Pope Pius XII and the Rescue of Jews in Italy: Evidence of a Papal Directive?*

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Little evidence supports the notion that Pius XII delivered a directive to members of the Catholic Church to help Jews during the German occupation of Italy, argues the author of this article. That many such men and women did open their doors is well known, and several thousand Jews in Italy were saved as a result. The pope and his advisers knew that many Jews, along with many more non-Jewish fugitives from the Nazis and Fascists, were hiding in religious institutions outside Vatican City, and being sheltered individually in prelates' residences in Vatican City itself. However, they seem not to have been aware of the full extent of the rescue effort, nor to have ordered it initially.

Since the end of the Second World War, supporters of Pope Pius XII often have claimed that he was instrumental in saving hundreds of thousands of Jews during the Holocaust.1 Assistance from the Holy See allegedly included measures to facilitate Jewish emigration from Europe, as well as diplomatic interventions before and during the war. A third reputed activity consisted of direct Vatican involvement in hiding, supplying, and guiding Jews who were trying to escape deportation. Some papal supporters maintain that Pius XII initiated these rescue efforts and ordered men and women of the Church to participate in them. More specifically, they assert that he issued directives to the heads of Church institutions to open their doors to Jews and other fugitives from the Nazis and local collaborators.2

Papal critics disagree with supporters on the extent and effectiveness of the pope’s efforts in all three of these assistance options. They maintain that Vatican efforts to facilitate Jewish emigration were directed almost exclusively toward converts to Catholicism. They indicate, also, that most Vatican diplomatic interventions

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on behalf of Jews during the war were tentative, tardy, and ineffective. These positions have been examined elsewhere and cannot be described further here. This article focuses exclusively on the third option, the issuance of a papal directive to save Jews. The analysis is limited to Italy, the country where Vatican officials, most of them Italian in origin, likely would have been most able to help.

The conclusion that the pope did not issue a rescue order is based on several factors. First, there is no written evidence of a papal directive to save Jews. If a directive had ever been written and delivered, it is almost inconceivable that at least one copy would not have been preserved. By the time of the German occupation of Italy on September 8, 1943, many clergymen realized that the pope was being criticized for his failure to denounce publicly the ongoing destruction of European Jews. They surely would have understood that written evidence of a papal order to rescue Jews would be important for the historical record after the war, and at least some of them would have saved such a document. Priests, monks, and nuns hid many documents and other personal belongings for those they assisted. They hid lists of names and addresses of their “guests” and of those who provided financial assistance for rescue efforts. It would not have been difficult to hide a written papal directive. But no such document has been produced, either by those involved in Jewish rescue or in the Actes et Documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale (ADSS), the eleven volumes of Vatican wartime diplomatic documents published between 1965 and 1981.

Of course, a papal directive to save Jews could have been issued orally. During the first eighteen years after the war, however, priests, monks, and nuns directly involved in Jewish rescue efforts in Italy did not testify that they had received or acted because of a papal order. Such testimony or claims of testimony, usually by individuals only indirectly involved in Jewish rescue, began to appear after the production in 1963 of Rolf Hochhuth’s play The Deputy, which criticized Pius XII for failing to protest the Holocaust. Many more testimonies and allegations have been forthcoming in response to the attention given to the subject by papal critics since 1999.

Careful scrutiny of the chronology of Jewish rescue in Italy also suggests the improbability of a papal directive. In Genoa, Turin, and Florence, where men and women of the Church protected large number of Jews, the rescue process began in mid-September 1943, at a time when Vatican officials in Rome were refusing to become involved. One refusal, for example, occurred on September 17, 1943, when a representative of the Roman Jewish Community met with a highly placed Vatican official to ask if Jews could be hidden in Church institutions in the Eternal City. The answer, recorded in a document published in the ADSS, was an unambiguous negative. This refusal probably was issued not because the pope and his advisers were antisemitic or pro-Nazi, but because they were determined to preserve Vatican neutrality and protect the Church. Whatever the reason, certainly no papal order to open Church institutions to fugitives was issued in mid-September. It is unlikely that the
pope would have ordered men and women of the Church to do what he himself was refusing to do.

While the hiding of Jews in Church institutions in Genoa, Turin, and Florence began in mid-September, it occurred in Rome, for the most part, three or four weeks later, during or immediately after the roundup of 1,259 Jews on October 16, 1943.\(^9\) That movement of Jewish fugitives into convents and monasteries was so fast and spontaneous that there would have been no time for a papal directive beforehand.

There is, in addition, considerable evidence of papal disapproval of the hiding of Jews and other fugitives in Vatican properties. In December 1943, for example, the rector of the Pontificio Seminario Romano Maggiore, near the Basilica of St. John the Lateran, wrote a letter to the pope in which he apologized profusely for troubling him by accepting too many fugitives.\(^10\) The rector apparently had been reprimanded for excessive zeal. Also, after an early February 1944 raid by Italian Fascists and a few Nazis on the extraterritorial Basilica and Monastery of St. Paul Outside the Walls, fugitives hiding in Vatican properties outside Vatican City itself were ordered to leave.\(^11\) Officials felt that their continued presence in Vatican institutions had become, at least temporarily, too dangerous for both the Church and the fugitives themselves. The guests were not thrown out into the streets but were assisted in finding other refuges. Nevertheless, their removal from Church institutions is inconsistent with allegations of a papal order to accept Jews.

The presence within Vatican City of at least fifty fugitives, mostly non-Jews and converts but including seven or eight who were Jewish in religion, was also questioned in February 1944. The fugitives were living in a building called the Canonica, where they were guests in the private apartments of individual prelates. Monsignor Domenico Tardini, secretary of the Section for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs at the Vatican Secretariat of State and one of Secretary of State Luigi Cardinal Maglione’s two closest aides, wrote at the time that, for security reasons, those hosts had been ordered to make their guests leave. “The matter caused an uproar,” Tardini added.\(^12\) After much discussion, the fugitives finally were allowed to remain, but it had been a close decision.

