

DIO O IL DUCE? POPE PIUS-XI AND THE
RISE OF EUROPEAN FASCISM

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It is difficult to imagine a history of the 20th century in Europe without the scourge of fascism. Leaders like Francisco Franco in Spain, Ante Pavelić in Croatia, and Adolf Hitler in Germany not only brutally curtailed the rights of their own citizens, but led violent campaigns against their ethnic and political enemies. Indeed, the Spanish White Terror, the slaughter of Serbians in Croatia, the extermination of roughly six million Jews across the continent, and even the Second World War itself can be laid at the feet of these fascist leaders. These regimes and the violence, authoritarianism, and hyper-nationalism that characterized them all had a common ancestor: Italian fascism. In 1922, Benito Mussolini rose to power after his infamous March on Rome, and then took to suspending political opposition and coalescing the powers of state around himself. In doing so, he not only became the first fascist leader in Europe, but also a model for the burgeoning far-right parties across the continent.¹ Indeed, Hitler credited Mussolini as a political inspiration, often saying, “he might not have come to power at all had he not followed Mussolini’s political example.”² Hitler’s adoration of *il Duce*, “the leader” in Italian, was such that Hitler even placed a bust of Mussolini next to portraits of his German heroes in the Reich Chancellery.

Thus, to understand the emergence of European fascism and the great destruction it precipitated during the Second World War, it is critical to look to Benito Mussolini’s rise to power in Italy. Before he founded the Partito Nazionale Fascista, the Fascist Party, Mussolini was

actually a socialist: at the start of the First World War, he edited a socialist newspaper and even called the conflict an “imperialist war.”³ The war, though, had a lasting impact on both him and Italy as a whole. His experience in the Italian military turned him into a voracious nationalist with strong anti-Bolshevik leanings, while at the same time the war wreaked havoc on Italy: “Some 650,000 soldiers had perished; returning veterans swelled the ranks of the unemployed; nearly two million Italians found themselves out of work.”⁴ Making matters worse, Italy was governed by a weak parliamentary coalition known for its history of “squabbling legislators.” Mussolini’s claim to leadership grew out of this “post-war disorder and economic hardship which reigned in Italy,” and in 1922 he organized the famous March on Rome whereby fascists descended on the capital city to “take by the throat the miserable political class.”⁵ Fearing utter chaos, King Victor Emmanuel III gave in to the fascist demands and made Mussolini the Prime Minister on October 31, 1922. However, Mussolini did not immediately dive into authoritarianism; the future of the regime was still very unclear. At this point, “fascism was still a protean movement, not yet the stark regime it would become. No one ... had any idea ... that Italy stood on the threshold of a dictatorial rule.”⁶ The world’s first fascist leader had come to power, but the future might of European fascism was still largely unforeseeable.

One of the most important influences that would shape Mussolini’s consolidation of power was the Catholic Church. In the same year that Mussolini became Prime Minister, Pope Benedict XV’s sudden death brought together the College of Cardinals to elect a new Bishop of Rome. After fourteen rounds of voting, they selected a relatively unknown man who had been a Cardinal for just one year: Ambrogio Cardinal Ratti, Archbishop of Milan, who took the name Pius XI.⁷ The dire post-war situation in

Europe afforded him no honeymoon period: the widespread destitution and unemployment, the political instability in many of the nascent states established by the Treaty of Versailles, and the rising specter of communism in Eastern Europe all gave the Church cause for concern. Because of the Holy See's physical location in Rome, Pius XI also had to navigate Italy's tumultuous internal politics. At the time of his election, there was a deep enmity between the Vatican and the Italian government which stretched back to 1870, when the newly-unified Italian government conquered the Papal States and denied the Church's right to territorial sovereignty.⁸ Despite this tension between the Church and the state, though, the Italian population was still vastly Catholic, which gave the Vatican a massive influence over the country's affairs. The deep piety of the Italian people begs the question: what role did the Church under Pius XI play in Mussolini's rise to power? Given the inspirational relationship between Mussolini and the rise of fascism across the continent, the stakes of this question could not be higher; indeed, it asks what role the oldest and most powerful institution of Christianity in the world played in paving the way for European fascism and the destruction that followed from it.

