

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 Raffaella Perin

I have had the privilege to discuss and review David Kertzer's book in several occasions, praising above all the author's style and the huge amount of archival and bibliographical sources employed.<sup>1</sup> Given my studies on Catholic anti-Semitism in Modern History I have always focused my analysis especially on the way Kertzer dealt with this specific topic. Nonetheless, when I was invited to ponder again on this book I thought it might have been the opportunity for me to underline something new brought to light by this important research on the relationship between Church and State in Italy in the 20s and 30s; namely, the unprecedented attention put on biographical details of the "characters" involved in the plot. I wondered if the author's stylistic choice to linger on apparently secondary private aspects, conveying a sort of spy story atmosphere, was not only an esthetic quirk but instead played a role in his historiographical judgment. In other words, I tried to guess how better we can understand the reasons that underpinned the policy of the Holy See and the Fascist government by trying to recreate the climate in which all decisions were taken, which was in my opinion one of most laudable efforts of the author.

In 2006, the records produced by Pius XI's Curia, held in the Vatican Secret Archives, were completely opened to scholars. From then onwards numerous books and conference proceedings were published in Italy and abroad, pointing out historians' strong interest for the position of the Holy See in the international arena in the decades between the two world wars.<sup>2</sup> It was precisely

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<sup>1</sup> "Forum Essay," *The Catholic Historical Review* 102/4 (2016): 799-813; *Il mestiere di storico*, 8/2 (2016): 191.

<sup>2</sup> See at least Emma Fattorini, *Pio XI, Hitler e Mussolini: la solitudine di un papa*, (Turin: Einaudi, 2007); Hubert Wolf, *Papst und Teufel: Die Archive des Vatikan und das Dritte Reich*, (München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2008) Lucia Ceci, *Il papa non deve parlare: Chiesa, fascismo e guerra d'Etiopia*, (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2010); Id., *L'interesse superiore. Il Vaticano e l'Italia di Mussolini*, (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2013); and the conference proceedings *Pius XI: Keywords. International Conference Milan 2009*, eds. Alberto Guasco and Raffaella Perin (Berlin: LIT, 2010); *Le gouvernement pontifical sous Pie XI: pratiques romaines et gestion de l'universel*, ed. Laura Pettinaroli (Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 2013); *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); *Il pontificato di Pio*

the opportunity to work on new documents, together with the perceived necessity to renew historiographical methods in order to face a changing globalized world, that Ratti's papacy became soon the occasion to move from a traditional national perspective to a transnational one. European, American, but also Russian and Israeli scholars built up networks that encouraged scientific dialogue on several important questions concerning ideologies, political relations and religious matters.

David Kertzer's book fits among these new studies on Pius XI's pontificate. The author's expertise in Italian history is well known,<sup>3</sup> and we can probably consider his latest work a sort of fine-tuning of his research on the relations between the Holy See and the Italian State.

Moving in medias res, it is useful to notice the main editorial differences between the American and the Italian edition. The first one concerns the title: Rizzoli – the Italian publisher - made the unoriginal choice to emphasize in the main title the opposition between the “pope” and the “devil,” formerly variously employed by many publishing houses to indicate on the one hand Pius XI or Pius XII, and on the other hand Mussolini or Hitler.<sup>4</sup> The English title is maybe more faithful to the narrative style kept by the author, who stresses his analysis on the two main protagonists, Pius XI and Benito Mussolini, and puts them at the center of the history of the Church and State relationships. To be honest, there is another slight difference in the subtitle: “The Secret History of Pius XI and the Rise of Fascism in Europe” becomes in the Italian edition “Mussolini and Pope Pius XI. The secret relations between the Vatican and Fascist Italy” [*Mussolini e Papa Pio XI le relazioni segrete fra il Vaticano e l'Italia fascista*]. The last one conveys a sort of restriction on Italian affairs whereas the original title is again closer to the author's effort to include them in a wider context. The second evident difference is the lack, in the Italian edition, of the maps of Rome and of Vatican City together with the “cast of characters” included at the very beginning of the book in the American version, as to introduce a theatrical (historical) play. Such

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*XI nella crisi europea / Der Pontifikat Pius XI. im Kontext der europäischen Krise*, ed. Raffaella Perin (Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2016), <http://doi.org/10.14277/978-88-6969-092-1>

<sup>3</sup> David I. Kertzer, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*, (London: Picador, 1997); *The Popes against the Jews. The Vatican's role in the rise of modern anti-semitism*, (New York: Knopf, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> For example Wolf, *Papst und Teufel*: Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965*, (Bloomington (IN): Indiana University Press, 2001).

elements would have probably made many Italian scholars feel uncomfortable, given our well-known unfamiliarity to this kind of popular writing style.

