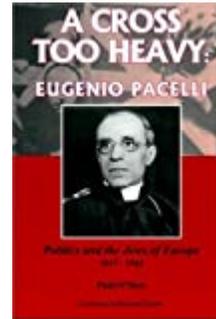


Paul O’Shea. *A Cross Too Heavy: Eugenio Pacelli—Politics and the Jews of Europe, 1917-1943.* Kenthurst: Rosenberg Publishing, 2008. 240 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-877058-71-4.



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Supersessionism and a Man Trapped in His Own Time

Paul O’Shea’s work on Eugenio Pacelli (later Pope Pius XII) is an interesting contribution to the “Pius Wars.” O’Shea’s work does not seek to canonize nor to demonize Pius XII; rather, O’Shea provides background information from Pacelli’s early life, the atmosphere that surrounded him as a young man, and his interaction with his predecessor, Pius XI. Each chapter builds toward the real heart of the book: chapter 8, entitled “Habemus papam,” which explores the years 1939-43, culminating in a study of the round-up and deportation of Jews from Rome. Throughout O’Shea’s work, a clearer picture of Pacelli as a Roman-born priest emerges, which helps to explain the action (and lack of it) taken by the pope during the Holocaust. Examining Pacelli’s writings, both as priest and as pope, allows O’Shea to offer a clearer understanding of Pacelli’s behavior.

Chapter 1 offers a review of some of the historiographical literature swirling around this controversial figure. O’Shea emphasizes that the historical debate on Pius XII is far from over. He also makes clear that he is most interested in placing Pius in the historical context of

his time, thus necessitating an intensive examination of the history of Christian anti-Judaism and antisemitism in chapter 2. Examining the early Christian church, O’Shea explores the development of the supersession myth: the notion that Judaism was made null and void by the rise of Christianity. The power of the idea of supersessionism is central to O’Shea’s work; he argues that even as the Jews of Rome were about to be sent to their deaths in the fall of 1943, Pius XII had completely accepted the idea that Christians were the “new Israel” and that Jews would have to take care of themselves. This theme continues into chapter 3, which examines Catholic ecclesiology from the Reformation era to the 1960s. Again, O’Shea seeks to demonstrate that supersessionism was alive and well and that throughout the tumultuous times, the teaching of the Catholic Church was that “all things are passing” but that the church would remain eternal. The Church Militant, a perfect society striving to restore the true faith, used this notion to counter threats to the political and social order it supported, whether liberalism, socialism, communism, Freemasonry, or relativism.

Chapter 4 begins the exploration of Pacelli's early life as well as sketching the Pacelli family history. Here, the reader can see how Pacelli, living in the shadow of the Vatican, was able to believe faithfully what the Catholic Church had taught for centuries. The third child of four siblings, he grew up in a loving, affectionate family known for its conservatism and ultramontanist Catholic theology. As Pacelli matured, he emerged as a loner, content to read, pray, and think by himself. These qualities persisted as he studied to become a priest and served him well as a member of the Vatican bureaucracy. By the time Pacelli was forty-one, he was made bishop and was appointed nuncio to Bavaria. Chapter 5 continues the story by tracing the dramatic influence that the First World War and the rise of both Bolshevism and fascism were to have on Pacelli's understanding of the world and of Catholicism's challenge to remain independent of any earthly power. That challenge—to remain a voice in world affairs—became more pressing as the chaos of the 1920s and 1930s erupted. Chapter 6 explores the relationship that developed between Pacelli and Pius XI. O'Shea connects Pius XI's and Pacelli's worldviews. By 1924, O'Shea argues, a pattern emerges that would remain unchanged until John XXIII's papacy: a tendency to accommodate right-wing governments and a proclivity to violent denunciation of left-leaning regimes. Throughout this time of trouble, Pacelli worked and agonized over events in Russia, Mexico, and Spain. By the 1930s, he enjoyed the reputation of an unwavering opponent of communism as he traveled the world, willingly representing Pius XI.

Chapters 7 and 8 lie at the true heart of O'Shea's book. Chapter 7 addresses Pacelli and his attitude towards Jews, National Socialist racism, and the role of the Catholic Church during times of Jewish persecution. O'Shea argues that Pacelli's behavior was consistent: he acted to preserve the position of the church in all circumstances. To that end, German Jews, suffering under Nazi discriminatory laws, would rank in his priorities below German Catholics and the perceived need to protect the church's institutional structure in the Nazi state. On March 2, 1939, Pacelli was elected to succeed to Pius XI and took the name Pius XII. The new pope's primary concern, as before, was to protect and preserve the Catholic Church, not to rescue German Jews. Using his years of diplomatic training, Pius XII placed his faith in mediation, persuasion, and persistent appeals to moral behavior in order to maintain peace in the world. Once the war erupted, Pius XII was determined to remain above the fray, a strictly neutral party who spoke out only on matters of morals and faith. As the war progressed and reports reached the

Vatican revealing the depth of Nazi crimes against the Jews, Pius XII found it hard to verify and to believe that such massive killing was possible. Like many others, he also found it difficult to accept that this type of brutality reflected state-sponsored policy. By the middle of 1942, however, the evidence was incontrovertible: Jews in the path of Germans were "facing a deadly future" (p. 284).

In October 1943, the Final Solution was enacted in Italy. The Pope no longer needed to wait for verifiable reports to filter in; he could witness the actual round up before his very eyes. O'Shea examines the pope's actions (or lack thereof) in the October round-up, and finds that Pius XII remained consistent: he had resolved to protect the Vatican from possible German occupation and save Rome from aerial bombardment. O'Shea argues that while Pius did not order any church institutions to hide Jews, neither did he oppose any request to hide potential victims of the Nazis. The pattern had shown itself again: protect the Church, worry about Jews later. O'Shea is careful to delineate the difference between Pius XII's public and the private character, showing that in private, he was worried about the fate of Rome's Jews, but believed that he could do nothing publicly.

The final question O'Shea asks is probably the most important one: whether Pius XII was obliged morally to speak out despite his belief that his words would have changed nothing. Chapter 9 addresses this question and answers it by discussing what the author terms Pius XII's "leadership of reaction." What he finds is a man trapped by his own upbringing and worldview. Pacelli was a diplomat and pope. He would not or could not be other than what he was. He believed in the supremacy of Christianity and the need to protect Catholic institutional structures from the dual threats of Bolshevism and fascism. Privately, he might have hoped that local bishops would intervene to save persecuted Jews, but publicly, he would not waver from his stance of strict neutrality. O'Shea concludes: "If Pius XII committed a sin with regard to the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust, it was the sin of consistency in thought, word and deed" (p. 334). Adhering to the lengthy tradition of supersessionism, Pius would not deviate from the feeling that Jews were the "lesser victims."

In all O'Shea's work offers readers familiar with the "Pius Wars" a remarkably neutral, fuller understanding of Pacelli's early life, the atmosphere surrounding the young priest, and his consistent pattern of reaction to events around him. Although O'Shea has not unearthed any new evidence, the book is valuable for its close read-

ing of papal documents including encyclicals, which shed antisemitism.
light on the pope's outlook on Bolshevism, fascism, and

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