In many ways, Fascism is one of the riest and most complicated historical debates of our time. Of all the questions about fascism, one of the most intriguing is the relationship between Italian Fascism and the Catholic Church. This paper will seek to clarify this ambiguity and will argue that the relationship between the Catholic Church and Mussolini and his Fascists was one of mutual interest and necessity on many issues, as well as one of deep competition on others.

Primary sources reveal that for Mussolini this relationship was first and foremost a method to consolidate power, while for the Catholic Church it would be to ultimately resolve the “Roman Question.” This was the question of how to settle the dispute over the temporal powers of the pope after the loss of the Papal States during Italian Risorgimento. Other issues that proved to be of mutual interest would be efforts to subdue Bolshevism, as well as promote traditional family values and ruralization. Despite agreeing in many areas, there were also areas of continued contention between the two factions. This was particularly the case in regards to the existence of Catholic Action and the control of Italian youths more generally. As time went on, the Vatican also grew increasingly uncomfortable with Italian Fascism’s relationship with Nazism.
Historian Gerald Parsons argues that the relationship between Italian Fascism and the Church was “subject to recurrent tension but was also profoundly and inherently ambiguous.” They collaborated on many matters that were in both their interests and publicly supported and respected one another, as well as promoted the values that they held in common.¹ Also noting this ambiguity and ambivalence, historian Jorge Dagnino argues that many in the Church saw Italian Fascism as a potential ally to their efforts for a “Christian restoration of Italian society.”² Bosworth goes further and argues that the Church can be described as “fellow-travelers” to the fascist regime. He goes on to point out that the Italian Fascist government was forced to regularly accommodate the Church in a way that “It is hard to imagine Hitler or Stalin being so accomodating[.]”³

It is undeniable that there was significant collaboration, or as Emilio Gentile states, “cohabitation” between the Church and the fascist state. However, this “cohabitation” needs to be squared with the fascist attempts at the “sacralization of politics” as popularized by Gentile. Gentile himself offers little comparing these two ideas. On the one hand, Gentile argues for the totalizing power of the fascist regime, but also admits that the regime cohabitated with the Church wanting to avoid any “divisiveness” that a conflict would bring.⁴ Jan Nelis points out that, while there was generally cohabitation between the two sides, there was a fear on the part of the Church of the “sacralization of politics.”⁵ This a position that Dagnino also subscribes to.⁶

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Historians broadly agree that a majority of Italian Catholics supported the regime, but that it was only a minority that would be considered Fascists and even fewer who would be considered anti-Fascists. Duggan argues that being a good Fascist was seen by many in Italy as being part and partial of being a good Catholic. However, as Adamson points out, this was often merely lip service to the regime. This was not universal though, with there being several cases of syncretism between Catholicism and Italian Fascism in regards to the “Cult of Fascist Martyrs” in places like Florence and Siena. However, under all this was serious competition with the Fascist State.

Most historians note that the relationship between the two factions was one of ambiguity and “cohabitation.” However, there were always areas of tension. However, at the end of the day, most Italian Catholics supported the regime, with instances of extreme syncretism between the two. Now that historiography of fascism has been explored, we can now attempt to answer what the relationship between Italian Fascism and the Church was.

On October 27, 1922, Mussolini and approximately 25,000 Blackshirts would March on Rome, with Fascist forces converging on towns and cities and occupying important infrastructure. Then-Prime Minister Facta asked for King Victor Emmanuel to declare martial law, but the king would refuse and instead ask Mussolini to form a government. The New York Times would declare that “He is that person, to the lack of whom Italy has long attributed her political misfortunes - a strong man.” Fascism was subsequently characterized as being the savior of Italy from Bolshevism. In the same way, many in the Catholic Church saw Mussolini

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7 Adamson, “Fascism and Political,” 63.
9 Adamson, “Fascism and Political,” 63.
10 Parsons, “Fascism and Catholicism,” 476.
11 Duggan, Fascist Voices, 59-60.
and his Fascists as “an indispensable bulwark against Communism and other detestable aspects of modernity.”

While some early fascists such as Alfredo Rocco had argued for some “points of contact” between the Church and fascism, most “Fascists of the first hour” like Mussolini were strictly anti-clerical. Mussolini himself was an atheist, whose first published work was rather straightforwardly titled God Does Not Exist. His anti-clericalism was “the result of life-long militancy in the Italian working-class movement.” As historian John Pollard points out, this does not mean that the fascists were necessarily anti-Catholic or anti-Christian.

