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Mussolini And The Vatican 1922-1943

James E. McGoldrick

It has become common among students of totalitarianism to dismiss Benito Mussolini as an incompetent braggard whose every effort finally met with ridiculous failure. Indeed, if there were any comic aspect of World War II, it was provided by *Il Duce* trying to be an imperialist. His abortive invasion of Greece, Hitler's rejection of his offer to contribute Italian troops for the invasion of Russia and his continual posing for photographers with arm raised and lower lip jutting out give one the impression that Mussolini was a theatrical ham the world would always have difficulty taking seriously.

Any realistic appraisal of the Italian fascist regime leads to the conclusion that Mussolini was a failure and that his very limited abilities were greatly to blame. Nevertheless, the failures of fascism should not be permitted to obscure *Il Duce's* one great personal triumph, for here he succeeded where all of his political predecessors had failed. Mussolini resolved the longstanding and complex "Roman Question." The nature of that question, Mussolini's method of solving it and subsequent Italian church-state relations are the subject of this study.

Following the French Revolution of 1789, an atmosphere of pervasive secularism, gaining the acceptance of intellectuals and others interested in achieving liberal political reforms, spread across Europe. One of the major obstacles to the progress of liberal reform was the Roman Catholic Church, which had a tradition of papal monarch for centuries past and had consistently used its influence for the benefit and protection of its programs in the various states. Nowhere was this position of the Church more apparent than in Italy, headquarters of the Universal Church. Italy was not only the residence of the papacy but also the base of papal temporal power as it existed in the nineteenth century. Across Italy lay the Papal States, which were the private preserve of the Vatican from which the popes derived considerable material income. So long as those states remained under papal sovereignty, Italy could never be a truly united nation-state.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the expulsion of Austrian and Bourbon power from Italy, thus making possible a genuine national unification. The last great obstacle to the completion of the process was the papal political presence in the States of the Church. For some time, France had played the role of the pope's protector in Italy, but, in 1870, France was reeling from defeat at the hands of Prussia, and so, the city of Rome, the last of the papal territories still resisting absorption into the Kingdom of Italy disappeared from the map. Italy was at last a real nation-state under the House of Savoy, and Rome was declared the national capital.

The creation of the nation Italy left Pope Pius IX gravely discontented and vehemently opposed to the new national government. Pius IX, denouncing and excommunicating secular Italy as he went, withdrew into the shelter of the Vatican compound. Moreover, he called upon loyal Catholics to refuse to participate in the new regime. In a country overwhelmingly Catholic there were obvious political disadvantages for a government unreconciled to the Vatican, so the state moved quickly to seek an agreement with the pontiff.

In 1870, the government approached the Vatican with the Law of Guarantees, which exempted the pope from the jurisdiction of Italian penal law, gave his official servants diplomatic immunity, allowed him to be sovereign over the Vatican and his personal residences outside of it and promised no state interference in the religious affairs of the Church.¹ The pontiff rejected this arrangement and proceeded to resist all forms of political liberalism in an effort to thwart the further secularization of the state. As obedient Catholics refused to participate in the government, the state became fearful that the papacy might yet try to summon aid from a foreign Catholic power to restore its temporal possessions.

Although the official papal position regarding the Kingdom of Italy remained one of non-recognition until 1929, the years after 1870 saw a gradual relaxation of tensions expressed in the ever-increasing number of good Catholics participating in the government. In a sense, World War I brought an improvement in church-state relations. By 1918, there was no Catholic power anywhere in a position to enforce the Vatican's temporal claims even if it desired to do so. Therefore, Pope Benedict XV announced that although the papacy still sought the restoration of its temporal sovereignty and independence, these goals were desired only by action of the Italians themselves. This meant that the "Roman Question," as the dispute was called, was still unresolved, but a positive thaw was evident in Italo-Papal relations.

An especially significant evidence of softening on the part of the papacy was the creation in 1919 of the Popular Party led by Don Luigi Sturzo, a Sicilian priest. He had papal consent for the formation of this Catholic democratic movement, which reflected ideas borrowed from both liberalism and socialism. The appearance of the Popular Party shows that the Vatican had discarded its prohibition against Catholic involvement in politics, but it must be noted that at no time did the Pope endorse this party as the political arm of the Church. In fact, Sturzo desired to include within his movement supporters who were not members of the Roman Church. Sturzo hoped that his party could supply national direction to replace "the outworn Liberal leadership of Italy,"³ which was overwhelmed with post-war problems.

