

THE POPES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Giuseppe Sarto or Pius X-the first Pope elected in the twentieth century (1903) and the first Pope to be canonized (1954) since the sixteenth century-was the son of poor peasants from Riese, an obscure village in northern Italy. After his ordination in 1858 he gained a rather wide experience as a parish priest, as spiritual director of a seminary, and as a chancery official, impressing everyone at the same time by his deep spirituality. In 1884 he was made bishop of Mantua, where he showed a marked zeal for reform. Finally, in 1893, he was transferred to Venice as patriarch and cardinal. In spite of his advance up the ranks of the hierarchy, he remained dedicated to the tasks of the parish priest and loved nothing more than catechizing children, saying Mass, and hearing confessions. Even as Pope he retained the heart of a simple parish priest and manifested a warmth, humor, affability, and gentleness that won the hearts of pilgrims from all corners of the world.

His most important acts as Pope were inspired by the same pastoral sense and solicitude. His love of the Mass and his desire to have it performed in the most dignified manner was embodied in his decree on the reform of sacred music (1903). Of similar inspiration was his decree urging all the faithful to frequent communion and admitting children to this sacrament at the earliest possible age. Of all his initiatives, however, the one that probably left the deepest stamp on the Church of our times was his project for the codification of Canon Law, which Cardinal Gasparri earned out at his behest but which was only promulgated in 1917, under Benedict XV. It reflected Pius X's own highly authoritarian and conservative concept of Church structure.

Unlike his predecessor, Leo XIII, Sarto was little concerned with reconciling the Church with the modern world his general attitude toward the cultural and political trends of the day was, in fact, negative and in line with a general pessimism about temporal progress endemic in the post revolutionary Church. He had, for instance, little love of the new trend toward democracy that was sweeping the world; he thought it violated the natural hierarchical

order of society, and he did his best to cool whatever enthusiasm for democracy existed among Catholics. Christian democratic movements were either destroyed, as in the case of Marc Sangnier's Sillon, or forced to bide their time.

The same intransigence characterized Pius' handling of the Modernist crisis which, as we have seen, ended in an impasse for Catholic thought.

Pius, however, showed keen insight into one aspect of the Church's relation to the modern world. When France unilaterally abrogated the Concordat (originally signed by Napoleon and Pius VII) and then tried to reduce the Church to financial dependence on the state by getting it to accept a system of state subsidies, the Pope reacted with vigor. He felt that the French Church would be better off stripped of all its possessions and forced to rely only on its own inner riches, its traditions, its spirituality, and the devotion of its clergy and people. And so he ordered the French bishops to reject any financial ties with the state. The wisdom of his stand seems to have been vindicated by the subsequent history of the French Church, which though poverty-stricken has been foremost in the current movement of renewal.

Pius died as Europe plunged into the inferno and was succeeded by Benedict XV (1914-22), the least physically impressive of twentieth-century Popes—a frail, stoop-shouldered little man who came from a Genoan patrician family, the Della Chiesa. After his ordination in 1878 and further studies in Rome he was snatched up by the Curia, where he worked under Cardinal Rampolla, eventually Leo XIII's Secretary of State. With the accession of Pius X, Rampolla was replaced by Merry del Val, and Della Chiesa found himself for no fault of his own—something of an outsider. He was kicked upstairs to Bologna as archbishop and deprived for six years of the red hat traditionally conferred on Bolognese, a matter of course. But whatever injustice he suffered from his enemies in the Curia was more than recompensed when the cardinals chose him as Sarto's successor.

They were looking for a peacemaker, and Benedict did not disappoint their hopes. Peace and conciliation were the objectives he

unswervingly pursued from the first moment of his pontificate. Peace-first in the Church, which was bitterly divided by the anti-Modernist zealots who had been allowed to run riot during the previous administration. And one of his first acts was to call a halt to the witch hunt after "Modernists."

But seeking peace among the great powers engaged in the horrendous conflict was an altogether different matter and called for superhuman tact and diplomatic subtlety-qualities with which he was superbly endowed.

