

David I. Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini. The Secret History of Pius XI and the Rise of Fascism in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 549

by Paolo Zanini

In September 2006, at the start of Benedict XVI Pontificate, the opening of the Holy See's archives relative to Pius XI's Papacy (1922-1939) was completed. This decision contributed to shifting the focus of research, which until then had been concentrated on Pius XII and the Second World War, on to the previous period. Numerous studies investigated the work of Pope Ratti, the salient features of his rule and the *modus operandi* of the Vatican Congregations, and especially the Secretariat of State during his Papacy.¹ In many of them, the principal focus was, even more than Pius XI himself, his second Secretary of State, Eugenio Pacelli, who took over from Pietro Gasparri in 1930, and who would become the next Pope in 1939 with the name of Pius XII. However, there is no doubt that from a general standpoint the opening of the Vatican archives for this period has reawakened interest in Pope Ratti, helping to put the spotlight on many aspects of a Papacy that coincided almost exactly with the period between the world wars, the rise of totalitarianism and of Fascist regimes in Europe.

Given this premise, it should be no surprise that there are two aspects of the Pius XI Pontificate most analyzed with reference to the Italian situation: 1. the relations between Holy See and the Fascist regime, and the related

¹ Among the numerous titles, see: Emma Fattorini, *Pio XI, Hitler e Mussolini: la solitudine di un papa*, (Turin: Einaudi, 2007); Hubert Wolf, *Il papa e il diavolo: il Vaticano e il Terzo Reich*, (Rome: Donzelli, 2008); Giovanni Coco, "L'anno terribile del cardinal Pacelli," in *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* 47 (2009): 143-276; Lucia Ceci, *Il papa non deve parlare: Chiesa, fascismo e guerra d'Etiopia*, (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2010); *Pius XI: Keywords. International Conference Milan 2009*, eds. Alberto Guasco, Raffaella Perin (Berlin: LIT, 2010); *Pius XI and America. Proceedings of the Brown University Conference (Providence, October 2010)*, eds. David I. Kertzer, Charles R. Gallagher and Alberto Melloni (Berlin: LIT, 2012); *Diplomazia senza eserciti. Le relazioni internazionali della Chiesa di Pio XI*, ed. Emma Fattorini (Rome: Carocci, 2013); *Le gouvernement pontifical sous Pie XI: pratiques romaines et gestion de l'universel*, ed. Laura Pettinaroli, (Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 2013); Alberto Guasco, *Cattolici e fascisti. La Santa Sede e la politica italiana all'alba del regime (1919-1925)*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2013); Paolo Valvo, *Pio XI e la Cristiada: fede, guerra e diplomazia in Messico (1926-1929)*, (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2016); *Pie XI, un pape contre le nazisme? L'encyclique Mit brennender Sorge (14 mars 1937). Actes du colloque international de Brest, 4-6 juin 2015*, eds. Fabrice Bouthillon and Marie Levant (Brest: Dialogues, 2016); *Pio XI nella crisi europea. Atti del Colloquio di Villa Vigoni, 4-6 maggio 2015*, ed. Raffaella Perin (Venice: Ca' Foscari Digital Publishing, 2016); Lucia Ceci, *The Vatican and Mussolini's Italy*, (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2017).

issue of the Lateran Pacts of 1929 and the new status of the Catholic Church in Italy; 2. the reactions of the Vatican to the Italian “racial laws” of 1938 and, more generally, to the rise of racial anti-Semitism that spread through many European countries in the second half of the Thirties. Obviously, these are issues of great historical importance that have been investigated many times before 2006, but which have recently gained a new centrality thanks to the availability of Vatican documents.

These are the two main themes brought to light by David I. Kertzer in his book *The Pope and Mussolini. The Secret History of Pius XI and the Rise of Fascism in Europe*, first published in 2014 and later translated into Italian under the title *Il patto col diavolo. Le relazioni segrete fra il Vaticano e l'Italia fascista*. For at least two reasons, this approach does not come as a surprise in what consists of the first synthesis of the ecclesiastical policy adopted by the Fascist government – and of the “fascist” policy developed by the Holy See – published by an American scholar who takes into account the newly available Vatican documents. The first concerns the direction of Kertzer’s research. He is a careful scholar of Italian society and politics who had already examined the question of relations between the Catholic Church and the Jews in the contemporary age, underlining the responsibility of the Church in the development of modern anti-Semitism.² The second regards the centrality that totalitarianism, anti-Semitism and, lastly, the *Shoah* have assumed and continue to have in the contemporary historical debate.

