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Pius XII, a Roman from Rome

By WALTER G. TILLMANN

NUNTIO vobis gaudium magnum: Habemus Papam!" Cardinal Caccia-Dominioni, dean of Cardinal Deacons, announced from the balcony of St. Peter's. Cheers went up from the crowds in the square. "Eminentissimum ac reverendissimum dominum meum, Dominum Eugenium. . . ." At this point a roar of approval rose from the crowds and the cardinal had to pause before he could continue, ". . . Pacelli, qui sibi nomen imposuit Pium Duodecimum."¹

"E Romano di Roma," he is a Roman from Rome, the joyful multitudes shouted.² For the first time in over 200 years a native Roman had been elected Bishop of Rome. The time was 5:30 P. M., the day March 2, 1939, the 63d birthday of Eugenio Maria Giuseppe Giovanni Pacelli.

Now, 20 years after the event, the pontificate of Eugenio Pacelli has become history. His first words after accepting the office to which he had been elected were "Miserere mei, Deus, secundum misericordiam tuam." Years later, when he wrote his last will and testament, he said: "These words, which I pronounced at the moment in which with trepidation I accepted election as Supreme Pontiff, I now repeat at a time in which knowledge of the deficiencies, of the failures, of the sins committed during so long a pontificate and in so grave an epoch has made more clear to my mind my insufficiency and unworthiness. . . . I pray those whose affair it is not to bother to erect any monuments to my memory: sufficient it is that my poor mortal remains should be laid simply in a sacred place. . . ."³

Pius XII was a true pope. He did "was eines Papstes ist," as a Lutheran journalist in Dr. Lilje's house organ wrote of him after his death. The expressions of sincere condolences which Bishop Lilje sent to Cardinal Frings (and Franklin Clark Fry to his American counterpart) may have raised some eyebrows among Lutherans — imagine Luther sending condolences at the demise of

¹ *Time*, March 13, 1939, p. 36.

² *Sonntagsblatt* (Publisher Hanns Lilje), Oct. 19, 1958, p. 32.

³ *Time*, Oct. 20, 1958, p. 42.

a Roman pope! — but they were indicative of the admiration which the world had for the man Pacelli, "who gave himself the name Pius XII." And this in spite of the fact that Pius XII did more than any other pope — with the possible exception of Pius IX — to deepen the gulf which has divided the church since the Reformation. His dogma of the Assumption of Mary (1950), his dedication of all Germany to the Sacred Heart of Mary, and finally his efforts to have Mary declared coredemptrix of the world, were more divisive than all the "anathemas" of the Council of Trent.

Pius XII was a 20th-century anomaly. He was an aristocrat, an ascetic, and an autocrat. Wilhelm II who met him in 1917 called him a "vornehme, sympathische Erscheinung, von hoher Intelligenz und vollendeten Umgangsformen, das Bild eines katholischen Kirchenfürsten."⁴ He was a true Roman aristocrat, cold and aloof, until one saw him at a distance of five feet.⁵ If we may believe one of his biographers, he must have had the commanding presence of a Leo I, who singlehandedly repelled the barbarians from the gates of Rome. When Pacelli was nuncio in Munich an armed band of Spartacists invaded his residence to assassinate him. But ". . . while revolvers were leveled at his breast, he sympathetically analyzed their problem. . . . One by one the pistols dropped. . . . Later the leaders returned to apologize."⁶ Later, during the Second World War, after the occupation of Rome by Field Marshal Kesselring, he kept the Gestapo out of the Vatican, where hundreds — including Lutherans — had taken refuge.

He was an autocrat. For almost 60 years he had been in the diplomatic service of his church. When he died there was no secretary of state, no *camerlengo*; all the reins were held tightly by his hands. "The Holy Father provided poorly," a Vatican official complained after his death.⁷ The cardinals were hastily summoned to elect a *camerlengo*, for the whole machinery of the church had ground to a halt. During the last few years of his life Pius XII had consulted no one and had seen few.

