

**The Collaboration of Neutrals:  
Vatican-American Diplomacy, 1939-1941**

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As events in Europe continued to devolve after the Munich Pact of 1938, two influential, neutral states were becoming increasingly vocal in putting to an end the continent's downward spiral. The Vatican in Rome, led first by fiery Pope Pius XI before the succession of Pope Pius XII in March 1939, recognized a war would be catastrophic for Christianity in Europe, not to mention its fears of the tremendous loss of life which would be inflicted upon Europeans of all faiths. Across the Atlantic Ocean, President Franklin Roosevelt, hamstrung by isolationist policies imposed by Congress after involvement in the First World War, understood the necessity of making his voice heard in the name of peace before it was too late. The Vatican and the United States indirectly worked with each other throughout 1939 before officially joining forces in early 1940.

It only made sense that the two collaborated with each other during this period. The Pope's moral authority over the millions of Catholics in Europe could not be ignored, and Europe was keeping a wary eye on an America that was potentially a sleeping tiger. Additionally, the Vatican felt American support would give its words—since words were all it had without an army of its own—more value to European leaders. The Roosevelt administration, on the other hand, believed the Vatican to be a source of vast intelligence on European affairs that could be mined, and much more importantly, the Pope could mitigate, if not silence altogether, the President's numerous detractors among the American Catholic hierarchy.

The relationship evolved from first establishing quasi-official relations and voicing concerns over the possibility of war throughout 1939, to attempting to keep Italy out of the war in 1940, to finally convincing American Catholics to support Lend-Lease aid to Russia after its German invasion in 1941. The relationship would prove to be amicable, and although it would not stop the war, the coordinated diplomacy represented the last unified front to limit the number of participants. Once that also could not be achieved, Pius XII and Roosevelt began to work to conclude the war as quickly as possible, including preparing isolationist American Catholics for intervention. The relationship would ultimately be much more fruitful for the United States than for the Vatican in terms of tangible results, but it was not a one-way street regarding benefits. Indeed, each side had its needs met in different ways, which is why for two years of official relations—plus 1939—the relationship was so important.

Before expounding any further on the collaboration of these neutral sovereigns, the debate over the Vatican's purported silence over the Holocaust and other wartime atrocities (such as the indiscriminate Allied bombings of German cities) must be acknowledged, but it falls out of the purview of this study. There are numerous other works which address the issue, some of which might be described as either unfairly polemical or hopelessly apologetic.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps a few books worth perusing on both sides of the debate are John Cornwell's *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York: Viking, 1999); Carlo Falconi, *The Silence of Pope Pius XII*, trans. Bernard Wall (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970); Michael O'Carroll, *Pius XII: Greatness Dishonoured* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1980); Oscar Halecki, *Eugenio Pacelli: Pope of Peace* (New York: Creative Age Press, 1951).

the criticisms leveled against the Vatican for its post-1941 (in)actions are valid, analysis of its efforts alongside those of the United States to contain the scope of the war in Europe foreshadows the reticence of Pope Pius XII of which he would be accused in his handling of crimes against humanity during the course of the war. Nevertheless, analysis will also show the Vatican's usefulness in aiding President Roosevelt's efforts for peace, and, ultimately, war.

The path to diplomatic relations between the United States and the Vatican had been in the works for several years prior to 1940. Vatican Secretary of State Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli visited the United States in autumn of 1936, the highest ranking Vatican official to ever come to America. During the course of his tour, he met President Roosevelt—*after* the election for fear of angering Protestants—and the two men agreed to begin the process of establishing official relations.<sup>2</sup> After the meeting, the Vatican made its voice heard on the world stage, impressing the United States. Pope Pius XI recognized the threat of Hitler and the National Socialist Party to the peace of Europe and to the existence of the Church. The persecution of the Catholic Church in Germany and the rearmament of that nation greatly troubled the Pontiff, so much so that he risked incurring even more of the Gestapo's wrath by issuing the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* (*With Deep Anxiety*) in March 1937. Described as "one of the greatest condemnations of a national regime ever pronounced by the Vatican," it denounced the neo-paganism extolled by the German state and the subjugation of all other creeds.<sup>3</sup> The Nazis exacted revenge on the Church with attacks against both the clergy and laity, but the Pope refused to relent in his pronouncements against "exaggerated nationalism," and he would continue to speak out against Nazi policies for the remainder of his papacy.<sup>4</sup>

Pius XI, however, was actually more concerned with the Communist menace emanating from the Soviet Union. Whereas Germany allowed the practice of religion—at least for the time being—Red Russia denied religious freedom and systematically closed all but a few Catholic churches.<sup>5</sup> Fearing that Communism would spread westward, Pius XI issued yet another encyclical, *Divini Redemptoris*, only five days after *Mit Brennender Sorge*. Just as he had condemned the neo-paganism of the Nazis, he vehemently spoke against the militant atheism of Communism, expounding that "Communism is intrinsically wrong, and no one who would save Christian civilization may collaborate with it in any undertaking whatsoever."<sup>6</sup> This pronouncement would have important ramifications with the United States when Roosevelt attempted to convince American Catholics to support Lend-Lease aid to Russia in 1941.

