Vatican beatifies anti-Semitic Pope

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19 September 2000

The beatification of Pope Pius IX has again revealed the deeply ingrained anti-Semitism within the Catholic Church. Pope Pius IX, who reigned from 1846 to 1878, was one of two former pontiffs beatified by Pope John-Paul II on September 3 in a ceremony attended by thousands of pilgrims in St Peter's Square.

Beatification is the last step before bestowing sainthood. It was carried out despite widespread criticism by Jewish organisations and liberal Catholics of Pius IX's anti-Jewish record. On the eve of the ceremony hundreds of Rome's Jews and Catholics protested against the beatification in a candlelight vigil.

Pius IX was renowned for his frequent anti-Semitic speeches. In one address, he is said to have called Jews "dogs of which there are too many present in Rome, howling and disturbing us everywhere". In 1848 Pius IX forced the Jews of Rome back into the old ghetto to which they had been confined for centuries, and in the following year, he enacted racial laws against them. Jews were banned from public hospitals, prevented from giving evidence against Christians in papal courts and excluded from all institutes of secondary and higher education. Israeli historians say that these laws were the forerunners of fascist dictator Benito Mussolini's race policies.

Leading British church scholar Professor Owen Chadwick said that the nineteenth-century pontiff's record "verges on the criminal". In one case, which caused an international outcry at the time, Pius IX personally ordered the forced kidnap and baptism of a six-year-old Jewish boy, Edgardo Levi Mortara in 1858.

Pius IX was known for his extreme conservatism. He condemned 80 propositions as "erroneous", including socialism, liberalism, communism, rationalism, progress and modern civilisation in general.

Catholic conservatives say that Pius IX, who had the longest reign of any Pope, should be celebrated for his "heroic values" in standing up against the creation of a secular Italy and as "a model of Christian life".

The decision to proceed with Pius IX's beatification comes after the Catholic Church was forced to suspend that of Pope Pius XII, known as "Hitler's Pope". According to John Cornwell, a former seminarian and research fellow at Jesus College, Cambridge and author of *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pope Pius XII*, the wartime Pope displayed a "secret antipathy towards the Jews".

Cornwell spent six years researching information in the Vatican archives on Eugenio Pacelli, as Pius XII was known before his election. He had originally intended his book to defend Pope Pius XII against criticism that he had not done enough to stop the Holocaust. Instead he had uncovered evidence that amounted to a "wider indictment".

As the papal envoy in Munich in 1932, prior to his becoming Pope in 1939, Pacelli considered the Jews to be part of a Bolshevik plot to destroy Christendom and agreed to sanction the Vatican-German Concordat of 1933 that aided Hitler's rise to power. In doing so, he cleared the way for Hitler's "Final Solution" to continue. "He was Hitler's pawn. He was Hitler's Pope," said Professor Cornwell.

Although the Vatican was forced to quietly suspend plans for Pius XII's sainthood due to widespread opposition from Jewish groups and others, the Catholic Church has defended his record. During a television interview about Pius XII's wartime role, Archbishop Sambi said that the Vatican had taken the view that public condemnation of the Holocaust would only have made matters worse. "I am convinced that a strong condemnation would have increased Hitler's persecution of the Jews. I justify totally what he did to save many Jews."

At the end of the war, the Vatican aided the escape of hundreds of Nazis from Europe by issuing them with

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false Red Cross passports. The so-called “rat line” involved a network of European monasteries used to harbour war criminals. These were spirited out of Germany and the former Nazi occupied territories to Latin America. Mass murderers like Adolf Eichmann, Klaus Barbie and Ante Pavelic were delivered to the port of Buenos Aires disguised as priests. As in the case of Barbie, some went on to become expert advisers to Latin American dictatorships in techniques of repression and torture perfected by the Third Reich.

Last year the Pope had designated the new millennium as a “year of purification” for the Church. The Vatican issued a 14-page document, *We Remember, A Reflection on the Shoah*, meant as an “act of repentance” for its wartime record. During the papal pilgrimage to Israel in March, the Pope had placed a note in the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, asking God's forgiveness for the past sins of his Church, and committing Catholics to future brotherhood with Jews. French bishops issued an apology for the Church's support for the collaborationist Vichy regime and the Spanish Church was said to be asking for “forgiveness” for its support for the fascist Franco before, during and after the 1936 civil war.

Such apologies aside, the Papacy has never accounted for the help it extended to those who directed the Holocaust. Moreover, the Catholic Church still refuses to open its archive of documents relating to this alliance. One US Treasury document accuses the Vatican of keeping gold—worth an estimated 200 million Swiss francs at the time—looted by Croatia's Nazi puppet regime safe in the Vatican vaults for the *Ustashe*. The money is alleged to have been used to finance the “rat line”.

The Catholic Church's support for the Nazi regime was not solely due to its anti-Semitism. As a bastion of the ruling elite, it has played a reactionary role at every juncture of social and historical developments. In the eighteenth century it supported the autocracy against the fight for constitutional democracy. At the beginning of the twentieth century, its support for reaction took the form of hostility towards the struggle of the working class for socialism, and support for its total suppression through fascism.

It still plays this role today. The proposal to sanctify known anti-Semites is just one way this can be seen. Last year the Vatican lent its support to the former Chilean Dictator General Pinochet in his attempt to avoid extradition to Spain for human rights abuses committed during his reign of terror. Only recently the Vatican has confirmed that Pope John-Paul II is to meet Jörg Haider, the leader of Austria's far-right Freedom Party on December 16.

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