

The Holy Office Against Fascism: Book Censorship and the Political Independence of the Church (1928–1931)*

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Owing to his "organic conception of society" (Fattorini 2007: 22) Pius XI soon found himself at variance with the totalitarian policies of the newly established fascist regime¹. The pope felt that Mussolini and his followers endangered the very essence of the Church, threatening it above all through the creation of a fascist 'liturgy': «politics has touched the altar and therefore it is our duty to defend God and his religion» (Ratti 1985: 452).

In order to limit such lay interference in spiritual matters, the pope headed a sort of Catholic interventionism, whose opening salvo was the anti-laicist Encyclical *Quas primas* (11 December 1925) written to defend the political autonomy of the Church. In the context of Pius XI's initiatives, the Curia gave Roman congregations – and, in particular, the Holy Office – special powers. The cardinals of the Supreme Congregation, among whose competencies was the control of the publishing market, thus started a vigorous campaign to identify dangerously heterodox fascist publications (or those endorsed by the regime) and proscribe them in the *Index of Prohibited Books*.

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¹ On the political conception of the Church and religion under Pius XI, see at least Boutillhon 2002: 269-89.

This paper aims to show how Pius XI selected the Holy Office as the Holy See's frontline to defend God and religion, once the contrasts between the papacy and Fascism became increasingly evident before and after the signing of the Concordat. In particular, unpublished Vatican documents will show how the Holy See used book censorship as a weapon to combat Mussolini's incumbent fascistization of Italy. Furthermore, the research focuses on the activity of the Holy Office between 1928 and 1930, revealing the censorship dynamics that led to the condemnation, for political reasons, of Gabriele d'Annunzio's *Opera omnia* (1928) and Mario Missiroli's *Date a Cesare*, as well as minor fascist publications (1929–30).

The National Edition of Gabriele d'Annunzio's Works

In the months prior to the signing of the Lateran Pacts a new factor contributed to create tension between the Holy See and Fascism and revolved around the figure of Gabriele d'Annunzio whose works had been condemned by the Church for being immoral in 1911².

After the disaster of the First World War had made him a national hero for Italy, d'Annunzio enjoyed a certain level of patronage from Mussolini (on self-interested grounds) so much so that on 26 June 1926, by express wish of the Duce, the *Istituto Nazionale per la pubblicazione di tutte le opere di Gabriele d'Annunzio* was founded to publish his complete works under royal patronage.

On 4 January 1928 the Prime Minister's Press Office announced the official launch of the first volume of d'Annunzio's *Opera omnia*, thus causing friction between Church and State over this popular figure to escalate to danger levels: the Holy See could not allow the works of an author who was on the *Index of Prohibited Books* to be compared to those by the nation's most famous writers (Manzoni, Carducci, etc.), and to

² Cfr. Brera 2012: *passim*; and later in Brera 2014: 101-18.

be hailed as representing Italian culture and disseminated through state propaganda³.

Yet the Lateran Pacts were already at an advanced stage of gestation and the Holy See had no intention of prejudicing the final outcome of the negotiations, especially over matters concerning banned books. Therefore, behind the walls of the Apostolic Palace, plans were laid for an explorative mission to gauge the nature of the publishing venture.

Father Giovanni Mercati, prefect of the Apostolic Vatican Library, had identified Monsignor Enrico Carusi as an ideal emissary to communicate all the concerns of the Holy See to the Italian government⁴. Mercati confirmed to Cardinal Merry Del Val, Secretary of the Holy Office, that Pietro Fedele, the government Minister of Education, was "extremely embarrassed" on hearing the Holy See's complaints regarding the possible publication of a national edition of d'Annunzio's works with the Duce's support. The Vatican therefore initiated a rapid series of preliminary contacts with civic authorities and a summary of the Vatican's diplomatic activity is formalised in a report drawn up by Carusi on 18 January 1928 and inserted in the dossier on d'Annunzio in the Holy Office:

I warned His Excellency Minister P[ietro] Fedele of the murmurs of dissatisfaction expressed by various parties concerning the national edition of G[abriele] D'Annunzio's works: [...] the grave failings of Catholic morality embodied by his work

³ News that a committee for the national edition of d'Annunzio's works had been set up appeared on 7 January 1928 in the *Messaggero*, among others. The article entitled *L'edizione nazionale delle Opere di Gabriele d'Annunzio* is contained in the dossier relating to the second instalment of the proceedings against d'Annunzio's works and to the debate between State and Church on the appropriateness of the National Edition, an indication that it was precisely this article that alerted the Holy See and heightened the tensions between the Poet, the Pope and Mussolini. The newspaper cutting is preserved in ACDF 1928: 4.

⁴ Cfr. *Annuario* 1928: 587.

do not justify a ceremonial publication promoted by the national government. What's more, the government would promote its distribution by printing circulars full of praise, thereby assuming an even greater responsibility⁵. (ACDF 1928: 2r)

In addition to empty reassurances ("these are just simple circulars [...] for an extremely luxury edition, not within reach of everyone's pockets or indeed of the majority [...]. The volumes [...] will remain [...] in the hands of a few bibliophiles, certainly not the young"), Fedele "advised against" a fresh proscription of d'Annunzio's work in the Index:

The Minister [...] added that a condemnation of the national edition of D'Annunzio would also make a negative impression on the government, which, also thanks to his own efforts, supports culture and religious teaching". (ACDF 1928: 3r)

After reminding Monsignor Carusi of the "merits" of Fascism and its support for Catholic religion, the Minister ended his argument with the declaration that he was obeying "orders from above", affirming that the "high cost" of the National Edition "would limit its circulation" (*Ibid.*).

