

David J. Kertzer, *Un Papa in guerra. La storia segreta di Mussolini, Hitler e Pio XII* (Milano: Garzanti, 2022), pp. 720.

by *Liliana Picciotto*

Kertzer's volume offers what the title honestly proclaims: *A Pope at War. The secret history of Mussolini, Hitler and Pius XII*. This is the chronicle, rich in documentation, of papal politics, from the years of the election to the papal throne of Pius XII in March 1939 to the end of the Second World War. The events discussed by Kertzer are those on stage and also those in the background, on the basis of a long research that has involved not only the Vatican archives, but also the archives of the Foreign Ministries of various States involved in the Second World War: Italy, Germany, France, United States and Great Britain.

In addition to describing the various official diplomatic positions, the book abundantly describes secret meetings, important and less important talks, rumors, opinions and moods circulating in the corridors of power, in this way revealing intrigues, antipathies and double-crossing between various characters, even including the private chats between Mussolini and his beloved Claretta Petacci. This over-abundance of documents on the one hand reveals interesting internal mechanisms of the international diplomacy of the time, on the other risks confusing the reader and making him lose the thread of some themes, especially since everything is narrated in a rigidly chronological order and not according to the different topics.

Despite these difficulties, I will try here to point out some passages of this important, even though not definitive, book. We must first of all keep in mind that very little time has passed between the opening, brought forward by a few years at Pope Francis's behest, of the four Vatican archives that can now be investigated and their closure due to the pandemic. The underlying thesis, already known but amply verified here, is that Pope Pacelli, finding himself at the time of his election, in March 1939, on the eve of the most frightening conflict of the modern age, unleashed by a state ready to do anything to win and expand his own ideology, did nothing to counter it even in the face of the blatant atrocities it perpetrated, and on which Pacelli always had precise information.

The best way, according to Pope Pius XII as soon as he ascended the papal throne, to coexist with Nazi Germany, in the hope that it would eventually repent, was to flatter Hitler, to try not to irritate him and to seek his favor to obtain that Catholic schools and seminaries were not closed in Germany, that no books were published that attacked the Church, that the cut of public funds in favor of the Church in Austria was reviewed. He was also concerned that, after the German annexation of Austria and part of Czechoslovakia, forty million Catholics now lived in the Reich and, consequently, he did not want to do anything that would jeopardize their situation. Another thought worried him: the fear that denouncing the Nazis would alienate, within the territories of the Reich, loyal citizens who were both Catholics and Nazis, thereby risking causing a schism.

Hitler had sensed the change of perspective towards Nazi Germany taking place in the Vatican. In previous years, being Pope Achille Ratti-Pius XI, he had received from him clear disapproval of the Nazi ideology in its form of “new pagan religion” and even ostracism towards its racist policy, with various initiatives, even striking ones, which I will not be repeating here. Now Hitler was willing to open a dialogue with the new Pope even outside the official diplomatic channels, using as an intermediary the pro-Nazi German prince Philip of Hesse, husband of the unfortunate (she was later arrested and deported) Princess Mafalda of Savoy, daughter of King Victor Emmanuel. The secret meetings between Philip of Hesse, very close to Hitler, and the Pope are one of the new pieces of data discussed in Kertzer’s book.

A first meeting took place on 19 May 1939 and started off a relaxing phase in relations between Nazism and the Vatican. Another took place on August 26, 1939, in Castel Gandolfo, in which the prince of Hesse reported to the Pope that Hitler wished to confirm his most fervent desire to restore peace with the Church. He believed that there were two major issues that needed to be resolved if an agreement were to be reached: the “racial question,” and what the Führer regarded as clerical interference in Germany’s internal politics. Hitler thought that the first of these obstacles, the “racial question,” could possibly be “evaded,” Kertzer says, by continuing the new Pope’s policy of not speaking out on the matter. What was therefore necessary to conclude an agreement on was the role of the German Catholic clergy.