His opposition to the war was absolute; intellectually and morally he stood in the vanguard with those who found the war totally unjustifiable. For him it was the "darkest tragedy of _human hatred and human madness,"! And unlike the jingoist prelates who in the belligerent countries disgraced the Christian name, he utterly rejected any attempts to justify it by recourse to ancient theories about "just wars."

Nevertheless, he refrained from openly condemning the war, since this would have posed a terrible dilemma for Catholics on both sides who were unfortunately not prepared theologically and emotionally to take up such a radical position. He contented himself, therefore, by general appeals to both sides to end the mad, useless carnage. And finally he issued his celebrated but futile "Note to the Heads of State at War" in August 1917. His proposals were realistic, calling for suspension of hostilities, systematic and regulated disarmament, and the establishment of arbitration, including international sanctions-ideas which, in fact, were quite close to President Wilson's subsequent "Fourteen Points."

Benedict's unequivocal condemnation of the war and his refusal to take sides were widely misinterpreted by both sides who wanted him to condemn the other side as the aggressor: He was vilified in the press and even excluded from the Versailles Peace Conference. As time passes, however, there is growing recognition of the truly prophetic role he played.

Peace between Church and state was another imperative he fully appreciated, and he took major steps in this direction by his overtures to the French Government that led to the resumption of diplomatic

relations in 1920. He also made the first official approaches to the Italian Government for the settlement of the Roman question, which had tragically divided Italians since the seizure of the Papal States in 1870.

One of the most important initiatives of his pontificate was his epochal missionary encyclical *Maximum Illud*, called the charter of the Catholic missionary movement of this century.

On a more personal level, one of the most attractive features of the frail, reserved aristocrat was his boundless charity. He was never able to refuse a plea for help, and he literally emptied the Vatican treasury, so that at his death there was not even enough money to cover the expenses of the conclave.

His successor, Achille Ratti, Pius XI (1922-39), followed a most unlikely path to the papal throne. The son of a modestly prosperous textile manufacturer, he spent the first thirty years of his priestly life as a librarian—first at the Ambrosian library in Milan and then from 1911 to 1918 at the Vatican, where he gained international recognition for his research. It kept him quite removed from the bitter controversies swirling through the Church over the Modernist question. His first entry into the world of action occurred when he was sent to Poland in 1918 as apostolic visitor and then nuncio in order to assist in the reconstruction of the Polish Church after the devastation of the war—a most difficult assignment. After its long subjection to Austria, Germany, and Russia, Poland was given its independence in 1919. Ratti's task was to secure the rights of the Catholic Church in the new state and forge strong relations with Rome. His successful acquittal of the mission demonstrated his exceptional qualities of courage and decision, and upon his return in 1921 he was appointed archbishop of Milan and made a cardinal. Five months later, the death of Benedict XV brought him to Rome for the conclave that elevated him to the throne of Peter.

He immediately indicated a major objective of his pontificate—reconciliation with Italy—by appearing on the outer balcony of St. Peter's to give his first papal benediction—something no Pope had done since Pius IX in 1846. The moment

was a critical one for Italy. The ebullient Mussolini and his rowdy Blackshirts were busy digging the grave of Italian democracy. Pius was inclined to think that Italy needed a strong man to establish order and saw in the blacksmith's son the one ordained by providence to settle the Roman question. Pius helped to smooth Mussolini's way to power by withdrawing Vatican support from the Catholic Popular Party and causing the resignation of its leader, the priest Don Sturzo.

The Pope reaped his reward when Mussolini signed the Lateran Concordat and Treaty with the Vatican in 1929. In return for the surrender of papal claims to Italian territory, the treaty granted the Pope a munificent sum of money and complete sovereignty over Vatican City-the forty-acre complex of buildings and gardens around St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. In addition, the Concordat accorded to the Catholic religion a privileged status in Italy and imposed Catholic teaching as the norm for religion courses in the state school system.