Carusi, on the other hand, closed the report with his objection to Fedele's parting shots: «But the publisher [...] could still find a way to turn it into a popular edition» (*Ibid.*)⁶.

In less than a week, the question was officially on the discussion agenda at the Holy Office. The justifications made by Fedele were not deemed satisfactory by the highest Vatican officials and appropriate measures would now have to be taken, in keeping with the express wishes of Pius XI.

⁵ All translations of Vatican documents are by the author.

⁶ The report is undated but was registered on 27 January 1928, as can be seen from a handwritten note at the top of the paper.

The following quote is from the minutes of the hearing of Feria IV, which took place on 26 January 1928 and was attended by the pope and the Assessor of the Holy Office⁷:

The Holy Father read Mon[signor] Carusi's report. He did not appear satisfied with the explanations and justifications given by the Minister, and expressed his idea of acting in some way, adding that he would wait to hear Mussolini's personal views on the matter, whom he would contact through private channels (*Ibid.*: 5r).

On 2 February, during the meeting on Feria V, matters took a further step forward:

The Assessor presented to the Holy Father the list of books published by D'Annunzio since 1911 and the Holy Father requested a copy of the said books because he would personally undertake to procure them in order to have them examined by the Holy Office. (*Ibid.*: 5v)

Following the stance taken by the pope, the Holy Office opened proceedings against d'Annunzio, as a reaction to the government's indifference towards the Vatican's complaints. The list of all d'Annunzio's works, extending over 17 sheets, was drawn up by 23 March, and in the meantime Pius XI, when addressing the Lenten preachers, encouraged them to publicly condemn prohibited books, pointing his finger especially at those by d'Annunzio:

A serene, enlightened, grounded, erudite pronouncement [...] but above all a grave pronouncement, imbued with spirit, faith and Catholic discipline. This is what the Pope thought was necessary while the subject of a bookselling apotheosis was an

⁷ The Congregation met regularly during the week and each meeting was called *feria* (working day) followed by the ordinal number expressing the day on which the consultors met (I for Monday, II for Tuesday, etc.)

author many of whose works were already expressly condemned by the Church, and many others were equally condemned on their own account. (*Osservatore Romano* 1928)

Throughout the resulting storm of condemnations preached by bishops in many parts of Italy, and d'Annunzio's own stinging responses to Pius XI, the Holy Office continued to examine d'Annunzio's works. Within a few months, the two consultors, Padre Marco Sales, Master of the Sacred Apostolic Palace, and Monsignor Ernesto Ruffini, had submitted their report⁸.

It opened with a general introduction setting out the underlying reasons for the trial against d'Annunzio, starting with the «grave and learned words spoken by the Holy Father to the hearing on 20th February last to the Lenten Preachers»⁹. The report clearly explained the grounds for these new proceedings, which were mainly attributed to the creation of the committee for d'Annunzio's *Opera omnia*:

[...] in 1927 the publication of a National Edition of all G[abriele] D'Annunzio's works was publicly announced and for this purpose a special committee was formed. This imprudent and ill-advised recommendation by the civil authorities wounded the heart of the common Father of the faithful [...]. (ACDF 1928: 18, 2)

The consultors maintained that the pope had painted an "excellent" picture of d'Annunzio in his speech to the Lenten preachers and that "the works of G. D'Annunzio were extremely reprehensible". After condemning the books published by the author before 1911 (apart from his books of poetry), Ruffini and Sales asserted that «those written after this date deserve the same condemnation, made even more appropriate today on account of the tributes and praise lavished on d'Annunzio, the writer, all over Italy» (*Ibid.*: 18, 56).

⁸ The report is published in its entirety in Brera 2014: 437-468.

⁹ ACDF 1928: 18, 1.

However, the fear – never explicit but nonetheless present between the lines of the consultors' assessment – was that this would undermine relations with Fascism, precisely at the time when the Lateran Pacts were on the verge of being signed:

Condemning these texts, now that the motherland is more exalted than at any other time and now that this strongest nationalism dominates every aspect of Italian life, might give rise to ill-feeling against the Holy See, and as a result make the condemnation itself barely acceptable or even ineffective. Therefore a decree containing a universal ban could easily be misrepresented as a repressive measure against such an alleged hero of the Great War, the strenuous defender of the motherland at Fiume, the great champion of patriotic pride. (*Ibid.*: 18, 56)

At the meeting held on 18 June to examine the qualifiers' report, the assembly voted to put d'Annunzio's *Opera omnia* on the *Index*. There was just one openly dissenting vote from the consultor Luigi Santoro, who pronounced against the condemnation: "Prudenter est tacere" – he wrote – to avoid giving publicity to the author and jeopardising negotiations for the Concordat.