Despite the fact that meetings between the Prince of Hesse and the Pope lasted until March 1941, nothing came of the religious peace between the Vatican and the Reich, given the war in progress and Hitler's lack of aspiration to submit to any request, but these talks are the premonitory sign of the Pope's stubborn attitude of non-pronouncement on any subsequent question presented to his consideration.

In fact, the Pope remained silent for many years, out of convenience and out of fear, following the idea that it was better never to pronounce himself and in the conviction that Europe would be subjugated by Nazism everywhere in the near future. The silence covered many events: the murder of the Jews of Europe, the persecution of the clergy in Poland after the attack of September 1941, the harassment of the Catholic Church in Germany, the massacre of the Fosse Ardeatine, the roundup of the Jews of Rome, the treacherous invasion of territories, the unchallenged use of absolute violence. All missed opportunities to affirm the moral strength of the Church, letting instead diplomatic considerations linked to the Vatican's state of neutrality prevail. Conversely, let us not forget that the moral influence of the Church was, at the material time and throughout the world, incomparably superior to today's and the Pope's words were listened to with devotion and respect everywhere. The Pope's silence, supported if not often induced by his advisers, the Secretary of State Cardinal Luigi Maglione, the two Deputy Secretaries of State Domenico Tardini and Giovanni Battista Montini, perplexed not only the diplomats of the nations hostile to Nazi Germany and stationed in the Vatican, such as Francis d'Arcy Osborne representative of Great Britain; Myron Taylor personal representative of US President Roosevelt and his successor, Harold Tittmann; François Charles Roux and then Vladimir d'Ormesson, until even France was overwhelmed by German armies; but even German military themselves.

In two years, Nazi Germany captured much of Western Europe and pushed back British forces in North Africa, while Japan, the third Axis partner together with Italy, captured a large territory in Asia and Oceania. The Pope, like everyone by now, was convinced that the future of the world was Nazified. As we know, Mussolini had thrown himself on the side of the conquerors and had not hesitated to throw Italy into a war for which the country was not prepared. Interesting and new in the book is the close examination of Mussolini's attitude towards the Pope

and the influence he systematically tried to exert over him by making him accept his alliance with Hitler and trying to induce him to make pro-German statements. The Church and Mussolini needed each other to establish popular consensus in Italy and the Pope tried not to displease a person he basically trusted. Mussolini guaranteed him the respect due to the national religion and this was no small thing for a Pope attacked from various sides. Furthermore, Kertzer reminds us, we are talking about an Italian Pope (as was the tradition) and a predominantly Italian clergy, educated in the fascist mentality, convinced that the best protection for the Church was precisely its close bond with Mussolini and the fascist government. On the occasion of Italy's entry into the war with the attack on France, *L'Osservatore Romano*, urged to be cautious by Monsignor Montini himself, made no pronouncement, but the Catholic press went wild in favor of Mussolini's declaration of war shouted by the Duce himself from his balcony in Piazza Venezia on 10 June 1940. *L'Avvenire d'Italia*, the country's main Catholic newspaper, carried the headline "Winning!" and others followed. It emerges from Kertzer's study that the Pope's main concern was to save the institutional structure of the Catholic Church and, for this, he considered that Mussolini was a good guarantor. The result was that the clergy supported the Axis war by urging good Catholics to side with Hitler despite their embarrassment towards the Nazi regime. It was a kind of vicious circle: the clergy supported fascism which, in turn, held on to the alliance with Hitler and, consequently, the clergy themselves never publicly criticized Nazism. Pius XII's interest in maintaining friendly relations with Mussolini was also motivated by his assessment that he was a useful intercessor for the Vatican with the Führer.

The surprise German attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 aroused a certain enthusiasm in the Catholic press which fueled the idea of the Axis cause as a Christian crusade against Bolshevism. However, also in this case, the Pope personally did not allow himself to be persuaded to make a declaration condemning communism, although he was under pressure in this sense especially from the fascist government. In this, it must be admitted, he maintained a behavior consistent with his principles of non-intervention, being continually solicited by the parties involved to condemn something or approve something else. His moral pronouncements, throughout the war period, would concern only the opposition to the Allied bombings on Italian cities—which intensified in the

second half of October 1942, with the aim of weakening fascist Italy and inducing the population to rebel against the regime.

