Pius XII, Italy, and the Outbreak of War

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Charles F. Delzell

The attitude of Pope Pius XI towards Hitler’s Germany and the persecution of Europe’s Jews has become the subject of heated public discussion since the appearance a few years ago of Rolf Hochhuth’s controversial drama, The Deputy. No doubt that play was a major consideration in causing the Vatican to publish an interesting collection of documents pertaining to Pius XI’s diplomacy at the outbreak of war in Europe.¹ This collection supplements information already available in Italian, German, American, British, and French sources. The documents from the Vatican archives also help to clarify the interesting relationship that existed between Church and State in Mussolini’s Italy during the first two years of Pius XI’s pontificate (1939–1958).

By and large, the Vatican got along well with Mussolini’s fascist regime. Frightened by the spectre of bolshevism in Italy, many leading Catholics welcomed the March on Rome. Pius XI, who was Pope from 1922 to 1939, quickly sacrificed the young but powerful Catholic Popular Party of Luigi Sturzo in order to promote harmonious relations with the new government. Mussolini’s skillful negotiation of the Lateran pacts in February 1929 marked the high point of friendly relations between the Pope and the man ‘whom Providence caused Us to meet’ (to use Pius XI’s phrase). In the mid-1930s most Italian Church leaders gave enthusiastic support to Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia and to his intervention

in behalf of Franco in the Spanish Civil War. In short, the climate of relations between Mussolini’s fascist dictatorship and the Vatican during the pontificate of Pius XI was generally serene.²

Nevertheless, there were moments when the barometer fell sharply and thunderstorms erupted—almost unavoidable when two such powerful institutions as an authoritarian Church and a would-be totalitarian dictatorship were competing for the allegiance of men’s minds and souls. Flare-ups occurred especially over the delimitation of functions of fascist and Catholic youth organizations; over the alleged political activities of the Church’s lay organization known as Catholic Action; and in 1938–39 over the anti-Semitic racist decrees that Mussolini, imitating Germany, introduced in Italy.

This latter problem especially disturbed the substantially cordial relations between the government and the Church, and caused a good many Italian Catholics to begin to lose faith in the wisdom of Mussolini’s regime—a faith that, in the words of one eminent liberal Catholic scholar, was ‘neither blind nor very deep but which was sincere’.³ Pius XI, who in 1937 had publicly condemned Hitler’s racial policies, also condemned Mussolini’s anti-Semitic campaign in Italy; by denying the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, anti-Semitism struck at the very roots of Christianity. ‘If there is anything worse than the various theories of racialism and nationalism, it is the spirit that dictates them’, he said on 21 July 1938. He infuriated Mussolini by taunting him about the adoption of policies in deliberate imitation of nazi Germany and in direct violation of the noblest traditions of the Roman Empire which he supposedly was anxious to restore. The Duce was even more irritated when on 3 September 1938, the Pope bluntly explained to Belgian pilgrims, ‘Spiritually we are Jews’.⁴ In November he clarified Catholic doctrine regarding mixed marriages, and in a note to the Italian government on the

² On the general course of relations between Church and State in fascist Italy, see especially Daniel A. Binchy, Church and State in Fascist Italy (London, 1941); Arturo Carlo Jemolo, Chiesa e Stato in Italia negli ultimi cento anni (Turin, 1955); abridged English translation, Church and State in Italy, 1850–1950 (Oxford, 1960); Luigi Salvatorelli and Giovanni Mira, Storia d’Italia nel periodo fascista (Turin, rev. ed., 1964).
⁴ Cited in Binchy, Church and State in Fascist Italy, pp. 615–17.

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13th he requested the latter not to question their appropriateness. But the Vatican preferred to give only minimum publicity to these protests, as the Pope was anxious that nothing be done to jeopardize the continuance of the Lateran accords. The government rejected the Pope's contentions, but in actual practice never went as far as Germany in enforcing the anti-Semitic decrees.

Tension continued to mount between Church and State in Italy in early 1939. We know from the diary of Mussolini's son-in-law and Foreign Minister, Ciano, that fascist circles were filled with a certain fearful expectancy over a speech that Pius XI was scheduled to deliver on 11 February 1939, the tenth anniversary of the Concordat. But the Holy Father died the day before. The Duce was anxious to obtain a copy of the undelivered speech, fearing that it might contain a hidden bombshell. But twenty years went by after Pius XI's death before the contents of that message were revealed by a later and quite different pontiff, John XXIII. It turned out that there was nothing explosive in Pius XI's text, though it did openly deplore the persecution of the Church in Germany, and contained some barbed references to Mussolini's regime; the late Pope was to have advised the Italian bishops to 'note well and not to forget that very often there are observers or informers (you can call them spies and you will be telling the truth) who, because of their own zeal, or for a task entrusted to them, listen to you in order to denounce you although, of course, they haven't understood the slightest thing you have said, and if need be, will have understood the opposite'.

The news of Pius XI's death 'rather upset' Ciano, but was

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5 A. Martini, Studi sulla Questione Romana e la Conciliazione (Rome, 1963), p. 218. By the Concordat of 1929 the State had agreed to recognize and register all marriages performed by the Church. The new laws prohibited the civil registration of marriages between Italian 'Aryans' and 'non-Aryans'. This challenged the rights of the Church with respect to marriage procedure. In spite of formal and informal representations by the Vatican, the decrees remained in effect.

6 See especially Renzo De Felice, Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo (Turin, 1961), p. 535 et seq.

7 According to Ciano, this was 'in order to avoid a repetition of the Filippelli incident'—i.e., a repetition of the kind of exposé that a high-ranking fascist official had made of Mussolini's part in the assassination of the socialist leader Matteotti, in June 1924. Galeazzo Ciano, The Ciano Diaries, 1939–1943, ed. Hugh Gibson (Garden City, 1945), p. 27.