Therefore, *The Pope and Mussolini* can be seen as a part of a consolidated historiography which is continuing to develop, as can be seen from the extensive bibliography referenced by the author. Much use is made of press sources and, mostly, of archival documents, which Kertzer cites, quotes and paraphrases throughout the text, as well as reconstructing dialogues. Extensive use is made of documents from the Vatican Secret Archive (especially from the Archive of the Nunciature in Italy), the Archive of the Secretariat of State (which contains the materials from the Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs), the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and lastly, the Roman Jesuit Archives, which contain the private papers of Pietro Tacchi Venturi, one of the major figures in the book, being the informal intermediary between Pius XI and Mussolini. Diplomatic material from the French and Italian Foreign Affairs

² On this issue see David I. Kertzer, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*, (London: Basingstoke, 1997); *Pope against the Jews. The Vatican’s Role in the rise of Modern Anti-Semitism*, (New York: Knopf, 2001).

Ministries' archives also constitutes a key reference, together with the rich American diplomatic correspondence. However, the author's use of documents kept in the Central Archives of the State in Rome is even more interesting, and in particular the plentiful material from the Fascist political Police - and their trusted sources of information - which enabled the fascist command to gather reserved information from the Apostolic Palaces.

Extensive use of the latter source is one of the most innovative elements of Kertzer's work. It enables us to fully understand the extent of the control exercised by the Fascist regime and by Mussolini himself in their dealings with the Holy See, as well as a picture of the extreme susceptibility of the Holy See to outside influence and the real or perceived vulnerability to blackmail of many of the most influential prelates. The Italian documents, especially the reserved ones, help to reconstruct in detail a large number of minute episodes in the history of the relations between various protagonists of Vatican politics. Their central role in the overall construction of the book does, however, expose some passages in the reconstruction to the risk of assuming the biased standpoint of Police observers or spies: people who, by their very nature, are likely to pay more attention to rumor, gossip or scabrous details rather than to articulate a complex analysis of the situation or of the relations between cultural and political forces inside the Vatican.

If the wide range of sources used by Kertzer in his book may seem complex and far-reaching, the structure of the text is equally significant, favoring a biographical and episodic approach, even if everything is kept in strict chronological order. The result is a book that carefully describes the role and influence exerted by each person involved in determining Fascist Italian and Holy See policies. It depicts a rich spectrum of protagonists and players, with the main roles being held by Pius XI and Mussolini, both of whom came to power in 1922 and who, despite the many differences, seem to the author to have some character features in common. In addition to these two main protagonists, there are many other people to whom the book devotes some pages and whose stories are told: high prelates in the Vatican State Secretariat and the Roman Curia, but also lower-level players from Vatican or Fascist diplomatic ranks, such as Cesare Maria De Vecchi, long-serving Italian ambassador to the Holy See, and Francesco Borgongini Duca, the first Apostolic Nuncio to the Kingdom of Italy following the Lateran Pacts.

Notwithstanding this rather fragmentary approach, based on the description of various episodes and key events and the influence thereon of diverse characters, the underlying thesis emerges with great clarity. In Kertzer's analysis, Fascism and the Catholic Church, despite the deep theoretical and doctrinal differences, seem destined to come together because they have common enemies. First and foremost liberal democracy and any concept of lay liberalism in politics, but also Bolshevism, Socialism, the Freemasons and, equally important, Protestant proselytizing and the so-called "international Jewry." Similarly, common ground also lay in their favor for a hierarchical society, in established order and in a government that was openly reactionary and anti-democratic. This ideological common ground, despite all the cultural differences that the author certainly has no intention of overlooking, led Fascism and the Church or, rather, Pius XI and Mussolini, to follow a common path of mutual recognition from 1922 onwards, which bought long-term benefits to both. The nascent regime did, in fact, obtain the sacrifice of the Italian People's Party and of its leader don Luigi Sturzo himself, forced into a twenty-year long exile, whilst the Church would in just a few years reconquer much of the ground it had lost, in terms of public profile, after fifty years of liberalism. As has been noted, the highest point of this process of rapprochement consisted in the February 1929 Lateran Accords, which gave life to the Vatican State and favored Mussolini's victory in the subsequent June plebiscite, establishing the Regime definitively and signing the start of the "years of consensus."³ These accords, whose principal architects in the Vatican were the old Cardinal Pietro Gasparri and the Jesuit Tacchi Venturi, the unofficial ambassador of the Pope to Mussolini, are perceived by Kertzer as a triumph for Fascism. This they certainly were, at least in the short term and from the standpoint of consensus and image. However, from an overall standpoint, it is true to say that the Lateran Pacts allowed for the return of the Catholic Church to a public role in Italian affairs. The new centrality of the Catholic Church in the Italian public life contributed to reduce the absolute independence and sovereignty of the State: a principle which, although being part of the liberal political and theoretical doctrine, was also held high by many Fascists, in particular those belonging to the most radical circles.