The deadly aspect of this anti-clericalism came in the form of the squadrismo. The era of the squadrismo began on April 15, 1919, when members of the fasci launched a deadly raid on the socialist paper Avanti!. Ironically, this was the same paper that Mussolini had edited from 1912 to 1914. Squadrismo (plural for squadrists) sprung from the Fasci di Combattimento. These squadrists (known also as Blackshirts for the eponymous black shirts) formed into thousands of action squads that engaged in violent attacks on Socialist and Catholic organizations, especially during the biennio nero (two black years) of 1921-1922. Upon his ascension to power, Mussolini would treat these violent Blackshirts with first ambivalence, but

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14 Adamson, “Fascism and Political,” 55.
16 Pollard, “Fascism and Religion,” 141.
17 Bosworth, Mussolini’s Italy, 118-119.
then later he would distance himself from them. However, “Collectively, the squadristi were insubordinate and violent, but they were Fascism's, and the Duce's, indispensable fist.”

Mussolini’s rise to power would force him to temper his anti-clerical views. This was helped by the willingness of the Church to work with him thanks to his opposition to “socialism, liberalism, and the doctrines of materialism.” The squadristi had often targeted the various Catholic organizations, all under the command of Catholic Action, but after Mussolini’s ascent to power, the Vatican would become far more “conciliatory” in an attempt to take advantage of Mussolini’s need to consolidate power. On their end, the Fascist government would make an effort to reconcile with the Church, through a series of “goodwill” gestures such as the inclusion of the crucifixes in schools, increased funding and stipends for the Church, and the much broader recognition of the importance of Catholicism in Italian society among many other things.

In this early period, one of Mussolini’s main sources of political opposition came in the form of the Italian Popular Party, which was founded in 1919 by the Sicilian Priest Luigi Sturzo. The party would attempt to draw Italian Catholics away from the Socialist movement in Italy by presenting a form of Progressive Catholicism. By 1922, it was one of Italy’s largest parties. When asked about “Don Sturzo” in an interview with the New York Times, Mussolini would state, “Priests…should only say mass; they should not mix in profane affairs-like politics.”

The newly elected Pope Pius XI would also not hold such a favorable view of the Popular Party; firstly because of his distrust of democracy and secondly due to the Party’s insistence on independence from the Vatican. In the end, he would opt to throw his support behind the PNF. In

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21 Duggan, Fascist Voices, 81.
22 Duggan, Fascist Voices, 81-82.
23 Parsons, “Fascism and Catholicism,” 470.
1922, an edict would be sent out from the Vatican banning Catholic priests from joining any political party and by 1926 the Popular Party would dissolve.\textsuperscript{26} Historians Petra Votavová and Marek Šmíd put it best when they say, “The Holy See perceived the fascists to some extent as a necessity to establish order and authority in Italy. Attitudes towards them were dominated not only by confidence and hope in the Christianization of the fascist movement but also by faith in the early settlement of the Roman Question.”\textsuperscript{27}

The Roman Question had existed since the formation of the Italian State in 1871. This was regarding the question of what temporal powers the Papacy possessed ever since the loss of the Papal States during the Italian Risorgimento. Negotiations occurred off and on throughout the previous liberal governments,\textsuperscript{28} however, the new Pope Pius XI would see an opportunity with the new Fascist regime to solve this question.\textsuperscript{29} For his part, Mussolini would declare in a speech at Lausanne before a delegation of Swiss, French, English, and American journalists that,

\begin{quote}
My spirit is deeply religious. Religion is a fundamental force which must be respected and defended. I am therefore opposed to anti-clerical and atheistic demagogy, which represents an old game. I affirm that Catholicism is a great spiritual and moral power, and trust that the relations between the Italian State and the Vatican will henceforth be very friendly. Our relations with the Vatican are based in friendship and cordiality. But to arrive at an official reconciliation there is still a long way to go. The Vatican is a power that can not be ignored, but it should not mix politics and religion.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

This was far from the anti-clericalism of his youth. From here, he would actively court the Church by giving them the respect that was lacking during the liberal era of politics. Mussolini would reject the concept of the separation of church and state.\textsuperscript{31}