8 Quoted in Jemolo, Chiesa e Stato in Italia dalla unificazione a Giovanni XXIII, p. 270.
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received with 'open indifference' by the Duce, we are told in Ciano's diary (p. 25). Mussolini did make a small gesture of respect by postponing a meeting of the Fascist Grand Council, but it was only after considerable pressure from both Ciano and Vatican officials that he announced he would attend the funeral. Meanwhile, Ciano went to the Holy See to pay the respects of the Italian government. He was received by Cardinal Pacelli, who had just become Camerlengo pending the election of a new Pope. According to Ciano, Pacelli spoke to him 'in a very agreeable and hopeful tone about relationships between State and Church' (p. 26).

On 2 March 1939, Cardinal Pacelli, sixty-three years of age, was elected Pope, as Pius xii. Of aristocratic birth and manner, the new pontiff was a Roman of the Romans. He was far more cautious and suave than either his outspoken predecessor or his still more forthright and impulsive successor, John xxiii. These traits had been strengthened by a long, distinguished career in the diplomatic service of the Church, most of it spent in Germany, for whose people he felt special affection. As Cardinal Secretary of State, Pacelli had been one of the late Pope's closest advisers, and his brother had helped to negotiate the Lateran pacts with Mussolini. Pacelli's cautious diplomatic behaviour and training were to prevent him from becoming a first-rate moral leader of the Church during a time of unprecedented violence and destruction.

The Duce professed to be satisfied with the election of Pius xii and, with characteristic arrogance, remarked to Ciano that he intended to send the new Pope some advice on how he could usefully govern the Church.9 A few days later the new pontiff granted the Italian Foreign Minister his first audience. Ciano relates that he found Papa Pacelli exactly as in the past - 'benevolent, courteous, and human'. Their half-hour meeting took place only three days after Hitler had torn up the Munich agreement and seized what was left of Czechoslovakia. According to Ciano, Pius xii 'did not conceal his concern over aggressive German policy and added that as an Italian he was uneasy'. Nevertheless, the Holy Father made it clear to Ciano that he intended to follow a more conciliatory policy towards Germany than had his predecessor - provided, of course, there was co-operation from Hitler's side, for otherwise it would be a 'vain soliloquy'. The Pope declared that

9 The Ciano Diaries, p. 36.
he was optimistic about a solution to problems involving Church and State in Italy, and most notably the status of Catholic Action. He assured Ciano that they could reach an agreement, and to facilitate this he would be willing to appoint a new papal nuncio. He promised that he would entrust direction of Catholic Action to a committee of diocesan archbishops. This terminated Catholic Action’s direct link with the papal curia and also ended the last vestige of lay direction. For an organization that had been conceived as giving concrete expression to the ‘apostolate of the laity’, these changes represented a move of near desperation on the part of the Vatican. After the meeting, Ciano wrote in his diary with evident pleasure: ‘I believe that we can get along well with this Pope’ (p. 47). The Italian Foreign Minister was also pleased by the appointment of Cardinal Maglione as the Vatican’s new Secretary of State, and Ciano soon had a long talk with this sympathetic official.

A couple of weeks later Italy embarked on a new war. On Good Friday (7 April 1939) Mussolini and Ciano dispatched an Italian invasion force to Albania. Two days later, Pius XII preached an Easter sermon on the broad theme of peace, but made only the most oblique reference to Italy’s act of aggression. Clearly he did not wish to attack the government outright; presumably he sought to refrain from taking sides on international questions in the hope of being able to mediate such disputes. The war in Albania soon came to an end with an Italian victory, and without further comment by Vatican officials.

10 Ibid., pp. 46–7.
11 In April 1939 Pius XII abolished the Central Committee of Catholic Action and vested ‘central control in a commission consisting of three members of the Italian hierarchy (the Cardinal Archbishops of Palermo and Genoa and the Patriarch of Venice), thereby terminating the direct link between the papal curia and the organization. Three months later the commission issued a new set of statutes under which the last vestiges of lay direction were abolished. At the diocesan level, control was vested in a Catholic Action office under the personal supervision of the bishop, and at the parish level there was a corresponding office directly responsible to the priest’. See Leicester C. Webb, Church and State in Italy, 1947–1957 (Melbourne, 1958), p. 50. Not until 1946 did Pius XII restore the principle of lay responsibility.
12 Not all fascist officials were pleased by the elevation of Pacelli and Maglione, however. See Camillo Cianfarra, The Vatican and the War (New York, 1944), pp. 47–9.
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In mid-April President Roosevelt sent a message to both Hitler and Mussolini, asking them to pledge for a period of ten years not to attack thirty-one designated countries. He notified the Vatican of his initiative and urged the Pope to join in a broad moral front against further German-Italian aggression. But, as one can now read in the Vatican documents, the Holy See preferred not to press Hitler at this time, because relations with the Third Reich had ‘somewhat improved’ (un peu relâchée) since the election of Pius XII. The most that Pius was willing to do was to have his Secretary of State speak to Italian officials about Roosevelt’s suggestion.14

The Pope had a different plan, however. In the latter part of April 1939 he launched through Mussolini his own project for peace. It was based essentially on appeasement, notwithstanding the fact that Hitler’s repudiation of the Munich pact a month before had made such a policy quite unrealistic. In retrospect it seems clear that the Pope’s assessment of the international situation at this juncture was deficient. Pius chose Italy as his agent for promoting a new ‘summit conference’ both because Italy was closest and because Mussolini, in the light of the Munich experience, seemed the most likely intermediary. The Vatican made use of Fr. Tacchi-Venturi, a Jesuit priest and historian, whenever it wished to convey messages directly and informally to Mussolini. This emissary was instructed to carry a letter to the Duce in which the Pope explained his desire to send a message to five powers (France, Germany, Britain, Italy, and Poland) ‘to exhort them to find, in a joint conference, a solution to those questions which raise the danger of a war’.15 What the Vatican proposed, in effect, was the convocation of a new Munich-type conference. The precedent hardly augured well for the outcome. Mussolini had played a pivotal role in bringing about the original Munich conference of the four western powers (Britain, France, Germany, and Italy) in September 1938 without the presence either of the victim, Czechoslovakia, or of Russia, which was then the ally of both France and Czechoslovakia. The Vatican proposals in 1939 would have included the new victim, Poland, but would again have left out the Soviet Union. In addition to discussing German-Polish

relations, the proposed conference would take up Franco-Italian differences.

