The Competition for Influence: 
Catholic and Fascist Socialization of Youth in Interwar Italy

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the turbulent relationship between the Vatican Catholic Church and the Fascist government in interwar Italy. First, I will outline the historical events that deepened the divide between the two powers and analyze their consequences for the political climate inherited by Benito Mussolini and Pope Pius XI in 1922. An analysis of the “Roman Question” and its resolution, the Lateran Accords, will be set against larger themes of collective identity, fragmented citizenry, diplomacy, and ideology. This study will examine how the Lateran Accords further exacerbated the conflicting situation and continued to prompt both the Papacy and the government to flex the power of their positions. I argue that the Lateran Accords, rather than unite the Pope and the Premier, prompted each to undertake massive socialization projects in an effort to draw citizens into their respective spheres of influence. By focusing on initiatives in the Italian education system and youth group organizations, this thesis will demonstrate how both Catholics and Fascists specifically and determinedly targeted youth. My thesis is most significant in its comparative analysis of Catholic and Fascist youth socialization. This study will add nuance to this topic by exploring those initiatives in their connection to the Lateran Accords, Catholic dogma, and Fascist creed.
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I. Introduction

It is the ancient dilemma of tribute to Caesar and the tribute to God, complicating as the functions of the modern State invade all the territory once held private. The Pope claims that the citizen is first a man, Mussolini that the man is first a citizen. No conflict is as fundamental as this, and seldom has it been waged with such dramatic simplicity, as now, in the Pontifical city, between rulers who symbolize spiritual and temporal power and their most uncompromising.¹

In Italy, the relationship between Church and State has always represented a peculiar dynamic, a situation attached to this nation alone. Although governments worldwide must reconcile the enclosure of the spiritual with the secular within their borders, the circumstances in which the Vatican Catholic Church and the Italian State must coexist are unique. Rome not only serves as the capital and center of the nation, but within its city limits reside the heart and Head of the Catholic faith, Vatican City and the Pope. The close proximity in which the Church and State in Italy attempt to wield power and assert influence has resulted in one of the most tumultuous relationships in history. This dichotomy was never more contentious than during the Pontificate of Pope Pius XI and the government of Benito Mussolini.

The “Roman Question,” an outcome of Italian unification in 1860, embodied the struggle for the Vatican and the State to agree on peaceful coexistence and a functional working relationship. Polarization, however, extended far beyond the diplomatic divide

of the Papacy and the government; the “Roman Question” left Italians torn between competing sentiments of patriotism and Catholicism. Finally, in 1929, Mussolini and the Pope found resolution in the ratification of the Lateran Accords.² While the issue seemed resolved on its face, in actuality, the Lateran Accords served as a catalyst, igniting years of controversy for the Catholic Church and the Fascist regime as they contended to claim authority over the Italian people. With socialization as their weapon, Italy’s youngest generation became the primary target, and the education system and youth group organizations served as their battleground. Through extensive socializing campaigns and bold assertions of legitimacy, both the Church and the State competed for influence over the minds of youth.

II. The Contentious Nature of the Lateran Accords

On the streets of Milan, two men could have easily passed each other without a second glance. One, a budding religious figurehead and the other, an atheistic Socialist with his sights set on power. In the early twentieth century, neither was particularly well known outside of their circles of interest, and yet their future was to be forever intertwined. These two men are Benito Mussolini and Achilles Ratti – the future Prime Minister of Italy and the next Pope, respectively. Little did they know that it would be their efforts together, rather than apart, that would result in a solution to Rome’s most pertinent and long-standing dilemma, the “Roman Question.”

In 1861, with unification finally on the horizon, Italians gleefully celebrated the long-awaited amalgamation of their beloved nation-state.¹ Nine years later, when the Italian troops seized Rome and the young government annexed the city as its capital, one Italian in particular was outraged and refused to leave his domain and recognize the new state, Pope Pius IX. Locking himself within the Vatican walls, the Holy See declared himself a hostage of the State, furious that his control over Papal States and his last shed of sovereignty had taken its final blow. For the past 1000 years, popes from St. Paul I to Pius IX had exercised control over a large portion of the Italian peninsula. Yet, as the formation of nations continued across the European continent, Papal territory gradually whittled away. The Vatican, home of the papal residency, church offices, and

¹ Mabel Berezin, Making the Fascist Self – The Political Culture of Interwar Italy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 49.
St. Peter’s Basilica, was the heart of Catholicism and the center of the Catholic Church. But as Italian troops descended upon Rome on September 20, 1870 the threat to Papal power and control was grave.