In accordance with the choice to fictionalize the story, the book opens with a “Prologue”<sup>5</sup> instead of an “Introduction,” and the first scene put in front of the reader’s eyes is the one of the moribund pope intent on writing - on the night of January 31, 1939 - his very last speech, which he would have had to pronounce on February 11, namely in the day marking the tenth anniversary of the Lateran Accords. Hence, the prologue looks more like an epilogue resembling the ancient Greek novels in which the end was already known to the public but what really mattered was the development, what happened in-between. Still, in the few initial pages we can already learn several traits of Pius XI and Eugenio Pacelli’s characters, which influenced many of their political decisions, and the high tension raised in 1939 in the relationship between Achille Ratti and Mussolini. Besides, anticipating a topic deepened in the third part of the book, the author accurately describes which steps Pius XI made to be sure his speech would be kept secret and finally spread to the Italian episcopate in the designated moment. I will discuss this issue later on.

Skimming through the book it is worthy to briefly summarize the content of each of the three parts into which it is subdivided. The first part – “Act one” if we wanted to follow a play’s scheme – is dedicated to the Twenties, from the nearly simultaneous election of Pius XI and Mussolini’s seizure of power until the signature of the Lateran Accords. The second part deals with the challenge between the two totalitarian organizations (the Church and the Regime) in order to reaffirm the right of jurisdiction on many aspects of people’s lives they both claimed. In the last part the author touches the most controversial polemics concerning the relationships among Mussolini, Hitler and the pope, and the attitude of the latter towards racism, anti-Semitism and the Italian racial laws.

As mentioned before, throughout the entire book the storytelling is corroborated by a clear definition of the characters and the description of the atmosphere that surrounded them and their actions. I would like to dwell in particular on the figure of Pius XI, to the depiction of his personality the author gives indeed an important contribution.

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<sup>5</sup> Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 41-50.

Achille Ratti's Catholic Brianza background is usually used to explain his temperament, and Kertzer follows suit.<sup>6</sup> "Brianza people are concrete, serious, devoted to work," wrote Carlo Confalonieri, personal secretary of Pius XI.<sup>7</sup> In XIX century Italy, religious fervor determined and dominated nearly every single aspect of Catholics' social lives as well as their intimate sphere. Above all in the Lombard-Venetian region the parish was not only a religious but also a civic landmark. Ratti grew within a traditional Catholic community and his education was obviously influenced by intransigent ecclesiology. His personality was affected by his Lombard roots, stimulating his strong work ethic, his concreteness and realism; his authoritative and impulsive nature also betrayed this kind of background. In his government of the Church, his personal commitment in matters dear to him is clearly evident, making pressure on his *entourage* to keep him always well informed on current affairs.<sup>8</sup> As a strong-willed person, Pius XI often intervened in his own hand on the draft documents prepared by Curia, and he never completely trusted his collaborators.

These elements suggest a first consideration. Ratti's *cursus honorum* is marked by a high cultural level combined with a shrewd political skill. He never abandoned intransigent ecclesiology: his main aim was defending and preserving the rights and privileges of the Catholic Church, even at the cost to sign "pact[s] with the devil[s]." I think, as Kertzer demonstrates, that this primary intention of Pius XI should never be forgotten. Even if during his pontificate he had often realized and feared the incongruity of these "partnerships,"<sup>9</sup> it was only at the end of his life that he definitely recognized that the costs had been, and kept on being, too high.

The diplomatic experience as nuncio in Warsaw saw Ratti struggling with Polish nationalism. Kertzer believes that he "could not help being affected by the deep anti-Semitism he encountered in Poland," where the members of the Catholic élite wrote him reports claiming their concern for the Jewish threat.<sup>10</sup> In fact, he

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<sup>6</sup> Carlo Puricelli, "Le radici brianzole di Pio XI," in *Achille Ratti. Pape Pie XI. Actes du colloque organisé par l'École française de Rome et al. (Rome, 15-18 mars 1989)*, ed. Carlo Puricelli, (Rome: École française de Rome, 1996), 23-52; Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Puricelli, *Le radici brianzole*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Dominique Durand, "Lo stile di governo di Pio XI," in *La sollecitudine ecclesiale di Pio XI alla luce delle nuove fonti archivistiche. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studio, (Città del Vaticano, 26-28 febbraio 2009)*, ed. Cosimo Semeraro, (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010), 44-60.