Evidence of high-ranking Italian prelates who did little for the Jews, or were even hostile to them, also challenges claims of a papal directive for rescue. One example was recorded by Don Leto Casini, a young priest recruited by Elia Cardinal Dalla Costa, archbishop of Florence, to hide Jews in his archdiocese. In his memoirs, Casini wrote of a dangerous train trip he took to Foligno on a frigid day in January 1944. His mission was to deliver funds to the bishop of Foligno, who actively was helping Jews. To reach Foligno, Casini had to change trains in Perugia, a transfer that involved a long delay. While waiting, he went to see the archbishop of Perugia, hoping, he later admitted, that he could leave the money with the archbishop, to be relayed to Foligno by someone else. But, as Casini wrote, “I had barely referred to the ‘Jewish’ problem. . . . He didn’t let me finish the sentence before asking me to leave and showing me to the door.”\(^13\) Stranded in Perugia again on his return from Foligno late that cold January night, the
young priest was so intimidated that he did not even dare ask for shelter at the archbishop’s residence. He preferred to spend the night, as he recorded, “sleeping out in the open, behind a gate.” If the pope had issued an order to rescue Jews, why would he not have sent it to a prelate as important and as close to Rome as the archbishop of Perugia?14

Some scholars have argued for the existence of a papal directive based on the fact that the archbishops of Genoa, Turin, Florence, and Milan cooperated over a large geographical area to save Jews.15 However, these coordinated efforts can be more correctly explained as the consequence of requests from local committees of an Italian Jewish assistance agency called Delasem. When each archbishop agreed to help, Delasem representatives turned over to him their funds and lists of local clients, along with information about other prelates who were engaged in the same activities. There is ample evidence of these Jewish-Catholic contacts.16

There is, finally, reason to doubt the existence of a papal directive to open Church institutions to Jews because such an order was usually not necessary or required. As the evidence shows, Jews were admitted spontaneously soon after the Germans arrived in Italy. At the parish level, priests had a certain leeway: They generally would have informed their bishops after the fact of any outside guests, and in Rome that bishop was the pope himself, who probably would not have objected, but they did not have to wait for a papal directive before acting. Nor was a papal directive required in most convents and monasteries, where the rules of the individual orders usually permitted outside guests in specified sections of the buildings. In fact, many such institutions operated hostels for traveling pilgrims. Others operated boarding schools with extra rooms. In most cases, Jewish and non-Jewish “guests” were separated by gender, with men and boys going to male institutions and women and girls to female ones. Only rarely and only in the most desperate cases did strict rules of cloister need to be lifted wholly or in part.17 Under these circumstances, directors of religious houses often sought permission from the heads of their orders to take risks or to dispense charity, but they were usually not required to inform the Vatican. From the pope’s point of view, while he may have had the authority to issue a rescue directive, he would have refrained from interfering in most cases, especially when the substance of such an order already was being fulfilled.

An April 30, 1943, letter by Pius XII to his friend Bishop Konrad von Preysing in Berlin makes it clear that the pope was sensitive to varying levels of risk in nations and locales throughout German-occupied Europe, and preferred to give the clergy discretion in dealing with Jews and other fugitives from the Nazis. “Regarding pronouncements by the bishops [on the subject of Jews],” he wrote, “We leave it to local senior clergymen to decide if, and to what degree, the danger of reprisals and oppression, as well as, perhaps, other circumstances caused by the length and psychological climate of the war, may make restraint advisable—despite the reasons for intervention—in order to avoid greater evils. This is one of the reasons why We limit Ourselves in Our proclamations.”18 Several years earlier, in 1935, while he was still
Vatican Secretary of State Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli, the future pope had been similarly explicit in a conversation with Dietrich von Hildebrand, a German Catholic philosopher and outspoken anti-Nazi. Hildebrand asked Pacelli if he realized that possibly millions of German Protestants and Socialists would have flocked to the Catholic Church if all the German bishops in the country had opposed National Socialism from the beginning. According to Hildebrand’s wife and biographer, Pacelli answered, “Indeed, but martyrdom is something that the Church cannot command. It must be freely chosen.”

While all of these factors contribute to the conclusion that no papal directive was issued to save Jews in Italy, most convincing is the absence of oral testimony from rescuers. Yet such testimony is the point upon which supporters of Pius XII recently have focused most strongly. Drawing on long-known statements in memoirs, newspaper articles, and secondary studies, as well as on some new material, supporters have, since around the year 2000, named two successor popes, several cardinals, and many other priests who allegedly claimed to have received a directive. The remainder of this article focuses on these claims.

The first pope, chronologically, whom many contemporary papal supporters invoke is the then Monsignor Angelo Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII (1958–63), who was the apostolic delegate in Turkey and Greece during the war. According to papal supporter Ronald Rychlak, Roncalli once said “In all these painful matters [meaning his efforts to save Jewish lives] I have referred to the Holy See and simply carried out the Pope’s orders: first and foremost to save Jewish lives.” But the evidence for that statement is Pinchas Lapide, whose consistently erroneous Three Popes and the Jews (1967) is often cited by papal supporters. Lapide wrote that Roncalli made that statement to him personally in 1957 in Venice, when Roncalli was the patriarch of Venice and Lapide was the Israeli consul there. No witnesses for this statement exist, so we have only Lapide’s word. Moreover, Rychlak misquoted Lapide as having said “Jewish lives”; the phrase actually reads “human lives.” Also, of course, Roncalli did not work in Italy during the war and was not referring to a papal order there.

