

The Pontificate of Pope Pius XII

BY REV. PATRICK J. CORISH, M.A., D.D.

THE conclave which elected Pope Pius XII was unusual in two respects. A tradition of very long standing excluded the Secretary of State of the previous Pope from the succession. Nevertheless, in this instance Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli was immediately mentioned on all sides as the most likely candidate, and the conclave which elected him was the shortest since the one which had elected Pope Urban VIII in 1623.

The new Pope had grown up in the diplomatic service of the Church. Within two years of his ordination, in 1901, he had entered the Secretariate of State. Ten years later, in 1911, he had become Under-Secretary for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs, and, in 1914, Pro-Secretary. In 1917, he was named Archbishop of Sardes and Apostolic Nuncio to Bavaria, a very important post, as the Holy See had, since 1870, maintained diplomatic relations with the German Empire through the Bavarian Nuncio.

Archbishop Pacelli, in fact, became the first Nuncio accredited to Berlin as the new Germany took shape after the calamity of the lost war and the dissolution of the Empire. In these disturbed days, the Papal Nuncio had to face revolutionary disturbances on a number of occasions. In one well-known instance, he contributed very much towards calming the outbreak of revolution in Bavaria, in which he showed a complete disregard for the safety of his own life. In 1920, he took up his residence in Berlin, where he remained for nine years. The two most outstanding events of a distinguished nunciature were the signing of concordats with Bavaria and Prussia, in 1925 and 1929 respectively.

At the end of 1929 he was recalled to Rome, where on 16th December he was created Cardinal. Two

months later, on 7th February, 1930, Pius XI nominated him Secretary of State on the resignation of Cardinal Gasparri. This began nine years of very intimate association between the Pope and Cardinal Pacelli, nine years of troubles and achievements. The chief troubles came from the totalitarian states—Italy, where difficulties in the working of the Lateran Treaty led to a sharp papal protest and rebuke in the encyclical *Non abbiamo bisogno*, issued on 29th June, 1931; and Germany, where the violations of a concordat signed with the new totalitarian government on 20th July, 1933, led to the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* of 14th March, 1937. Bolshevik Russia, the greatest of the totalitarian states, was not yet an immediate threat to the daily lives of Catholics, but it may be recalled that the encyclical against atheistic Communism, *Divini Redemptoris*, was issued on 19th March, 1937, five days after *Mit brennender Sorge*. The Papacy saw the same threat in the rise of all totalitarianisms, and its uncompromising opposition was one of the chief factors in its steady re-establishment as a world institution. After the extinction of the Papal State in 1870, many had confidently prophesied the coming extinction of the Papacy itself. In fact the Papacy was renewing itself before 1870, and now the new life and influence was spreading, not merely through the institutions of the Church to Catholics all over the world, but also to the largely-secularized nations in which Catholics live to-day. The travels of the Secretary of State emphasized the new impact of the Church on the world. He travelled to South America in 1934, to Lourdes in 1935, to the United States in 1936, to Lisieux in 1937, to Budapest in 1938. When Pius XI died in 1939, the world paid a tribute which showed how in its increasing uncertainties it was turning to a new estimate of the Papacy. It was indeed a very uncertain world, in which the quarrels of Europe had led it to the brink of a war which everyone felt was fatal, but unavoidable. The episcopal motto of

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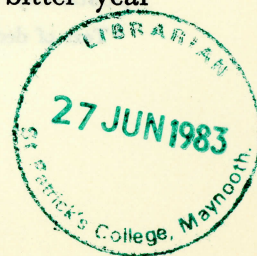
Eugenio Pacelli, elected Pope on 2nd March, 1939, was significant—*opus iustitiae pax*.

