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Passey: How the Pope Played Politics



Pope Pius XI and Mussolini: the leaders who created a treaty between the Holy See and Italy, 1929.

Paper

How the Pope Played Politics

The Papal Politics of Pape Pius XI in 1920s and 1930s Italy

Benjamin Passey

SINCE THE CONCLUSION OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR, MOST OF THE debate on the Catholic Church's relationship with Italian fascism has focused on the wartime period and the Vatican's response or lack thereof to the Holocaust. However, in recent years, historians have turned their attention from Pope Pius XII (1939–1958) to his predecessor, Pope Pius XI (1922–1939).

On 11 February 1929, the Papacy, with Pope Pius XI at the head, signed a series of treaties and agreements with Mussolini's Fascist regime. Many contemporary historians have pointed to this moment as the beginning of the Pope's subservience to Il Duce. The willingness of the Pope to engage in an agreement with Mussolini has led to the belief that Pius XI was motivated by a lust for power and evil intent. However, a closer examination of the policies of Pius's pontificate in the 1920s and 1930s paints quite a different picture, of a man better suited to the life of astute diplomat rather than the head of the Holy See.

Historian David Kertzer has led the charge with his recent book, *The Pope and Mussolini*, stirring up scrutiny into the life of Pope Pius XI and his

contribution to the rise of fascism in Italy.¹ Kertzer asserts that not only did the church tolerate fascism in an attempt to isolate itself against potential reprisals, but also that fascist ideology—including authoritarianism, the intolerance of political opposition, and the suspicion of Jews—was inspired by Catholic tradition.² In his book, *Controversial Concordats: The Vatican's Relations with Napoleon, Mussolini, and Hitler*, Frank Coppa also examines the events leading up to the signing of the Lateran Treaty.³ Using his vast knowledge of Italian politics and the social climate in the 1920s, Coppa provides an alternative explanation for the willingness of the Vatican to reach terms on the Roman Question, an explanation far less sinister than that offered by Kertzer. Coppa argues that the church led by Pope Pius XI was motivated by a righteous desire to mend the relationship between church and state and protect Italians from the dangers posed by authoritarianism. In his book, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism, 1929–1932*, John Pollard takes an alternative approach to that of both Kertzer and Coppa, tracing what he refers to as “the logical and organic relationship” which formed between the church and state.⁴ He concludes that the relationship between Pope and Duce were far less cordial than Kertzer claims, attributing tensions between the two individuals in the years following 1929 to inaccurate expectations for the implications of the *conciliazione*. Because these books represent the majority of English-language scholarship on this topic, this paper will build upon the work of all three historians, examining the calculated and decisive political decisions of Pope Pius XI, which allowed him to consolidate power while establishing himself as one of the most powerful forces against fascism in Italy.

The willingness of the Vatican headed by Pope Pius XI to cooperate with Mussolini's totalitarian regime does not demonstrate weakness or lust for power on the part of the pontiff, but rather a keen eye for political maneuvering and the opportunity to further papal objectives. Specifically under Pius XI, the Vatican consolidated control of territory and historic sites and solidified the

1. David Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini: The Secret History of Pius XI, and the Rise of Fascism in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

2. Frank J. Coppa, *Controversial Concordats: The Vatican's Relations with Napoleon, Mussolini, and Hitler* (Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 193.

3. Coppa, *Controversial Concordats*, 95.

4. John Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism, 1929–1932: A Study in Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

position of the Catholic Church in Italy, all while maintaining the ability to speak and act freely of the repressive totalitarian regime.

Early Relations between Church and State

In order to understand how the Vatican was able to make such significant strides toward greater autonomy and political control in Italy, it is important to examine the period of Italian unification. During the *Risorgimento*, or unification of Italy, the papal states were seized from the church and annexed into the new nation, with Rome, home of the Vatican, as the capital. In the following six decades, the relationship between the church and state did not improve.⁵ Pope Pius IX (1846–1878) declared himself a “prisoner” in the Vatican, setting the precedent for the political attitude of the next three popes towards the Italian state.⁶ From their “incarceration” in the Vatican, the popes denounced the growing separation between the church and state, lamenting not only the loss of the papal states, but also the secularization of the new nation. Some of the popes were so disenchanted with the Italian government that they discouraged devout Catholics from participating in the politics of the nation that had robbed them of their territory and had forsaken its Catholic origins. The turn of the century marked the climax in hostility between church and state, but in the coming decades, that relationship would gradually transform from one of resentment and distrust to one of partnership and mutual benefit.