Pius' tenure coincided with the rise of dictators to power in many other European states, and as with Mussolini he did not hesitate to come to terms with them, even when it meant sacrificing Catholic political parties. In Germany the situation was complicated by the deviousness and mendacity of Adolf Hitler, whose National Socialist Party had been condemned by the German bishops more than two years before his seizure of power on January 30, 1933. On March 23, however, Hitler upset all calculations by declaring before the Reichstag that he regarded the churches, Catholic and Protestant, as "the most important factors in the preservation of our national heritage." Promising full respect for church rights, he demanded from the churches an immediate choice between cooperation for "the political and moral purification of our public life," and open conflict. Despite grave misgivings about the sincerity of this preferred cooperation, the Catholic Center Party decided it could not be rejected and gave Hitler the crucial votes he needed for emergency powers, hoping to obtain in return a moderating influence on Hitler's future actions. Within days the German bishops, likewise responding to Hitler's pledge of respect for church rights,

withdrew their previous condemnations of his movement, though not of its underlying anti-Christian philosophy. By June, Hitler was achieving the demise of all other political parties but his own. The last to yield was the Center Party, which voted its dissolution on July 5. Three days later the Vatican gave its assent to a Concordat, by which Hitler pledged respect for church rights in Germany. Though the negotiations had been going on in Rome for weeks, the Vatican delayed acceptance of Hitler's terms until the demise of the Center Party, founded sixty years previously to protect the rights of German Catholics, and Hitler's use of his emergency powers to suspend the constitution made it evident that there was no way church rights in Germany could be defended save through a Concordat.

Altogether Pius negotiated eighteen concordats, whose main objectives were to secure freedom for Catholic Action, to obtain legal status for Church marriages, and to give the Holy See exclusive control over the appointment of bishops.

His pontificate registered impressive accomplishments: He established 128 residential sees, founded many new institutes and ecclesiastical colleges in Rome, and canonized thirty-three saints. Pius was a pragmatist in his political views and had no ideological preference for fascism. In fact, he condemned the Fascist ideology and did not bless the Italian campaign in Ethiopia—accusations to the contrary notwithstanding. Neither was the Vatican pro-Fascist in the Spanish imbroglio. By the end of 1935, in fact, the Vatican had reached a *modus vivendi* with the Republican government of Spain, realizing that monarchism was dead. Only two conditions were attached: that the Republicans maintain law and order and that they stop the antireligious excesses of the extremists. But they were able to do neither. The fanatics who destroyed the churches and convents and murdered the priests and nuns also destroyed the Spanish Republic. The Vatican at length went over to the side of Franco's nationalists.

That Pius was not pro-Fascist is also evident from his handling of the French Action Française. This was a movement originating with Charles Maurras, a gifted ideologue who was anti-republican, fanatically nationalist, and an agnostic who had seduced a large

number of Catholics into his camp of reactionaries and Fascists. Pius saw through the fallacies of Maurras and issued a condemnation of the movement in a decree of the Holy Office of 1926. In so doing, he helped make the French Church safe for democrats.

Personally Ratti was reserved in manner and strongly self disciplined; his record-breaking Alpine exploits also showed him to be a lover of adventure. On papal ceremonies he projected an aura of solemn majesty, inspiring awe even in those least susceptible to ecclesiastical pomp.

One of the first photos taken of him after his elevation showed him sitting on his throne with his right hand clenched in a fist. It was a good symbol of his style. Conscious of his absolute sovereignty, he ruled in the fashion of the great medieval Popes. Making himself conversant with every detail of affairs, he tried to keep in close touch and make all the decisions himself. He demanded and expected absolute compliance with his orders, and the first to tremble before an audience with him were often the cardinals themselves. He forced Cardinal Billot to hand over his red hat when Billot opposed him over the Action Francaise question and would have done the same to Cardinal Innitzer, archbishop of Vienna, when Innitzer blessed Hitler's takeover of Austria had it not been for adverse repercussions on the Austrian Church. Pius made his sovereignty felt by studiously keeping his distance and cultivating an atmosphere of isolation. No less a figure than Hermann Goering, second in rank in the Nazi hierarchy, confessed that he felt overawed when ushered into his presence. Definitely not the type to shrink from conflict, Pius saved the independence of Catholic Action in Italy by forcing Mussolini to back down after the dictator tried to suppress this key Catholic organization. And it remained during the Fascist regime the only nongovernmental organization not completely under the thumb of the government.

