



Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time November 17, 2013 C

Church History—Part 15 From Vatican Council I to Vatican Council II Part Two: The pontificates of Pope Pius IX and Pope Pius XII

In this article, we will look at church history during the pontificates of Pope Pius XI and Pope Pius XII (1822-1958).

Between the World Wars

World War I devastates Europe in every way. It is estimated that about 8.5 million people die. Another 20 million are wounded. Vast areas of north Eastern Europe are in rubble.

In 1917, the Russian Revolution gives birth to a Marxist state under Vladimir Lenin. Lenin and his successor, Joseph Stalin, ruthlessly eliminate dissidents and do everything possible to destroy Christianity—both Russian Orthodox Church and Roman Catholicism. In the 17-year span, the Communist Party destroys 5,300 Catholic churches and chapels. Clergy are dismissed and churchgoers harassed. 200,000 Catholics, including every Catholic bishop, simply disappear in the first eight years of the so-called Bolshevik Revolution.

Mary at Fatima. In 1917, another strange event occurs in Fatima, Portugal. Mary appears to three children on the thirteenth day of six consecutive months. She predicts the end of World War I but also warns that unless a special prayer and Eucharistic reparation are offered, “Russia will spread her errors throughout the world, promoting wars and the persecution of the Church.” This is a strange prophecy since Russia is then a weak, agrarian nation suffering the internal throes of a civil war.

Rise of Fascism. Fascism is a new form of totalitarianism that resulted from World War I’s revenge-filled peace treaties, political turmoil, fear of communists, and economic turbulence. Like communism, Fascism controls all aspects of people’s lives—personal, political, and economic—in trying to create the perfect state. Founded by Benito Mussolini of Italy in 1919, the word Fascism comes from *fascia*, meaning “bundle (political) group.” It is marked by oppressive, dictatorial control. Mussolini, Hitler in Germany, and Francisco Franco in Spain are dictators who mobilize dedicated followers to

begin eliminating anyone who opposes their strong-arm tactics. Propaganda, secret police, control of the mass media, lies, the arrest and execution of dissidents are the methods used by dictators to gain and maintain power.

Pope Pius XI (1922-1939). The pontificate of Pope Pius XI coincides with the growing power of fascist dictators as well as with the reign of Stalin in Russia. Achilli Ratti follows a most unlikely path to the papal throne. He spends the first 30 years of his priestly life as a librarian in the Vatican. He is an avid mountain climber.

In 1918, Pope Benedict XV brings the future pope onto the world stage when he sends him as Nuncio to Poland to secure the rights of Catholics in a newly freed Poland. Fourteen months after his arrival, the Bolsheviks invade Poland. Nuncio Ratti could have easily escaped to Rome but he refuses to leave a country under attack by evil forces. Later on, as Pope, Ratti will conclude that of all the enemies Christian Europe has had to face, Communism is by far the worse.

Achilli Ratti has only been a cardinal for seven months when he is elected pope. The new pope takes as his motto, “Christ’s peace in Christ’s kingdom,” to make the point that the Church should be active in the world and not isolated from it. During his papacy, he canonizes many saints, including John Fisher, Thomas More, John Bosco, and Thérèse of Lisieux. Pius XI shows a strong commitment to the missions.

He required every religious order to engage in missionary work. As a result, the number of missionaries doubled during his pontificate. He personally consecrated the first six native Chinese bishops in 1926, then a native Japanese bishop in 1927, and native priests for India, Southeast Asia, and China in 1933. The total number of native priests in mission lands rose from almost three thousand to over seven thousand during his pontificate. At the beginning of his pontificate there were no mission dioceses under the direction of a native bishop. Upon Pius XI’s death, there were forty such dioceses. The Catholic population in mission countries rose from nine million to twenty-one million. He also established a faculty of missiology at his alma mater, the Pontifical Gregorian University. (Lives of the Popes, p.360, Richard McBrien)

The “Roman Question.” During the papacy of Pius IX (pope 1846-1878), the Italian government took over the

Papal States in an attempt to bring about the unification of Italy. In response, Pius IX and his successors declared themselves “prisoners of the Vatican.” [The dispute about the Papal States between the government and the papacy became known as the “Roman Question.”]

When Benito Mussolini comes to power in 1922, he strives to improve relations with the Church realizing that nearly all Italians are Catholic. After long negotiations, he and Pius XI sign the *Lateran Treaty* in 1929. In the Treaty, the papacy officially gives up all legal claims to the former Papal States and agrees to stay out of Italian politics. In return, the Italian State recognizes the Holy See (about 100 acres) as an independent nation and reimburses it for the loss of revenue from the former Papal States. Rome is designated as the capital of Italy. Roman Catholicism becomes the only recognized religion of the State. Catholicism can be taught in state schools.