With near consensus, scholars have answered this question by critiquing Pope Pius XI's relationship with Mussolini and his government to varying degrees. Even before his papacy had ended, William Teeling argued that the pope had acquiesced to Italian fascism and "become more and more friendly with the leader of [the] Totalitarian State"⁹ because, "terrified of Bolshevism, [he] saw in Mussolini a worthwhile weapon to fight it."¹⁰ According to Teeling, Pius XI's motivating fear of communism was rooted in his experience as the Papal Nuncio to Poland at the close of the war, during which time the invading Red Army approached Warsaw. Although many diplomats and other clergy members

fled the city, then-Monsignor Ratti decided to stay in Warsaw with the people. The Russian advance was halted in a last minute counteroffensive by the Polish forces, but Teeling argues that the near-disaster experience made an indelible anti-communist mark on Pius XI. Because of his first-hand experience with Bolshevism, the Pope had “an intense hatred of Communism and Russia,”¹¹ which left him willing to accept any political alternative to communism in Italy – even Mussolini’s strikingly totalitarian regime. Daniel Binchy furthered this tough-on-communism but weak-on-fascism narrative, and in 1939 he wrote in his otherwise laudatory elegy of the recently-passed Pontiff that, “His three years as Nuncio in Warsaw led him to exaggerate ... the practical ... menace of Communism and to underestimate the dangers that threaten European civilization and peace from the other forms of totalitarianism.”¹² Even before the disastrous effects of fascism had fully come to fruition, scholars like Teeling and Binchy critiqued Pius XI as a leader who was so concerned with the rise of communism that he was willing to turn a blind eye to, and even tacitly support, the rise of fascism.

As time passed, historians elevated these critiques into condemnation. In 1965, Karlheinz Deschner published a damning analysis of Pius XI’s role in the rise of fascism, arguing that he not only accepted the Mussolini government, but actively worked with the fascists in order to subdue the potential of Italian communism. Deschner describes the relationship as an alliance, and goes so far as to say that, “This unholy Catholic alliance with the supposedly lesser – Fascist – evil led to the greatest catastrophe in human history: the Second World War and the Holocaust.”¹³ Most recently, David Kertzer published his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Pope and Mussolini*, which built on the previous scholarship by interweaving material from the newly opened Vatican Archives. Using documents from the Holy See’s

ambassadors and aides, he argues that the Church and the fascist state shared a symbiotic relationship through which the Vatican regained territorial integrity for the first time since 1870 and Mussolini gained the political support of the Catholic masses. Ultimately, Kertzer comes to a similar conclusion as Deschner: despite that Pius XI and Mussolini “made an odd couple,” their working relationship was so close that it was not only a “partnership” but a joint “clerico-Fascist revolution.”¹⁴ Thus, the scholarship of Pius XI paints him as permitting, if not facilitating and benefiting from, the rise of fascism in Italy, and subsequently across Europe more generally.

Strikingly, though, scholars thus far have largely overlooked the words of Pius XI himself, instead relying on a psychoanalysis of his time in Poland or the documents of others working in the Vatican. Although these sources give valuable insights into the vision and workings of the Pontiff, they fail to tell the whole story of his relationship with fascism. An analysis of Pius XI’s own words in his many encyclicals shows that, while he was certainly concerned about communism, he by no means supported the fascist government. In fact, he vigorously advocated for a society that was in opposition to fascism. Assuming the throne of Saint Peter in the wake of the politically, economically, and – most importantly – socially catastrophic First World War, Pius XI was determined to restore the Catholic foundations of European society. To do so, he envisioned a system of universal Catholic education and an active and engaged laity which, facilitated by local bishops through an organization known as Catholic Action, would not only profess Catholicism but zealously act upon the faith in all aspects of their daily lives. When his mission of reviving Christianity in Europe came into conflict with the fascist desire to make the state the supreme authority over people’s lives, Pius XI harshly rebuked the growing dangers of Mussolini’s

government. Thus, Pius XI neither permitted nor supported the rise of fascism; to the contrary, he was committed to furthering his own vision of a society founded on Christian principles, which directly opposed the ideology and hopes of Mussolini.

THE PAPAL PLAN

Pope Pius XI's first act as the Bishop of Rome was a dramatic one: he delivered the traditional *Urbi et Orbi* speech on the external balcony of St. Peter's Basilica to a crowd gathered from all over the world.¹⁵ For the previous fifty years, since the territorial dispute between Italy and the Papal States arose in 1870, newly-elected popes had symbolically given the address from the inside balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, not out in the open air for the world to hear. In breaking this tradition, Pius XI showed both an openness to rapprochement with the Italian government and a concern for the state of the world more generally. This outward-cast focus would come to define his papacy as he sought to lead Europe in rebuilding – socially, politically, and morally – from the destruction of the First World War.¹⁶

His initial attempt at doing so was in December of 1922, when he issued his first papal encyclical, *Ubi arcano Dei consilio* (When in the Inscrutable Designs of God). To begin, he acknowledged the unresolved political anxieties in Europe: “The nations of the earth have not as yet found true peace. ... Small nations complain that they are being oppressed and exploited by great nations. The great powers ... contend that they are being judged wrongly and circumvented by the smaller.”¹⁷ However, Pius XI did not interpret the international tensions of the interwar years as mere politics; rather, he believed that they reflected more profound problems with society's moral underpinnings. More specifically, he identified a rise in impious sexual ethics:

“Too often,” he asserts, “we have seen both the sanctity of the marriage tie and the duties to God and to humankind ... forgotten.”¹⁸ As a result, the fabric of society was being challenged in fundamental ways: for example, he cited “the destruction of purity among women and young girls, as is evidenced by the increasing immodesty of their dress and conversation and by their participation in shameful dances.”¹⁹ Despite their personal nature, these sins did not just affect the individuals involved but had a far larger and more dangerous impact on society itself: “The inordinate desire for pleasure, concupiscence of the flesh, sows the fatal seeds of division not only among families but likewise among states.”²⁰ Indeed, Pius XI argued that the tensions within and between countries that he was addressing were not rooted in mere political differences, but were a manifestation of individual “human infirmities”²¹ that had been amplified into national shortcomings.

Pius XI continued on to contend that this moral and sexual demise was not caused by the First World War, but by the more insidious development of secular liberalism that preceded and even contributed to the cause of the conflict. He posits that “the theory that all authority comes from men, not from God,” fundamentally weakened the foundations of society, and that “because men have forsaken God and Jesus Christ, they have sunk to the depths of evil.”²² In particular, he was concerned with liberal reformers’ abrogation of the Church’s authority over institutions like marriage and education throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. By making marriage “a mere social contract,” secular states had “menaced and undermined ... the stability and unity of the family” and welcomed the resultant increase in “acts of sinful lust and soul-destroying egotism.”²³ Similarly, by removing the Church’s control over education, he claimed that secular states had done away with any “possibility of ever laying a solid groundwork for peace, order, and prosperity, either

in the family or in social relations”²⁴ Without the crucial corrective foundation of Christian principles, European countries fell prey to the sinful natures of their people and gave way to the rampant sectionalism, materialism, and nationalism that boiled over into the First World War. Thus, Pius XI argued that weakening the Church’s control over education and marriage in turn weakened society, leading not only to the calamities of the First World War but also to the continued moral demise and political tension that lingered after the conflict. To remedy these moral issues – and thereby the political strife and international conflict of the interwar years – Pope Pius XI offered a three-pronged plan for the future of the Church’s relationship with European society: Catholic education, Catholic Action, and political neutrality.

Protecting and promoting Catholic education and the Church’s influence over young people was by far the foremost concern of Pius XI. In his eyes, the problems facing European civilization were too immense to be solved by any simple, expedient solution; a long-term reorganization of society was necessary, and this began with planting the seed for a Catholic-minded, God-fearing next generation. Although this belief permeated his papacy from its inception, he most clearly expounded on them in 1929 in *Divini illius magistri* (*On the Christian Education of Youth*). In the encyclical, Pius XI defended the right of the Church to control education. He explained that there are three “necessary societies ... into which man is born: ... the family, civil society ... [and] the Church,”²⁵ each with their own purpose, function, and – most importantly – role in education. Yet, he was unambiguous in his assertion of which institution holds the most authority: “First of all, education belongs preeminently to the Church.”²⁶ The Church, he argued, has the responsibility of shepherding each person towards salvation, and the supernatural nature of this duty unquestionably trumps the worldly concerns of the

family and the state. In this sense, education is not just the memorization of certain creeds or theological dogmas, but rather the formation of a Christian soul and, more broadly, a Christian society:

Education consists essentially of preparing man for what he must be and for what he must do here in order to attain the sublime end for which he was created. ... From this we see the supreme importance of Christian education, nor merely for the individual, but ... for the whole of human society, whose perfection comes from the perfection of the elements that compose it.²⁷

Accordingly, Pius XI expected for governments to yield to the Church's dominion over education. Rather than administering secular schools, he said that states should fulfill their rightful role of forming good citizens through a broad, vaguely defined "civic education" by which governments "provide information having an intellectual, imaginative and emotional appeal."²⁸ Classrooms, however, should be run by the Church or by the laity in Catholic schools. Indeed, he made it clear that schools outside of the Church's oversight were doomed to become "agents of destruction,"²⁹ and thus for the good of not only each individual but for society as a whole, "the State should respect the inherent rights of the Church ... concerning Christian education."³⁰ Unequivocally, then, the Pontiff stated in *Divini illius magistri* that European governments should surrender their claims to state-run education systems in deference to the authority of the Church, and instead rely on Catholic-run schools.

