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The Vatican and the Shoah

70 years after World War II

The Vatican still washes its hands in innocence. To regret, there is nothing – on the contrary. Pius XII is one of the “Righteous among the nations”. He has saved Jews like no one else and raised his voice against the mania for extermination by the Nazis. For the Vatican, it is clear: All attacks on the now venerable Pius XII are causeless and often only spiteful – mostly both.

For many years, the caption for Pius XII in Yad Vashem has been a stumbling block for the Vatican. The first caption openly criticized the silence of the Pope concerning the extermination of the Jews. The raid of the old-venerable Jewish community of Rome in October 1943 was especially mentioned. At that time, Pius would not have intervened. After the amended version of the caption in summer 2012, the Vatican shows itself more reconciliatory, but it is not yet fully repentant. The uncommented pros and cons are unacceptable, also the remark, that Pius staged a conspicuous intervention during the Roman raid.

Is it not about time for the Vatican to give up its knee jerk rejections of the criticism of Pius XII and shows itself remorseful? It is overdue that the Vatican confesses its guilt and asks for forgiveness for the diplomacy of Pius XII.

For quite some time the German and Austrian Bishops have demonstrated how matters could proceed. Even though it took some decades to finally face up timidly to the past, there are now statements of self-criticism. Their work of vigilance has failed, however, by »lacks, mistakes and contradictions«. The Magisterium has rejected the racial theory of the Nazis, but »there was no public scream when it was ruthless set in work.« The church would have broken their commandment of love, »those were our next ones who became innocently victims of the violent anti-Semitism.«

The French Bishops have gone much further with their confession (1997). They openly admitted that the silence was a mistake and that the Church of France has afflicted herself with guilt: »We implore the forgiveness of God and we ask the Jewish people to hear these words of remorse. « Was the church silence concerning the extermination of the Jews a mistake? Has the church become guilty because she turned her head from the big hunt for Jews in Europe?

Today German, Austrian and even French Bishops are thinking this way. And the Church of the World, the Vatican? Nothing! Any failure or even partial responsibility is completely rejected.

Individual Catholics have failed, not us – so the credo goes. The Vatican still insists on its exemplary behavior. Why does the Curia avoid words of regret concerning the diplomacy during the Nazi period just as the devil fears holy water?

The degree of self-righteousness that has been argued can be easily read in the only communication of the Vatican on the Shoah. The document with the important title: »We remember. A reflection on the Shoah« (1998) would see only »some Christian circles« responsible for anti-Judaism in history. These circles falsely interpreted certain statements in the New Testament. The Church played no role – this has been especially stressed. The central question for aid to the Jews during the Shoah also carefully distinguishes between individual Christians and the Church itself. Some Christians have heaved a heavy burden of conscience on themselves, but Pius XII acted exemplarily. He and his representatives undertook so much as to save »hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives«. Pius is the only one in the document who is named a saviour of Jews.

The Vatican still defends the silence of the Pope to the Shoah with the argument that it prevented worse – for the church and for the Jews. »I think he foresaw the result an open protest would have had ... He knew, he had to speak out, actually, but nevertheless, the situation did not allowed it«, so Benedict XVI emphasized shortly in his collected interviews.

Pius XII's strategically preventative silence offers no improvement if only repeated like a Mantra. It must also be demonstrated plausibly. This means more than indicating an alleged harm-benefit assessment. Independent of this Pius had the responsibility to review whether he was permitted to balance moral interests. The moral teaching of the church sets strict terms of conditions in this case. Only if no values are injured, can you decide in a consequentialist manner, i.e. weighing benefits and harms. Then purpose-rational diplomacy takes place. He had had no choice, asserted Pius XII again and again. He had to consider the consequences of a protest, or even an active movement of resistance, against the Nazi extermination of the Jews. Therefore, his silence was a "wise" act of diplomacy. The bishops in Germany, Austria and France see things differently, however. In spite of understanding the difficult situation, they see the silence of their predecessors as a moral mistake, not an illustration of wise behavior. They are right. They also would be right if they included the Vatican's diplomacy. However, the Vatican must make this step itself. No one else can do it for them.

There is plenty of other things to reflect on, for example:

- **Instead** of taking to heart the clairvoyant and urgent warning cry of the Jewish woman Edith Stein at the beginning of April 1933, the Holy See ignored her and hastily signed a concordat with Hitler some weeks later. Today the Holy See is really proud of "her" Edith Stein. She is canonized as a saint and declared as patroness of Europe. Today she is carved in best Carrara marble, larger than life-size, and stands in the very place she was denied entrance: in the Vatican City, within seeing distance of Pope Francis.

- **Instead** of denouncing the despicable treatment of the Jews in "the Reich" an encyclical was written, which only offered academic expiation of the race and state

theory of the Nazis. There were even some articles in the half-official CIVILTÀ CATTOLICA and the official L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO about the "Jewish question" with disrespectful statements. The Cardinal Secretary of State, Eugenio Pacelli (Pius XII), redacted and signed these articles. Up until now, only the editor in chief of CIVILTÀ CATTOLICA has apologized for the anti-Jewish slanders on occasion of the 150-year-jubilee of the magazine.