After waiting a week for an appointment, Fr. Tacchi-Venturi was received by Mussolini on the evening of 1 May. The next night the Duce gave his general approval to the Pope’s proposal but expressed reservations about its timing, pointing out that it would be better to wait until after the Polish Foreign Minister, Beck, had made a speech announced for 5 May. Mussolini recognized that German aggression against Poland would produce a general war, and he also recognized (at least intermittently) that Italy was not yet ready for such a war; a new Munich-type conference might safeguard Italy from becoming embroiled too soon in a major conflict. Moreover, it might well bring Italy some territorial concessions from France.

The Pope did not wait for Beck’s speech, though he did urge the Polish leader to take a moderate line towards Germany. The Vatican Secretary of State telegraphed the conference proposal to the representatives of the Holy See located in the interested nations and asked them to make confidential soundings of these governments. Fearing a new Munich, the British minister to the Holy See, Sir d’Arcy Osborne, discreetly suggested that cold water be poured on the idea of a five-power conference, recommending instead bilateral talks between Germany and Poland. The French government advised the apostolic nuncio ‘to preserve intact the authority of the Pope for the day when every other way of saving the cause of peace might have failed’. Poland’s reaction was to express fear that a five-power conference would not protect her interests any better than Munich had looked after those of Czechoslovakia.

Hitler, on the other hand, professed to welcome the Vatican’s intercession—just as Mussolini had predicted. Hitler had the papal nuncio in Berlin, Mgr. Orsenigo, flown to Berchtesgaden for friendly talks. While accepting the principle of a Vatican-sponsored conference, Hitler, fearing that in a five-power conclave

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18 According to Orsenigo, Ribbentrop ‘immediately granted me an audience’ with Hitler, who at that moment was in Berchtesgaden, and sought ‘to facilitate it with all possible comfort’. ‘A special airplane was put at my disposal. . . . It completed the trip from Berlin to Salzburg in two hours and a half. . . . At the end of our conversation, the Chancellor even offered me a cup of tea. . . . After
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Germany would find herself in a minority, suggested to the Holy See an alternative procedure resting on bilateral talks between Berlin and Warsaw, from which Poland's allies would be excluded. Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop made this point quite clear to Ciano when he saw him in Milan on 7 May. When Ciano recognized that he could not impose Italy's preference for a five-power conference on Germany, the Axis leaders reached agreement that the Pope's proposal was 'premature'.

In view of these developments, Pius XII decided on 10 May to give up the idea of issuing formal invitations for a Vatican-sponsored five-power conference; he spent the next two months offering his good offices for the initiation of bilateral talks between Germany and Poland as well as between France and Italy. Repeatedly the Vatican put pressure on the French and British not to go to war in behalf of Poland. Thus in a conference at the Vatican on 20 May Cardinal Maglione advised the French ambassador 'to consider the sacrifices that a war, even a victorious one, would cost France'. That country, he explained, 'should urge Poland to pursue a course of moderation' and persuade her to give in to Hitler. Thus the Vatican still believed in peace at all costs. Moreover, the Vatican Secretary of State advised France to seek friendly relations with Mussolini in order to re-establish the harmony that had prevailed before the Ethiopian war and the sanctions policy of the League of Nations. Mussolini really desired peace, the Vatican official went on, and Italy 'is the sole power who has more than negligible influence over Germany and can restrain her'. In France there were still numerous diplomats who welcomed this appeasement line, and André François-Poncet was transferred from the French embassy in Berlin to that in Rome in order to pursue this strategy.

Meanwhile, towards the end of May 1939, Italy and Germany consolidated their ties. The somewhat grandiloquently labelled Pact of Steel was signed, although the Italians did not even have a draft ready for discussion and used Ribbentrop's text, which had

listening to me with much deference, Hitler expressed his thanks to His Holiness, begging me to bring his sentiments to the attention of the Holy Father.'

Ibid., pp. 129–32.

19 Ibid., p. 138.


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been shrewdly prepared ahead of time. The pact declared that ‘if in spite of the hopes and desires of the contracting parties, it should happen that one of them finds itself engaged in military operations with one or more powers, the other contracting party will intervene immediately as an ally at her side and will back her up with all her military forces on land, on sea, and in the air’. Thus Italy bound herself to support whatever Germany did. Before the pact was finally signed in Berlin on 22 May, however, Mussolini did warn Hitler that Italy would not be ready for war until 1943. But Hitler had no intention of being bound by Mussolini’s timetable. The very next day, without bothering to inform the Duce, Hitler told his generals to prepare for war against Poland ‘at the earliest favourable moment’. There is no evidence in the published documents that the Vatican made any protest or comment about Mussolini’s pact with Hitler.

As the Polish problem rapidly moved to the centre of the diplomatic stage, however, Pius xiI on 30 May once again entrusted Fr. Tacchi-Venturi with a message to Mussolini, asking the Duce to use his ‘great influence’ on Hitler so that the Danzig issue might be handled calmly. The Pope also pointed out that the Vatican was urging the French ambassador to persuade his government to open friendly talks with Mussolini on questions at issue between Italy and France. The Jesuit priest had to wait until 6 June to see Mussolini, who, to the emissary’s surprise, listened in glacial silence to his message. Embarrassed, Tacchi-Venturi asked him: ‘Does Your Excellency believe that war is inevitable?’ ‘Most certainly’, snapped Mussolini. ‘Is this perhaps because Russia may make an alliance, as it is thought, with England and France?’ Mussolini replied: ‘That doesn’t matter at all; what Russia does is quite immaterial’. The Duce made it clear that he did not wish to pursue the subject. Tacchi-Venturi then discreetly commented that relations between fascist youth organizations and the Catholic Action society had improved recently, though in some cases the regime was not permitting joint membership. The Duce professed incredulity at this news. The rest of

22 On the Pact of Steel, see Mario Toscano, Le origini diplomatiche del patto di acciaio (Florence, 1956). Cf. The Ciano Diaries, p. 86.
their difficult conversation centred on Tacchi-Venturi’s efforts to obtain special treatment for certain Christianized Jews in Italy.\textsuperscript{23}