⁴ *Wilhelm II, Ereignisse und Gestalten 1878—1918* (Berlin, 1922), p. 225.

⁵ Joseph F. Dinneen, "Pius XII," in *Reader's Digest*, June 1939, p. 83.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Time*, Oct. 20, 1958, p. 44.

He was an ascetic. He ate little. Towards the end he ate less and less. He did not smoke. He sipped wine sparingly. What a contrast to John XXIII, who likes to smoke his cigars, eats like a "big fork," and has such an ample supply of wine that he is afraid he won't be able to drink it during his "brief pontificate." He had visions. During the war years, and especially during his sickness in the early 50s, Pius XII saw Christ and Mary. When his coffin was brought back from Castel Gandolfo thousands of Romans were discussing his canonization.⁸ A few months later his successor mentioned that the "cause for his canonization would be introduced at an early date."⁹

Yet this aristocratic, autocratic, ascetic Roman was closer to the peoples of the world than any other pope in the history of the papacy. He was closer to the Germans, including the German Lutherans, than any other pope since the Reformation. He spent 12 long years among the Germans. According to his biographers, he was tactful in dealing with all men, "especially non-Catholics,"¹⁰ a fact which deeply impressed Louis P. Lochner, dean of foreign correspondents in Berlin during the 20s and faithful Missouri Lutheran. When Lochner, as president of the foreign correspondents' association, was seated next to the dean of the diplomatic corps, he explained to the future pope that he was the son of a Lutheran pastor. "I hope, Your Excellency, that you will not be too shocked."—"Not in the least," Pacelli replied with an engaging smile. "We are all God's children."¹¹ Before he left Germany in 1929 to accept a cardinal's hat and to become secretary of state of Pius XI, he made a pilgrimage to the Wartburg and stood for a long time in the room where Luther had translated the New Testament in 1521—22. He was heard muttering in German: "What a great man! What a great man! Too bad we lost him!" These words, repeated by the venerable castellan of the Wartburg, may be apocryphal, but they were widely believed as an expression of the "enlightened Catholicism" of Pacelli.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49

⁹ *New York Times*, Jan. 29, 1959.

¹⁰ Dinneen, *loc. cit.*

¹¹ Louis Lochner, "Famous People I Have Known," in *This Day*, May 1954, p. 15.

Yet this same man made the first effective use of the dogma of infallibility by declaring the dogma of the Assumption of Mary, thus offending the non-Roman Christian world. A few years ago a Lutheran correspondent reminded him that he had been consistently wrong in predicting Hitler's chances. "That was years before I became infallible," Pius XII declared with a gentle smile.

"Pope of Peace," he has been called. He himself was in love with the word *pace* and the play on words which it offered when combined with his family name "Pacelli."¹² His coat of arms showed the dove of peace with the olive branch.¹³ One of his favorite photos showed him holding a dove in his open hand, sitting on the fisherman's ring.¹⁴ To Wilhelm II he said: "C'est le devoir du Pape. . . . Il faut qu'il agisse, c'est par lui que le monde doit être regagné à la paix" (It is the duty of the pope, he must act, through him the world must regain peace).¹⁵ For six years, from 1939 to 1945, he pleaded for peace, and his peace messages are collected in seven volumes.¹⁶ But "peace" was not his sole concern, not even his chief concern. Pius X had been a "pope of peace" and had died of a broken heart when World War I broke out. Benedict XV had had the ambition to bring lasting peace to the world and had failed. Pius XI, to the very end of his life, had admonished the rulers to solve the world's problems peacefully. Pius XII wanted to be more than a mere "Pope of Peace." He wanted to be *the* "Marian Pope."

It is probable that when the history of the reign of Pius XII will be written, he will be called the Marian Pope. Devotion to the Virgin became an obsession with him, especially in his later years. As nuncio in Berlin he could say: "Nahe bei Petrus stehen heisst nahe bei Christus stehen."¹⁷ Yet, at the end of his life, a month before he died, he sent Cardinal Tisserant to Lourdes (by jet plane, provided by Air France) to tell the faithful: "It is

¹² Walter Yust, ed. *Ten Eventful Years* (Chicago: *Encyclopedia Britannica Inc.*, 1947), III, 568.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Anthony Flynn et al., *The Triumph of Faith* (New York: Imprimatur Francis Cardinal Spellman, 1958), p. 420.

