Not long ago I had dinner with several Catholic scholars from around the nation. During a lull in the conversation (there were not many) I ventured my observation that Pope Pius XII was at the center of the attack on the Catholic Church. I said that the phony charges against him were actually part of a much broader assault on the Church itself. He was simply a convenient target for authors who were not brave enough to express their objections directly. My brilliant observation went over with a thud. I don’t think anyone agreed with me. Since that time we have seen book after book critical of Pius XII, but behind almost every one was a larger attack on the papacy and the Catholic Church. The culmination (at least as of the time I write this) is Daniel Goldhagen’s hate-filled piece in the January 21, 2002 edition of The New Republic, which is also scheduled to be released in book form later this year. Goldhagen took all the half-truths and lies from earlier books, combined them with his own venom and lack of knowledge, and repackaged them into a true broadside against the Catholic Church. Upon reading the article, one of the scholars from my earlier conversation called me up. “I never saw it coming,” he said. Now, however, he agreed: the attack on Pius is actually just the focal point of a much larger attack against the Catholic Church.

The person who has seen this coming for the longest time, and who has waged a difficult, and often lonely, battle to defend the honor of Pope Pius XII (and hence the Church), is Sr. Margherita Marchione. It is largely due to her efforts that Pius XII’s reputation was not rolled over in the last several years by books like Hitler’s Pope and those that followed in its wake. I first met Sr. Margherita while doing a television show on Pius XII for EWTN. I had read her earlier writings on Pius, and I assumed that this was her life work. What a surprise (and a joy) it was to learn so much more about her from her autobiography, The Fighting Nun: My Story. While Sr. Margherita has done much for Pius, she has done as much or more for many other people (and historical figures) during a life in which she earned a Ph.D. from Columbia; authored 36 books; served as a Fulbright Scholar; been honored by the New Jersey Literary Hall of Fame; and hobnobbed with popes, presidents, scholars, and royalty. Despite the accomplishments and accolades, she has never lost her sense of perspective. She enjoys talking about a photograph (which appeared in the newspaper) of her being kissed by the late, great New York Yankee manager and player Billy Martin.
Sr. Margherita's story begins with her as a 13-year old, sitting at the dinner table and informing her parents and seven older siblings that she was leaving to become a nun. Later that day she took off (with a ride that she had arranged herself) to begin her studies with the Religious Teachers Filippini. Before long the stage for her wonderful life of service was set. Much in the following chapters is about the people who helped Sr. Margherita, and the ways in which they did so. She had many benefactors over the years, including Frank Sinatra and Henry Salvatori. She paid them back by going above and beyond anything that they might have expected. Prior to her work on Pius XII, Sr. Margherita wrote about Clemente Rebora, Giovanni Boine, and Giuseppe Prezzolini, but her most significant efforts were directed towards the promotion of Philip Mazzei, a key figure in the American Revolution. Not only did Sr. Margherita write several books about him, but in conjunction with the bicentennial celebration she led the successful effort to have his image placed on an international commemorative airmail stamp. She also was behind the effort to have his bust sculpted and placed in Monticello and to have his image placed on an Italian postage stamp. Writing in the The New York Times, Shirley Horner reported: “Although Mazzei seems to have had a good life, his real luck was falling into Sr. Margherita’s lap.” Drawing an analogy to the spirited character in the motion picture Sister Act, Horner explained: “Sister Whoopi Goldberg, who plays the nun, has nothing on Sr. Margherita Marchione.” For her part, Sr. Marchione said: “Not only did he fall into my lap, but I have been living with him for many years!” Sr. Margherita taught for twenty years at Fairleigh Dickinson University, and she was a favorite of the students. When she became embroiled in a campus dispute that threatened her position, they came to her defense. In a parody of a Beatles song they held banners proclaiming: “Happiness Is the Warmth of a Nun.” She ended up staying on the faculty.

Sr. Margherita’s latest passion began when she learned that Jews had been sheltered in three convents of the Religious Teachers Filippini in Rome during World War II. That discovery led to research and a commitment to revealing the truth about Pope Pius XII. Over the past decade, no one has written more letters, more books, or made more presentations defending the honor of Pius XII than Sr. Margherita, and that, of course, is an important part of her memoirs.

The Fighting Nun is published by Cornwall Press, which also published two of Sr. Margherita’s earlier books [Twentieth Century Italian Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology (1974) and Peter and Sally Sammartino: Biographical Notes (1994)]. Cornwall is an interesting name for the publisher of this book, given that the book records Sr. Margherita’s confrontational radio and television debates with John Cornwell, author of Hitler’s Pope: The Secret History of Pius
When that book came out, there was virtually no one for the American press to turn to for the Catholic perspective on Pius other than Sr. Margherita. Fortunately, as can be seen in this book, she was up to the task. She develops this work even further in most recent contribution to the study of Pius XII, *Pope Pius XII: Consensus and Controversy*.

