

Pope Pius XII and the Nazis: Shrewd diplomat or failed prophet?

by [John T. Pawlikowski](#) in the [February 23, 2000](#) issue

Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII, by John Cornwall

Pius XII and the Second World War: According to the Archives of the Vatican, by Pierre Blet

These two volumes stand in stark contrast. John Cornwall indicts Pope Pius XII for aiding and abetting the Nazis in order to consolidate his power over the Catholic Church. Pierre Blet offers an equally strong defense of Pius as a compassionate leader who did all he could to help Jews and other Nazi victims under very trying circumstances—a claim Blet considers confirmed by 12 published volumes of Vatican archival materials. There is little or no middle ground between the two authors. Cornwall is the prosecutor, Blet the defense attorney. Neither succeeds fully in his assumed role, though Blet's scholarship is by far the sounder.

Cornwall has good credentials—he is a senior research fellow at Jesus College, Cambridge, and author of the best-selling *A Thief in the Night: The Death of Pope John Paul I*—but his new book is full of exaggerated claims and deceptions, beginning with the title and dust cover. The title implies that Pius XII was a virtual agent of the Nazis. Yet Cornwall's actual argument stops short of any direct connection between the pope and Hitler's program. He presents Pius's willingness to enter into a concordat with Hitler and to refrain from strong public criticism of the Nazis as based on Catholic self-interest rather than on any support of Nazism as an ideology. And the cover photo of Pius was taken in 1927, before he was pope, as he was leaving a reception for Paul von Hindenburg, president of the Weimar Republic. Though the photograph is correctly identified in very small print, it conveys the impression that the pope is visiting the Third Reich.

The exaggerations do not stop there. Far more serious are the unfounded claims about the "secret" materials on which the book supposedly is based. Vatican library records show that Cornwall spent very few hours there and that he was not privy to

any materials unavailable to other scholars. In short, there is little really new in Cornwall's account. And his interpretation of materials is often deeply flawed. His claim, for example, that Pius harbored a deep anti-Semitism is based simplistically on a condemnatory remark Pius made about Jewish bolsheviks. The comment may have been inappropriate, but many Jews of the time said far worse things about Jewish bolsheviks.

Cornwall presents only the evidence that suggests his predetermined view. Nowhere does he seriously engage the major scholarship on Pius that has come from such important Jewish and Christian researchers on the period as Michael Marrus, John Morley, John Conway and Owen Chadwick. Some of their works are listed in Cornwall's bibliography, but he does not seem to have used them. He does not even acknowledge Marrus's major work on the subject. Nor does he deal in any comprehensive way with the published Vatican archival material.

It is disturbing to see the attention this book has received from the secular press, including reputable journals. That publisher hype can elevate a work of deeply flawed scholarship to the bestseller list is a serious threat to responsible scholarship. No well-recognized scholar who has studied the relationship between the Vatican and the Holocaust was asked to review this volume in the nonreligious press.

Cornwall does raise some issues that cannot be ignored, especially by Catholics, but most of these have already been raised in a more comprehensive fashion by other scholars. At best, Cornwall serves as a devil's advocate. Perhaps the most important issue with which he deals is Pius's signing of the concordat with Hitler. Cornwall interprets this signing as integral to Pius's efforts to centralize the church's power in the papacy. He makes it a major aspect of his indictment in part because he sees a connection between centralization then and centralization later under Pope John Paul II, of which he is profoundly critical. The supposed connection may be an important subtext of this book.

There is little doubt that Pius XII strove to bring about such centralization, and his effort is surely open to critique. But there is a real question about the motives that Cornwall attributes to Pius's efforts. It is clear that Pius had no illusions about full Nazi implementation of the accord. While his judgment about the value of the accord for the preservation of Catholic life in Europe may be seriously questioned, he did not support the agreement simply to enhance his own power, as Cornwall implies, but because he felt it was in the best interest of the church at the time. Pius's vision

may have been too insular and diplomatic; he was insufficiently concerned about protecting the human rights of non-Catholics; he seriously misjudged the significance of the concordat in legitimizing the Third Reich; and his treatment of the Catholic Center Party in Germany is deeply disturbing. These issues must be considered seriously by anyone who cares about maintaining the moral integrity of the church. But Cornwall's book is of little help.