³ The definition of the "years of consensus," referred to the period 1929-1936, entered in the historiographical debate from the publication of the fourth volume of the monumental biography of Mussolini written by Renzo De Felice in 1974: *Mussolini il duce*, I, *Gli anni del consenso* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974).

It was just this necessity of Mussolini to prove that he was not capitulating to the Holy See that brought about the period of disputes which followed the signing of the Pacts and which ebbed and flowed in degrees of tension until the end of 1931. Only then, after bending the resistance of Pius XI on the crucial questions of youth education and the independence of Catholic Action groups, did Mussolini agree to many Vatican requests, starting with the issue of Protestant proselytizing. This topic has been the focus of some specific studies,⁴ but often tends to get pushed into the background in the more general reconstructions of Fascist-Church relations. The author rightly rectifies this attitude, analyzing Catholic opposition towards Protestant proselytism in Italy as it emerges in the only meeting between Mussolini and Pius XI, in 1932, when the Pope complained many times about the danger to Italy of evangelical Protestantism. Opposition to any non-Catholic presence in Italy was a priority of Pius XI and the Vatican high officials. After all, from the Catholic prospective religious freedom and, even worse, the possibility of unfettered religious propaganda, was one of the most poisonous outcomes of the deprecated liberal regime that Fascism had dismantled. From this standpoint, the new political climate was an unrepeatable opportunity to reaffirm the identification of Italianness with Catholicism and to repair the effects of religious indifference and laicism of the liberal governments.

⁴ On this aspect see, Pietro Scoppola, "Il fascismo e le minoranze evangeliche," in *Il fascismo e le autonomie locali*, ed. Sandro Fontana (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1973), 331-69; R. Moro, "L'opposizione cattolica al Metodismo tra anni Venti ed anni Trenta," in *Il Metodismo italiano*, ed. F. Chiarini (Turin: Claudiana, 1997), 131-80; Renato Moro, "Pregiudizio religioso e ideologia: antebraismo e antiprotestantesimo nel cattolicesimo italiano fra le due guerre," in *Le Carte* 3 (1998): 17-66; Renato Moro, "Antiprotestantesimo cattolico alla settimana sociale del 1928," in *Democrazia e cultura religiosa. Studi in onore di Pietro Scoppola*, eds. Camillo Brezzi, Carlo Felice Casula, Agostino Giovagnoli, Andrea Riccardi (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), 231-70; Renato Moro, "Cattolicesimo e italianità. Antiprotestantesimo e antisemitismo nell'Italia cattolica," in *La Chiesa e l'Italia. Per una storia dei loro rapporti negli ultimi due secoli*, Antonio Acerbi ed. (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2003), 307-39; Renato Moro, "La Germania di Hitler come eresia protestante," in *Le due società. Scritti in onore di Francesco Traniello*, eds. Bartolo Gariglio, Marta Margotti, Pier Giorgio Zunino (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009), 303-21; Maria Antonia Paiano, "Contro l'invadente eresia protestante: l'Opera della Preservazione della Fede in Roma (1899-1930)," in *Chiesa cattolica e minoranze in Italia nella prima metà del Novecento. Il caso veneto a confronto*, ed. Raffaella Perin (Rome: Viella, 2011), 27-103; Raffaella Perin, "La Chiesa veneta e le minoranze religiose (1918-1939)," *ivi*, 133-223; Raffaella Perin, "Santa Sede e minoranze evangeliche in Italia durante il fascismo," in *Storia e problemi contemporanei* 62 (2013): 79-98; Paolo Zanini, "Il culmine della collaborazione antiprotestante tra Stato fascista e Chiesa cattolica: genesi e applicazione della circolare Buffarini Guidi," in *Società e Storia* 155 (2017): 139-65.