Traditionally dominating city life in Rome since late antiquity, the clergy suddenly found themselves dispossessed of their properties and their place in public life. The Vatican still existed, of course, but was now technically under the control of the newly formed Italian government. While Italians across the peninsula proudly declared their citizenship, the Pope remained steadfast in his adamant objection to the new development. Refusing to accept his loss of temporal power, he proclaimed the new state illegitimate and excommunicated Italian government leaders. Fueled by rage and devastation as he watched his power crumble before his eyes, he ordered Catholic rulers worldwide not to visit Rome or risk facing excommunication like their Italian counterparts.² The actions of the government had tainted unification and devastated Italy’s people, who now had to choose between a primary loyalty to their Church or to their State.

The relationship between the Church and State within Italy, even before unification, was one precariously unique from that of other nations. In Rome, the Vatican and the Holy See are physically present. The enormity of this reality cannot be overstated. The Catholic Church in Italy is different than anywhere else on the globe.

because the infallible head of the Church, or at the very least his residency, can be seen at any time by the people of Italy; the vicar of Christ lives within their borders. This has always been, and remains, intensely significant to the daily lives and actions of the citizens. Catholicism, for them, is something present and tangible. The city of Rome holds 900 churches alone, most of them Catholic and St. Peter’s basilica is the second largest church in the world.\(^3\) In Italy, “dialogue and collaboration between the Church and the State are based on recognition of the value of religious culture, and in particular, on the awareness that the principles of Catholicism are part of the historical patrimony of the Italian people.”\(^4\)

In 1870, that dialogue came to a screeching halt. The Pope had severed ties with the government, and as Italian liberals steadily increased their hold over the State, their response to his dissent was incalculably negative. Anti-clerical laws were passed and the Church was forced to endure periodic outbursts of anti-clerical violence. The Liberals enacted a series of laws to take control over matters such as education, censorship, and marriage from the church; attempts were even made to introduce divorce. The dominance of anti-clerical legislation and the promotion of secular values represented a progressing ‘de-Christianization’ of the Italian society, a reality that was not well digested by Catholics.


The extreme polarization of Church from State caused a disaccord amongst the citizens themselves and the newly formed government realized this was not conducive to order or control. The claim that he was now a ‘prisoner of Vatican’ was not purely rhetorical. The pope himself was often the target of insults from people in the streets. “In 1871 a mob was reported as having smashed Madonnas outside his walls, and in 1874 another mob of 300 changed death threats at the Pope. The anticlericalism of Italian patriots and the political class generally had become as much cultural as it was political.”\(^5\) The new nation, fearful of both the international consequences resulting from a direct attack on the Church and the domestic obstacles that it presented, decided to initiate a truce. The first step in reconciliation was made in 1871, as the Parliament of Liberal Italy passed the Law of Papal Guarantees of 1871.

The Law of Guarantees, as it is more commonly known, stated the following: First, it recognized the Pope’s personal statutes and the honors and privileges that accompany such status. Second, it guaranteed the freedom of conclaves and councils of the Church that were to be held in Rome. The Law’s last major point was a provision providing a small compensation for the loss of revenues from former Papal States that would be supplied through annual payments by the government to the Vatican.\(^6\) Despite the peace-offering, the Pope rejected it. Renowned scholar on Church-State relations in interwar Italy, John Pollard, argues the rejection is because, “In 1871, in the


aftermath of the occupation of Rome by Italian troops the previous September, the Pope was even less willing to compromise with the representatives of the Liberal State than he had been in 1861, and this refusal to negotiate then made it possible for him and his successors to denounce the law as an unjust and unilateral act.”

The Supreme Pontiff remained locked away from the State, both physically and communicatively, through his death in 1878. He had officially ignited what was to be known for the next fifty years as the “Roman Question,” the issue of how to ameliorate the relationship between Church and State within Italy.