Providing for Catholic education was important because it would form young people into good Christians who would make it to Heaven, but Pius XI believed that such Catholic-educated, pious Christian adults also had a critical role to play in worldly affairs before they found salvation. He recognized that while the laity was a flock that

needed shepherding by the Church, the Catholic faithful could also be a power force in shaping society. Indeed, he wrote in *Ubi arcano Dei consilio* that the “great activity of the apostolate ... by prayer, ... the religious press, personal example, [and] works of charity, seeks in every way possible to lead souls to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to restore ... His sovereign rule over the family and over society.”³¹ In some ways, this idea of an active laity was nothing new: the Church’s flock had always been expected to live out the principles of Catholicism in all aspects of their daily lives. In fact, in the 13th century Saint Thomas Aquinas described such involvement in the extracurricular works of the Church as the fulfillment of the sacrament of confirmation: “Confirmation, which all the laity ordinarily receive, is called the sacrament ... of Catholic action, of the lay apostolate, of the Christian’s mature participation in the public work of the Christian community.”³² Yet, Pius XI’s dedication to creating an energized laity dwarfed that of any pope before him. He revolutionized the structure of the laity by building the organization known as Catholic Action, which facilitated the work of everyday Catholics through the direction of local bishops. Before the formal creation of Catholic Action, the work of the laity was decentralized through various independent associations and organizations focused on specific tasks, such as education, healthcare, or charity.³³ Pius XI’s initiative incorporated these separate associations into one larger umbrella organization, through which local clergy members could direct the laity’s work. Thus, through Catholic Action, “The laity were called not to independent action, but to co-operation with Church interests as defined by the hierarchy.”³⁴

The cultivation of Catholic Action was not just a mere agenda item for Pope Pius XI; it was a defining aspect of his papacy. Indeed, he would come to be known as the “Pope of Catholic Action.”³⁵ As Jesuit Joseph Schuyler explained in

1959, the Pope realized that “if the Church’s life was to be in the market place and the contested arenas of modern thought as well as in the sanctuary, obviously it had to be lived by the laity who were there.”³⁶ Accordingly, Pius XI began his campaign for Catholic Action in his earliest encyclical by praising the “whole group of movements, organizations, and works so dear to Our fatherly heart” which he said “ought not only to continue in existence, but ought to be developed more and more.”³⁷ In 1925, he repeated his call to action in more passionate terms, urging Catholic lay people to “fight courageously under the banner of Christ the King ... fired with apostolic zeal ... to win over to their Lord those hearts that are bittered and estranged from Him.”³⁸ Even in his ardent defense of the Church’s role in education in *Divini illius magistri*, he tied his concern about the Christian formation of young people to Catholic Action by highlighting the role of the lay apostolate in supporting and staffing Catholic schools.³⁹ The organization was so important to Pius XI that he even raised the stakes of living up to the expectation that confirmed Catholics involve themselves in the work of the Church, declaring that “a Catholic who was not was not apostolic was to that extent not a complete Catholic.”⁴⁰ Alongside Christian education, then, Pius XI defined his papacy with a commitment to reinvigorating and reorganizing the participation of the laity in the missions of the Church through Catholic Action.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that Pius XI’s work regarding education and the laity was being conducted amid the uneasy political landscape of the interwar years. Maintaining political neutrality, then, was crucial. In his first encyclical, he made clear that he had no interest in politics or in governing over states: “The Church does not desire, nor ought she to desire, to mix up without a just cause in the direction of purely civil affairs.”⁴¹ Moreover, he asserted that the Church would work with any form of

government – whether it be a monarchy, republic, or even a fascist dictatorship – because “the Catholic faith ... can easily be reconciled with any reasonable and just system of government.”⁴² Thus, Pius XI refused to endorse any political parties, even the nascent Christian Democratic and Catholic parties which professed fierce anti-fascism and a willingness to collaborate with the clergy over civil affairs. He feared that doing so would tie the Church to the volatile political fortunes of any one party or regime. His reasoning for this neutrality was steeped in history, particularly the memory of “the injury done to Catholicism when it [was] allowed to become a political label” during the French Revolution.⁴³ To protect the long-term interests of the Church, Pius XI had to keep himself above the turbulence of party politics.

Moreover, he believed that any regime was viable for Catholics to support so long as it afforded the Church enough latitude to operate freely within society. Just as he hesitated to endorse any friendly political parties, he was likewise wary of condemning hostile parties unless they proved themselves to be irreversibly anathema to the precepts and missions of the Church. It was for this reason that Pius XI was so opposed to communism: because they are “avowedly hostile to revealed religion, ... the Communists ... place themselves by their doctrines outside the possibility of Catholic support.”⁴⁴ Rather than being indelibly scarred by his near-collision with the Red Army in Warsaw, Pius XI opposed communism because it unquestionably threatened the robust existence of the Church in society. Therefore, his anti-communism – instead of being the motivating principle of his worldview – was simply a function of his wider belief that the Church must maintain political neutrality unless a party or ideology was radically antagonistic to Catholicism’s place in society.