Knowing that the Vatican wanted a resumption of relations ever since the United States had severed ties in 1870, the initiative was placed solely in Roosevelt's hands, but the idea was politically risky in a nation traditionally wary of the papacy. Nevertheless, he did not shy away from the subject, broaching it in the summer of 1937 to entice Catholics to support revisions to

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<sup>2</sup> John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope* (New York: Viking, 1999), 176.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Rhodes, *The Vatican in the Age of Dictators, 1922-1945* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 204. An encyclical is the most important document the Pope can issue, as the document represents the official teaching of the Catholic Church.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>5</sup> George Flynn, *Roosevelt and Romanism: Catholics and American Diplomacy, 1937-1945*, Contributions in American History, ed. Jon L. Wakelyn, no. 47 (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1976), 148

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

neutrality laws as well as in a speech that October expressing a desire for nations to isolate and cut ties with aggressor nations. The plan, the President told Chicago prelate George Cardinal Mundelein, would include the Vatican.<sup>7</sup>

When Pius XI died in February 1939, the most important conclave of the century resulted with the election of Secretary of State Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli, who took the name Pius XII. The new pope had plenty of experience with diplomacy. For the nine years prior to his elevation to the papacy, Pacelli served as the Vatican's Secretary of State, the second highest position inside the Vatican. Throughout the turbulent 1930s, Pacelli and Pope Pius XI closely collaborated in formulating foreign policy for the Catholic Church.<sup>8</sup> Even before his appointment to lead the Secretariat, Pacelli had spent all but his first two years as a priest serving in the Vatican bureaucracy. In February of 1917, Pope Benedict XV appointed him to become the nuncio (ambassador) to Munich, promptly making Pacelli a key figure in attempts to negotiate an end to the First World War. After the war, he remained Benedict's—and in early 1922, Pius XI's—liaison to the Weimar Republic and moved to Berlin. His diplomatic skills provided the Vatican with more power over the German Church at the expense of the secular government. As he adapted to his role as Secretary of State in the 1930s, he firmly opposed the Communist menace which was evident in Russia, Mexico, and Spain.<sup>9</sup> He also traveled extensively, visiting most all of Europe, crossing the Atlantic to South America, and, as previously mentioned, touring the United States. Undoubtedly, Cardinal Pacelli felt the pulse of world affairs firsthand. Historian John Cornwell argues that the Secretary of State continually appeased Hitler throughout the 1930s, but he fails to acknowledge that appeasement was the prevailing diplomatic approach to Hitler up through the conference at Munich in late 1938. Therefore, the Vatican's efforts under Pacelli should be deemed no more (or less) contemptible than those of the English and French governments.

Because of his previous experience with the German nation in the 1920s and his efforts as Pius XI's right-hand man as the Secretary of State, the English and French governments—each of which took the unusual step of speaking to their native Cardinals in order to influence their votes for Pacelli—welcomed the outcome, as did the United States, but Italy and Germany both feared he would continue his predecessor's policies.<sup>10</sup> The new Pope certainly sought to prevent another war just as his predecessor did, but Pius XII would prove to be much less forceful in his pronouncements than the recently-deceased Pontiff, preferring instead to adopt a more conciliatory manner. His less-aggressive approach to resolving European tensions quickly became evident.

On March 12, 1939, one day after the papal coronation, Germany invaded Czechoslovakia. President Roosevelt had sent telegrams to Hitler and Mussolini requesting that they pledge a guarantee against further aggression a mere day before the invasion, but Pius XII refused to support the message due to the poor timing of it, and because it singled out the Axis for bearing the sole responsibility of maintaining the peace. Such support, the new, cautious Pope reasoned, would make the Vatican appear to be breaking its neutrality in favor of the West.<sup>11</sup> While the United States had hoped for the moral reinforcement the Holy See could provide, administration officials did not appear to be overly disappointed by the lack of cooperation. In fact, when the Vatican announced its plan for a conference of the five European powers in April,

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<sup>7</sup> Gerald P. Fogarty, *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy*, Pápste Und Papsttum, Band 21 (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1982), 249.

<sup>8</sup> Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, 111.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 217-218.

<sup>11</sup> Fogarty, *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy*, 259; Flynn, *Roosevelt and Romanism*, 102.

some American officials in Europe believed it signified “belated collaboration” despite the purposely omitted invitation to America to participate.<sup>12</sup>

The proposed conference, though, never materialized. Even though the Munich Conference the previous fall had been recognized as a thorough disaster, Pius XII naïvely, if not arrogantly, believed he could broker peace with Hitler before a war could start. He was not without encouragement, however. Several members in the British and French governments were still willing to concede more to Hitler but could not say so publicly.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Secretary of State Luigi Cardinal Maglione knew that Mussolini did not want to go to war—at least not at this stage—and Maglione even attempted to enlist the dictator to mitigate Hitler’s demands, but to no avail.<sup>14</sup> The United States was probably the most enthusiastic about the Pope’s initiative. Cardinal Maglione made assurances that if the conference actually convened, President Roosevelt’s “assistance and co-operation” would be requested by Pius XII.<sup>15</sup> American Under-Secretary of State Sumner Welles declared, “Regardless of the outcome of the attempts to bring about a conference of nations, the efforts of the Holy Father have been of the utmost value” because of his influence at a time of international crisis.<sup>16</sup>

The invitation to Roosevelt never had to be extended, because predictably, the idea fell apart. Mussolini announced that the tensions which might lead to war had effectively subsided, and thus there was no longer a need for the European powers to meet. Amazingly, the Vatican accepted this absurd notion and dropped its proposal on May 10, 1939.<sup>17</sup> How quickly Pius XII discarded his proposal can only call into question his sincerity to see it come to fruition. If he and Secretary of State Maglione actually believed the European situation had decreased in gravity, then both men were incredibly naïve. This could hardly be the case, however, as both men were savvy enough after years of diplomatic experience to know that Hitler had more on his agenda than Czechoslovakia. The peace conference proposal has to be deemed an empty gesture to show that, like his predecessor, Pius XII possessed a commitment to peace and that he was willing to be the mediator.<sup>18</sup> When the situation clearly remained unsettled, though, letting the conference collapse without any objection was a curious way of showing this desire.

