

# The (Un)Holy Silence of Pope Pius XII

BY DINA GOLD | Arts & Culture



“The Pope has come to symbolize a moral test for the Catholic Church during World War Two. What is the point of a religion, what is the role of the Catholic Church? And it’s a question for all time,” says Suzanne Brown-Fleming, director of international academic programs of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and author of *The Holocaust and Catholic Conscience*, in the opening minutes of the powerful, thought-provoking documentary, *Holy Silence*.

In March of this year, the long-awaited opening of the Vatican archives gave historians their first opportunity, finally, to examine the legacy of Pope Pius XII—particularly what he did, or rather did not do, during the Holocaust. This feature is an excellent primer on what we know up to this point.

A rich collection of historical film footage, photographs, documents and interviews with historians and contemporary Catholic clerics charts the Vatican’s evolving stance toward Jews from the papacy of Pius XI, beginning in 1922, through the papacy of Pius XII, from March 1939 to the end of the war.

The enduring controversy over the role of Eugenio Pacelli—closest adviser to Pope Pius XI who succeeded him to become Pius XII, is the main focus of the film, asking why he did so little to speak out when his predecessor had tried to take a clear moral stand.

In 1933, there were 21 million German Roman Catholics—a third of the population of the country. The Vatican had an opportunity to influence them and, it seems, Pope Pius XI had every intention of doing so. He abhorred the Third Reich’s anti-Semitism, stating it was “a hateful movement...spiritually we are all Semites,” and described Hitler as “an enemy of the Catholic Church.” Pius XI had personally tasked a Harvard-educated American Jesuit priest and journalist, John LaFarge, author of the 1937 book *Interracial Justice: A Study of the Catholic Doctrine of Race Relations*, to write a groundbreaking encyclical—a letter to all bishops from the Pope—against racism and anti-Semitism. On February 10, 1939, the eve of presenting LaFarge’s 100-page document “*Humani generis unitis*” (On the Unity of the Human Race), Pope Pius XI died. Pius XII succeeded him on March 2 and decreed that all copies should be destroyed and never referred to again as an encyclical.

Americans’ reactions to the rise of fascism in Europe were mixed. Several notable characters are featured in the film, including leading industrialist Myron Taylor, who brought “quiet diplomacy” as FDR’s go-between with the Vatican, and Father Charles Coughlin, a priest in Detroit, who made openly anti-Semitic broadcasts to his 30 million radio show listeners.

The enduring controversy over Pius XII is why, when war came and reports reached him of mass atrocities, did he stay silent? Susan Zuccotti, author of *Under His Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy*, says there is little disagreement about what the Pope knew since he had ambassadors in numerous countries, including Germany, who reported to him. “Many of the reports had actually been signed ‘seen by the Pope,’ says Zuccotti. “The documents speak of 2 million Jews having been killed.”

Pius XII neither denounced what he knew was happening nor instructed religious institutions or the general public to open their doors and offer shelter to persecuted Jews. A bold statement instructing Catholics to cease cooperating on a day-to-day level with the Nazis, or an appeal to soldiers on the battlefield, might have led to them responding differently. But the spiritual leader of the Catholic world remained silent in the face of known mass deportations and the murder of millions. Pius XII issued mere anodyne statements about world peace, harmony and brotherhood.

Several explanations for the Pope’s silence are given, from his wanting to stay “on the safe side” by remaining neutral, hoping he would be involved in any peace negotiations, to a reluctance to risk a diplomatic break between the Vatican and Germany, to, according to Michael Phayer, Emeritus Professor of History at Marquette University, Pius XII thinking that the Allies could not win the war and there would be a negotiated peace “... that would leave the Nazis in power in much of Europe.” Astonishingly, Norbert Hofmann, from the Vatican Commission on Jewish Relations, offers this excuse: “The Nazis were here in Rome at the gates of his Palace. He was a prisoner in the Vatican. What you can do (sic) as a prisoner? You can only hope and pray.”

Whatever the reason for his silence regarding the fate of the Jews of Europe, when it came to protecting Rome’s buildings, Pius XII found his voice, writing personally to President Franklin D. Roosevelt on July 19, 1943 “... a city whose every district has its irreplaceable monuments of faith or art and Christian culture cannot be attacked without inflicting an incomparable loss on the patrimony of religion and civilization.” The irony is nauseating.

As Peter Eisner, author of *The Pope’s Last Crusade*, commented at a post-screening discussion, there are still “many unanswered questions.”

There are 16 million documents in the Vatican waiting to be read. Maybe one day we will get a deeper understanding of the profound moral questions raised in the film about complicity and silence. It is not only Jews who need answers but also Catholics, who must ask themselves why their church failed to uphold Catholic principles of love and mercy.

The story of the inaction of Pope Pius XII in the face of evil still has many chapters to be written. Sadly, Steven Pressman has said he is not planning a sequel.