

Robert Ventresca explores complex life of Pope Pius XII



Story by Agnes Chick

This month, Robert Ventresca, associate professor of History, published his book *Soldier of Christ: the Life of Pope Pius XII*. Ventresca presents an objective account of the fascinating life and career of Pius XII, a contradictory figure who has sparked debates known as the “Pius Wars”.

During the Pope’s reign from 1939 to 1958, the papacy confronted the effects of World War II (1939-45), the abuses of the Nazi, fascist, and Soviet regimes, the horror of the Holocaust, the challenge of postwar reconstruction, and the threat of communism and the Cold War.

Although known for his dedicated work to God, the Pope has been accused of failing moral leadership during the Holocaust. *Soldier of Christ* moves past the disputes and focuses on a historical interpretation of Pius XII, formerly known as Eugenio Pacelli. Ventresca explains why the Pope’s response to Nazism and the Holocaust was considered as weak and inadequate by many, both at the time and in the decades after the war.

At the same time, Ventresca cautions against reading the life and times of Pius XII strictly through the lens of the war years, since the Cold War and his manner of engaging with the modern world were also defining features of his pontificate.

“There were many ways in which he was progressive and forward-thinking,” says Ventresca. “He could appreciate the many contemporary challenges the Church was facing in the middle of the 20th century, and he was able to anticipate future challenges. Yet at the same time, he could be quite conventional, even somewhat reactionary in this thinking. I describe him as a prophetic reformer of limited vision. The limited vision was evident, for instance, in his response to Nazism but especially in his relationship with Judaism and the Jewish people before, during and after the war. ”

Ventresca touches on Pacelli’s childhood, his intellectual formation in Rome’s seminaries, and his interwar experience as papal diplomat and Vatican secretary of state. Although he was criticized for his silence during the Holocaust, Pius XII later fought the spread of Communism in Western Europe, spoke against the persecution of Catholics in Eastern Europe and Asia, and tackled a range of social and political issues.

“I found him to be a fascinating, enigmatic and contradictory figure,” notes Ventresca. “Many scholars have focused on what they think Pius XII should have said and done. My objective is to describe and understand what he did or did not say and do, and why.”

For more information about this book, please visit the Harvard University Press website at www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674049611

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