

## Benoit, Marie

(b. 1895), French Capuchin monk who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. In the summer of 1942, Benoit was a resident monk in the Capuchin monastery in Marseilles, France. Witnessing the spectacle of Vichy authorities rounding up thousands of non-French Jewish refugees and handing them over to the Germans for deportation, Benoit decided to devote himself to helping Jews escape from France to either Spain or Switzerland, both neutral countries. Under his guidance, the Capuchin monastery was transformed into a nerve center of a widespread rescue network, in collaboration with frontier smugglers (*passeurs*) and in coordination with various Christian and Jewish organizations. A printing machine in the monastery's basement turned out thousands of false baptismal certificates, which the fleeing Jews needed in order to procure other necessary documents.

With the occupation of Vichy France in November 1942, the escape routes to Switzerland and Spain became more difficult to negotiate. The nearby Italian zone of occupation now became the principal escape haven. Journeying to Nice, Benoit coordinated plans with local Jewish organizations. Accompanied by Angelo Donati, an influential local Jewish banker in Nice, he met with Gen. Guido Lospinoso, the Italian commissioner of Jewish affairs (sent to Nice by Mussolini, under German pressure, for the express purpose of instituting anti-Jewish measures), and convinced him that the rescue of the thirty thousand Jews in Nice and its environs was the divine order of the day. Benoit was promised that the Italian occupation authorities would not interfere. Not satisfied with this commitment, and harboring presentiments as to the ultimate fate of the Jews in Nice, Benoit continued on to Rome, and in an audience with Pope Pius XII on July 16, 1943, he outlined a plan for transferring the majority of the thirty thousand Jews in the Nice region to northern Italy to prevent their falling into German hands. This plan was later expanded to provide for the Jews' transfer to former military camps in North Africa, now in Allied hands. The new Italian government of Marshal Pietro Badoglio (Mussolini had been deposed on July 25, 1943) was prepared to provide four

ships for this giant undertaking, and ways were found to channel funds from Jewish organizations abroad. However, the premature publication of the Italian armistice on September 8 and the immediate German occupation of northern Italy and the Italian zone of occupation in France foiled this plan.

Benoit's activities now centered on helping Jews in Rome and its vicinity, with the Capuchin College inside the Vatican as his base of operations. To be able to deal effectively with the task of providing food, shelter, and new identities to thousands of Jewish refugees in Rome and elsewhere, he was elected a board member of Delasem (Delegazione Assistenza Emigranti Ebrei), the central Jewish welfare organization of Italy. When its Jewish president, Settimo Sorani, was arrested by the Germans, Benoit was nominated acting president; he chaired the organization's meetings, which were now held inside the Capuchin College. Benoit escaped several attempts by the Gestapo to arrest him, as his fame spread among Jews and non-Jews. He extracted letters of protection and other important documents from the Swiss, Romanian, Hungarian, and Spanish legations. These papers enabled thousands of Jews, under assumed names, to circulate freely in Rome. He also obtained a large batch of ration cards from the Rome police, ostensibly on behalf of non-Jewish homeless refugees stranded in the capital.

After Rome's liberation in June 1944, the Jewish community at an official synagogue ceremony applauded Benoit. With the war over and the Jews safe, he returned to his ecclesiastical duties. France awarded him various military decorations; Israel, through Yad Vashem, conferred on him the title of "Righteous Among the Nations" in 1966.