The next day, when the Pope received Tacchi-Venturi’s written report, he did not take too seriously Mussolini’s ill-humour. Vatican officials also saw a ray of hope in information received from an aged Italian hero of the Great War, Marshal Enrico Caviglia, who advised them that Italy could not go to war because she was not sufficiently armed for a long conflict. Only the French were ready for a long war; Mussolini knew this and, unless he completely lost his head, he would not move.\textsuperscript{24}

Nevertheless, a week later (13 June) the papal nuncio to Italy, Mgr. Borgongini-Duca, was sent to remind Ciano of the need for peace. On this occasion the Foreign Minister was amazingly sanguine. He assured the nuncio categorically that for the next six months there was no danger of war, because Germany had no intention of attacking Poland; in the interval there would be time to settle all the questions in such a way as to guarantee peace for years. Ciano went on to say that it was really Poland’s leaders who were the threat to peace, and advised the Vatican to exert pressure on them, for ‘Poland listens to the Pope’.\textsuperscript{25}

The Vatican promptly followed Ciano’s advice and telegraphed the nuncio in Warsaw on 16 June that ‘the Holy See knows from reliable sources that Germany has no intention of attacking Poland’. The nuncio was advised to renew the Pope’s counsels of moderation, and Poland’s Cardinal Primate Hlond was instructed ‘to recommend calmness to the Polish clergy, in order that they might persuade the faithful to pursue a peaceful course’. The Holy See informed the papal nuncio in Berlin of these instructions.\textsuperscript{26}

Contrary to Ciano’s assurances, the international situation was actually worsening. Yet Ciano again advised the Vatican on 30 June that ‘Germany will not budge without our consent, and neither Mussolini nor I want war’. Britain did not share this view. London asked the Vatican to make it quite clear to the Axis leaders that the Allies would go to Poland’s defence if Germany attacked. Britain did not want any repetition of the 1914 situation,

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Actes et documents du Saint Siège}, pp. 160–1, 171–2.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 170–1.
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 177.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 178, 193.

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when Germany had assumed that England would not really fight in behalf of Belgium. Cardinal Maglione thereupon summoned the Italian ambassador on 3 July and transmitted this warning, which was repeated on the 7th. The Vatican hoped that Italy would pass the British message on to Germany.\textsuperscript{27}

After that a month passed during which the Holy See undertook no other diplomatic steps of significance, while Mussolini sought to persuade the German ambassador, Hans von Mackensen, of the desirability of Germany’s improving relations with the Vatican. The Duce told him that this would also strengthen Axis ties with Spain; he did not advocate carrying these gestures too far. Recalling his own experiences with the Vatican, Mussolini observed that whenever ‘the interests of the State conflict with those of the Church, the State should go ahead and take care of its own business. The Pope . . . can go ahead and protest, if only “to save his own soul and maybe also mine’’.\textsuperscript{28}

So far during 1939 relations between Pius XII and Mussolini had been generally pleasant. But in mid-July the Vatican reacted coldly to news of an Italo-German agreement permitting German-speaking inhabitants of Italy’s Alto Adige to adopt German citizenship.\textsuperscript{29} And on 20 July a discordant note was sounded by Ciano who, acting on orders from his father-in-law, presented a demand to the papal nuncio that the Vatican newspaper, \textit{Osservatore Romano}, ‘cease its subtle propaganda against the Axis’. If not, ‘we shall prohibit its circulation in Italy, [for] it has become the official organ of the anti-Fascists’. On this occasion, the editors of the Vatican newspaper prudently restrained themselves and the crisis passed.\textsuperscript{30} (\textit{Osservatore Romano}, it is of some interest to note, was founded by the grandfather of Pope Pius XII.)

The news that Germany and Russia had on 23 August 1939 signed a Pact of Neutrality and Nonaggression – whereby Stalin gave Hitler the green light to attack Poland – precipitated a new flurry


\textsuperscript{28} \textit{The Ciano Diaries}, p. 98.

\textsuperscript{29} About the same time the Pope asked Mussolini to intercede with Hitler for the release of the former Chancellor of Austria, Kurt von Schuschnigg. See \textit{Documenti diplomatici italiani}, VIII Serie, XII, Docs. $500$, $626$.

of diplomatic moves. Pius XII made an anguished radio appeal to the world on the evening of 24 August. Speaking in Italian, he argued fervently that ‘nothing is lost by peace, but everything may be lost by war’.\(^{31}\) The next day the Vatican summoned the Italian ambassador to find out if there was anything more that could be done to save the peace. The ambassador replied that the only thing to do was to persuade Poland to give in at once. Consequently, the Pope personally dictated a message to the nuncio in Warsaw on 26 August: ‘In diplomatic circles it is thought that if Poland gives Germany some satisfaction as regards Danzig, it will be possible to reach an understanding’.\(^{32}\) Meanwhile, Mussolini informed Hitler on the 25th that Italy could not go to war unless she obtained vast material assistance from Germany. Ciano sent such a long list of requests to the Germans that he remarked in private, ‘It’s enough to kill a bull, if a bull could read’.\(^{33}\) Momentarily taken aback, Hitler permitted Italy to remain on the sidelines for a few months.

On 29 August Pius dispatched Fr. Tacchi-Venturi to ask Mussolini, in the name of the Pope, to intensify efforts to preserve peace, and to give assurances that Italy in any event would stay neutral. Mussolini seemed pleased with the mission thus entrusted to him, and agreed that war would mean the end of civilization. He declared that it would be ‘criminal’ to unleash a world conflict over Danzig, and he made it clear that if war should begin for that reason, Italy would not get into it but would look after her own affairs. He recommended the Pope to appeal to the Polish President to yield Danzig to Germany and to start direct talks with Hitler on the status of the Corridor and the ethnic minorities. A message on these lines was dispatched to Poland by the Vatican on the 30th.\(^{34}\)

Early in the afternoon of 31 August, Pius XII ordered his Secretary of State to summon the envoys of Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Britain, and Spain who were accredited to the Holy See. In addition, he invited the American ambassador accredited to Italy. They were requested to forward to their respective governments a message in which, ‘in the name of God’, the Pope begged


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the governments of Germany and Poland to do ‘everything possible to avoid any kind of incident and to abstain from taking any measure capable of aggravating the present tension’. He asked the governments of Italy, Britain, and France to support this request.\(^{35}\)

That same evening the papal nuncio to Italy went to see Ciano, whom he found very depressed. Ciano assured him that ‘naturally Italy supports these [papal] interventions with all its power’, and begged him to let His Holiness know that ever since he had met Hitler at Salzburg two weeks earlier and had learned that war was inevitable, he ‘had done nothing else except struggle to preserve peace’. The nuncio ended the conversation by saying, ‘Whatever happens in the future, I hope that Italy won’t move’. To this Ciano replied, ‘That is another question. Before Italy makes a move she will think about it a lot, very much, with complete calmness and attention.’\(^{36}\) Ciano thereupon set out to organize another last-minute conference à la Munich, but this time in San Remo.

