

War and remembrance: Vatican highlights Pope Pius XII's peace efforts

VATICAN CITY – Like much of Europe and the world, the Vatican was marking the 70th anniversary of the start of World War II with an act of remembrance.

In the Vatican's case, though, the remembering has focused largely on the dramatic and unheeded warnings issued by Pope Pius XII to world leaders in the weeks and days leading up to the war's outbreak.

The late pope's sense of alarm came through loud and clear in the radio message he delivered Aug. 24, 1939, as German troops were massing on the Polish border. His voice full of urgency, the pontiff told the world's powerful that "empires not founded on justice are not blessed by God."

"Today, when the tension of spirits has reached a level that makes the unleashing of the tremendous whirlwind of war appear imminent, in a spirit of paternity we make a new and heartfelt appeal to governments and peoples," the pope said.

"To governments so that, laying aside accusations, threats and the reasons for reciprocal mistrust, they try to resolve present differences through the only suitable means, that is, sincere joint agreements; and to peoples so that in calm and serenity, and without unbecoming agitation, they will encourage efforts for peace on the part of their leaders," he said.

The pope added, "Along with us, the whole of humanity hopes for justice, bread and freedom, not the iron that kills and destroys."

Parts of the audio recording were replayed in late August on Vatican Radio, which called the message "a milestone in the church's service to peace." Likewise, the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, printed the text of this and other papal warnings against war, depicting Pope Pius as a prophetic figure who was ignored by those in power.

A week after the pope issued his appeal, German troops invaded Poland, setting off six years of unprecedented warfare. When it was over, an estimated 60 million people – most of them civilians, including more than 5 million European Jews – were dead, cities lay in ruins and millions were homeless or displaced.

The role of Pope Pius during the war has been much debated in recent years. Against the accusations of indifference to the plight of Jews and inaction on other fronts, the Vatican has stepped up its defense of the wartime pontiff.

In early August, the Vatican newspaper published a sharply worded critique of Allied governments for failing to help European Jews despite having detailed information about the Holocaust. It said U.S. and British inaction contrasted with the quiet efforts undertaken by Pope Pius to save as many Jews as possible.

More recently, the Vatican has spotlighted Pope Pius' public and private moves to dissuade key countries from crossing the line into war. An able diplomat, he followed the international turn of events carefully, and in May 1939 made a quiet push for negotiations through apostolic nuncios in Germany, Italy, France, Britain and Poland.

Speaking to the world's cardinals in June of that year, the pope briefed them on his diplomatic offensive and even expressed some optimism at the response it had generated among the governments involved.

In the subsequent weeks, however, those hopes slowly vanished and the pope's disappointment was palpable. As he said in a talk two months later, "we have tried and done what was in our power to stave off the danger of war," a war that he predicted would be unprecedented in its "physical and spiritual destruction."

In a front-page article Aug. 24, the Vatican newspaper recalled all this and argued that Pope Pius and his aides never stopped working for peace throughout the conflict. The article, signed by the newspaper's editor, Giovanni Maria Vian, said Pope Pius "helped the persecuted, without distinction," in Rome and inside the Vatican, throughout Italy and in other European countries.

Vian said the church had symbolically closed a chapter of reconciliation over the war

with the elections of the Polish Pope John Paul II in 1978 and the German Pope Benedict XVI in 2005 – two figures who suffered the war's effects personally, “sons of nations which were then opposed,” and who have both strongly praised Pope Pius.

What was interesting about the Vatican's latest, forceful defense of Pope Pius' record was that there was no mention whatsoever about his pending sainthood cause. Faced with a unanimous recommendation in favor of Pope Pius' beatification last year, Pope Benedict put the cause on hold and put out the word that both critics and supporters should stop pressing the issue – something Vatican officials seem to be taking seriously.