Perhaps more curious is that, in the Vatican’s efforts to foster relations with the United

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<sup>12</sup> Flynn, *Roosevelt and Romanism*, 103. The five invited nations were France, Britain, Germany, Italy, and Poland.

<sup>13</sup> Owen Chadwick, *Britain and the Vatican During the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 60; Cornwell, *Hitler’s Pope*, 224.

<sup>14</sup> Chadwick, *Britain and the Vatican*, 61.

<sup>15</sup> “Cicognani to Carroll, 15 May 1939,” in *Le Saint Siege et la guerre en Europe: Mars 1949-Aout 1940* (1965); English edition by Gerard Noel, *The Holy See and the War in Europe, March 1939-August 1940* (“Records and Documents of the Holy See Relating to the Second World War,” Vol. 1 [Washington, D.C., and Cleveland: Corpus Books, 1968]), 136. Hereafter cited as *The Holy See*.

<sup>16</sup> “National Catholic Welfare Council Under-Secretary Carroll to Washington Apostolic Delegate Cicognani, 16 May 1939,” *The Holy See*, vol. 1, 136.

<sup>17</sup> Flynn, *Roosevelt and Romanism*, 104.

<sup>18</sup> Cornwell, *Hitler’s Pope*, 223.

States, it snubbed the Americans for a conference which had little hope of ever taking place. The reason for not inviting the United States to the conference table can only be speculated, but it is likely that Pius XII did not believe an American presence would have been beneficial since the United States did not have a direct interest in the situation. Nevertheless, such a gesture certainly would have signaled the Vatican's seriousness for cooperation. Instead, it would seem relations between the two sovereigns were off to an inauspicious beginning.

Roosevelt and the State Department bore no hard feelings, however, as the following month in June, Sumner Welles expressed to Washington's Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Amleto Cicognani, the President's "wishes to co-operate with any Government or Power inclined to promote peace" and how Roosevelt "would be honored and pleased to receive suitable suggestions from the Holy See" in such an endeavor.<sup>19</sup> Despite the overture, Roosevelt remained unprepared to announce the re-establishment of diplomatic relations. The State Department, particularly Under-Secretary of State Welles, prodded him to do so. Welles wrote that the relationship would be highly advantageous to the United States because "it is unquestionable that the Vatican has many sources of information, particularly with regard to what is actually going on in Germany, Italy, and Spain, which we do not possess."<sup>20</sup> Ambassador to Italy William Phillips concurred, and he further argued that America "would be supporting the Holy See in its well-known efforts to preserve peace in Europe at a moment of great tension."<sup>21</sup>

By October of 1939, a month after Germany's invasion of Poland, President Roosevelt made the decision to establish relations with the Vatican for the somewhat-disingenuous reason of working together to help place war refugees.<sup>22</sup> That he had to devise such a poor excuse is indicative of the fear he had of the inevitable Protestant opposition to such a move. Francis Spellman, Archbishop of New York, reported this to Rome, stating that Roosevelt "was looking for a moment and occasion for a persuasive appeal to the American people."<sup>23</sup> The moment arrived just days before Christmas. Roosevelt personally wrote Pope Pius XII requesting His Holiness to accept Myron Taylor as a personal representative of the President—as opposed to being an actual ambassador in charge of an embassy—"in order that our parallel endeavors for peace and the alleviation of suffering may be assisted."<sup>24</sup> After his first discussion with Roosevelt

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<sup>19</sup> "Apostolic Delegate in Washington Cicognani to Maglione, 11 June 1939," *The Holy See*, vol. 1, 194.

<sup>20</sup> Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers, 1939*, 5 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1956), "The Under-Secretary of State (Welles) to President Roosevelt, 1 August 1939," vol. 2, 868.

<sup>21</sup> "Ambassador Phillips to Sumner Welles," *Foreign Relations, 1939*, vol. 2, 869.

<sup>22</sup> "Memorandum By President Roosevelt to the Secretary of State, 2 October 1939," *Foreign Relations, 1939*, vol. 2, 869. Both the United States and the Vatican shared an interest in the plight of refugees, but there is no reason to believe this convenient excuse superseded the necessity for official diplomatic communications.

<sup>23</sup> "Archbishop Spellman of New York to Cardinal Maglione, 25 October 1939," *The Holy See*, vol. 1, 302.

<sup>24</sup> "Letter from President Roosevelt to His Holiness, 23 December 1939," in *Wartime Correspondence Between President*

just three years before had raised the possibility for official relations, the Pontiff was ecstatic that it was now a reality. He announced the news in his Christmas message, saying:

Nothing could be more pleasing than this Christmas news as it signifies the coming from the Eminent Head of such a great and powerful nation and promising contribution to . . . the attainment of a just and honourable peace and a more fruitful and widespread action to relieve the suffering of the victims of war.<sup>25</sup>

The first nine months of Pius XII's papacy he displayed peculiar behavior towards the United States. He refused to endorse President Roosevelt's message calling for Hitler and Mussolini to cease their aggressive behavior, nor did he invite the United States to his proposed peace conference the previous May. Perhaps Pius XII believed he could better negotiate with the European rivals without an isolationist transatlantic partner, or perhaps he simply wanted the glory of brokering peace all to himself. Regardless of the reasons for the Vatican's odd behavior, the United States remained eager to assist in the peace efforts of the Holy See. With war finally a reality, Roosevelt opted to send a delegate to Rome, and Pius XII recognized he needed the help of the Americans to limit the war. When Myron Taylor arrived at the Vatican, a fresh period of collaboration was set to begin between the two neutrals.