If he was going to reconstitute the basis of European society on Christian foundations, then this political neutrality

would be essential not only in words but in actions as well. Specifically, securing the Church's control over education and Catholic Action's right to organize across the continent would require maintaining strong, amicable diplomatic relations with the various post-war regimes across Europe. To do so, Pius XI relied on what Professor Giuliana Chamedes describes as "concordat diplomacy,"⁴⁵ whereby the Holy See negotiated legal agreements across the continent which clearly defined the Church's relation to each state. Although each concordat had country-specific details, they largely all looked alike and contained guarantees of the Church's right to found confessional schools, the right for Catholic Action associations to be formed, and some level of government funding for the Church.⁴⁶ Growing on the heightened diplomatic role that his predecessor, Pope Benedict XV, had cultivated during the First World War, Pius XI oversaw the signing of concordats with a number of countries: Austria,⁴⁷ Poland, Latvia, Mussolini's Italy,⁴⁸ and even Nazi Germany.⁴⁹ The diverse range of regime types that the Vatican signed concordats with – from diverse republics to nation states to fascist dictatorships – clearly demonstrates that Pius XI was not concerned with the triumph of one ideology, party, or governance style; he wanted solely to protect and promote the rights of the Church.

THE COLLISION WITH FASCISM

Unfortunately, Pius XI was not the only leader of the interwar years who wanted to radically transform society. Benito Mussolini had his own vision for solving the massive problems facing Italy in the wake of the First World War which revolved around enlarging the power of the state dramatically. In his eyes, the parliamentary system was too inefficient and weak to lead the country through the tumultuous aftermath of the war; Italy needed a powerful

central government headed by a strong leader who would quell partisan squabbling. Indeed, he was the father of fascist totalitarianism, famously declaring, “Everything in the State, Nothing outside the State, Nothing against the State!”⁵⁰ However, Mussolini did not immediately become a dictator. It is important to note that the fascists did not necessarily have broad support in 1922 when he rose to power; his ascent to the prime ministry was the result of a threatened coup, not an election of any sort. Before he could take complete control of the state, he needed to widen his coalition of support in order to build legitimacy.

In a country so widely Catholic as Italy, endearing himself to the Church and to its faithful would be essential for the long-term success of his regime. At the time of Mussolini’s rise to power, the most powerful counterbalance to fascism in Italy was the Catholic party, Partito Popolare Italiano. Despite being an avowed atheist, Mussolini quickly cozied up to Catholicism in the hopes that he could prove himself to the Catholic faithful and thus neutralize his opposition. He began to restore symbolic privileges of the Church which previous liberal reformers had stripped away: he had crucifixes placed in classrooms and hospital rooms, he permitted Catholic chaplains to join military units, and increased the state allowances given to clergymen.⁵¹ Perhaps more interesting were the personal acts of his purported faith that he performed, such as baptizing his children and even forcing his wife to be baptized.⁵² Still, though, Mussolini needed to go to greater lengths to prove his Catholic credentials if the former-socialist, personally-atheist leader was going to win over the pious public. Indeed, he needed to enact policies that were favorable to the Church.

The Roman Question gave him the perfect opportunity to do so. Since the capture of papal-controlled Rome by the unified Italian government in 1870, the Holy See had suspended diplomatic relations with Italy. The popes

since the invasion argued that territorial sovereignty was absolutely necessary for the Church to carry out its mission of leading souls to salvation, and that the city of Rome was its rightful territory. For over fifty years, each pope had called himself a “prisoner of the Vatican” and in protest refused to venture outside of its walls.⁵³ These longstanding questions of who controlled ‘the Eternal City’ – Italy or the Vatican – and how much territory, if any, the Church would have still persisted at the start of Mussolini’s prime ministry. Knowing that resolving these tensions with the Church would endear his regime to the Catholic population, Mussolini opened covert negotiations with the Vatican. Pius XI, in the spirit of his concordat diplomacy, was happy to negotiate with *il Duce* with the hope that he could not only carve out a sovereign papal realm in Rome but, more importantly, also pursue his continent-wide agenda of reviving society’s Christian foundations in Italy. Indeed, his sights were set on more than just the Roman Question: Pius XI sought to reestablish the Church’s control over Italian education that liberal reformers had done away with and to protect the right of Catholic Action to operate freely.