His immediate, urgent, problem was to avert the catastrophe. All through the summer of 1939, he bent every effort of the papal diplomacy for peace. A broadcast message of 24th August called for peace through justice and righteousness: 'nothing is lost by peace; everything may be lost by war. Let men come again to understand one another . . . We entreat them through the blood of Christ, whose conquering force in the world was meekness in life and death.'¹ Last desperate measures on 31st August brought no result. The next morning the world faced the news that the German armies had begun the overrunning of Poland.

Once the appeal had been made to force, what the Holy See was able to do by direct diplomatic means became very sharply limited. Relations with the Fascist regime in Italy worsened as the country moved towards war, which was declared when Mussolini thought he saw his opportunity with the collapse of France in June 1940. The German attack on Russia led to a strange alliance with Britain and later with the United States, further complicating and limiting the scope of papal diplomatic action. It did not limit, however, the great humanitarian activities of the Papacy, grants of money for the relief of want and suffering; a vast information-service which traced the missing and prisoners of war; and, especially as the war moved into Italy, direct relief of hunger which saved the lives of thousands of Italians. Papal prestige saved Rome from being fought over and destroyed like so many Italian cities, and gave a new emphasis to its unique character as the city of the Popes.

The allied armies entered Rome on 4th June, 1944. Two days later came the Normandy landings, and with the Germans retreating in Russia it was clear that the war was coming to its end, though another bitter year

¹ Radio message, 24th August, 1939.



lay ahead. There was no peace, however, when the fighting came to an end, for the victors could not even begin to agree. Communism was now a much more immediate threat to the Catholic Church than it had been in 1937. Russia was in military occupation of the Catholic countries of Eastern Europe, and began at once to impose on them the system which Pius XI had condemned as 'atheistic communism,' but which Pius XII was to refer to, increasingly, as 'atheistic materialism.' He pointed out that such a system must, inevitably, attack the basic dignity of human nature itself, that it must necessarily be, in the most literal sense, inhuman. Events quickly showed that it was. The case of Archbishop Stepinac in October, 1946, of Cardinal Mindszenty in January, 1949, of Archbishop Beran in March, 1950, of Cardinal Wyszynski in September, 1953—each came as a shock, but they only high-lighted the sufferings of many thousands, distinguished and obscure, which showed that atheistic materialism struck, not only at the revealed religion of Christ, but at the basic dignity of human nature. The long ordeal of the Chinese Catholics began in 1949. In 1954 the solid Catholic community of Vietnam was overrun. And even outside the limits of Communist military power, its specious promises worked on genuine discontents to give it a following which in the great Catholic nations of France and Italy was large enough to constitute a real danger that Communism might take over power by a popular vote.

The decree of the Holy Office of 1st July, 1949, is to be set against this background of inhuman pressure and deceptive propaganda. Some first reactions feared it might be inopportune, perhaps without taking the trouble to examine the text very closely.¹ In fact, it introduces certain mitigations in the general law by which adherents of atheistic communism are *ipso facto* excommunicated as apostates, recognizing that the adhesion of many to

¹ Text of decree in *A.A.S.*, 1949, p. 427.

Communism is free choice. The doctrine of the defend or propagate 'knowingly and them' or 'public newspapers or action of Communist penalty of exclusion that they are statesmanlike re and a Christian breaking the br Atheistic materialism not Pope Pius XII materialism not real and more i

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¹ Encyclical *Le pèlerinage*

a new factor in human life, the pace of whose development no-one could have anticipated. This was the promise and the threat of technology. It brought great and obvious benefits, but, as the Pope never ceased to emphasize, it could become a great spiritual peril, 'unfolding before contemporary man a vision so vast as to be confused by many with the infinite itself.' In the short run, he pointed out, it could easily lead to spiritual blindness; in the long run, it led to frustration, for, however vast the vision of technology, it deals only with the material universe, which is too circumscribed to content the human spirit. Technological progress does not, of course, require the renunciation of religious values; it should, in fact, lead to their discovery. The danger lay in 'technological thinking,' in which the mind 'remains insensible, unresponsive, and finally blind before those works of God, by their nature wholly different from technology, such as are the mysteries of the Christian faith.'¹