The second pope who allegedly testified to a papal directive was the then Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini, the future Pope Paul VI (1963–78). As secretary of the Section for Ordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs at the Vatican Secretariat of State during the war, Montini was, along with Tardini, one of the two chief aides to Secretary of State Maglione. Rychlak wrote that in 1955 a delegation of Italian Jews asked Montini if “he would accept an award for his work on behalf of Jews during the war.” Montini allegedly replied to the delegation, “All I did was my duty. And besides I only acted upon orders from the Holy Father. Nobody deserves a medal for that.” But the source for this incident is again Lapide, who provided no evidence for his claim. Moreover, the statement itself is unconvincing, for two reasons. First, Montini
allegedly said, “All I did was my duty,” but there is little evidence that he ever did much for the Jews. He was involved in some tentative diplomatic interventions, and he clearly knew that Jews were among those being hidden at the Seminario Romano, but he does not seem to have been actively involved in Jewish rescue. On the contrary, in the one solidly documented case published in the Vatican’s *ADSS*, Montini actually refused a December 1943 request for assistance from an important Jewish convert to Catholicism, apparently without even referring that request to someone else.26

Montini’s alleged statement implying a papal directive to rescue Jews is also inconsistent with his well-known letter of June 1963 to *The Tablet* in defense of Pius XII. That letter was prompted by Hochhuth’s charges in *The Deputy*, which recently had opened in Berlin, that the pope had done nothing to help Jews during the Holocaust. In the letter, Montini wrote of Pius XII’s goodness, sensibility, courage, and desire to be informed of everything. He declared that the pope “tried, so far as he could, fully and courageously to carry out the mission entrusted to him,” and pointed out “an attitude of protest and condemnation [of the Holocaust] would have been not only futile but harmful.”27 But Montini never claimed in his letter that Pius XII had issued a directive to save Jews or had involved himself in any way in Jewish rescue—activities that, had they occurred, would have been most relevant to Hochhuth’s accusations.

As in the cases of Roncalli and Montini, allegations regarding certain other clergymen and a papal directive also seem to be without foundation. One of them concerns Father Pancrazio Pfeiffer, superior general of the Società del Divin Salvatore (the Salvatoriani), whose monastery in Rome is just north of the entrance to St. Peter’s Square. Pfeiffer was Pius XII’s personal liaison to the German military command in Rome. In a claim that is, like so many of the others, often repeated, papal supporter William Doino declared that Pfeiffer “swear[s] that [Pius XII] approved and urged [him], and all Catholics, to help Nazi victims.”28 Doino did not, it will be noted, specifically mention Jews. But Pfeiffer died in an automobile accident in mid-May 1945. No one was yet talking about Jewish rescue and the pope’s involvement. Pius XII may have known about Pfeiffer’s rescue activities, if indeed there were any, and he may not have disapproved. It is, however, unlikely that Pfeiffer ever claimed to have received a papal directive to help Jews. Doino provided no source. He may well have drawn his information from Lapide, who wrote that Pfeiffer saved at least eight Jews and many others, but who also provided no source.29

Another individual often cited for claiming to have received a directive is the Jesuit Father Paolo Dezza, rector of the Pontifical Gregorian University during the war and later a cardinal.30 On June 28, 1964, during the controversy surrounding Hochhuth’s play, Dezza wrote in *L’Osservatore della Domenica* that, when the Germans occupied Rome, the pope had told him: “Father, avoid receiving the military; since the Gregorian is a pontifical house and linked to the Holy See, we must keep away from that part. But [accept] the others very willingly: civilians, persecuted Jews.” Dezza added, “In fact, we received several of them.”31 Given Dezza’s stature
and direct presence on the scene, this claim deserves careful attention. It is surprising, however, that in articles he wrote for *La Civiltà Cattolica* and other publications, Dezza did not repeat the statement. More significant, the Gregorian University was primarily a school for seminarians who lived elsewhere. For a short time during the first months of the German occupation, the school accepted some “false seminarians” disguised in clerical garb as day students, not as residents. But documents that have come to light identify these “false seminarians” as political fugitives, not Jews. Also, in February 1944, after the Nazi-Fascist raid on the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, Maglione instructed the abbot there “in the name of the Holy Father, not to permit disguises in other clothing: no one should wear religious habits if he is not a priest or a monk.” Without clerical garb, “false seminarians” could not attend the university. At around the same time, as noted, properties of the Holy See and many other Church institutions received instructions from the Vatican to remove clandestine guests.

Another alleged witness to a papal directive was Monsignor Giuseppe Maria Palatucci, the bishop of Campagna. About Palatucci, William Doino repeats a lengthy quotation from an earlier writer, Fernande Leboucher, a French Catholic who worked during the war with rescuer Father Marie Benoît. Leboucher’s sentence reads, “The bishop of the Campagna, [Giuseppe Maria] Palatucci, who… saved almost a thousand Jews from the Germans, was asked in 1953 why he had risked his life for the Jews. [He said he did so] ‘because of Vatican orders, issued in 1942, to save lives by all possible means.’” But as we shall see, it is clear that Leboucher simply had repeated, without attribution, information provided by Pinchas Lapide.

According to Lapide, who provided no source, “Monsignor Palatucci, bishop of Campagna, and two of his close relatives saved 961 in Fiume.” At first glance, it is difficult to see how anyone in Campagna, in the province of Salerno and roughly seventy-five kilometers from Naples, could have saved or even assisted Jews in Fiume, hundreds of miles away on Italy’s extreme northeastern border. However, it appears that from May 1940 to September 1943 Bishop Palatucci may have worked with his nephew Giovanni Palatucci, a commissioner in the office for foreigners at police headquarters in Fiume. Commissioner Palatucci is best known for his assistance to Jews in Fiume after September 1943, when Germans occupied the city and Jews for the first time were in danger of immediate deportation to Auschwitz. He withheld or destroyed municipal records of their residency, warned them of pending police raids, and helped them find hiding places. He may well have saved hundreds.

