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Britain and the Vatican in the last years of Pope Pius XI (1935–39)

i. The embassies at the Vatican

In the year 1936 34 nations kept ambassadors or ministers or chargés at the Holy See. But the Argentine spent a lot of time enjoying himself in other European capitals. The Belgian lived quietly to qualify for a pension. The Spaniard had been driven out by a tragi-comic siege in the Piazza di Spagna. The Peruvian was hardly ever in Rome and when he was in Rome was hardly ever seen. The Estonian was a pluralist for he was also ambassador in Paris and preferred that city. The minister of Honduras was unpaid. The Latvian had not appeared in Rome for several years and ran the Foreign Ministry in Riga. The ministers of Monaco and San Marino and of the Order of Malta hardly counted. The Nicaraguan was senile, the Panamanian disappeared in 1929 and had not been heard of since. The minister of Salvador lived at Brussels while the Liberian lived in Paris. This list shows that while it is true that 34 nations kept representatives at the Vatican, it was in part a façade.¹

Diplomatic services need a certain number of well-paid sinecures for their members who are not good enough for important offices and not old enough to go on pension. The extraordinary case is that of the German ambassador Diego von Bergen. No one could suppose, especially after the Nazis came to power, that the post of German Ambassador could be a sinecure. And Bergen was a man of substance. He twice refused the office of Foreign Secretary in governments of the Weimar Republic, for he preferred to stay in Rome. He was the senior ambassador, the doyen of the diplomatic corps. When the Nazis came to power he disliked them and their policy. He was a professional diplomat of the old school. As the behaviour of his government grew more unpleasant, he gradually receded from affairs and did as little as possible; until by the end of his time he was almost as invisible as the ambassador of the Republic of Salvador. The Nazis were perfectly aware that he could not be said to be dedicated to their party. Nothing shows more flamboyantly the contempt with which they regarded the office than that they left him there undisturbed till 1943. Then they

¹ See the report of 5 January 1937 in FO 371/21164/6.
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suddenly awoke to what chances they had missed and filled the place with the biggest man in their Foreign Service – partly because they wanted to exile him from the Foreign Office but not only for that reason.

The British had not always kept a minister at the Vatican. When the Papal State existed, they kept an unofficial official at Rome during the middle years of the nineteenth century. The remnant of the old Papal State was occupied and suppressed in 1870. Four years later someone in the House of Commons pointed out that we kept a mission attached to a non-existent State, and that there was no more reason for Britain to send an ambassador to the Pope than for the kingdom of Italy to send an ambassador to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Put like that, the British mission in Rome sounded absurd. A Conservative government withdrew its representative.

Between 1874 and 1914 certain representatives went to Rome for special and temporary missions.

When the First World War broke out, both sides competed for the alliance of Italy. Rome was the centre of intrigue to gain Italian intervention on one side or the other side. Germany had an advantage. The French were officially anticlerical, the Russians were against the Pope, the Entente had no one at the Vatican. The British decided to send back a minister to be attached to the papal Court.

When the war was over, the British government considered whether their mission in Rome was worth the expense and whether they should withdraw. They resolved that the problems of Ireland, and the problem of Malta, of Quebec, and of the Irish in Australia, warranted the maintenance of the mission. But in that maintenance prestige mattered more than political utility.

The office of British Minister started by being a quiet place for a not very distinguished diplomat, who therefore stayed several years. The first, De Salis, wrote reports which show signs of illiteracy. Odo Russell, bearer of a historic name in papal diplomacy and no doubt chosen partly for that reason, held office for five and a quarter quiet years (January 1923 to June 1928). He was succeeded by Henry Chilton, who might have had a longer tenure if a quarrel between Britain and Malta had not blown to gale force. He was moved to Chile in May 1930, and the post of Minister was left empty for almost three years because the British wished to show their disapproval of the conduct of the Vatican over the troubles of Malta. They thought it not in the least important to have a Minister in Rome. Then they began to fill the post with distinguished men, so distinguished that they used it only as a halting place on the way to higher or tenser posts: Sir Robert Clive, the most soigné and handsome of envoys, who was only there for a year
and left for the anguish-ridden post of Tokyo; Sir Charles Wingfield who was only there for a year and left for the not uncomfortable and not too important post at Lisbon. At this point the Cardinal Secretary of State, Cardinal Pacelli, expressed his regret at the shortness of the tenures. D’Arcy Osborne was appointed to succeed Wingfield, but could not arrive for six months on the not very convincing plea that his present duties in Washington were too weighty.

