Vatican
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Red binders or upright boxes line metal shelves in a basement. Some have dates on the spine

Materials from the pontificate of Pope Pius XII are pictured in the Vatican Apostolic Archives in this Feb. 27, 2020, file photo. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js



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Through a vast network of priests, diplomats, ordinary faithful and Jews themselves, the Vatican was one "one of the major points of arrival of news of the Jewish genocide" taking place during World War II, a scholar examining the Vatican's wartime archives said.

From mid-1941, letters received by the Vatican Secretariat of State increasingly began noting the death of Jews, explained Michele Sarfatti, director of the Contemporary Jewish Documentation Center in Milan, during a conference at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University Oct. 11. And the following year, Italian military chaplains in German-occupied Ukraine described mass executions and deportations of Jews, who were sent to unknown places and never heard of again.

At an Oct. 9-11 conference hosted by the Gregorian University, Sarfatti and dozens of other scholars presented their findings from the archives of the wartime pontificate of Pope Pius XII, which were opened to researchers by Pope Francis in 2020.

Sarfatti said the first public sign that knowledge of the genocide had reached Pius XII was a single phrase in his 45-minute Christmas Eve radio address in 1942 when he urged people to advocate for the "to the hundreds of thousands of people, who, through no fault of their own, sometimes only by reason of nationality or lineage, are destined for death or progressive decay."

"These words appear to be the only public result obtained by the news of the Jews that were accumulated" over the course of 1942, Sarfatti said.

The pope "didn't invite the Allies to defend the Jews, he didn't order Catholics to defend them anywhere and however [they could]," he said.

Joahn Ickx, director of the historical archive of Vatican Secretariat of State's section for relations with states, said that while publicly revealing very little about the horrors of the Holocaust, the Catholic Church used its extensive human network to save thousands of Jews from extermination.

Members of the Catholic hierarchy were limited by German and Italian racial laws, which "left no room for assisting anyone of Jewish birth," so in official actions and public remarks, the church could reach out only "to those who were baptized," he said, "otherwise, those words and actions could be considered as interference in state matters of Germany."

Still, Ickx said, the Vatican Secretariat of State acted behind the scenes to assist Jews through four channels: within the city of Rome, in Italy, throughout Europe and globally.

In addition to well-known cases of Jews being sheltered in religious buildings in Rome, he said newly accessible materials in the archives show that the archbishops of several large Italian dioceses were active in assisting Jews at the request of the Vatican Secretariat of State. Archbishop Pietro Boetto of Genoa, Italy, for example, was previously known for working with Jews, but such efforts were seen as an "individual and local choice" prior to the opening of the archives.

Through the granting of "special faculties" to him during the war by the Vatican, "we know that these efforts were by construction and upon request of the secretary of state," Ickx said.

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Additionally, Ickx said documentation from the Vatican archives demonstrates that offices dedicated exclusively to the assistance of Jews were established by church leaders throughout Europe, such as Cardinals Johannes de Jong of Utrecht, Netherlands, and Aloysius Stepinac of Zagreb, Croatia. In other cases, private individuals -- religious and not -- were charged by the Vatican Secretariat of State to help Jews flee from Europe and to place them in other continents, often in South America. He also highlighted the existence of two offices in the Vatican Secretariat of State that handled some 17,800 requests for assistance from the pope.

Responding to the requests "called for an almost perfectly functioning worldwide network," said Ickx. "The individuals involved, also in the grassroots [level] that were appointed to this work, beginning with the clergy and the nuncios, they all received instructions and guidelines from the Secretariat of State."

Yet members of the church did not always prioritize helping the Jews, other scholars said.

Looking at the church's relationship with the Romanian government, Ian Popa, a historian at the University of Manchester, England, said the Vatican was "willing to compromise on important ethical issues such as cooperation with helping antisemitic governments." After a 1943 visit to a concentration camp operated by Romania, the Vatican nuncio to Romania filed a report that "deliberately hides the murders that took place in that territory and paints a rosy image about the conditions in which Jews were kept," Popa said.

"At a time when the Holy See was helping Romania get closer to the Allies," a negative report "would have compromised those efforts," he said.

Monika Stolarczyk-Bilardie, a researcher at the Catholic University of Leuven, said that the "the tragedy of the Jews was at most a secondary issue" for Catholic bishops in Poland precisely because the Vatican failed to demonstrate concern for Jewish persecution.

She attributed the omission of facts surrounding Jewish persecution in bishops' reports to the Vatican to antisemitism and indifference, but also to the expectations for their reporting communicated by the Vatican. Information about the murder of Jews in Poland previously provided to the Vatican by Catholic bishops, military chaplains and other religious leaders were largely "ignored and not followed up," she said.

"The Vatican was more interested in the administration of the dioceses and in counteracting the Nazi's anti-papal propaganda and persecution of the church," she said.

"Those were the subjects the Vatican expected the Polish bishops to inform about," she said. And "not many bishops in those territories had the courage to break that logic and inform the pope anyway of what was happening in Poland."

Ickx told Catholic News Service that millions of documents still need to be analyzed and that while researchers have combed through the wartime archives, "knowledge of the after-war [period] can help to understand some choices, some policies that were decided during the war."