Pope Pius XII sensed the same danger of ultimate dechristianization in the political restlessness which developed out of the war. As it drew to an end, he saw coming 'a grave, decisive hour for the whole of humanity.'² Europe was broken and uncertain, no longer the centre of world power, its colonial empires were dissolving, 'peoples have, as it were, reawakened from a long torpor. They have assumed a new, questioning, criticizing, suspicious attitude towards the State and those governing.'³ Here, too, danger was concealed in promise. Democracy could threaten as well as tyranny. The Church was not concerned with debates on one form of government or another. She must firmly refuse, of course, the impossible demands made by atheistic dictatorships. She must also point out the dangers in the legitimate demands of all

¹ Cf. Allocution to the Sacred College, 24th December, 1953.

² Radio message, 1st September, 1943.

³ Radio message, 24th December, 1944.

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¹ *Ibid*

countries from the missionary state by the establishment of a hierarchy as soon as possible. In the old Christian countries something not unlike the reverse process had to be faced, to meet a situation where progressive de-christianization made it necessary to supplement the ordinary parochial organization in an attempt to recover past losses. The Pope showed himself ready and sympathetic in giving trial to new methods, and, equally, firm in the more difficult task of deciding to put an end to methods which had showed signs of breaking down under trial.

Another group of administrative changes impinged more directly on the day-to-day life of Catholics. In the encyclicals *Mystici corporis Christi* in 1943 and *Mediator Dei* in 1947 the Pope had turned to expound the riches of the theology of the supernatural life of the faithful in the Church. These were followed by a series of changes in liturgical law, all directed to making it easier to participate in the life of the Church's liturgy under the conditions of modern life. A new translation of the psalter was made for the breviary, and further changes made the recital of the daily office less burdensome for priests increasingly busy with the duties of the ministry. The liturgy of Holy Week was restored to being the liturgical worship of the Christian people. It had for too long consisted in ceremonies conducted by the clergy almost behind closed doors. As a result of these changes, Holy Week has become again for the great body of the faithful *Maior Hebdomada*, the Great Week of the Church's liturgy. Undoubtedly the change most far-reaching in its effects was the very considerable modification, first in January, 1953, and more radically in March, 1957, in the laws which unnumbered centuries of Christian reverence had laid down concerning the Eucharistic fast. The far less stringent regulations in this matter, together with provision for evening Masses, have made more frequent and fuller participation in the great central act of Christian worship

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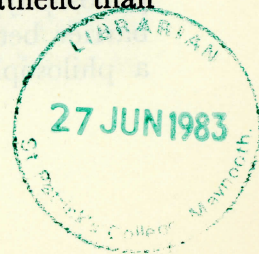
possible for people living under the conditions of modern industrial civilization, which can raise such obstacles to the spiritual life of the Christian and at the same time demand that this life be deeper, more conscious, more truly personal.

Pope Pius XII's emphasis on devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary is closely linked with the same theme. It is a point which has been much misunderstood outside the Catholic Church, where it is too easy to see in it a kind of personal devotion, indeed a kind of Latin provincialism. Pope Pius XII, however, left no doubt of his motives in stressing devotion to the Mother of God. They were the traditional Christian motives which honour Mary above all creatures because God has honoured her above all creatures. This emphasis on Mary as the supreme example of the supernatural exaltation of a creature was particularly apposite at a time when, as the Pope so often pointed out, supernatural values can so easily be obscured by the impressiveness of natural achievements. A hundred years earlier, Pope Pius IX had solemnly defined the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Pope Pius XII defined 'the crowning and complement of her earlier privilege,'¹ the Assumption. Again, one might be tempted to see something apposite in the definition coming at a time when scientific achievements were tempting humanity to set other ascents in its heart in the exploration of the material universe, 'vast, it is true, but circumscribed, and therefore in the long run a prison unbearable to man's genuine spirituality.'² Man must be recalled to the life of the spirit, which must be built up by prayer, penance and asceticism, and in building up this spiritual life in Christ man could find no greater model than Mary, the most privileged of creatures.

