PIUS XII AND THE HOLOCAUST:
UNDERSTANDING THE CONTROVERSY

By José M. Sánchez.
Reviewed by John N. Schumacher

The accusations against Pius XII for his alleged silence in the
face of the attempted genocide of the Jews by Hitler and his Nazi
collaborators during World War II were first raised as a consequence
of Rolf Hochhuth’s play, The Deputy, in 1963. Since the Pope’s cause
was proposed for beatification the number of books attacking and
defending him has multiplied beyond measure. They have ranged
over every point of the spectrum from pious apologists for everything
the pope did or did not do, to broadside attacks on the entire Catholic
Church, the most vicious of which is Catholic John Cornwell’s
outrageously titled book, Hitler’s Pope.

Sánchez, a history professor at St. Louis University in the
United States, has made it his purpose neither to defend nor condemn
the pope. He gives evidence of having read everything that appears
in his lengthy bibliography, but his approach is rather an orderly
analysis of the major arguments brought forth, repeatedly in some
cases. He then proceeds to evaluate the reasoning of their authors.
A sign of a true scholar, he can show the improbability or even
absurdity of some of these arguments, and at the same time conclude
the chapter acknowledging that there are valid points that he has not
answered. The orderly approach of the book, and its renunciation
of refuting in detail all the arguments each writer has used, make it
easy reading.

The controversy has not had the kind of impact in the
Philippines that it has had in the United States and Europe. But it
raises questions that every Christian, indeed every person who is
concerned with moral conduct, must consider and try to answer.
When, and to what extent, can a person of integrity, particularly one who holds an influential position in his/her milieu, keep silence in the face of evil, whether of the magnitude of the Holocaust or lesser evils that seem to call for action? To what extent can one compromise with evil in public life, or be silent in the face of it? For these reasons, the book should not only be in any theological or philosophical library, but should be widely read among thinking persons who are concerned with integrity in their moral and civic lives.

Sánchez says frankly in his introduction that he cannot pretend to have solved the question of the evaluation to be put on Pius’ silence, as he has not fully settled it in his own mind after reading all the authors and the sources. But he has done a great service in giving us a book that will serve as an orientation not only for those who have not read anything on the controversy, but also for those who have been overwhelmed by the polemic literature. This is a major contribution for a small book.