

Fair minded should welcome beatification of Pope Pius XII

Stirrings in Rome suggest that the movement to beatify Pope Pius XII may be on its way to getting back on track. If so, it's a development that fair-minded people should welcome.

The beatification of Pope Pius, who headed the church from 1939 until his death in 1958, got shifted to the Vatican's back burner several years ago thanks to an ugly controversy about his actions before and during World War II.

In brief, it was alleged in some quarters that he was soft on Hitler, seeing him as a potential counterweight to communism, and didn't do enough to protest and resist the Holocaust. "Hitler's Pope" was the vicious title of one book making such charges.

Even so, the cardinals and bishops of the Vatican Congregation for Saints' Causes last year voted to recommend that Pope Benedict formally recognize the wartime pope's heroic virtues and declare him "venerable." Instead, Benedict XVI established a commission to examine new archival material and weigh the impact that beatifying him would have on Catholic-Jewish relations.

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone - who holds the same job, Secretary of State, that Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pius XII, held between 1930 and 1939—calls the allegations against him a "black legend."

For many, the charges against Pope Pius smack of a cold war disinformation campaign orchestrated from Moscow and naively taken up by people who should know better. The masters of the Kremlin, who apparently arranged the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II, would have had few qualms about blackening the reputation of the fiercely anti-communist Pius.

Among those sharing this view is Michael Burleigh, a distinguished British historian who specializes in the interaction between church and state in modern times. In defending Pius XII, he takes his stand alongside other respected figures like Ronald

Rychlak, Sister Margherita Marchione, M.P.F., and Rabbi David Dalin.

In “Sacred Causes,” a volume covering the 20th century that was published last year by HarperCollins as a companion piece to his earlier book “Earthly Powers,” Burleigh links anti-Pius propaganda to “the Soviet secret police” and ties it especially to the Pope’s successful anti-communist stand in the 1948 Italian elections and to the communist crackdown on the Church in Poland that began soon after.

But as Burleigh makes clear, Pope Pius despised Hitler. His first, prewar encyclical, “Summi Pontificatus,” was praised by The New York Times as “a powerful attack on totalitarianism.” Early in the war, he was an intermediary for a group of Germans hatching a plot to overthrow the Nazi chief. The British government wasn’t interested, and nothing came of it.

During the war, at some risk to himself, Pius XII spoke and acted many times to protest the treatment of Jews and offer them protection. So much so that after the war Jewish groups publicly hailed him as a friend. Burleigh calls it “extraordinarily mean-spirited” to suggest that the Catholic priests who with the encouragement of the Pope extended help to Jews or the Jews who thanked Pope Pius after the war had some “ulterior motive” for doing so.

Eugenio Pacelli was a diplomat by training and temperament, and as pope he did things in his own diplomatic fashion. Perhaps a different pope would have denounced the Nazis more directly than he did, but in doing so that different pope might have contributed without intending it to making a very bad situation even worse. If and when we are able one day to speak of “Blessed” Pius XII, it will be welcome recognition of the sanctity of this brave man.

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