As if he were an actual ambassador, Myron Taylor presented his credentials to the Pope in February 1940. Taylor's mission was to apprise Roosevelt of the possibility of promoting a negotiated peace to conclude the war and, if no possibility existed, if the United States could exert its influence on Mussolini to prevent his entry into the war.<sup>26</sup> Ending the war as soon as possible remained the Vatican's first priority, but a tour of the European capitals by Sumner Welles—including a meeting with Pius XII—led the American Under-Secretary of State to determine that this was not feasible.<sup>27</sup> As a result, the United States and the Vatican agreed to put all of their weight into maintaining Italy's neutrality.

Taylor enjoyed privileged access to the Pontiff. He met with Pius XII seven times during his initial stay in Rome from February 27 to May 23, a highly unusual number of audiences in such a short span of time.<sup>28</sup> As the Vatican was surrounded by nations either at war or preparing for hostilities, it is no surprise that the American envoy curried special favor with the

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*Roosevelt and Pope Pius XII*, Myron C. Taylor, ed. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1947), 19. Roosevelt encountered a fair amount of outrage over the appointment, but this was assuaged in several ways. First, he did this while Congress was at recess to prevent debate. Second, since Taylor was not an ambassador, approval of his funding did not require Congressional approval. Third, Taylor was an Episcopalian. Fourth, and most importantly, Roosevelt reached out to Protestant and Jewish leaders and encouraged their opinions alongside those of the Catholic leader.

<sup>25</sup> "Christmas Message of Pope Pius XII (Extracts), 24 December 1939," *The Holy See*, vol. 1, 336.

<sup>26</sup> Chadwick, *Britain and the Vatican*, 102.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Harold H. Tittmann, Jr., *Inside the Vatican of Pius XII: The Memoir of an American Diplomat During World War II*, ed. Harold H. Tittmann III (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 10.

Holy See. At the March 18 audience in which Sumner Welles also attended, the Pope told the American diplomats that he believed President Roosevelt's personal intercession would have a very positive impact on Italy's dictator.<sup>29</sup> Welles was much more skeptical of a push by the neutral leaders because he had no reason to believe the antiwar stances of the Church, Italian Foreign Minister Count Galeazzo Ciano, or the Italian public in general meant anything to Mussolini, much less the pleadings of a distant leader who had done little to demonstrate that his nation was willing to get involved.<sup>30</sup> Afterwards, when Welles met with Vatican Secretary of State Maglione, the latter confided that any peace overtures to Germany and Italy would be rebuffed because the two nations were certain of complete victory at this point in the war. Welles agreed with the Cardinal's assessment.<sup>31</sup> The gloomy outlooks of the diplomats were being validated as Mussolini and Hitler discussed their plans at the same time as the Vatican-American meetings, and the Duce declared his intention to take Italy to war when the time was right.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the pessimism of Welles and blissfully ignorant of the details of the summit between the two fascist dictators, Pope Pius XII and President Roosevelt pressed forward in pressuring Mussolini. In the spirit of open exchanges of ideas, Maglione suggested to Myron Taylor a relaxing of the Atlantic blockade so Italy would have a window to the ocean, as well as for the Americans to make concrete proposals rather than simply indicate a willingness to negotiate. The President's representative agreed on both points and promised to advise his superiors.<sup>33</sup> Roosevelt, however, expected a mutual partnership. Rather than taking all action by himself, the President was confident that joining forces with the Pope would apply the right amount of pressure to keep Mussolini from becoming a belligerent.<sup>34</sup> The Pope agreed to take a "parallel action" if Roosevelt made a personal appeal to the Duce, but he asked for his role to be kept quiet in order to maintain the Vatican's neutral status.<sup>35</sup> Pius XII wanted his actions to appear to be independent of America's, a nation which openly voiced its sympathies for their fellow democracies in Great Britain and France, fearing such collaboration could result in retribution against the Church in both Germany and Italy.

Roosevelt and the Pontiff simultaneously appealed to Mussolini to keep Italy peaceful by tag-teaming him with flattery. In the Pope's letter dated April 24, Pius XII praised Italy's dictator for his efforts "to avoid and then to localise the war," attributing to him "the high merit of having contained the calamity with certain limits." The Holy See then trusted Mussolini would continue his policies, and therefore "Europe may be saved from greater ruins and grief; and in

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<sup>29</sup> Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers, 1940*, 5 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1958), "Welles to Roosevelt, 18 March 1940," vol. 1, 107.

<sup>30</sup> Elisa A. Carrillo, "Italy, the Holy See and the United States, 1939-1945," in *Papal Diplomacy in the Modern Age*, ed. Peter C. Kent and John F. Pollard (Westport, CN: Praeger Publishers, 1994), 138.

<sup>31</sup> "Cardinal Maglione's Notes, 18 March 1940," *The Holy See*, vol. 1, 375.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> "Cardinal Maglione's Notes, 2 May 1940," *The Holy See*, vol. 1, 404.

<sup>34</sup> Flynn, *Roosevelt and Romanism*, 117.

