

Books and reviews

THE HOLY SEE AND ITS CHARITY WORK IN BEHALF OF PRISONERS OF WAR (1939-1945)

This work by Belgian historian Léon Papeleux focuses on the relations between the Holy See and the International Committee of the Red Cross in their respective activities to assist prisoners of war during World War II.¹

Based on extensive research of the archives of the Holy See, the book contains a detailed description of the Vatican's work in behalf of POWs from 1939 to 1945.

Pope Pius XII entrusted this humanitarian task to a *Bureau of Information Service*, one of whose functions was to draw up lists of prisoners and send news to their families, with the help of Radio Vatican. The service also sent the POWs relief supplies and lent them what spiritual assistance it could.

Representatives of the papal nuncio in Berlin were allowed to make a few visits to POW camps, but their activities were restricted by the German authorities, who argued that it was up to the International Red Cross to conduct such visits.

Pius XII appointed an Undersecretary of State, Monsignor Montini (the future Pope Paul VI), in charge of the service. Mgr. Montini was assisted by Cardinal Maglione and his deputy, Mgr. Tardini.

The Holy See began this work when German troops invaded Poland. It immediately requested its nuncios in Berlin, Budapest, Bucharest, Kaunas and Riga to obtain lists of Polish POWs and refugees. The papal representatives failed to do so, however, because the German authorities informed them that such lists were sent solely to the International Red Cross. The Vatican thereupon asked its nuncio in Bern, Mgr. Bernardini, to get in touch with the ICRC. From the autumn of 1939, Mgr. Bernardini had regular contacts with the institution, in particular with its President, Max Huber. Mgr. Bernardini was to become the principal liaison between the Vatican, the Swiss Government, the ICRC and the other nuncios throughout the war years. President Huber immediately informed him of the ICRC's activities and the difficulties it was experiencing — especially

¹ Léon Papeleux, *L'action caritative du Saint-Siège en faveur des prisonniers de guerre (1939-1945)*, Edition Institut historique belge de Rome, 1991, 300 pp.

with regard to Polish POWs in the USSR whom the ICRC was not authorized to visit. He promised Mgr. Bernardini the ICRC's help in forwarding mail and parcels the Holy See wanted to send to POWs and also assured him that the ICRC would try to ensure the application of Article 16 of the 1929 Geneva Convention providing for religious assistance to POWs.

After the campaign of May-June 1940 the Holy See, which was trying to obtain news of French POWs, again met with a refusal on the part of the German authorities, who maintained that such information was being forwarded to the ICRC.

When Italian troops entered Greece in late October 1940 the Holy See attempted, through the intermediary of Mgr. Roncalli (the future Pope John XXIII) and Father Biscara (a Swiss national who had been living in Greece since 1905), to obtain lists and news of Italian prisoners taken by the Greeks. The latter, however, replied that the matter came within the purview of the ICRC, which had an office in Athens, and the Hellenic Red Cross. The National Society ultimately supplied the Vatican with particulars on 400 Italian prisoners out of a total of 6,000.

Between December 1940 and February 1941, at the end of their offensive in Libya, British troops captured 130,000 Italians; the Italians for their part took a few British prisoners. The commander of the British forces in the Middle East, General Wavell, agreed to send the Vatican lists of Italian POWs and to provide any information that was needed urgently. The British also authorized the papal envoy, Mgr. Testa, to visit Italian prisoners. On 10 March 1941 the British Government stated, however, that the lists of POWs would be given to the ICRC and the Protecting Powers. On the other hand, the Vatican's diplomatic representatives were allowed to visit the camps and to request information on individual prisoners. The Vatican undertook to draw up lists of British POWs held in Italy whom the nuncio accredited to the Italian Government was authorized to visit.

Three times a week Radio Vatican broadcast the names of British and Australian prisoners held by the Italians, but the BBC refused to transmit lists of POWs in British hands.

The Vatican proved no more successful than the ICRC in its endeavours to assist German and Italian prisoners held in the USSR, nor was it able to come to the aid of Soviet servicemen captured by the Germans.

The Allied victory in North Africa in 1943 swelled the ranks of German and Italian POWs. The Vatican attempted to obtain lists of names but, with a few exceptions, the Allies sent them primarily to the ICRC.

Alongside its efforts to obtain such lists, the Vatican tried to facilitate the exchange of correspondence between prisoners and their families. It succeeded in doing so for some prisoners held by the Allies, in particular in Australia and New Zealand, but met with a flat refusal on the part of the German authorities.

The reason given by the author is that Catholics were the victims of merciless persecution in Germany and all territories controlled by the Reich — above all Poland. Indeed, despite the Holy See's protests, numerous Polish priests were deported.

In July 1942 Mgr. Bernardini went to ICRC headquarters in Geneva, where he met President Huber and some of his colleagues. When asked how he felt the institution should deal with pressure to publicly denounce war crimes, the nuncio replied that the Holy See had a spiritual legacy to defend. Should that legacy come under threat the Vatican would be faced with a choice, but would in any event be compelled to react. Conversely, the Red Cross had a purely humanitarian role. If it stepped beyond the practical domain to denounce human beings or ideas that lay beyond its purview, it would jeopardize its mission.

After Marshal Badoglio capitulated in 1943, Germany captured hundreds of thousands of Italian soldiers to whom it refused prisoner-of-war status, thus depriving them of the protection of the ICRC and the Geneva Convention. Despite its endeavours the Vatican was practically unable to contact any of these prisoners, who were regarded as military internees by the Germans. On 20 July 1944, Mussolini met Hitler and persuaded him to agree to the Italian Social Republic's acting as a protecting power for the military internees. What the Republic's representatives in fact did was to try and enrol them to fight alongside the Germans. The ICRC for its part did manage to convey messages from Italian military internees to their families.

Within the general context of its activities in behalf of prisoners of war, the Holy See succeeded in getting relief supplies to a number of these men and to repatriate some of the disabled. It also persuaded both sides to allow prisoners to receive spiritual assistance from priests of their own nationality.

In his conclusion the author notes that, as in World War I, the Vatican's work in aid of POWs throughout the Second World War was conducted in parallel with the activities carried out by the ICRC under the mandate conferred upon it by international humanitarian law.

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VOLUNTARY SERVICE

Volunteer Management Cycle

In pursuance of Resolution XXIII of the 25th International Conference of the Red Cross (Geneva, 1986), which among other things recommended that the Henry Dunant Institute, in close cooperation with the League (now the Feder-