The first electoral test for the Popular Party came in 1919, and it emerged second to the socialists in an election where no party polled a majority. The socialists were associated with Bolshevism (in the thinking of most political factions), so Sturzo's party supplied the core for a coalition government. It joined with the Liberal Democratic Center to compose a government with Francesco Nitti at the head of the coalition. This alliance lasted until 1920, when the Popular Party withdrew in pro-

test over Nitti's failure to deal effectively with Red strikers while trying to placate both the socialists and the fascists, the latter being Italy's most recent political phenomenon.

The fall of Nitti was followed by a government headed by Giovanni Giolitti, a long-time leader of the liberals who took several prominent *Popolari* into his cabinet. By this time, bitter factionalism was splintering the socialists, and a schism led to formation of the Italian Communist Party. Being bound together only by its opposition to anti-clericalism and sharply divided over the desirability and extent of social reforms, the Popular Party also suffered from severe internal disputes. The liberals were advocates of *laissez-faire* economics, and their leader, Giolitti, "believed that problems solved themselves if you were wise enough to leave them alone."⁴ However, one problem, which Giolitti found would not solve itself, was the appearance of the fascists, who were growing as the socialists were losing ground.

Giolitti made the disastrous mistake of underestimating the fascists, thinking that they could be taken into a parliamentary block where they could be managed. He found, to his dismay, "Fascism was not . . . a hotheaded youthful folly but a cleverly planned and led counterrevolution, an attack upon the socially mediating and balancing constitutional State which Giolitti had done so much to shape."⁵

The fascists were led by Benito Mussolini, one-time socialist and anti-nationalist who stepped forward after the war with an appeal to the veterans and propertied classes to save Italy from Bolshevism. During 1920-21, the country was wracked by severe urban and agrarian disturbances, which the liberal government either could not or would not control. This governmental weakness gave Mussolini an opportunity to advertise fascism as the philosophy of order against communist anarchy. In 1921, the fascists gained 35 seats in the Chamber of Deputies after a campaign featuring intimidation and violence by the very party which presented itself as the "guardians of order." The socialists and liberals refused to cooperate against the fascists, so, in 1922, Mussolini staged a march on Rome to seize the government; however, no seizure was necessary. King Victor Emmanuel invited Mussolini to form a cabinet. Thus, a revolt was transformed into a victory march. The fascists had become the ruling party in Italy.

Although Mussolini attained power by technically legal means, his regime was faced with all the problems which his predecessors had been unable to solve. Not least among them was the perennial dispute with the Vatican over the "Roman Question." If the fascists could settle this matter, it would do a great deal to legitimize their regime in the eyes of Catholics around the world, and the possibilities for the personal prestige of Mussolini were incalculable.

The thorny church-state problem was perhaps the biggest obstacle in Mussolini's path as he moved to remake Italy in the fascist mold. The economic and social troubles were easily the most grave from a material point of view, but failure to achieve a settlement with the Church would have been a terrible liability regardless of the social and economic improvements which might take place. Conversely, suc-

cess in the realm of ecclesiastical relations could well compensate (in the public mind) for the state's inability to deliver on its promises in other spheres. Diplomatically speaking, the "real test of Mussolini's ability as a statesman would be the measure of his success in bringing about a *rapprochement* between Church and State."⁶

Mussolini had a personal history of anticlericalism, even atheism, but, in typical opportunist fashion, he saw that his political security could not fail to be greatly influenced by his relations with the Church. Specifically, "in spite of his atheistic past it is clear that Mussolini longed to harness the Catholic Church to the Fascist state."⁷ Events worked to his advantage, and he found himself in a good position to succeed where others had failed. In this regard, his anticommunism earned him two important sources of support—the Clerico-Moderates, who were the conservative landowning class who controlled the Catholic press, and Pope Pius XI. It was *Il Duce's* anti-Bolshevism and super-nationalism which attracted the Clerico-Moderates to his standard. In fact, they were the forerunners of the Clerico-Fascists.⁸ Pius XI, before his enthronement in 1922, was the archbishop of Milan whose outspoken opposition to communism had gained him fascist backing. If ever conditions seemed to favor a church-state reconciliation, it was now. This was quickly realized by pope and premier, for the advantages of both were considerable.

Almost immediately upon the assumption of office Mussolini began cultivating good relations with the Vatican. His concept of a totalitarian state demanded a Church which was at least cooperative if not submissive to complete domination. Since it did not seem likely that the Church would supinely accept dictation from the state, the next best thing was to gain its good will in whatever measure that was possible. In this connection the government moved with dispatch. In the schools the crucifix was returned to the classrooms, and religious instruction was made compulsory on the elementary level. In higher education the state chartered the University of the Sacred Heart at Milan. In addition, state-financed salaries for the clergy were increased. These outward expressions of governmental favor were paralleled by behind-the-scenes diplomatic overtures designed to effect a formal settlement of the "Roman Question."