<sup>35</sup> Tittmann, *Inside the Vatican*, 12.

particular Your and Our beloved country may be saved from this calamity.”<sup>36</sup> Likewise, in the letter Ambassador William Phillips read to Mussolini one week later, President Roosevelt commended the dictator’s promotions of peace, but the letter also possessed a caveat which tacitly threatened the intervention of the United States if fascism continued its quest for world domination.<sup>37</sup>

The Duce appeared to be genuinely happy to receive the note of gratitude when he responded to Pius XII on April 30. He gave no assurance of remaining peaceful, however, stating that the situation was dependent upon “the will and the intention of third parties,” conveniently placing the onus of Italy’s status on the British and the French.<sup>38</sup> Mussolini issued a much more curt response to the American President, saying that no guarantee of peace could be made until basic issues concerning Italian liberty had been resolved, and he told Roosevelt to mind his own business and stay out of European affairs.<sup>39</sup> Such an undiplomatic response might have brought an end to American pressure on Mussolini had Pius XII not implored President Roosevelt to continue pressuring the Italian leader. Keeping Italy neutral received all the more importance when Germany invaded Belgium and the Netherlands on May 10 to begin its Western offensive. Roosevelt sent another three messages on May 14, May 27, and May 31, but these were given to Italian Foreign Minister Ciano because Mussolini refused to receive Ambassador Phillips.<sup>40</sup> Despite being rebuffed on each attempt, some in Washington recommended another try, and a draft was composed but never sent.<sup>41</sup>

The efforts of both the Pope and President Roosevelt failed when Mussolini announced on June 10 that Italy would enter the war the following day. The declaration caught neither neutral by surprise. Sumner Welles, as mentioned above, had possessed little faith in the diplomatic overtures being successful since the plan’s genesis, and by the middle of May, Vatican Secretary of State Maglione had also lost all hope of keeping Italy neutral.<sup>42</sup> Pius XII himself had told Myron Taylor on May 23 of his belief that Mussolini would enter the war within three weeks of their meeting.<sup>43</sup>

In examining the onslaught of pleas to Mussolini, it is curious Pius XII and Cardinal Maglione were content to let the Americans assume the primary burden of keeping Italy out of the war. Roosevelt personally sent four notes on the subject, and it should be recalled that Maglione requested a relaxation of the Atlantic blockade of the Mediterranean Sea. There is no reason to believe that the Vatican was not serious about maintaining Italian neutrality, but the Pope’s single letter seems a meager contribution when compared to Roosevelt’s efforts. The reason for this, the Pontiff intimated to Taylor on May 23, was because he had lost his influence on the Duce.<sup>44</sup> This claim certainly had validity. As early as April 25, Mussolini proclaimed in a

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<sup>36</sup> “Pope Pius XII to Mussolini, 24 April 1940,” *The Holy See*, vol. 1, 395.

<sup>37</sup> “The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Italy (Phillips), 29 April 1940, *Foreign Relations, 1940*, vol. 1, 691-692.

<sup>38</sup> “Mussolini to Pope Pius XII, 30 April 1940,” *The Holy See*, vol. 1, 402.

<sup>39</sup> Tittmann, *Inside the Vatican*, 14.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Flynn, *Roosevelt and Romanism*, 118; Taylor, *Wartime Correspondence*, 33.

<sup>43</sup> Carrillo, “Italy, the Holy See, and the United States,” 138.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*



speech, "The Vatican is the chronic appendicitis of Italy," weakening the country each day.<sup>45</sup> The Pope did little to assuage Mussolini's vitriolic sentiment. When the Vatican received intelligence that Germany was preparing to invade Holland and Belgium in early May, the Pope sent those two nations warnings to prepare, but the messages were deciphered by Italian intelligence.<sup>46</sup> A furious Mussolini effectively severed his ties to the Vatican. Regardless, the Vatican possessed intermediaries in the Italian Foreign Ministry to send its messages just as the Americans passed Roosevelt's messages to the Italian Foreign Minister. After all, Roosevelt had little reason for hope, either, but he exerted his energies for peace until the last possible moment. It does not speak well for His Holiness to have ceased his efforts so quickly.

The only other possible explanation in his defense is that he was losing the propaganda battle against Mussolini, and he feared a further erosion of his leadership among Italian Catholics. On the streets of Rome, marching youth chanted, "Down with the Pope," and Mussolini banned the influential Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, beyond the walls of the Vatican.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps Pius XII believed he could not lead if no one would follow. Whatever the reason for the Pope's reticence, his inaction sharply contrasted with his predecessor who damned the consequences and tirelessly championed peace.

Italy's new status as a belligerent devastated the Vatican. Because the city-state inside Rome was encapsulated by a nation at war, Church officials worried that the Vatican might be overrun by Mussolini's forces or could suffer damage from Allied bombing raids or Rome.<sup>48</sup> Even worse in the eyes of the Pope and Secretary of State Maglione, the Vatican's prestige and importance diminished on the world stage.<sup>49</sup> If the Pope could not convince Catholic Italy to ignore the call to arms, what other nation would listen to his appeals for peace?

Pius XII despaired. The Axis Powers were dominating the battlefield in the summer of 1940, conquering France and forcing Britain back to the home island at Dunkirk, and the United States appeared to have no interest in intervening despite assurances to the contrary. The Pope's spirits flagged under the possibility of Nazi victory, requiring President Roosevelt to write a letter of encouragement asserting, "The whole world needs You in its search for peace and good will."<sup>50</sup> Pius XII desperately wanted an end to hostilities and death—although he regrettably was not willing to speak as vociferously as his predecessor had—but he felt his opportunity had passed. The close relationship he had enjoyed with the United States became estranged but for sporadic notes of enquiry on benign matters. His Holiness was looking for an event in which he could reassert his leadership in the international community. When he got his second chance a year later, the Pope was hesitant to seize it.

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<sup>45</sup> Chadwick, *Britain and the Vatican*, 107.

