

# The Church and the Holocaust

# Our Catholic Heritage

## How the Church Saved Thousands of Jews

By MSGR. JAMES F. CONNELLY

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The Catholic Church suffered enormous losses in religious personnel and property, and millions of her sons and daughters during the Second World War (1939-1945). Three bishops and some 2,000 priests were killed in Poland. An estimated 1,600 German priests were killed in action and another 1,000 were executed by the Gestapo. A greater number of priests and nuns lost their lives in other countries of Europe and the Far East. Invading Japanese forces killed numerous missionaries and native priests in China and throughout the Orient. Others were imprisoned. War damage to church buildings alone during the war was estimated at \$6 billion. These statistics do not include the hundreds of Protestant clergyman and the 6 million Jews whom Hitler killed in the Holocaust.

Rolf Hochhuth, in his play "The Deputy" (1963), accused Pope Pius

XII (1939-1958) of being a silent accomplice in the Holocaust, the most massive and dastardly genocide in history. Hochhuth was not the first to levy such a popular charge nor will he be the last. However, the recent opening of the Vatican Archives to scholars of the Holocaust should put such charges, with their unjust innuendoes, to rest.

Pope Pius XII knew that he must maintain the strict neutrality of the Holy See to continue its credibility among all nations. He further knew that any further anti-Nazi protests on his part might trigger even more severe reactions against Jews and Catholics, destroy the bond between Rome and German Catholics and perhaps endanger efforts by the Church and many Catholics to save as many Jews as possible. He could not forget the repression of the Church in Germany after Pope Pius XI had issued his encyclical against Nazism (1937).

Catholic youth and labor organizations were dissolved by the Nazism (1937); priests and monks were falsely accused of immorality and currency violations and were either killed or imprisoned in concentration camps. Even the famous Protestant leader, Martin Niemoller was arrested.

A similar situation developed in Holland (1942) when the Dutch Bishops issued a pastoral letter against the deportation of Dutch Jews to Polish concentration camps. Pope Pius XII knew all these sad facts and more. He feared that his protests might escalate the war, as he himself remarked at his first conclave of cardinals after the war.

On the other hand, it was Pope Pius XII who used gold church vessels of sacrifice to ransom the Jews of Rome from the Nazis. It was he who ordered that the persecuted Jews be hidden in the churches, convents and monasteries of Rome, and even in the Vatican itself. So grateful were the Jews of

Rome that two years after the war their leader, Rabbi Zolli, embraced the Catholic faith. Some time later, the Israeli consul in Rome, Pinchas E. Lapid wrote:

"The Catholic Church saved more Jewish lives during the war than all other churches, religious institutions and rescue organizations put together ... Its record stands in startling contrast to the achievements of the International Red Cross and the Western democracies ... The Holy See, its nuncios, and the entire Catholic Church saved some 400,000 Jews from certain death."

There is no doubt that the Church was responsible for saving thousands of Jewish lives. There is doubt as to how much Pope Pius XII knew from its earliest stages to the end of the Holocaust. A further question also remains: whether, by publicly protesting more vigorously the atrocities of the Nazis, Pope Pius XII would have saved — or lost — more lives?