The response of the cardinal consultors was formalised at the assembly on Feria IV, which took place on 27 June 1928. The following day the pope approved the outcome of the vote and ordered its publication in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* of 30 June. The condemnation of all Gabriele d'Annunzio's works was validated by Luigi Castellano, Notary to the Holy Office, and appeared in the *Osservatore Romano* of 7 July and the *Corriere d'Italia* that same day.

Later, in 1933, the Vatican's pressure on the government intensified when the concerns of Monsignor Carusi, the Curia's representative to Mussolini at the time, were confirmed: the national press announced that a popular edition of d'Annunzio's works was nearing completion, under a publishing venture known as *L'Oleandro*. Father Pietro Tacchi Venturi, an influential mediator between the

parties during the pre-Concordat negotiations, wrote to the Duce in terms filled with concern:

Yesterday I learnt that the newspapers are speaking of a committee meeting of the "Oleandro" association that aims to publish the works of G[abriele] D'Annunzio. As is well known to Your Excellency, all the works of D'Annunzio were banned by the church under the solemn formula, "Opera Omnia"; when the national edition was discussed, the Holy See did not fail to manifest its displeasure in the clearest terms. What will happen now that efforts are made to spread the writings of an author who is unquestionably noxious to faith and morals, and positively condemned by the Church? If this "Oleandro" continues with its intentions, unimpeded by the government, who will prevent the Holy Father from profoundly disapproving of the matter in some other public form?

Tacchi Venturi's letter was not given very serious consideration by Mussolini, who preferred to stand aside and wait for events to unfold. By this time Fascism and its leader could count on almost unconditional support throughout the Italian cultural and political establishment. The Duce therefore showed no intention of changing his mind and dismissed Tacchi Venturi's complaint with a few words, testament to his attitude throughout the d'Annunzio affair: "I am not doing anything"¹⁰.

Pius XI Against the Fascist "Religion"

Pius XI was unwilling to condone Mussolini's tacit support for d'Annunzio's *Opera omnia*, knowing that, thanks to the Oleandro edition and fascist subscriptions, it would sell a large number of copies.

¹⁰ The letter, dated 9 January 1933, is preserved in the Central State Archive (Archivio Centrale dello Stato, ACS), *Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Carteggio Riservato (1922–1943)*, fasc. 404/R, "Tacchi Venturi, Pietro", subfasc. 2, insert B. Also published in De Felice–Mariano 1971: 426.

Moreover, the Holy Office, particularly as a result of the government's snub over the d'Annunzio question, did not miss an opportunity to highlight and denounce the unacceptable presence in many fascist publications of sacred imagery contaminated by Dannunzian rhetoric. Promptly reporting to the Pope several newly published fascist books, pamphlets and prayers, the Holy Office stressed the distance between the Church and a regime that aimed, in the months after the Concordat, to establish its own liturgy, as an alternative to the Catholic Church's.

The first relevant incident occurred at the end of 1929. On 4 November the archbishop of Gorizia, Francesco Borgia Sedej, sent the Secretary of the Congregation of the Council the text of a prayer «deemed not very suitable for strengthening a religious spirit in children because it contain[ed] political allusions» and was imbued with Dannunzian language and style (ACDF 1929a: 4).

In "respectful observance" of the climate of collaboration between State and Church, the local fascist party in Gorizia had sought prior approval by sending the *Pregghiera del Balilla* to the archbishop of the city, a man renowned for his energetic opposition to Mussolini's racial laws.

On 13 November 1929 Monsignor Giulio Serafini, Secretary of the Sacred Congregation of the Council, forwarded Sedej's letter to the Assessor of the Holy Office, Monsignor Nicola Canali.¹¹ The Congregation had to evaluate whether the wording of the prayer was appropriate to be read out by fascist youths:

THE BALILLA PRAYER

God, bless the risen Motherland – watch over our cities, our plains, our seas – let our territories grow and prosper: overseas there are people from our Motherland who live in suffering.

Support our Wings – guide our prows.

Protect our armies and make them invincible.

¹¹ Cfr. ACDF 1929a: 2. Registered on 16 November.

Let the name of Italy and Rome ring ever louder and be more feared in the world every day.

God bless the KING – the KING of our Victory.

God bless the Duce, at whose signal we are ready to live and die to a man.

Guide our souls to the sacred destinations you have allotted to us in peace and in War.

Bless our parents, and those love us and will sacrifice themselves for us.

God give blessing. (ACDF 1929a: 5)

The prayer shows clear signs of Dannunzianism, especially when it invokes the blessing of God upon the "armies" (firstly referred to through the metonymies "wings" and "prows", then more explicitly). It exalts the figures of the "King" (capitalised) and the "Duce", who are equalled to God, and finally it glorifies "War" – which is capitalised, whereas "peace" is not.