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\textsuperscript{26} Madigan, “How the Vatican,” 33.
\textsuperscript{28} Votavová, “The Long Road,” 186.
\textsuperscript{29} Votavová, “The Long Road,” 190.
\textsuperscript{30} Benito Mussolini, “Statements made in Lausanne,” (Speech in Lausanne, November 21, 1922), Biblioteca Fascista, \url{http://bibliotecafascista.blogspot.com/2012/03/speech-in-lausanne-november-21-1922.html}.
\textsuperscript{31} Adamson, “Fascism and Political,” 55.
\end{flushright}
Negotiations between the Fascist government and the Vatican began on August 6, 1926, although meetings were held in secret as far back as 1923.\textsuperscript{32} The Italian government would be represented by Domenico Barone, while the Vatican would be represented by Francesco Pacelli. Both men were highly respected lawyers, with the former serving both the liberal and fascist government in the Council of State, while the latter was the brother of Eugenio Pacelli, the later Pope Pius XII.\textsuperscript{33}

A good deal of progress was made in the initial 5 months, with a preliminary treaty being offered up for discussion. However, during these five months, two sources of tension would arise: the first being a wave of Fascist violence, often directed against the Catholic Church, after a failed assassination attempt on Mussolini on October 31, 1926. The second occurred in the December of that year with the threat issued by the Fascist regime to end the autonomy of the Catholic youth organizations. Historian Albert O’Brien argues that “In this relationship, Mussolini needed a source of tension that would enable him to hold the initiative with the Vatican”\textsuperscript{34}

The fascist violence that resulted from the failed assassination attempt came from the “intransigents” within the fascist movement. These intransigents, the squadrismo, were vital to Mussolini’s rise to power and had up to 1924-25 made up a core of his support. However, the assassination of socialist politician Giacomo Matteotti in 1924, as well as the need to broaden his base of power in Italy, led Mussolini to distance himself from them.\textsuperscript{35}

However, the violence that had broken out after the failed assassination attempt worked in Mussolini’s favor in the negotiations with the Vatican. Mussolini could act as a mediator

\textsuperscript{32} Votavová, “The Long Road,” 193.
\textsuperscript{34} O’Brien, “Benito Mussolini,” 118.
\textsuperscript{35} Paul Corner, The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini's Italy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 52.
between the intransigents and the Holy See. He sent out orders to each prefect to not only decry the violence but also clamp down on it.\textsuperscript{36} By December, the violence had begun to die down, with the prefects being able to regain control of the situation. However, this end of anti-clerical violence meant that Mussolini needed a new form of tension to “keep a reluctant pope at the negotiating table, enable Mussolini to get the best possible terms at that table, and, finally, give Mussolini a psychological advantage by forcing the Vatican to appeal to him to reduce tension.”\textsuperscript{37}

This tension came in the form of the conflict between the newly established Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB), a Fascist youth organization for boys 8 to 18, and the Catholic Youth organizations under Catholic Action, particularly the Catholic Boy Scouts. While the ONB allowed for chaplains, the training was “essentially Fascist and not Christian.” To put more pressure on the Vatican, Mussolini, in 1926, would push for the ONB’s monopoly and control over all Italian youths.\textsuperscript{38}

The Vatican reacted strongly against this, with Pacelli informing Barone that these actions would threaten the future of negotiations. Pacelli would warn Barone that the Vatican would go public with the proposed regulation. This seemed to work and Barone informed Pacelli that Mussolini had rescinded his support for the regulations.\textsuperscript{39} However, the regulation would move forward anyway. Outraged, Pacelli informed Barone that the issue was of such importance to the Papacy that they were willing to suspend negotiations. When the regulations went through anyways on January 9th, 1927, the Vatican broke off negotiations. Despite the assurances that Catholic Action would be exempt or that the government would be conciliatory, the law made it

\textsuperscript{36} O’Brien, “Benito Mussolini,” 121.
\textsuperscript{37} O’Brien, “Benito Mussolini,” 122.
\textsuperscript{38} O’Brien, “Benito Mussolini,” 123-124.
\textsuperscript{39} O’Brien, “Benito Mussolini,” 124-125.
so that the ONB oversaw all youth organizations. Again, the Pope threatened to go public, and again Mussolini backed down. The law would not apply to Catholic Action.\textsuperscript{40}

