News

A white man in a suit speaks from behind a podium with a projector and the words "The U.S. a

Joe Donnelly, U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, speaks ahead of a screening of segments of "The U.S. and the Holocaust" at the University of Notre Dame's Rome Global Gateway in Rome Jan. 27, 2023. (CNS photo/Justin McLellan)



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More than three-quarters of a century after the largest genocide in history, the United States and the Catholic Church are still making sense of their response to the Holocaust.

Scholars and diplomats discussed the historical legacies of the responses of the United States and of the church at a screening of segments of Ken Burns' documentary "The U.S. and the Holocaust" at the University of Notre Dame Rome Global Gateway on International Holocaust Remembrance Day Jan. 27.

In his opening remarks Joe Donnelly, U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, underscored the joint efforts of the U.S. government with the Vatican to combat religious persecution worldwide, particularly in the face of a global rise in antisemitism.

"At a time when people choose to forget or deny the past, it is all the more important to celebrate International Holocaust Remembrance Day," the ambassador said.

The German and Israeli ambassadors to the Holy See also attended the screening and expressed the need to ensure study of the Holocaust remains relevant in academic circles and the wider culture, particularly as the last Holocaust survivors age and die.

Burns' three-part, six-hour documentary critically looks at anti-immigrant and antisemitic sentiment in the United States during the 1930s which made immigration possible for only a small fraction of European Jews seeking asylum in the United States.

One focus of the film is the role of Christians in fomenting resistance to immigration.

It estimated that 85% of Protestants and 84% of Catholics opposed legislation that would allow greater numbers of European refugees into the United States as World War II began. The film also tells the story of Fr. Charles Coughlin, a Michigan-based Catholic priest whose radio sermons from 1926 to 1940 often included antisemitic rhetoric and attracted up to 40 million listeners at their peak.

"There was a lot of anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S. that made legislation impossible to pass, but when we think about the Catholic Church in Rome it's even more complicated in the sense that the pope is a head of state but he is also the vicar of Christ on earth," said Suzanne Brown-Fleming, director of international academic programs at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's Mandel Center during a panel discussion following the screening.

"He's the shepherd of Catholics who are looking at the Holy See for their example of what it means to do good," she said.

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The pope during World War II, Pope Pius XII, has been criticized for not publicly condemning the Nazi regime or the genocide committed against Jews in the 1940s, however, scholars have found that he facilitated hiding thousands of Jews on church property and coordinated efforts to rescue and locate displaced persons in Europe during and after the war.

Massimiliano Valente, a professor at the European University of Rome and associate at the University of Notre Dame Rome Global Gateway, likened the Vatican's activity during the Second World War to an iceberg, with only a small fragment of its mass visible above water.

"What the pope said with his words is only part of this iceberg, because behind them was something else," he said. "The Vatican's policy was not to condemn a single country but the entire war. The Vatican had to play the role of a mediator."

Both Valente and Brown-Fleming are studying the Vatican's wartime archives which were opened to scholars in March 2020.

The challenge during World War II for both Pope Pius XII and the United States, Brown-Fleming said, was to "balance humanitarian ideals with realpolitik."

"This is a struggle that nobody is going to solve, and it was no different for the church," she added.

While the church worked to save Jews from the Holocaust, its legacy of antisemitism even during World War II remains complicated, according to Brown-Fleming.

"Hitler's racial, biological definition of Jews was not acceptable because baptism can transform you into a Catholic no matter what your blood is, but these (racist) tropes about Jews absolutely went all the way up to the Holy See itself," she said. It wasn't until 1965 that the Roman Catholic Church rejected antisemitism as a sin, and "for 2,000 years prior it was actually Catholic teaching that Jews were dangerous," said Brown-Fleming.

"I would say that this is something that the church has overcome since Vatican II, though there is still work to do," she said.