Less well known are Commissioner Palatucci’s activities between 1940 and 1943, when he apparently assisted in less dramatic ways foreign Jews in Fiume, especially recently arrived refugees from Yugoslavia. After Italy entered the war on the side of the Germans in June 1940, foreign Jews throughout the country were arrested and interned or placed in supervised residences, always within Italy.
survivor testimonies, Commissioner Palatucci then provided many refugees in Fiume with false documents and helped them find safe and comfortable areas for supervised residence. He also seems to have arranged to send many foreign Jews in Fiume to an internment camp or supervised residence in Campagna, where his uncle Bishop Giuseppe Palatucci worked hard, and perfectly legally, to persuade local authorities and the civilian population to treat them humanely. The maximum number of Jews interned in the main camp at Campagna was 272, in September 1940. Around that time, the bishop made financial contributions from diocesan funds to supplement the small and inadequate government subsidies of 6.50 lire per person per day with which internees were to buy their own food and other supplies. He even requested additional subsidies from the Holy See, receiving 3,000 lire in October 1940 and 10,000 lire in November 1940. Thus, while Bishop Palatucci did not “save 961 in Fiume,” as Lapide claimed, he did make life easier for many Jewish internees in Campagna.

Thirty-six-year-old Police Commissioner Giovanni Palatucci was arrested on September 13, 1944, and deported. He died at Dachau on February 10, 1945. Eight years later, in 1953, he was honored by Israel when a street in Ramat Gan was given his name. Again according to Lapide and repeated by Leboucher, Bishop Giuseppe Palatucci and another uncle who was a Franciscan priest in the southern region of Apulia were interviewed at that time by the Israeli press and asked why they had decided to risk their lives for others. In answer to the question, Lapide wrote, “both referred to Vatican orders issued in 1942 ‘to save lives by all possible means’”—the phrase repeated by Leboucher. But because Lapide provided no source or evidence for that statement, we cannot be certain that the two priests actually made such a claim. Also, without more information, it is difficult to know exactly what they had done to “risk their lives.” In addition, the claim of their having received Vatican orders in 1942 “to save lives by all possible means,” insofar as it applied to Jews, is improbable because of the early date of the reputed statement. Jews in Italy were not threatened with deportation until the arrival of the Germans in September 1943.

Another alleged witness to a papal directive is the Capuchin Father Calliste Lopinot, who was sent in early July 1941 to minister to some eighty-five Jewish converts to Catholicism who were among the 1,144 foreign Jews then interned at Ferramonti-Tarsia near Cosenza, about 250 kilometers south of Naples. While there, Lopinot made numerous conversions, but he also provided moral and physical support for many who remained Jewish. He wrote extensively about his service at Ferramonti. He noted, for example, that he received 3,500 lire from the Vatican in early spring 1942 to help the 494 Jewish survivors of the shipwrecked Pentcho. The amount was small, but he wrote in another context that 3,000 lire were enough to provide a bowl of soup daily for thirty people for a month. But Lopinot never claimed in his reports that he had received a papal directive to rescue Jews. Foreign Jews at Ferramonti
were released a few days before the Italian armistice and the German occupation on September 8, 1943. They were obliged to hide from the otherwise engaged Germans for only a few days before the Allies reached them on September 14.

Father Marie Benoît, a French Capuchin priest known in Rome as Maria Benedetto, is also commonly cited, without evidence, as a witness to a papal directive.\textsuperscript{47} The evidence suggests otherwise. After a direct personal request from Lionello Alatri, a friend and an important figure in Rome’s Jewish Community, and in constant cooperation with Settimio Sorani of Delasem, Benoît hid and supplied several thousand Italian and foreign Jews in Rome during the German occupation. Far from receiving an order or even encouragement from the Vatican, however, he met with disapproval. On November 20, 1943, for example, when the irrepressible young priest was already in trouble with Italian authorities for forging documents for his refugees, an exasperated Vatican official, Monsignor Angelo Dell’Acqua, wrote, “I have repeatedly (and the last time very clearly) told Father Benoît, Capuchin, to use the maximum prudence in dealing with the Jews…. It can be seen, unfortunately, that he has not wished to listen to the humble advice given to him.”\textsuperscript{48} On December 29, in reference to reports of a joint Catholic-Jewish rescue group that could only have been the one headed by Benoît, Dell’Acqua wrote, “Several times… I have observed that persons employed at the Vatican or close to it interest themselves too much (in a manner that I dare to call almost exaggerated) with the Jews, favoring them…. I have always believed… in using the maximum prudence in speaking with Jews, to whom it would be better to speak less.”\textsuperscript{49}

Despite the claims of some papal supporters, Father Benoît received no financial help from the Vatican for his highly successful rescue activities.\textsuperscript{50} On the contrary, in March 1944 Vatican Secretary of State Maglione refused to become involved in the priest’s proposal to convert dollars deposited in London by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee into lire with which to support Jews in hiding in Rome, although evidence suggests that he permitted similar transactions for British prisoners of war.\textsuperscript{51} In reports after the war, Benoît, without mentioning the Vatican or the pope, made it clear that his funding had come entirely from Jewish sources.\textsuperscript{52} But papal supporters continued to claim that Pius XII had provided substantial financial assistance.\textsuperscript{53} Finally, in exasperation, Benoît wrote explicitly in an Israeli newspaper article that appeared on July 6, 1961, that he had received no financial help from the Vatican.\textsuperscript{54}

The final two frequently cited “witnesses” are the most important, not because they provided credible evidence of a papal directive but because of another nuance in their testimony.