Although the fascist policy appeared to contain positive benefit for the Church at this point, it is clear that Mussolini's moves were coldly political and in no sense philanthropic. There was a price to be paid for the beneficence of the state—a political price! It was papal disavowal of the Popular Party of Don Luigi Sturzo.

Mussolini's scheme for a one-party state demanded the abolition of this movement, and, if the papacy would assist in speeding its demise, so much the better. The Popular Party was somewhat akin to the old Centre Party, which had survived the wrath of Bismarck in Germany. The left wing of the *Popolari* often tangled with the fascists, so Mussolini was eager to bring about its dissolution. As an organized political movement, it could not survive a papal disavowal. In October, 1922, the

Vatican announced that the Popular Party was not in any sense the official Catholic party and that Catholics had no particular obligation toward it.⁹

No doubt, the Pope's enchantment with the party had ended due to its failure to provide a solution for the "Roman Question," which the fascists now showed every desire to resolve. The abandonment of a party, which held no substantial hope for the solution of the Vatican's most grievous problem, seemed a small price to pay for the good will of the state. The price having been paid, the prospect for continuing improvement in church-state relations appeared encouraging to all concerned.

The formal and legal settlement of the "Roman Question" did not come until 1929, but the years between 1922 and 1929 reflected a movement toward conciliation. Nevertheless, these were not years without church-state friction. For example, in 1925 Pius XI denounced *Action Française* in a speech before the Sacred College. In thus assailing the French school of fascism, the pope made remarks which had obvious implications for the Italian state as well. He even said, "It is not lawful for Catholics to lend material or moral support to a programme or doctrine that sets politics above religion and makes the latter serve the former."¹⁰ However, such incidents notwithstanding, the trend of these years was decidedly toward official reconciliation.

By 1928, in his autobiography Mussolini was already boasting of being the savior of Catholicism. He claimed that he had saved the faith from "Socialist-Masonic audacity," which had infringed upon the rights of the Church prior to the establishment of his regime. He even said that the period after 1870, when the papacy had tried to ignore the Kingdom of Italy, had produced "a form of clerical bolshevism which I resolutely liquidated and put into political and intellectual bankruptcy."¹¹

According to Mussolini, Masonry had excluded the mention of God from the halls of government, but he had restored the faith. He said, "I have seen the religious spirit bloom again . . . Fascism has done and is doing its duty."¹² Those who read his bragadocio should also have carefully noted another statement in the same autobiography. In speaking about his relation to the Church, the premier defined his task as being "to differentiate and separate the principles of political clericalism from the vital essence of the Catholic faith."¹³ Just what he meant by this was not evident in 1928, but it would become crystal clear in the years to follow. However, 1929 brought the long-awaited legal settlement of the "Roman Question," and a few could have been convinced that the future held anything but favor for the Church.

The settlement came in the form of the Lateran Accords, which contained diplomatic, political, territorial and financial concessions for the Vatican. The Accords were composed of the Treaty and the Concordat. The Treaty affirmed the papal sovereignty over 109 acres whose citizens were mainly functionaries of the papal structure. It also awarded about \$100 million to the pope as compensation for the loss of other papal possessions. The Concordat reaffirmed that Catholicism was the official religion of the realm, gave the Church jurisdiction over matrimonial affairs, and made religious education compulsory in the secondary schools.¹⁴

Catholic reaction around the world was nothing short of ecstatic. Pius XI said, "We have given back God to Italy and Italy to God."¹⁵ American Catholics were especially profuse in their praise of Mussolini. Reports of some American bishops who visited Italy during the 1920's exuded enthusiasm for the fascist government. The now-famous Fulton J. Sheen related that he regarded the black-shirts as a "resurrection of the spirit of Roman Christianity."¹⁶ Prior to 1930, the *Catholic World* was the only prominent Catholic newspaper in America to consistently oppose Mussolini.¹⁷

In appraising the significance of the Lateran Accords it is important to note that here Mussolini may have registered his single greatest diplomatic success. It has been appropriately observed:

There could be no guarantee of permanency about any arrangement which one large body of opinion was desirous of interpreting to mean that the Pope had become a Fascist chaplain, and another large body that the Fascists would in the future perform, on an extended scale, the functions of the Swiss guard.¹⁸

The Lateran Accords did not create either of the above images in the public mind. Mussolini had found a way to preserve the spiritual authority of the papacy without a restoration of Italian territory and without injuring the complete civil authority of the state. Moreover, he had placed all Catholics of the world in his debt. This agreement saw the pope promise that he would not engage in international politics and that the Vatican state would not seek membership in the League of Nations. This meant relations "between Italy and Papacy should not be a subject of discussion with any third power."¹⁹ The Accords also did much to allay the fear of some foreign powers that the Vatican was Mussolini's collaborator in international affairs. The pope was now legally independent—a sovereign in his own right. Both the fascist state and the Vatican were eager to foster this impression around the world.