Thus, in 1929, the Lateran Accords were signed. The most noted aspect of the agreement was that the Holy See was granted territorial sovereignty through the creation of Vatican City as it stands today. Yet, the agreement was far wider in its reach than just solving the Roman Question: it declared Catholicism as the state religion, granted the Church power over education and marriage, recognized Catholic Action’s right to organize, and even paid the Church 750 million lire.⁵⁴ Clearly, there were massive benefits for Pope Pius XI, but Mussolini did not leave the negotiating table empty-handed. Most importantly for him, the landmark achievement of resolving a fifty year-long conflict gave his regime political legitimacy: “From the very first day after the signing of the Treaty, Mussolini made it quite clear

that he intended to use the Lateran Treaty ... as something useful for his Italian State.”⁵⁵ Not only did the agreement make him seem like a capable leader, but it buttressed the pro-Catholic facade he had been projecting. Indeed, “devout Italian peasants flocked to church to pray for the man who had given back God to Italy and Italy to God.”⁵⁶ Thus, this monumental agreement with the Church solidified his support among the Catholic population. It is precisely because of this political boon that the Lateran Treaty afforded to Mussolini that historians have condemned Pius XI as a collaborator with fascism. Given the size of the Pope’s influence over the Italian people, scholars argue that his decision to work with Mussolini in order to secure political and financial privileges for the Church indefensibly galvanized the legitimacy of fascism in Italy.

While the success of the Lateran Accords certainly benefited Mussolini’s political standing, extrapolating that Pius XI was therefore an ally of fascism ignores the Pope’s undeniable anti-fascist activity. In one sense, this critique overlooks the vision that Pius XI dedicated his papacy to producing: a European society re-founded on Christian principles, with the fear of God and a respect for religion as its core values. This worldview was fundamentally incompatible with fascism, and thus promoting it was an act of anti-fascism in and of itself. Moreover, this critique omits from the historical record the serious conflicts that emerged as the contrasting visions of Pius XI and Mussolini collided with one another. Indeed, Pius XI flagrantly critiqued Mussolini and his ever-stronger fascist regime whenever the state began to encroach on what the Pope had claimed to be the realm of the Church. In these clashes and the ensuing papal encyclicals, Pius XI’s anti-fascism and disdain for Mussolini’s regime fully came to fruition.

Mussolini’s consolidation of power began in 1925, after a group of his supporters murdered the leader of the

socialists, Giacomo Matteotti, who had publicly decried how the fascists rigged the 1924 parliamentary elections. Despite intense uproar from the opposition coalition, King Victor Emmanuel III was unwilling to remove him from power or call for a new election, which effectively allowed Mussolini and the Partito Nazionale Fascista to dominate the parliament. In an impassioned speech he mocked his nearly-powerless opponents, saying, “You believed that fascism was finished ... but you will see ... Italy ... wants peace, wants tranquility, wants calm. We will give it this ... through love if possible, and with force if it becomes necessary.”⁵⁷ Soon after, Mussolini censored the press, outlawed political opposition, replaced labor unions with fascist syndicates, and exiled liberal and socialist activists.⁵⁸ As he strengthened his control of the government, he also began to embolden his public image. Rather than just being seen as a prime minister, he began to project a vision of himself as “the new Caesar, the man who would return Italy to its ancient grandeur.”⁵⁹ In some schools, students even began to recite transformed Lord’s Prayers that likened the fascist leader to Christ:

I believe in the high Duce – maker of the Black shirts – and in Jesus Christ his only protector. Our Savior was conceived by a good teacher and an industrious blacksmith. ... He came down to Rome. On the third day, he reestablished the state. He ascended into the high office. ... I believe in the wise laws, the Communion of Citizens, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of Italy and the eternal force. Amen.⁶⁰

In the eyes of Pope Pius XI, this adoration of the Prime Minister was inching closer and closer to becoming the deification of Mussolini, which he believed would conflict with the piety of Italian Catholics. In response, he issued in December of 1925 an encyclical titled *Quas Primas* (In the First), which inaugurated the celebration of a new Church

holiday acknowledging the authority and dominion of Christ: the Feast of Christ the King. While this celebration certainly had theological ends, it was also undeniably political. His hope was that the occasion would remind everyday Christians and political leaders alike that, “[God] is the very truth, and it is from Him that truth must be obediently received by all mankind.”⁶¹ He argued in the encyclical that in terms of obedience to God, “There is no difference ... between the individual and the family of the State; for all men, whether collectively or individually, are under the dominion of Christ.”⁶² Therefore, political leaders must recognize the authority of God and neither make laws which harm the Church nor make themselves into an idol that could divert the reverence of the faithful to an earthly ruler instead of their heavenly ruler. To that point, Pius XI sharply wrote, “If ... the rulers of nations wish to preserve their authority, to promote and increase the prosperity of their countries, they will not neglect the public duty of reverence and obedience to the rule of Christ.”⁶³ The encyclical itself was a subtle, yet clear, strike at Italian fascism, as it emphasized that there is only one indomitable leader: God, not Mussolini. Yet, the institution of a new, annually-celebrated feast was a profound, far-reaching step of anti-fascism. Pius XI noted that while his encyclicals generally “reach only a few and the more learned among the faithful, feasts reach them all; the former speak but once, the latter speak every year – in fact, forever.”⁶⁴ By creating a holiday that draws the eyes of Catholics toward God and away from Mussolini’s growing-deification, the Pope was purposefully planting a seed of anti-fascism among the everyday, working class Catholics that Mussolini so badly wanted to draw into his coalition of support.

