CHAPTER ONE

Problems with Pacelli

As faithful, practicing Catholics, consecrated and lay, we urgently write to you concerning the cause of Pope Pius XII. We are educators who have conducted research and are currently carrying into effect more research on Catholicism under National Socialism and the Holocaust. The movement to press forward at this time the process of beatification of Pius XII greatly troubles us. Needless to say, the controversy over Pius XII’s actions during the Second World War and the Holocaust is long-standing.

Letter to Pope Benedict XVI from Catholic historians (February 16, 2010)

A Conundrum

Christopher Dawson, the English Catholic historian, wrote an article entitled “The Sword of the Spirit” in the January 1941 edition of the Dublin Review. He condemned neutrality as an untenable position in the (then) current war. The scale of death and destruction was beyond anything previously imagined. To remain neutral in the face of such evil was immoral. Dawson cited Pope Pius XII in support of his argument:

Nevertheless, there is already a general realization that social and political issues have become spiritual issues—that the Church cannot abstain from intervention without betraying its mission...therefore the Church must take up her prophetic office and bear witness to the Word even if it means the judgment of the nations and an open war with the powers of the world...the principle of such action has been stated perfectly clearly by the present Pope in his address to the Lithuanian Minister a year ago...1

In October 1939, two days before the release of his first encyclical letter, Pius received the Lithuanian minister to the Holy See.2 After Vladimir Girdvainis had presented his credentials, the pope “emphasized the
importance of defending Christianity against the attacks of its enemies in Europe.” And although Pius was referring to the specter of Bolshevism, Dawson adroitly commented that communism was by “no means the only representative of the spiritual evils of totalitarianism, although it avows its anti-religious and anti-Christian attitude more openly and directly than the totalitarian state in Germany has done.” What is significant is that this sentiment of principle is not some hidden secret Vatican document, but a public expression found in the London *Times* and the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* of the Vatican. I am unaware of any historian who cites these documents.

We have a conundrum, especially in the context of those who argue that the pope had to remain neutral for the sake of ensuring the safety of the Church and others throughout the war. Neutrality was, it has been argued, the best way to save lives and reduce risks to other lives. The conundrum lies in the bald fact that, in October 1939, Pacelli declared it the duty of the Church to resist evil and defend Christianity. In effect, the pope condemned a neutral, “fence-sitting” position. Since 1958, scholars and apologists have trawled over the life and work of Pius XII and, for the most part, have ended up in opposing trenches lobbing academic bombs at each other. It is my intention to revisit the evidence and attempt to make some breakthrough. It should be done, or else Pacelli will remain in an historical limbo, either sanctified or vilified, with not much in between.

There have been few problems within contemporary Catholicism that arouse such passions as the subject of Eugenio Pacelli, known to history as Pope Pius XII. The man who exercised the office of supreme pontiff during the years of the Second World War and the Holocaust has been the center of a storm since 1963. In that year Rolf Hochhuth’s play *The Deputy* (*Der Stellvertreter*) opened in Germany. His scathing summation of Pacelli opened the way for a reevaluation of the role of the man who had been widely credited with the saving of thousands of Jewish lives.

He was not a “criminal for reasons of state”; he was a fence-sitter, an over-ambitious careerist who, having attained his goal wasted his time on inconsequential trifles while the tormented world, as Bernard Wall writes, waited in vain for a word of spiritual leadership from him.5

The playwright’s scorn was condemned as outrageous by many and stirred supporters of the dead pope to write about Pacelli’s virtues. Hochhuth had done the unthinkable: he had effectively accused the pope of criminal negligence and moral culpability in the face of the Nazi destruction of European Jewry. Indeed, there grew rumors and hints of a Soviet-inspired “black propaganda” conspiracy designed to defame Pius and paint him as pro-German and pro-Nazi.6 The genie had escaped and there was no way it could be recaptured.