Despite the legacy of discord and resentment that marked the decades after unification, hope of improved relations arose from the devastation of global war. The First World War and the postwar years lessened the tension and improved the relations between the Vatican and Rome, as both parties decried the unfair treatment of Italy at the Treaty of Versailles. With the relationship between Rome and the Vatican slowly improving, the liberal democratic government, most notably under Prime Minister Orlando, attempted to end the Roman

5. Italian unification, or the *Risorgimento* (“the Resurgence”), was the political and social movement that consolidated the independent states of the Italian peninsula into a single state in the 19th century. The process began in 1815 with the Congress of Vienna and culminated in 1871, when Rome became the capital of the Kingdom of Italy.

6. David Kertzer, *Prisoner of the Vatican: The Popes’ Secret Plot to Capture Rome from the New Italian State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 45.

Question by offering to renegotiate the Law of Guarantees, a law passed in 1871 in an attempt to reconcile with the Vatican after the Risorgimento.⁷ Despite the best attempts of Orlando and countless Prime Ministers before him, the Vatican refused to recognize, let alone reach an agreement on, the Law of Guarantees. With issues about the church and its relations remaining hostile, it is no surprise that drastic measures would be required to improve the conditions.

A Relationship of Mutual Benefit

The year 1922 marked an important turning point in both the course of the church and state, with the ascent of Pope Pius XI to the papacy in February, and the rise of Mussolini eight months later, in October. Almost immediately after assuming the position of prime minister, Mussolini began to vocalize his desire to reach a settlement with the Vatican, recognizing that a treaty with the Vatican would offer immense legitimacy to his regime. Equally interested, the Pope saw in Mussolini an opportunity that had not been presented to his predecessors: the prospect of negotiating not with a liberal democratic government, but with an aspiring authoritarian dictator who desired the appearance of a papal endorsement. Pius's chance presented itself after the assassination of Giacomo Matteotti in 1924 and the subsequent Aventine Succession. While many political parties and organizations in Italy condemned Mussolini and the fascist party for the removal of political opposition, Pius expressed his conviction that only Mussolini could "steer the ship [Italian State] into calmer water, providing the strong hand needed."⁸ However, with a deeper understanding of Pius's own agenda and motivation to improve the Vatican's situation, it is clear that this expression was one of temporary necessity rather than earnest conviction.

Pius's praise of Mussolini as a leader continued, although ulterior motives grew more transparent as time progressed. After a failed assassination attempt on Mussolini's life, the Pope went so far as to say that divine intervention had spared Mussolini's life. Whatever the Vatican's assessment of the morality of Mussolini, a self-proclaimed *mangiaprete*, or priest-eater, it clearly determined

7. Thomas B. Morgan, *A Reporter at the Papal Court: A Narrative of the Reign of Pope Pius XI* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1939), 166.

8. Antonio Pellicani, *Il Papa di tutti, La Chiesa Cattolica, il fascismo, e il razzismo, 1929–1945* (Milan: Sugar Editore, 1964), 10.

that there was divine intervention for him to live since, unlike so many Italian leaders before him, he could finally resolve the Roman Question; his yearning for papal backing put him in a position to make concessions that other leaders would not make.⁹ Pius ensured Mussolini's retention of power by weakening the *Partito Popolare Italiano* (Italian Peoples Party [PPI]) in 1922 with the forced resignation of adamant anti-fascist and the party's priest-leader, Father Don Sturzo. Without a powerful leader, the PPI was in no position to form a coalition government with Matteotti's socialist party, allowing Mussolini to ascend to the position of dictator in 1925 uncontested.¹⁰

Finalizing the Agreement

With Mussolini formally installed as Il Duce, secret talks began between representatives of the Pope and Mussolini in 1926. These covert exchanges continued periodically until formal negotiations began in 1928. On 11 February 1929, Pius announced that the Vatican had concluded a formal settlement with Italy, ending the Roman Question and laying to rest a quarrel that had burdened the papacy for more than half a century. With the negotiations complete and the treaty signed, many heralded the reconciliation of the church and state as well as the end of the Roman Question as the "biggest story of 1929" and Mussolini's most important political maneuver of the decade.¹¹ Nonetheless, contrary to this popular belief, Pope Pius XI was the true victor of the negotiation.