As the relationship was partly a ritual, matters of ritual became very important, not only to the clergymen. In October 1930 the airship R 101 crashed with heavy loss of life. A telegram went out from the Pope to Cardinal Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster, asking him to convey to the King and his government condolences on the national disaster. This was awkward for it was a breach of protocol. The government was not normally willing to accept the Cardinal of Westminster as a suitable channel for communications between the Curia and the British government. However, as it was the holiday season and a slip could have occurred in the office of the Secretary of State, and as it was embarrassing to be stuffy over a kind message sent about dead men, the British government swallowed its ritual pride and was grateful.\(^2\) But in July 1934 the government was petulant when it discovered that Cardinal Bourne’s secretary delivered to Buckingham Palace a letter from the Pope to the King on official business; and Monsignor Ottaviani had to throw the blame on a minor official who failed to understand protocol. How many naval guns should be fired to salute a papal legate was another ceremonial which exercised the ministry; the Pope would receive 21 guns as a head of State, a nuncio 19 guns and an internuncio 17 guns. Such matters of protocol were important in the relationships between all States. But they were more prominent in the work of the British Legation at Rome because ceremony was a very important feature of an ancient court with many survivals, and because the Vatican State, being (whichever way you looked) a very new State or a very ancient State, was particularly sensitive that due protocol should be correctly observed in order to be certain that its status was conceded. Part of the ritual was lunches and dinners. But this was not so important as with a normal embassy. The cardinals and monsignori of the Curia thought lunches and dinners doubtful entertainments, and stayed as short a time as possible.

The British government kept two ambassadors in Rome, though one of them was not allowed the rank of ambassador. Since the Pope was the sovereign of a very small territory after 1929, which had few economic or social interests, and which had only a little ceremonial

army of Swiss guards, and was thought to have small political importance, the post of envoy at the Vatican was held by men different in kind and outlook from the men who held the post of ambassador to the kingdom of Italy, who like their colleagues in Berlin or Paris or Washington dealt in high politics. It was considered an easy job.

Historically, the envoy in the Vatican, whether official or unofficial, whether resident or (as between 1874 and 1915) only visiting, had a vital part to play in the government of the United Kingdom. Not without reason, the British government believed that the Pope was important to the government of Ireland. No Pope could believe in bombs. No Pope could believe in revolution. And therefore any Pope might help in preventing nationalist Irish priests from encouraging their flocks to violence. This had been the historic function of the envos in the Vatican ever since the far off days when the Duke of Wellington was prime minister and the country moved towards Catholic Emancipation.

The making of the Irish Free State altered and then destroyed this historic task. At first Ireland did not think of sending its own envoy to Rome. But in April 1929 the Foreign Minister of the Irish Free State sent a delegation to discuss with the Pope whether it could set up its minister in Rome. The British government was consulted and said that it was in favour. On 27 June 1929 the first minister of the Irish Free State presented his letters to the Pope. Five months later the Pope announced the appointment of a nuncio in Dublin.

This direct communication between Rome and an autonomous government in Dublin appeared to remove the main reason for keeping a British envoy in the Vatican. However, ambassadors are not put in places because they are useful but because they were once useful and now cannot be withdrawn because it would offend someone.

The ritual function of any ambassador is considerable. He presents congratulations at jubilees, receives dignitaries from kings downwards, stands on platforms at parades, meets personages at the railway station, represents his people at funerals or marriages. The Vatican was the only small State of its size where these ceremonial functions were as arduous as those of the ambassador to one of the great powers. If a king came to Rome he could hardly avoid visiting the heads of both the States in Rome. Any State with a Roman Catholic population – and that included all the Great Powers except perhaps Stalin’s Russia before 1939 – had eminent men coming on pilgrimage, new cardinals coming to audience, groups or individuals seeking the Pope’s favour.

