

PAGEANT

November, 1964: p. 130

The Incredible Father Benoit—
'Rescuer of the Jews'



'Father Benoit blazed a trail for all of us to follow in protecting the civil and human rights of our fellow citizens'—President Johnson

BY THE REV. JOHN A. O'BRIEN

Research Professor of Theology at
the University of Notre Dame

● **THE VISITOR** to Rome who strolls past 159 *Via Sicilia* will see a sturdy five-story brick building, the Capuchin International College, which looks as prosaic and uneventful as the other neighboring edifices drowsing in the sunshine. But within that venerable institution of learning there was enacted a feat of incredible

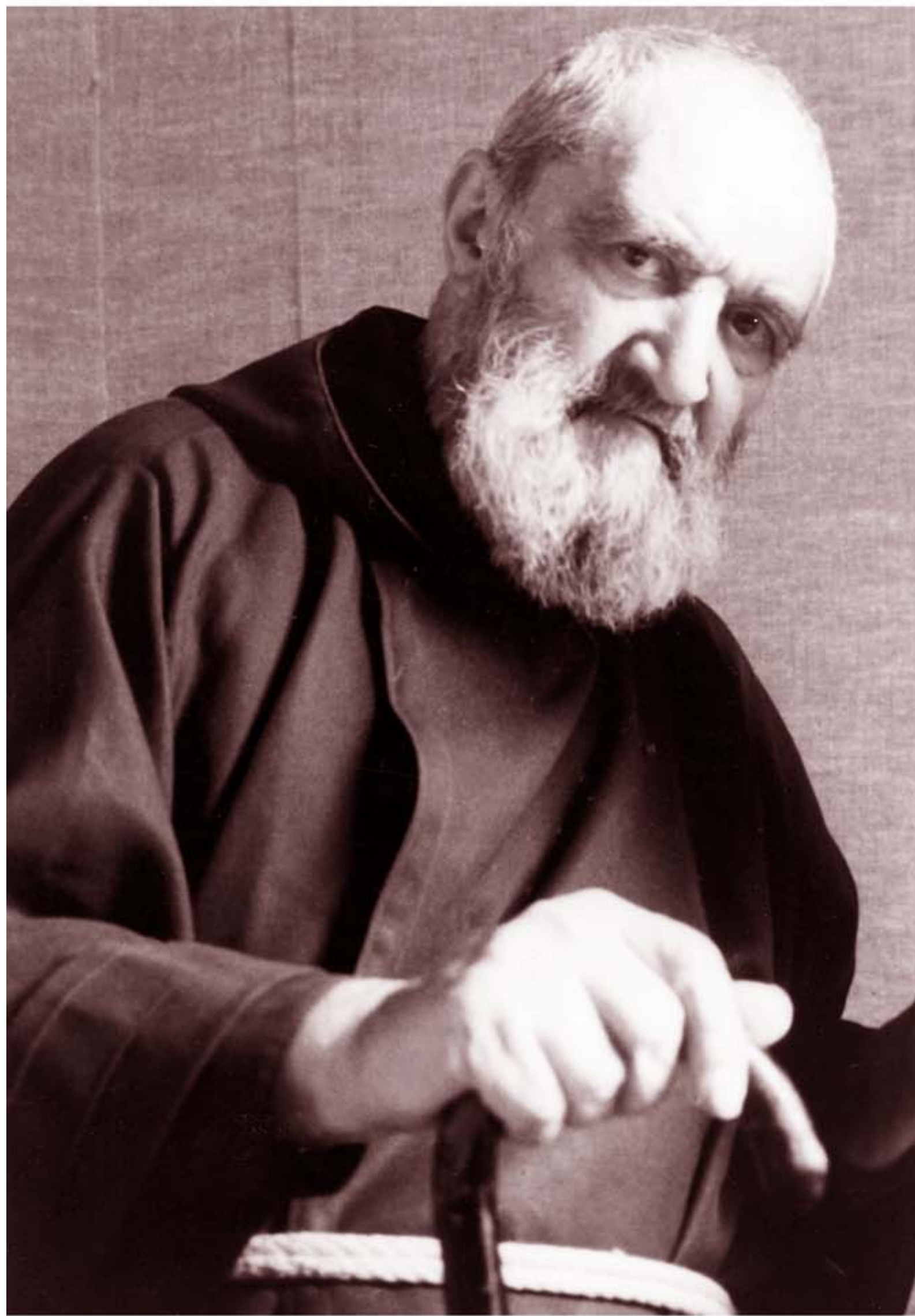
daring and bravery that will long stir the hearts of men.