This, however, also meant that the Catholic Boy Scouts would have to be dissolved as an organization. The Vatican would attempt to assuage this discontent arguing that cooperating with the Fascist government was for the greater good, i.e it would keep Catholic Action untouched. After negotiations resumed, Mussolini would again use this threat against Catholic Action to pressure the Vatican in 1928.\textsuperscript{41}

On August 28, 1928, the first preliminary draft of the concordant would be produced. Herein, it was established that the Pope would have possession of a small Papal State at the Vatican and that the Vatican would receive an indemnity of 750 million lire in cash and 1 billion in government bonds. However, what remained to be discussed was the future of Catholic Action. Mussolini would take over negotiations for the Italian State after the death of Barone on January 4, 1929.\textsuperscript{42} Finally, the Lateran Treaty would be signed on February 11, 1929.\textsuperscript{43}

The Lateran Pacts of 1929 contained three sections: the Treaty of Conciliation “which established Vatican City as an independent state, restoring the civil sovereignty of the Pope as a monarch.”\textsuperscript{44} The Papacy gained sovereignty over Vatican City, a minuscule 44 hectares of land near the city of Rome. This section of the accords would also declare Catholicism to be the state religion of Italy, which would last until a revision conducted in 1985.\textsuperscript{45} This represents, effectively, the ultimate abandonment of fascism’s anti-clericalism.

\textsuperscript{40} O’Brien, “Benito Mussolini,” 126-128.
\textsuperscript{41} O’Brien, “Benito Mussolini,” 129.
\textsuperscript{43} O’Brien, “Benito Mussolini,” 129.
\textsuperscript{44} “Lateran Pacts of 1929: the Treaty of Conciliation,” signed February 11, 1929, United Settlement, Article 3-5. \url{https://www.uniset.ca/nold/lateran.htm}.
Next was the Financial Convention “which compensated the Holy See for the loss of the papal states.” This came in the form of 750 million lire and 1 billion in government bonds in compensation for the loss of the Papal States. After 1937, the Vatican’s “clever” chief financial agent Bernardino Nogara would secure the Holy See’s financial future by investing heavily in U.S blue-chip stocks.46

Finally, the Concordat “dealt with the Roman Catholic Church's ecclesiastical relations with the Italian State.”47 This effectively allowed the Vatican to maintain control over its clergy and put limits on what the State could and could not do regarding the Church. Article 36 would allow for religious instruction in public schools and Article 43 would supposedly guarantee the independence of Catholic Action.48 Ultimately, this was a major step for the Church, with “the signature of the Lateran treaties did mark the embrace of Fascist totalitarianism by the public forms of Catholicism.”49

For Mussolini’s regime, such developments offered the prospect of support among Catholics, whilst the symbolic triumph of the conciliazione brought both international prestige and popularity with ordinary Italians through the resolution of the formal contradiction between loyalty to Catholicism and loyalty to Italy.50 In a speech delivered on May 13, 1929, Mussolini would brag about this accomplishment declaring that,

It had been previously concluded that the Roman Question was one of those static, chronic problems which had no solution, like squaring the circle. Furthermore, it was argued that a solution could not take place under the Fascist Regime, because ours is a dictatorial regime, because it has made a clean sweep of many ideologies, and because the old Vatican diplomacy—owing to its two millennia of experience—would never give credence to a Regime with only ten years of history and seven years of government life.51
This accomplishment seemed to many in the world to justify the 1922 praise leveled by the New York Times; that Mussolini would be the strongman that Italy needs.\textsuperscript{52} The Roman Question was not the only area of mutual interest for the Regime and the Church.

One of, if not the biggest, area of agreement between the Catholic Church (and many Christians more broadly) and Italian Fascism was its staunch anti-Bolshevism. This can be extrapolated to the fact that fascism professed to believe in such spiritual things as the soul and rejected materialist philosophies such as Marxism and even liberalism. It argued for a supposed restoration of the nation from the decadence of modernity.\textsuperscript{53}

Another threat presented by Bolshevism was that it presented itself as an alternative to the Church. Historian Jorge Dagnino argues that Bolshevism presented “an alternative religiosity that sought to inaugurate a wholesome and total secularisation of the Christian credo, replacing it with its own dogmas, charismatic leaders, sacred texts, rituals, ceremonies and festivals.”\textsuperscript{54} Worse yet in the Church’s mind, this ideology presented a threat to the Church and Christianity everywhere due to its apparent universal invocation.\textsuperscript{55}

