catholic Centre Party had held much of its Catholic vote, and anti-Nazism proved strong within independent Catholic working class organizations of the Rhineland. Even the German bishops, meeting at Fulda (1931 and 1932), spoke out against Nazism and membership in the Nazi party. However, with the negotiations for the Concordat the Centre Party disbanded, though not before providing the necessary votes in the *Reichstag* to grant Hitler dictatorial powers. Sec-

retary of State Pacelli and his pope sealed the fate of effective Catholic resistance to Nazism. Their strategy of high-level concordats at the expense of independent grass-roots Catholic anti-Nazism opened the door to the Nazi excesses to follow, however good Vatican intentions may have been. Sister Marchione does not undertake to examine these issues; after all her book deals only with the pontificate of Pius XII, not with his previous diplomatic career. Nonetheless, these charges by Cornwell remain devastating, and to my mind have never been challenged satisfactorily.

Cornwell's third conclusion is counteracted by the Marchione book. The former author charges that Pius XII spoke out too little and too late against Nazi atrocities, especially those perpetrated in the *Shoah*. Marchione suggests that Pius XII's caution and care were motivated in the interest of avoiding worse bloodshed, since he knew full well that baiting such an unholy regime with sharp language would only escalate the terror. This position deserves a hearing. So also does the case developed by Cornwell. First of all, the action of European Catholics, here and there throughout Europe, to rescue Jews and to stand up to Nazi anti-Semitism cannot be used to defend the action or non-action of Pius XII. By the same token neither can the anti-Semitic legislation promulgated in pro-Catholic countries (Croatia, Vichy France, etc.) build up a case against the Pontiff. The issue to be resolved in all this remains Pius XII's own behaviour in the face of these contradictory realities. How did he relate to these two camps? Cornwell is convinced that the pope, fuelled by his anti-Red passion, inclined himself toward living with the new Nazi order in Europe until it became patently obvious that the Allies would win the war. Even then, Cornwell points out, His Holiness did not raise an outcry against the massive deportation of Roman Jews by the Gestapo (late 1943). His reaction to the deportation of French Jews was silence as well. Again and again Cornwell cites instances where the pope said nothing or merely uttered tepid, generalized statements. Recently, information has emerged that Pius XI had commissioned theologians to write an encyclical for him which would denounce Hitlerian anti-Semitism (Georges Passelecq & Bernard Suchecky, *The Hidden Encyclical of Pius XI*). The pope died before its publication; Pius XII did not follow through on this project. In fact, one of his first acts as pope was to lift his predecessor's condemnation of the rabidly anti-Semitic *Action Française*. These instances, cited by Cornwell with footnoted evidence, need direct answers by those with alternate points of view.



Strange as it may seem, there remains truth in the positions of both authors. Marchione makes a strong case for papal humanitarianism in the midst of war through massive aid via diplomatic channels, and one would be hard pressed to challenge the assertion that Pius XII used all his diplomatic strength and influence to promote a peaceful end to the conflagration of the 1940s. Nevertheless, this strong case does precious little to undermine the main assertions of Cornwell. The difference of opinion found in the two writers as to the most effective strategy to save Jews and other minorities cannot be resolved conclusively. At the same time, Cornwell makes an excellent case that rescuing Jews, refugees and other minorities, or combatting the tyranny of Fascism/Nazism, were near the bottom of the list in Vatican priorities. His most chilling accusation (virtually unassailable in my opinion), that Pacelli and the Vatican put their own ecclesiastical power needs and programs above all else, meets the test of his challengers. This narrow focus rendered the Vatican structurally complicit with Nazism and its "look-alikes".

Today the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations continue to struggle with issues surrounding the conflict between faithful risk and institutional preservation and promotion. The two do not have to be antithetical, but in the face of horrendous evil the church must discover again and again that it cannot expect to "make a pact with the devil" and emerge unscathed. I suspect history will judge that Eugenio Pacelli did not learn that lesson in spite of his personal piety and holiness. One can only hope that the current spirit of Christian repentance over our historical excesses will move beyond photo-ops and generalizations to hard, honest analysis and rectification of wrongs. We witness good signs in that direction. The continuing debate around the papacy of Pius XII demands such faithful scrutiny.