While the enhancement of Mussolini's prestige as a result of the Accords is obvious, it should be noted that the pope's public image was augmented too. The nature of the settlement showed that he was not seeking temporal power but rather the right to be independent of secular political control.²⁰ The pope was satisfied that this goal had been realized.

Mussolini was able to take credit for a remarkable diplomatic triumph, but his concessions to the Church were shown by subsequent events to have been the products of political expediency. They did not signify his conversion from anticlericalism. In fact, the fascist scheme for the state was still incompatible with the existence of an independent Church under a papal monarchy with vast international connections and programs. He let this be known only three months after the Accords had been ratified. In a speech to the Chamber, he insisted that the fascist state "is Catholic, but it is Fascist—indeed it is exclusively, essentially Fascist. Catholicism sets the seal upon it."²¹ Parts of this speech were aggressively imperialistic, and the pope hastened to reply that Mussolini's talk of conquest did not have papal endorsement. The pope's

remarks notwithstanding, the implications of the premier's speech are clear. He expected the Church to be a loyal pillar of support for the designs of the fascist regime.

During the first two years after ratification of the Accords there were some evidences of papal discontent. For example, Pius complained that the government was allowing too much freedom of propaganda to non-Catholic sects.²² However, a dispute which threatened to undo the whole agreement erupted in 1931. This time the matter of contention was Catholic Action, a youth organization that had been given legal recognition by Article 43 of the Concordat. Catholic Action was defined by the Vatican as a non-political movement to propagate Catholic principles. One means to this end was the promotion of a Catholic press. The government-controlled press attacked Catholic Action as disloyal to the state, and printed accusations were followed by violence against Action members by fascist youths in Rome, Milan, Trieste and elsewhere. The government expressed fears that the Catholics were trying to reconstruct the Popular Party to replace the fascists if the state showed signs of weakening.²³

Perhaps there was some basis for the fascist fear that Catholic Action was at least potentially a vehicle for political action. The movement had 5000 youth clubs, which had operated until 1929 with no real government interference. It was especially strong among Catholic university youth, so the regime viewed it as an educational instrument which was likely to be counterproductive in the light of fascist goals. At least one scholar is convinced "Catholic Action—and similar lay groups in the universities—were able to supply the political education of a whole generation of Christian Democratic politicians who took office after the Second World War."²⁴ Be that as it may, Catholic Action was charged with a conspiracy to destroy the government.

The pope immediately came to the defense of Catholic Action with an encyclical—*Non Abbiamo Bisogno*—in which he lamented the fascist persecution without actually mentioning the fascists by name. Pius insisted that Catholic Action had been faithful to his orders "in refraining absolutely from any and every kind of political party activity," and he charged the state with treating the Catholic youth like a "vast and dangerous organization of criminals."²⁵ The encyclical interpreted the attacks as a "systematic campaign . . . against the most reasonable and precious liberties of religion."²⁶ Perhaps the most important assertion of the encyclical is the demand that the Church must have a major role in education and that Catholic Action was a vital agency of that kind. This could not fail to be viewed as an affront by Mussolini. In addition, Pius advised Catholics whose livelihood was dependent upon membership in the Fascist Party to take the fascist oath with a mental reservation. It appeared that a church-state rupture was imminent.

The apparent rupture did not occur. Instead, a compromise was negotiated whereby the pope agreed to decentralize Catholic Action so as to make any concerted political activity on its part very difficult. The strategy of the fascists from this point forward would be to avoid outright confrontation with the Church and to resort to "gradual but unrelenting encroachment."²⁷ Throughout the controversy the pope never capitulated.

lated. Even after the compromise was reached, the pope placed the writings of Giovanni Gentile, one of fascism's major spokesmen, on the *Index of Forbidden Books*. This included Gentile's eulogy of Mussolini.²⁸

After the heat of controversy over Catholic Action dissipated, Italo-Papal relations remained mostly pacific until 1938 when Mussolini began committing Italy too much to Nazi Germany. When some ugly features of National Socialism, such as its racialism, began appearing in Italy the Vatican again became critical of the fascist government.

