

# BLACKFRIARS

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## PIUS THE ELEVENTH

WHOEVER would write about a modern pope labours under serious handicaps. The public utterances of the popes are veiled by a conventional language that most effectually muffles their personality. In the action of the Roman See upon the universal Church during the time they are its bishop, it is not by any means easy to disentangle the part of the pope and the part of the high official whose trained mind is the papal instrument. Convention, again, seals the mouths of those who could speak about the personal reactions of the pope whether to the personalities who cross his path or to the crises of his reign. And once the pope is dead interest shifts rapidly to his successor. In the reign of that successor, in the press of business and of actuality that absorbs the high officials of the Curia from the moment of the new pope's election, there is little leisure left for the composition of memoirs by those who really knew the pope who has died. The portrait of a pope has thus to be built up from scanty materials indeed, and the most promising of these, from the biographical artist's point of view, are only too often sadly lacking in authenticity. If Pius XI had been a letter writer as industrious as Queen Victoria, if he had kept a diary, and if there were any chance of these documents seeing the light, then we might, some one might, at some future day, be in a position really to analyse his personality in the best French manner, and set his greatness before the world with the skill of a Gainsborough or a Goya. As it is . . .

The almost universal voice of the press has already made up its mind to the dead pope's essential greatness. With a warm friendliness that is something new it has rallied to honour the memory of the champion of human liberty

and of the rights of conscience. In a crude simplicity, seventeen years ago, it cheered the advent of the alpinist pope, and it is in part this same instinctive admiration for the 'bonny fecht,' refined by the discipline which the successive crises of those seventeen years have forced on even the least serious among us, that is at the basis of the general sympathetic admiration amid which, after heroic struggles with disabling old age, Pius XI has rendered up his great soul.

Without in any way attempting to anticipate the better judgment that will come with time, we can perhaps set out some of the achievements of the pontificate, and make something more than a guess at the sources in the pope from which they came.

The event of the pontificate which was at once the most spectacular and, to its author, admittedly the most satisfactory, was the Lateran Accord of February 11th, 1929. And no event, in all its parts, was more characteristic of Pius XI, more marked by all the varied strength of his character. On that day two documents were signed for the high contracting parties, a treaty that ended for ever the 'Roman Question' and a concordat which emancipated the Catholic Church in the kingdom of Italy. Pius XI, from his first pronouncement on the matter, made the very day on which the great news was published, was at great pains to have it understood that of the two documents the Concordat was the more important. While Treaty and Concordat stood together, so that if one were to go the other would fall with it, it was for the sake of the Concordat that the Treaty had been negotiated, and consented to. By the Concordat the pope, to use his own words, had 'given back Italy to God, and God to Italy.' And as the price of this he gladly liquidated the question of his rights as the civil ruler of the old papal states, ravished from his predecessor two generations before and still detained by the House of Savoy.

The Lateran Accord was emphatically the act of the

priest and the bishop who, to bring it about, suppressed the rightly aggrieved and long suffering Christian prince. In this respect the now famous event only exemplified what Pius XI continually preached to Catholics as their duty in every politico-religious crisis that his time knew, namely, that they should clearly distinguish between their lawful political pre-occupations and the interests of religion. It was a lesson in act on the primacy of the spiritual, and it was by no means unintentionally that the style in which the liberated sovereign of the new State chose to make his first public appearance, was sacerdotally vested in alb and cope, and bearing the Blessed Sacrament, in the Corpus Christi procession of 1929.

Pius XI was not among those Catholics, and such have ever abounded, who carefully concealed their spiritual aims behind a published concern for the material improvement of mankind. If the Church has ever done anything to better the daily life of man it has done so accidentally. The special mission of Catholicism is spiritual. In his very first encyclical *Ubi Arcano Dei* the pope pointed to the common lack of esteem for spiritual realities as the root of all the world's ills, *nihil pervulgatius quam bona sempiterna*. His survey of Europe as the War and the Peace Treaties had left it comes to its logical end in a kind of mission-sermon simplicity. The spiritual is everywhere despised and man everywhere is giving way before his ancient triple danger 'the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life.'