Born July 29, 1882, Benito Mussolini showed early signs of his disdain for the Church and authority as a whole. His father was a blacksmith and Socialist party activist who undoubtedly indoctrinated his child with Socialist views. “Raised in the anti-clerical and irreligious tradition of radical socialism, Mussolini had taken little heed of the sensibilities of the Church in pre-war days. In 1908, he had dismissed priests as ‘black microbes who are as fatal to mankind as tuberculosis germs.”

Later, during World War I, he served his army as a sniper from 1915-1917 and began distancing himself from the Socialist party. Experience in the army had sparked new sentiments of nationalism and he began to figure himself as leader of a more socially conservative national party.

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7 Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism*, 78.

Upon his return from the front, Mussolini began preaching the ideologies of what would become known as Fascism, ideology that I will explore further in Chapter 3. He theorized broad reforms and organized a political movement by 1919. The fascists formed dangerous squads of army veterans known as Blackshirts, or squadristi that terrorized communists and socialists. As numbers thrived in the first two years, the fascisti transformed themselves into the National Fascist Party (Partito Nazionale Fascista or the PNF) during a congress in Rome on November 7, 1921.

The PNF was hugely instrumental in Mussolini’s rise to power, using propaganda, promotion, and panic as their avenues for increased compliance. “Fascism did not offer a clear political programme, for among their ranks one could find monarchists and republicans, as well as revolutionaries and conservatives, but if anything can be salvaged from their obtuse rhetoric...it was the absolute moral primacy of the nation.” The Fascists hoped they could build their political legitimacy by promoting assertions of a shared national culture and identity guided by Romanità, a discussion I will explore in depth in Chapter 3. This radical nationalist movement, determined to propel Mussolini to the head of the government and lay their ideology into the foundation of the State,

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11 Doumanis, Italy, 150.
staged the ‘March on Rome’ on October 28, 1922.\textsuperscript{12} King Vittorio Emanuele III, fearful of civil war, decided against calling on his army to stop the Blackshirts, and instead awarded the position of Prime Minister over to Mussolini. The great march had succeeded in elevating the PNF to a position of power, a position that would allow it to eventually establish a totalitarian government and impose on Italian civil society grand views of nationalism.

On February 6, 1922, in his first gesture as Supreme Pontiff, Pope Pius XI stood on the outer loggia of St. Peter’s Basilica. The world watched with baited breath. The expectations were high for the new Papacy, especially in light of this first action. From 1870 through 1922, the Pope would only appear to the masses from inside St. Peter’s Basilica rather than outside in St. Peter’s Square.\textsuperscript{13} But this Pope was different. A determined and authoritative man, he looked for an opportunity to emerge out of the chaos of the Italian political landscape. His gesture was both intended and received signaled a culmination to the conflict between the Holy See and the Kingdom of Italy, a long-awaited end to the “Roman Question.” All he needed now was a conservative Italian leader who saw the Church as an ally rather than an adversary.

That man would be Benito Mussolini. Just a few months after the cardinal’s election to Pontiff, the Duce came to command the Italian government. While the King

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. 138.

was still the sovereign, Mussolini took hold of the government with relatively free reign. Understanding his new political arena, he realized that his consolidation of control over Italy could not be completed unless he controlled, or appeared to control the Vatican. The burned bridges needed rebuilding. In 1922, the Church welcomed the advent of Fascism, believing it might save Italy from anarchy or from being taken over by Socialists or Communists.\textsuperscript{14} Although the Pope obviously had doubts about the intentions of a Fascist regime that wanted to reconnect with the Church, Pius XI saw this as an opportunity to solve the “Roman Question,” the last obstacle to the union of Italy and an important step in his plan to reignite faith in Christian youth. The Premier, who had previously preached atheism and declared that ‘Christ is Dead’, veered away from these public professions in an attempt to erase what he had said in the past.\textsuperscript{15} Reconciling his religious attitudes with his insatiable appetite for control, Mussolini began to “maintain the greatest outward respect for the Church, as the first of national institutions. The ideology of fascism, however, allowed no such allegiance to the Holy See. The State was Supreme.”\textsuperscript{16} But it was this surface display of empty loyalty that was above all necessary for reconciliation. And so it began.