<sup>46</sup> Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, 242.

<sup>47</sup> Carrillo, "Italy, the Holy See, and the United States," 138.

<sup>48</sup> Tittmann, *Inside the Vatican*, 17. The fear of the Vatican being targeted by bombing raids was not paranoia. Later in the war, after failing to condemn the German blitzkrieg of England in which Italy participated, the British wanted revenge on the Italians and the pleadings of the Holy See to spare the Vatican carried little weight when His Holiness opted not to speak when he was not threatened. Britain never took the option off the table to the Vatican's deep consternation.

<sup>49</sup> Rhodes, *The Vatican in the Age of Dictators*, 248-249.

<sup>50</sup> "Roosevelt to Pope Pius XII, 1 October 1940," in *Wartime Correspondence*, 38.

Hitler changed the tide of the war when he opened the Eastern front by invading the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Just as it did in Western Europe, the German army continued its rapid-paced assaults to which the Soviets slowly reacted. It appeared that the German juggernaut would achieve success in Stalin's land, quickly laying siege to Leningrad and Moscow by October. Only the brutal Russian winter slowed the advance.

The Soviets desperately needed supplies from the West, and President Roosevelt was fully prepared to offer the Communists assistance through the Lend-Lease program which had already been extended to the British. Anticommunist sentiment in America, however, presented a major stumbling block to aiding the Soviets, led particularly by the Catholic Church. It must be recalled that Pope Pius XI had condemned any measure of aid only four years before the invasion of the Soviet Union, and the majority of the American hierarchy, which was already strongly isolationist (and several who were strongly anti-Roosevelt in general), intended to rigidly follow the late Pontiff's encyclical and instruct their congregations to do the same. Roosevelt, looking to acquire broad support on the matter, sought to capitalize on the rapport built with the Vatican over the course of a year and a half and convince Pius XII of the necessity of helping the Communists at this crucial juncture. This was not an easy sell.

First, a Pope dismissing the teachings of a predecessor is rarely done; in fact, such teachings of an encyclical are usually built upon further. The more prevalent problem facing Roosevelt, however, was that he assumed the Vatican viewed Nazism as worse than Communism, which was not necessarily the case. Whereas Pius XII grew increasingly apprehensive about the treatment of the Church in Germany, he looked to the Soviet Union and saw a full-blown offensive against the Catholic Church.<sup>51</sup> The only thing more disconcerting to the Pope than religious conditions inside Russia was his belief that should the Soviets achieve victory, Stalin would seek to expand Communism and its atheism into Eastern Europe and square off against the Christian West in yet another disastrous world war.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, plenty of conservative American bishops and clergy had few qualms about denouncing President Roosevelt's domestic and foreign policies. The most vitriolic was Father Charles Coughlin, a priest in a Detroit suburb whose radio program developed into a political rather than spiritual pulpit, and although at first a Roosevelt supporter, his views evolved into rage against the New Deal and Communism (and by the end of the decade, the Jews). Millions listened to his program every Sunday afternoon.<sup>53</sup> Another, lesser known priest, James Gillis, also used the airwaves to denounce Roosevelt's supposed undermining individual liberty through the creation of the leviathan state and the evil of interventionist policies.<sup>54</sup> While these priests are now considered radicals, mainstream Catholic publications, such as *America* and *Commonweal*, adopted cautious stances on the president's initiatives.<sup>55</sup>

Although generally strong supporters of Roosevelt's domestic programs as part of a wave of social justice dominating Catholic thought during the 1930s, the American Catholic laity

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<sup>51</sup> Tittmann, *Inside the Vatican*, 57.

<sup>52</sup> Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, 260. The fear of an Eastern bloc, of course, would prove to be quite prescient.

<sup>53</sup> Jay Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1985), 403-404.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Gribble, "The Other Radio Priest: James Gillis's Opposition to Franklin Roosevelt's Foreign Policy," *Journal of Church and State* 44 (Summer 2002), 505.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 508.

agreed with the opposition to involvement in global conflicts.<sup>56</sup> Catholics took great pride in their religious identity in the 1930s as the Church grew in both adherents and parishes. The visibility of Catholics in the Roosevelt administration won the President support, and Catholic intellectuals wrote of the New Deal being in line with papal encyclicals concerning social justice.<sup>57</sup> Thus, Catholics were willing to support Roosevelt as long as it did not conflict with Church teaching, and this was evident as the laity followed their bishops on the matter of interventionism in the latter part of the decade. If Roosevelt could win over the bishops, he would win over most all of America's twenty-some million Catholics.

Yet President Roosevelt had to tread carefully in his courtship of the American hierarchy. Protestants maintained their historical suspicions of the Catholic Church and its undemocratic leadership under a pope who has the option of invoking papal infallibility. This was directly counter to the ideals of a democratic nation. Furthermore, Protestants did not readily understand how Catholics could claim to follow two leaders—the pope and the president—and therefore the papists “could not be considered loyal citizens of the United States.”<sup>58</sup> The 1930s, however, served as the beginning of the wane of anti-Catholicism in this nation. Roosevelt's appointment of Catholic officials did wonders for assuaging fears of Catholics in office, and the descendants of the immigrants who were loathed by the Know-Nothing Party of the nineteenth century had become established, well-to-do members of society. Although not eradicated by any means (recall footnote 24 in which Roosevelt made several conciliatory gestures to non-Catholic leaders for his announcement of the Taylor mission), anti-Catholicism began its decline during this period.

