

June 23, 2022

Reply to the June 20, 2022 article in *L'Osservatore romano* devoted to *The Pope at War*

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On June 20, 2022, the Vatican's daily newspaper devoted an entire page to a criticism of my new book, *The Pope at War*. The book reconstructs the drama that Pope Pius XII lived through during the Second World War. The *Osservatore Romano* article focuses on three episodes I chronicle in the book. The first regards the secret negotiations Pius entered into shortly after his ascent to the papacy in 1939 with Hitler's personal emissary, Prince Philipp von Hessen. The second regards the pope's first encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus*, issued in October 1939. The third focuses on the pope's failure to publicly protest the October 1943 roundup of over a thousand Jews of Rome and their subsequent deportation to Auschwitz.

The author of the *Osservatore Romano* article, Matteo Napolitano, writes that my chronicling of the secret negotiations between the pope and Hitler's emissary offers nothing new [*"niente di nuovo"*], that the volumes of wartime documents that the Vatican published in 1965-1981 alluded to them and that the pope's meetings with Hitler's envoy were well known to the pope's collaborators. To prove these points, Napolitano refers to the publication in those volumes of a document that Monsignor Domenico Tardini, secretary of the section of the Vatican secretariat of state dealing with foreign affairs, wrote in regard to the March 1940 meeting the pope had with German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop. He cites a single sentence: The meeting had been arranged, Tardini wrote, "Through prince von Hessen (I think) and by means of X."

Yet what Napolitano offers as evidence that the talks were well known to the pope's collaborators shows the exact opposite. The fact that a year after the talks had begun, the pope's most trusted collaborator on foreign relations could offer the tentative note in his internal brief allusion to the matter, "Through Prince Von Hessen (I think)" is in fact an indication that the pope was not sharing news of his secret talks even with Monsignor Tardini. The pope himself assured von Hessen that he was keeping the talks an absolute secret.

Furthermore, while there were some hints in the past that secret talks may have been taking place, they have never previously been confirmed, nor their exact nature ever known. My book relies on virtual transcripts of the talks that have only now come to light with the opening of the Vatican secretary of state archives in 2020. The pope apparently directed a German prelate to conceal himself in such a way to record what was said at the meetings without von Hessen's knowledge. These quasi-transcripts provide rich new insight into the pope's attempts to reach an agreement with Hitler that would protect the interests of the Church in the Third Reich.

Napolitano describes these talks as motivated by Hitler's desire for a revised concordat with the Vatican in the wake of the expansion of the Third Reich, with the addition of Austria and Catholic portions of Czechoslovakia. I am not sure where he gets this idea, but it is not based on a reading of the transcripts of the pope's meetings with von Hessen. Moreover, the

documents I have found in the diplomatic archives in Berlin directly contradict this assertion. On his election as pope, Pacelli sent immediate signals to Hitler suggesting he was eager to reach an understanding with him. To that end, he ordered the end of the stream of criticism of German persecution of the Catholic Church that had marked the pages of the Vatican newspaper in the last months of Pius XI's life. Within weeks, Hitler made the decision to send von Hessen, son-in-law of Italy's King Victor Emmanuel III, to initiate the secret talks. Hitler had no interest in negotiating a new concordat. Nor did Pius XII expect one. What the pope wanted was for Hitler to abide by the terms of the concordat that Pope Pacelli had himself negotiated six years earlier. Napolitano criticizes me for not explaining why Hitler wanted a new concordat. The reason I did not explain it is that this was not what Hitler wanted. Hitler wanted the pope to end all public Vatican criticism of the Nazi government's treatment of the Church. In this he was successful. Napolitano then gratuitously criticizes me for failing to explain why the 1933 concordat remains still today in effect in Germany. This amounts to criticizing me for not discussing a matter far outside the book's focus on the years of World War II and in any case irrelevant to the issues under discussion.

Napolitano then argues that the pope made a condition of successful negotiations Hitler's agreement to abide by five points he prepared in a document for Hitler, something Napolitano writes, "Kertzer knows." The implication is that I knew this but failed to mention it. In fact, the document in question, written by the pope himself in German, is quoted in full in my book. However, when Ribbentrop responded to the five points, asking if their fulfillment were required in order for negotiations to begin, the pope specifically denied that this was the case.

The *Osservatore Romano* critique then turns to my brief discussion of Pius XII's first encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus*, issued shortly after the German invasion of Poland in October 1939. The basis for the criticism is that I did not sufficiently represent the encyclical as an attack on the German government and the German invasion. Yet I quoted from the pope's words regarding the value of "human brotherhood" and his words disparaging the placing of the state "in the place of the Almighty," the words buried amidst the 117 numbered paragraphs that presumably could have upset the Germans. (Albeit the speech also contained fulsome words of praise for Mussolini's government with its friendly relations with the Vatican). As historian of the Church in Germany John Conway, certainly not known as unduly critical toward the Church, wrote of the encyclical, "Pope Pius XII expressed sympathy and sorrow for all the people who had been drawn into the tragic abyss of war, but made no reference to German aggression....It was expected that the encyclical would be read from the pulpits throughout Germany on 5 November, but in fact it was read only in a few isolated cases—no doubt because of the heightened feeling of nationalist euphoria after the victory of Poland, in which German Catholics fully shared."<sup>1</sup>