No human being could be more truly sympathetic than

¹ Encyclical *Fulgens Corona*, 8th September, 1953.

² Allocution to the Sacred College, 24th December, 1953.



Pope Pius XII to the spiritual anxieties of non-Catholics and non-Christians, but he was also sensitive to the danger that some apologists, in their eagerness to break down barriers which they felt had been set up by an outdated presentation of the Church's message, might succeed in making the contacts they sought at the cost of the truth of Catholic doctrine. His repeated warnings on this point are summed up in the encyclical *Humani generis*, dated 12th August, 1950. Theology, he recalled, though it must be a living science, deeply concerned with presenting the truths of faith in an idiom which men can grasp and appreciate, is not and cannot be a purely positive science. 'Together with the sources of positive theology, God has given to His Church a living Teaching Authority to elucidate and explain what is contained in the deposit of faith only obscurely and implicitly. This deposit of faith our Divine Redeemer has given for authentic interpretation not to each of the faithful, nor even to theologians, but only to the teaching authority of the Church.' He applied the same warning of the danger of a purely positive approach to the exegesis of Sacred Scripture. As in his earlier encyclical on biblical studies, *Divino afflante Spiritu*, he urged Catholic scholars to develop every means towards 'the supremely important task of discovering and expounding the genuine sense of the sacred books'; their efforts, however, must recognize the unique character of the Bible—that God is its author and that its authentic interpretation belongs to the Magisterium. The Magisterium too must judge current philosophical trends from the viewpoint of faith. While it is important to understand the viewpoints of others and present our own in a way which men find attractive, the Christian philosopher must be careful lest he be tempted to do so at the expense of revealed truth. Scholastic philosophy, under attack in certain quarters as another barrier between unbelievers and the faith, is more than a philosophy which must still be judged useful to the

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to the spiritual anxieties of non-Catholics, but he was also sensitive to the needs of the apologetists, in their eagerness to break through the barriers which they felt had been set up by an isolation of the Church's message, might have been sought at the cost of Catholic doctrine. His repeated warnings were summed up in the encyclical *Humani generis*, August, 1950. Theology, he recalled, is a living science, deeply concerned with the truths of faith in an idiom which men can appreciate, is not and cannot be a purely abstract science. 'Together with the sources of positive truth given to His Church a living Teaching must be able to identify and explain what is contained in the Faith not only obscurely and implicitly. This is the work of our Divine Redeemer has given for the enlightenment of all men, not to each of the faithful, nor to each of the nations, but only to the teaching authority of the Church. He applied the same warning of the need for a more positive approach to the exegesis of the Bible. As in his earlier encyclical on biblical studies, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, he urged Catholic scholars to approach the Bible with a new openness towards 'the supremely important and expounding the genuine sense of the text. Their efforts, however, must recognize that God is its author and that the authentic interpretation belongs to the Magisterium too must judge current interpretations from the viewpoint of faith. While we must understand the viewpoints of others and express them in a way which men find attractive, the Magisterium must be careful lest he be tempted by the appearance of revealed truth. Scholasticism, which is an attack in certain quarters as another name for a denial of the faith, is more than ever necessary. It must still be judged useful to the

Church. It is the Christian philosophy, 'a patrimony handed down from the earlier Christian ages,' 'in harmony with Divine revelation, and most effective for safeguarding the foundation of the faith and for reaping, safely and usefully, the fruits of sound progress.' To sum up, the papal warnings underlined the danger of distorting the exact nature of the Church's message in an understandable anxiety to proclaim it to people who were increasingly drawn to the Catholic Church as the guardian of spiritual values, but who had, in many cases, strong inhibitions in regard to the Church as a historical institution. As the Pope had stressed in *Mystici corporis Christi*, the Mystical Body of Christ is the institution known to men as the Roman Catholic Church. The divisions in Christianity are, more than ever before, a scandal and a stumbling-block, but the scandal would be immeasurably greater if they were ended other than by a return to the one true Church.

