

## The Principal Victim: Catholic Antisemitism and the Holocaust in Central Europe

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Throughout his pontificate Pope John Paul II has strongly emphasised the need for recognition of the church's past failures, especially with regard to antisemitism and the persecution of the Jewish population of Europe. This specific issue is tackled in documents like *We Remember* (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 1998) and *Memory and Reconciliation* (International Theological Commission, 1999).<sup>1</sup> In the former the question is raised whether 'anti-Jewish prejudices' contributed to the Holocaust:

But it may be asked whether the Nazi persecution of the Jews was not made easier by the anti-Jewish prejudices imbedded in some Christian minds and hearts. Did anti-Jewish sentiment among Christians make them less sensitive, or even indifferent, to the persecutions launched against the Jews by National Socialism when it reached power? Any response to this question must take into account that we are dealing with the history of people's attitudes and ways of thinking, subject to multiple influences. Moreover, many people were altogether unaware of the 'final solution' that was being put into effect against a whole people; others were afraid for themselves and those near to them; some took advantage of the situation; and still others were moved by envy. A response would need to be given case by case. To do this, however, it is necessary to know what precisely motivated people in a particular situation.

A fresh start at examining this past was made by the International Catholic-Jewish Historical Commission consisting of three Catholic and three Jewish historians. Appointed by the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations they set out in 1999 to clarify the position of the Vatican and more notably that of Pope Pius XII. In October 2000, after studying the main core of documentary evidence, the *Actes et documents du Saint Siècle relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale* (Blet *et al.*, 1965–81), the commission members drafted their conclusions. The mainly Italian-language *Actes et documents* alone proved to be too limited a source and additional research in the Vatican archives was needed. The six historians proposed some 47 questions, which aimed at a more profound understanding of the topic (International Catholic-Jewish Historical Commission, 2000). In 2001 work was suspended.

Although much academic research has been done already and many questions still need answering, common knowledge about exactly how and why the church fell short of its vocation remains relatively limited. Furthermore, research has been obscured by polemics.

Good illustrations of this fact are provided by the recent disputed contributions to the ongoing debate over the beatification of Pope Pius XII by John Cornwell and Daniel Goldhagen (Cornwell, 1999; Goldhagen, 2002). Conversely, attempts have also been made to rewrite the church's history in too favourable a light, as for example by Milan S. Ďurica in his controversial *Dejiny Slovenska a Slovákov* (Ďurica, 1995).

This article focuses on the attitude of local Roman Catholic church leaders in the pro-Nazi states Croatia, Hungary and Slovakia towards the deportation of the Jews from Central Europe by examining their public protest, the lack thereof, and their implicit or explicit support for anti-Jewish measures. The period studied extends from 1941 to the start of the mass deportations from Hungary in 1944. While the countries under German occupation were more or less cut off from the church's centre and had to deal with events as they developed, in the pro-German countries Croatia, Hungary and Slovakia papal representatives monitored developments, implemented Vatican policy and offered guidance to local church leaders. The communications between these papal representatives and the Vatican Secretariat of State were partly publicised in the aforementioned *Actes et documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale* and will serve as principal source in this article.<sup>2</sup> First the ideological context in which the church operated, its antimodern stance and traditional antisemitism will be examined. Then some attention is given to the knowledge the church acquired of the Holocaust as it progressed. In the conclusion some remarks on future research will be proposed to the reader. They arise from the sources used.

### **Antimodern Catholicism**

The relation between the Catholic Church and fascism was undoubtedly ambiguous, for alongside clear ideological differences certain similarities existed. One of these was the ideal of corporatism in the social and political realm, which was formulated as an alternative to the Marxist class struggle in Pope Leo XIII's encyclical letter *Rerum novarum* (1891). Furthermore an important current within the Catholic Church bore straightforward antimodern features and opposed the French Revolution, democracy and liberalism much as fascism did (Aubert, 1978). In his first, programmatic, encyclical *Ubi arcano* (1922) Pope Pius XI passed a very negative judgment on liberal democracy, because it allegedly proclaimed the primacy of the political sphere over the teachings of the church, championing for example the confessionally neutral state and school, civil marriage, individualism and nationalism. According to Pius XI party democracy led to social anarchy. 'Liberalism', he wrote in the encyclical letter *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), 'is the father of this Socialism that is pervading morality and culture and ... Bolshevism will be its heir.' In many European countries the democratic traditions were young and brittle and the poor functioning of parliamentary democracy in the 1920s and 1930s gave rise to authoritarian reflexes to which the Catholic teachings did not provide fundamental objections or answers. Indeed, in his encyclical *Libertas praestantissimum* (1888) Leo XIII formulated a rule to which Pius XII still adhered:

It is not of itself wrong to prefer a democratic form of government, if only the Catholic doctrine be maintained as to the origin and exercise of power. Of the various forms of government, the Church does not reject any that are fitted to procure the welfare of the subject; she wishes only – and this nature itself requires – that they should be constituted without involving wrong to anyone, and especially without violating the rights of the Church. (Pontier, 1988, p. 272)

Thus, Catholic church leaders in Central Europe could express their affinity to fascist ideology. In a speech in Považská Bystrica on 7 September 1941 the Slovak President Tiso, a Roman Catholic priest, stressed the identity of the papal encyclicals with national socialist doctrine. When questioned by the papal envoy to Slovakia Mgr Burzio he explained that he was speaking only of the social encyclicals and that 'Slovak national socialism intends to implement social reforms in the spirit of the papal encyclicals' (Blet *et al.*, 1969, pp. 301–2). Archbishop József Grösz of Kalocsa underlined the compatibility of Hungarian fascism and Catholicism and the second-highest hierarch from 1943, Archbishop Gyula Czapik of Eger, deplored the fact that the Catholic Church in Germany did not identify itself with national socialism: in his words a 'fatal error' (Braham, 1981, p. 1029).