The first, most important, and most directly involved in Jewish rescue is Father Pietro Palazzini. During the German occupation of Rome, the Seminario Romano sheltered from the Nazis and their Italian collaborators some 200 fugitives, about fifty-five of whom were Jews. According to papal supporter Rabbi David Dalin, then
Cardinal Palazzini, during a 1985 speech accepting the designation of Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem for his wartime help to Jews at the seminary, stressed “the merit is entirely Pius XII’s, who ordered us to do whatever we could to save the Jews from persecution.” This statement is curious, for several reasons. First, Palazzini’s file at Yad Vashem does not mention that he made such a claim. Second, as noted, in December 1943 Palazzini’s immediate superior, the rector of the seminary, wrote the pope a letter of apology for displeasing him by accepting too many fugitives. Third, in February 1944, after the Nazi-Fascist attack on the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, the Seminario Romano was among those institutions ordered to remove fugitives from the premises, at least temporarily. Finally, after Palazzini received his award at Yad Vashem and allegedly made his statement about a papal order, he wrote a book about his experiences at the seminary during the German occupation. The book was published in 1995. In it, Palazzini made no reference to a papal order.

Palazzini’s actual words on the issue, however, must be studied carefully. He wrote, “the guidelines provided by Pope Pius XII were to save human lives, on whatever side they may be.” That remark is significant, because Palazzini recorded that after liberation, Nazi and Fascist fugitives hid at the same seminary. He referred to them as “the persecutors of yesterday, now being scrutinized by the purge tribunals.”

About the German occupation, Palazzini added,

Under the pressure of events, although so very tragic, men rediscovered the Christian message, that is, the sense of reciprocal charity, according to which it is a duty to charge oneself with the salvation of others. To rediscover it, one voice was often raised among the din of arms: it was the voice of Pius XII. The refuge offered to so many people would not have been possible without his moral support, which was much more than a tacit consent.

However, Palazzini’s only concrete evidence of the “voice of Pius XII” was eight of the pope’s speeches. Three of the eight, at Christmas 1942 and on his name day, June 2, in 1943 and 1944, included brief references to the pope’s compassion for those persecuted because of nationality and descent (stirpe), but did not directly mention Jews or ask Catholics to help them. The other five speeches simply stressed the need for charity to all victims of war. Other than in the context of those papal speeches that were broadcast, Palazzini did not refer to Vatican Radio, which Rychlak, in particular, claimed sent out orders to help Jews. Nor did Palazzini ever refer to any other more precise papal directives. In other words, this honest and courageous man never testified to a directive, but he did indicate that Pius XII provided “moral support” for efforts to hide fugitives. That perception was undoubtedly an important element in the story of rescue. The priests and nuns who hid Jews likely believed that they were acting in a manner consistent with the pope’s will. But “moral support” is not the same as a papal directive.

Finally, there is the case of Father J. Patrick Carroll-Abbing, later a monsignor, who rescued and assisted escaped POWs and destitute civilians during the war, and
founded Boys’ Town of Italy after it. In an August–September 2001 article published in *Inside the Vatican*, William Doino claimed that Carroll-Abbing had told him in several telephone interviews the year before, “I spoke to Pope Pius XII many times during the war, in person, face to face, and he told me not once but many many [sic] times to assist the Jews.” Yet in his two books about his wartime activities, *A Chance to Live* (1952) and *But for the Grace of God* (1966), Carroll-Abbing rarely mentioned Jews at all. He never wrote that he took personal initiatives to hide Jews, that the pope told him to hide Jews, or even that Jews were hidden in Vatican properties. Carroll-Abbing died in July 2001, before the publication of Doino’s article.

Carroll-Abbing certainly did good and courageous things during the German occupation of Rome. Using vivid and dramatic examples, he described his work with Allied POWs, political fugitives, partisans, civilian victims of bombing raids, the poor, and, especially, homeless children. But he mentioned helping Jews only once, writing vaguely that for a time after the October 16 roundup, he was “in touch with many of the more than 150 religious institutions that were sheltering the Jews.” In *But for the Grace of God*, the only book that extended its description beyond his own personal activities, he also made many factual errors. The one statement that Carroll-Abbing made about a papal directive should thus be viewed in this context. He wrote that after the German roundup of Jews in Rome on October 16, 1943, “word came from the Vatican that, because of the emergency, nuns would be allowed to give hospitality in their convents to Jewish men as well as their families [emphasis added].” He said that the permission was given specifically to the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion [Zion], who passed it along to other convents.

This statement makes perfect sense. The Sisters of Our Lady of Sion convent was in fact a large residence for nuns devoted to the conversion of the Jews. The house was across the Tiber from the former Jewish ghetto. When the Germans began their roundup in the ghetto on October 16, 1943, many Jews fled across the river and knocked on the gates of Our Lady of Sion. Because the house was not a cloistered convent, the nuns needed no special permission to admit outsiders temporarily, but they probably did need it to house men for any period of time. They may have sought permission from the head of their order, or they may have petitioned the Vatican. In any case, the men (and women) who had entered on October 16 remained. The Sisters of Our Lady of Sion was, in fact, one of the few female religious institutions that hid men as well as women. The Vatican may well have given explicit permission, as Carroll-Abbing said. But it took no initiative in rescuing Jews, and issued no directive before or after the fact.

There is, however, much room for compromise and reconciliation between those who criticize Pius XII and those who defend him. Pius XII knew that Jews were hiding in Church institutions, although he probably knew few of the details. He and his closest advisers did not prevent that rescue effort, although some members of the Curia opposed it rather strongly and did try to interfere. On the other hand, some
papal advisers, probably including Montini, approved of limited and cautious rescue efforts as long as they did not compromise the neutrality of the Holy See. Vatican documents reveal that on a few occasions, papal advisers referred important political dissidents to Church institutions, and once or twice those referred may have been Jewish. As further documents become available, additional cases may become known. However, the documents also show that some Jewish supplicants were turned away without referrals.