And when Hitler showed increasing belligerence toward the Church, Pius met the challenge with a decisiveness that astonished the world. His encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* was the "first great official public document to dare to confront and criticize Nazism"

and "one of the greatest such condemnations ever issued by the Vatican."² Smuggled into Germany, it was read from all the Catholic pulpits on Palm Sunday in March 1937. It exposed the fallacy and denounced the Nazi myth of blood and soil; it decried its neopaganism, its war of annihilation against the Church, and even described the Fuhrer himself as a "mad prophet possessed of repulsive arrogance. The Nazis were infuriated, and in retaliation closed and sealed all the presses that had printed it and took numerous vindictive measures against the Church, including staging a long series of immorality trials of the Catholic clergy. At Koblenz, 170 Franciscans were arrested and prosecuted for corruption of the youth and for turning their monastery into a "male brothel." A Hitler Youth film was circulated that showed priests dancing in a bordello.

Increasingly distressed by Hitler's and Mussolini's treatment of the Church and by their vicious racist policies, Pius was preparing an explosive encyclical denouncing Fascist crimes and racism when he was overtaken by death on February 10, 1939.

The sixty five cardinals who gathered two weeks later to elect the 261st successor of St. Peter were hardly puzzled over their choice. All eyes were on Eugenio Pacelli, who had won universal renown by his brilliant career as Pius XI's Secretary of State and in his unprecedented global travels had impressed everyone by his aristocratic bearing, personal piety, and quiet affability. Moreover, with the world poised for war, the purpurati were in no mood to take chances; a man well schooled in the Vatican tradition of diplomatic finesse seemed an absolute necessity. And so when the crowd in the piazza outside saw the white smoke rise from the chimney only a few hours after the conclave opened, they knew it had to be Pacelli.

This tall, stately ascetic who two weeks later was crowned with the tiara as Pius XII was the only Pope of the twentieth century who did not hail from northern Italy. As his aquiline nose might suggest, he was a born Roman. Profiles of his half-sad countenance under a white skullcap, deep-set eyes, and long, bony fingers clasped in prayer were reproduced in countless forms and became the visible

symbol to the world of the unity and spiritual strength of Catholicism as the world itself came apart at the seams.

Only two weeks after Pius' coronation, Hitler sent his tanks rumbling into Czechoslovakia-bringing the world only an inch away from global war. Pius made the most strenuous efforts to ward off the catastrophe-he even endangered his own personal safety by acting as an intermediary between the Allies and the underground German resistance movement, which in the spring of 1940 plotted to overthrow Hitler and seal peace with the Allies. Italy's declaration of war placed the Vatican in a most delicate position-a little island in the Axis sea. It had to use the utmost circumspection to avoid being attacked as an accomplice of the Allies.

The Pope made every effort to maintain an appearance of impartiality between the opposing blocs. Thus in spite of his almost pathological fear of communism, he lent no support to Nazi attempts to portray their invasion of Russia as an anti-Communist, religious crusade; his hatred of Nazism, in fact, was only second to his hatred of communism. But at the same time he had a special love of the German people, and culture and strove for a peace that would ensure their legitimate rights and interests. And when the war took a dramatic turn in favor of the Allies, he was frightened by the prospect of a Communist victory and worked for a negotiated peace that would not give total victory to either the Soviet Union or Germany.

One question often arises in this connection: Did Pius carry neutrality too far in refusing to publicly denounce the Nazi atrocities against the Jews, the Poles, the Serbs, and others? There is no doubt that the Pope was fully informed about the extent and the nature of these crimes, and yet he kept silent, except for some vague and generalized references to Nazi crimes.

