

Why the Rush?

Peter Quinn

Pius XII was pope through most of my childhood. Though I never remember my parents speaking his name, a framed blessing from him, adorned with his severe profile, hung on the wall of our apartment.

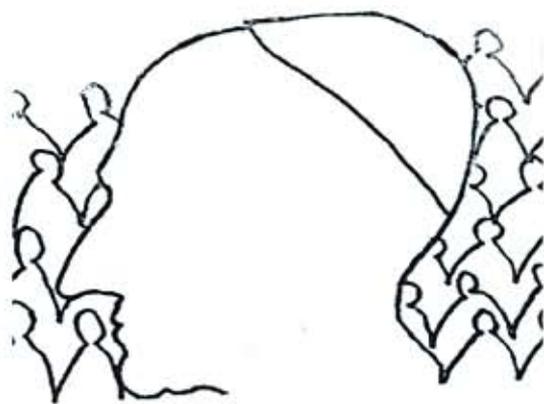
No one ever intimated to me that he was immortal, but my young mind assumed he was. When he died, in October, 1958, I remember going with my class into a hushed and darkened church to pray for his soul.

It is now the controversy over Pius's conduct during the Holocaust that seems immortal, as the reaction to Pope Benedict XVI's January visit to Rome's main synagogue made clear. Was Pius the heroic leader in a time of great crisis who stayed silent about the Holocaust out of fear of provoking reprisals? Or was he a decidedly unheroic prelate whose inordinate love of all things German and fear of communism blinded him to the true dimensions of Nazi evil? For its part, the church insists that it alone will evaluate which Catholics, through "the exercise of heroic virtue," have earned the high honor of sainthood. In the case of Pius's recent elevation to "venerable," the Vatican seems to regard his canonization as not only earned but urgent.

Neither a professional historian nor a scholar of the papacy, anti-Semitism, or World War II, I'm not qualified to offer a definitive judgment on Pius's response to the Holocaust. From the reading I've done, it seems to me that while Pius XII wasn't the villain he's been made out to be by some—"Hitler's Pope," as one book put it—he was a man of his time, defined (compromised?) to one degree or another by his career as a diplomat and church official with commonly held values and views, including a low opinion of Jews and Judaism. (He was by no means alone. Any true accounting of the Catholic Church's conduct toward Jews over the centuries must face up to a long history of contempt and, on occasion, active persecution.)

The final verdict of historians on Pius XII will have to wait until the Vatican grants full access to its wartime archives, which it claims must first be properly catalogued. Forging ahead with Pius's canonization won't influence that verdict one way or another, but it may cause the church to lose substantial credibility with Jews and perhaps do serious damage to the dramatic progress that has been made in Jewish-Catholic relations since the Second Vatican Council.

Ultimately, what harm is there in waiting? Martyrs such as Isaac



Jogues and Thomas More waited hundreds of years to be canonized. Were they any less holy for the wait? Given the legitimate desire of the church to raise to sainthood those of its daughters and sons whose "exercise of heroic virtue" might serve as a beacon to the world, there is a plethora of causes to choose from. Some, in fact, are already on the road to sainthood.

Blessed Bernhard Lichtenberg was the canon of St. Hedwig's Cathedral in Berlin when the Nazis seized power. His personal sanctity was matched by his defense of German Jews and his courageous denunciation of the pogrom carried out on Kristallnacht. Arrested by the Gestapo, he died in transit to Dachau. In an act of solitary and heroic resistance, Blessed Franz Jägerstätter of Austria was beheaded for refusing to be drafted into the Nazi Wehrmacht and participate in an unjust war.

Bishop Oscar Romero's adamant advocacy of human rights and social justice in El Salvador led to his murder by a right-wing death squad while saying Mass. In the same year, 1980, Sisters Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, and Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan were raped and murdered for their activism on the part of El Salvador's oppressed, intimidated peasantry. In Poland, Fr. Jerzy Popieluszko's 1984 murder at the hands of the secret police made him one in a long line of martyred resisters to Communist tyranny. The church in China has produced numberless Catholics whose willingness to bear witness to their faith stands as a universal example of courageous and heroic virtue. Every one of these heroic Christians may be a saint in heaven now, and they will stay there regardless of whether we identify them as such on earth.

"There is no time with God," wrote Dorothy Day, a candidate for canonization who founded the Catholic Worker movement and led a life dedicated to fulfilling Jesus' injunction, "Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do unto me." Like Dorothy Day, Pius XII has passed into eternity. His status before God, whatever it may be, will not be altered by a rush to judgment on the part of the church. ■

Peter Quinn's third novel, *The Man Who Never Returned*, will be published this August.