The need to proclaim this truth, however, did not prevent Pope Pius XII from extending a wide charity and concern to those outside it, to the Protestant churches and to the Eastern schismatics, especially to the people of Russia. He was especially concerned too with those great religions which do not accept the divinity of Christ but nevertheless have links with the Christian revelation. A number of Moslem or predominantly Moslem countries are now diplomatically represented at the Vatican, and, in spite of difficulties and tensions which arose out of the problems of the Holy Places consequent on the establishment of the state of Israel, world Jewry will not quickly forget the Pope's words and actions in its hour of trial.

The death of Pope Pius XI evoked tributes which showed the greatly increased prestige of the Papacy, not merely in spiritual matters, but in international diplomacy. The tributes on the death of Pope Pius XII showed how greatly papal prestige had grown during the difficult years of his pontificate. In his Christmas allocution to

the cardinals in 1953 the Pope had quoted St. Ignatius that the Pontiff of Antioch: 'In times in which it is an object of hate, since Christianity is not a matter of persuasive words, but of an hardly greatness.' 'A thought,' he commented, 'fascinating to deep or far-reaching modern souls as well.' The Pope's own words showed have so many the qualities both of persuasiveness and of greatness. In the Like all the modern Popes, his pontificate saw a great the world as a number of encyclicals addressed to the Universal Church, His death evoked but these were increasingly supplemented by radiounique in its un addresses and discourses to groups received in audience. advanced the a Regularly, the Pope addressed six or eight such groups by the Church every month. His addresses were often on highly Jesus Christ.' technical and specialized subjects. They were not repetitive, and there is abundant testimony of the impression they made even on very highly specialized scholars. In general audience, he was more accessible than any Pope before him had been; he became a familiar figure to Rome and to the world.

The Catholic Church [he said] does not identify herself with any culture. The culture of the Middle Ages, though closely tied with the Church, drew its elements from different sources. The Church is ready to enter into relations with all cultures. She recognizes and allows to continue in existence those things which are not opposed to nature. But in each of them she introduces, in addition, the truth and grace of Jesus Christ.¹

In his last will, Pope Pius XII said that he did not need to follow the custom of leaving a spiritual testament, for his thought on religious and moral questions was sufficiently made known by the 'not inconsiderable number' of the acts and speeches of his Pontificate. These were, in truth, so many and so manifold that years must pass before a full and definitive assessment can be made. There can be no doubt, however, that the definitive assessment will confirm the immediate impression

¹ Address to the Tenth International Conference of Historical Sciences, 7th September, 1955.

1953 the Pope had quoted St. Ignatius that the Pontificate of Pius XII was one of real greatness. Since the foundation of Christianity, the world has not a matter of persuasive words, but of deep or far-reaching as that of modern times; never can hardly have passed through a spiritual crisis so thought,' he commented, 'fascinating to deep or far-reaching as that of modern times; never well.' The Pope's own words showed have so many traditional stabilities been called into question. In this situation, Pope Pius XII stood before the world as a figure firm, resolute, and understanding. His death evoked a tribute of admiration and regret increasingly supplemented by radio unique in its universality, which showed how far he had advanced the aim that all cultures should be influenced by the Church's message of 'the truth and grace of Jesus Christ.'

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At the 1953 International Conference of Historical Sciences, 7th July, Pope Pius XII said that he did not have the custom of leaving a spiritual testament, but his action on religious and moral questions was well known by the 'not inconsiderable' number of his acts and speeches of his Pontificate. The truth, so many and so manifold that years would be required for a full and definitive assessment can be made. There can be no doubt, however, that the death of the Pope will confirm the immediate impression

¹ 1953 International Conference of Historical Sciences, 7th