Next day, 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, while Italy proclaimed her own ‘non-belligerence’. Italy’s desperate effort to convene a summit conference failed, as Hitler would not agree to withdraw any of his forces from Poland, as the British demanded. On 3 September, Britain and France announced that they were at war with Germany. On the 5th, Mussolini sent a message to the Pope, reporting his inability to prevent the outbreak of war. He promised that he would not overlook any favourable occasion to bring about the cessation of hostilities and a peace with justice.\(^{37}\)

Pius xii was particularly anxious to keep Italy neutral, and not only for the obvious humanitarian reasons and because he was Primate of Italy; so long as Italy remained at peace, she could render important service to the cause of mediation. Moreover, Vatican communications with the rest of the world could continue without fear of interruption. On 6 September, the Pope again dispatched Fr. Tacchi-Venturi to impress once more upon the Duce the great need to keep Italy out of the war, and to tell Musso-

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 270–1.


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Duce's peace efforts. Tacchi-Venturi could not see Mussolini that evening, but he did talk to Ciano, who asked him to reassure Pius that Italy's decision of 1 September regarding non-belligerence was equivalent to a declaration of neutrality, and that this would remain the Duce's firm intention until the conflict came to an end - which he thought might occur once the campaign in Poland was concluded. 'It is not humanly possible', Ciano continued, 'to foresee events that could force Italy, in the face of her present intention to remain neutral, to follow any other line of conduct.'

The improvement of relations between Italy and the Vatican that had been in progress ever since Pius XII's election reached its height during the autumn of 1939. This was due in part to the tacit understanding they had reached on Catholic Action and on the Jewish question in Italy, and in part to Mussolini's determination (in the face of contrary advice from his party secretaries) to avoid a blatantly anticlerical policy that would create internal dissension at a moment when national solidarity was needed more than ever. Furthermore, the new pontiff had steadfastly refrained from attacking the ideology of fascism directly. But the basic bond of understanding between the Pope and Mussolini was their joint fear of communism. The Soviet attack on Poland, combined with Italy's diplomatic moves in the Balkans and her frequent repetition of the danger presented by bolshevism, served to strengthen the links between the Vatican and the fascist regime. Thus the Vatican was pleased when several fascist newspapers, including Italo Balbo's Corriere Padano in Ferrara, launched an anti-com-

38 Ibid., pp. 296-7; The Ciano Diaries, p. 140.
39 The friendly tone of Vatican-Italian relations since Pius XII's election stood out in sharp contrast to the Vatican's attitude in September 1939 towards the other dictatorships—Germany and Russia, and particularly the latter. Thus, Osservatore Romano expressed only moderate regret over Germany's attack on Poland: 'Two peoples are here crossing swords, spilling blood and starting a war over matters which ought rather to have been settled peacefully'. But three weeks later, when Russia attacked Poland, the Vatican newspaper protested unequivocally against this act of aggression. Admittedly, the Pope's position was easier with respect to non-Catholic Russia than it was when Catholics were fighting on both sides, as was the case between Poland and Germany. After the Soviet attack on Poland, Pius dispatched his nuncio to Ciano to ask him to persevere for peace. Ciano gave the usual reassurances. See Actes et documents du Saint Siège, pp. 313-14; John S. Conway, 'The Silence of Pope Pius XII', The Review of Politics, January 1965, p. 115; Giovannetti, Il Vaticano e la guerra, p. 141.
munist press campaign in the autumn of 1939. Editorials in Osservatore Romano paralleled the fascist propaganda on this theme. This parallelism became more marked after the Soviet attack on Finland that winter.

On 1 November 1939, Mussolini suddenly reshuffled his ministers and formed what was popularly termed 'Ciano's cabinet'. One of the changes involved the transfer of the Minister of Popular Culture, Dino Alfieri, to the ambassadorship at the Holy See, where he replaced the career diplomat, Count Pignatti. Presumably Mussolini regarded Alfieri as a more adept interpreter of the fascist ideology. Pius XII, for his part, welcomed the new envoy on 7 December and expressed the hope that the tenth anniversary of the Lateran pacts would lead to still more cordial relations with Italy. The Pope told Alfieri that he hoped the scourge of war could be confined within its present limits, and commended the wisdom of Italy's rulers in keeping her out of the conflict and thus placing her in a better position to promote world peace.40

The most sensational diplomatic development between the Vatican and Italy during the winter of 1939 was an unprecedented exchange of visits by the Pope and the Italian royal family. On 21 December 1939, King Victor Emmanuel III and the Queen paid a visit to Pius XII in the Vatican. Mussolini was annoyed when only a brief news item in Osservatore Romano announced the impending visit. Though this was a standard editorial practice for this newspaper, Mussolini complained to Ciano: 'This is how the Vatican always acts. It's hard to make them understand. . . . I'm becoming more and more of a Ghibelline'. When the Pope received the King and Queen he was effusive in expressing his affection for Italy and his desire to see it 'nobly active' in efforts to restore peace among the nations. In his subsequent private conversation with the King, Pius strongly criticized Germany for its persecution of the Church.41

A week later Pius paid a return visit to the Quirinal Palace, which had been the residence of popes before the unification of Italy. (Not even after the signing of the Lateran treaties in 1929

41 Ibid., p. 181.
had any previous pontiff made such a visit to the Italian Head of State.) He openly confided to the King his desire to improve relations with Germany, but explained that this was rendered impossible by the increasingly uncompromising German attitude. Mussolini was not invited to be present at either the conference in the Vatican or the one in the Quirinal. The papal visit unquestionably enhanced the prestige of the House of Savoy vis-à-vis the fascist regime, and it revealed clearly to the Italian people the increasing importance that the Vatican attached to the monarchy in Italy’s peculiar system of ‘dyarchy’. According to Ciano, Mussolini underestimated the political repercussions of the Pope’s visit on Italians, and in his pique the Duce went to new lengths in calling himself ‘an unbeliever’.