<sup>9</sup> Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 152.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

was especially struck by the charge that the Jews were responsible for the diffusion of Bolshevik ideology. So, what he would never stop considering the worst enemy of the Catholic Church (Communism) was believed by important segments of the Church to be strictly linked with the Jews. Accordingly, we can suppose that this might be the reason why, during his pontificate, he was acquiescent with the spread of anti-Semitic stereotypes in Catholic diocesan and national periodicals, even in one attached to the Holy See, such as the influential Jesuit periodical *La Civiltà Cattolica*.

Nonetheless when in Vatican, Pius XI was described as being “insufficiently exercised about the danger that Italy’s Jews posed. [...] Although the pope shared in the general Vatican view that the large numbers of Jews in central and Eastern Europe posed a threat to Christian society, he had always excepted Italy’s tiny Jewish community.”<sup>11</sup> The memory of the anti-Semitic prejudice toward Russian communists was recalled by Pius XI during his noteworthy meeting with Mussolini on the 11th of February 1932, when the pope still marked a difference between Eastern European and Italian Jews, the latter to be considered an exception. That however did not prevent the pope, in February 1929, to ask for the exclusion - from the list of 400 candidates’ for the Chamber of Deputies - of all men collusive with Freemasonry, Judaism and with all sorts of parties deemed anticlerical.<sup>12</sup> Again, at stake there were the Catholic Church privileges that had to be preserved. The long battle to raise an agreement with the Italian State was over, but another one had begun just the day after the Accords were signed: the struggle to make Mussolini and his government respect the pacts. Kertzer employs a proper expression to describe the new situation: both the Fascist regime and the Holy See “jealously guarded the rights they thought were theirs.”<sup>13</sup>

As previously recalled, Pius XI has always been obsessed by the communist threat.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in February 1937, when Jesuit superior general Włodzimierz Ledochowski insisted on the necessity of stressing the role of Jews as champions of communist propaganda in the encyclical against Communism, the pope jotted down on the margins of Ledochowski’s letter, next to the sentence concerning the Jews, the following order: “Verify.”<sup>15</sup> The encyclical

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 187-8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 389.

*Divini Redemptoris* did not contain any reference to the Jews. If anti-Semitic prejudice had accompanied a large part of Pius's life, how was it possible that it had been excluded from the anti-Communist encyclical?

The question acquires a growing relevance if we consider that from 1933 until 1937, the year of the three encyclicals (*Divini Redemptoris*, *Mit brennender Sorge*, *Firmissimam Constantiam*), no voices had risen from the Vatican in defense of German Jews persecuted by the Nazi regime. What was then, in 1937, the position of Pius XI towards the Jews and anti-Semitism? Had something changed?

Actually, many things had happened in the meantime: the pope's trust in right-wing totalitarianisms had vanished, but the reason why was not (yet) their attitude against the Jews. Soon after Hitler's election and following the signature of the Concordat between the Holy See and the Third Reich, Nazi policy against the Catholic Church and against Catholic doctrine (such as the forced sterilization of individuals deemed defective) provoked the pope's protests. The nuncio in Berlin, scared by Hitler, tried to minimize the danger, and with regards to the anti-Semitic laws suggested the Holy See not to interfere with what was considered German internal affairs. What worried the pope most was the situation of the Church in Germany. In the meeting with the German ambassador von Bergen, in early 1936, Pius XI appeared visibly livid: "Shouting and waving his arms and becoming ever more agitated, Pius bemoaned all the ways the Third Reich was persecuting the Church."<sup>16</sup> Despite the irritation and the displeasure, Pius XI did not despair and never came up with a condemnation of Hitler's regime until January 1937, when he gathered a delegation of the German episcopacy to discuss the question. Three months later released the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*.

The documents from the Vatican Secret Archives reveal a recurring dynamic within the Roman Curia during those key years. The pope seems to be more disenchanted and critical towards Mussolini and Hitler than his entourage (Pacelli, Tacchi Venturi, Pizzardo, Tardini). The famous speech to the Catholic nurses in August 1935, when he claimed that the Italian invasion of Ethiopia would have not been a "just war", a speech that was censored by *L'Osservatore romano*, is another example of a significant divergence of thought and sentiment between the pope and his collaborators. Yet, again, he let the written version of

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.

the speech to be altered and finally he promised he would have not spoken against the war. Later on he was convinced by Pacelli not to write a letter to Mussolini expressing his concern for the war. So where is the often praised willfulness of Pius XI? The pope was ill. From time to time Kertzer gives in his book a sort of medical journal, so we are constantly aware that all along the Thirties the disease advanced whereas the moral strength and the mental alertness never abandoned him. His entourage was the arm through which he could govern the Church, therefore even if he was suspicious of them he was forced to let them advise him and to allow them to mediate with the dictators.