A black-bearded and brown-robed French Capuchin priest, P. Marie Benoit, established there a passport center that became the mecca for Jews caught in the vortex of those weird cyclonic forces unleashed by the fury of Nazi hatred. His unbelievable rescue of great numbers of these pathetic fugitives from the hands of the Gestapo—and from horrible deaths in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Dachau, and Buchenwald—made his name a fabulous and legendary one among the Jews of Europe.

Indeed, I saw lumps form in the throats and tears come to the eyes of Jews who told me how Father Benoit risked his life time after time to snatch them and their kin from the Gestapo's grasp. They spoke of him as "a man sent from God" to help them in their hour of need.

OldMagazineArticles.com

'Rescuer of the Jews'



Father Benoit

Yet in back of his defiance of the Nazis and his ability to outwit the dreaded Gestapo is a distinguished military record. His studies for the priesthood were interrupted by World War I, in which he served five years. Wounded at Verdun, he received no less than five *Croix de Guerre* citations and the coveted *Medaille Militaire*.

In World War II his services were even more distinguished, both to his country and to humanity. Though no military medals were conferred on him then, he has received a greater accolade: the unqualified admiration and gratitude of thousands of Jews whose lives he saved. To this may well be added the esteem and admiration of the Christian world, whose highest traditions he upheld through five dark years of hardship, sacrifice, and constant danger of death.

After the fall of France in World War II, Father Benoit was sent to Marseilles. There he became a leader in the resistance movement, protecting both French and foreign Jews endangered by the implacable Gestapo and the piancy of the Vichy government. Under his direction, the Capuchin monastery at 51 *Rue Croix-de-Regnier* soon became one of the

'Rescuer of the Jews'

headquarters for the lodging and feeding of Jewish refugees.

With daring and resourcefulness Father Benoit built up an efficient organization to smuggle Jews and other anti-Nazi refugees into Spain. This brought the Capuchin priest under the suspicion of the lynx-eyed Gestapo. While trying to cross the Spanish border, one of his protégés was caught by the Gestapo, who tortured him into disclosing the part Father Benoit played in the smuggling operations.

THEREAFTER he was under constant surveillance. They pounced in on him at all hours of the day and night, increasing the danger to his life because a mounting number of refugees from nearby internment camps were also coming to him at all hours.

Happily, as Father Benoit remarked, "the Italian occupation authorities in Marseilles had adopted a very humane policy toward the Jews." Indeed, despite the suspicions of the Gestapo, they even accepted the nomination of the priest by the Bishop of Marseilles to act as official visitor at the two principal internment centers in the city—a move that enabled him to take and deliver all sorts of clandestine messages.

To save the Jews who were fleeing to Spain from harassment and capture by the Gestapo, Father Benoit first had to clear one hurdle: The legal opening of the Spanish frontier for the passage of all Jews with credentials attesting to their Spanish nationality. He interested influential friends in the Vatican to secure such an agreement.

The official document, signed by Cardinal Maglione, indicated that, in case of doubt concerning the authenticity of a refugee's papers, the final decision would rest with Father Benoit. The Cardinal added the significant notation that he had been assured by Monsignor Cicognani, Papal Nuncio to Spain, that "at the request of the Holy See and in conformity with the sentiments of the Spanish government, the requirements set forth in this agreement by the Minister will be interpreted with ample generosity."

'Rescuer of the Jews'

With that mission accomplished, Father Benoit threw his energy into the launching of a far more difficult and ambitious undertaking: the shipping of thousands of refugees to safety in North Africa.

"Every Sunday evening," he related, "accompanied by my secretary, a French Jew, I would take the train for Nice and Cannes, and there I would remain until the following Wednesday, transacting current business with the General Union of Israelites of France and the synagogue on the *Boulevard Dubouchage*. A Jesuit, Father Bremont, devoted himself completely to our cause, despite his great age."

At Nice the Capuchin priest met Angelo Donati, director of the French-Italian Bank, a wealthy and influential Jew, to whom he revealed his ambitious plan of transporting 30,000 refugee Jews to North Africa. Donati responded enthusiastically and rallied the support of the leading rabbis of France.