On September 1942, shortly before returning to the United States, Taylor visited the Pope and handed his Secretary of State a long memorandum which contained reports of the incessant massacre of Polish Jews, outlining a picture of appalling violence. The Pope, according to the recently unearthed documents found by the author, read it immediately. In the meantime, precisely in that month, news of horrendous massacres and of the policy of extermination of the Jewish population reached the Vatican from various parts. The Holy See took nineteen days to respond to the American memorandum, through Cardinal Maglione: the declaration, unsigned, acknowledged that stories of “serious measures taken against non-Arians had also reached the Holy See from other sources, but that so far it was not possible to verify their accuracy” (p. 289). From a *memorandum* from Monsignor Dell’Acqua of the Vatican Secretariat of State dated the previous 2 October, Kertzer deduces that the Pope accepted the advice not to give confirmation to the Allies of the Nazi genocide of the Jews of Europe, risking that the Vatican would be called into question. “In fact,” said Dell’Acqua, “better not to use the word ‘Jews’ at all” (p. 290).

Two months later, information about the ongoing massacres spread with even more certainty, especially from the Polish government in exile in London: “December 10: The Polish government addresses a new circular to all governments concerning the massacre of Jews by the Germans. In Poland, one million Jews out of three have already been exterminated” (p. 302). It was just one of several memorandums that reached Western chancelleries and reflected the fact that 1942 was precisely the year in which the extermination policy flared up most violently from eastern to western Europe. On 18 December, Osborne, the English appointee, had a conversation on this subject with Tardini and the Polish representative did the same, and asked the Pope to “firmly and clearly condemn these and other German crimes the extent of which is unprecedented in history” (p. 303).

Everyone knew that the Pope would, with Christmas just around the corner, make a public speech and that is why pressures multiplied precisely in that December of 1942. As Kertzer points out, on the twenty-fourth page of the Pope’s text there were words that the defenders of Pius XII would later quote in an attempt to

present the speech as a blatant denunciation of the massacre of the Jews of Europe. Even if the Pope never mentioned either Nazis or Jews, in that well-hidden passage, he did pity “the hundreds of thousands of people who, without any fault of their own, sometimes only for reasons of nationality or race, are destined to die or to a progressive physical deterioration” (p. 306). The diplomats of the nations involved were disappointed and did not fail to send their impressions to their respective governments. As usual, the speech had been of an exaggerated length and enveloped in an unstoppable flow of oratory.

But the ambiguity of the Pope’s position, expressed in his speeches, as Kertzer well underlines, had one characteristic: it set amid rivers of rhetoric pearls that both parties to the conflict could have defined as proofs of support for their cause.

To give just one following example of a speech after that of Christmas 1942, his address on the radio on 2 June 1943, on the occasion of his name day, was so unclear that Osborne, emphasizing the passage in which the Pope expressed closeness to the persecuted due to their ancestry and for the Polish people, described his address as “the most forthright speech he has given since the outbreak of war” (p. 327). Galeazzo Ciano, however, as a consummate diplomat, preparing the report to Mussolini, underlined how Pius XII, combining the theme of concern for the peoples of the occupied nations, with regret for the cruelty of the air war, had come almost to equally distribute burdens and responsibility to the two belligerent groups and thus underline the universality and impartiality of the action of the Holy See (pp. 327-328).

Pius XII used the same method in the aftermath of the terrible roundup of the Jews of Rome, which took place on 16 October 1943, a few hundred meters away from his headquarters. After a mellifluous and completely useless dialogue that took place between the German ambassador to the Holy See, Ernst von Weizsäcker and the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Maglione, the same afternoon as the raid, the German diplomat was very fearful of a public declaration of condemnation from the Pope.