What probably stroke the pope more than anything else was the growth of racism as an ideological engine of the Nazi and, afterward, of the Fascist political program. Despite the fact that in 1937 he stopped the Holy Office from finalizing the condemnation of nationalism, totalitarianism, and racism, the year after, the last of his pontificate, he started the final struggle against these doctrines.<sup>17</sup>

An apparently trivial fact brought to light by Kertzer in his biographical notes about Ratti is his habit to talk “at a painfully slow pace, struggling to find the right words, then constantly correcting himself when he thought what he had said wasn’t quite right.”<sup>18</sup> While speaking he kept on looking for synonyms trying to properly convey what he had in mind. This distinctive trait of speaking is evident both in the video recordings of his public speeches and in the transcribed texts collected by Domenico Bertetto.<sup>19</sup> Considering the outstanding three discourses pronounced in July 1938, in which Pius XI condemned “exaggerated nationalism”, the careful choice of words must be emphasized. For example, while admonishing the ecclesiastical assistants to take a distance from the spirit that preached “one or another form of racism and nationalism”, he recalled that “Catholic means universal, and not racist, nationalist, separatist,” adding that there was “something particularly odious, this spirit of separatism, of exaggerated nationalism, which was not Christian, not religious, and yet not human.”<sup>20</sup> Focusing on the repetitions employed in this renowned speech, one

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<sup>17</sup> I discussed this topic in several articles. I take the liberty to refer to two of them: Raffaella Perin, “Pio XI e la mancata lettera sugli ebrei a Mussolini (agosto 1938),” *Rivista di Storia del Cristianesimo* 10/1 (2013): 181-206; “La svolta di fine pontificato. Verso una condanna dell’antisemitismo,” in *Pio XI nella crisi europea*, 37-56. <http://doi.org/10.14277/978-88-6969-092-1>

<sup>18</sup> Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 54.

<sup>19</sup> *Discorsi di Pio XI*, ed. Domenico Bertetto, 3 voll., (Turin: Società editrice internazionale, 1960).

<sup>20</sup> “Discorso agli assistenti ecclesiastici della gioventù di Azione Cattolica,” in *Discorsi di Pio XI*,

can wonder if while the pope was pronouncing it he was at the same time pondering in order to explain, to clear out even to himself the significance and importance of the terms used. Racism and anti-Semitism are two topics that become more and more a central preoccupation in 1938. In the speech of September 6, he talked about racism even if he had said that he did not want to face the issue.<sup>21</sup> Pius XI improvised; he had been meditating on these topics for months, but the repetitions, the uncertain stride in his speeches, betray a certain discomfort with these race-based ideologies that he had so far underestimated. He gradually became aware of the insufficiency of the traditional tools he and his predecessors had employed to face the challenges that the new era was raising.

I would like to conclude recalling the content of the Prologue of Kertzer's book. In the Christmas speech to the College of Cardinals of 1938 Pius XI reminded that the following February 11 would have marked the tenth anniversary of the Concordat. But while defining Mussolini as the "incomparable minister, to whom credit is due if such an important and beneficial work was crowned by a good result and gratifying success,"<sup>22</sup> it is clear that the adjective "incomparable" sounded ironic given what the pope said immediately afterward. In fact, he complained for the celebration made in Rome of "a cross that is the enemy of the Cross of Christ," for the wound recently inflicted on the Concordat and the persecution of members of Catholic Action. In an ascending climax of tension with the Fascist regime, in the last month of his life Pius XI reclaimed the draft of the encyclical he commissioned to John La Farge (the well-known hidden encyclical *Humani generis unitas*) and prepared the speech to be pronounced on February 11, 1939. The pages dedicated by Kertzer to the very last days of Pius XI, characterized by the exchanges between the Holy See and Mussolini in order to organize the celebration of the anniversary, convey the anxious climate of the moment.<sup>23</sup> Ratti wrote the last speech on his own and showed it to his secretary of State only three days before he had to pronounce it.<sup>24</sup> He only allowed Pacelli to quickly read it and then sent it straight to the typography. He did not trust anyone, since he was aware that his collaborators had not understood his very urgency to modify the relationship with the Fascist regimes. In fact, after Pius XI

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vol. 3, 772-7.

<sup>21</sup> "Ad insegnanti di Azione Cattolica," in *Discorsi di Pio XI*, vol. 3, 793-8.

<sup>22</sup> Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 629.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 562 f.

<sup>24</sup> See the notes of Giovanni Vian, "Il ripensamento dell'antisemitismo da parte di Pio XI. Una chiave di lettura del pontificato?," in *Pio XI nella crisi europea*, 261-72.



death his successor decided to smooth the tense situation hiding both the encyclical and the speech.

*Raffaella Perin, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Brescia*