If the fear of Protestant proselytism was rooted in the determined campaigns of evangelization carried out in Italy by the Evangelical Churches starting from the Risorgimento and Italian unification, the hostility of the Catholic hierarchy to “international Jewry” and the pretext of identification of Judaism with Bolshevism seem the product of ideology alone: the result of a long cultural process that even cultivated human beings like Pius XI were unable to detach themselves from. Of course, the Pope distinguished between Italian Jewry, which he understood and respected, and the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, whom he regarded as closely tied to Communism: nevertheless, there is no doubt that in the only meeting he had with Mussolini he directed the dictator's attention to both questions, Protestant proselytism and Jewish influence, whereas in the subsequent years, the nuncio Borgongini Duca made various overtures to the Italian government with a view to limiting religious freedom for non-Catholic Christians in Italy.

In the first half of the book Kertzer mainly analyses the efforts of the Catholic Church under Pius XI to re-Catholicize Italy, starting with the public sphere and a direct and preferential relationship with the Fascist regime. A relationship that worked also through the formal and open adherence of the Mussolini family to the Catholic Church, a point the author makes on various occasions. The second half of the book looks at the development of relations between the Holy See and Fascism throughout the Thirties, when international questions became more important than domestic ones. This was a time when the “solitude” of Pius XI grew as he worried about the rise of National-socialism in Germany, about the Italian war of conquest in Ethiopia and, lastly, about the dispute with the Fascist regime in 1938 over the anti-Semitic race laws. A Pope who was, however, conditioned by an entourage he had largely put together himself. This entourage was irresolute and inclined to conform or even willingly comply with the Fascist position, either by calculation or conviction. Such was the case with leading prelates at the Vatican like Monsignor Pizzardo, the already-noted nuncio Borgongini Duca, and the Secretary of State himself Eugenio Pacelli, a shrewd and able diplomat who was, however, ever-ready to compromise rather than face a challenge. Not to mention other figures who could be blackmailed such as the previously mentioned father Tacchi Venturi or Monsignor Camillo Caccia Dominioni, whose embarrassing habits were well-known to the Fascist police.

The impression is that Pius XI, without the old guard of diplomats such as Gasparri and Bonaventura Cerretti, found himself surrounded by devoted

but inadequate people: the result was he had to face one of the most dramatic periods in modern history from a particularly difficult position. His authoritarian character and autocratic style of leadership made his position weaker instead of stronger and his isolation grew. This became especially evident in the second half of the 1930s, when the Pope's opposition to the growing anti-Semitism of the Nazis, and not only to racism as a general principle, was not backed up by the Vatican Curia which had been developing preferential relations with authoritarian regimes for the past fifteen years. Due to this established attitude, the Vatican Curia was also incapable of understanding the paradigm shift brought about by Nazism in developing a new kind of anti-Semitism, different in many aspects from the anti-Jewish prejudice of the Catholic tradition. In this situation, the Pope's decision to issue an encyclical explicitly condemning the Nazi version of racial anti-Semitism vanished. Such a decision was, indeed, obstructed by the resistance in the Church's high offices and from the Jesuits, and by the declining health and uncertainty of Pius XI himself.⁵

Written in a very lively style and full of engaging descriptive passages, *The Pope & Mussolini* belongs to the tradition of Anglo-American history books, particularly attentive to biographical and psychological detail. Whilst being a fairly hefty tome, containing an extensive bibliography and copious notes, it is nonetheless a pleasure to read, often appearing halfway between an erudite historical reconstruction and a fast-paced spy story. This engaging rhythm makes it accessible to a wide range of readers and matches the need of scientific rigor with that of narrative fluidity.

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⁵ On the "hidden" encyclical see, Georges Passelecq and Bernard Suchecky, *L'encyclique cachée de Pie XI: une occasion manquée de l'Église face à l'antisémitisme*, (Paris: La découverte, 1995); Giovanni Miccoli, "L'enciclica mancata di Pio XI sul razzismo e l'antisemitismo," in *Passato e Presente* 15 (1997): 35-54.