For a short while, Mussolini and the Church get along well, but the honeymoon ends when Mussolini, suspicious of Catholic Action groups, tries to suppress them. In 1931, Pius XI, no longer conciliatory toward Mussolini, publicly opposes the suppression in an encyclical. Mussolini backs away from his open crackdown on Catholic Action groups. In the end, however, the Pope could do little to stop Mussolini from swaying the masses of Italians from backing the fascist dictator.

The Church and Nazism

Deeply resenting the terms of the Treaty of Versailles (1919) at the end of World War I and experiencing political and economic turmoil, the German people are ready for a strong leader who will rebuild their nation and restore their status in the world. Adolf Hitler steps into the political vacuum. He founds the National Socialist Party (Nazism). Even though bishops generally oppose Nazism, many Catholics and some church leaders are drawn to it. They see it as a force that will restore Germany’s political and economic stability and pride, and a system of government less evil than godless communism that seeks world domination.

Concordat of 1933. Pius XI’s way of dealing with dictators is to enter into a concordat with them as a way to guarantee certain rights for the Church. In July 1933, representatives of Pius XI and Hitler sign a concordat. Generous privileges are granted to the Catholic clergy and to Catholic schools in Germany in return for the withdrawal by the Catholic Church, with its various associations and its newspapers from all social and political action. This withdrawal mutes all the power of the Center Party (mostly Catholic political party) from opposing Hitler’s rise to total control of Germany. Hitler has no intention of keeping the terms of the concordat.

Once he gets church authorities to more or less disband the Center Party, he begins his persecution of the Church. He closes Catholic schools, disbands Catholic Youth organizations and arrests any clergy and laity who dare to criticize him.

As Pius XI witnesses the increasing suppression of the Catholic Church between 1933 and 1936, he protests privately to German authorities on 34 occasions – all to no avail. With his patience running out, he smuggles into Germany an encyclical entitled *Mit Brennender Sorge* (*With Burning Concern*) and orders every pastor in Germany to read it on Palm Sunday 1937. This is the first official public document that attempts to confront and criticize Nazism. The encyclical soundly condemns and exposes the fallacy of the Nazi myth of blood and soil; it condemns its neopaganism, its war of annihilation against the Church and even describes the Führer himself as a “mad prophet possessed of repulsive arrogance.” As may be expected, the encyclical infuriates Hitler. In retaliation, he closes down all the presses that have printed it and takes numerous vindictive measures against the Church, including staging a long series of immorality trials of Catholic clergy.

Increasingly distressed by Hitler’s and Mussolini’s treatment of the Church and by their vicious racist policies, Pius prepares an explosive encyclical denouncing Fascist crimes and racism, when he is overtaken by death on February 10, 1939. He begs his doctors to keep him alive long enough to give what he believes would be the most important speech of his life. Pius dies the day before he is due to give the speech.

Persecution of the Church in Spain and Mexico

During the pontificate of Pius XI, the persecution of Catholics is not limited to the Soviet Union and Germany. Terrible atrocities are also happening to Catholics in Spain and Mexico—two traditional Catholic countries. In many countries, revolutionaries turn against the Church because all too often, the Church aligns herself with the rich and powerful.

Spain. In 1931 the King of Spain is forced to leave the country. The subsequent republic shuts down the Church, secularizes education and sanctions the burning of churches. Thousands of priests are killed during the brutal Spanish War 1936-1939; about one million people are killed. General Franco and his Nationalist Party emerge as the winner of the civil war. The Church supports the dictator, regarding him as more desirable than the godless communists.

Mexico. Concerning events in Mexico, the Didache Church History writes:

Events in Mexico followed a similar pattern. Mexico had been a Catholic country since colonial times, but revolutionaries, Freemasons, and various political “reformers” frequently turned on the Church after the coming of independence in the nineteenth century. A revolution in 1917 made Mexico the world’s first officially socialist, anti-religious, constitutional revolutionary republic. The Church could not own property and any privileges it previously held were removed. Anti-Christian sentiments were so high that the governor of the Tabasco province, a particularly brutal persecutor of religion, named his children Lenin, Lucifer, and Satan.

After a Catholic rebellion was put down, the government killed 250,000-300,000 people, most of them Catholics. Between late 1931 and early 1936, 480 churches, schools, orphanages and hospitals were closed or used for other functions such as movie theaters, garages and shops.

Beginning around 1940, there was a gradual easing of persecution in Mexico as authorities relaxed their enforcement of anticlerical laws. However, more than half a century still had to pass before the religious rights of the Church and the Mexican people were restored. (p.718)

Pope Pius XII (1939-1958)

Eugenio Pacelli is the odds-on favorite to be elected successor to Pius XI. He has spent his life in papal diplomacy, including serving as Nuncio to Germany during Hitler’s rise to power.

He is the best known of all the Cardinals and seems to possess the diplomatic experience needed at the time. Pius’ papacy spans from the beginning of World War II through the post-Cold War era to 1958.