The Lateran Treaty included three accords: a conciliation treaty that terminated the Roman Question and declared Vatican City to be a neutral and inviolable territory; a concordat which regulated church-state affairs in Italy, and a financial convention that provided financial compensation for papal territory annexed during the unification.¹²

The structure of the agreement demonstrates the political cunning of the Pope. With one treaty, he effectively resolved the three most pressing issues facing the Vatican. Article three of the Lateran Treaty put an end to the Roman Question, granting the church "full ownership, exclusive dominion, and

9. Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 52.

10. D. A. Binchy, *Church and State in fascist Italy* (Oxford University Press, 1970), 157–58.

11. Morgan, *A Reporter at the Papal Court*, 166.

12. Coppa, *Controversial Concordats*, 95.

sovereign authority and jurisdiction of the Holy See over the Vatican.”¹³ Article one of the treaty codified Catholicism as the “only State religion.”¹⁴ Ordinarily, a provision of this nature would have been addressed only in a concordat rather than a treaty. However, its presence and position in the Lateran Treaty reflect Pius’s determination to have the privileged position of the church bound by international law. By agreeing to this article, Mussolini effectively agreed to allow a foreign power to play a role in Italian internal affairs. This concession on the part of Mussolini and his Fascist government contradicts the assertion that Mussolini, rather than the Pope, most benefited from the accord because Mussolini simultaneously weakened his totalitarian control politically and socially.¹⁵

Article forty-five of the Concordat, which accompanied the Treaty, detailed the powers and privileges afforded to the church as the sole state religion. These included compulsory religious instruction in primary and secondary schools, the official adoption by the totalitarian state of the church’s position on marriage and divorce, and the reformation of public policy and state legislation to harmonize with church teachings.¹⁶ Located at the end of the Concordat, Article forty-three provided for the immunity of Catholic Action groups from coercion or control by the fascist government on the condition that the groups refrain from all political activities.¹⁷ The inclusion of this seemingly insignificant article would become one of the most important parts of the entire Concordat in the coming years, allowing the Pope to openly oppose Mussolini at the height of Il Duce’s power.

The final part of the three-part accord was an agreement on financial compensation for the loss of the papal states during unification. Although this is the least discussed portion of the agreement, it is one of the most important, given the serious financial difficulties that faced the Holy See in the 1920s. For this reason, Pius negotiated relentlessly on the amount of compensation, pushing Mussolini to the limit on the matter.¹⁸ Whereas the Lateran Treaty and the

13. Article 3, Lateran Agreement, Treaty between the Kingdom of Italy and the Holy See, 11 February 1929.

14. Article 1, Lateran Agreement, Treaty between the Kingdom of Italy and the Holy See, 11 February 1929.

15. Coppa, *Controversial Concordats*, 96.

16. Claudia Carlen, *Papal Pronouncements. A Guide: 1740–1978*, 2 (Pierian Press, 1990), 99.

17. E.R. Tannenbaum, *Fascism in Italy: Society and Culture 1922–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), 190.

18. Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism*, 43.

Concordat took only four months to negotiate, the financial component of the agreement took nearly two years.¹⁹ Ultimately, the parties agreed on an immediate payment to the Vatican of 750,000,000 Italian lire and the issue of a bearer bond with a 5 percent yield and a coupon value of 1,000,000,000 Italian lire.²⁰ This large infusion of capital drastically improved the financial situation of the Vatican, which was so near bankruptcy in 1922 that it had to borrow \$100,000 to cover the funeral expenses of Pope Benedict XV (1914–1922).²¹ Without Pope Pius XI's insistence on the addition of this crucial component of the Lateran Treaty, it is quite possible that the Vatican would have gone bankrupt, significantly diminishing their historical role over the next decade.