No doubt a complex of reasons motivated him: fear of even more savage measures if he protested-as actually happened in Holland when the Dutch bishops spoke out against the Nazi deportation of Jews; an unwillingness to jeopardize his official neutrality; the threat of terrible reprisals against the Church; realization that nothing would deter the hysterical Hitler from his "final solution" joined to the hope of being able to do more for the victims behind

the backs of the Nazis as long as their wrath was not aroused by public denunciations-in Rome alone over five thousand Jews were given asylum in convents and monasteries belonging to the Vatican, while Pinchas Lapide, former Israeli consul in Italy, credited the Holy See and the Church with saving some four hundred thousand Jews from certain death. Anthony Rhodes, in his *The Vatican in the Age of the Dictators*, agrees that in private the Pope did much for the Jews.

Yet for many, these reasons seem specious, and in their eyes the whole affair has cast a long shadow over an otherwise brilliant pontificate. The only consideration, they maintain, for one claiming to be the Vicar of Christ should have been his duty to voice the abhorrence of the human conscience at such incalculably monstrous evil.

Whatever truth may lie in this opinion, it is at least certain that Pius was a man of the utmost personal rectitude of conscience and that his decision to remain silent caused him deep anguish. If indeed he erred, it was probably due to excessive preoccupation with diplomatic considerations.

Recent publications from the Vatican archives show that while Vatican relief efforts were very expensive and time-consuming, the results were rather insignificant and disappointing. As in so many other fields, the experience of World War I afforded little guidance. In the First World War the Vatican received co-operation from the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire, and the relatively primitive technology made it rather easy to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants, while there were few political or racial refugees. But in the Second World War, the Soviet Union and Germany refused to co-operate, while the improved methods of bombing victimized entire populations and racial and ideological fanaticism created enormous numbers of refugees. The Vatican's relief task took on huge dimensions and became nearly impossible to carry out. Nor did the moral authority of the Pope always function effectively enough to secure the results intended. Nevertheless, food, clothing, and medical supplies were dispatched on a large scale, while the Vatican radio sent out as many as twenty-

seven thousand messages a month in order to find missing persons. The Holy See also exerted great efforts to save Rome from destruction.

As conditions in Italy deteriorated near the end of the war, the Vatican also joined in the efforts of the anti-Mussolini forces to get Italy out of the war and took part in the armistice negotiations. It involved considerable risk since, as the Pope realized very well, if Mussolini and the Germans found out, they would have inflicted severe reprisals on the Church. But he felt that he could not stand by while Italy sank into chaos and ruin. His role, however, was actually not decisive, and in the end the armistice was reached by other channels.

The end of the war saw the prestige of the papacy at an all-time high. Many nations had ambassadors accredited with the Vatican. The President of the United States sent his personal representative, while a constant stream of the world's celebrities moved through its portals. The Holy Year of 1950 brought millions of more humble pilgrims to the tomb of Peter. The Pope gave daily addresses on every conceivable subject and was widely quoted around the world. The number of Catholic dioceses increased during his reign from 1,696 to 2,048. The Vatican's economic power followed suit as its heavy investments in real estate and industry brought it a big share of the postwar Italian boom, and its newly created bank-or, more properly, the Institute for the Works of region-did a brisk business.

While Pius had striven to maintain impartiality during the war, the upsurge of antireligious communism in the west after the war caused him to align the Church more and more with the Western democracies. Instead of trying to foster detente with the Iron Curtain countries, the Pope, in fact helped to exacerbate relations by using every means to mobilize world opinion against the Communists. With Italy and Rome itself under grave danger of a Communist takeover, he issued a decree in 1949 by which all Catholics belonging to the Communist party were automatically excommunicated. He also tried to use his influence over the dominant Christian Democratic party to get a ban on the Communist party in Italy.