Before exploring the course of Mussolini's relations with the Church in the era of Fascist-Nazi collaboration, one other episode should be considered. It is the position of the Church on the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935-36. The details of the origin and course of this war are only incidental to the subject at hand. It is sufficient to note that world opinion through the League of Nations condemned the invasion as naked aggression. However, the Church and the papacy did not join in the condemnation.

On the contrary, Catholic bishops pronounced benedictions over Italian troops and arms as they went off to war, and Catholic papers were lavish in their praise of the effort, as they would later be in the Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War, which was explained as a defense of the faith. Beyond this, the pope established ecclesiastical machinery to absorb the Ethiopian Orthodox Church into the Roman jurisdiction. Pius XI defended his failure to condemn aggression in Ethiopia on the basis that the Vatican had promised in the Latern Accords to refrain from interfering in international disputes. He also pointed out that the Vatican state was not a member of the League of Nations. Most Catholic leaders followed the example of the papacy by giving at least tacit approval to the war. "In short, the climate of relations between Mussolini's Fascist dictatorship and the Vatican during the pontificate of Pius XI was generally serene."²⁹

After the controversy of 1931 passed, the most Pius XI seemed ready to do in the way of applying moral criticism to the regime was to voice an occasional complaint about increasing antisemitism in the government as it drew closer to Germany.

Death ended the pontificate of Pius XI on February 10, 1939. Eugenio Pacelli was elected Pius XII, and Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and foreign minister, noted in his diary that *Il Duce* "is satisfied with Pacelli's election. He promised to send the pope some advice on how he can usefully govern the Church."³⁰ Ciano also expressed his own belief: "We can get along well with this pope."³¹

Nevertheless, this optimism was not altogether justified as subsequent events would show. Pius XII made no direct criticism when Italy conquered helpless Albania in 1939, and, as war clouds began gathering over the Polish question, the pope worked frantically to promote the maintenance of peace. However, his advice was for Poland to come to terms with Hitler. Moreover, he urged that, if war should come, Italy should stay neutral. His appeal to Britain and France was not to allow themselves

to be taken into war by the Polish problem. It would appear that the Vatican was in the forefront for appeasement, which could only aid the Axis cause.³² But this is to oversimplify the role the pope was attempting to play.

From the very start of his pontificate, Pius XII was a critic of Nazi Germany, and "from every point of view the Rome-Berlin Axis was abhorrent to the Holy See."³³ This pontiff consistently denounced Nazi racialism and was very vocal in criticizing the German takeover in Austria, which he feared would lead Italy into war. The papal press, *Osservatore Romano*, was so decidedly anti-German that Ciano at one point threatened to close down its operations. He even charged it had "become the official organ of the anti-fascists."³⁴

It appears that when war broke out Pius XII urged Italy to remain neutral in the hope that it could then function in a mediatorial capacity to achieve a swift end to hostilities.³⁵ Here are some evidences that Pius XII was not subservient to Mussolini. Then too, this pope refused to accept the German invasion of Russia as a crusade against communism, and when the Germans occupied Italy, he provided leadership to hide Jews from Nazi wrath. And finally, the Vatican showed one quiet but definite sign of its lack of support for the fascist war effort—as a state it remained officially neutral throughout World War II.

Conclusion

The years of fascist rule in Italy saw a remarkable reconciliation of church and state for which Mussolini must be given credit even though the trends in that direction were established before he came to power. The Lateran Accords were a valuable propaganda move which helped his image around the world, and within Italy they served for a while at least to "offset Fascism's dismal economic policies."³⁶

For the Vatican these were years when it enjoyed greater freedom in relation to the state than did the monarchy, but, for the most part, the papacy was no real barrier to Mussolini's programs. The anti-fascist encyclicals seemed to have little effect within Italy though they probably improved the image of the Church in the non-totalitarian world.³⁷ Nevertheless, there is evidence that the Church through Catholic Action was able to keep alive some portion of the Christian Democratic tradition which Italy had known before Mussolini, and after the war this tradition reappeared from a "generation that grew up under fascism."³⁸ The virtual divorce between church and state during the war encouraged this revival.

The original alliance between Church and Regime had been imposed from above upon the Catholic masses between 1922 and 1929, but the turning away from Fascism between 1938 and 1943 was spontaneous.³⁹

The Christian Democratic Party which appeared after Mussolini's fall was largely led by people from Catholic Action and former members of the old Popular Party.

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NOTES

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