For Cornwall, all of Pius's failures come down in the end to a seriously flawed personality and spirituality. Pius left us no deeply personal reflections on his papacy, something we would need in order to evaluate his personality. But we have ample documentation of his actions and increasing evidence of how people close to him regarded his administration. This record is complex. There is now solid evidence, in part from Vatican archival materials, that Pius did more to oppose Hitler and to help Hitler's victims than many believe. That he might have done even more, for example through the papal nuncios, that he might have acted earlier and that he might have spoken more publicly are claims that need a more thorough airing than many of his Catholic defenders have allowed. But Cornwall's book presents only a very small part of that record, the part that supports his indictment.

Blet's book, on the other hand, helps demolish the thesis that Pius was "silent," at least if one means by that that he did nothing on behalf of Jews and other Nazi victims, such as the Poles and the disabled.

Blet presents a detailed description of Pius's largely behind-the-scenes interventions. While Blet can be criticized for not providing detailed citations for the material he quotes, he presents unquestionably genuine evidence. What is not so certain are some of his judgments about that evidence. Much like his late archival associate Robert Graham, Blet tends to highlight Pius's positive actions without ever questioning whether he might have acted earlier and more comprehensively. While he does engage some of the criticisms of Pius XII—such as those made by the Polish government-in-exile in London—he tends to explain them away, always giving Pius the benefit of the doubt.

Blet also fails to address the issue raised by Gerhart Riegner of the World Jewish Congress. Riegner has identified an important missing document from the published archival materials (whose existence is acknowledged in the archives) that shows the Vatican had information about the depth of the Nazi attack on the Jews considerably earlier than it has claimed. Similarly, Blet omits any reference to the strong critique

of Pius made immediately after the war by Jacques Maritain, a prominent Catholic who eventually resigned his post as French ambassador to the Vatican over what he regarded as Pius's inaction on the issue of German guilt.

Blet's volume may finally force scholars on the Catholic Church and the Holocaust to probe far more thoroughly into the 12 published volumes of Vatican materials. The planned joint Catholic-Jewish scholarly team that is to examine these documents in depth will, one hopes, further advance this process. And full credibility will come only if the remaining archives are opened, at least on a selective basis. Both Cardinal John O'Connor and the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin called for such openness. So long as the archives remain closed, Pius XII and the Catholic Church of the time will continue to live under a moral cloud.

Both the Blet and Cornwall volumes are also part of the current struggle over the possible beatification and canonization of Pius XII. Cornwall addresses this issue directly in his work—indeed, some of his critics see the book as an attempt to derail the sainthood process. Blet does not deal with the issue directly, but many see his book as an effort to clear the air about Pius so that the process might continue. Whatever Cornwall's intention, his biased portrayal may inadvertently have strengthened the hand of those promoting canonization. This would be most unfortunate. Many of us who have researched Pius's record are strongly opposed to his canonization, beatification or even elevation to "venerable" status. Such action would make it extremely difficult, particularly for Catholic scholars, to continue their investigation of his record. At a March '99 consultation on the Vatican document on the Shoah, *We Remember*, I joined Marrus and other participants in emphasizing this point to Cardinal Edward Cassidy, president of the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with Jews. He promised to transmit our argument to key Catholic officials in Rome.

For Cornwall, Pius remains the pope who ignored the requests of some German bishops to speak out more publicly and strongly against the Nazi attack on the Jews. He was a consummate diplomat at a time when the church needed a prophet. For Blet, Pius is the church leader who confronted the Austrian bishops over their support of Hitler's annexation of their country, who harbored Jewish orphans at his summer residence and who strongly supported the efforts of Italian nuns to hide Jews in Rome. Neither author solves what historian José M. Sánchez has termed the "enigma" of Pius XII. Perhaps no one ever will.