There were, nevertheless, clear divergences between Catholic and Nazi doctrines. The church condemned, for example, Nazi *Blut und Boden* racism, because salvation was for everyone regardless of ethnicity. Jews who converted to Catholicism enjoyed the protection of the church and the rights of any Catholic. As far as securing the rights of believers was concerned the leading principle was the freedom of the church, notably in the struggle against the assertion of the primacy of politics over the church and its teachings. Pius XI demonstrated a slightly more positive attitude towards the Jews than his predecessors and he had an encyclical letter prepared that plainly condemned racial antisemitism, repeating however conventional Catholic antisemitism. After his death in 1939 the document ended up in a Vatican desk drawer. The Dutch theologian Hans Jansen suggests that his successor, Pius XII, found too much traditional Catholic antisemitism in this document. It justified social and economic marginalisation of the Jews and could have fuelled existing antisemitism within and outside the church (Jansen, 2000, pp. 130–53; Phayer, 2000, pp. 1–4).<sup>3</sup> The Catholic Church in Germany opposed so-called 'German Christianity', the aim of which was to purify Christian doctrine of Jewish influences by, for instance, abolishing the Old Testament and denying the Jewish ancestry of Jesus. Criticism of this aim was the main substance of the 1937 German-language encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* issued by Pius XI and written by his Secretary of State Eugenio Pacelli, who, two years later, became Pius XII.

#### Catholic Antisemitism<sup>4</sup>

Analogous with Protestant fears about Jesuit fathers intriguing at the royal courts of Europe in the eighteenth century and fears in Catholic circles about freemasons plotting, for example in the period leading up to the French Revolution, in the nineteenth century the myth of an evil worldwide Jewish conspiracy took hold. Many common accusations were accumulated in the slanderous work *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* which acquired great fame in tsarist Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century and spread from there throughout the world. These forged minutes tell the tale of a secret Jewish world government which was preparing the coming reign of the Antichrist. To attain this goal the Jews used any means available: Darwin, Nietzsche and Marx, communism, liberalism, freemasonry, capitalism and much more. The *Protocols* also showed how the Jews would corrupt public morals with their avarice and deceit and the production of pornography (Cohn, 1996). Catholic criticism of modern society could and in fact did get along quite smoothly with this kind of secular antisemitism (Kertzer, 2001).

Antisemitism was present at every level in the European Catholic Church – in its teachings, and among ordinary believers, theologians, priests, bishops and popes – but its intensity differed between Central and Western Europe. The notion of the Jews as the 'murderers of Christ' was covered extensively in the Catholic press in Poland and

Hungary. The medieval chimera of the ritual murder of Christians in order to extract blood for the preparation of unleavened bread and Passover wine was less but still quite widely propagated. As late as 1882 a Hungarian court acquitted Jewish inhabitants of Tiszaeszlár of the murder of a Christian child. Much emphasis was placed on the contention that the Jew was an alien element in society which ought to be removed from it (Phayer, 2000, pp. 8–13, Braham, n.d., pp. 1–9, 1981, pp. 1027–32). In Poland the *Kristallnacht* in 1938 led to fierce polemics between Catholic and Jewish newspapers. *Głos Narodu*, for instance, which was edited by the archdiocese of Kraków, condemned the violence, but found it ‘understandable’ and contended that it had been provoked by the Jews themselves by their remaining in a country that wished to do without them. They should abstain from protest and rather leave Europe as quickly as possible. The newspaper acknowledged the right of every nation to defend itself against ‘subjection to so foreign a nationality as the Jews and their injurious influence on social life ... But always within the limits of ethics, that is, the limits drawn by universal Christian morality’ (Modras, 1994, pp. 302–4). Murder of Jews and violence against them were generally condemned (Jansen, 2000, pp. 34–41).

A notorious example of mainly culturally-inspired Catholic antisemitism is the pastoral letter *O Katolickie zasady moralne* (*Catholic Moral Principles*) by the head of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland Cardinal Hlond (1936). According to Ronald Modras the cardinal ‘was sincerely attempting to be even-handed’ (Modras, 1994, p. 347). Still the letter, which resurfaced in the 1980s during a sanctification inquiry into the cardinal’s life, reiterates a number of classical anti-Jewish topics, although it condemns violence against the Jews and warns against the (racial) antisemitism of the Nazis:

So long as Jews remain Jews, a Jewish problem exists and will continue to exist ... It is especially difficult in our country and ought to be the object of serious consideration ... It is a fact that Jews are waging war against the Catholic church, that they are steeped in free-thinking, and constitute the vanguard of atheism, the Bolshevik movement, and revolutionary activity. It is a fact that Jews have a corruptive influence on morals and that their publishing houses are spreading pornography. It is true that Jews are perpetrating fraud, practicing usury, and dealing in prostitution. It is true that, from a religious and ethical point of view, Jewish youth are having a negative influence on the Catholic youth in our schools. But let us be fair. Not all Jews are this way ... I warn against that moral stance, imported from abroad, that is basically and ruthlessly anti-Jewish. It is contrary to Catholic ethic. One may love one’s own nation more, but one may not hate anyone. Not even Jews. It is good to prefer your own kind when shopping, to avoid Jewish stores and Jewish stalls in the marketplace, but it is forbidden to demolish a Jewish store, damage their merchandise, break windows, or throw things at their homes. One should stay away from the harmful moral influence of Jews, keep away from their anti-Christian culture, and especially boycott the Jewish press and demoralizing Jewish publications. But it is forbidden to assault, beat up, maim, or slander Jews. One should honor and love Jews as human beings and neighbors ... When divine mercy enlightens a Jew to sincerely accept his and our Messiah, let us greet him into our Christian ranks with joy. (Modras, 1994, pp. 346–47)

The Hungarian lay movement *Katolikus Akció* (*Catholic Action*), which had 250,000 members, included an anti-Jewish paragraph in its programme: ‘The Jews ... should not exercise their influence on the intellectual life of the country; they should not influence the

arts, literature and the press ... We must replace (Jewish) liberalism that destroyed the entire economy of the country by a corporative system and subject capitalism once more to national interests.' (Jansen, 2000, pp. 112–13)

Prominent Catholic dignitaries contributed to antisemitic legislation between 1935 and 1940 in 'Catholic' countries like Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. The Hungarian and Slovak Catholic clergy held seats in parliament and voted in favour of discriminatory laws which aimed at the social and economic marginalisation of the Jewish population; for example Prince Primate Cardinal Serédi of Esztergom-Budapest (Kirschbaum, 1995, pp. 196–97; Kurtán *et al.*, 1999, pp. 89–90). And if at a later date, between 1941 and 1944, the bishops or the Vatican protested against 'racial' laws, they would certainly disapprove of 'materialistic racial theory', as did for instance the Slovak bishops in a memorandum to President Tiso (Blet *et al.*, 1974, pp. 308–12), but almost exclusively criticised regulations that hampered Catholic Jews in freely exercising their religious convictions. The volumes of the *Actes et documents* quoted provide ample evidence of this. An essential issue among others was the prohibition of marriage between Jews and 'Aryans', so that a convert who according to racial law was a Jew could not marry an Aryan Catholic. The Catholic Church viewed this as an infringement of its autonomy (Phayer, 2000, pp. 13–15).

## **Holocaust Reality**

The Holocaust did not begin with the Wannsee conference on 20 January 1942, when Nazi bureaucrats convened to find a systematic solution for the 'Jewish problem' in relation to the military developments on the Eastern front. This more coordinated approach had been preceded from June 1941 by the work of four *Einsatzgruppen* which murdered the 'undesired elements', Jews, gypsies and intellectuals, in the rear of the advancing *Wehrmacht* (Safrian, 1995, pp. 105–168 and 169–175).

From Vatican sources it becomes clear that the Catholic church leadership was quickly informed about these developments. Let us look at a few examples. As early as 27 October 1941 the papal representative in Bratislava Mgr Burzio sent a report to his superior, state secretary Cardinal Maglione. He mentioned Slovak army chaplains reporting that Jewish prisoners of war 'are fusilladed without exception' and that 'the Jewish civilians are systematically murdered as well, without distinction of sex or age'. When the deportation of Slovak Jews was looming, Burzio sent a telegram to Rome on 9 March 1942 saying that the 'deportation to Poland of 80,000 persons, who are left to the mercy of the Germans, equals a certain death sentence for the majority of them.' Then on 11 March, answering a request from Rome for additional information to the October 1941 report, he wrote about the perpetrators: 'the mass murders are being committed by units of the SS, acting by orders of the German authorities.' On 12 May the Italian army chaplain Pirro Scavizzi wrote to the pope that: 'The bloodshed of the Jews in Ukraine is now completed. In Poland and Germany they want to finish it as well, with a system of mass killing.' The semi-official papal envoy in Croatia, Abbot Marcone, mentioned in a report on 17 July 1942 that according to the national police chief Kvaternik two million Jews had already been murdered and that apparently the same fate awaited the Croatian Jews (Blet *et al.*, 1974, pp. 328, 453, 456, 534 and 601–2; Phayer, 2000, p. 87).

More details reached Rome in the second half of 1942. Letters from the Greek Catholic Metropolitan Andrei Sheptyts'kyi of L'viv and Archbishop Antonijs Springovičs of Riga to Pope Pius XII depict the fate of the local Jewish population in dark colours. They break a more or less general silence by Catholic church leaders in the central region where the

Holocaust took place, in the ghettos and death camps in the Baltic states, Belorussia, Ukraine and Poland (Phayer, 2000, pp. 82–83; Libionka, n.d., p. 76).