Writing to the Fuehrer a week later, Mussolini sought to make out that the exchange of visits between the King and the Pope had no international significance; yet in the same message he recommended caution to Hitler and suggested the possibility of reconstituting a Polish state as a means of getting the Western powers to quit the war. But Hitler was in no mood to listen to the Duce’s advice.

The advent of 1940 saw the Vatican continue its pressure on Italy to remain neutral. On 24 January Ciano once more found himself reassuring the nuncio that insofar as it depended on him, Italy would not go to war. Ciano repeated this to Cardinal Maglione on 11 February, the anniversary of the Lateran pacts. In mid-February the Pope urged Marshal Caviglia to press the Duce to stay out of the war, for not everyone was counselling Mussolini in this direction. A few days later Ciano again promised the nuncio that he would work for peace, even though Germany would soon be launching an offensive and would be putting maximum pressure on Italy to enter the war. This Ribbentrop did when he suddenly arrived in Rome on 10 March to invite Mussolini to confer with Hitler. While in Rome, Ribbentrop was re-

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cieved by the Pope. Their rather strained conversation concerned chiefly the status of the Catholic Church in Germany.\textsuperscript{45}

The situation turned critical after Mussolini conferred with Hitler at the Brenner Pass on 18 March. We now know that on this occasion Mussolini told Hitler that Italy would indeed join Germany in the war but would have to decide the date herself.\textsuperscript{46} A few days later, when the papal nuncio expressed great concern to Ciano over these talks, Ciano conceded frankly that there had been a setback. In a burst of emotion, Ciano asked the nuncio to beg Pius xii to 'think of me often, pray for me and bless me, because I have great need of this. . . . May God help me!' Taking leave, the nuncio cautioned Ciano to be prudent and not endanger himself too much.\textsuperscript{47}

Soon after the Brenner meeting, Mussolini gave vent to an anticlerical outburst equal to those of his youth. In southern Italy, Mussolini told Ciano, 'the population almost forces the curate to take a concubine, since only in this way will their wives be left undisturbed'. And a few days later he told Ciano that Catholicism was to blame for 'having made Italy universal, hence preventing it from becoming national. When a country is universal it belongs to everybody but itself.'\textsuperscript{48}

More important were the attacks Mussolini now made on the pacifist-minded Vatican newspaper. The Duce asserted that its news reports were continually 'sabotaging' the Axis. He encouraged Roberto Farinacci's Il Regime Fascista to declare on 9 April that some of the articles in the Vatican journal might be attributed to 'some synagogue, if not right to the Press Office of the Quai d'Orsay. . . . By now it is only too clear that Osservatore Romano has passed into the service of the French and English.'\textsuperscript{49}

When Hitler's armies invaded Denmark and Norway on 10 April, Osservatore Romano condemned this extension of the war. Its circulation soared from a mere 20,000 to over 150,000. The fascist ambassador immediately complained to the Vatican: 'L'Osservatore Romano, an Italian newspaper that is widely read, has an attitude that differs ever more from that of the Italian press.

\textsuperscript{45} Actes et documents du Saint Siège, pp. 68–9.
\textsuperscript{48} The Ciano Diaries, pp. 226, 229.
\textsuperscript{49} Giovannetti, Il Vaticano e la guerra, p. 172.
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It must moderate itself, be less prolix in reporting war news, and more impartial.’ Cardinal Maglione replied sharply that ‘Osservatore Romano, which is printed in Italian but which is an organ of the Holy See, is not to be confused with Italian newspapers. If at present it differs increasingly from Italian newspapers, as the ambassador charges, this is not because it has moved away from the policy hitherto followed, but only because for some days the Italian newspapers have been filled with white-hot rhetoric.’ As to Mussolini’s complaints that the Vatican was promoting too many demonstrations that ‘have the character of extreme pacifism and contrast with the government’s policy’, Cardinal Maglione declared: ‘The Holy See has not given instructions to intensify in any way the alleged demonstrations for peace, nor is it aware that the bishops have given any such instructions.’ Furthermore, ‘there is no need to have recourse to presumed instructions in order to explain the invocations and prayers which are now being made more insistently in behalf of peace and tranquillity. The desire for peace is profound and widespread in Italy.’

Throughout the rest of April the fascist regime interfered repeatedly with the distribution of Osservatore Romano and also harassed members of Catholic Action. In the face of these provocations the Vatican on 24 April sent an oral communication to all the metropolitans in Italy, asking them to maintain an ‘attitude of dignified reserve’. The instructions said further that ‘if Italy should go to war, the bishops should maintain and advise their clergy to follow a policy that while duly fulfilling the obligations imposed by a proper patriotic sentiment does not depart from that heavenly spirit of serenity, gentleness, and charity which must distinguish the ministers of the Lord’.