The encyclical received enthusiastic and respectful treatment from Italy's main Fascist newspapers. As Napolitano points out, though, in private, some of the German leaders were unhappy with what could be read as criticism of the totalitarian state.<sup>2</sup> As is amply discussed and documented in *The Pope at War*, the encyclical followed Pius XII's practice throughout the war,

one noted repeatedly by the foreign diplomats serving in the Vatican. The pope carefully crafted his speeches so that passages could be plucked by both sides in the war as evidence that the pope supported their cause. Behind the scenes, both the Allies and the Germans lashed out at the pope for those utterances they deemed more friendly to their enemies. But for public consumption each side did all they could to present the pope as denouncing the other side in the war, a freedom that the pope's approach accorded them.

The third focus of the *Osservatore Romano* critique of *The Pope at War* regards the SS roundup of over a thousand Jews in Rome on October 16, 1943. In what Napolitano refers to as "a truly serious omission," I am faulted for not including in my extensive quote from Secretary of State Cardinal Maglione's account of his October 16 meeting with German ambassador Ernst von Weizsäcker the cardinal's statement that "The Holy See should not be put in the necessity of protesting. Were the Holy See obliged to do so, it would leave the consequences to Divine Providence." But what exactly does this add to the account given in *The Pope at War*? I make clear that the reason for the cardinal's summons of the ambassador was to let him know of Vatican unhappiness with the roundup of Rome's Jews. I quote Maglione as saying to the ambassador, "It is painful for the Holy Father, painful beyond all measure that in Rome itself, under the eyes of the Holy Father, so many people are made to suffer simply because they belong to a particular race." And when Weizsäcker then replies with a question, "What would the Holy See do if things were to continue?" I quote the cardinal's reply "The Holy See would not want to be constrained to say a word of disapproval." The fact is, in Maglione's own account of their conversation, when Weizsäcker in concluding the meeting asks him "Does Your Eminence leave me free not to report this official conversation?" the cardinal responds: "I observed that I had asked him to intervene by appealing to his sense of humanity. I left it to his judgement whether or not to mention our conversation which had been so friendly." In fact, the ambassador would not inform Berlin of this conversation before the Jews were shipped off to their death at Auschwitz, a freedom that Maglione's reply gave him.

The *Osservatore Romano* article then argues that I have misrepresented the accounts that the British and American envoys gave of their meetings with the pope soon after the Jews of Rome were rounded up. While he acknowledges the accuracy of my account of the pope's failure to mention the roundup of Rome's Jews at his meeting with the British envoy, D'Arcy Osborne, the morning the Jews of Rome were placed on the train to Auschwitz, he charges that my account is vitiated by the fact that I failed to mention that in a report two weeks later, Osborne would tell London, "As soon as he knew of the arrest of the Jews in Rome, the Cardinal Secretary of State directed and formulated a sort of protest to the German ambassador." Yet in fact I had described in detail the weak "protest" that Cardinal Maglione had "directed" to the German ambassador in my book, as described above.

Napolitano then accuses me of another "serious error" in attributing the absence of any papal mention of the roundup of the Jews to a conversation Pius XII had with the American envoy to the Vatican, Harold Tittmann, on October 19. According to Vatican sources, Napolitano writes, Tittmann's meeting actually took place five days earlier and so before the roundup of Rome's Jews. I have an archival copy of Tittmann's report, which is dated October

19, and in fact his report bearing that date was subsequently published in the volumes of *Foreign Relations of the United States*.<sup>3</sup> Yet the dating of his report changes little. The Vatican's only public statement about the activities of the German forces in Rome on October 19 is one broadcast over Vatican Radio that day. It dismissed as "unfounded rumors" the claims that the Germans were doing anything other than fully respecting all the rights and prerogatives of the Holy See. The pope never had any words of public protest over the rounding up of the more than thousand Jews of Rome and their deportation to Auschwitz, where, on arrival, most were sent directly to the gas chamber. This is the sad fact that nothing the Vatican paper can say can change.

In announcing the opening of the archives for the papacy of Pius XII, Pope Francis said: "The Church is not afraid of history."<sup>4</sup> It can only be hoped that after its initial defensive reaction to the revealing of this history, the Vatican can begin the process of coming to terms with it. Papal hagiography may have its place, but not when it prevents an understanding of a tragic chapter in human history.

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<sup>1</sup> John Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 239-40.

<sup>2</sup> For an example, see Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin, Auslandsvertretung Rom-Vatikan, R773 38-39, Ernst Woermann [Head of Department at the Foreign Office], Berlin, to Diego von Bergen, German ambassador to the Holy See.

<sup>3</sup> The original document can be found at Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library, psfa 495, pp. 194, 198. The published version is at *Foreign Relations of the United States 1943*, vol. 2, p. 950.

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/march/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190304\\_archivio-segretovaticano.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/march/documents/papa-francesco_20190304_archivio-segretovaticano.html).