¹⁵ Wilhelm II, p. 230.

¹⁶ Yust, *loc. cit.*

¹⁷ *Sonntagsblatt*, Oct. 19, 1958, p. 32.

Mary who in her unspeakable goodness wants to dwell among us in order to be our eternal help and sure refuge. By strengthening our faith through her miracles, which are always new and without number, by sustaining our hope through inexhaustible and generous mercy, by kindling the flame of our love through her heavenly beauty, through her boundless goodness and through her acts of love . . . the Kingdom of Christ will be re-established."¹⁸ From the living Peter to Mary, "through whom we go to Christ!"¹⁹ This is indeed a frightening aspect of Roman theology, not merely a 20th-century anomaly. A Lutheran commented on this pronouncement by a Roman pope: "Der Mensch stellt sich hier neben Gott . . . er wird Mithelfer . . . ja schliesslich Miterloeser."²⁰

This is, of course, not a sudden development, it is an evolutionary development. What is frightening is that within the lifetime of one man the papacy should rise from its nadir to its zenith *in spite of itself*. As we look upon the papacy during the last century, we see a tremendous resurgence of Catholic power.²¹ When Eugenio Pacelli was born in 1876 Pius IX was a thoroughly discredited "prisoner in the Vatican." He had no friends outside his own little circle of Jesuit advisers. Even his hierarchy had no affection for him. The wounds of the Vatican Council were still bleeding on the body Catholic. When he died shortly thereafter the Romans wanted to throw his coffin into the Tiber River. Three times within the century before the birth of Pius XII Roman popes had been forced to leave the Eternal City. A quarter century before his birth the reigning pope, Pius IX, had been forced by the anticlericals to flee to Gaeta. In Germany Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* was raging in full force, the Italian government and people were rabidly anticlerical, France was once again turning away from ultramontanism, the U. S. bishops had asserted their independence

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.31.

¹⁹ *Des Moines Register*, Feb. 17, 1959, p. 8.

²⁰ *Sonntagsblatt*, Oct. 12, 1958, p. 31.

²¹ E. E. Y. Hales, *The Catholic Church in the Modern World* (New York: Imprimatur Francis Cardinal Spellman, 1958), pp. 19 ff. See also *Rheinischer Merkur* (leading German Catholic newspaper), Oct. 24, 1958: "Welch ein Wandel! Als im Jahre 1878 der tote Pius IX . . . vom Vatikan in seine Begrabnisstaette San Lorenzo ueberfuehrt wurde, wollten Roemer den Sarg in den Tiber werfen" (p. 3).

at the Vatican Council, and the worst troubles for the church were still to come in the New World. Even Francis Joseph of Austria was showing an inclination to separate the Austrian bishops from their Roman tutelage, renewing the heretical tendencies of Joseph II. Spain, Portugal, and South America were restive. The much-touted conversions of Newman and Manning had not produced the desired results. Growth of the Roman Church in England was painfully slow.²² One after another Christian nations were withdrawing their diplomatic missions from the Vatican. Pius IX was, according to some Catholic historians, considered a mere chaplain to the Italian king, who in turn was under the influence of the Freemasons.

Eighty-two years later, when Pius XII was laid to rest in St. Peter's, the Roman populace knelt along the road of the cortege. Fifty-three governments, including the foreign ministers of Germany, France, and the U. S., were present to witness the hurried-up obsequies (the body was turning green).²³ There was not a ripple of protest, not even from the Protestant majorities in most of the countries represented. In those 82 years the Roman Church had made tremendous progress. Pius XII had been its witness, and in most cases its chief architect.