Father Benoit then appealed for the support of the highest authority in the Church. On July 16 he secured a personal audience with the Supreme Pontiff, Pope Pius XII, and unfolded his daring plan.

"Holy Father," he said, "the Italians are retiring from southern France and the Germans are already in the vicinity of Nice, menacing the eight or ten thousand Jews in hiding there. What will happen to them and to another twenty thousand Jews in southern France who will seek refuge in Italy when and if Hitler's forces take over completely?"

IT IS EVIDENT that Pius XII responded favorably, because on August 7 Donati wrote to Father Benoit to acknowledge the powerful assistance of the Vatican. "I do not thank you," he added, "because I know that you have accomplished this Christian mission without asking for my gratitude or that of my co-religionists."

Two weeks later Donati notified Father Benoit that the official authorization of the transfer of the refugees from Nice to North Africa was on the way. The Italian government had agreed to make available four ships, the *Duilio*, *Guilio Cesare*, *Saturnia*,

'Rescuer of the Jews'

and *Vulcania*. In three voyages from Nice they were to carry to Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria some 30,000 Jewish refugees.

Preparations were complete to the last detail when Premier Pietro Badoglio's announcement of the unconditional surrender of Italy was made on September 8, 1943. It was a heartbreaking disappointment, for the announcement scotched the whole project and at the same time touched off a wild, frantic scramble of Jews across the Alps into northern Italy.

Some 400 fell into the traps laid for them by the wily Gestapo, were deported to Poland, and presumably were gassed. Others scattered and headed for Rome. Indelibly written on their minds was a secret address, 159 *Via Sicilia*, where Father Benoit had been made spiritual director of the Capuchin College.

Now began the most daring and dangerous phase of the monk's incredible and fantastic career. With hundreds of proscribed Jews streaming into Rome, he had to quickly devise some means of spiriting them out of the reach of the dreaded Gestapo. Accordingly, he transformed the library of the monastery into a huge passport factory.

He found an old hand press in the basement and, with the aid of a Jewish printer-engraver, turned out thousands of passports. Then he summoned a number of Swiss, Hungarian, and Rumanian consuls and convinced them "in the name of God and of our common humanity" to sign the crudely made documents.

Soon hundreds of terror-stricken Jews, slinking at night through the dark alleys of Rome, were disappearing into thin air. Overnight, as if by magic, in their places appeared equal numbers of Hungarians, Rumanians, French, and Swiss, equipped not only with passports but also with ration cards. Never had the great Houdini worked such a feat.

Father Benoit's miracles, however, did not stop here. By some incredible wizardry he managed to get himself appointed head of the Provisional Committee for the Aid of Refugees. In that capacity he vouched for the authenticity of the signatures on the forged ration cards.

'Rescuer of the Jews'

"They can't live on passports," he observed wryly. "They must have food."

It scarcely needs to be observed that Father Benoit's actions in all these matters, though in violation of Nazi regulations, were in strict conformity with the divine law of mercy, justice, and love. They were not only justifiable but necessary to save innocent human lives. The decrees of the Gestapo were void of all moral authority.

Time and again the Gestapo laid their traps for him only to have the wily priest escape by a hairs-breadth.

"One day two men came to the door," related one of his chief collaborators, Fra (Brother) Callisto, "and represented themselves as Jewish refugees who were instructed to get passports from Father Benoit. But Father had outwitted the Nazi secret service: He had his own confidants among them, and they had tipped us off in advance that two Gestapo officers disguised as Jews would call that day. Father had discreetly fled the city.

"On another occasion he went to Milan, where he had some hidden funds to buy food for Jews in hiding in Rome and to help others to escape across the border. While at the railroad station buying his ticket to return to Rome, he received a telephone call.

"A friend in Rome tipped him off that the Gestapo was waiting there to arrest him on arrival. He bought a ticket for Florence, and the Gestapo, swarming through the train in Rome, could not understand how he had disappeared into thin air."

"What," I asked, "was one of his narrowest escapes?"

"After Father had been running his passport factory for several years," said Fra Callisto, "the Gestapo were getting desperate. They managed to bribe some renegade young Jews to help track him down. They planned to raid the monastery one night and search it, room by room, certain that they would find him concealed somewhere.