As stated previously, the Vatican saw Mussolini and his Fascists as a bulwark against the growing presence of Bolshevism in Italy. This was backed up by the vicious \textit{squadisti} attacks and raids conducted against various socialist organizations. This support would also extend to the Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War on the Francoist and Catholic sides as they fought the “red menace” on the Iberian Peninsula.\textsuperscript{56}

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\textsuperscript{52} Rohe, “Hope of Youth,” 109.
\textsuperscript{53} Pollard, “Fascism and Religion,” 152.
\textsuperscript{54} Dagnino, “The Intellectuals,” 220.
\textsuperscript{55} Dagnino, “The Intellectuals,” 220.
\textsuperscript{56} Bosworth, \textit{Mussolini’s Italy}, 260.
\end{flushleft}
To counter what the Church saw as the growing threat and influence of Bolshevism, Pope Pius XI would deliver an encyclical entitled *Divini Redemptoris* (Divine Redeemer) (1937) that decried atheist Communism. He writes,

[T]here are not lacking men who declare that they honor and exalt, above all, the power of the State. They say they must use every means to assure civil order and enforce authority, and pretend that only thus are they able totally to repulse the execrable theories of the Communists. However, they despise the light of evangelic wisdom and endeavor to revive the errors of the pagans and their way of life.\(^{57}\)

Here he decries the idolatry of the State, as well as the militancy of Bolshevism. As stated previously, the threat of Bolshevism was that it seemed to provide an alternative religion to the universal faith of Catholicism. This seemed to be literally the case with satirical Bolshevist organizations like the League of Militant Godless who inverted many Catholic traditions.\(^{58}\) Pius XI continues,

To this is added the clever and lamentable sect of those who, denying and hating God, declare themselves the enemies of the Eternal, and who insinuate themselves everywhere. They discredit and uproot all religious belief from souls. Finally, they trample on every human and Divine right. And while they cast scorn on the hope of heavenly reward, they incite men to seek, even by illicit means, false earthly happiness, and therefore drive them with brazen temerity to the dissolution of the social order, causing disorder, cruel rebellions and even the conflagration of civil war.\(^{59}\)

Here he decries the false redemption of Bolshevism, he makes it a point to contrast this to the *civitas humana*, the ideal human civilization, which values family, human dignity, and rights among many others. Or put another way Christian values.\(^{60}\)

Another area of general agreement between the two sides was the importance and roles of family and women in Italian society. “Fascist State and Catholic Church were generally in patriarchal concord about the proper place of women in society.”\(^{61}\) Both opposed abortion, with

\(^{57}\) Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, March 19, 1937, sec. 3-4. [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19370319_divini-redemptoris.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19370319_divini-redemptoris.html)


\(^{59}\) Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*.

\(^{60}\) Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*.

\(^{61}\) Bosworth, *Mussolini’s Italy*, 264.
the Church paying special attention to contraception.\textsuperscript{62} For both, the “model” woman was the mother and homemaker.\textsuperscript{63} In his \textit{Divini Redemptoris}, Pius XI would decry Bolshevism for “the rejection of any link that binds woman to the family and the home[.]”\textsuperscript{64} They both condemned the “1900 girl” whose freer lifestyle aroused the ire of both sides.\textsuperscript{65}

Connected to fascist views of women, was the regime’s “battle for births.” Italy had by the 1930s faced a steady decline in births, which fascist authorities (for reasons related to racism) sought to solve. They had many enemies; the first being urbanization and another being feminism.\textsuperscript{66} For the former, despite the regime's efforts and rhetoric, the population of Italy became steadily more urban.\textsuperscript{67} One organization of note that attempted to stem this tide was the \textit{Fascista Delle Massaie Rurali} (Rural Housewives Association). When speaking about the \textit{Massai Rurali} (rural housewives), the historian Perry Wilson points out the connection that local, rural clergy had and the mobilization of rural peasant women. She states, “weekly meetings were held straight after church and priests themselves appeared regularly on the rota of speakers, usually giving talks on the theme of ‘Religion - Motherland - Family’.”\textsuperscript{68}

These priests in many areas were highly respected, especially among women, and, thus, their blessing gave a huge “seal of approval” to the organization. This is one of the benefits that Mussolini and his regime garnered from the signing of the Lateran Pacts, which was arguably one of its core goals for the concordant. While some priests were certainly pro-fascist, the