In the thirty-six years that passed between the end of his seminary days and the amazing appointment of the Vatican librarian to be Vicar-Apostolic to Poland, Don Achilles Ratti had given a good half of his time to an intensive apostolate, as preacher, teacher, and director of souls. The main centre of this hidden activity was the Cenacle convent at Milan. Here he preached annually retreats, novenas, courses of sermons. He gave classes in Apologetics and classes in Christian Doctrine. He had his

own confraternities to direct. He prepared adults for Baptism and children for Confirmation and for First Communion. Particularly, he formed one generation after another of Milanese school-mistresses, every Saturday morning finding him at his place in the convent confessional, and thence issuing forth every few minutes to give Communion to his penitents if they were fasting.

Many memories remain of this busy life, which entailed some two hundred sermons, lectures or conferences every year. The most significant thing is the universal testimony to the solid doctrinal foundation that underlay all this. As the priest charged to form the seminarians of Milan to the difficult art of preaching, Don Ratti had been known, had been notorious, one might say, for his persistent harking back to the classic masters of sacred eloquence, for his everlasting citation of St. Ambrose, St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom. His own pastoral direction was drawn from the masters too, from the great theologians and from Holy Scripture.

The pope whom the Cenacle—no less than the Ambrosian Library—gave to the Church was above all things a pastor of souls, and the priestly character determined every action of his pontificate, as surely as it determined such a characteristic gesture as his staying on in Warsaw to await the Bolshevik invader in the great crisis of August, 1920. 'I am not, like yourselves, a diplomatist only,' he said to his colleagues. 'As a priest I have the duty of helping to keep up this people's courage.' It was the apostolate of the Cenacle that formed the priest in him—and the great priest he was did much to form and fashion the Cenacle of Milan. As pope he publicly thanked God for the great opportunity this long service had been, 'In this way the Lord gave Us, as a change from study and immersion in books, those souls "in fossil," this spiritual contact with living souls.' It was for him he declared, 'a beginning of that Catholic Action which, much later, was to have so large a place in Our cares and in Our will.'

The primacy of the spiritual, care to establish this wherever it has been lost, the priest's understanding that in treason to this ideal lies the final destruction for men's souls, and the priest's charitable concern to save, it is in such elements of his life as these that, it seems to me, the key to the achievement of Pius XI is to be found.

Here, in his concern for the emancipation of the spiritual from the temporal as a preliminary to its enthronement above the temporal, is the secret of his vigorous action in the matter of the Action Française in France, the secret of his anxiety over affairs in Germany, of his never-ceasing watchfulness (and repeated intervention, *opportune, importune*) over the new régime in Italy. And it is characteristic of his simple natural courage, his Lombard frankness, that it was in the case where intervention was most fraught with possible danger to himself, that he denounced the evil most outspokenly. Let anyone read the long series of warnings, about the super-exaltation of the state, addressed to Italy, from the first short notes of 1923 to the thunderous indignation of *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* and the last touching appeals of 1938, and he must agree that not since the popes of the Middle Ages has anyone, from that See, so plainly and so boldly risked all to give an anti-Christian danger its right name.

This concern for the primacy of the spiritual, and the determination to do all in his power to secure, from Catholics in the first place, a due practical recognition of the all-important truth, is evident throughout the teaching and directions which, during seventeen years, Pius XI lavished on the Church. The sin of sins, for Pius XI, is *Laicismus*—the attitude of the Catholic who has two moralities, a Catholic morality where the theological virtues and the virtue of Religion are concerned, and a pagan outlook in public life and in matters of Justice. It is in the *Ubi Arcano Dei* that he first draws the portrait of this pest of modern Catholicism, the Catholic whose Catholicism is rigidly confined to his private life and spiritual devotions.

Such conduct is stigmatised as 'modernism in morals.' There is another criticism and condemnation of this type in *Quadragesimo Anno* and again in the masterly letter on Communism, *Divini Redemptoris*.

It was to bring home to every Catholic the vital, practical character of this truth that the public life of the world is subject to God and God's laws, and that 'only through the reign of Christ can the peace of Christ be realised' that Pius XI, in 1926, established the great feast of Christ the King. In the office he wrote for it his teaching is admirably set forth.