"Fortunately we were tipped off a few minutes before the raid. Father fled hurriedly to the Capuchin Sisters' convent at 70 *Via Piemonte*, a few blocks away. There he shaved off

'Rescuer of the Jews'

his beard, donned the garb of a nun, and hid in a cell for more than a week."

"Wasn't that without precedent," I asked, "nuns allowing a monk to remain in a convent?"

"Of course," agreed Fra Callisto. "But it was a matter of life or death. If the Gestapo had gotten hold of him, they would have led him to the firing squad. They wanted desperately to make an example of him."

Here was a striking example of how the Church's regulations were shelved in the interest of human life. The Capuchin Fathers had also waived their rule against allowing seculars into the cloistered interior of their monastery in order to provide shelter and protection for Jewish fugitives.

"At times," said Father Vigilus, another collaborator, "the place was swarming with them. We regarded them as Father Benoit's ever increasing flock. Indeed, the conviction had grown among the students that Father Benoit himself was a Jew, as every bit of his energy and strength was devoted to them.

"Actually, he is not a Jew, but he couldn't have cared for them more devotedly if he had only Jewish blood in his veins."

Shortly after the close of the war, the Jews sought to show their gratitude to the big-hearted and courageous Capuchin priest who had placed their safety above his own life. At the principal synagogue in Rome on *Lungtovere* they held a huge testimonial meeting in his honor. The speakers hailed him as "Christianity's noble ambassador to the Jews," and as "a man enshrined in our hearts forever."

A still more impressive celebration, commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Liberation was staged by the Union of Israelite Communities of Italy in the *Teatro Alcione* in April 1955. In the presence of a vast concourse, Italy's President Ottolenghi, chairman of the committee in charge, conferred on Father Benoit a gold medal with the following citation:

"P. Marie Benoit, a Capuchin Father, while in the Friaries of the French Riviera from 1940 to 1943 collaborated actively with the He-

'Rescuer of the Jews'

brew communities of Marseilles, Cannes, and Nice and gave himself unsparingly to their assistance. In October 1943 he was transferred to Rome, and there, in the Capuchin International College, he organized a center for the secret activities of the Delegation for the Assistance of Exiled Jews.

"Noteworthy was the example of his imposing achievements. Incomparable was his work of rescue. With unfaltering courage and steadfast purpose he risked his life to accomplish rescues worthy of imperishable recognition and lasting memory."

PHILIP FRIEDMAN, who escaped from the Hitler terror to America, has published a careful study of the activities of the brave men and women who befriended Jews at the risk of their own lives. He finishes his account of the Capuchin priest's feats with this tribute: "Father Benoit was one of a score of giants who strode across the slaughterhouse that was Occupied Europe, aiding those whom the rest of the world cynically abandoned to the Nazi guillotine. France has bestowed numerous honors upon him, as have many of those he helped rescue. An honor he claims to cherish most is the nickname: 'Father of the Jews.'"

The fabulous feats of Father Benoit, however, could not have been achieved without the collaboration of innumerable brave men and women. They, too, risked life and limb to rescue the pitiable victims of the Nazi persecution.

In recognition of the work these people, as well as other priests, had done, President Ottolenghi conferred 23 gold medals in all, seven of which were awarded posthumously. (Medals for heroic work also were bestowed on three other priests: Monsignor Vincenzo Barale, secretary to the Archbishop of Turin; Father Francesco Repetto, secretary to the Bishop of Genoa; and Father Carlo Salvi, also of Genoa.)

Typical of the heroism of the laymen was Focherini Odoardo, manager of *L'Avenire d'Italia*. The father of seven children, Odoardo ignored the warning of the Nazis that he would be punished severely if he continued to smuggle Jews to safety. Seized by the Gestapo, he was de-

'Rescuer of the Jews'

ported to Flossemburg, from which he never returned. The names of Odoardo and of the other Christians who gave their lives in defense of their Hebrew brothers will be kept forever fresh and green in the memory of the Jews of Italy.

Before leaving Rome I made a final visit to the Capuchin International College. The massive five-story brick building was basking peacefully in the warm July sun. I walked around the venerable edifice and came upon a side entrance through which Benoit had often stepped, unseen by the Gestapo, on his errands of mercy.