\textsuperscript{62} Bosworth, \textit{Mussolini's Italy}, 260.
\textsuperscript{63} Bosworth, \textit{Mussolini's Italy}, 266.
\textsuperscript{64} Pius XI. \textit{Divini Redemptoris}.
\textsuperscript{66} Bosworth, \textit{Mussolini's Italy}, 266-268.
\textsuperscript{67} Bosworth, \textit{Mussolini's Italy}, 168.
\textsuperscript{68} Perry Wilson, \textit{Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy: The Massaie Rurali} (London: Routledge, 2002), 185.
Lateran Pacts demanded that the Church discipline their priests if they ever engaged in discussions harmful to the regime and in general had to obey local fascist authorities.\footnote{Wilson, \textit{Peasant Women}, 186-187.}

While the Vatican attempted to take a more cautious approach to the fascist regime, it was far more common for local Catholic leadership to be in support of the regime. Parsons presents the Church in the city of Siena in the region of Tuscany as being an important example of the close relationship between fascism and the Catholic Church.\footnote{Parsons, “Fascism and Catholicism,” 472-473.} The local Catholic newspaper, \textit{Il Popolo di Siena}, would routinely praise Mussolini and his regime who “were in sympathy with the church's aspiration to restore a truly Christian identity to Italian society.” The paper even went so far as to downplay Pope Pius XI’s denunciation of Nazism, the impact of the Italian Race Laws (1938), and any other tensions between Church and State.\footnote{Parsons, “Fascism and Catholicism,” 474.}

Parsons argues that the Siena Church represents a true case of syncretism between Catholicism and Italian Fascism. This is especially apparent with the Sienese Church’s veneration of 10 Fascist martyrs at the Crypt of San Domenico, which would be restored in March 1935 and inaugurated in November 1938, and be dubbed the \textit{Sacrario dei Caduti Fascisti}.\footnote{Parsons, “Fascism and Catholicism,” 474.} This crypt would take on all appearances of a shrine complete with altars, statues, and even a stone tablet with a quotation from Mussolini.\footnote{Parsons, “Fascism and Catholicism,” 474.} This “cult of the Fascist martyrs” was also present elsewhere with similar shrines and celebrations that all incorporated many of the rites of the Catholic Church. Most importantly is the fact that many of these rites and practices of the Catholic Church were done with the oversight and approval of local clergy such as the Archbishop of Siena, Marco Toccabelli.\footnote{Parsons, “Fascism and Catholicism,” 476.}
Siena provides an example of local Churches and clergy that did not display this caution. And in fact, showed the levels of rapport and integration that Catholicism and Fascism could have.\textsuperscript{75} The question is then whether this was “primarily a catholic benediction of fascism; primarily an example of fascism as a political religion; or an example of a moment of de facto syncretism between conservative Catholicism and fascism understood as a surrogate religion?” Parsons argues that the latter is most correct in this particular situation and throws a wrench into the idea that the marriage between Catholicism and fascism was merely a marriage of convenience.\textsuperscript{76} In the end, a strand of clerical fascism was always present.\textsuperscript{77}

While there was close cooperation between Italian Fascism and Catholicism, there were always points of tension from the beginning. One such point was regarding Catholic Action. Catholic Action had begun as a network of associations after the loss of the Papal States to the Italian Risorgimento. This was used by Pope Benedict XV and, especially, Pope Pius XI as a method of maintaining political influence.\textsuperscript{78} Under Pius, they would be reorganized and gained further power after the Church turned on the Italian Popular Party. Catholic Action “can be seen as manifestations of Catholic 'political' intervention in civil society, situated not at the level of party politics, but the level of structural organization of society.”\textsuperscript{79}

Catholic Action had been a major point of contention of the Lateran Accords, with Article 42 of those accords seeming to guarantee the existence of the organization.\textsuperscript{80} However, Mussolini would try once more in 1931 to make the organization illegal. However, this time Pope Pius XI issued an encyclical titled Non Abbiamo Bisogno (We Do not Need) in 1931. He states,

\textsuperscript{75} Parsons, “Fascism and Catholicism,” 478. 
\textsuperscript{76} Parsons, “Fascism and Catholicism,” 480. 
\textsuperscript{77} Bosworth, Mussolini's Italy, 259. 
\textsuperscript{78} Jan Nelis, “The Clerical Response,” 243-244. 
\textsuperscript{79} Jan Nelis, “The Clerical Response,” 244. 
\textsuperscript{80} Bosworth, Mussolini's Italy, 261.
To monopolize completely the young, from their tenderest years up to manhood and womanhood, for the exclusive advantage of a party and of a regime based on an ideology which clearly resolves itself into a true, a real pagan worship of the State - the "Statolatry"... To propose and to promote such a monopoly to persecute for this reason Catholic Action...all this is truly and literally to "forbid the little children to go to Jesus Christ[.]

