Nazi Germany and the Catholic Church:
A Tragic Encounter

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Introduction

During the 1930's and the 1940's, Germany and the surrounding countries, such as Austria and France, were ruled by a political party, the National Socialist German Workers' Party, or the Nazi Party. At the same time, the Catholic Church was a very influential force around the world, especially in Germany, with about 35% to 40% of Germany's population calling themselves Catholic in the 1930's.¹ As the Nazi Party grew into one of the world's most feared regimes because of their atrocities and mass murders, the Catholic Church encountered a problem: whether or not they would help the persecuted while protecting its own members. As the Church spoke out against National Socialism and the idea of a superior race, the Nazis began brutal executions of Jews and Catholic clergy all around Europe. Those harboring Jews or other persecuted people were treated with the same cruelty. Yet people continued to help one another in this time of distress. The Catholic pope during that time, Pius XII, has often been accused of not speaking out against these evils, but he actually helped hide Jews while balancing the weight of the Church at the same time. This paper argues that the Catholic Church tried to help the suffering people during World War II and that it was not in support of the Nazis.

The Rise of the Nazi Party and of Adolf Hitler

The Nazi Party started out as a small political party in 1919 that disagreed with the Treaty of Versailles and spoke out against Jews and Communists.² They believed that Jews and Communists were the reason Germany lost World War I. They also fanatically believed in German nationalism, thinking that they were the superior race. Adolf Hitler joined their ranks in

1919 after being a dispatch runner for Germany during World War I.³ He was angry at Germany for signing the Treaty of Versailles because he thought it humiliated Germany and was unjust.⁴ He joined The German Workers' Party in 1919 and became a popular speaker for the Nazi party, becoming very important to the party as its public face. In 1923, he and the rest of the Nazi party attempted to overthrow the government, which became known as the Beer Hall Putsch.⁵ The rebellion failed and he was sentenced to jail for five years although he was pardoned after just one year.⁶ When he was released, he and the rest of the Nazi party slowly built up the popularity of National Socialism. It became a prevailing political party and Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany in 1933.⁷ After a German Communist named Marinus van der Lubbe admitted to burning down the German congress building, or Reichstag, Hitler used the fire to say that German communists were plotting against the government. Hitler then urged the German president, Paul von Hindenburg, to release a decree that would allow the government to arrest people without a trial. This decree, called the Reichstag Fire Decree, also took away the right to assemble, freedom of speech, a free press and caused the arrest of nearly 4,000 Communists.⁸ Finally Hitler's cabinet proposed an act at the new Reichstag. It was called the Enabling Act, and it stated that Hitler's party could pass laws without the consent of the German Congress.⁹ This gave Hitler almost supreme control over Germany and made the Nazi Party very powerful because he could now arrest people and pass laws without hindrance.

⁶ Ibid.
⁷ A&E Networks, “Adolf Hitler Biography”.
The Catholic Church vs. The Nazi Party

With the rise of the Nazi Party, a new problem presented itself to the Catholic Church. The Nazis preached anti-Semitism and beliefs contrary to Church teachings. There was much discussion and confusion at the time about the topic of National Socialism. Most people looked to the Church for guidance during this turbulent period. However the motives of the Nazi Party were not abundantly clear and many Church clergy and good Catholic lay people encountered nationalism and fell under the spell of Hitler's words. The Church in 1933 signed a Reichkonscordat (agreement) with the Nazis, agreeing to stay out of German politics while the Nazis would allow the Church to exist in Germany without interference. Unfortunately, the Nazis still encouraged children to join government-run organizations, such as the Hitler Youth Group, and leave Catholic-run groups and schools. The Concordat made it harder for the Church to protest the Nazis actions and made it difficult for the Church to be involved in German politics. Hitler soon broke this Concordat by making it arduous for children to attend Catholic schools and by shutting down Catholic newspapers. In fact, all organizations that were not “purely religious”, as the Concordat stated, were shut down. Often times the implementation of the phrase “purely religious” was very unclear and used as an excuse to eventually shut down Catholic youth organizations and Catholic communications. Despite this, many German bishops and priests still spoke out against the Nazis, along with many professors and philosophers of the time, such as Dietrich von Hildebrand. In 1937, Pope Pius XI issued a papal bull, titled Mit Brennender Sorge. It was written in German, sent to all the Catholic churches in Germany, and was read to the congregations. It condemned National Socialism, and the breaking of the 1933

Concordat by Hitler.\textsuperscript{12} It spoke of how the state or a race should not be considered greater than others.\textsuperscript{13} With this attack on National Socialism, relations between the Catholic Church and the Nazi Party deteriorated to the point of direct persecution of the Church by the Nazis.