At the same time, *Quas Primas* was a personal warning to Mussolini himself that Pius XI would not tolerate the replacement of God with fascism. Yet, Mussolini paid

him no mind, and continued to consolidate power and authority in the state by directly competing with Catholic education and associations. Despite the fact that in the Lateran Accords he would agree to the Catholic Church's claim to a monopoly over education, Mussolini was interested in controlling education himself. Like Pius XI, he knew that to create a lasting change in society he would need to mold the next generation and indoctrinate them with a devotion to the state; he wanted to indelibly form the young people of Italy into fascists. To that end, he established the Opera Nazionale Balilla in 1926. This "aggressively national" organization, to which membership was mandatory for all boys between the ages of six and eighteen, oversaw the "preparation of a young generation in matters military and ... political so as to will them to the defense of Fascist Italy."⁶⁵ The new organization stood in direct contrast to the youth associations that had been established under Catholic Action, and thus served as a fascist counterbalance to the children's Christian instruction.

Mussolini's efforts to strengthen fascism also took aim at Catholic Action directly. Even after the signing of the Lateran Accords, which guaranteed the organization's right to operate freely, the Ministry of the Interior began to investigate its leaders and their political views. Fascist prefects and state police likewise began attending Catholic Action meetings and would report detailed information to the Ministry.⁶⁶ This state pressure came alongside a coordinated propaganda campaign that tied Catholic Action to the recently-dissolved, pro-clerical Partito Popolare Italiano. The fascists argued that the organization was "a cover for the old [Catholic] Party" and that its branches were "engaging in illegal union activity."⁶⁷ Mussolini knew that this was not the case, since the prefect and police reports largely indicated that Catholic Action was not engaging in political activity.⁶⁸ Still, he followed through with attacks on the

organization because he recognized that it was successfully inspiring an increase in devotion among the laity, and that this more fervent Catholicism in line with Pius XI's vision of a Christian post-war society was fundamentally incompatible with his desire for an unchallengeable fascist state.

Mussolini's rhetoric against Catholic Action soon turned into violence. Tension had long been brewing on Italian university campuses between the fascists and those who affiliated themselves with Catholic Action, but in 1931 this tension boiled over into physical conflict. On May 27, the Young University Fascists "invaded Catholic clubs, ... invaded the editorial offices of the Jesuit periodical, the *Civiltà Cattolica*, ... [and] attacked the Italian Catholic University Federation headquarters."⁶⁹ Using this fascist-spurred violence as an excuse, Mussolini ordered on May 30 that all youth organizations established by Catholic Action – including those for both children and college-aged students – be disbanded.⁷⁰ The next day, state police began visiting local Catholic Action offices to deliver Mussolini's decree, shut them down, and even seize membership rolls and documents.⁷¹ This dramatic breach of the Lateran Accords was immediately condemned by the Pope, who took the opportunity to cast the fascist violence and abuse of power as the "first manifestation of ... an education that is the antithesis of Christian and civil education, and entirely given to hate, to irreverence, and to violence."⁷² Thus, Pius XI drew a line in the sand between the teachings of the Church and those of Mussolini: the fascist beliefs that organizations like the Opera Nazionale Balilla were carving into the culture of Italy were not only irreconcilable with the Christian society he was trying to rebuild, but also violent and dangerous in nature.

Despite the strong initial protests of the Pope, the fascist state maintained the suspension of Catholic Action organizations. Therefore, faced with the permanent

dissolution of what he believed to be a crucial means for reinvigorating Christianity in Europe and remedying the political foment of the interwar years, Pius XI resorted to issuing a jolting encyclical, *Non abbiamo bisogno* (We Do Not Need), just one month later. To begin, he refuted the fascist propaganda that described Catholic Action as politically motivated, calling their claims, “inventions, falsehoods, and real calumnies diffused by the hostile press of the party, which is the only press free ... to dare to say anything.”⁷³ The supposed political activity of Catholic Action was mere pretext, he argued, saying that the real intention of the government pressure was “to tear society away from Catholic Action ... and from the Church.”⁷⁴ Pius XI did not just condemn their actions; he went further and denounced their ideology as the “pagan worship of the state.”⁷⁵ Fascism, he argued, was becoming a sort of public religion that “rebels against the directions of higher religious authorities” and thus it “cannot in any way be reconciled with Catholic doctrine and practice.”⁷⁶ The impact of this statement cannot be overstated: in such an overwhelmingly Catholic country, the Pope declared that the government’s core ideology was fundamentally incongruous with the Church.