And instead, against the same German expectations, the only official reaction of the Holy See was a bland editorial that appeared in *L’Osservatore Romano* of 25-26 October 1943, entitled “The charity of the Holy Father,” with extremely vague references to the deportation of Roman Jews, the majority having being already murdered two days earlier in Auschwitz: “The Holy Father continues to hear,

more than ever, the insistent and pitiful echo of the disasters that the current conflict, with its prolongation, continues to accumulate. The August Pontiff, as is well known, after having worked in vain to avert the outbreak of war, trying to dissuade the rulers of the peoples from resorting to the force of arms, so tremendous today, did not desist for a single moment from implementing all the means in His power to alleviate the sufferings that in any way are the consequence of the immense conflagration. With the increase of so many evils, the universally paternal charity of the Supreme Pontiff has become, one might say, almost more industrious, which does not stop in front of any border neither of nationality, nor of religion, nor of race. This multifaceted and incessant action of Pius XII in recent times has also intensified, due to the increased suffering of so many unhappy people. May this beneficial activity, especially for the prayers of the faithful throughout the world, who with unanimous consent and burning fervor do not cease from raising it to Heaven, achieve even greater results in the future, and hasten the day when on earth it will return to shine the iris of peace; and men, having laid down their arms, extinguished all discord and rancor and found themselves brothers, will finally collaborate loyally for the common well-being.”¹ The German ambassador Weizsäcker himself, on 28 October 1943, was able to write to his boss, Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop, the following reassuring words, already known to the general public because they were presented at the Nuremberg trial with the text of the article in *L’Osservatore Romano* attached: “Despite having been implored to do so by several fronts, the Pope has refrained from making any overt comment on the deportation of Jews from Rome. Although he certainly expects to be criticized for this for a long time by our enemies, and that Protestant circles in Anglo-Saxon countries exploit this for propaganda purposes, even on this matter he has done everything possible not to undermine relations with the German government and the German authorities in Rome.”²

¹ From Weizsäcker to Berlin, October 28, 1943, with attached text of the article “L’atteggiamento caritatevole del Santo Padre,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, October 25-26, 1943, in *Nuremberg, Doc. NG-5027*; the same text is in *Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts*, PAAA, Inland II g.193, *Juden in Italien 1943-1944*.

² Ibid.

As amply underlined by many other historians, the Pope had done nothing to stop the murderous intentions of the Germans in Rome on 16 October 1943 and, not even in Kertzer's research, nothing new seems to emerge in this regard: the arrested were, according to the report from Kappler to Wolff, one thousand two hundred fifty-nine, the prisoners released in the following hours, from 1.30 pm on 16 October until the morning of the 18th were, according to accredited calculations, two hundred forty-two. The merit of the releases, I add, should not be attributed so much to the intervention of the Vatican as for the Nazi policy which at that time did not provide for the deportation of Jewish spouses living in mixed marriage, nor that of children of mixed marriage, as well as the safeguarding of those Jews belonging to a neutral state or one not invaded by Nazi Germany. In reality, the Vatican sent the German authorities a list of baptized Jews, but, I venture to say that it was not that which led the Nazis to release them. It was only the victims' ability to prove their status (and some actually didn't succeed, like Clara Sereno).³ Furthermore, according to new documents found by Kertzer, the lists of non-Aryan Catholics (i.e. baptized Jews) bear the dates 19, 21 and 23 October, the latter the same day as the arrival of the one thousand twenty deportees (not one thousand seven) to Auschwitz: too late for any intervention. However, the fact that the Vatican worked in some way to specifically protect only baptized people and that it made some attempts in the days following the deportation to get them released does not speak in favor of the morality of the Church at the time. With regard to "non-Arian Catholics," I would like to highlight a small internal contradiction in some Vatican documents, already known because they were published in the series *Actes et Documents du Saint Siège Relatifs à la Seconde Guerre Mondiale* with which Kertzer also deals. In a note dated 26 October 1943, Father Tacchi Venturi sent Cardinal Maglione a question from Rosy Gattico on the disappearance of her husband, Count Vittorio Cantoni Della Rovere, and of his mother, Irma Finzi, after being taken from their villa in Arona the previous 15 September⁴ (the count and his mother, as mentioned

³ Liliana Picciotto, *Salvati. Gli Ebrei sfuggiti alla Shoah 1943-1945* (Torino: Einaudi, 2017), 257-261.