Undoubtedly this was a text worthy of attention by the Holy Office, given its use of the sacred in conjunction with temporal matters, and debate on the question was postponed until 16 November, in the preparatory congregation. The task of drafting the *votum*, in anticipation of the general congregation, was given to Father Giovanni Lottini, (a Dominican), who was at the time Padre Commissario and Primo Socio of the Holy Office:

This prayer cannot be approved under any circumstances; because it contains too much of the human and temporal and cannot be accepted by God. [...] It is also very dangerous [...] since it is capable of forming, particularly in young minds, the thought, sentiment and persuasion that the soul must or should rest on these temporal attainments [...] almost, one might say, becoming its ultimate purpose. [...] It cannot be [...] approved, first because it does not conform to the liturgical and customary prayers of the Church; second it is not imbued with the spirit of humility; third because only temporal attainments are sought, whereas any prayer subject to the church's approval must express

spiritual attainment at least as being preponderant over the temporal attainments requested therein. (*Ibid.*: 7–8)

On 20 November Lottini's *votum* was submitted to the congregation. The cardinals' opinion was negative because approving a text like the one being examined by the assembly would have set an extremely dangerous precedent, both in Italy and abroad: the legitimation of a type of prayer that was unacceptable to the Church.

On 21 November the pope gave his approval, supporting the line taken by the cardinals:

[...] it cannot be approved, also in view of the fact that if a prayer of this kind were approved for Italy, the ecclesiastical authority would find itself having to approve prayers with the same warlike and profane overtones that were proposed for other countries, following the example of Italy¹². (*Ibid.*: 8)

The policy of the Holy Office, modelled on Pius XI's idea to defend the Church against what he perceived as attacks to its foundations launched by Fascism, took the form of a total closure to contaminations between the two liturgies, Catholic and fascist, which could not – and should not – coexist even after signing the Lateran Pacts. The Holy Office put an end, at least temporarily, to questions concerning the abuse of the sacred in fascist prayers and its secretary wrote to Monsignor Sedej, indicating the approach to take.¹³ Even if the prayer was not placed on the *Index*, the objections raised by the Holy See against Mussolini, whom the pope himself once defined as "the

¹² This paper also contains the following pencil note, written in a hasty hand: «It lacks the essential characteristics for prayer. His Holiness would have to approve similar prayers also for other countries. It excites the passions. The Church must pray for peace». These are very probably the words spoken by the pope and transcribed by the Secretary of the Holy Office during the Friday hearing.

¹³ A short manuscript note ends the dossier: "Scritto all'Arcivescovo di Gorizia – 23 XI 1929". Cfr. ACDF 1929a: 8.

man whom providence has placed before us", and his movement, which began to show less and less respect for the pope's official and officious protests, would certainly not end with this and other minor 'condemnations', which in effect remained closeted (at least until now) within the Vatican palace walls.

The latent ill-feeling between the pope and the dictator, whose regime was competing with the Church for the hearts and minds of Italian people (and especially young people) would emerge yet again a few months later in the rooms of the Holy Office where, by this stage, politics was being openly discussed.

And to God what is God's. Pius XI Against Mussolini's Religious Policies

An occasion soon presented itself when the Holy See could strike at the heart of the religious policy of the fascist leader. In 1929 Mario Missiroli, who was at the time editor of the *Popolo di Roma*, published a book entitled *Date a Cesare* (Roma, Libreria del Littorio). This work is a lengthy volume illustrating "Mussolini's religious policy" with the help of key documents, such as the Duce's speech to the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of the Kingdom (1929), and which includes the pontiff's own reactions.¹⁴ Because of the topic and the slant taken, which was exclusively intended to affirm the superiority of the State over the Church in matters of religion and education, and also because of the somewhat critical interpretation of Pius XI's theocratic views, a copy of this work, together with a copy of the pamphlet by "Ignotus" (Temistocle Ceci) entitled *Stato fascista, Chiesa e scuola* (Roma, Libreria del Littorio, 1929), was immediately procured by the Holy See.

Date a Cesare was submitted to the Holy Office on the morning of 24 December by the Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, the Vatican official who signed the Lateran Pacts on behalf of Pius XI, and evaluated by a member of the papal secretariat and by the pontiff in person. The discussions at the highest echelons of the Church took

¹⁴ For a bio-bibliographical profile of Missiroli, see Pertici 2011: 60–65.

place on 13 January (Feria II), during the *Congregatio particularis*, a meeting designated to study single political or doctrinal cases with a huge potential impact on Catholicism.

In the journal entry of this congregation mention is made of an "annexo folio A [adjoining folio A]" which was the final version of the typed report submitted by the Secretary of State, along with the 'incriminated' book and a short "Official Note", to the Holy Office (ACDF 1929b: 26). In the same journal we find the following handwritten annotation under the congregation on Feria V: «S[anctissimu]S – The opinion of the Holy Father concerning the books by Mario Missiroli and Ignotus is expressed on Sheet 'a'».

Document "a" is the typed minutes of the report sent to the Holy Office by the Secretary of State, which contains a few significant handwritten notes. In all, it covers 13 sheets of thin paper, typewritten in black ink, which the Holy Office received and registered as early as 28 December.

These corrections, which were then incorporated into the report copied out by the Holy Office, are extremely important since they can be identified with reasonable certainty as having been written by Pius XI.¹⁵

As the first monograph on the Concordat, and since its author's opinions were completely biased towards Mussolini, the book could not be taken lightly by the Holy See. Indeed, it was the Secretary of State himself who dealt with it and raised the possibility of a nominal ban. However, the anonymous report was clear and its author's opinion went beyond the figure of Missiroli to attack the "heresiarch", Mussolini, who was guilty of having made two speeches (one to the

¹⁵ The graphological analysis of the manuscripts leaves little doubt if one compares, for example, the *ductus* and the morphology of the pope's handwriting in general (examined on a copy preserved in ACDF 1922: 1, 1) with the handwritten notes on the *votum* for *Date a Cesare*. In particular, the graphics of the word "impium" reveal positive traits if compared with the signature "Pius pp. XI". Also the line and *ductus* of the letters "u" and "s" are identical.