## The Gospel Message Amidst the Nazi Horror

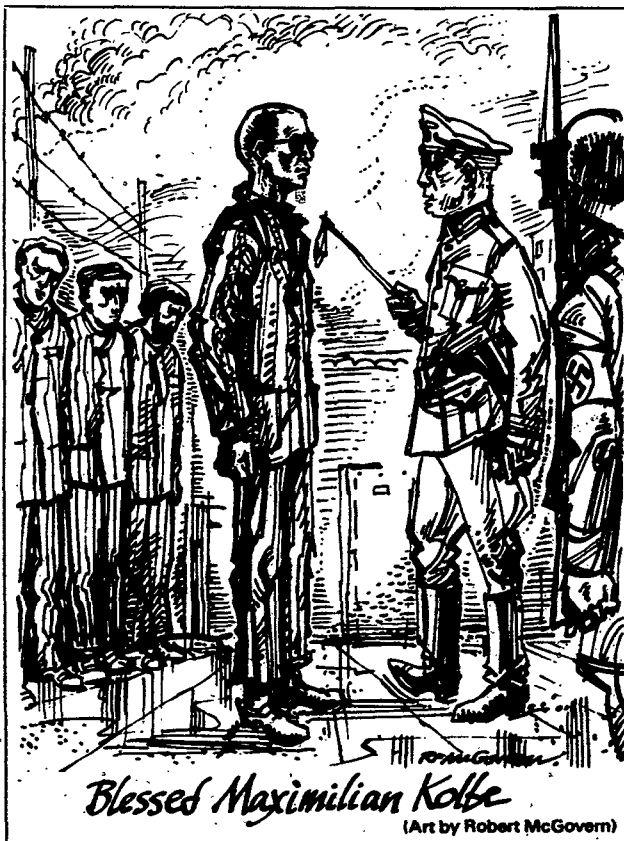
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On his beatification day, Vatican Radio extolled Father Maximilian Kolbe as the answer to all question which are asked about the identity and the value of the modern priest.

The priest whom the Church was offering as a model of Christian charity was born on Jan. 7, 1894, near Lwow, Poland. Although he was almost consumed by tuberculosis when he was young, Maximilian Kolbe entered the Franciscan Order in 1911. He studied philosophy and theology in Rome (1912-1919); was ordained in the Eternal City (1918) and returned to Poland the next year where he became a professor at the Franciscan Seminary in Krakow.

In 1922, he began publishing a popular devotional magazine, "The Knight of the Immaculate Mother," fulfilling a vow of his youth. Five years later, he began to build a community near Warsaw which he called Niepokalanow (City of the Immaculate), which rose from its first tar-papered shacks to become the largest single religious community in the world with 700 Franciscans. This self-contained "city" eventually acquired a radio station for religious broadcasts and published a daily newspaper with a circulation of 320,000. By 1930, Father Kolbe was in Japan where he built a similar City of the Immaculate Mother; published "The Knight of the Immaculate" in Japanese, and began a Franciscan seminary.

World War II found him back in Poland where he turned Niepokalanow into a hospital and a refugee



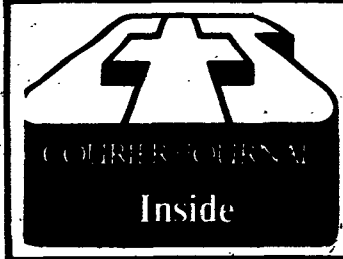
Blessed Maximilian Kolbe

center, one third of whose inhabitants were Jewish. On Feb. 17, 1941, the Gestapo arrested him and sent him to Auschwitz, the most notorious of all the Nazi concentration camps. He became prisoner #16670.

One day, when the Nazi guards ordered that 10 prisoners be killed in reprisal for the death of a guard, prisoner #16670 stepped forward and offered himself as a replacement for one of the condemned prisoners, a Polish Army sergeant, Franciszek Gajowniscek, a married man with children. Father Kolbe was put in the starvation bunker with no food or water for two weeks; then the S.S. killed him with an injection of carbolic acid. His body was cremated the next day, the Feast of the Assumption. Oddly enough, in the "Calendar of Auschwitz Events," which contains the record of over 5,000 days of infamous history, the sacrifice of Father Kolbe is not mentioned.

On Oct. 17, 1971, Pope Paul VI (1963-1978) beatified Father Kolbe not as a martyr, despite his fatal and heroic charity, but for his intense devotion to Our Lady, his missionary work, and his evangelization feats.

Father Kolbe's charity in giving his life for another man was a stark reminder of the Gospel message that there is no greater love than to give one's life for another. The decree of beatification reminded the world of this message of Jesus Christ. It opens with the words: "Greater love has no man: . . .!"



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