One very notable feature of the long pontificate has been a renaissance of papal diplomacy, whose chief sign is the group of seventeen new concordats. Here again, it is no mere fancy that descries, at the source of this immense activity, the soul of a great pastor. The concordats secure the free practice of Catholicism to all the Catholic subjects of the various powers. They secure a legal existence for the religious orders and for the various lay societies through which Catholicism is corporately active. They guarantee to the State the loyalty of its Catholic subjects as a religious duty and, a point of immense importance to Pius XI, they eliminate all chance that a Catholic shall ever be torn between his religious duty and the will of the temporal ruler.

This last point, care for the conscience of the ordinary Catholic, anxiety that no unusual strain shall be placed upon it, is not indeed a virtue peculiar to Pius XI among the popes. The Roman Church has generally been ready to stretch avoid principles to the very limits of the possible in order to avoid the scandals that inevitably follow on these conflicts between Church and State. But Don Achilles Ratti had had, in this matter, a peculiarly realist experience. He was born a subject of the Austro-Hungarian Emperor, and he was scarcely out of his cradle when his native Lombardy was delivered from its oppressor by the King of Sardinia. But the liberator of Milan was also the

despoiler of the Papal State, and, even in his own states, he had shown himself tyrannically hostile to monasticism, and a would-be caesar-pope. Then the future Pius XI, as a boy of thirteen, saw his own king instal himself at Rome, the papal capital. For a patriot Lombard who was also a good Catholic, the next thirty years were necessarily years of serious strain.

The Ratti, apparently, were in all this time, moderates, who hoped for an ultimate reconciliation and meanwhile steered successfully between the sterile suggestions of the crafty Liberal State and the no less sterile stupidities of the Catholic *intransigentissimi*. Whatever their own opinions, they loyally obeyed the papal directions. And they maintained a respectful loyalty to the ruler who, whatever his position at Rome, was the lawful ruler in Milan. It is not to be supposed, however, and there is evidence to prove the contrary, that Don Achilles Ratti was unaware of, or indifferent to, the strain which this iniquitous state of affairs imposed on the Catholics of his own generation. And it is not fancy to suggest that his real knowledge of what such a crisis might entail for souls was a leading motive in that general endeavour to reconstruct the relations of Church and State which distinguished his reign. Indeed, in the different speeches Pius XI made regarding the Italian Treaties he stated explicitly his joy that now there need be no obstacle to the Italian's being perfectly loyal to both the powers that ruled his life.

A further matter in which the priest in Pius XI found a means to relieve Catholic consciences from a possible strain was the delicate business of Catholic activity in political life. The first solution to the question how might the new institution of nineteenth century democracy best be turned to serve the cause of God, had been to organise Catholics *as such* in a political party. But, whatever the merits of this solution, and whatever benefits it may, in certain cases, have brought to all concerned, it suffered from a radical defect. It failed to distinguish between the

Catholic end in view, some ideal to which Catholics as such must necessarily pay homage, and the means chosen to attain this ideal, means not of their nature Catholic, even where they were not characterised by elements hostile to Catholic ideals. All over the continent, in countries where there was an officially Catholic political party, there were to be met Catholics who disagreed more or less violently with the methods or the direction of the party, and whose Catholicism was therefore looked upon askance by the majority of their co-religionists. This situation, thanks to the intervention of Pius XI, has now very largely passed away. So long as a party is not, of its nature, anti-Catholic, any Catholic may belong to it. The ideal is that Catholics, lawfully members of all lawful parties, act within their parties as intelligent instructed Catholics must always act everywhere, acting upon their own milieu and seeing that this milieu does not unduly react upon themselves. Here is the essence of that Catholic Action of which so much has been heard in recent years, and which Pius XI never tired of styling 'the apple of my eye.' Catholics are in politics as citizens—as Catholic citizens, of course, and as citizens who are good Catholics. But as Catholics they have no politics, and everywhere Pius XI has done his best to withdraw the clergy wholly and entirely from all political activity.