Mussolini's Motivation

In return for the concessions Mussolini made in the negotiation of the treaty, he anticipated the full and considerable support of the Vatican. He was not disappointed; not long after the signing of the treaty, a plebiscite was held to replace the Acerbo electoral law, which had allowed the Fascist Party to ascend to power in 1924. The Vatican instructed Catholics to vote in support of Mussolini and the Fascist Party as “eloquent proof of the full support of Italian Catholics for the Government.”²² Upholding the unspoken agreement to support Mussolini was only a secondary motive for the Vatican's instruction to Catholics to vote for the fascists. In reality, their primary motive was to ensure the parliamentary ratification of the Lateran Treaty, guaranteed by Mussolini's retention of power. The appeal to Catholic voters issued on the eve of the election stated, “a vote ‘yes’ will signify a binding mandate to Parliament [controlled by Mussolini] to ratify the Pacts [treaty] and to approve the legislation necessary for the implementation of the Concordat.”²³

19. Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism*, 44.

20. The Financial Convention Annexed to the Lateran Treaty, 1929, Article 1.

21. Ronald J. Rychlak, *Hitler, the War, and the Pope* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2010), 37.

22. A.C.S., S.P.D., C.R. 88W/R, “Tachi-Venturi,” letter to Mussolini of 17 February 1929, in Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism*, 57.

23. Bollentino Ufficiale, 15 March 1929, “I Cattolici e le Elezioni,” in Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism*, 57.

Many fascists inside Italy and around the world viewed Mussolini's treaty with the Catholic Church as a betrayal.²⁴ Not long after securing his position as Italian dictator, Mussolini began making statements about the relationship between church and state that were contrary to the Lateran Treaty. In May 1924, only a few months after the signing of the Treaty, Mussolini said, "Within the state, the Church is not sovereign, nor is it even free . . . because it is subordinate . . . to the general law of the state. We have not resurrected the Temporal Power of the Popes, we have buried it."²⁵ Mussolini continued to test the strength of the treaty by resuming his mangiaprete rhetoric. Despite Mussolini's open violations of the treaty, Pius recognized that the accords and concordat offered him a legal basis to oppose the "totalitarian regime." In his December 1929 encyclical, Pius upheld the codified role of the church in Italian education, denouncing Mussolini's attempts to consolidate control of education as "unjust and unlawful."²⁶ Thus, despite Mussolini's outward violations of the treaty, Pius continued to use the treaty as a means of insulating himself and the papacy from Mussolini's reach.

Counterbalancing Mussolini

Notwithstanding his harsh rhetoric directed at the church and papacy, soon after signing the Treaty, Mussolini and his government sought the support of the church to further their expansionist objectives. In November 1929, the Italian government appealed to the Vatican to use its missions to spread fascist propaganda in Ethiopia. This request was met with the curt response, "it was not and never had been the policy of the Catholic Church to permit its missions to be used for nationalistic ends."²⁷ When the government repeated its request in 1930, it was again met with opposition—this time in the form of an even more resounding no! Pope Pius XI stated his and the church's position unequivocally:

24. Derek J. Holmes, *Papacy in the Modern World 1914–1978* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 58–59.

25. Nicolas Cheetham, *The Keeper of the Keys: A History of Popes from St. Peter to John Paul II* (London: Macdonald, 1986), 280.

26. Claudia Carlen, *The Papal Encyclicals 1903–1939* (Milwaukee: The Pierian Press, 1990), 359.

27. L'Italia, "Le Missioni Cattoliche." 23 November 1929.

“Nationalism has always been a calamity for the missions, indeed it would be no exaggeration to say that it is a curse.”²⁸