The Foreign Office continued to ask itself from time to time whether the existence of the Legation in Rome was worth its expenditure of
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Time and people and money. In March 1935 an argument developed in the Dutch press about the absence of any Dutch representation at the Vatican, though Holland was a State containing many Roman Catholics. From Rome, Wingfield reported the argument to London, where it came to the desk of Stephen Gaselee. Gaselee’s minute of 28 March 1935 ran thus:

We have some reason for our mission at the Vatican, because of Roman Catholic interests in our Empire – Ireland, Malta, French Canada – but even so we are often doubtful whether it is worth (1) its expense and (2) Protestant feeling against it. I cannot think that such a Mission would be worth anything appreciable to the Dutch.3

But Britain had more than a ceremonial use for its ambassador. Irish immigration, and immigration from Europe including Italy, created a far larger Roman Catholic population in Britain. The Irish Free State did not contain all the Irish. Northern Ireland was still troublesome and might become more troublesome. Canada had a problem between French and English, expressed mainly through a difference in language but partly through a difference in religion. The British colonies in Africa had questions of denominational education. Britain governed Palestine by mandate and therefore the Holy Places of Jerusalem and Bethlehem in which the Popes long had a vital interest. The British government wanted to give everyone a better or more regular Easter holiday by fixing the date of Easter and the Church of England agreed provided that the Pope would agree and the Churches act together. The Pope would not agree, and the argument fell into limbo, but it was the kind of argument which shows how a British minister in the Vatican might be needed even if Britain contained not a single Roman Catholic.

But much the largest amount of time, and much the largest amount of paper, was expended by the British minister, before the years of appeasement, on the affairs of Malta. The nationalist pressure of Mussolini’s Italy generated nationalist passions among Italian speakers on the island. Since the island was very Roman Catholic, some of the most vociferous among the nationalists were clergymen. The British governor and the British government were particularly troubled by Franciscans, who being religious were under the remote control of Rome. The Vatican was particularly troubled at the growth of Anglican influence on the island, as for example when three Anglican bishops held ‘propaganda lectures’ in the throne room of the old Grand Master of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, and the sitting of the Maltese Parliament was suspended to do them honour.

3 FO 371/19544/247.
Ambassadors suffer from the natural temptation to exaggerate their services to the State and their influence with the court to which they are accredited. Odo Russell in his time claimed to exercise an important influence on the appointment to bishoprics in the British Empire; and when the sees were indeed in the empire, as distinct from the British Isles, government could exercise a half-control by the threat to refuse passports to anyone of whose politics it disapproved. The custom existed of clearing the candidate with the British before the appointment was announced. In 1931 the Legation claimed, by means of its special relation with the journals Osservatore Romano and Civiltà Cattolica, to have caused Roman attacks on the Church of England to cease. Sometimes the Legation was used in ecumenical matters by the Churches. In 1931 the Pope pronounced a strenuous condemnation of Protestant propaganda in Italy and everyone grew nervous lest this condemnation apply to them. It was the secretary at the Legation and not the responsible Anglican bishop (of Gibraltar) who repudiated all connexion with the proselytism of which the Pope complained. 4

Occasionally the Legation could help over the question of money – for example when a partly British company with a contract for building churches in Southern Italy could not get payment out of the Calabrian ecclesiastics. But this time the help was no use. They were continually in action over Malta, even when the air was cleared of friction; sometimes by trying to get more English monks or Jesuits into teaching posts there (but there were not enough Englishmen to go round). They made sure that the interest of the British government in the politics of Indians appointed to Indian bishoprics was well-known in the Vatican. As the representative of the power with the mandate in Palestine, they were concerned with the safety and welfare of the Holy Places; for though this might only concern the hanging of a tapestry in the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem, and therefore looked as though it was essentially a ritual question, it was in fact one of the most political of all questions. Everything in Palestine was made difficult, for the Vatican even more than for the British government, because the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, Monsignor Barlassina, was a tiresome clergyman.

The British did not know, but could guess, that the Vatican also had trouble over Malta with Mussolini’s government. In 1939, for example, Italy was offended at a rumour that Maltese bishops communicated with the Vatican in the English language; and the Vatican had to contradict the report. 5

4 Hachey, Anglo-Vatican Relations, 200/142; 221/143.
5 AE, Santa Sede, 1939, Busta 44.
ii. A Fascist Pope?

Between October 1935 and the middle of 1937 the British regarded the Pope as a man in Mussolini’s pocket. This was ‘a Fascist Pope’.