Chamber of Deputies on 7 June and the other to the Senate, the following day, on the "education of the young") that openly challenged the Church's authority.

Missiroli, objected the author of the report, dared to doubt the infallibility of Pius XI: «Even the pope [is wrong] when he complained and duly deplored "these propositions as being heretical and worse than heretical"». At this point in the document, Pius XI added a weighty epithet – "impium" – to Mussolini's 'heretical' words quoted on page 200 of Missiroli's book:

This religion became catholic in Rome. If it had remained in Palestine it would very probably have died out; indeed, Mussolini has the audacity to add: "it is difficult to understand how such widely known and unchallenged propositions for anyone with a modicum of historical knowledge have produced such an outcry in Catholic circles". [!:]¹⁶ (ACDF 1929b: 5)

Among the countless other assertions deemed worthy of censure is the pivotal passage from *Date a Cesare* on collaboration between the State and the Church. The following words again reveal the idea of the 'impassable boundary' between Church and fascism that remained for Pius XI the number one priority of his pontificate:

Many other propositions are, moreover, to be qualified respectively as "specious, false, *debitae apostolicis constitutionibus obedientiae derogantes*", not to say lacking the most elementary respect for the pope's pronunciations. [...] Indeed (page 55) supposes that any "collaboration between lay and religious culture should be denied, where it is explicitly affirmed, albeit with a reserve that did not escape [Mussolini], where lay refers to a culture that, although not ecclesiastical nor strictly religious, is neither hostile nor unappreciative of religion or morals, and as such remains within appropriate boundaries". (*Ibid.*: 6-7)

¹⁶ The pope added a double exclamation mark at this point to stress his consternation on reading this sort of assertion.

As stated in the report, fascism based these convictions on theories and individuals already identified by the Church as heretics who, in some cases, had even been excommunicated:

The matter is much more serious because it is widely known that Mussolini's "grossly heretical" propositions on the origins of Christianity were compiled using material supplied by Missiroli, on the understanding that the latter received it from Buonaiuti, and Mussolini himself recognised it as being "clearly of modernist inspiration".¹⁷ (*Ibid.*: 9)

Furthermore, the Holy See disapproved of Missiroli's view that the State could claim some superiority over the Church due to the latter's perceived reluctance to embrace progress. In practice, as the pontifical document rebutted, the antimodernist reaction did not amount to a rejection of contemporaneity. The last proposition (80th) of Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* had clearly stated the pope's views concerning

the need and duty to seek reconciliation with progress, liberalism and modern civilisation: "*Romanus Pontifex potest ac debet cum progressu, cum liberalismo e cum recenti civilitate sese*

¹⁷ The reference here is explicitly to Father Ernesto Buonaiuti, who collaborated with Missiroli during the latter's term as editor of *Il resto del Carlino*. The "modernism" with which the book is imbued had already spread to other texts, as the author of the *votum* noted: «The same errors can also be found above in the article by the journalist Coppola, and he too affirms that "Christianity only became catholic, or in other words universal, in Rome when it encountered the universal genius of Rome" etc., along the lines of the already condemned system outlined by Maurras. Even the gravest theological comment would be too light a measure in view of the enormity of these errors, despite the fact that to a large extent they derive from the superficiality and ignorance of those who do not know what they are saying» (*Ibid.*).

reconciliare et componere" [...] almost as if the Pope were an enemy of true progress.¹⁸ (*Ibid.*: 9)

On the issue of the Church's autonomy from the State, the votum was quite strongly critical of the Duce himself and did not mince words in describing him as "ignorant" about things religious:

This proposition (made by Mussolini) ["In the State the Church is not sovereign or even free"] is not only equivocal but, *prout sonat, in errorem inducens alias damnatum; in Ecclesiam iniuriosa*, and, insofar as it appears to deny the essence of the Church as a perfect society, independently ordered from civil society, it can also be qualified as "*propositio temeraria, pernicioso, schisma fovens et haeresim*". Furthermore, it cannot be attributed to Missiroli, except that he reports it without comment and without reservation; it is therefore based on the religious ignorance of Mussolini, as well as of Missiroli. (*Ibid.*: 11-12)¹⁹

Further censurable affirmations followed the ones above and were found by the author of the report in later passages, confirming that the idea of the State as an entity superior to the Church was firmly rooted in Missiroli's mind (and, consequently an idea that also came from Mussolini): «All the concessions [made by the State] to the Church are a function of this limit, which it imposes on itself, and they do not signify any sort of renunciation because they are voluntary». (*Ibid.*: 12)

Lastly, Missiroli's book was deemed irreverent by the report written by the staff of the Secretary of State (and revised by the Pius XI) because it referred to an "original theocratic intransigence" regarding

¹⁸ The sentence after the ellipsis is an autograph addition in the same hand that I have suggested as belonging to the pope.