It is possible that the pope and his advisers gave permission, on special request after the fact, to individual convents, such as the one Carroll-Abbing mentioned, to hide men on their premises. Vatican trucks continued to supply food to convents, schools, and other institutions sheltering Jews and many others. In late winter and spring 1944, until the liberation of Rome on June 2, Vatican authorities also allowed thousands of Italian civilians fleeing from Allied bombing raids and the German Army’s forced evacuations of the hill towns south of Rome to find shelter in the pope’s nearby summer residence at Castel Gandolfo. Although it has never been proven, there may have been Jews among them. In addition, the pope’s public messages about his compassion for those persecuted because of their nationality or descent, along with two encyclicals that made reference to his love for all people regardless of race, and L’Osservatore Romano’s pleas for compassion in four additional articles, encouraged rescuers from among the clergy, such as the young Palazzini, to believe that they were doing the pope’s will.

Clearly, papal involvement in Jewish rescue is not a black-or-white issue, but one of painfully nuanced shades of grey. Pius XII was a conscientious, deeply spiritual man, perhaps somewhat out of touch with reality and perhaps unable to comprehend fully the horrors of his age. He struggled to do his job as he saw it, in the best way he could given his training, experience, and temperament. He protected his institution while issuing general guidelines in favor of peace and charity to all who suffered. He permitted the establishment of the Vatican Information Service to enable thousands of refugees, including Jews, to communicate with their loved ones. Toward the end of the war, he encouraged the formation of a Vatican refugee-assistance agency to provide hot meals and clothing for thousands of Romans. Jews may have been among the recipients. In a context that did not involve Jews, he also accepted certain risks. For example, he agreed to pass messages from anti-Hitler agents in the Third Reich to the British in late 1939 and early 1940, and he warned the Allies of German invasion plans throughout spring 1940. Finally, he allowed men and women of the Church to make choices and to take far greater risks in acts of resistance and rescue. But there were limits to what the pope did, and those, too, should be recognized. Above all, he himself was not willing to take initiatives or to become directly involved in the rescue of Jews in mortal danger. Pius XII cannot receive credit for the courageous acts of rescue taken by men and women of the Church in Italy and elsewhere in German-occupied Europe.
Notes


4. Records of this type may be found in the archives of the Seminario Lombardo in Rome, the Archdiocese of Turin, and the Istituto Storico della Resistenza in Cuneo e Provincia, f. 5, Carte di Don Raimondo Viale.

5. These volumes, published in Vatican City by the Libreria Editrice Vaticana, consist of wartime diplomatic documents selected from the Vatican archives by an international team of Jesuit scholars, including Pierre Blet, Robert A. Graham, Angelo Martini, and Burkhart Schneider. Until 2003, other diplomatic documents written since 1922 had remained inaccessible to scholars. Additional material from the papacies of Pius XI and Pius XII is now gradually becoming available.


8. *Actes et Documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale* (ADSS), IX, doc. 338, notes of the Secretariat of State, September 18, 1943, pp. 482–83. On page 482, fn. 1 identifies the author of this document as Monsignor Di Meglio and declares that the Jewish lawyer probably was Ugo Foà, president of the Jewish Community of Rome.

9. There were, of course, exceptions, and Pius XII was aware of some of them. For example, Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini at the Vatican Secretariat of State noted on October 1 that an eighty-four-year-old man “of the Jewish religion” had asked for permission to stay at a particular Roman convent where the nuns were willing to accept his seventy-six-year-old wife, a niece, and an elderly female domestic servant. Special permission was necessary for the man because convents did not usually accept men. Montini added that the man had expressed a wish to make a gift in his will to a Catholic charity. That same day, with the note “Ex. Aud. SS.mi. 1X43,” Montini indicated that he had mentioned the matter to the pope. He added, “We’ll see if it is possible to help him.” The pope, in other words, was not opposed. But the pope had taken no initiative and issued no directive. The following day, Montini wrote that he had spoken of the matter with Monsignor Luigi Traglia, assistant to the vicar, who “seemed to be favorable.” No Vatican document indicates whether the man was actually accepted. See ADSS, IX, doc. 356, p. 496.

10. The letter is printed in Carlo Badala, “Il Coraggio di accogliere,” *Sursum Corda*, anno LXXVII, n. 1, 1994, pp. 43–46. It said, among other things, “It is with the greatest sorrow that I have learned that I also have added a displeasure to that mass of pain that today weighs upon the paternal heart of Your Holiness. . . . I believed that it was in the heart of Your Holiness to welcome in your seminary, with the greatest possible reserve, caution, and secrecy, some poor unhappy persons caught up in the current storm. . . . These grew in number: but I thought that it was not necessary to involve the highest responsibility of Your Holiness in individual cases.”


12. ADSS, X, note by Tardini attached to doc. 53, February 13, 1944, p. 129. Document 53 itself was written by Monsignor Guido Anichini, head of the Canonica di San Pietro, to the pope, informing him of the number of fugitives being sheltered in that building. Clearly, the pope did not know the full extent of these assistance efforts. For more on Jews sheltered within Vatican City, see Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows*, pp. 212–14 and 228–32.


14. Other examples of indifferent or hostile prelates include the Patriarch of Venice, Adeonato Piazza, who seems to have done little for the Jews (see Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows*, pp. 265–76); Archbishop Cesare Boccoleri of Modena, who insisted that classes in a seminary in Nonantola resume in early October 1943, as usual, and thus demanded that the roughly thirty to thirty-five Jewish orphans hiding there leave (Klaus Voigt, *Villa Emma: Ragazzi ebrei in fuga: 1940–1945* [Milan: La Nuova Italia, 2002], pp. 207, 212, 217); the Bishop of Mantua, known to the Allies as a Fascist sympathizer who refused to have anything to do with the incipient anti-Fascist Christian Democratic Party (Lamberto Mercuri, “La Situazione dei partiti italiani vista dal Foreign Office [dicembre 1943],” *Storia Contemporanea*, anno XI [6],...
December 1980, pp. 1049–60); and a bishop in the Valle d’Aosta who expressed strong disapproval of the efforts of a priest in his diocese to hide a Jewish family (Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea [CDEC], Milan, 9/1, f. Biella, statement of Davide Nissim, December 13, 1954). On the apparent indifference or hostility of Monsignors Antonio Riberi and Angelo Dell’Acqua at the Vatican Secretariat of State, and even of Secretary of State Maglione himself, to the rescue activities of Father Benoît, see below.