Alongside critiquing the state’s actions and beliefs, Pius XI also attacked Mussolini personally. In his argument that the purported political activity of Catholic Action was just a pretext for stifling the Church’s role in society, he cited Mussolini’s rhetoric: “This ... is made all the more explicit and categorical ... by the individual who not only represents all, but who can do all, and who confirms it in official ... publications, ... and by communications to representatives of the press.”⁷⁷ Of course, Mussolini’s approval of the attacks on Catholic Action was obvious, given that by 1931 Italy was clearly under a dictatorship. Yet, Pius XI implying that Mussolini played an active role in suppressing the Church,

rather than vaguely blaming the government or fascists at-large, was a clear attempt at tarnishing his personal reputation. Still, the Pope was not done; he even went so far as to question the sincerity of Mussolini's newly-professed Catholic faith. Although Pius XI appreciated Mussolini's symbolic actions of piety – such as baptizing his family and refurbishing classrooms with crucifixes – he found il Duce's anti-Catholic policies reprehensible enough to publicly call his bluff, writing, “One is a Catholic in name only ... who adopts and develops a programme with doctrines and maxims so opposed to the Church ... and who misrepresents, combats, and persecutes Catholic Action.”⁷⁸ In terms of political consequences, these subtle attacks on Mussolini's character were the most dangerous aspect of the encyclical in the eyes of the fascists, because they threatened the very god-like, unassailable image of Mussolini that the dictatorship rested on.

Taking into account Pope Pius XI's critiques of the fascist state's actions, ideology, and even its leader, it is clear that *Non abbiamo bisogno* was a powerful anti-fascist publication that imperiled the Catholic population's support for fascism, which Mussolini needed so desperately. While Pius XI, in keeping with his commitment to keep above party politics, chose not to formally condemn the Partito Nazionale Fascista as a political organization, his strong rebuke of their actions and their beliefs served as a blunt reminder that if they continued suppressing Catholic Action, fascism would fall into the same category as communism: fundamentally unsupportable for Catholics.

In response to this pressure, Mussolini backed down. Roughly one month after the encyclical was published, the state announced that not only would Catholic Action associations be reinstated across the country, but that ecclesiastical authorities would be given even more control over the education system.⁷⁹ By September of 1931, then,

Pope Pius XI had effectively warded off Mussolini's imperilment of the Church's place in Italian society, by not only protecting but bolstering both Catholic education and the laity's right to participate actively in civic affairs.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, however, Pius XI failed to create the European society that he hoped for. In fact, when he died in February of 1939, the situation across Europe could not have been farther from his vision of a peaceful continent reconstituted on Christian principles. An axis of fascist leaders had come to power and built authoritarian, hyper-nationalist regimes, and were soon to plunge the continent into the deadliest conflict in human history. Given that the Catholic Church was an institution with immense moral authority and wielded a monumental influence over the culture and politics of Catholic-dominated countries, it is no surprise that historians have turned their focus toward the Holy See in trying to understand how the deadly ideology of fascism first emerged in Italy. The existing scholarship on the relationship between the Vatican and Italian fascism has overwhelmingly condemned the papacy of Pius XI for permitting, if not actively supporting, Mussolini's consolidation of power. However, this characterization of the Pope obscures his determined anti-fascism.

Through an analysis of his encyclicals, it becomes clear that Pius XI actively combatted the rise of fascism through his advocacy of a Christian-based international order in the wake of the First World War. By promoting an

increase in Catholic-run education, the reinvigoration of lay Catholics' involvement in civil affairs, and the maintenance of the Church's neutrality from political parties, Pius XI sought to cultivate a strong role for the Church in European society, which had otherwise fallen into moral decline. By doing so, he believed he would build not only a more robust Church, but a more pious, and thereby more peaceful, culture across the continent. His hope that Catholicism would ultimately order society, though, stood in stark contrast to Mussolini's desire to create a strong fascist state that would unquestionably rule over the Italian people. When their dueling conceptions of a rightfully-ordered society came into conflict with one another, Pope Pius XI unabashedly fought to protect the interests of the Church from the fascist state's encroachment. Certainly, the Vatican lost this battle in the long-term since fascism continued to fester in Italy and ultimately spread to countries like Spain and Germany, but it would be deeply inaccurate to say that Pius XI supported its emergence or refused to lift a finger in opposition. Instead, the Pope actively crusaded against the rising specter of fascism, and should thus be remembered as an adversary to Mussolini and to fascist leaders all across Europe.

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