Regardless of Protestant reaction to Roosevelt's overtures to Catholics, there were weaknesses in the anticommunist beliefs of the Vatican, and the United States government would seek to exploit them in order to secure aid for the Soviets against Germany. Just as Pius XI's encyclical forbidding aid to Communists could not be ignored, neither could his encyclical condemning the evils of Nazism. The Pope refused to commend the German invasion as an anti-Bolshevik crusade, and his silence led to accusations by the Axis leaders of being a pawn of the Allies. More than a few leaders in the Vatican administration shared those sentiments.<sup>59</sup> The Pope had no intentions of siding for a nation whose religious repression—among other crimes—neared Soviet levels.<sup>60</sup> Privately, though, Pius XII hoped the Germans would destroy Communist Russia and be so weakened in its effort that the West would in turn conquer National Socialism.<sup>61</sup> By August the Vatican began preparing for the inevitability that the United States would be pulled into the war. Vatican Secretary of State Maglione instructed the Apostolic Delegate Amleto Cicognani to start informing American Catholics of the religious conditions in Germany to lay the groundwork for their support of Roosevelt's eventual intervention.<sup>62</sup> This was not a repudiation

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 510; Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, 401-403.

<sup>57</sup> Gribble, “The Other Radio Priest,” 506.

<sup>58</sup> Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, 296.

<sup>59</sup> Chadwick, *Britain and the Vatican*, 195.

<sup>60</sup> Pierre Blet, S.J., *Pius XII and the Second World War: According to the Archives of the Vatican*, trans. by Lawrence J. Johnson (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).

<sup>61</sup> Rhodes, *The Vatican in the Age of Dictators*, 262-263. Some Americans, including Senator Harry S Truman, possessed this hope, as well.

<sup>62</sup> Fogarty, *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy*, 272-73.

of Nazism in favor of Communism, but rather a realistic view given American affinities with Great Britain and sympathies for the Soviets. The Vatican certainly had to believe it was important for American Catholics to support their leaders rather than be labeled as perfidious by Protestant America.

Pius XII, despite serving as the head of a neutral state, had to decide which ideology was the biggest threat to the Church he oversaw, and Roosevelt began the campaign to help the Holy See make the decision which would be favorable to the Allied cause. At a press conference, Roosevelt astounded those in attendance by declaring that the Soviet Constitution guaranteed a religious liberty which was not dissimilar to the religious freedom granted by America's own Constitution.<sup>63</sup> While his statement was not false, it certainly discounted the fact that it was a freedom unexercised under Stalin's regime. On September 3, 1941, the President dispatched Myron Taylor to deliver to Pius XII a letter intended to bolster the image of the irreverent Soviets. In the letter, Roosevelt reiterated what he said at the press conference:

In so far as I am informed, churches in Russia are open. I believe there is a real possibility that Russia may as a result of the present conflict recognize freedom of religion in Russia. . . . In my opinion, the fact is that Russia is governed by a dictatorship, as rigid in its manner of being as is the dictatorship of Germany. I believe, however, that this Russian dictatorship is less dangerous to the safety of other nations than is the German form of dictatorship.<sup>64</sup>

On the first point of churches in Russia being open, the Pope and Secretary of State Maglione found the claim to be entirely ludicrous. Churches throughout Russia had been shut down but for one in Moscow and one in Leningrad, and the priests who obstinately practiced their faith in the open rather than going underground suffered imprisonment or execution.<sup>65</sup> Roosevelt knew this, too. A month before he dispatched his letter, the State Department cabled Harold Tittmann, who served as the Vatican liaison when Myron Taylor was not in Rome, and told him that the United States had no indication of increased religious tolerance in Russia and that there would be no pressure placed upon the Soviets to foster such tolerance.<sup>66</sup> The comparison of religious freedom in Germany and Russia elicited no response from the Vatican because neither the Pope nor Cardinal Maglione knew what to think of one dictator being better than the other—they thought both nations were oppressive, but Germany at least allowed religious practice despite ever-increasing crackdowns. Roosevelt's first attempt to win over Pius XII failed, but he persisted.

The American hierarchy remained virulently opposed to any such aid. Led by the archbishops of influential dioceses such as Boston, Dubuque, Baltimore, and Cincinnati, as well as the Catholic press, the laity flooded the White House and their representatives in Congress their own opposition to aiding the Communists. Only a few bishops had the courage to defy the encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* and support Lend-Lease aid to the Soviets. The most prominent among this small group were Archbishop Francis Spellman of New York, Archbishop Edward Mooney of Detroit, and Bishop Joseph Hurley of St. Augustine, Florida. The latter two, especially, played a vital role in helping the Roosevelt Administration convince Catholics,

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<sup>63</sup> Chadwick, *Britain and the Vatican*, 193.

<sup>64</sup> "Letter from President Roosevelt to His Holiness, 3 September 1941," in *Wartime Correspondence*, 61.

<sup>65</sup> Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, 263.

<sup>66</sup> Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers, 1941*, 7 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1958), "The Acting Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Italy (Phillips), 31 July 1941," vol. 1, 999.

including the Vatican, to support Lend-Lease to Russia. Hurley in 1941 had returned from working for Cardinal Maglione in the Secretariat of State, and his outspokenness in support of intervention in Europe led many to believe he spoke on behalf of the Vatican.<sup>67</sup> Archbishop Mooney, though, was the first to call for a different interpretation of *Divini Redemptoris*, arguing that the encyclical did not prohibit aid to Russians, just to Communists.<sup>68</sup> Despite the efforts of these men, they were still being drowned out by the much louder isolationist clergymen.