I glanced at the address: 71 *Via Bon Compagni*—*The Street of the Good Companions*. How appropriate a name for the street on which the Christian and the Jew had so often walked in friendship and love, the former shielding the latter from Nazi vengeance. Above the entrance were carved the words from *Ecclesiasticus*: "*The Father's Blessing Fortifies the Houses of the Children.*" How prophetic, I mused, were these words.

Silent now are the cannons, faded from the sky the bombing planes, and green are the fields in peace. Subdued, if not altogether banished, is the fierce hatred of the Jews that the Nazis unleashed like a plague upon the world. Terrifying, indeed, is the memory of the infamous incineration camps at Auschwitz, Dachau, and Buchenwald, where untold thousands of defenseless men and women were murdered for the crime of having Semitic blood in their veins.

Can this happen again? Civilization must build up its defenses—social, cultural, and spiritual—that such a massacre can never again be inflicted on any people because of their race, creed, or color. The struggle will not be an easy one. But it must be waged with courage and determination.

THE STORY OF Father P. Marie Benoit and of the thousands of Protestant and Catholics who risked their lives to rescue the persecuted Jews gives grounds for hope that we may ultimately succeed. Beneath all the debris of human depravity and cruelty that was piled mountain-high

'Rescuer of the Jews'

in the wake of Hitler's conquests, there was uncovered an ineradicable core of decency, courage, and heroism in defending the proscribed and the defenseless. In that inexhaustible well of human sympathy lies the hope of a brighter tomorrow.

That hope is strengthened when we read the words written by Anne Frank—the 15-year-old Jewish girl who was murdered by the Gestapo—her diary. "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart."

PRAISE FOR A FATHER

The heroic and fabulous feats of Father Marie Benoit in rescuing Jews from the Gestapo during the Nazi occupation of Rome should inspire us in the United States to protect and respect the civil rights of all people regardless of how they may differ from us in race, color, or creed. Father Benoit saw the human dignity in the persecuted Jews and repeatedly risked his life to rescue them from the Gestapo and the incineration camps awaiting them. He blazed a trail for all of us to follow in protecting the civil and human rights of our fellow citizens and in thus respecting their dignity as fellow human beings.

President Lyndon B. Johnson

Father Benoit could not halt the grim processions which led to the gas ovens of Auschwitz. But he risked his life to save those whom it was in his power to give freedom. He should live anew in the hearts of us who must now protect the dignity of man in America.

George N. Shuster
*President Emeritus of Hunter College,
 Chairman, Committee on
 Discrimination in the Nation's Capital,
 Representative of the United States,
 the Executive Board of UNESCO*

The scale and the perseverance of Father Benoit's work in helping Jews to escape the clutches of the Nazis, both from France and later from Italy, coupled with his personal danger, make him an outstanding figure, one that ought to inspire all of us to concerned and sacrificial action for the oppressed of every race, in every clime.

Lewis Webster Jones
*President, National Conference of
 Christians and Jews*

During the Hitler era, when most of Europe trembled in fear before the

'Rescuer of the Jews'

ruthless Gestapo, Father Pierre Marie Benoit, with courage and dedication, rescued thousands of unprotected Jews marked for the Nazi death camps. His selfless, heroic work should inspire all Americans to recognize and work for the humanity and dignity of all men.

Benjamin R. Epstein
*National Director, Anti-Defamation
 League of B'nai B'rith*

Of the Christians who came to the defense of the persecuted and hunted Jews in occupied France and Italy, Father Marie Benoit was outstanding. Outwitting the Gestapo intent upon sending them to the gas ovens of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Dachau, he smuggled thousands to safety. He sets us in America an inspiring example of concern and solicitude for the human and civil rights of citizens of all colors, races, and creeds: The task challenging us all today.

Albert M. Shulman
*National Chairman, Americanism
 Council of the American Legion*

Father Benoit has become one of the legendary heroes of our time. His fearless, dedicated, and brilliantly planned rescue work saved many Jews from the Nazi concentration camps and gas chambers. He risked his life countless times, first in France and later in Italy, especially in Rome. He recognized the humanity in the persecuted, ostracized, and hunted-down Jews. Father Benoit has set a great example for all who affirm the rights of all people whatever their creed, their color, or their race. In these days when the issue of rights, human rights, for all our citizens is so much in the forefront, Father Benoit's convictions and courage take on great meaning to us Americans.

Dr. Joseph L. Lichten
*Anti-Defamation League
 of B'nai B'rith*

PAGEANT NOVEMBER 1964