\textsuperscript{16}Joseph J Florencio, “Solving the Roman Question.”
Papal authority was never more effective in the Catholic world than in the pontificate of Pius XI. The keys to the Catholic response to fascism lay in his hands. Mussolini, for his part, openly urged citizens to pay increased attention to religion and ordered the previously banned crucifix to be restored. In addition, he began to allot large sums of government funds for numerous church restoration projects. The divide caused by the unsettled relationship of the Vatican and the State carried severe consequences for the Italian citizenry. Italians were challenged to be either a faithful Catholic or a good citizen, two roles that seemed unable to coalesce in this peculiar political climate. The Duce, recognizing this same further disintegration of national unity, initiated contact with the Vatican in the fall of 1926.\textsuperscript{17} The division of citizenry as an effect of the “Roman Question” is discussed by Mussolini in his memoirs. He explains that the polarization yielded a ‘white’ group of those who recognized the King of Italy and its inclusion of formed Papal territories and a ‘black’ collective of those who continued to regard the Pope as the true sovereign of Rome.\textsuperscript{18} Negotiations for a resolution to the “Roman Question,” took over two years. The final solution was an answer known as the Lateran Accords.

Signed on February 11, 1929, for King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy by Prime Minister Benito Mussolini and for Pope Pius XI by Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro

\textsuperscript{17} Pollard, \textit{The Vatican and Italian Fascism}, 11.

Gasparri in the Lateran Palace, the Lateran Accords, or Lateran Pacts, was a three-part agreement that officially established the new relationship of Church and State in Italy.  

First agreed upon was a political treaty articulating the Italian State’s recognition of the sovereignty of the Catholic Church. By article four of the treaty, “the sovereignty and exclusive jurisdiction that Italy recognizes to the Holy see over the Vatican City means that in the said City there will be no interference whatsoever from the Italian Government, and that there will be no other authority save that of the Holy See.”

Agreeing on land roughly the size of 160 acres, Vatican City was born. Article one reaffirmed “the Holy Catholic Apostolic and the Roman Religion” as the only State religion. Article twenty-four, most important to Mussolini’s regime, asserted that “the Holy See, considering the sovereignty due to it even in the international world declares that...the territory of the Vatican City will always and in every case be considered neutral and inviolable” in its position in international politics. And lastly of the notable articles of the treaty, article twenty-six declares “the ‘Roman Question’ definitely settled and therefore eliminated...the Holy See recognizes the Kingdom of Italy...with Rome as capital of the Italian State.”

What Pope Pius Xi accepted with the treaty, in the 160-

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acre Vatican City, was essentially the extra-territorial space allotted by the rejected Law of Guarantees. The difference being that Vatican City was now set apart by a bilateral treaty, an agreement between two sovereigns, rather than by grant of Italian law. Within the context expressed by the mission of the Pope and his clergy, the formal establishment of Vatican City cannot be understated in its importance to that mission. In the post-war era, and with an economic recession sweeping the globe, the Church felt the need to reintroduce Christian doctrine and values to a world it perceived as lost in secularization.

Secondly, a concordat was agreed upon that determined the position of the Catholic Church in Italy, a decision that laid out the working relationship between Church and State.\(^\text{22}\) The concordat was most essential to Pope Pius XI, as it guaranteed the Church the freedom to carry out its religious mission. Article three stated that clerics and members of religious order were to be exempt from jury service and the military except in case of general mobilization. Article II made Church holidays legal holidays for the State as well. Articles 36 and 43 were the key pieces of the concordat for the Holy See, and would become the subject of a major dispute between the Church and State in the following years, an issue that will be addressed further in later chapters. Article 36 articulately expresses, “Italy considers the teaching of Christian doctrine in accordance with Catholic tradition, as both the basis and the crown of public education. It therefore agrees that the religious teaching now given in public elementary schools shall be

\(^{22}\) Ibid. 204.
extended to the secondary schools.” The Catholic Church had historically always been relatively in charge of the education of youth. However, with the rule of Italy now under fascist control, that flashpoint was under possible alteration. Pope Pius XI, however, remained adamant about the Church’s necessary position as the educators of the nation, and the concordat solidified this position, at least for the time being.