The language of the speaks of “paganism” and “Statolatry,” which is very similar to the language of the later Divini Redemptoris. Later in the encyclical, he would declare that the monopolization of education would steal away the “fundamental rights” of families.

This encyclical was not an isolated decree sent by the Pope, with the New York Times publishing a dramatic story partially entitled, “POPE IN ENCYCLICAL DENOUNCES FASCISTI AND DEFENDS CLUBS; Says Suppression of Catholic Action Was a Pretext to Tear Young From the Church.” However, while this encyclical decree went against the Fascist regime, it was not a full renunciation, as the Pope did not “condemn the party as such.” At the end of the day, Pius XI would maintain a sense of ambiguity regarding the Fascist regime. However, what was ultimately at stake was the question of who got to control Italy’s youth?

Mussolini had stated emphatically that the education of the youth belonged squarely in the domain of the state. Pius XI would argue the exact opposite. A point in the Church’s favor was the fact that 70% of all elementary school teachers were women, with the vast majority being “pious Catholics, convinced patriots, and only lastly Fascists[.]” However, as De Grazia points out, the majority of Italian youths, around 60-70%, were under the auspices of the

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81 Pius XI, Non Abbiamo Bisogno, encyclical letter, Vatican website, June 29, 1931, sec. 44. 
https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_29061931_non-abbiamo-bisogno.htm

83 Duggan, Fascist Voices, 194.
85 Pius XI, Non Abbiamo Bisogno, sec. 62.
86 Duggan, Fascist Voices, 193.
87 Bosworth, Mussolini’s Italy, 263.
88 Bosworth, Mussolini’s Italy, 264.
Gioventù Italiana del Littorio (GIL) (Italian Youth of the Lictor) which was created in 1937 to replace the ONB. In the end, both sides would agree to disagree so to speak and they let sleeping dogs lie, although there would be continued mistrust.

Another area of major disagreement that arose between the Vatican and the Fascist regime was over the latter’s relationship with Hitler’s Nazi Germany. Pope Pius XI had longstanding complaints against Hitler and his Nazis, not least being the abuse at times leveled against German Catholics and the subsequent violation of the Reichskonkordat, a concordat signed between the Vatican and the German Reich in 1933. The concordat had been signed to put a stop to the anti-Catholic actions of the German Reich. However, attacks and persecution of German Catholics continued after the signing of the concordat.

At the same time, the Pope also frowned upon the extreme racism and the idolization of the State. In 1937, he would issue, written in German, an encyclical titled *Mit Brennender Sorge* (With Deep Anxiety). The Catholic newspaper *The Tablet* describes its delivery to Germany as such,

> The Encyclical, which took the Nazi Government completely unawares, had been introduced into Germany by the diplomatic bag to the Nunciature, and Monsignor Orsenigo, Apostolic Nuncio in Berlin had arranged for its secret distribution all over the country so that it was read in every Catholic church of the Reich last Sunday, before the Government had time to confiscate and suppress it.

The reason behind the smuggling was the nervousness both the leadership in the Vatican and the Church in Germany felt about criticizing the German Reich openly.

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90 Bosworth, *Mussolini’s Italy*, 262-263.
91 Dagnino, “The Intellectuals,” 222.
The encyclical begins with Pius XI’s denouncement of the violations of the *Reichskonkordat*. He would state, “At the same time, anyone must acknowledge… how the other contracting party emasculated the terms of the treaty, distorted their meaning, and eventually considered its more or less official violation as a normal policy.” As stated previously, immediately after the signing there had been almost immediate violations of the concordat, with the Reich cracking down on anything involving the Church that was not strictly religious.