The causes of this belief, or the case for this belief, ran thus:

the Pope seemed rather happy than unhappy with the Italian conquest of Abyssinia;

the Pope was believed to be almost totally on Franco’s side in the Spanish Civil War, since it was the other side which shot bishops, priests, monks and nuns. Mussolini’s units fought on the same side;

Pope Pius XI made the Lateran treaty of 1929 by which the Vatican City State was formed and so reconciled himself to Italy. It now looked as though the status of a little neutral state inside Italy but dependent on Italy, gave him less real freedom, as well as less psychological freedom, than the old status of the prisoner in the Vatican;

the war of Abyssinia was popular in Italy, and therefore was popular among Italian churchmen.

After the Lateran treaty the Pope had a resounding quarrel with Mussolini over Catholic Action, which meant controversy about the spheres of Fascist and Catholic youth organizations. But since 1933 the relationship had been cordial. The Lateran treaty at last healed the old war between Italian nationalism and the Church. This Fascist government saw the historic Church as a main part of the international influence of Italy, both in the past and in the contemporary world.

Pope Pius XI was careful not to commit himself to Mussolini’s policy. But with it he had this amount of natural sympathy: his personal experiences in Poland during the Russo-Polish war of 1920 left him with a hostility to Bolshevism and a conviction of its danger to a Christian Europe. This fear and enmity were reinforced by the terrible persecutions of innocent Catholic priests or nuns in Mexico and Spain.

Many Italians believed that the only viable alternative to Mussolini’s government in Italy was a Communist regime. They were not alone in this belief. The British ambassador to the King of Italy, Drummond, also believed the choice for Italy to lie between Fascism and Communism.

Early in October 1935 Mussolini invaded Abyssinia. This was abhorrent to the British government because all British foreign policy rested on the League of Nations and this invasion looked like destroying the League. They regarded it as blatant and immoral aggression.

How should you stop Mussolini from conquering Abyssinia? You
could stop him by economic sanctions or deprive him of access to raw materials. Few sensible men believed that this could work. They engaged in economic sanctions more to satisfy an outraged public opinion than because they thought that they could thereby stop the Italian armies. You could stop him by an army and a navy – but that meant war, and no one was willing to go to war with Italy. Perhaps, therefore, you could stop him by moral opinion – and suddenly, in Britain, men magnified absurdly what was possible for a Pope. Most Italians are Roman Catholics – Roman Catholics are bound by their religion to do what the Pope orders – then the Pope has only to condemn this naked act of aggression and Mussolini could advance no further – such were the naive feelings in the breasts of some British democrats.

Italian bishops did not conform to this picture. Cardinal Schuster of Milan said that the Italian flag bore the Cross in triumph over the Ethiopian plains, and that the Italian army opened the gates of Abyssinia to Catholic faith and Roman civilization. The Archbishops of Brindisi, Sorrento and Amalfi attacked the League powers in violent language, accusing them of greed, egoism and hypocrisy. The Pope said nothing like this. But he said nothing to the contrary. And, therefore, among the democratic powers a lot of abuse was thrown at the Pope for not trying to stop Mussolini, or for being a secret backer of Italy, or for being an Italian instead of an international leader, or even for being a Fascist. Part of the trouble was the usual difficulty of not being able to get authentic information. The Pope said nothing. The Secretary of State Cardinal Pacelli said almost nothing. The Under Secretary of State Monsignor Pizzardo said a little but to little purpose. The British had a dubious ecclesiastic in their pay, a Monsignor Pucci. He was a free-lance journalist, with no official post in the Vatican. He had played a discreditable part in the seizure of power by the Fascists. After the death of Pope Pius XI he claimed to have been his personal friend. He made his living by selling information. The British bought it though they doubted whether it was worth buying. We shall meet Monsignor Pucci later on over questions of espionage. Pucci was in favour of the Fascist government and slanted his information to make it appear that the Vatican was more decisively on Mussolini’s side than might be the case.