As early as 1929, protected by the Concordat from fascist intervention, Pope Pius XI encouraged the growth and participation of Italians in Catholic Action organizations as a counterbalance to fascism. With Mussolini’s growing resentment and rejection of the Catholic Church, Pius relied on Catholic Action groups to affirm, diffuse, and defend Catholic principles in the state and society.²⁹ In an attempt to limit the control of the Vatican through Catholic Action groups, and likely in an effort to punish the church for its refusal to back his expansionist aspirations in Africa, Mussolini embarked on a campaign to dismantle the organizations. Despite his best efforts, the political maneuvering of Pius kept the Catholic Actions groups alive. The signing of the Catholic Action Accords in September 1931 limited the power of the groups but solidified their existence as part of Italian society under the protection of the Pope. The Vatican left the accords, and was heralded throughout the Catholic world as the victor; one magazine charged that the “Man of Providence” had succumbed to the Pope.³⁰

Notwithstanding the limitations of the Catholic Action organizations imposed by the 1931 Accords, Pope Pius XI used the groups with maximum efficiency, conducting an ideological campaign against Fascism through publications and discussion groups that were protected from reprisal by the Pope himself, in order to condemn totalitarian ideology including the anti-Christian doctrines of the regime.³¹ The protection provided by the Pope through the Lateran Agreement allowed Catholic Action groups to grow organically, free from fascist penetration. These organizations spread throughout society, initially drawing the bulk of their memberships from the anti-fascist *Federazione Universitaria Cattolica Italiana* (Italian Catholic Federation of University Students), or FUCI. Pius described these early devotees as “the apple of his eye and the light of the entire Catholic family.”³² Protected from Mussolini and his

28. Discorsi, vol. II, “Ai Religiosi Missionari,” 7 December 1929, 214–15.

29. Coppa, *Controversial Concordats*, 111.

30. Marc Agostino, *Le pape Pie XI. et l'opinion: 1922–1939* (Roma: École française de Rome, 1991), 480.

31. Frank Rosengarten, *The Italian Anti-Fascist Press (1919–1945); From the Legal Opposition Press to the Underground Newspapers of World War II*. (Cleveland, OH: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1984), 58.

32. Coppa, *Controversial Concordats*, 118.

quest for ideological hegemony by Pope Pius XI, Catholicism was free to compete for the hearts and minds of Italians both old and young. It began slowly but then picked up momentum, until it was the second largest movement in Italian, second only to Fascism.

Emboldened Opposition

Though much of the Pope's opposition to Mussolini was veiled in diplomatic language or channeled through Catholic Action, his response to Mussolini's adoption of the Aryan Manifesto in July 1938 was different. Pius immediately branded Mussolini's anti-Semitic policy as true apostasy, calling for Catholic Action groups to combat the manifesto with full force. With each address or policy change that Mussolini issued to advocate racism, Pius responded with condemnation, coming as close as he possibly could to publicly denouncing Mussolini. When Mussolini forbade marriage between Aryans and non-Aryans, Pius condemned the policy as a breach of the Concordat. At the time of his death in February, Pope Pius XI was drafting an encyclical to be released to the Catholic world, condemning Mussolini and fascist abuses. When Mussolini learned of the Pope's passing he reportedly yelled, "Finally, that obstinate old man is dead."³³ These were not the words of a man who was mourning the loss of an ally or pawn. Rather, they were the words of an individual relieved to be rid of a cunning, powerful, and protected revival.

Looking Forward

Many historians have pointed to the signing of the Lateran Agreement in 1929 as the moment Mussolini solidified his influence over the Catholic Church and its leader, Pope Pius XI. In reality, the Lateran Agreement allowed the church to consolidate power, setting the tone for its political and social actions over the next two decades as well as demonstrating the diplomatic genius of the Pope. Max Ascoli, an Italian Jewish professor of political philosophy, effectively summarized the advantages the church derived from the agreement. He said,

33. Roger Aubert, *The Church is a Secularized Society: The Christian Centuries* (Paulist Press, 1978) 5:557.

“The Church keeps intact her moral prestige and the hierarchic framework, her legal rights are well guarded; the doors of the spiritual world are wide open.”³⁴ Long after his death, the people of Italy continued to reap the rewards of Pius’s foresight. After the fall of fascism, Catholic Action—the organization that the pope had gone head to head with Il Duce to preserve—stepped in as the most influential movement in Italy, playing a key role in the post-war reconstruction of Italy.³⁵

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34. Max Ascoli, “The Roman Church and Political Action,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 1935.

35. Coppa, *Controversial Concordats*, 119.