The pro-administration bishops may not have had a large impact on the laity, but others listened and took notice. President Roosevelt and his minions, recognizing that promoting Communism over National Socialism failed to make any headway with the Vatican, adopted Mooney's approach in their courting of Pius XII. In a meeting with Secretary of State Maglione, Myron Taylor asked for *Divini Redemptoris* to be interpreted as Archbishop Mooney had suggested, and in a subsequent meeting, Cardinal Maglione informed Taylor that the Pope had accepted this idea.<sup>69</sup> Of course, His Holiness requested for this to be done discreetly in order to avoid the appearance of collusion with the United States.

The hierarchy received instructions through Apostolic Delegate Cicognani in Washington a few weeks after Taylor's meeting to again make it seem that this was being done on the Vatican's own initiative. The plan called for Archbishop John McNicholas of Cincinnati, an outspoken critic of Roosevelt's aid to Russia, to write a pastoral letter for his archdiocese elaborating on Pius XI's words which would then be carried across the nation by the Catholic News Service in late October.<sup>70</sup> McNicholas was chosen because Cicognani believed his words would carry more weight than those of a supporter of Roosevelt's. But if the Vatican was hoping to spurn accusations that it was working with the Americans on this issue, the abrupt about-face of a prominent clergyman should have required an explanation. To the relief of Pope Pius XII, no inquiries were made on the matter, and the letter rallied Catholics behind Roosevelt in the fight against fascism. Public criticism among the hierarchy ceased for good in November when the bishops at a national conference voted to yield to Roosevelt's leadership on foreign policy, and the Vatican let it be known that public dissent would not be tolerated.<sup>71</sup> It is ironic that although Pius XII had a deep interest in preventing the expansion of the war, his greatest achievement in his diplomatic exchanges with the United States helped another nation enter the fray.

Shortly after the conference, the United States ended its neutrality after the attack at Pearl Harbor. With the Americans at war, the Vatican grew optimistic about the war's final outcome as both the Pope and Secretary of State Maglione were certain of the defeat of the Axis.<sup>72</sup> The relationship nevertheless changed as a result of America's entry into the war. Over the course of the war, the United States would protest the Vatican's acceptance of a Japanese delegation despite the known atrocities being committed in the Far East, as well as the Vatican's small voice in denouncing wartime atrocities in Europe, and Pius XII would chafe at America's refusal to rule out bombing Rome during its Italian campaign.<sup>73</sup> But relations always remained

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<sup>67</sup> Flynn, *Roosevelt and Romanism*, 152.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 163. Recall that the line of the encyclical in question is: "Communism is intrinsically wrong, and no one who would save Christian civilization may collaborate with it in any undertaking whatsoever."

<sup>69</sup> Blet, *Pius XII and the Second World War*, 123.

<sup>70</sup> Fogarty, *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy*, 274.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>72</sup> Tittmann, *Inside the Vatican*, 130.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Trisco, "The Department of State and the Apostolic Delegation in Washington During World War II," in *FDR, the*

cordial as a result of the affection the Pope and the President shared for each other.

Was the relationship worthwhile? From Myron Taylor's first audience with Pope Pius XII as President Roosevelt's personal representative in early 1940 until the bombing at Pearl Harbor in late 1941—not to mention most of 1939—each sought to work in concert and employ the moral authority of the Vatican and the ever-increasing military might of the United States to influence events in Europe. Of course, the Vatican had no military to back up its words, and the Americans were entrenched in isolationism an ocean away; therefore, it is no surprise that they possessed little influence. The only instances when the relationship bore fruit were when the two neutrals were influencing each other. Pius XII convinced Roosevelt to personally implore Mussolini to keep Italy out of the war, and the United States pressured the Vatican to support assistance to the Soviet Union as well as to silence critical members of the American hierarchy.

Despite the limited success in attaining their goals, each needed the other to varying extents. The Vatican believed it received instant credibility with another neutral power lobbying Mussolini, and perhaps more importantly, it was Roosevelt who encouraged Pius XII in the dismal latter half of 1940 to maintain faith that the neo-paganism of the Nazis would not prevail. But the friendship with the United States ultimately provided few tangible benefits. Granted, Roosevelt was much more active in the efforts to convince Italy to remain neutral than was the Pope, but the President of an isolationist country could not exert as much influence on Mussolini as had been originally hoped. The bottom line is that with the exception of moral support, the Vatican gained little, if anything, from its relationship, especially after Italy entered the war.

It is in these terms of tangible results that the United States clearly got the better end of the bargain. The disclosure to American Catholics of Germany's religious persecution and the Pope's consent to a re-interpretation of an unambiguous encyclical statement cleared the way for Catholics to drop their opposition to aid for the Soviets and effectively silenced the Catholic hierarchy. The re-interpretation was the coup of the relationship, and it served as the basis for historian Owen Chadwick's assertion, "In short, Myron Taylor was sent to Rome for the domestic purposes of the United States."<sup>74</sup>

Two of the most important neutral leaders in the world joined forces to work towards limiting a war both knew would be devastating. In doing so, regardless of which sovereign gained the most out of the relationship, they both had crucial needs met by the other. Although President Roosevelt and Pope Pius XII were unsuccessful in their efforts to prevent and then minimize a war, the genuine friendship between the two laid the groundwork for future cooperation. Before America entered into hostilities, their joint efforts served not only as the last hope to save Europe from itself, but also to support each other in their own times of need.

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*Vatican, and the Roman Catholic Church*, 224, 228. The Pope later agreed to accept a delegation from Chinese leader Chiang Kai-Shek to mollify the American outrage over the Japanese delegation.

<sup>74</sup> Chadwick, *Britain and the Vatican*, 113.