On 31 August Sheptyts'kyi wrote about the persecution of the Jews in Galicia and elsewhere in Ukraine:

Gradually the government has implemented a truly incredible reign of terror and corruption, which is becoming every day more burdensome and intolerable. At present everybody throughout the country agrees that the German regime is bad, almost diabolical, maybe even more than bolshevik rule ... The Jews are the principal victim. The number of Jews killed in our little country is certainly higher than 200,000. As the army has advanced the number of victims has risen. In Kiev almost 130,000 men, women and children have been executed in a matter of days. All towns and cities in Ukraine have witnessed similar butchering and it has been persisting for one year now. In the beginning the authorities felt ashamed of these inhuman, unjustifiable acts ... In the course of time they began to kill the Jews in the streets, in the sight of the entire population and without any shame.

Only divine providence could save them:

The only comfort we may take in these horrible times is that nothing happens without the will of our Heavenly Father. I think that among the butchered Jews many souls converted to God, because for centuries they have never been confronted with the probability of certain death, as they are today, even months before it becomes reality. (Blet *et al.*, 1967, pp. 625 and 628)

Later that year Sheptyts'kyi reported more extensively on the German outrages (Krawchuk, 1997, p. 202). A short account by Springovičs is unequivocal as well. On 12 December he mentioned that

The atrocities of the national socialist doctrine have come to light in Latvia in all their severity and abomination: almost all the Jews have already been killed and only a few thousand remain in the Riga ghetto. The majority of them were brought in from abroad. (Blet *et al.*, 1967, pp. 695–96)

### **Croatia 1941–1943**

Despised as a fascist collaborator after the war and hailed as an anticommunist martyr since the 1940s the archbishop of Zagreb Alojzije Stepinac might serve as a model for the dilemmas that a church leader could face in a self-declared 'Catholic state' (Shelah, 1989, pp. 266–80. See also Phayer, 2000, pp. 31–40 and 84–86; Rivelli, 1998; Safrian, 1995, pp. 214–17; Tanner, 1997, pp. 141–67). His wartime record looks more favourable than generally assumed, but shows nevertheless how his acts were determined by both ideological and practical limitations. There existed, for instance, a strong Croat nationalism, of which Stepinac was definitely not free (Tanner, 1997, p. 145). This national awareness comprised the myth of the *antemurale christianitatis* (bulwark of Christianity), which underwent a revival in a strong anticommunist variant. Furthermore the Croat clergy was seriously divided and priests, monks and bishops became accessories to terror and murder, in word and deed. 'Satan helped them to invent socialism and communism. Love has a limit. The movement to liberate the world from the Jews is a movement for the renewal of human dignity. The all-knowing and almighty God supports this movement', Archbishop Šarić of Sarajevo wrote on 25 May 1941 in his diocesan newspaper.

The commander of the infamous Jasenovac concentration camp was a Franciscan monk, who for that reason was excommunicated. As head of the Croatian Catholic Church Stepinac could undertake little against his fellow-bishops, because according to canon law he had no juridical power in their respective dioceses. He could only decommission his own diocesan priests, if they had crossed the line.

In addition, the Vatican, primarily in the person of the papal state secretary Cardinal Maglione, wanted to give the new fascist state a chance and was prepared to dismiss the mass murder of Jews and Serbs in the middle of 1941 as 'regrettable events' and to see it as an initial error. Maglione emphasised loyalty on the part of the church and, over and over again, tact (Shelah, 1989, pp. 273–74). After 1942, when the German war fortunes took a turn for the worse, the Vatican still persisted in its appeasing attitude towards the Croatian *Ustaša* state. Stepinac himself never overtly criticised the brutal Croatian regime as such. In a note for Maglione dated 23 May 1943 he even put in a good word for some of the alleged achievements of the *Ustaše*: the fight against pornography and abortion, which according to him were committed 'mainly by Jews and Serbs', the banning of freemasonry, laws against blasphemy, the promotion of Catholic education and financial support for the Catholic Church (Blet *et al.*, 1975, pp. 218–29; Shelah, 1989, p. 272). According to his supporters the archbishop believed until 1943 that the Croat leader Ante Pavelić and other prominent figures knew nothing about any abuse, but this view is contradicted by the many concrete complaints Stepinac had been making to them, and a few times to Pavelić personally, ever since April 1941 (Blet *et al.*, 1975, pp. 224–28).

Stepinac criticised the policies of the *Ustaše* from an early stage. Only two months after the declaration of independence on 10 April 1941 he sent a letter of protest to the minister of the interior, Artuković, in which he condemned the racial laws that also affected Jewish converts while partly approving of their economic marginalisation. The letter exemplifies the archbishop of Zagreb's approach. Social and economic discrimination he permitted, though emphasising simultaneously the 'human dignity' of the people concerned. However, he opposed measures that were based on the 'race principle', like compulsory wearing of the yellow Star of David, and he demanded a special regime for the converted Jews. He also warned the Croat leadership of tarnishing the reputation of Croatia abroad. The hunting and murder of the Jews began in July 1941, and converts were soon being arrested and robbed of their possessions as well. The Croat bishops protested on 18 November, but only on behalf of the Catholic Jews, who constituted a relatively large group. More than 5000 Jews had changed their beliefs since the 1930s.