Pius XII and World War II. The first years of the new pope’s papacy takes place during the Second World War. About 40 million people are killed during the war, many of them civilians, victims of the bombing of cities by both sides.

Pius XII’s role during World War II has been the subject of much debate. He has been especially criticized for not issuing stronger public denunciations of the Nazi war crimes, and especially the Holocaust, Hitler’s effort to wipe out the Jews of Europe. Those who have written of his wartime posture point out:

- That while Pius denounces the atrocities of the war in general terms (not mentioning the Germans or Jews), he fears that more explicit condemnations would only lead to greater reprisals. In fact, this is what happens in Holland in 1942. The Dutch bishops, at the urging of Pius, publicly deplore the Nazi deportation of the Jews. In retaliation, the Nazi speed up their roundup of Jews,

including Jewish converts to Catholicism, and deport them to Auschwitz. The best known of the converts is Edith Stein, who will be canonized in 1986.

- Pius is well aware of Hitler’s hatred of Catholicism. In Poland alone, three million Catholics and twenty percent of Poland’s clergy perish at Auschwitz concentration camp.

- Rather than choosing the route of public denunciations like his predecessor, Pius decided to work behind the scenes to save many Jews and war victims.

In 1943 when Nazi troops occupy Rome, Vatican City opens its doors to a flood of refugees, including Jews. Pius orders chalices to be melted to help pay ransom to the Germans to keep the Jews of Rome safe. Hundreds of other Catholic sites provide shelter to Jews.

In his book, *The Compact History of the Catholic Church*, Alan Schreck writes:

*Pinchas Lapide, a Jewish scholar and former Israeli consul to Italy, credits the pope and the Catholic Church with saving some four hundred thousand Jews from certain death. Lapide writes in the book *The Last Three Popes and the Jews*: “The Catholic Church saved more Jewish lives during the war than all the other churches, religious institutions and rescue organizations put together. Its record stands in startling contrast to the achievements of the Red Cross and Western democracies. The Holy See, the nuncio, and the entire Catholic Church saved some 400,000 Jews from certain death.*

Heinrich Himmler, head of the Nazi secret police, wrote a letter to a subordinate in which he said, “We should not forget that in the long run, the pope in Rome is a greater enemy of National Socialism [the Nazi party] than Churchill or Roosevelt.” (pp 124-125)

It should also be noted that shortly after the war ends, the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Israel Zolli, inspired by the example of the Church’s extraordinary charity, becomes a Catholic, taking as his baptismal name Eugene, out of gratitude to Pius XII (Eugenio Pacelli).

While history may rightfully judge that Pius XII could have made stronger protests concerning the Nazi’s extermination of Jews, no one should doubt the sincerity of his motives and his care for the Jewish people.

Pius and Post-World War II. After the threat of Nazism has passed, Pius XII focuses his attention on the threat of atheistic communism. Pius has every reason to fear communism as he witnesses the Soviets take over the countries of Eastern Europe – all of them heavily Catholic in population. Priests and religious are exiled, jailed and forced to leave their ministries and work in factories, farms or forced labor camps. Catholic schools are

confiscated by the government. The Church in these countries go underground, only to emerge triumphant with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989-1990.

China. When Mao Zedong comes to power in 1949, the People's Republic of China also becomes a communist nation. It imprisons or exiles foreign missionaries, kills professing Catholics and forces others to go underground. The government will eventually allow public worship but only in a nationalized Chinese Catholic Church, with bishops approved by the government.

Pius and Modern Scholarship

With three Encyclicals, Pius XII does much to lay the groundwork for the great renewal of the Church that has come with Vatican Council II (1962-1965).

Mystici Corporis Christi 1943 (“*Mystical Body of Christ*”). This encyclical prepares the way for Vatican II's document on the Church (which teaches that the Church is the People of God), the laity, as well as the clergy. It declares that the church is a charismatic and Spirit-filled institution and not just a human institution.

Divino Afflante Spiritu 1943 (“*Inspired by the Divine Spirit*”) encourages Catholic biblical scholars to make good use of all modern tools of scholarship in the interpretation of the Word of God. This document paves the way for the Vatican II document on Divine Revelation which leads to a great renewal and interest in biblical studies not only amongst the clergy but also the lay faithful.

Mediator Dei (“*Mediator of God*”). This encyclical on the liturgy prepares the way for Vatican II's groundbreaking document, The Constitution of Liturgy.

Mary. Pius' special devotion to Mary and his conviction that she is the main spiritual bulwark against atheistic Communism leads him in 1950 to define as infallibly true the *Assumption of Mary into Heaven* at the end of her life on earth. (For more on this Catholic belief, see my Catechism Article 10.)

During his papacy, Pius XII canonizes 33 persons including Frances Xavier Cabrini, the first U.S. citizen to be canonized. He creates an unusually large number of cardinals: 56 during two consistories. His selection of new cardinals helps to give the Church leadership a much needed international look.

Have a blessed week,

