

# Vatican document voices repentance for Holocaust

By John Thavis  
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — In a long-awaited document on the Holocaust, the Vatican expressed repentance for Christians who failed to oppose Nazi persecution of Jews.

The document, released March 16, said centuries of anti-Jewish attitudes in the church may have contributed to Christians' lack of spiritual and concrete resistance to the Nazi policies, which left some 6 million Jews dead.

"For Christians, this heavy burden of conscience of their brothers and sisters during the Second World War must be a call to penitence. We deeply regret the errors and failures of those sons and daughters of the church," it said.

"This is an act of repentance," it said, "since, as members of the church, we are linked to the sins as well as the merits of all her children."

Titled, "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah," the 14-page text was prepared over an 11-year period by the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, at the request of Pope John Paul II. It was carefully reviewed before publication by the pope and a number of other Vatican departments.

In a brief accompanying letter, the pope called the Jewish Holocaust, or Shoah, an "indelible stain" on history. He said the church's reflection was part of an effort to encourage Christians to "purify their hearts" by examining their own responsibility for the "evils of our time" in anticipation of the year 2000.

The pope said he hoped the document would "help to heal the wounds of past misunderstandings and injustices" and help shape a future "in which the unspeakable iniquity of the Shoah will never again be possible."

Addressed to all Catholics, the Vatican document was also sent to Jewish leaders around the world.

Cardinal Edward I. Cassidy, who heads the Vatican commission that prepared the text, said it went beyond an apology to Jews, because "an act of repentance is more than an apology."

The Vatican document, while acknowledging shortcomings of some Christians during World War II, said others had act-

ed heroically to save Jews. In a series of footnotes, it defended Pope Pius XII, who has been criticized by some Jewish groups as too timid in his criticism of Nazi actions.

The text also made a distinction: The failure of some Christians to protest the Holocaust policies may have been linked to centuries of mistrust and hostility toward Jews in Christian environments, it said. But the anti-Semitic ideology of the Nazi regime had different origins and in fact was also anti-Christian, it said.

"The Shoah was the work of a thoroughly modern neo-pagan regime. Its anti-Semitism had its roots outside of Christianity and, in pursuing its aims, it did not hesitate to oppose the church and persecute her members also," it said.

The document asked whether anti-Jewish sentiment among Christians made them less sensitive, or even indifferent, to Nazi persecutions of the Jews.

While noting that the answer needed to be given case by case, it concluded that "the spiritual resistance and concrete action" of some Christians was "not that which might have been expected from Christ's follow-

ers."

Did Christians give every possible assistance to those being persecuted? it asked. "Many did, but others did not," it said. Here it offered the example of Pope Pius. It cited a series of testimonials and thanks from Jewish leaders immediately after the war, acknowledging what it described as the "wisdom" of Pope Pius' diplomacy.

In reflecting on the Holocaust, the document briefly examined several centuries of what it called "tormented" relations between Jews and Christians, noting "the balance of these relations over 2,000 years has been quite negative."

The early centuries of Christianity, it said, witnessed disputes between the church and Jewish leaders, Christian mobs that attacked synagogues and anti-Jewish interpretations of the New Testament.

In later times, the document cited a generalized discrimination against Jews in Christian quarters, which led to expulsions and attempts at forced conversions.

"Despite the Christian preaching of love for all, even for one's enemies, the prevailing mentality down the centuries pe-

nalized minorities and those who were in any way 'different,'" the document said. By the 19th century, it noted, discrimination against Jews in Europe was "more sociological and political than religious."

Nazism in Germany, it said, was a form of nationalism that drew from theories of racial superiority. The church in Germany replied by condemning racism, it said. It also cited criticism of Nazi policies by other church leaders of the time.

Asked at a press conference why the document spoke only of Catholic indifference or insensitivity to Nazi policies, and not of church members who actively supported the Nazi regime, Cardinal Cassidy said it would have been problematic to select church figures for criticism.

"To sit in judgment on people is much more difficult than to praise those who took a stand" against Nazism, he said.

Preparation of the document was begun in 1987, at a time of tensions in Catholic-Jewish relations. Cardinal Cassidy said it took so long to publish because the document reflected an important "maturation process" of church thinking.

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### Catholic Courier (USPS 135-580) Vol.

109 No. 23 March 19, 1998

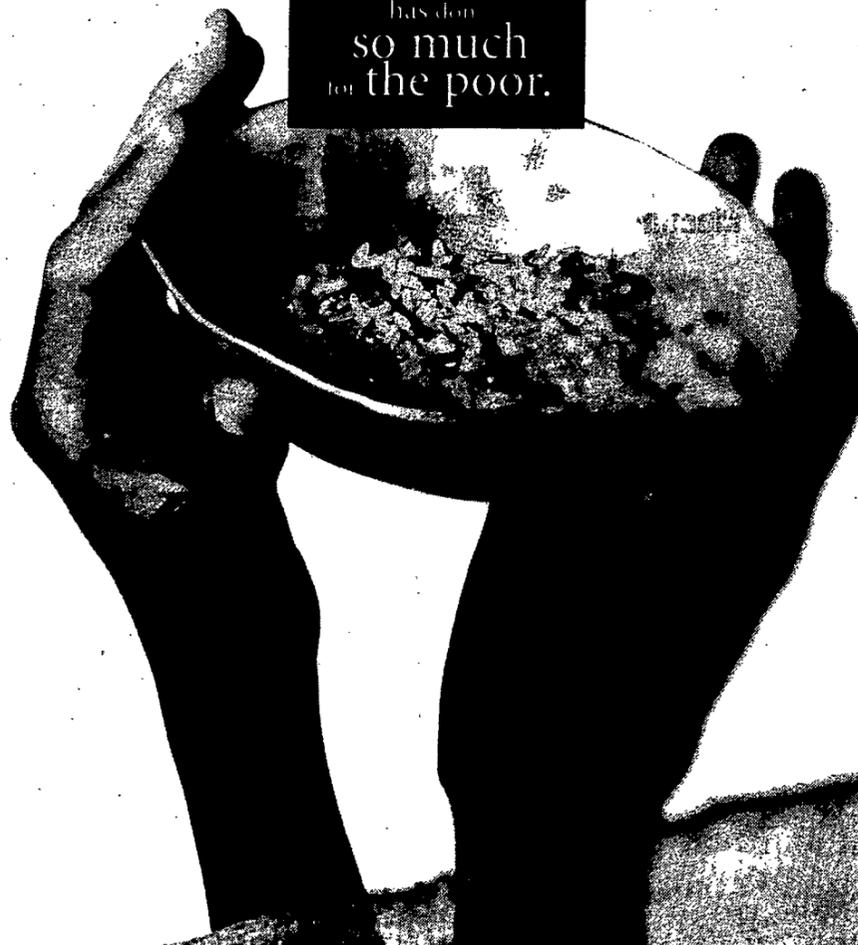
Published weekly except the first

Thursday in January.

Subscription rates: single copy, 75¢; one-year subscription in U.S., \$20.00; Canada and foreign \$20.00 plus postage. Offices: 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y. 14624, 716/328-4340. Periodicals postage paid at Rochester, N.Y.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Catholic Courier, P.O. Box 24379, Rochester, N.Y. 14624.

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