Meanwhile, Mussolini’s under-secretary of the Interior, Buffarini-Guidi, launched harsh new attacks on the Church and its newspaper, while on 26 April other party officials, speaking in Mussolini’s presence and amidst applause from hierarchs in the Chamber of Fasces and Corporations, referred to the Vatican as ‘Italy’s chronic appendicitis’. Immediately the nuncio remonstrated to the Italian Foreign Minister. Though offering no apology for the speeches, Ciano promised to refer the complaints to

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51 Giovannetti, Il Vaticano e la guerra, p. 172.
the party officials concerned, and advised the nuncio to avoid polemics, because very few people were aware of what had been said. The nuncio, however, was not fully convinced of this, for the newspapers had carried an account.\footnote{Ibid., p. 161.}

While these squabbles were going on, the international situation worsened perceptibly. President Roosevelt sent a personal letter to Mussolini on 24 April, appealing for Italian neutrality and assistance in ending the war. Through Myron C. Taylor, his recently appointed personal representative to the Holy See, the President was able to persuade Pius XII to make a similar appeal to Mussolini. On 30 April Mussolini replied to the Pope, making it clear that he no longer intended to guarantee Italian neutrality. With unconcealed sarcasm he went on to say: 'The history of the Church, and you are teaching it to me, Blessed Father, has never accepted the formula of peace for the sake of peace, of peace "at any price", of "peace without justice", of a "peace" that in the given circumstances might irreparably compromise the fate of the Italian people both in the present and future.' Mussolini concluded his answer by blaming the western democracies for making unrealistic demands on the Axis. A day or two later Cardinal Maglione suggested to Mr Taylor that the Allies should relax their economic blockade as it affected Italy and offer concrete concessions to Mussolini in order to keep Italy neutral. The British decided to do this a little later, but to no avail.\footnote{Foreign Relations of the United States, 1940, vol. II, pp. 687–8; Actes et documents du Saint Siège, pp. 425–6, 432–6, 484–5.}

It was in May 1940 that one of the most interesting episodes involving the Pope and the Axis leaders occurred. A few days before the invasion of Belgium, Luxemburg, and the Netherlands, Pius XII learned of its imminence from certain high German army officers in the anti-nazi underground. On 3 May, the Holy Father forwarded this intelligence to the pontifical representatives of the three threatened countries, and broke the news to Italy's Belgian-born Princess of Piedmont in a private audience with her on 6 May. Much shaken, she dispatched a special courier to inform her brother, King Leopold III of the Belgians. Meanwhile, on 5 May, Pius left Vatican City and drove to the centre of Rome where, at the Church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva, he prayed
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for Italian neutrality, directing his prayers to Italy’s two patron saints, Francis of Assisi and Catherine of Siena.54

When the German armies blasted their way into the Low Countries on 10 May, Pius XII, took a forthright position. He promptly dispatched telegrams to the three sovereigns, expressing his sorrow that their lands had been invaded ‘against [their] will and right’. He assured them of his paternal affection and of his prayers to the Almighty that full freedom and independence would soon be theirs again. These telegrams, which resembled extremeunction to the dying, were published in Osservatore Romano on 12 May. Unquestionably they were the Pope’s most courageous protest during the war against nazi aggression; unhappily they were also his last vigorous protest against Hitler’s onslaughts. Understandably, the Allies wished that the Pope had gone further. Thus the French ambassador to the Vatican expressed the disappointment of Catholics in France, Belgium, Luxemburg, and Britain that the Holy Father had not seen fit to condemn Hitler’s ‘crime’.55

Mussolini, on the other hand, was furious at what Pius had done, and decided to take reprisals by preventing the further distribution of Osservatore Romano. ‘The papacy is a cancer which gnaws at our national life’, he said to Ciano. He was ready ‘to liquidate this problem once and for all. . . . The Pope need not think that he can seek an alliance with the monarchy, because I am ready to blow both of them to the skies at the same time.’56

On 13 May, the Italian ambassador to the Vatican, who had just been notified by Mussolini that he was to be transferred to the embassy in Berlin, was ordered to deliver the Duce’s complaint to Pius XII in person during the course of his leave-taking. In the face of Alfieri’s charges, the Holy Father stood his ground. He declared that he found the Duce’s anger incomprehensible, since the aggression in the Low Countries was Hitler’s deed, not Mussolini’s; even Germany had not protested against his telegrams to the three sovereigns. At one point, Pius raised his voice and told Alfieri, ‘Whatever may happen, We have absolutely

54 Ibid., p. 436. On the Vatican’s sources of information in Germany, see especially ibid., pp. 92–3, and the paper read by Professor H.C. Deutsch at the American Historical Association, December 1965: ‘Pius XII and the German Opposition in World War II’.


56 The Ciano Diaries, pp. 248–9.
nothing to be ashamed of, and We do not even fear deportation to a concentration camp!' Then he added, 'We were not afraid of the revolvers pointed at Us once before; We are even less so this second time.'

The situation remained tense for several days, as word of the Pope's reference to a concentration camp made the rounds among fascist officials. The new Italian ambassador to the Holy See, Bernardo Attolico, met the Substitute Secretary of State of the Vatican on the 18th and Mgr. Tardini on the 19th. Most important, the papal nuncio, Mgr. Borgongini-Duca, conferred for an hour on the 22nd with Buffarini-Guidi. (Ciano was in Albania.) The nuncio made it clear that 'at this moment the Lateran Treaty is being tested by fire'. Buffarini-Guidi appeared conciliatory, blaming the recent anticlerical manifestations on young firebrands in the Fascist Party. He indicated that within a fortnight Italy would be at war. For that reason, Italy could tolerate no Vatican newspaper reports that would be harmful to her; but if Osservatore Romano would restrict its news coverage of the war, then it would be permitted to circulate. The Vatican decided to capitulate. Henceforth, Osservatore Romano published only the most anodyne comments on the war, and circulation quickly dropped to its former low level. The Vatican felt that it had no other recourse, for in a showdown Mussolini could have silenced the paper completely, as well as cut off the Holy See from easy communication with the outside world. By yielding on this issue, the Vatican hoped to preserve freedom of diplomatic action and be able to intercede for peace whenever this was feasible.

In the middle of May the French government again tried to persuade the Holy See to condemn Germany more vigorously. The American ambassador in Paris, William C. Bullitt, recommended the Pope to excommunicate Mussolini if Italy entered the war, while others in France called also for the excommunication

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58 Actes et documents du Saint Siège, pp. 467–9; Giovannetti, Il Vaticano e la guerra, p. 173.

59 Cianfarra, The Vatican and the War, p. 228.
of Hitler. To all these demands the nuncio in Paris replied negatively; the ancient papal weapon of excommunication was now anachronistic, even ridiculous, and certainly ineffective.\textsuperscript{60} Late in May, the Pope considered making one further appeal to Italy to remain neutral, as he had just learned that France was ready to make important concessions to Mussolini in the Mediterranean. But the British were not willing to make concessions to Mussolini in advance; they would agree only to talk. They advised the Vatican that they had little hope that Mussolini would change his mind, particularly in view of his rejection of President Roosevelt’s latest peace effort of 26 May.\textsuperscript{61} The Vatican decided therefore to do nothing. Its efforts to keep Mussolini out of the war had come to an end.