He would decry the racism of the regime declaring that “It knows no retouches by human hand; it admits no substitutes or arbitrary alternatives such as certain leaders pretend to draw from the so-called myth of race and blood.” For this, he would go on to state that the Christian God could not be restricted “within the frontiers of a single people, within the pedigree of one single race.” Despite the denouncement, the encyclical was written in such a way as to step carefully around the issue of racism with the letter even stating that race was an important part of the human community. However, when race is exalted, then it becomes idolatry according to the letter.

He would decry the idolization of the state and declare, “Whoever exalts race, or the people, or the State, or a particular form of State, or the depositories of power, or any other fundamental value of the human community… whoever raises these notions above their standard value and divinizes them to an idolatrous level, distorts and perverts an order of the world

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94 Pius XI, *Mit Brennender Sorge*, sec. 5.

95 Dagnino, “The Intellectuals,” 222.


97 Pius XI, *Mit Brennender Sorge*, sec. 11.

planned and created by God.[99] This language reflects that of the previous two encyclicals, thus, pointing to the particular concern Pius XI had for totalitarianism’s tendency towards “statolatry.”

As a result of the growing friendship between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, the autumn of 1938 would see the passing of Italian Race Laws that stripped Italian Jews of most of their rights. This was even though there had always been Jews within the ranks of the Italian Fascists (Mussolini’s mistress was herself Jewish). Despite privately arguing that antisemitism was “unacceptable” and being bothered by the more extreme aspects of the law, Pius would fail to decry the laws, instead opting to try to get better treatment for those Jews who had married a Catholic or converted to Catholicism.[100] He would secretly commission another encyclical that would denounce racism and antisemitism, but he would die before it would ever be released.[101]

Pope Pius XI’s successor would be Eugenio Pacelli. The newly elected Pope Pius XII would take a much more cautious and silent approach as compared to his predecessor; taking after Popes Leo XIII and Benedict XV. Here he would attempt to maintain the impartiality of the Holy See during the Second World War. This includes remaining silent on the Holocaust, even refusing Allied pleas to condemn it. Supporters argue that this was an attempt to not provoke any retaliation from the Nazi government while providing under-the-table aid to Jews. In contrast, others decry this and accuse the Pope of everything from indifference to antisemitism. Although the latter position lacks credibility according to historian Frank J. Coppa.[102]

No matter how good or bad the relations between the Fascist regime and the Catholic Church were, it all too quickly came to an end. WWII would go badly for the Italians and as the

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[99] Pius XI, Mit Brennender Sorge, sec. 8.
Regime grew weaker, the Church would, in a sense, grow stronger as more and more Italians turned to the Church in times of trouble. “The Church… had never forgone its right to contemplate life after Mussolini and after Fascism.”103 As Bosworth succinctly argues,

It is fairer… to see Pius and the hierarchy over whom he presided as fellow travellers or outright sympathizers with Mussolini and Fascism. In what they perceived as this wicked world, the Vatican liked most of what they saw in Fascism and… preferred it probably too liberal democracy and certainly to socialism and communism… it was fine for them until it was obvious they were going to lose their battles on every front.104

At the end of the day, while there had been genuine strains of Clerical Fascism within the Church, even the much-vaunted *Sacrario dei Caduti Fascisti* would be all but forgotten within five years of the fall of the regime.105

In answering this question we can readily see the importance of institutions in the rise of totalitarian regimes. Without the Catholic Church’s support, no matter how cautious or tacit, the Italian Fascist movement would have likely never succeeded in getting or holding power. However, at the same time, it is important to see how important institutions are in holding back totalitarianism. As has been shown many times throughout this paper, the Catholic Church also ultimately limited Italian Fascism.

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the Italian Fascists was one of cooperation on many things, but deep competition on others. The Vatican needed the Roman Question solved and Mussolini needed to broaden his base of support, so they were willing to negotiate. Bolshevism was an enemy to both sides, so they had no problem cooperating. They shared many of the same views on family and gender roles. However, they both thought that the future of the education of Italy’s youth belonged to them and so years of bitter conflict ensued over the Catholic Action. When the Fascists grew increasingly close to the Nazis, the Catholic

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103 Bosworth, *Mussolini’s Italy*, 488.
104 Bosworth, *Mussolini’s Italy*, 490.
105 Parsons, “Fascism and Catholicism,” 484.
Church, especially under Pius XI, grew increasingly wary and discontented. At the end of the day, it was just business for both sides.

About the author

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