**The Nazi Persecution in Europe**

When Germany invaded and conquered Poland in 1939, they began the overt persecution of the Catholics and Jews living there.\textsuperscript{14} The Nazis believed the Poles were subhuman and began an extermination of all Polish people, especially Jews and Catholic clergy.\textsuperscript{15} The Catholics were not allowed to attend Mass, while priests lost their basic rights.\textsuperscript{16} About 1.5 million people were sent to concentration camps or were enslaved.\textsuperscript{17} The churches were closed and the newspapers were shut down. Many priests were shot or deported to camps.\textsuperscript{18} Everything Church-related was either forbidden or suppressed. As many priests and lay people were being imprisoned, the Nazis were committing many atrocities in Poland, such as shootings in town squares, or torture of priests and other people. Over 2,300 Polish clergy were killed by the end of the war.\textsuperscript{19}

**The Catholics' Hidings of Jews**

Many Catholics all across Europe were killed for various reasons, like hiding Jews or publicly speaking out against the Nazi party. Priests were framed for crimes they did not do and were imprisoned.\textsuperscript{20} Many Catholics in France and the Netherlands hid Jews while protesting the
actions of the Nazis. In Germany, certain Cardinals, such as Cardinal Preysing and Cardinal Fring, gave speeches and organized protests and complaints against the actions of the Nazis. Nuns, monks, priests, and other religious across Europe, such as Father Dom Bruno or Blessed Sára Salkaházi, also hid thousands of people in their convents. Some Catholics have been beatified or canonized as saints by the Church for their heroic efforts during the war, such as St. Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest who gave up his life in a concentration camp for another person. Another saint from the Holocaust is Edith Stein, also known as St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. She is a Catholic martyr who died defending the teachings of the Church. Some Catholics also ran underground “railroads” to transfer Jews. In order to save these Jews many priests, monks, nuns, and lay people sacrificed their safety and sometimes their lives. But there is one man who secretly lead the cause of saving Jews while maintaining balance in Italy and the rest of Europe: Pope Pius XII.

The Efforts of Pope Pius XII

Eugenio Pacelli was the Catholic Pope from 1939 to 1958. Before he was made pope he was the Nuncio of Germany, meaning he was the pope's ambassador to Germany. When he was made pope he took the name Pius XII and helped make the treaty between the Catholic Church and the Nazis that was signed in 1933 and which the Nazis later broke numerous times. He protested the Nazis' frequent breaking of the treaty, eventually leading to his writing of Mit Brennender Sorge, condemning nationalism and the Nazis. During his tenure as pope he advocated peace in the world and an end to war. But the controversy surrounding Pope Pius XII is not just about him talking about peace. The controversy is about whether or not he helped the Nazis. Pius was a critic of National Socialism and of the idea of a superior race. He became a

staunch defender of Jews during World War II and hid Jews in the Vatican and in his summer residence Castel Gondolfo. He angered Hitler by speaking out against National Socialism and the ideals of the Nazi Party. After the war, Jewish officials expressed their thanks to Pius XII for his help in saving Jews and in resisting the Nazis. The Chief Rabbi of Rome even became a Catholic. This alone establishes that Pius helped Jews significantly. In his encounter with the Nazis, Pius not only saved many Jews, but he also gained their trust and helped build up the relationship between Jews and Catholics, paving the way for a better future.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the evidence I have presented in this paper shows that the Catholic Church and Pope Pius XII tried, and in some part succeeded, to help the persecuted people of the their times and should be commended for their efforts. Many people believe that the Catholic Church did not try to aid Jews and fellow Christians, or that the Church was in cooperation with Hitler, but in actuality the Church was not only persecuted too but assisted those whom the Nazi's oppressed. Everybody who opposed the Nazi party suffered, and Pope Pius XII, along with many brave priests, nuns, monks, and Christian laity risked their lives to help Jews. Through all of these encounters, the Catholic Church has demonstrated its humanitarian efforts during World War II and because of this, Christianity and Judaism are persevering in their work to coexist in our world today.

23 Ibid.
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