In the first months of 1942 rumours began to spread that the Jews were to be handed over to the Germans. From May Stepinac himself started issuing public protests, in which he condemned racism that leads to violence and the extermination of gypsies, Jews and Serbs. At the beginning of 1943 there was once again question of deportations, this time of the remaining Jews (mostly converts), mixed married couples and their children. Again Stepinac preached publicly against racism. In a letter to Pavelić of 6 March he even threatened to speak out against the Germans, if it proved to be they who had ordered the transports, but the strongest emphasis lay as usual on the Catholic Jews. The letter has been credited with some success. Indeed Jews in mixed marriage and their offspring were not to be deported, but this was common German policy throughout Europe. However, the many Jews who had themselves been baptised before and during the war, often because they were seeking the protection of the moral power of the Catholic Church, would eventually be deported. The church certainly knew that many of these conversions were born out of need, but somewhat opportunistically hoped that not a few converts would remain Roman Catholics. Papal representative Marcone even discerned an intervention from above: 'One cannot rule out *a priori* supernatural motives and the silent work of

Divine Grace' (Blet *et al.*, 1974, p. 261, note 1). Another reason for allowing dubious conversion was nevertheless the wish to save Jews from imminent death.

### **Slovakia 1942–1944**

With the deportation of the Slovak Jews in sight the Catholic bishops were forced to react to two accusations that were levelled at them: that they were baptising Jews in order to protect them from deportation, and that they were lobbying with the government on their behalf. Meanwhile they had to defend themselves from claims made by government minister of the interior Mach that the Catholic Church had approved of the marginalisation of the Jews and their elimination from Slovak society. According to chargé d'affaires Burzio this was due to the attitude of Bishop Vojtaššák of Spiš, one of the vicepresidents of the Slovak State Council. After the council had decided to hand over the Jews to the Germans, on 26 March, Burzio informed Rome of the proceedings and the attitude of the Slovak bishops, which was in some cases neither 'spontaneous or energetic'. He singled out Vojtaššák, who, 'instead of rebelling against the inhumane project', had remained 'totally passive, limiting himself to objections of little substance'. Immediately after the session Vojtaššák explained to a fellow bishop that 'it were better if the Church remained outside this question' and that 'the Jews are the worst enemies of Slovakia' (Blet *et al.*, 1974, pp. 486–89. The full text of the report is in Morley, 1980, pp. 226–29).<sup>5</sup>

Subsequently the Slovak bishops decided to publish a protest in the widely-read newspaper *Katolícké Noviny*. It appeared on 26 April 1942 after the censor previously struck out two short passages. One announced continuing protest on behalf of the Jewish converts, the other denounced the stealing of private property from the deportees and the breaking up of their families. The censor had left them the choice between these minor cancellations and an added conclusion that annulled most of their criticism, stating that no legal, natural or divine law had been broken with regard to the Jews.

First of all the bishops denied that Jews were being accepted by the church without good preparation or in groups and affirmed their autonomy in this matter. With respect to 'the other Jews' the bishops formulated three 'principles' that contain a number of antisemitic clichés. The persecution of the Jews was above all their own fault, the result of their enmity towards Christ and the Christians:

The tragedy of the Jewish nation lies in the fact that they did not recognise the Redeemer and prepared him a terrible and disgraceful death on the cross. The Redeemer himself shed tears because of the stubbornness of the Jewish people and predicted for them, as punishment, their dispersal over the whole world. After the fall of Jerusalem the prophecy of Christ became reality. For almost two millennia the Jews have been living in larger or smaller groups among the nations of the world. All this time they never mingled with other peoples and live there as foreign elements. Their aversion to Christianity has not changed and finally they played an important part in the bloody persecution of Christians in Russia and Spain.

The Jews had inflicted serious harm on Slovakia as well:

In just a short time they have appropriated almost the entire economic and financial life of the country at the expense of our people. Not only in the economic sphere, but also in the cultural and moral domain they have damaged our people. The Church cannot be opposed, therefore, if the state with legal regulations hinders the dangerous influence of the Jews.

In the old Hungary, between 1848 and 1896, when political-church legislation

was being dealt with, a law on hospitality for the Jews was accepted as well. The ecclesial caretakers protested against such a law, because they feared the harmful influence of the Jews on public life. State circles then and a large part of public opinion accused the church of being backward. The facts have proven the church right.

But:

When resolving this difficult issue one should not forget that Jews are men as well and one should deal with them humanely. Above all it is necessary not to transgress the prevailing legal order and divine law. It is a natural right of each individual to gather private property through honest work and to use it according to Christian doctrine. It is also a right of everyone to found a family of his own. Someone who takes this decision should fulfil all the requirements of this state and all the rights according to Christian principles. (Blet *et al.*, 1974, pp. 515–19, notably 517–19)

In view of the deportations taking place at the time to the Auschwitz and Majdanek concentration camps – ‘a certain death sentence’ – this line of argument and the stress on marriage and private property was dubiously ambiguous, because given their negative judgment on the contribution of the Slovak Jews to society the bishops, even if they did not intend to do so, were supporting German policy. After all, the Germans explained the deportation of the Jews by saying that they would be put to useful work in the East. Thus the Catholic readership could gain the following impression: the Jews are bad for us; the Germans make them earn their wages; the deportations should be conducted while maintaining the families involved intact. A more decisive protest made itself heard on 21 March 1943. A letter of protest was read out to the faithful, in Latin (Morley, 1980, p. 90).

