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Beyond Silence?
The Catholic Church, Jewish Diplomacy, and Humanitarianism
in the Light of War-Time Vatican Archives

This paper revisits the often-controversial debates on the Catholic Church's "silences" during the Holocaust by discussing new materials from the Vatican archives of Pius XII's pontificate (1939-1958) and assessing the significance of their historic opening in March 2020. In particular, I focus on Jewish-Catholic diplomacy in the face of the genocide in a transatlantic and interreligious perspective: to what extent did relations between Jewish and Catholic representatives during the war address anti-Jewish persecutions and humanitarian aid to refugees? Drawing upon untapped Vatican sources, the paper highlights cases of negotiations between the Holy See and Jewish organizations (such as the American Jewish Committee, the Joint Distribution Committee, and the World Jewish Congress), as well as networks of refugees from Europe and their connections in North and South America. Instead of looking at Jewish and Catholic internationalisms as two separate paths, this research brings them together to explore their contribution to the internationalization of human rights throughout the war and immediate postwar period. I argue that Jewish-Catholic encounters during the Holocaust shaped a religious and transnational idea of human rights that had an enduring and global, albeit intricate, legacy. The examples under examination shed light on the manifold understandings, and sometimes misunderstandings, of human rights that emerged from the Jewish-Catholic discussions on humanitarian aid.

At the intersection of Jewish history, Church history, and Holocaust studies, this research engages recent scholarship on human rights, humanitarianism, and religious internationals. The Vatican archives offer a global perspective on these topics by bringing together examples from multiple countries and non-state actors. The paper discusses how these new materials help revisit crucial research questions, which have been previously examined through the nation-state focus: the legacy and political instrumentalization of Christian antisemitism, the range of Christian responses to fascism and antisemitism, and the shaping of interreligious relations in the face of mass violence.