"Velut oriens sidus emicuit qui nunc fulget in orbe terrarum" (Like the rising sun, first appeared here he whose splendor now shines throughout the world). This inscription in Ennio Quirino Visconti school in Rome is no empty phrase.²⁴ For Pius XII, born of "black parentage" in 1876, who attended school here, helped create this splendor. From 1901, when he became assistant to the later papal secretary of state of Pius X, Merry del Val, and attended the obsequies for Queen Victoria in his company, to his death in 1958 Pius XII served his church well. He codified the canon law during 18 years of ardent study which made him the greatest living authority on canon law in modern times. He met Edward VII, represented the pope at the coronation of George V and Queen Mary, talked with anti-Roman French leaders after the break between Paris and the Vatican, went to Germany in 1917 to promote

²² Hales, p. 239.

²³ *Rheinischer Merkur*, Oct. 24, 1958. Article: "Der Fall Galeazzi-Lisi."

²⁴ Yust, loc. cit.

the peace plan of Benedict XV, and served his mentor, the secretary of state Cardinal Gasparri, in many important missions. He became known as an expert on concordats, concluding concordats with Bavaria, Prussia, and finally with Hitler's Reich. With Gasparri he was one of the restorers of papal independence, bringing about a reconciliation between Quirinal and Vatican and the restoration of the secular power of the pope. As secretary of state he backed Pius XI in his consistent fight against communism, nazism, and fascism. While Uniates in Russia tried to save themselves by making compromises with the Orthodox Church, especially after the Second World War, while Cardinals Faulhaber in Germany and Innitzer in Austria exhibited "indecent haste" in welcoming Hitler and Hitlerism,²⁵ while Cardinal Schuster of Milan and other Italian ecclesiastics blessed the arms of Mussolini's invading army, the Vatican kept aloof and gained the respect of the world. It is, of course, possible that it was all part of Vatican strategy to use local ecclesiastics to do the dealing with the dictators. But the world saw only the consistent refusal of Rome to deal with those who were opposed to Christianity. (The concordats with Mussolini and Hitler were excused by the fact that they were concluded early when it was still thought possible to "civilize" them.)²⁶

On the other hand Pacelli was not a tool of western democracy. He opposed consistently the "cruel dogma of unconditional surrender" advanced by Roosevelt and Churchill.²⁷ He was, in spite of his record, often accused of being profascist.²⁸ Although Catholic scholars admit that there was a natural inclination for the church to ally herself with the anticommunist forces of fascism, Pacelli as secretary of state and later as pope refused to join any fascist crusade. The Ethiopian venture of Mussolini offered "wonderful opportunities to the Church" to convert the Coptic Ethiopians, yet the Vatican remained aloof. More difficult was its position during the Spanish civil war, supported both by German and Italian intervention. Pius XII was against the Spanish republic and for the

²⁵ Hales, p. 273.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

²⁸ G. Salvemini, "Pius XII and Fascism," in *New Republic*, March 8, 1943, pp. 305—309.

emerging dictator. But again the church "kept her hands clean." Finally, the most forceful attempt to win the approval of the Vatican was made during World War II when both the Italian and German governments put strong pressure on the Vatican to endorse their crusade against Russia. For several years the pope felt unsafe in Rome. The question of his removal to Canada was discussed throughout the Catholic world.²⁹ He did not dare to take the customary summer vacation at Castel Gandolfo, because a Gestapo post had been installed nearby, and it was feared that Hitler might abduct him as Napoleon had abducted Pius VII.³⁰ Other embarrassing situations developed: the dealings of the Vatican with the practicing-Catholic Marshall Pétain of Vichy, which made the role of the church in postwar France difficult until Cardinal Roncalli smoothed over the ruffled feelings of practicing-Catholic De Gaulle (Roncalli is now Pope John XXIII); the alleged cooperation between Stepinac and certain pro-Nazi groups in Yugoslavia, which led to his imprisonment by the victorious Tito; the troubles of Mindszenty in Hungary; the many problems which grew out of the accusation that the policy of the Vatican had been profascist during the Second World War. With fine tact and skillful diplomacy Pius XII managed to extricate himself and the church from most of these problems.

