"What People Thought of Pius XII During the War"
Ronald Rychlak Talks About His Acclaimed Book

ROME, APR. 1, 2001 (Zenit.org).- Ronald J. Rychlak, a University of Mississippi law professor, is the author of "Hitler, the War, and the Pope" (Genesis Press; soft cover, Our Sunday Visitor Press), a book that defends the wartime role of Pius XII. Rychlak also serves as an adviser to the Holy See's delegation to the United Nations. He recently gave an interview to ZENIT.

Q. Rabbi David Dalin, writing for The Weekly Standard, recently singled out your book, "Hitler, the War, and the Pope," from among numerous books on Pope Pius XII, calling it "the best and most careful of the recent works, an elegant tome of serious, critical scholarship." Did that evaluation surprise you?

--Rychlak: I was certainly pleased. I worked hard on the book, and I'm glad it shows.

Q: What makes your book different from the others?

--Rychlak: I suppose it is because my book was really a quest to find the truth. It seems to me that many other authors have forced their evidence to meet a preconceived theory. I really did not know anything about Pius when I started. I set out to know his mind. Only after a good deal of research did I form my conclusions.

Q: Was there anything special that attracted you to this story?

--Rychlak: The allegation of a Pope being sympathetic to the Nazis or indifferent to human suffering is interesting in and of itself, but there was more in this case.

I saw several very interesting intersections in the lives of Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pope Pius XII, and Adolf Hitler. In the 1920s they were both in Munich, starting their careers. In the early 1930s, Pacelli became Vatican Secretary of State and had to negotiate with Hitler's Germany.

Then, in 1939, Pacelli became Pope and Hitler invaded Poland, starting World War II. In 1943, the Italians ousted Mussolini and Hitler sent his troops in to occupy Rome.

Q: Do these intersections imply any sympathy between the men?

--Rychlak: Precisely the opposite. The evidence clearly shows that they were strongly opposed to one another.

Q: What evidence did you find so persuasive?

--Rychlak: There are many things. Look at the papal encyclicals. The Allies used Pius XII's first one for propaganda purposes. Look at what the victims said, what the rescuers said, and what the Nazis said. Read the newspapers from the time.
These judgments from his contemporaries are very influential, and they all indicate that Pius strongly opposed Hitler and sided with the Jewish victims.

Q: What about the claims of his "silence"?

--Rychlak: Pius was not silent. He sent many protests to the Germans. Vatican Radio -- at his direction -- broadcast report after report on Nazi atrocities. The Vatican newspaper frequently condemned anti-Semitism.

The Pope himself made public statements, such as his 1942 Christmas statement, which everyone recognized as being in opposition to the Nazis. What he did not do was use the bully pulpit for repeated, express condemnations of Hitler.

Q: Why not?

--Rychlak: Three reasons: First of all, there would have been retaliation against Catholics in Germany and occupied areas. This, in turn, would have been the end of the rescue efforts that the Church was undertaking, so Jewish victims who were being sheltered would also have suffered.

Second, he was convinced that words would do no good. Nazi leadership would not listen to him, and they almost certainly would have kept the message away from other people. There was no free press, and there was a virtual blackout in areas controlled by the Nazis. The statement therefore would not have benefited the victims.

Third, Pius had only one chance to make a bold statement. Once he did that, Hitler would have shut down the Vatican and all of its rescue efforts. Pius was able to get more concessions from the Germans by threatening to make a statement than he ever would have gotten by actually making statement.

Q: Can you give us an example?

--Rychlak: Sure. In October 1943, Berlin sent to order to Rome to round up 8,000 Jews for deportation. On the 16th, the Nazis captured 1,200 Jews. The Vatican's protest arrived at the German headquarters in Rome about noon. It was immediately conveyed to Berlin by telephone, and by 2 p.m., the order came back to halt the roundups.

The Nazis released only about 200 of the people they had already captured, but large-scale roundups came to an end in Rome. The Vatican's threat -- to make a public condemnation -- looks fairly mild today, but it worked!

Q: Does that happen much? Things that sound mild today were actually very effective at the time?

--Rychlak: Oh, yes. People fail to put things into the context of the times. I recently debated Dr. Susan Zuccotti on C-SPAN2's "BookTV." I think that is one of her most
serious problems. She expects to find documentary evidence of papal instructions, but rescue operations were carried out with whispers. Paper was dangerous.

Q: Do you have an example of that?

--Rychlak: The one I find most interesting relates to a group of German generals who wanted to overthrow Hitler and broker a peace agreement with the British. They approached Pius to act as an intermediary. He not only passed messages back and forth between the conspirators and British diplomats, he even informed the British about planned German troop movements.

Q: That is interesting.

--Rychlak: Yes, but even more interesting is that there is no record of this in the Vatican archives. The Pope kept no papers that might have endangered the lives of the conspirators. We know of this very telling activity only because of the British archives.

Q: But should the Pope have made his sentiments known?

--Rychlak: The New York Times, the Times of London, Time magazine and several Jewish papers ran articles or editorials noting that he sided with the Allies, opposed the Nazis, and offered refuge to the victims. No one at the time really doubted that.

Q: What impact do you hope your book will have?

--Rychlak: I want people of today to see what people thought of Pius during the war. The Nazis hated him. The Jewish victims thanked him. Virtually everyone praised him for his leadership. Today, too many people look upon him as if he sided with the Nazis. Clearly he did not.

Q: Why is it that so many people today say such things about Pius?

--Rychlak: Well, Rabbi Dalin, in the Weekly Standard article, noted that as the last pre-Vatican II Pope, Pius XII is used by some authors to argue about the future direction of the Catholic Church. I'm glad that he expressly noted that I did not do that in "Hitler, the War, and the Pope."

Q: But that does not account for all of the criticism, does it?

--Rychlak: No, it doesn't. I think many of the people who say bad things do so in good faith, they just don't know all the facts. For instance, if John Cornwell's "Hitler's Pope" had been out eight or nine years ago, I might have picked up that book and stopped my research there. Thank goodness that did not happen.

Q: Cornwell's book was recently released in paperback.
--Rychlak: Yes, and it has all the same problems, including the cover photo which has been misleadingly cropped, darkened and blurred. I'm glad to see that even other critics of Pius are distancing themselves from that book.

Q: Do you think this matter will ever be resolved?

--Rychlak: The Church will always have critics, so Pius is likely to remain controversial for some time. It is clear, however, that the more we learn about this era, the more reason there is to be proud of the activities of the Church under the leadership of Pope Pius XII.