In internal Church affairs also, the Pope drove a hard line and stood firm against most attempts at innovation, perhaps feeling that the climate of opinion in the Church was not yet ready for the obviously needed modernizations. But he did give the College of Cardinals a majority of non-Italians-for the first time in modern history. However, he carried to new heights the almost mythical exaltation of the monarchical papacy and continued to centralize power in the Curia at the expense of the bishops-an extreme of papalism that would soon bring a reaction.

He was extremely cautious as regards theological and liturgical developments. Two of his major encyclicals, *Divina Afflante Spiritu* and *Mystici Corporis* both of 1943, were, however, certainly progressive documents, the one allowing Catholic biblical scholars to apply the methods of form criticism in their exegesis, and the other summing up recent theological developments that emphasized the unity of the Church in the Mystical Body of Christ.

But in general Pius evinced little sympathy or understanding toward the new currents in theology and tried to apply the brakes to certain fast-moving French and German theologians. Like his predecessors since Leo XIII, he equated theology with Thomist theology, and in his encyclical *Humani Generis* he warned Catholics against possible aberrations of the new historical theology.

When he died in 1958, the fifty-one cardinals (only seventeen of them Italians) who met to elect the next Pope were almost evenly divided between those who felt the need for a definite break with Pacelli's triumphalist Church and those in favor of continuing it. The one finally chosen after a three-day struggle supposedly reflected a compromise: Angelo Roncalli, the seventy-six-year-old patriarch of Venice, reputed to be moderate and conciliatory. Probably no one on either side had even an inkling of the revolutionary ideas percolating behind the old man's peasant face as they knelt to do him homage.

The first surprise came when he chose the name John-a name that hadn't been taken since the notorious anti-Pope John XXIII had been deposed at the Council of Constance. Roncalli soon showed that

he would not be intimidated by Vatican protocol or inhibited by the memory of his august predecessor. As people soon realized, this priest, clad in a white cassock with his rotund frame, massive head, big nose, and powerful jaw was a totally new kind of Pope: a simple, spontaneous person who loved life and loved people and was not at all afraid to show it. Heedless of papal etiquette, he invited friends to his dinner table and wandered through the streets of Rome, speaking with all and sundry, visiting hospitals and prisons and making little gestures and telling jokes that soon were repeated around the world. One of the favorites was how, as he recounted, he often awoke during the night, thinking himself still a cardinal and worrying over a difficult decision he would have to make. He would then say to himself: "I'll talk it over with the Pope!" But then he would remember, "I'm the Pope!" "Well," he would conclude, "I'll talk it over with Our Lord!"

At first the world was astonished-people had almost forgotten that Popes were also human beings-but then they took him to their hearts and poured out their affection for him. Gradually every detail of his past was dug up and became familiar: his birth of a poor peasant family near Bergamo; his entrance into a seminary at the age of fourteen; his work as a young priest secretary as professor of Church history and as secretary to the man who so greatly influenced him, Bishop Radini-Tedeschi; and his long, humiliating nineteen year exile as a papal envoy in the Near East, followed by his turn as nuncio in Paris and finally as patriarch of Venice. Though his pontificate was destined to be one of the shortest in modern history (four years and seven months), it was undoubtedly one of the most important and, in fact, really amounted to a revolution that brought to an end the Tridentine Era of the Church and the whole fortress mentality characteristic of the Roman Catholic Church since Trent.

It could all be summed up in the word "dialogue"-the dialogue he opened up with the world. Thus he addressed his great encyclicals *Pacem in Terris* and *Mater et Magistra* to all men of good will and spoke in terms of values respected by all and he appealed to all to work together to build a better world. He extended friendly arms to Christians of other communions and made their leaders feel

welcome in the Vatican, where he received them as brother speaking with brother. He reversed dramatically the anti-Communist policy of Pius XII and went to the very limits of possibility in his quest for a more harmonious relation with the Communist world.

However, all of this might easily have perished at his death and a still conservative Curia might easily have interred his revolution with his bones were it not for his convocation of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), where the whole Church assembled in its bishops, fulfilled his magnificent dream of a heart-to-heart conversation with the whole of humanity on the major spiritual issues of the day.