He was the first pope in history who had been seen, before and during his pontificate, by millions and millions of people, ranging from the Harlem Globetrotters³¹ and bobby soxers³² to American presidents and English kings and queens. He visited not only England and Germany but most European countries. He was on two missions in France, was papal legate in Hungary, crossed the Atlantic to visit South America and the United States. While in the States for the avowed purpose of telling F.D.R. that the attacks by one Father Coughlin of the Church of the Little Flower in Detroit did not represent the views of His Holiness Pope

²⁹ *Christian Century*, March 3, 1943, p. 252.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1941, p. 1237.

³¹ Flynn, p. 426. "He [the pope] applauded several good shots with great enthusiasm and later received the famous Harlem Globetrotters in a private audience."

³² *Time*, Oct. 20, 1958: ". . . bobby soxers and Brahmins, camera-slung tourists, oilmen and stenographers and schoolteachers."

Pius XI,³³ he took occasion to "feel the pulse" of the nation.³⁴ While American matrons worried how to genuflect before his eminence,³⁵ Pacelli traveled 8,000 miles by air during the month of October 1936. "The people of the United States were magnetized by the calm spiritual majesty and democratic ardor of Cardinal Pacelli," reported the usually reliable *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Two of his closest friends were Americans, Francis Cardinal Spellman, the peppery archbishop of New York, and Joseph Kennedy, Sr., who according to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt is currently spending "oodles of money" to get his boy into the White House by 1960.³⁶ One result of Pacelli's American tour, predicted by the *Christian Century* in 1936, was the sending of a diplomatic representative to Rome (in 1940, when Roosevelt appointed Myron C. Taylor his personal representative with ambassadorial rank).

The church prospered during the pontificate of Eugenio Pacelli, increasing by about 100 million baptized members.³⁷ While Catholic writers are not agreed on the accuracy of these figures (e. g., the number of non-practicing Catholics increased in France and many other countries), these statistics are nevertheless impressive if we consider that many members of the Uniate Churches were lost to the Orthodox Church and that the cruel expulsions of whole populations after the Second World War hurt the Catholic Church as much as the Lutheran. England, where Catholic progress had been slow in the century before the 1930s (from about a million to two million members), Holland, where Calvinist opposition had been effective until recently, and other European countries found themselves with strong Catholic minorities. Catholic parties took over the government in Italy (for a century a center of anti-clericalism), in France (where the church had suffered much persecution since the French Revolution), and in Germany (which suddenly found itself with 45 per cent Catholics instead of the

³³ *Christian Century*, Oct. 14, 1936, p. 1352.

³⁴ *Time*, Nov. 16, 1936, p. 53.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Life*, Feb. 23, 1959, p. 104.

Time, Oct. 20, 1958, p. 44: "Two close personal friends of Pius XII were Americans — Cardinal Spellman and Boston Tycoon Joseph P. Kennedy. . . ."

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42: ". . . from 388,402,610 to 496,512,000."

historical figure of 33 per cent). Canada had its first Catholic prime minister in Mr. Saint-Laurent. About a dozen large states in our country were for all practical purposes under Catholic influence. There was talk of a Catholic president in 1960. Mexico, Argentina, and other trouble spots among the neglected daughters of the church were quieting down and opening doors to renewed Catholic activity. And while there was trouble in China (where shortly before Pius XII's death bishops were ordained without the church's approval), in Hungary, Yugoslavia, Poland, and East Germany, these misfortunes were more than offset by the gain which the church had made in numbers elsewhere and by the general acceptance which she met among others, including Lutherans who through various movements and personalities (Asmussen, etc.) expressed their desire to become better acquainted with the "sister church of Rome." It was hard to find anyone who at the time of the death of Pius XII would have dared to point a finger at the increasing idolatry, evident in the Mariolatry and hagiolatry (Pius created 33 saints during his pontificate), which was taking place in the Roman Church.