Meanwhile, President Tiso (Bily, 1997, coll. 183–88) and other clerics had become an embarrassment to the church: ‘... the position of Dr Tiso ..., the bishop of Spiš and numerous clerics in the State Council and the Parliament is beginning to inflict serious harm on the church’, Mgr Burzio wrote to Rome on 26 April 1942 (Blet *et al.*, 1974, p. 488). The Eastern-Rite bishop of Košice Pavel Gojdič was appalled by the treatment of the Jews and the complicity of church members, in particular Tiso. In a letter to Burzio of 16 May he suggests that the Vatican either press him to resign from office or else defrock him. The letter was forwarded to Rome on 7 March 1943 (Blet *et al.*, 1975, p. 177, note 5). The Vatican felt embarrassed as well. On 7 April 1943 Archbishop Tardini – assistant to secretary of state Cardinal Maglione – labelled Tiso’s presidency a ‘scandal’ that ‘might be passed on to the Catholic Church itself’ (Blet *et al.*, 1974, p. 561, 1975, p. 233 and 1980, pp. 597–98). Following an armed revolt in August 1944 and the intervention of the *Wehrmacht* deportation of the remaining Jews became imminent. Burzio requested Tiso’s intercession ‘at least’ on behalf of the baptised Jews, but the latter ‘showed no understanding or compassion’, called them ‘the cause of all evil’ and defended the Germans. In late October 1944 Pius XII approved that Burzio ‘remind Fr Tiso in the name of His Holiness of feelings and subjects that suit his priestly dignity and conscience’. Tiso replied on 8 November: measures against Jews, and Czechs, had been conducted not because of ‘nationality or tribe’, but because of ‘the obligation to defend the nation against its destructive enemies’ and ‘to secure in a moderate way the national, social and cultural existence of the people’. The participation of clerics in public service he defended as a ‘special kind of pastoral care’ (Blet *et al.*, 1980, pp. 433, 461–62 and 475–78).

### **Hungary 1944**

On 19 March 1944 the German *Wehrmacht* occupied Hungary and in its wake followed

Adolf Eichmann, who was to prepare the deportation of some one million Jews. New antisemitic measures such as wearing the yellow Star of David came into force (Safrian, 1995, pp. 293–307). In the light of the Holocaust in progress the attitude of the Catholic bishops was astonishingly inert, especially since all the horrific details of the German death camps – already known in smaller circles – gradually became world news in June 1944. The Vatican decided that the bishops were too ‘passive’ and on 29 May ordered the nuncio Mgr Rotta to ‘encourage them discreetly’ to more visible action. Rotta clearly knew that the ‘shipment for obligatory work’ was only a ‘pretext’, but he had little success, even though some 300,000 Jews had already been deported. On 24 June he sent a telegram to his superiors expressing the ‘annoyance’ among clergy and believers with the ‘submissive behaviour’ and ‘excessive caution’ of the bishops (Blet *et al.*, 1980, pp. 297, 308, 320–21 and 328).

Passivity remained the hallmark of the Hungarian church leadership. The head of the Hungarian Catholic Church Cardinal Jusztinián Serédi limited himself to invisibly lobbying members of the government and civil servants, focussing on the rights and plights of Jewish converts, for example their physical separation from non-Catholic Jews in the ghettos and exemption from wearing the yellow star. Furthermore, relations between the nuncio and the cardinal were stressful. The latter even questioned the usefulness of the papal delegation itself. During a discussion with Protestant church officials Serédi, who has been denounced as ‘callously antisemitic’ (Phayer, 2000, p. 109), took the silence of Pius XII as an argument for his passivity: ‘If His Holiness the Pope does nothing against Hitler, what can I do in my narrower jurisdiction? Damn it.’ (Braham, n.d., p. 17) According to the Dutch theologian Jansen, Serédi argued that since the appeals of the pope remained without result there was no point in his (Serédi’s) issuing them (Jansen, 2000, p. 566; compare Kranzler, 1989, p. 167). An appeal was made by Pius XII to the Hungarian head of state, the regent Horthy, on 25 June on behalf of those persecuted ‘because of their nationality or race’, saying he ‘could no longer remain insensitive to the appeals made to him’ (Blet *et al.*, 1980, p. 328). Pius was the first world leader to do this.

Then finally at the end of June Serédi drafted a pastoral letter on behalf of all the bishops which, after a rather lengthy exposé of social doctrine, discusses briefly the persecution and deportation of Jewish ‘fellow citizens and Catholic believers’. However, like the Slovak bishops more than two years earlier the Hungarian bishops make serious accusations against their Jewish compatriots and explicitly approve of exclusive economic legislation and punishment of bad behaviour, if it is done legally, justly and proportionally:

We also have no doubt that a part of Jewry has had a guilty subversive influence on the Hungarian economic, social and moral life. It is also a fact that the others did not stand up against their coreligionists in this respect. We do not dispute the fact that the Jewish question must be resolved in a legal and just manner. Therefore we do not object, but actually hold it desirable, that in the economic system of the country the necessary measures be taken and the rightfully objectionable symptoms be remedied. However, we would neglect our moral and pastoral duty if we did not make very certain that the just shall not suffer ... (Braham, n.d., p. 23, 1981, pp. 1035–40)

Archbishop Czapik of Eger himself interpreted the persecution of the Jews as ‘appropriate punishment for their misdeeds in the past’ (Phayer, 2000, p. 106). After the government found out about the letter the minister of religious affairs István Antal pampered Serédi with small concessions for converts and warned him about inciting the Hungarian fascists to take over the government. The cardinal subsequently withdrew the letter, which had already been distributed throughout Hungary. A subsidiary reason for the withdrawal of

the letter might have been the suspension of the deportations on 7 July, due to ever-mounting international pressure (Braham, n.d., pp. 17–24; Kranzler, 1989, pp. 166–167; Phayer, 2000, pp. 104–10). Attributing this postponement to the papal appeal and the retracted pastoral letter, one week later Rotta nevertheless informed the Vatican about ‘the bad faith of government members’ and ‘a probable change of government’ (Blet *et al.*, 1980, pp. 351–52).