The long 'hidden life' of Pius XI, the thirty years during which, from the Ambrosian Library and his Cenacle chaplaincy, he watched the life of the great archdiocese go by, and the six years during which, from the Vaticana, his keen trained mind observed the activity of the higher forms of ecclesiastical life, revealed to him the secret source of more than one weakness in the conduct of ecclesiastical affairs. A great chapter in his biography might well be '*Pius XI: the Reformer.*' Without spending time on any list of all he attempted in this direction, it may be permitted to refer at least to the principal remedy he prescribed for one of the principal weaknesses. Something



must be said of his care for the formation of an ever more competent clergy, for the deepening and strengthening of Catholic intellectual life, that Catholic Thought from which all Catholic Action must derive, and for his development of all his predecessors' devotion to the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas.

There are unmistakeable indications in the published work of Don Achilles Ratti that, long before he came within sight of high ecclesiastical office, the thought of learning as 'the eighth sacrament, the sacrament of the cleric'—the phrase of St. Francis de Sales which Pius XI made his own in a memorable encyclical—was often in his mind. It was but natural that so learned a priest, a priest who was indeed, in very many ways, one of the most learned men in Europe, should be concerned for Catholics not to be outstripped in intellectual efficiency by their non-Catholic rivals. As pope, in the great encyclical, *Deus Scientiarum Dominus*, that reorganised the Catholic universities of the world, he expressly demanded of them that they should aim at the very maximum of technical efficiency, and in one weighty document after another he urged upon the superiors of the clergy and of the religious orders the primary nature of their duty ceaselessly to improve the education of the clergy. In such letters as the *Unigenitus Dei Filius* and *Latinarum Litterarum*, Pius XI is at no pains to disguise his anxiety at shortcomings that are manifest in this matter, and to the practical character of his determination to secure an improvement such actions bear witness as his appointment of Apostolic Visitors to the seminaries of Italy (1931) and Great Britain (1938) or, still more forcibly, his personal assumption of the direction of the Congregation for Seminaries and Universities on the death of its prefect Cardinal Bisleti.

Pius XI's own record as a scholar must be read elsewhere. Such a paper as this would not suffice even to catalogue its detail. He was an érudit rather than a philosopher or theologian, a humanist primarily rather than a

speculative. Whatever his native bent, his long professional work at the Ambrosian had necessarily had this effect. But the Pope who on so many occasions repeated and emphasised the desires, the wishes and the commands of his predecessors as to the primacy to be given in all Catholic schools to the method and the principles of St. Thomas, and who crowned these utterances so gloriously in the great letter *Studiorum Duce*m had his own, by no means insignificant, personal association with the Thomist revival.

It is perhaps not so often realised as it needs to be that only now is the Church beginning to reap in its rulers the benefits of that revival which Leo XIII's great encyclical *Aeterni Patris* inaugurated. This appeared on St. Dominic's Day, 1879, and it was in the following October that Achilles Ratti came to Rome to complete his ecclesiastical studies.

Pius XI was, then, one of the first fruits of the Leonine revival of St. Thomas. If, as a student, he only knew it in its first experimental stage, he knew it as a thing intimately connected with the great pope, for he gained his doctorate in Philosophy, in 1882, in the Roman Academy of St. Thomas, which Leo had recently reorganised. And his tutor was none other than that veteran Liberatore, at whose enthusiasm for St. Thomas the Rome of Pius XI had smiled good humouredly, as it had once smiled at De Rossi. Liberatore had survived the smiles, to sing his *Nunc Dimittis*, and he might, could he have foreseen the future, have sung *Te Deum* with a full heart, on that day in 1882 when, to Leo XIII, he presented, as a kind of first fruits, the young doctor who, that year, had so brilliantly crowned his course, Achilles Ratti.

Pius XI had never the shattering intellectual brilliance of Leo XIII, but he had immense reserves of ordered knowledge, learning in abundance, technical skill, a passion for work and the ability to train others and make them work too. And he had what in this country we call character. This

he possessed supremely. And for every conscious minute of a long seventeen years, in a union of prayer that never ceased, Pius XI, with almost superhuman energy and will, gave all his rich personality to the service of Christ Our Lord and His mystical bride. May he soon receive his rich reward.

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