15. See, for example, Sergio Minerbi, Raffaele Cantoni, un ebreo anticonformista (Assisi: Beniamino Carucci, 1978), p. 118. Léon Poliakov did not make that claim specifically for Italy, but regarding all of occupied Europe he wrote, “We do not know what were the exact instructions sent by the Holy See to the churches in the different countries, but the coincidence of effort [by the Catholic clergy to help Jews] at the time of the deportations is proof that such steps were taken.” See his Harvest of Hate: The Nazi Program for the Destruction of the Jews of Europe (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979 <1951>), p. 295.

16. For details and documentation, see Zuccotti, Under His Very Windows, pp. 233–64. Delasem is an acronym for Delegazione Assistenza Emigranti Ebrei.

17. For example, Louis Goldman, in his memoirs Amici per la vita (Florence: SP 44 Editore, 1993), pp. 57–64, described the convent of Spirito Santo in Varlungo, near Florence, where his mother, aunt, and about nine other Jewish women were sheltered and saved. This convent of strict cloister devoted entirely to contemplation and prayer did not operate a school or other public facility. According to Goldman, therefore, the mother superior had to obtain the permission of the cardinal archbishop of Florence before she could modify the rules of cloister. Even here, however, the Jewish women lived in separate quarters that were technically outside the cloistered area, and did not have daily contact with the nuns. Also according to Goldman, the cardinal could grant permission, but he could not order the nuns to lift their rules of cloister.

18. ADSS, II, doc. 105, Pius XII to Preysing, April 30, 1943, p. 436.


20. One of the first recent papal supporters to make such a claim was Ronald Rychlak, in a response to my presentation at a symposium at Trinity College, Hartford, CT, in February 2001. Written and revised versions of our presentations may be found in the Journal of Modern Italian Studies 7:2 (summer 2002), pp. 215–68. I questioned Rychlak’s oral claims briefly in my published version, but this article discusses them in much more detail. Furthermore, in both his oral and published versions, Rychlak referred to “forty-two witnesses, including five cardinals, [who] spoke directly of Pius XII’s concern for and help given to Jewish people” in “sworn testimony, under oath” between 1967 and 1974. This reference is to testimony given in the Church’s official proceedings for the beatification of Pius XII. Rychlak and some others have been authorized to examine that testimony. My written request to see it was refused by Father Peter Gumpel, relator for the cause of Pius XII, on the grounds that some scholars had abused the privilege.

21. Don Aldo Brunacci of Assisi’s claim, made in 1982 and later raised not by papal supporters but by myself, is not repeated at length here because it was carefully examined in my Under His Very Windows, pp. 262–64. Very briefly, Brunacci claimed that he saw a letter from Vatican officials in the hands of his bishop, Giuseppe Placido Nicolini. He did not read the letter, but his bishop told him that it contained instructions to hide Jews. This Brunacci certainly did.
Apart from the question of why the bishop did not save the letter (he saved the personal papers of some of his “guests”), there is a problem of context here. Assistance activity for refugees from air raids began in Assisi in summer 1943, and clandestine efforts for Jews grew naturally from that. They were ongoing by September 1943, at a time when, as seen, Vatican officials were refusing shelter in Church institutions to Jews in Rome. For Brunacci’s claim, see his “Giornata degli ebrei d’Italia: Ricordi di un protagonista,” public lecture, Assisi, March 15, 1982, printed in full in Brunacci, Ebrei in Assisi durante la guerra: Ricordi di un protagonista, Assisi, January 27, 1985, pp. 7–15.

22. Rychlak, Hitler, the War, and the Pope, p. 242.


24. Rychlak, Hitler, the War, and the Pope, p. 242.


26. ADSS, IX, doc. 453, Foligno to Maglione, December 2, 1943, and attached note of Montini, pp. 589–90. The case involved a high-ranking Vatican lawyer named Foligno, who had been baptized a Catholic at birth and had a non-Jewish, practicing Catholic wife and children. In early December, after Mussolini ordered his police to arrest all Jews in Italy, including converts, Foligno wrote to the Vatican Secretariat of State to ask if he and his family could be sheltered in Vatican City or in some extraterritorial building. If ever there was an appeal that should have evoked a response from Vatican officials, this was it. Other Jews, especially converts, were being sheltered in Vatican properties, and Montini knew it. On Foligno’s letter, however, he wrote with terrible insensitivity and finality, “Unfortunately what he asks is not in our power. Respond accordingly.” This was not the action of a prelate who had been ordered by the pope to rescue Jews.


31. L’Osservatore della Domenica, pp. 68–69. Doino gave an incorrect date (June 26, 1981). He also somewhat exaggerated Dezza’s words, “Ma per gli altri ben volentieri: civili, ebrei perseguitati.” He translated them as “for the others, help them willingly, especially help the poor, persecuted Jews” (emphasis added).

32. See the list of names and identification cards of “false students” at the Gregorian University in ASL, b. 7.A.77.

33. ADSS, XI, doc. 30, notes of Maglione, February 6, 1944, p. 126.


40. Bishop Palatucci referred to this contribution in a letter to Montini on April 16, 1941; it is reproduced in full in *Giovanni Palatucci*, p. 134. Government subsidies for male internees were later increased to 8 lire per day.

41. See letters to Bishop Palatucci from Vatican Secretary of State Maglione on October 2, 1940, and from Montini on November 29, 1940, reproduced in full in *Giovanni Palatucci*, pp. 130–33. For a rough idea of the purchasing power of 13,000 lire, see below. Vatican officials later declined to send an additional 13,000 lire requested by Bishop Palatucci for the same purpose. See the letter from Monsignor Francesco Borgonini Duca, the apostolic nuncio to Italy, to Bishop Palatucci, March 10, 1942, also in *Giovanni Palatucci*, p. 136.