Three individual Hungarian bishops publicly denounced the persecution of the Jews to a wider public: Endre Hamvas of Csanád, Áron Márton of Gyulafehérvár (Alba Julia) in Transylvania and Vilmos Apor of Győr. Marton’s was the most impressive appeal. In a sermon on Thursday 18 May 1944 he said: ‘He who sins against his fellow man endangers one of the great achievements of the 2000-year work of Christianity – the idea of the brotherhood of man.’ In his Whitsunday sermon Apor called racists ‘pagan and clearly guilty’ (Braham, n.d., pp. 26–27 and 1981, pp. 1045–49).

### **Intermezzo: the Netherlands, 1942–1943**

Political extremism was rare in the Netherlands in the 1920s and 1930s and the almost 100-year-old parliamentary democracy was an established institution. The leadership of the *Rooms-Katholieke Staatspartij* (Roman Catholic State Party) opposed antisemitism, and party membership of the pro-German fascist *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging* (National Socialist Movement), which had relatively large support in the southern, mainly Catholic regions of the Netherlands, had been condemned by the Dutch bishops as early as 1936. Catholics in the party leadership were to be excluded from the sacraments. In January 1941 this sanction was extended to ordinary members and sympathisers. A climate of tolerance had developed in the course of history, and the attitude towards the Jews was rather different from that in Central Europe. Antisemitism nevertheless existed, and Catholic teachings were not lightheartedly ignored (Salemink, 2002, p. 12).

Together with five Protestant churches the Dutch Catholic bishops protested against the persecution of the Jews in a pastoral letter which was read in all churches on 26 July 1942. Social exclusion and deportation were condemned unequivocally as being in conflict with ‘the deepest moral consciousness of the Dutch people’ and ‘above all’ with ‘the justice and charity commanded by God’. There was no antisemitic element in the reaction of the bishops. Like their Slovak counterparts they referred to the destruction of Jerusalem, but only to make a comparison with the present day. They labelled the current events a divine ‘judgment of revenge’, but focused immediately on the shortcomings and guilt of the Catholic believers themselves. A new joint public protest followed on 21 February 1943, when the bishops in a pastoral letter denounced the deportation of Dutch forced labourers and the ‘persecution unto death of Jewish fellow citizens’. Whoever assisted the Germans in these proceedings was told that this was illicit and was called to steadfastness in refusing collaboration. The bishops made direct reference to the 1942 Christmas message of Pius XII (Stokman, 1945, pp. 249 and 250, 265–66, 266 and 267; Jansen, 2000, pp. 382–414).

### **Conclusion**

The historiography of the Holocaust is stiff with controversy. It is remarkable how authors can come to very different conclusions, even if they draw their material from more or less the same sources, for instance the *Actes et documents*. Jansen contends that in contrast to many bishops in the church periphery Pius XII constantly worked on behalf of the persecuted Jews. Goldhagen, however, states that these efforts were mere window-dressing, a deliberate attempt at a cover-up of Rome’s lack of commitment before 1943, that is before the Vatican decided that the allies would win the war (Goldhagen, 2002,

pp. 167–71). Jansen depicts Pius as energetic, yet Michael Phayer brands him as ‘lethargic’ (Phayer, 2000, pp. 109–10). Maybe the truth lies somewhere in the middle or maybe all three are right. Did apathy alternate with frenetic zeal? Did a concern for the public image of the church result in a sharper awareness of its mission and encourage more action?<sup>6</sup>

Apparently the International Catholic-Jewish Historical Commission was right: the *Actes et documents* do not allow one to draw solid conclusions. One does not need to be a (church) historian to find several flaws in them. First, the editors excluded documents concerning ‘the internal life of the church and the religious life of its believers’ (Blet *et al.*, 1965, p. viii). Yet the care for the faithful posed serious constraints on the activities of the Holy See and these could be understood better by studying a wider variety of sources. Second, many documents refer to material that was omitted. Third, because the documents are chronologically ordered, it might be possible that the editors unconsciously constructed a plot. Fourth, the documents themselves contain barely any information that refers to the way they were handled and what importance was attached to them. Fifth, 20 to 40 years have passed since the conception of the *Actes et documents*. With newer questions historians now would probably select different materials.

The suggestion made in the document *We Remember* (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 1998) to investigate ‘what precisely motivated people in a particular situation’ may offer a point of departure for further research. This goal may sound straightforward, but in fact it is far from so. Motivation refers to mentality, opinions, feelings, emotions, hopes, fears. How can these be reconstructed from mainly documentary evidence? Furthermore, the findings cannot be tested like theories in natural science. Still, the following theses could help to sharpen the ‘mental tools’ of those interested in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, antisemitism and the Holocaust.