On 10 June, Italy attacked France. \textit{Osservatore Romano} published the news of Italy’s declaration of war without comment. Some thirty Italian bishops, however, hastened to send the Duce an effusive message of patriotic devotion, and the fascist press gave much publicity to their liturgical flag-waving.\textsuperscript{62}

During and after the Second World War Pius \textsc{XII} took pride in being referred to as the ‘Pope of Peace’. He undoubtedly sought to preserve peace in 1939 and, failing that, at least to keep Italy neutral. But to do this he was prepared to renew and extend the appeasement policies that had characterized European diplomacy in the pre-Munich era. He had not learned the lesson that the western powers belatedly learned in March 1939, when Hitler repudiated the solemn Munich agreement made only six months before.

More recently Pius \textsc{XII} has come to be criticized as the ‘Pope of Silence’. From 10 May 1940 until the end of the holocaust, he

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Actes et documents du Saint Siège}, pp. 458–9, 463.


\textsuperscript{62} On 16 June 1940, fascist newspapers published the message. The Italian bishops prayed to the Almighty ‘that he might support the full success of the humane design of the genius of the Duce to emancipate the labour and spirit of the Italian people’, and they expressed their most ardent hopes ‘that the inevitable victory of our arms will crown brightly the invincible Italian banner over the Holy Sepulchre, reasserting the glory and the right of the House of Savoy, the restorer, under the fascist sign of the Littorio, of harmony among peoples civilized by Imperial and Christian Rome’. Quoted in Ernesto Rossi, \textit{Il manganello e l’aspersorio} (Florence, 1958), p. 447.
maintained public silence on the question of who was to blame for the war—much to the confusion of millions of Catholics and the irritation of additional millions of non-Catholics. In his behalf it can be argued that if he had criticized any single belligerent, he might have ruined whatever slim chance remained of his mediating the struggle. Moreover, he did not wish to do anything that might either have alienated from the Church those Catholics who were fighting against other Catholics under the banner of nationalism, or upset the concordats negotiated with Italy and Germany. When the Soviet Union was invaded in June 1941, the Pope felt that his position was even further complicated, for he was unwilling to make any public criticism of Hitler’s Germany unless he also criticized Stalin’s Russia; and as the latter was the ally of the western powers, he preferred to keep quiet. In line with his legalistic conception of strict neutrality, the Vatican gates opened in June 1940 to receive in asylum the diplomatic representatives of those states that were at war with Italy; and after the Allied liberation of Rome in 1944, the gates opened again to let out these Allied diplomats and to admit in their place the German representatives.63

Fearful of aerial bombardment of the spiritual and administrative centre of Roman Catholicism, Pius XII made great efforts after June 1940 to persuade the belligerents to recognize Rome as an open city, but with almost no success.64 After all, when Mussolini in August 1940 demanded and obtained from Hitler the ‘privilege’ of sending Italian bombers to join Germany’s Luftwaffe in raids on London, the British could hardly be expected to promise immunity to a city that was not just the centre of the Catholic Church but also Italy’s capital.

There can be no question but that Pius XII for many years displayed considerable sympathy for the Italian variety of fascism—in contrast to his uncompromising hostility to the atheistic Soviet regime and to his ill-concealed dismay over Hitler’s rule in Ger-

64 In addition to the general works cited earlier, see especially Mgr. Alberto Giovannetti, Roma città aperta (Milan, 1962); Giulio Castelli, Storia segreta di Roma città aperta (Rome, 1959); Giulio Castelli, Il Vaticano nei tentacoli del fascismo: La storia ignorata di una lotta sotterranea (Rome, 1946); Giulio Castelli, La Chiesa e il fascismo (Rome, 1951); R. Perrone Capano, La Resistenza in Roma (Naples, 1963); Gianfranco Bianchi, 25 luglio: Crollo di un regime (Milan, 1963).
many. In the course of the war, however, and especially after the turn of the military tide against the Axis, Pius was to become disenchanted with Mussolini’s dictatorship. We have no written evidence that the Vatican took a direct part in the conspiracies that overthrew Mussolini on 24–25 July 1943, but it is clear that for several months before that time, the Vatican showed its goodwill to the House of Savoy and encouraged the clandestine formation of a new Catholic political party, Christian Democracy, under the leadership of Alcide DeGasperi, in order to fill the rapidly developing political vacuum in Italy and to checkmate communism.65

During the twenty months of German military occupation of northern Italy between September 1943 and April 1945, it became the policy of the Church to try to attenuate the excesses of brutality on both sides. Many of the lower clergy, though almost none of the higher ones, openly sympathized with the Resistance. There is no doubt that hundreds of Catholic clergymen provided shelter in monasteries and other buildings to thousands of refugees of every political complexion and without regard to race. It is also true that most Romans during the German occupation looked to Pius XII as their Defensor civitatis. They were pleased that the Pope remained constantly in the city, even forgoing his usual summer vacations at Castel Gandolfo. Yet, in spite of these gestures, the historian today can hardly escape the conclusion that Pius almost certainly could have done more than he did for the people of Rome – as well as for people elsewhere. At the very least, he could have spoken out in October 1943 when the nazis rounded up Rome’s Jews almost in front of the gates of St Peter and sent them to concentration and death camps, and in March 1944 when they massacred 335 Italians in the Ardeatine Caves.66

It is to the credit of Pius XII in those admittedly difficult years, however, that he refused to consider extending diplomatic recognition to Mussolini’s puppet regime in northern Italy after Hitler

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rescued the decrepit dictator in the autumn of 1943. For in the new era that was emerging, it was becoming clear to everyone that Mussolini’s type of regime could no longer serve the needs of the Roman Catholic Church in Italy. The Vatican’s twenty-year flirtation with fascism would be relegated to the archives of papal history, and for the foreseeable future Christian Democracy would serve as the Church’s political arm in Italy.