42. Giovanni Palatucci was honored as Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem in Israel in 1990. He was also proposed as a candidate for beatification in 2002.


45. Fr. Callistus a Geispolsheim (Lopinot), “De Apostolatu inter Hebraeos in publicae custodiae loco cui nomen v. Campo di Concentramento Ferramonti-Tarsia (Cosenza),” in *Analecta Ordinis Fratrum Minorum Capuccinorum* 60 (1944), p. 73. The Pentcho left Bratislava in May 1940, sailed down the Danube, and sank in the Aegean in October. Mussolini’s government first interned the survivors in Rhodes, but transferred them to Ferramonti in February and March 1942.


48. ADSS, IX, doc. 433, attached note of Dell’Acqua, p. 569.

49. ADSS, IX, doc. 487, notes of the Vatican Secretariat of State, fn. 4, annotation by Dell’Acqua, pp. 631–32.


56. Il clero e l’occupazione tedesca di Roma.

57. Ibid., p. 35.

58. Ibid., p. 5.

59. Ibid., p. 17.

60. For the text of the messages evoking papal compassion for those persecuted because of their nationality or descent, see L’Osservatore Romano, December 25, 1942, pp. 1–3; June 3, 1943, p. 1; and June 3, 1944, p. 1. The other papal speeches mentioned by Palazzini, delivered on August 24 and December 24, 1939, June 2, 1940, December 24, 1941, and December 24, 1943, were also printed in L’Osservatore Romano.

61. For Rychlak’s repeated claims about Vatican Radio, see Hitler, the War, and the Pope, pp. 144, 151; “Goldhagen v. Pius XII,” First Things, June–July 2002, pp. 39, 46–47; and his presentation in the Journal of Modern Italian Studies, p. 223. Since the original transcripts of wartime Vatican Radio broadcasts are not available, claims about their content cannot be confirmed. The sources for Rychlak’s and other papal supporters’ claims are usually allegations made during the war for propaganda purposes by the Allies, who were anxious to depict a Vatican partial to them. See Chadwick, Britain and the Vatican during the Second World War, pp. 141–49.


63. The first book was published in New York by Longmans, Green; the second, in London by Secker & Warburg.

64. Carroll-Abbing, But for the Grace of God, p. 56.

65. He was often mistaken with dates and statistics. For example, he wrote that Roncalli saved nearly the entire Jewish community of Bulgaria (p. 46); he made many errors in his description of Benoît’s rescue activities with regard to the Jews in Rome (p. 56); and he was apparently a source for the false but often repeated claim that when the Nazis extorted gold from the Roman Jewish Community in September 1943, the pope “made available 15 kilograms of gold by having some sacred vessels melted down” (p. 52). Even the pope’s closest friends and supporters agree that this never happened and that the pope’s offer of a loan at the time was never needed.


67. In the Journal of Modern Italian Studies, p. 224, Rychlak claimed “hundreds, perhaps thousands” of Jews were among those sheltered at Castel Gandolfo. However, his evidence from American archives is unconvincing because he did not show it to have ever precisely mentioned Jews. His citation of Marchione and Leboucher is faulty because those authors did not provide evidence. His final source is Emilio Bonomelli, whom he identified as the director of the papal villa at Castel Gandolfo. Rychlak stated that in his book I Papi in campagna
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(Rome: Gherardo Casini, 1953), p. 439. Bonomelli wrote, in Rychlak’s words, “some of the people under his [the pope’s] care were Jewish.” However, Bonomelli actually wrote of “some families of Jews” who were present at a mass at Christmas 1943 given for a group of political refugees at the villa of the Congregation of the Propaganda Fide, next to the papal residence at Castel Gandolfo. Those families, in other words, were not numerous—certainly they were not “hundreds, perhaps thousands”—and they were converts. In his description of the thousands of local refugees who subsequently found shelter at Castel Gandolfo from Allied bombing raids in February 1944 and from German clearance of their villages later, Bonomelli did not ever mention Jews. I have, to date, found no personal testimony from Jews who were at Castel Gandolfo, while such testimony from Jews in Catholic convents, monasteries, hospitals, and schools is plentiful. The issue demands further investigation.

68. The pope’s references to his love for all regardless of race occurred in Summi Pontificatus on October 20, 1939, and, much more briefly, in Mystici Corpus Christi on June 29, 1943. They may be read in The Papal Encyclicals, vol. 4: 1939–1958, ed. Claudia Carlen Ihm (Raleigh, NC: McGrath, 1981), pp. 5–22, 37–63. Additional L’Osservatore Romano articles about the pope’s position included two on October 25 and 29, 1943, p. 1, which in the wake of the Rome roundup spoke of his compassion for all regardless of “nationality, descent, or religion,” and two on December 3 and 4, 1943, p. 1, protesting not the deportation and murder of Italian Jews by the Germans but a recent Italian measure ordering Italian police to arrest and intern Jews within their own country.

69. To suspect that Pius XII may not have been able to imagine the full horror of the war, however, is not to say that he was not well informed about the Holocaust. Even most papal supporters do not suggest that he was unaware that millions of Jews had been and were continuing to be murdered throughout the war. For more on what the pope knew, see Kevin Madigan, “What the Vatican Knew about the Holocaust, and When,” Commentary 112:3 (October 2001), pp. 43–52; and Zuccotti, Under His Very Windows, pp. 93–112.

70. The German conspirators were seeking assurances that the British would not attack in the wake of a coup against Hitler. The pope seems to have issued his warnings of German invasion plans because he feared being accused of acting as a cover for a German attack. For details, see Harold C. Deutsch, The Conspiracy against Hitler in the Twilight War (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968), pp. 111–46 and 332–50.