⁴ From Padre Tacchi Venturi to Cardinal Maglione, Rome, October 26, 1943, in *Actes et documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la Seconde guerre mondiale*, vol. 9, "Le Saint Siège et les victimes de la guerre," Janvier-Décembre 1943 (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1975), 527.

in my *Il libro della memoria*,⁵ were in fact victims of the massacre of Jews which took place around 15 September 1943 on Lake Maggiore). Following this request, which concerned two people who had long since become Catholics, Maglione took a step with the German embassy in the Vatican on 29 October, in so doing, though, he reported the data in an amazingly wrong way: “it is recommended to the benevolent interest of the most excellent German Embassy at the Holy See so that they may be released free, Count Victor Cantoni and his mother, who from Rome where they lived, were deported by German troops to an unknown location.”⁶ The error of the circumstance and place of the arrest of the Cantonis would not be so serious in itself, if it did not highlight a certain tiredness and inattention in pleading cases already considered lost by Vatican officials themselves.

In the book, strangely, the question of the shelter found in many religious houses by Roman Jews terrified for themselves and their families is not addressed. First of all, I must recall that the reception by Catholic religious houses was, yes, wide and generous (the number so far proposed by the historian Renzo De Felice is four thousand cases that I myself, together with the historian Sister Grazia Loparco, are trying to verify)⁷ but this acceptance was generally granted upon request, through acquaintances or recommendations. There are no known cases of spontaneous offers of opening and help. It should also be remembered that Rome, after 8 September 1943, was hit by a flood of refugees from the South, the homeless, the destitute, young people who refused to enlist, leaders of anti-fascist parties, officers of the dissolved army. In this context, the reception of a few thousand Jews was not specific, but included in this work. The aid to the Jews, as amply demonstrated in my book *Salvati*,⁸ took place in a broader context of aid activities to the civilian population left homeless, the disadvantaged and those wanted by the fascist and Nazi authorities. The surviving lists of people rescued by parishes and religious houses show that the guests were almost never only Jews in danger, but included

⁵ Liliana Picciotto, *Il libro della memoria. Gli ebrei deportati dall'Italia 1943-1945. Ricerca della Fondazione CDEC* (Milano: Mursia, 2002).

⁶ From Segretario di Stato to Ambasciata tedesca, Vaticano, October 29, 1943, in *Actes et documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la Seconde guerre mondiale*, vol. 9, “Le Saint Siège et les victimes de la guerre, Janvier-Décembre 1943 (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1975), 532.

⁷ Renzo De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1972), 610-614.

⁸ Picciotto, *Salvati*.

also many other refugees. The lists of the guests of the Pontifical Roman Major Seminary in Lateran, of the boys hosted at the Pius XI Salesian College, of the refugees in the house of the Augustinian Oblates of *Santa Maria dei Sette Dolori* in Via Garibaldi, of the wanted men accommodated in monasteries, even cloistered ones, by the apostolic visitor Father Giovanni da San Giovanni in Persiceto, of those hosted at the *Istituto Dermopatico dell'Immacolata*, directed by Father Emanuele Stablum, show an indistinct generosity and respect for the principle of the right to asylum, practiced towards all wanted and persecuted people.

