

# The Witness of Pius XII

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This Friday (October 9) will be the fifty-first anniversary of Pope Pius XII's death. Last year around this time, when Benedict XVI was planning a trip to Israel, the old controversy about Pius erupted once more because a caption at the Yad Vashem memorial, where Benedict was to visit, claimed the earlier pope had done nothing to condemn Nazis and their slaughter of the Jews. Pius is on the track to sainthood – as he should be – and it's worth looking again at these charges.

In October 1939, exactly seventy years ago, one month after the Nazis and the Soviet Union conquered Poland, Pius XII issued his first encyclical *Summi Pontificatus: On the Unity of Human Society*. Declaring that, as Vicar of Christ, he had “no greater debt to Our office than ‘to testify to the truth’ with Apostolic firmness,” he called on people of good will to unify in opposing world evils, particularly “two pernicious errors”: racism and statism.

Pius XII, who served as the Vatican Secretary of State for nine years before his election to the papacy in March 1939, explained to the faithful that the progress of spiritual decay in Europe was due to the “ever increasing host of Christ's enemies” who deify the state. Germany and the Soviet Union were guilty of “the denial and rejection of the universal norm of morality” – the natural law.

All men, said the Pontiff, were “looking with terror into the Abyss” because totalitarian legal positivists had forbidden “every appeal to the principles of natural reason and of Christian conscience” by “elevating the state [as] the supreme criterion of the moral and juridical order.”

Since civil sovereignty was created through the will of God, state activities must “converge harmoniously towards the common good” not the collective good promoted by totalitarians, whereas only select groups – Nazi Party members or Aryans – benefit. Pius condemned regimes that abolished “rights peculiar to family” (i.e., education) and insisted that rights of conscience are “sacred and invisible.” Taking a shot at the Communists, he stated that it is harmful to the prosperity of nations and their people and “leads to the violation of other rights” if the state is “something ultimate to which everything else should be subordinated and directed.”

As for the National Socialists, Pius bluntly stated they had “abandoned Christ's cross for another which brings only death.”

On the subject of race (which at the time referred primarily to the anti-Jewish policies of the Nazis), Pius condemns discrimination and emphasizes that all races “have equal rights as children in the House of the Lord.” The Church, he proclaims, is open to all people:

The spirit – the teaching and the work of the Church – can never be other than what the Apostle of the Gentiles preached: “putting on the new man, him who is renewed unto

knowledge, according to the image of him that created him. Where there is neither Gentile nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free. But Christ is all and in all.” (Colossians 3: 10-11)

Finally, he expressed his anguish over the war started by the Germans and Russians. He described it as Europe’s:

Hour of Darkness where there reigns in thousands of families death and desolation, lamentation and misery. The blood of countless human beings, even noncombatants, raises a piteous dirge over a nation such as Our dear Poland, which. . .has a right to the generous and brotherly sympathy of the whole world.

The reaction to the encyclical – from both friend and foe – was passionate. In a bold front-page headline, *The New York Times* declared “Pope Condemns Dictators, Treaty Violators, Racism.” The *Times* published the entire document and referred to the pope as an Old Testament prophet “speaking words of fire.” The London *Daily Telegraph* headline: “Pope Condemns Nazi Theory.” And the *American Israelite* praised the pope’s “denunciation of Nazism.” Records of a November 1939 British Cabinet meeting revealed that the encyclical was considered “in some ways, the most important document the war has yet produced and the wider its circulation the better from all points of view.” The French government reproduced *Summi Pontificatus* and airdropped 80,000 copies on select German cities.

Christ’s enemies, however, were not at all happy with the pope’s letter to the faithful. Gestapo Chief Heinrich Mueller stated, “This encyclical is directed exclusively against Germany, both in ideology and in regard to the German-Polish dispute; how dangerous it is for our foreign relations as well as our domestic affairs is beyond dispute.” SS chief Reinhard Heydrich said: “this declaration of the pope makes an unequivocal accusation against Germany.”

Fearing the political impact the encyclical would have on the conquered Poles, the Nazis distributed an altered version in Poland. To convince them that the pope supported the actions of the Nazi regime, every reference to Poland was changed to Germany.

*Summi Pontificatus* is just one piece of evidence that proves the critics of Pius XII are wrong. It is one of the many reasons why *The New York Times* wrote in a December 1941 editorial:

The voice of Pius XII is a lonely voice in the silence and darkness enveloping Europe. . . . In calling for a ‘real new order’ based on ‘liberty, justice and love’ . . .the pope put himself squarely against Hitlerism. Recognizing that there is no road to open to agreement between belligerents ‘whose reciprocal war aims and programs seem to be irreconcilable,’ Pius XII left no doubt that the Nazi aims are also irreconcilable with his own conception of a Christian peace.

It’s time for the uninformed voices raised against Pius XII to learn the plain truth – which was obvious to everyone seventy years ago – and to do justice to this much maligned, saintly, and heroic man.