- **Instead** of embracing the powerful word: »Spiritually we are all Semites« of the old Pope Pius XI in September 1938 and using it as a spearhead against the new race law of Mussolini, Pacelli prevented its publication in the Vatican media and ensured that the "word" would not be part of the collection of papal teachings. Today the Curia and Popes cannot avoid the embarrassment referring to a non-Vatican source if they self-confidently cite the Semite-word of Pius XI.

- **Instead** of expressing their outrage in the name of Jesus about the burning Synagogues, just set in fire on the evening of the worldwide high feast of the Church: "Mother of all Churches of Rome and the World" (Basilica of Lateran), there was a new attempt towards agreement between Rome and Berlin after weeks of silence. At that time the Dean of the Cathedral in Berlin, Bernhard Lichtenberg, prayed lonely: »Outside the temple burns. It is also a Lord's house.« From the Vatican came nothing: no public prayer, no ringing of bells and not even an aghast note of protest.

- **Instead** of publishing the prepared anti-race encyclical of Pius XI, in which every harassment and persecution of Jews was castigated, the new elected Pope Pius XII buried the project just of the eve of World War. It has now been expected that this diplomacy gains the upper hand, the German Father Gundlach SJ, one of the co-authors of the encyclical, annotated bitterly. The blatant speech of Hitler four weeks ago (Jan 1939), in which the dictator had publicly announced for the first time the extermination of the Jewish race in Europe, was ignored without any comment in the Vatican.

- **Instead** of pointing the finger at the diabolical Genocide of European Judaism, instead of sharpening the conscience of the believers, instead of protecting the Jews and showing resistance according to the papal magisterium as guardian and vigilance, there was only purpose-rational diplomacy of restraint and pedantic neutrality. The one opportunity when Pius bemoaned victims of the War due to their descent was at the end of the Christmas message of 1942. He neither mentioned the word "Jew", nor the huge and terrible tally, which he knew reliably at the end of the year 1942: about 2.5 million dead Jews! 2.5 million! In fact, he said that there were altogether hundreds of thousand innocent victims, of whom a smaller part lay doomed due to descent. How "wise" diplomacy can distort and appease such an awful fact!

- **Instead** of warning the Jews in his own bishop's town of Rome from the impending SS raid in autumn 1943, instead of protecting them during the raid and saving them of the collective killing, Pius hid behind the supposed diplomatic need not to cause a stir in Berlin. In the deportation train of Rome more than thousand people were crowded – a

newborn baby, a lot of children, some youths, and many elderly, up to the 90-year-old Signora Rothschild. The train left the Eternal City to Auschwitz without any papal opposition. There was no word of consolation to the surviving relatives and friends, no expression of disgust towards German authorities in Rome or Berlin, not even a simple announcement in the OSSERVATORE ROMANO. »Maybe a public word of Pius XII. to the Shoah would not have stopped a death train«, said the president of the Jewish Community of Rome, Riccardo Pacifici, in the presence of Benedict XVI while the Pope was visiting the Synagogue in January 2010. But a caring word of Pius would have been an »immense consolation, an act of human solidarity for our brothers and sisters who were transported to the ovens of Auschwitz.«

Today no one can seriously deny that Pius XII allowed numerous Jews to cross the border into safe countries or to escape in hiding. For the Holy See, with his diplomatic contacts and abilities, this was a natural Christian duty. Normally this kind of help was without any risk. While you cannot accuse pope Pius of anti-Semitism, he was certainly attuned to anti-Judaism. This attitude flourished in the Church until the end of the fifties and was a fertile soil for anti-Semitism. Pius was neither »Hitler's pope«, nor did he sympathize with the Nazi regime or the war against Stalin, although he considered Communism more dangerous than National Socialism.

The big problem of Pius XII was that he solved the matter of conscience, which the Shoah imposed on him, in a purpose-rational way. Instead of facing the demonic work of Hitler, with great courage like a prophet, Pius acted in a restrained way, following cautious diplomacy. He was too scared to make a "wrong" step, which could provoke Berlin and cause incalculable consequences. However, wasn't there another recourse for a Deputy of Christ, something more important, something holier — namely to listen to the conscience, which is absolutely obliging? If Hitler had demanded sacrifices from the Vatican and the Christianity for a papal cry of conscience and an active protection for the Jews, they would have been holy sacrifices – for love, justice and truth.

In Rome it is daily prayed "mea culpa, mea maxima culpa" – for 2000 years. Why is it so difficult for the Holy See to say "mea culpa" and to weep about her own sins? »Tears are melting ice of the soul, all angels are close to those who weep.« This wrote once by the Nobel Prize Laureate for Literature, Hermann Hesse. If the examination of conscience is not sufficient for tears about the alleged wise diplomacy Pius XII, the streams of tears of the six millions murdered Children of God might help to melt the ice of the diplomatic justification attempts.

Seventy years after the end of the Shoah, it is now long overdue that the Holy See beats her breast, that she humbly recognizes her own failure and asks for forgiveness. Only in this way, will true reconciliation open.

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