Article 43 was Pius’ other non-negotiable term. According to Article 43 of the concordat, Catholic Action was to be kept apolitical in the sense that all its organizations would “maintain their activity wholly apart from every political party and under the immediate control of the hierarchy of the church for the diffusion and practice of Catholic principles.” In return, “the Italian State recognizes the organizations forming part of the Italian Catholic Action.” Catholic Action had been established long before the concordat and was seen as the tool for Christian reentrance in the secularized world. The concordat, a legal, juridical agreement to regulate relations between the Vatican and national governments, and namely, Catholic Action, was of monumental importance to the development and spread of Catholic Action under Pope Pius XI. The concordat became the only guaranteed way of securing Church interests in those countries that were both Catholic and non-Catholic alike. Catholic Action will be discussed at length in the following chapters in so far as it served as a vehicle for the

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24 Ibid, 214.
mobilization and socialization of youth by the Catholic Church. The central role of Catholic Action in education and organized youth groups stands as one of the most prominent aspects of the Pontificate and absolutely his most blatant assertion for legitimacy, influence, and power during the interwar period.

The third and final element of the Lateran Accords was a financial agreement arranged between the Church and the State. The Pope received a cash settlement for the lands that had been confiscated over the past decades. By article one, “Italy pledges herself to pay to the Holy See, at the exchange of the ratifications of the Treaty, the sum of Italian Lire 750,000,000 in cash and to deliver...bearer bonds, of the nominal value of Italian Lire 1,000,000,000.” The Holy See agreed to all terms of the Lateran Accords, including the acceptance of the financial convention, and in theory, the “Roman Question” was finally resolved. February 11, 1929 was a monumental day in Italian history. Sixty years of polarization finally seemed to end. The Pope finally had his own sovereign state and a legal guarantee (although it would be severely broken later on) of the freedom of his beloved Catholic Action. Mussolini got what he wanted as well. “He had his national church, and with it the support of the Pope. It looked for the entire world as though the papacy had irrevocably linked itself with a fascist regime.”

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Due to the unique nature of the negotiations and signing of the accord, that being its secrecy in development and its ratification by just a few individuals, the *Conciliazione* of Rome had an extreme impact for the future power of both Mussolini and Pope Pius XI. It was the consensus of Italian citizens that “the greatest Italian statesman will be the one who solves the Roman Question.” And to the outside world, Mussolini was seen as just that. The Duce gained prestige for his brilliant and diplomatic victory and was enthusiastically supported by the majority of Italian people. To the international community, and as previously stated, the Lateran Accords provided a basis of legitimacy for the fascist government. Now, no foreign nation would threaten Italy with dismemberment in the name of “liberating the Prisoner of the Vatican.” And yet, within each party’s camp, an aura of hesitation and dissent remained. The years following would illustrate that the Accords, while definitive on the outside, were loaded with implications and consequences. The Lateran Accords, while publicly supported and celebrated by the Church and the State, would actually widen the divide of Mussolini’s government from the Catholic Church. “Was it largely a question of differing interpretations,” asks the historian John Pollard, “or had the Pacts left unresolved major problems that were to resurface in the years to come?” Or, as he continues, was the future cause of conflict a more serious reflection of two completely opposing ideologies? A 1931 New York Times article, “The Drama of the Pope and the Premier,”

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29 Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism*, 3.
explained that “despite official accord, the two powers in Rome could hardly meet except in debate.” A new “Roman Question” had been raised, one that resonated within the Italian citizenry and proved to be much older and would be far more difficult to solve.

Although unified on paper, in practice the two polities of influence were now forced to take initiatives to assert power and legitimacy within Italy. The Lateran Accords had created a cultural atmosphere that demanded the explicit expression of ideals. From this point on, the Fascists and the Catholic clergy had to emulate those ideals to prove their necessity to every-day life, and the possibilities each one presented for their followers. Both sides of the conflict recognized the potential vitality that indoctrinating their dogmas into Italians at their very youngest would add to their causes. The Lateran Accords may have been a solution to the “Roman Question,” but, consequently instigated conflict for the decade that followed. In the competition for influence over and resonance with the Italian citizens, the monopoly of youth became a primary priority. Chapters 2 and 3 will demonstrate how the Lateran Accords served as a catalyst for competitive attempts by both the Fascist and the Catholics to assert influence over youth through initiatives in education and youth group organizations.