One of the paragraphs of the book is devoted, very appropriately, to the supposition that Hitler was planning to kidnap the Pope, an issue often cited by Pius XII's defenders to explain his prudence, but which was non-existent, the fruit of Allied propaganda. The war not fought, but carried out through news circulated on purpose—that was already in common use during the Second World War. The “fake news” that Hitler wanted to kidnap the Pope was accompanied by reports that the Germans were mistreating the clergy in Rome. This was not true and had the opposite result to the desired one: it led the Pope to much prefer the German occupiers who maintained cordial and respectful relations with him, to the Allies who bombed the civilian population from the skies of the cities, including the Romans. In fact, the Pope, in this regard, expressed several times his opposition and underlined how it was not really the Germans who bombed the city, but the British and Americans.

Finally, I point out that the author, in a vigorous epilogue, reminds us that, after the war, the official interpretation of the events of the recent past was distorted by a series of actors, among which the main one was the Catholic Church itself, who hastened to the first possible opportunity, on 2 June 1945, to speak of its relations with National Socialism, defending the Concordat of the Church with Hitler's Germany as the lesser of possible evils. It highlighted the suffering experienced by Catholics and the Church during the conflict and portrayed Catholics in Germany as victims of the Nazis. It didn't even make the vaguest hint to the extermination of the Jews of Europe. He made no mention of Italy's part in the Axis cause, much less insinuated any Italian responsibility for the catastrophes that had befallen Europe. In his Christmas speech of 1945, with the war now over thanks to the intervention of the Allies, he finally spoke of totalitarian states as bloodthirsty and

tyrannical, of the Italian people portrayed as victims, of the German clergy who opposed the Nazi regime, something which, by the way, was denied in 2020 by the German bishops who admitted that they had done little or nothing against the extermination of the Jews.

The Pope was not the only one who wanted to cancel his moral responsibilities linked to his silence. Everything was rewritten and folded to the convenience of the moment which was, in fact, to turn the page and make all forget the evil distributed with both hands. Thus the vulgate was that the fault of the anti-Jewish persecutions fell exclusively on the Germans, Italy having only adapted to the Nazi requests; most of the population had helped Jews in danger, there hadn't been a whole band of Italians who had thrived in the practice of informing (about Jews, murdered in Auschwitz, but also about anti-fascists and partisans, tortured and put to death); Mussolini had not been a popular hero acclaimed and respected in all of his decisions; the papacy had not tried to agree with the worst dictatorships in order to keep its institutions alive; the fascist anti-Jewish laws enacted starting in September 1938 had been mild and very little applied; the Concordat, signed by the Church with the fascist regime in 1929, was not an implicit approval of the Church towards fascism; the subsequent Concordat signed with the Nazi regime, least of all; Italians redeemed themselves from the approval of fascism through the Resistance, to which all the people had given a hand. Even the Jews of Italy adapted to these false beliefs: they represented a psychological blanket that was supposed to protect them from the shock suffered and help them save something from their surrounding world. You can't survive thinking that everyone hates you to such an extent that they will hunt you down like an animal, hand you over to the assassins, will not organize any rescue network as was instead done for the allied military, prisoners of war, that were helped to escape, helped themselves to survive, and then were brought to safety in Switzerland or in the South of Italy. Jews in Italy, as in the rest of Europe, were left alone to face the worst, but this fact was too difficult to swallow for people who wanted to gradually heal their wounds and start a new life. After the war, Jewish delegations even went to the Pope to thank him for his "interventions on their behalf." As Kertzer says: "not only has the Pope helped to reconstruct the history of the collaboration of the Italian Church with the Mussolini regime and that of his support for the war, he has also contributed

to rewriting the history of Italy and Germany. Far from sharing responsibility for the conflict, Italians were now portrayed as victims” (p. 524).

An indisputable fact emerges powerfully from this book: the vaunted “heroism” of Pius XII lies in his having managed, for as long as World War II lasted, never to pronounce himself in favor or against any side in the conflict, despite the enormous pressure to which he was subjected. And despite the mass murder of the Jewish population of Europe and the persecutions and injustices against the Catholic clergy and their institutions in Germany, Poland and the occupied or annexed territories taking place before his eyes. Kertzer presents us with a Pope who, in times of war, protected, yes, the institutional interests of the Church, but sacrificing his moral leadership.

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