

Top Vatican official: Documents show Pius XII worked to help Jews

ROME - Thousands of Vatican documents demonstrate that Pope Pius XII worked quietly but effectively to help Jews and others during World War II, a top Vatican official said.

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican secretary of state, said June 5 that the documentation of papal charity is the most convincing response to the “black legend” that has depicted the late pope as indifferent toward the victims of Nazism.

The cardinal said a fair reading of history must recognize “the enormous work of charity that the pope promoted, by opening the doors of seminaries and religious institutes, welcoming refugees and the persecuted, and helping all.”

“The church of Pius XII continued to work not only with a prophetic voice but above all with daily prophetic action,” he said.

Cardinal Bertone made the comments in Rome at the presentation of the book, “Pius XII, Eugenio Pacelli: A Man on the Throne of Peter,” by Italian journalist Andrea Tornielli.

The cardinal’s lengthy talk came four weeks after the Vatican’s Congregation for Saints’ Causes declared that the late pope heroically lived the Christian virtues and recommended Pope Benedict XVI advance Pope Pius’ sainthood cause.

Cardinal Bertone said the legend about Pope Pius’ supposed “silence” during the war had its roots in the postwar period, specifically 1946-48, a time when the state of Israel was being formed and when the pope was calling for respect and justice for Palestinian residents of the Holy Land.

Over the years, Cardinal Bertone said, the false accusation of papal unconcern for Jewish suffering under Nazism gained acceptance, despite historical evidence to the contrary. On several occasions, the pope did denounce Nazi persecutions, the cardinal said.

But the pope measured his words carefully and prudently, Cardinal Bertone said, because he was convinced that speaking more bluntly would end up causing greater harm to Jews and other groups.

He said Pope Pius explained this policy of discretion when he spoke of the Jews in a public address in 1943, saying that people should not expect him to divulge “all we have attempted and achieved to mitigate their suffering, improve their moral and juridical conditions, (and) protect their indispensable religious rights.”

In fact, Cardinal Bertone said, former Nazi officials immediately after the war confirmed that papal denunciations would have only accelerated the killings of Jews and the church’s own ministers.

For similar reasons, he said, popes chose discreet action over strident criticism during the more recent decades of persecution of Christians under communism.

“Popes do not speak with the aim of prefabricating a favorable image for posterity. They know that on their every word could depend the fate of millions of Christians; they have at heart the fate of men and women in flesh and blood, not the applause of historians,” Cardinal Bertone said.

The cardinal said Pope Pius chose to give verbal instructions to his aides and others, who used the church’s resources to save many lives.

“The bishops, priests, religious and laypeople understood very well the mind of the pope and what needed urgently to be done,” he said.

Cardinal Bertone said many of the church’s activities on behalf of Jews and others have been detailed in published documents. But he said there also exists an immense amount of unpublished documentation in the Secretariat of State’s own archives, detailing the Vatican’s response to thousands of personal cases.

The cardinal said these documents are not accessible today because they have never been organized, and he suggested that the Vatican would like to do so quickly – perhaps with the help of funding from some foundation.

Even without access to all the archival information, Cardinal Bertone, people should consider the widespread thanks and recognition given to Pope Pius by European

Jews after the war.

He said honesty should also compel people to reject depictions of the wartime pope as sympathetic to Nazi leaders or Italian fascists.

“When did Pius XII meet with Mussolini? ... As pope, never. When did Cardinal Pacelli meet with Chancellor Hitler? Never. When did the pope meet Mussolini and Hitler together? Never,” Cardinal Bertone said.

The cardinal did not refer directly to Pope Pius’ sainthood cause, but he described the pope as a shining example of personal holiness and said his pontificate was “long, fruitful and, in my opinion, heroic.”

The cardinal said the debate over Pope Pius’ wartime role has eclipsed his many other achievements and breakthroughs as pope, including liturgical reform, advances in Scripture study, consideration of evolutionary theory, new missionary initiatives and promotion of women’s rights.