Yet while dogmatically the Roman Church was in some respects moving farther and farther away from the Gospel of Christ, there was new understanding for the problems surrounding it. Gone were the days of Denifle and Grisar (except for the American Paulist fathers and some stupid textbooks for Catholic high schools). Men like Karl Adam and Joseph Lortz, who displayed an amazing insight into the real causes of the Reformation, were permitted to speak without reproof. Although the principles of the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) were upheld, there were no longer any *anathemas*. Rome had become civilized. Bishop Strossmayer had been called Lucifer and *alter Lutherus* at the Vatican Council when he asserted that the Lutherans *errant, sed bona fide errant*. Lutheranism had been called a *pestis*. Now, 80 years later, Lutherans and Catholics had "meetings of mind." Cardinal Innitzer called Bishop May of Austria "*Herr Kollege*," and Bishop Dibelius made his guestrooms available for Catholic bishops attending the *Katholikentag* in Berlin (and visited good friend Pius XII in the Vatican). In America the days of the "Know-Nothings," the A. P. A., and the K. K. K. were past history, and although there was some excitement about school

buses, school lunches, and bingo games, everyone made an effort to be open-minded lest he be accused of bigotry or defamation. Even the Freemasons throughout the world were strangely silent. There was no Mazzini to challenge the pope, not even a Clemenceau. While the persecutions of Catholics, as of other Christians, under the Soviet government were real, the worst Stalin would say about his colleague in the Vatican was to ask Roosevelt: "How many divisions does the pope have?"

The pope who would not allow his barber to say "Salute, Gesundheit, after a pontifical sneeze ("Basta, basta!" Cut it out! he called)³⁸ saw as many as three million pilgrims a year (in 1950).³⁹ What had once been the privilege of a selected few, now had become the greatest tourist attraction in the world. Yet he lived a lonely life. His German housekeeper, his German confessor, his German secretary, and Monsignor Kahr, his closest friend, also a German, were his daily companions. By custom he ate alone, and no one spoke to him unless first spoken to. But as secretary of state he gave Marconi's radio station to the Vatican, had a gold-plated telephone installed, used a white portable typewriter, bought Cadillacs and "committed the Roman church to use for the purposes of religion the new media of mass communication."⁴⁰ He paid lip service to "toleration" and "freedom of conscience," but made it clear that only where civil courts insist on these principles "Catholics are in duty bound to practice political, civic, and social tolerance with respect to the faithful of other denominations." Thus a fanatical American convert priest who insisted that outside the Roman Church there is no salvation was excommunicated, while the Spanish Cardinal Segura said the same thing at the same time without incurring pontifical reproof. Democracy? "It is considered by many today to be a natural postulate of reason itself."⁴¹ He did not break the chain of thought of the modern papacy.⁴²

Pius XII was an imposing figure in the history of the 20th

³⁸ Ibid., p. 44.

³⁹ Flynn, p. 424.

⁴⁰ *Christian Century*, Oct. 22, 1958, p. 1196.

⁴¹ *Time*, Oct. 20, 1958, p. 44.

⁴² Carl S. Meyer, "The Modern Papacy," in *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXIX, 4 (April 1958), 241 ff.

century. Yet he was human. On the day when he was elected he stumbled down a flight of steps and fell flat on his face.⁴³ Again on the day when he died the nauseating spectacle of a mercenary doctor who took with his *Kleinkamera* indiscrete pictures of the dying pope and sold them to the highest bidders. Or the broadcast of the death rattle over Vatican Radio, invading the sanctity of the deathbed. Or the bungled-up embalming job. Significantly, one of his last words was: "*Dio mio, non ci vedo!*—My God, I cannot see!"⁴⁴

But the non-Roman world may well remember him as the pope who said after his election: "In this solemn moment our thoughts run also to all those who are outside the church, to those who will be pleased to know that the pope raises for them . . . prayers and wishes for every good. . . . We invite everybody to peace of conscience . . . and cordial understanding for the superior interests of the great human family."⁴⁵

⁴³ *Time*, March 13, 1939, p. 36.

⁴⁴ *Time*, Oct. 20, 1958, p. 44.

⁴⁵ *Time*, March 13, 1939, p. 38.