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Pius XII was 'totally anti-Nazi,' former aide says

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

Italian news outlets reported yesterday that two documents about Pius XII's role during World War II have been found in an English archive. One is a brief report of a conversation between Pius XII and an American diplomat in October 1943, in which Pius XII does not address the round-up of Roman Jews by the Nazis. The second, a year later, reports a session between Pius and a British envoy in which the pope discusses balancing criticism of the Nazi crackdown on Jews in Hungary with also speaking out against Soviet war crimes in Poland and the Baltic states.

Upon review, experts have raised questions about both documents. In the first case, some historians say the document from October 1943 has been misdated, and that the conversation between Pius XII and American Ambassador Harold Tittmann came two days before the round-up of Jews in Rome ? hence explaining the absence of any reference from the pope. In the second case, experts note that Pius XII actually sent a telegram of protest to the Hungarian government defending those persecuted ?because of their nationality or race? five months before Pius XII's meeting with the British ambassador.

Such clarifications, however, have not silenced the drumbeat of debate over Pius XII in the international press. The following is an NCR translation of an interview with Cardinal Achille Silvestrini, a veteran Vatican diplomat who served under Pius XII early in his career. The interview appeared on Monday in the Italian daily *La Stampa*.

Interview with Cardinal Achille Silvestrini

February 1, 2010

Your Eminence, you were a young priest in the Secretariat of State under Pius XII. From the [recent discoveries] in the English archives, it seems was worried above all about Rome.

In that tragic period, he was concerned about the Germans leaving Rome in peace and respecting its sacred character. It was not a choice against the Jews, because the pope believed that a gesture of protest would have been counter-productive. At the same time, however, he worked to see that as many Jews as possible were sheltered in churches and Catholic institutions.

He worried that a public condemnation of Nazism would have negative repercussions, that an explicit protest would carry more disadvantages than advantages. His awareness of the situation affected his state of mind. He had been the nuncio in Munich and then in Berlin, from 1917 to 1929, and was favorable to the Weimar Republic. He shared the anti-Nazi encyclical of Pius XI, "Mit Brennender Sorge," in 1937. The German episcopacy played a large role, especially Cardinal Faulhaber of Munich, but also Eugenio Pacelli, at the time the Secretary of State.

Why was he silent?

Pius XII considered what had happened to the Dutch bishops a warning not to do the same. The Dutch episcopacy had written a letter that condemned the "merciless and unjust treatment reserved for the Jews." That document was read in Dutch churches in July 1942. The intentions were the best, but the results were disastrous. Anne Frank died in the crackdown that followed. It was precisely the country where priests and bishops most vocally denounced the anti-Jewish persecutions that had more deportations than any other nation of Western Europe.

What did Pius XII mean when he told the American ambassador that the Germans had respected Rome?

He wanted Rome to be left alone, so much so that it's true the bombing on Via Rasella was considered a terrible mistake by the Holy See because it ruptured this sort of quiet. In fact, it swiftly led to the ferocious reprisals of the Fosse Ardeatine.[Note: In March 1944, Italian partisans fire-bombed a column of Nazi troops on Rome's Via Rasella, a small side-street near the Piazza Barberini. Thirty-three soldiers died. In response, the German occupiers executed roughly 350 Italian prisoners in caves on the outskirts of Rome called the Fosse Ardeatine -- a ratio of 10 Italians killed for every one German.]

Pius XII was totally anti-Nazi. Always. In the winter of 1940, before the German attack on the Western front, a group of high-ranking German officials who wanted to dethrone Hitler asked the pope to be a mediator with the Allied governments in order to find out what guarantees they might receive. Pius XII twice summoned the British ambassador to the Holy See, Osborne, to communicate the initiative to him. He did that directly, keeping the Secretariat of State out of it. In fact, there's no trace of it in the Vatican Archives, but only in Osborne's diary and a book by Chatwick.

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Why is that important?

Pius XII, who was always so sensitive to the rules of diplomacy, took this step against every procedure. A head of state never acts as a go-between on these matters. Pius XII did it because he was convinced that Germany could be saved.

Pius XI published two encyclicals in 1937. The first, ?Divini Redemptoris,? against Communism, was very strong in doctrine. The second, against Nazism, was stronger in terms of tone. Pacelli was with him.

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