¹⁹ The two parts of the text in italics have been, respectively, underlined and added in the same hand as appears earlier in the text. If my intuition is correct, this reveals a particularly negative judgement made by Pius XI on Mussolini, and that this view was already fully formed as of 1929.

the protection of the Church's rights, championed by the pope himself (*Ibid.*: 15-16).

The conclusions of the report touch on the author's own standing, describing him, in the words of the Holy See, as a journalist of "notorious servility and mental vileness" (*Ibid.*: 16)²⁰.

A condemnation would therefore be desirable – concluded the *votum* – even though, in view of the historical circumstances, and as was now clear to all in the Holy Office, this would run the risk of giving «a certain importance, publicity and resonance to a work of absolutely no value, which certainly has no merits whatsoever» (*Ibid.*: 16), thereby generating publicity that would be even more damaging to readers who were attracted by it.

The report was discussed as early as 13 January at the meeting on FERIA II and then at the general congregation held on 23 January. At this meeting the consultors unanimously resolved that *Date a Cesare* by Mario Missiroli – and *Stato fascista, Chiesa e scuola* by "Ignotus" (Temistocle Ceci) – deserved a nominal condemnation, in spite of the fact that they were already technically proscribed under the second and sixth articles of Canon 1399 of the Pio-Benedictine Code:

the books are to be condemned in full (for the gravest doctrinal errors and for insolence towards the figure of the pope). [The consultors] also affirm that it is not only opportune but also necessary that a decree is emanated to declare that they are pre-damned by Canon 1399, articles 2 and 6, and that they should be condemned anew with a motivated condemnation ("a"). The most reverend cardinals add the following thought. The general errors spread throughout the book shall be extracted from fascist doctrine, and shall be condemned in a general decree, such as, for example, the decree *Lamentabili [sane exitu]*. The most Reverend Father Sales adds: "The two speeches made by Mussolini, in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate, shall also be condemned because they serve as a foundation for all the errors contained in words in the books". (ACDF 1930)

²⁰ For this and the previous quotations.

The secretary, Cardinal Merry Del Val, then drafted the motivation to be included in the condemnation decree:

Too much importance is given to the books in question, with the connivance of the fascist authority, as is clearly evident from reading of the books and from the name of the printer that publishes them – Tipografia del Littorio [...] It is therefore right to condemn these too, to show impartiality. [...] and it is right that foreign [representatives] should be advised. It would be a relief to the universal Catholic conscience. (*Ibid.*)

The cardinals were concerned more about the government's "connivance" and indeed the satisfaction it took in this type of publication. It is interesting to note, moreover, that the Holy Office felt it was engaged in an actual 'war' in which the Church had to be defended against attacks from political 'heresies' made in literary and non-fiction works that assailed the Holy See on a daily basis with the aim of undermining the pope's authority. It is no coincidence that the articles of Canon 1399 mentioned at the meeting (and also in the condemnation) were 2 and 6, which respectively prohibited «libri quorum vis scriptorum, haeresim vel schisma propugnantes, aut ipsa religionis fundamenta quoquo modo evertere nitentes» [Books of any writers propagating heresy or schism, or attacking in any way the basis of religion] and «qui quodlibet ex catholicis dogmatibus impugnant vel derident [...] et qui data opera ecclesiasticam hierarchiam, aut statum clericalem vel religiosum probris afficiunt» [attacking or deriding any Catholic dogma [...] or bringing about opprobrium on religion or the clerical state] (*Codex* 2001: 471).

It is also worth noting the suggestion that the 'incriminated' speeches made by the fascist leader should be placed on the *Index*. This further confirms that Mussolini's standing with the Roman Curia was particularly low even in the days immediately after the signing of the Concordat.

Having denounced Missiroli's work – through the Secretary of State – Pius XI now had to evaluate and approve the consultants' report.

He did so once again through the Secretary of State who, on 23 January 1930, sent a strong statement to the Holy Office, expressing the pope's intention not to cede sovereignty over any of the Holy See's prerogatives, even in the event of a reconciliation that, at this point, seemed unlikely:

The Holy Father [...] observed that this act [the prompt condemnation of the books by Missiroli and Ceci] is opportune and necessary to eliminate any appreciation or even apprehension that [...] having signed the Pact steps would not be taken with due energy to defend the true doctrine of the Church, the education of the young, etc [...] He concluded by instructing that the condemnation decree should certainly be prepared, on summary grounds, namely for the gravest errors against the Catholic doctrine, and especially against the divine constitution and sacrosanct rights of the Church, and against papal power and its exercise. (ACDF 1929b: 16)

Pius XI decided that the moment had come to launch a counteroffensive against the fascists' attempts to manoeuvre the Church into a corner and deprive it of all authority, above all in relation to education and morals. Therefore, he ordered the Holy Office to monitor the circulation of books ascribable to fascist authors and to focus, in particular, on all minor fascist publications that had been previously authorised at the "highest levels" of the Fascist Party or, even worse, that had been endorsed by Mussolini in person:

His Holiness showed a lively concern for the increasing spread of false theories of fascism and therefore instructed the Most Eminent Card[inal] Secretary to arrange for other books of this kind to be examined, but that they should be of greater value in terms of content and author (for example, by [Achille] Saitta) than had been the case of the two in question. Lastly, he added that the Most Eminent Card[inal] Secretary should also order a study in order to extract erroneous propositions from books, especially small books or those printed as leaflets or used in catechism, but

assuring himself primarily that such publications, from which the errors needed to be removed, were not simply the work of private individuals but instead had the permission, approval or encouragement, or were prescribed in schools by the highest levels, and limiting such extraction to fundamental or general errors. And then we shall see. (*Ibid.*)

This closing phrase, "we shall see", may reveal the pope's hesitation in foreseeing what might happen in the years following the pact between the Holy See and the Italian government. For the time being, in addition to placing *Date a Cesare* on the *Index*, the Vatican intensified its own propaganda counteroffensive by printing a collection of essays and texts in support of the church, under the title *Parole pontificie sugli accordi del Laterano* (Roma, 1929). A few months later, by express order of Pius XI, a small volume was printed and distributed together with the *Osservatore romano*: its title was *Date a Dio* (Roma, 1930) and its precise aim was to reject the arguments put forward in Missiroli's book.

A Political Index

While it is certain that Church and State set aside differences on questions of particular interest that were widely known prior to signing the Lateran Pact and Concordat, the analysis of Vatican documents regarding the proceedings of the Holy Office against d'Annunzio's *Opera Omnia*, the *Preghiera del Balilla* and Missiroli's *Date a Cesare* shows how the positions of Church and State had never been so distant, in particular on three key cultural and political topics: the 'defence' of sensual and immoral books (and especially those by authors closely linked to the regime), the (ab)use of sacred imagery in lay publications and the recognition by the Italian government of the leading role of the Church in the education of the youth.

Up to the start of the Holy See's crusade against sensual works, which must be set in the context of the warfare against modernism, the proscription of books only implied the condemnation of their contents

and not necessarily of their authors. However, after the promulgation of the encyclical letter *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907), the coincidence book/author became the norm as shown, for instance, by the condemnation of Antonio Fogazzaro's *Il Santo* and *Leila* (1906 and 1911), which was followed by the desperate attempt by the author – a fervent Catholic – to rebuild his reputation as a good believer (Marangon 2009).

The condemnation of d'Annunzio's books is another clear example of this trend. Not only his works were regarded as morally corrupt by the Church but so was the author himself; moreover, he was deemed a pervert and corruptor of families and youth, which were the targets of Catholic education and propaganda. While the defence of public decency is the main reason behind the first decree of proscription signed by Pius X (1911), after *Le Martyre de Saint Sebastien* was staged in Paris, the following three nominal decrees promulgated against d'Annunzio by Pius XI (*Opera Omnia*, 1928 and *Il libro segreto*, 1935) and Pius XII, when the Comandante had just passed away (*Solus ad solam*, 1939) had a different scope: the dismissal of an author – and a man – regarded as poisonous for any Catholic believer (Brera 2012: 29).

Through d'Annunzio's condemnations, the Holy Office reached out to the Catholic people in order to reaffirm the Vatican's sole authority regarding the defence of morality; however, formal proceedings against d'Annunzio's *Opera omnia* highlight how the effects of Vatican book censorship were broadened, for the first time in 1928, beyond the dichotomy book/author and openly touched the political scene, on which the poet had become an influential actor under the protection of the Prime Minister and the King of Italy.

In the eyes of the pope d'Annunzio's condemnation of 1928, apart from being a strong statement against the circulation of immoral books and an equally stronger one in support of the Church's role as *defensor morum*, served as a direct warning to Mussolini in the months when the Church tirelessly attempted to defend its prerogatives, above all the defence of Catholic families from dangerously 'pornographic' publications, without compromising its pre-Concordat negotiations by making direct attacks on the fascist hierarchy.

When Pius XI signed the decree of proscription of d'Annunzio's *Opera omnia*, his blasphemous superhumanism and dissolute lifestyle, he implicitly condemned Mussolini who, while showing a lack of respect for the Holy See's formal complaints, had elected the former hero of Fiume as one of the most prominent stalwarts of his propaganda.

Dannunzianism, or the use of an emphatic rhetoric derived from d'Annunzio's pompous language, was furthermore largely used by the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* to charge up the masses that Mussolini aimed to control and exploit in order to cement his political power. The *Duce* resolved that fascist ideology should pivot around a liturgy imbued with the *Comandante* d'Annunzio's rhetoric, which famously stirred the feelings of legionnaires and civilians alike during the days of Fiume's revolution. Hence Fascism started to circulate several small publications, like the *Preghiera del Balilla*, through which Mussolini's party aimed to establish greater influence – and, ultimately, control – over the spiritual and moral life of the nation.

Pius XI could not tolerate the increasing attempts of the PNF to challenge the Catholic Church with a lay liturgy, which he saw both as blasphemous and an attempt to isolate the Vatican, thus depriving it of any social control of the people of Italy. In particular, the pope opposed Mussolini's attempted fascistization of the peninsula through the *Opera Nazionale Balilla*, the youth organization created to mould a new Fascist generation to challenge the 'pastoral' action of the *Azione Cattolica*, of which the pope was a strenuous supporter.

