

Seder at the Parish

by Irena Steinfeldt

■ While walking to the Hall of Remembrance during his visit to Yad Vashem, Pope Benedict XVI passed by the tree planted in honor of the Celis family from Belgium: two brothers – Father Hubert and Father Louis Celis, who were Catholic priests – their father and siblings. During the Holocaust the Celis family hid the four Rotenberg children, whose parents had been deported to Auschwitz in November 1942.

To camouflage their identity, the Rotenbergs had to attend church services, but in the privacy of his home, Father Louis Celis made sure that they preserved their Jewish identity, that Wolfgang put on his *tefillin* (phylacteries) and recited his prayers. After the war Father Hubert Celis wrote, “I never tried to convert the Rotenberg children to the Catholic faith. I always respected their religious belief. Besides, Mrs. Rotenberg had confidence in me and I had given her my word as priest.”



■ Father Hubert Celis (center) at the bar mitzvah of the son of survivor Regina Rotenberg-Wolbrom

Hundreds of clerics of all Christian denominations have been recognized over the years as Righteous Among the Nations, among them many Catholics. Hubert and Louis Celis received the title of Righteous for their role in the rescue of the four Rotenberg siblings, but their conduct is especially admirable because of the deep respect they showed for the children’s religion. Like them, Don Gaetano Tantalò of Tagliacozzo Alto, Italy, not only hid seven members of the Orvieto and Pacifici families, but also went out of his way to enable them to perform Jewish rituals. The page on which he did his calculation to determine the date of Passover is exhibited in Yad Vashem’s Holocaust History Museum, with the fascinating story of the celebration of a Jewish Seder at the home

of a parish priest during the German occupation of Italy in 1944.

The attitude of the churches towards rescuing Jews during the *Shoah* touches upon intricate and often painful questions, and when examining the particulars of every case, the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous

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is often faced with enormous challenges that reflect the complexity of the topic: the baptizing of children (was it motivated by the theological mission to convert the Jews and save their souls, or was the purpose to protect them and hide their Jewish identity?); the return of children to the Jewish fold at the end of the war; what made rescue more recurrent in certain dioceses or religious orders than others; and to what extent did clerics act as individuals or make their decisions as a result of instruction and guidance from their superiors?

Christian conduct during the Holocaust continues to challenge the Christian world well into the 21st century. A range of factors played a role in influencing the behavior of church leaders and clerics when confronted with the murder of the Jews. Like other groups, many remained silent and a number of clerics went as far as to collaborate, but there were those who risked their lives to rescue Jews. While Christian anti-Jewish theology and its teaching of contempt contributed to indifference and collaboration, other clerics and Christians saw it as their religious duty to intervene and act.

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