So if we turn to the archives of the British Foreign Office, we find a devastating series of comments on the reports out of Rome:

The Church has proved that it is purely Italian and far from ‘Catholic’ or:

It is natural that anticlerical Italians should rejoice in the repeated proofs that the Church is in Mussolini’s pocket.
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or:

At present the Vatican are behaving as though Italy were the only country whose goodwill was essential to them. They seem to forget that the goodwill of Great Britain is equally important, if not to the Vatican as such, at least to the Catholic Church, the prosperity of which is the only thing that should really matter to the Holy See.

or:

Vatican foreign policy seems to boil down more and more to a determination not to do anything displeasing to the present Italian government. In other words the Vatican, without perhaps being fully aware of the fact, is beginning to appear in the light of an ally of Italian imperialist and expansionist ideas.

E. H. Carr minuted on 27 November 1935:

Everyone concerned in directing Vatican policy is (so far as we can discover) ‘strongly Fascist in sympathy’, so that that policy is bound to be tinged by a strong Italian bias. The most that can be expected, is that they will maintain a certain semblance of decency. 6

They watched the Pope’s every move. A deputation of war-widows and mothers of the men fallen in Abyssinia came to the King to protest against sanctions, and the Pope agreed to receive them. Too late he realized that to receive them would look like taking sides against the League of Nations and its sanctions. So the Pope suffered from a diplomatic chill, suspended all public audiences, and could not receive the war-widows. The British Legation noted it down. A member of the Legation went out to a private dinner party in honour of one of the new cardinals and found Italian tricolour ribbons in front of each plate. The hostess commented on the unanimity of Italian feeling among all the guests; and then Monsignor Caccia-Dominioni, who was Master of the Pope’s household, pointed at the Englishman and said ‘Do not compromise me in the eyes of England’; and said of the white and red roses in the middle of the table ‘Those are our colours.’ The Legation noted it down.

When the Osservatore Romano of 7 December praised the Fascist order abolishing the fashion of Christmas trees, the Legation noted it down; and the minutes on their report show a growing obsession in the minds of good men at the desks in the Foreign Office:

There is little doubt that clerical circles in Italy tend to dance increasingly to Sig. Mussolini’s tune and the Christmas tree attitude is a striking example of it (Cavendish-Bentinck).

When the Lateran treaty was concluded, the danger was foreseen that the predominantly Italian character of the Vatican might become suspect in more

6 FO 371/19558/77, 83, 155.
than one quarter, once it and the Italian government were reconciled. It looks as though this were now coming to pass.

(Orme Sargent)

Even E. H. Carr would not let the Christmas tree alone:

This seasonal controversy is only important as revealing the extent to which Vatican machinery is at present at the disposal of the Italian government. It is becoming more and more apparent that the Pope, when he ceased to be the prisoner in the Vatican, became the prisoner of the Quirinal.

Meanwhile I hear that the Christmas tree, banned in Italy, has been readmitted to Soviet Russia.7

The British consulted the embassies round the world to find out whether papal nuncios or apostolic delegates in the various States tried to influence the government to which they were accredited towards a more friendly policy to Mussolini. These reports, as they came in, were almost universally mild or totally negative. Most of them said that they noticed no activity by the nuncio. London was told that the nuncio in Chile was a better ambassador on behalf of Mussolini than was the Italian ambassador. In Buenos Aires Sir Nevile Henderson said that he expected the anti-British Irish Passionists to be against British policy on Italy and had been agreeably surprised. One letter is worth quoting because it concerns a personage afterwards celebrated. The letter came from Sir Percy Loraine, the British ambassador in Angora (as he still called Ankara):

To judge from the practically total absence of reference to Monsignor Roncalli in the press, it would seem that the Archbishop leads a very retiring life, and I am informed that he is naturally of a very pious disposition and not the type of ecclesiastic who meddles in politics.

Briefly therefore I have hitherto been unable to detect any attempt by the Vatican to influence opinion in this country favourably towards the Italian thesis in the matter of the Ethiopian conflict.8

There is something a little obsessive about some of these minutes, especially the vast operation of consulting embassies all round the world to see if the Vatican secretly worked on the side of Mussolini.

There was a feeling—not universal, but looming out again and again in the documents—that the Pope's organization was but the international propaganda wing of Mussolini's policy. This reflected a widespread opinion among some groups in Britain. The Congregationalist leader Dr S. M. Berry denounced the Pope for refusing to put himself at the head of a great Christian appeal for peace. At the Whitefield Tabernacle in London the congregation passed a resolution protesting

7 FO 371/19558/180, 221, 292. 8 FO 371/19227/167–9.