The Vatican's concerns regarding the gradual interference of Fascism with the activities of the Church on spiritual matters are manifest in the Holy Office's treatment of the *Preghiera del Balilla*. The censorship of this text shows, on the one hand, the Church's unwillingness to authorise the proliferation of "heretical" liturgies, especially among the youth. On the other hand, the failure to place the prayer on the *Index of Prohibited Books* confirms how, in the twentieth century, the role of censorship changed in the context of the exercise of secular power by the Holy See and became openly political.

Notwithstanding the opinions of the Curia and the pope himself, the political situation prompted Pius XI to tone down the final judgement of the Vatican censors – the Holy Office – and reclassify the case as merely a local problem, one that concerned the diocese of Gorizia alone.

Finally, the censorship of Mario Missiroli's *Date a Cesare* was also wholly political. It was with this act of forbiddance that the pope condemned the religious policies of Mussolini, regarding whom he had already formed a clearly negative opinion.²¹

After the two previous subtle political acts, disguised under the cover of book censorship, Pius XI stigmatised, personally annotating a *votum* prepared for the Holy Office, what he perceived as an intolerable and open attack on the political independence of the Church, which had been in the balance since the opening of the *Questione romana* in the nineteenth century and seemed to have been settled forever with the signing of the Concordat.

The proscription of Missiroli's book in the *Index* is a more explicit reaction of the Holy See, through one of its most influential congregations, to the public statements made by Mussolini (collected in a book endorsed by the PNF) dismissing any possibility of political equality between the State and the Church.

Again, the pope refrained from publicly condemning – for political opportuneness – Mussolini "the heresiarch", although the *messa all'Indice* of one of the journalists who were most loyal to the regime must have sounded a much louder warning to the *Duce*.

²¹ It is interesting to add that the censorship of *Date a Cesare* was seen by the Holy See as among the most important documents held by the Holy Office, at least from a political and institutional point of view. When the Second World War broke out, many documents in the archive of the former Inquisition were moved to the United States to prevent any chance of them falling into the wrong hands. They were returned to Rome at the end of the war. The folder containing the documents on Missiroli's censorship was among those dispatched to the other side of the Atlantic and it is marked with the words "Sent to America 1940".

The condemnation of *Date a Cesare* and the other instances of censorship discussed in this article mark the transformation of the Vatican institution responsible for book censorship, which had long lost the enormous coercive power it had wielded throughout the early modern period, into a subtle instrument of political struggle. All the more so at a time when a frontal attack by the Holy See on a popular government that was, by 1928–29, firmly in control of the whole country and enjoyed a high level of support from the cultural and political establishment, could not, for obvious reasons, be carried out openly outside the corridors of the Vatican.

Pius XI would become more and more open in his attacks on the fascist regime when in 1930, only a few months after signing the Lateran Pacts, Mussolini threatened to close all the circles of *Azione Cattolica*²². In 1931, having tried in vain to reaffirm the right of the Catholic youth to participate actively in forming a new ethical and moral public conscience in Italy, mainly through the mediation of the cardinal archbishop of Milan, Ildefonso Schuster, Pius XI signed his most scathing attack on Fascism, the encyclical *Non abbiamo bisogno* [We do not need].

In his heartfelt address, the pontiff denounced:

a mass of authentic affirmations and no less authentic facts which reveal beyond the slightest possibility of doubt the resolve (already in great measure actually put into effect) 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" which is no less in contrast with the natural rights of the family than it is in contradiction with the supernatural rights of the Church. (Ratti 1931: 816)

²² Whose members the pope independently and reluctantly decided to disband in 1931 to prevent further acts of violence from the fascist followers.

Non abbiamo bisogno is beyond doubt Pius XI's strongest stance against the political interference of fascist propaganda with the governance and activities of Catholic church. In the passage quoted above the pope openly criticizes what he had already feared in the months that preceded the Concordat: the contamination of families and the young by the fascist ideology. When he proscribed d'Annunzio's works in the *Index* for the second time, Pius XI had realised how, beyond the appeasing façade of a friendly government that was happy to grant the Church its longed for political and territorial independence (and some support in its anti-communist fight), lurked a ferocious totalitarian regime, which fed its ideology to Italian families through grandiose Dannunzian rhetoric and publications circulated in the name of the 'education' of the *Balilla*.

Guided by the hand of the pope, the Holy Office's acts of censorship were mostly ineffective for two reasons: they arrived either too late, when Mussolini's power was already well consolidated, or they were withdrawn at the very last minute so as not to compromise the already uncertain political balance between the spiritual and the secular powers.

The use of censorship as a political weapon was, in Pius XI's view, the only card he could play in order to remind Mussolini of the Holy See's key role in the Italian scenario without compromising diplomatic relations with the regime, and thus preserving the political independence of the Church²³.

After the pope was forced to relinquish most of his political influence to Mussolini after both leaders signed the Lateran Pacts, Pius XI certainly regretted his 'hesitations' of the past, while on the contrary the Duce capitalised on this once his regime was strong enough *not to need* the pope anymore to succeed in his totalitarian project.

²³ The pontiff confirmed this when he wrote, in *Non abbiamo bisogno*, that he had «always refrained from [politically] condemning – formally and specifically – the [fascist] party and the regime» (Ratti 1931: 817-819).

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