1. Monocausal explanations in historic science are not fashionable any more, and rightly so. Sociology, for example, shows that human conduct is not just an individual matter but also a product of social processes such as group pressure to conform. The relationship between religiosity, Catholicism, antisemitism and the Holocaust should not be conceived in terms of a domino theory, with the first domino (antisemitism) necessarily knocking over the last one (Holocaust) in line with a concept of historical necessity which presupposes that human freedom does not exist and that the future can be predicted if all the causes are fully known. All this, of course, does not imply that antisemitism should be considered irrelevant: it undoubtedly contributed to a climate that diminished sensitivity towards the plights of the Jews.

2. In prewar society it was quite common for all important religious and secular ideologies to stigmatise groups of outsiders. With respect to Catholic antisemitism it is important to investigate what kinds of opinions existed in society at large and within the church itself. It should be made clear whether views commonly held within the church were different from those commonly held in the secular sphere, and whether these views were more extreme, similar in tone, or more moderate. The question should also be asked as to whether church antisemitism was of the same nature as secular antisemitism. Was Catholic antisemitism in reality not so much a protest against a particular group of people as an expression of opposition to a decadent, urban or cosmopolitan lifestyle? The distinction between racial and non-racial antisemitism also needs more refinement too. The Catholic Church was not unique in espousing a non-racial variety of antisemitism (in terms of ‘cultural contamination’): in Nazi circles too racial antisemitism was often considered as a vulgarised form of antisemitism.

3. The reconstruction of the ‘real’ policy of the Roman Catholic Church seems a tempting

task, but policy grew out of doctrine, and doctrine was hybrid and heterogeneous and comprised conflicting elements which were carried over into practice. A 1943 attempt to transfer Jewish children from Europe to Palestine, for example, was supported by the Vatican; but at the same time the Vatican wanted to limit the number of such immigrants and to be assured of continuing access for Catholics to the shrines of the Holy Land. There is the further general consideration that even within strongly centralised states and institutions the interpretation and application of doctrine and policy tend to diversify at various organisational levels.

4. It is undeniable that the Catholic Church came to the rescue of Jews, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, but it may be asked whether the 'Jewish question' as such was ever a serious focus of attention on the part of the church, and if so to what extent, and at which point(s) during the Second World War. It would be useful to clarify what the church considered to be its *ne plus ultra*. Did the church live up to its vocation as the safeguard of the highest moral standards? Which elements in its teachings, for example, would tend to inhibit or promote action on behalf of the persecuted? Did a certain conception of the history of salvation restrict the interest of the church mainly to its own flock? The church derived its right to intercede on behalf of the Jews from its duty to care for converts. Did this limit in any way its action on behalf of non-converts? Could belief in divine predestination, for instance, induce a sense of resignation while the Holocaust progressed?

5. It is extremely important to distinguish historical research from moral judgment. Looking back in 2004 we have a different perspective on the Nazi era than contemporary observers, who could assess current events only in a fragmented and incomplete fashion. Evaluating the moral stance of the Roman Catholic Church is possible only if one compares it with those of other contemporary churches and organisations. Did the church in any way stand out against the background of a generally accepted minimum level of humanity in a given cultural setting? In this respect it would be of great interest to compare episcopates throughout Europe. Why did they take different stands towards the legal exclusion and deportation of the Jews?

6. Without thorough knowledge of documentary evidence at the level both of the local church and of the church centre any research will remain open to contention. Two restrictions should be mentioned here. First, unprejudiced historical research in the now postcommunist countries was virtually impossible between 1945 and 1990, while today human and financial resources are lacking. Second, it is Vatican policy to keep its archives closed for some 75 to 100 years. Thus material relating to the last war will become available only by 2014 or later. Future research should not be undertaken by church historians and theologians alone. It will add to the credibility of such research if it is conducted together with scholars who have no connection with the Roman Catholic Church at all.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> These documents are available at the Vatican website: [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) The encyclical letters mentioned below are to be found at page [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/index.htm)

<sup>2</sup> John Morley gives a detailed account of Vatican diplomacy in Croatia and Slovakia between 1939 and 1943 (Morley, 1980, pp. 71–101 and 147–65).

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately there is no translation available of his interesting study *De zwijgende paus? Protest van Pius XII en zijn medewerkers tegen de jodenvervolging in Europa (The Silent Pope? Pius XII and His Collaborators against the Persecution of the Jews in Europe)*. It does, however, contain an extensive abstract in English and German.

<sup>4</sup> The expression 'Catholic antisemitism' as used in this article refers to a non-racial theological reflection on Jews and Jewishness or to a set of discriminatory measures in the religious, social, economic and political realms. David Kertzer has written a good introduction to this brand of antisemitism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from the point of view of the Papacy. Parts 1 and 2 are especially well done (Kertzer, 2001).

- <sup>5</sup> By using local sources the Slovak historian Dr Ivan Chalupecký comes to a positive overall appreciation of Bishop Vojtaššák's position. During a conversation in Freising, Germany, on 29 August 2003, he assured the author that documentary evidence shows that the bishop was instrumental in halting the 1943 deportations and that he helped Jews in need. According to him the chargé d'affaires, Burzio, was badly informed about what was really going on in Slovakia. Chalupecký prepared the documents for Vojtaššák's beatification process. See also Chalupecký, 2002.
- <sup>6</sup> José M. Sánchez provides a concise and, more importantly, irenic account of the controversy surrounding Pius XII (Sánchez, 2002).

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