

Pius XII feared outcry against atrocities would worsen situation

VATICAN CITY – Pope Pius XII wanted to speak out against Nazi atrocities, but was advised not to for fear of worsening the wartime situation, said the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano.

"If the pope was silent, it was not out of fright or self-interest, but concern for worsening the situation of those oppressed" by the Nazi regime, it said.

With continuing criticism of Pope Pius' wartime activities, especially given the advancement of his sainthood cause, the newspaper Feb. 2 republished an article that had first appeared in a special June 28, 1964, edition of the Vatican's weekly periodical, L'Osservatore della Domenica.

The article, written by the late Jesuit Cardinal Paolo Dezza, gave a firsthand account of the cardinal's conversations with Pope Pius during the war. Cardinal Dezza, who was rector of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome at the time, conducted spiritual exercises for Popes Pius XII and John Paul I.

During a lengthy audience with Pope Pius in December 1942, the cardinal said the pontiff was pained by the Nazi atrocities unfolding in Germany and was distressed by criticisms that he was not speaking out publicly against them.

The pope had recently sent letters to three bishops in Poland in which he deplored the Nazi's criminal acts, but the bishops had written back, first thanking the pope for his concern, but adding that they would not make the letters public "because it would worsen the situation," according to the late cardinal.

"If I speak out, I will do them harm," the pope said, according to Cardinal Dezza.

The cardinal said the pope told him, "People lament that the pope doesn't speak out. But the pope can't speak out. If he did it would be worse."

When the Germans occupied Rome in 1943, the late Italian cardinal said Pope Pius

encouraged him to use the pontifical university as a refuge for “civilians, Jews and the persecuted.”