As in her earlier books, Sr. Margherita strongly defends the World War II pontiff against the charges of callous indifference to human (particularly Jewish) suffering in *Consensus and Controversy*. Refreshingly, she acknowledges that she does not write from a detached perspective. In an earlier book (*Pius XII: Architect for Peace*) she wrote: “When I think of Pius XII, I feel inspired. How can I not dedicate myself to him with the same fervor that impelled me to write about [others]?” On this topic, too many authors (most notably John Cornwell, but also James Carroll and Gary Wills) have tried to disguise motives that become clear in their writing. Sr. Margherita does not do that. Unfortunately, some commentators (most recently Jose Sanchez in *Pius XII and the Holocaust*) have used this candor against Sr. Margherita, suggesting that her arguments should be dismissed for that reason alone. While it is true that some of her arguments involve personal beliefs, she openly states her position and her arguments remain valid. By dismissing her work without considering the merits, her critics are overlooking a great deal of valuable evidence.

Sr. Margherita works closely with several top scholars from around the world, including those within the Vatican who are studying the life of Pius XII for his sainthood cause. As such, her work is not to be taken lightly. Not only does she make arguments, she lays out primary source documents, which is more than is done by most of her critics. For instance, in *Architect for Peace*, almost half of the book is given over to appendices of tremendous importance. She includes an interview with Fr. Peter Gumpel, the *relator* (independent investigating judge) of Pius XII’s cause for sainthood, a very helpful chronology of Pius XII’s life, and a good annotated bibliography. She also includes articles written by two of the four Jesuit priests (Robert A. Graham and Pierre Blet) who compiled and published 11 volumes of documents relating to the Holy See during the Second World War from the still-sealed archives of the Vatican Secretariat of State (*Actes et Documents du Saint-Siege relatifs a la Seconde Guerre Mondiale*). Perhaps most importantly, she includes over 100 pages of those documents (most of which are not available in English anywhere else). Sr. Margherita’s first book on Pius, *Yours is a Precious Witness: Memoirs of Jews and Catholics in Wartime Italy*, collected firsthand accounts of witnesses who saw what support the Catholic Church gave to Jews and other victims of the Nazis during WW II. The value of this testimony, which is harder to collect with each passing day, will become more obvious in the near future. We are fortunate that Sr. Margherita recognized this value before the witnesses are all gone.
Sr. Margherita calls *Consensus and Controversy* a sequel to *Yours is a Precious Witness* and *Architect for Peace*, and that is quite clearly true. In this new book Sr. Margherita builds on her previous work and deals with new issues that have arisen in the past year or so. Thus she addresses new anti-Pius books by Susan Zuccotti and James Carroll, important pro-Pius articles by Rabbi David Dalin and William Doino, the now-defunct Catholic-Jewish study group that was charged with reading the *Actes et Documents* collection, and much more. The issues have been developing so quickly that it is difficult for one book to adequately cover them all. Viewed, however, as a continuation of her previous works, *Consensus and Controversy* does a fine job of bringing forth additional evidence, including a very nice summary of documents from the *Actes et Documents* collection. No one who honestly and carefully reads the evidence that Sr. Margherita presents in her body of work can give the slightest credence to the attacks against Pope Pius XII that have been made by John Cornwell, Daniel Goldhagen, Susan Zuccotti and the others. She may be outnumbered, but this “fighting nun” never gives up, particularly when fighting for a good cause. Sr. Margherita’s playful attitude, as well as the love that others feel for her, is reflected in the first verse of a song sung to her by Joe Piscopo (of *Saturday Night Live* fame) at a ceremony honoring her as recipient of the Humanitarian Award from the Religious Teachers Filippini. To the tune of *The Macarena*, Piscopo sang: “Let me tell you something, please listen up, Mister/I want to tell you about a ‘Super-Nun Sister’/If we didn’t see her ever day, we would surely miss her: ‘SISTER MARGHERITA’” When Sr. Margherita first told me that she was writing her memoirs, I told her that I knew it would be the story of a life well spent. It is, and these books only add to her stature. Catholics everywhere, but particularly in Italy and the U.S. (where most of her work has been published), owe her a debt of gratitude.

Ronald Rychlak
University of Mississippi School of Law

*Professor Rychlak is Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the University of Mississippi School of Law and author of* *Hitler, the War, and the Pope (Genesis Press and Our Sunday Visitor Press, 2000)*