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III. The Concordat and Catholic Action

Under the guidance of Pope Pius XI and Cardinal Gasparri, during the 1920s and 1930s, the policy of the Holy See towards the State and secular society can easily be summed up as ‘Concordats and Catholic Action.’ Recognizing the imperative need to both secure a legal protection for Catholic Action against persecution by the State and to solidify the Church presence in Italian education, Pius was adamant in his demand for the inclusion of Articles 36 and 43 of the Concordat of the Lateran Accords. Just to reiterate, Article 36 guaranteed religious instruction to be taught in primary and secondary education. Article 43 stated that, so long as Catholic Action represented a social movement wholly apart from political activity, the State was to secure its uninterrupted continuance. The Supreme Pontiff’s determination to remain progressive in the renewal of Christian values and education stemmed from his devout and academic past.

Pope Pius XI was born Achilles Ratti on May 31, 1857 just north of Milan. Studying theology, canon law, and philosophy, Ratti was an extremely gifted student who was so brilliant he would eventually catch the attention of the Supreme Pontiff at the time, Pope Leo XIII. Toward the end of 1911, Pius XI, then known as Monsignor


Ratti, had been created a domestic prelate to act as vice prefect of the Vatican Library. Within five years, he was appointed by Pope Benedict XV to the position of Apostolic Visitor to Poland and Lithuania. Recalled to Rome in 1921, he was elected Archbishop of Milan on June 21 and made a Cardinal that same day.\(^{34}\) When Pope Benedict XV died, the conclave to choose his successor found their next leader in Cardinal Ratti. Taking the name Pius XI, Cardinal Ratti was elected Pope on February 6, 1922. With the mind of a researcher, Pius was extremely intuitive and astutely aware of the power of rhetoric. Serving as testament to his experience as a librarian, Pius’ method is reflective in the priorities of his pontificate.\(^{35}\) With education as his most primary focus, the Papacy sought to expand his sphere of influence and construct a mass constituency of believers by educating the minds of the youth through a curriculum that was balanced with secular and theological material based on Christian doctrine. Pope Pius XI was known by many names: ‘Pope of the Missions,’ the ‘Pope who Settled the Roman Question,’ and most important for this discussion, the ‘Pope of the Youth,’ and the ‘Pope of Catholic Action.’ Within the context of Catholic Action that Pope Pius XI demonstrated the fervent zeal of his educating vision and would flex the Church muscle against an increasingly repressive fascist regime. Like its secular counterpart, the Vatican waged a campaign for the wide-spread socialization of youth by penetrating the school system and enriching youth group organizations.

\(^{34}\) McLaughlin, *The Church and the Reconstruction of the Modern World*, 111.

In the decade following the end of World War I, the global climate was dreary and ripe with problems. The world seemed painstakingly poised to enter a second Great War despite just exiting a first. The threat of Nazism continued to climb and was rapidly realized to be potentially cataclysmic to contemporary human society and the international balance of power. Communism was spreading across the globe and those who embraced its ideology saw Communism as a savior, while those who stood staunchly opposed, like the Catholic Church, saw it as proof of the decline of humanity. And lastly, one of the greatest economic crises in history was looming off in the not-so-distant future. In his seventeen years as Supreme Pontiff, Pope Pius XI saw all of these major events manifest themselves in one way or another. In response, the Holy See determined Catholic Action to be his prime instrument for Catholic influence in modern Italy. Combining the needs of the church, the state, and the society, Catholic Action was to be the clergy’s main vehicle for Catholic social, albeit apolitical, activism. By reforming and strengthening the organization and execution of the efforts made by Catholic Action, the Pope was able to meaningfully extend his reach far into the social climate, with a particularly focused attention paid to youth in both the school system and recreational youth group organizations.


Antecedents to the Catholic Action as developed by Pius began as far back as 1863 simply as networks of Catholic based self-help institutions that centered on the parishes and represented more of a local rather than a national effort. The election of Cardinal Ratti to the position of Supreme Pontiff, however, would yield a consolidating effect on these relatively regional missions to formulate a national movement that would surpass its precedent in strength, numbers, mobility, and capability. Issued in 1937, the encyclical “On Atheistic Communism,” succinctly articulates the purpose of Catholic Action, especially in the face of threatening communism and, obviously, fascism. “Catholic Action,” Pope Pius XI writes, “is in effect a social apostolate also, inasmuch as its object is to spread the kingdom of Jesus Christ not only among individuals, but also in families and society.”

Later, as if specifically referencing the fascist restructuring of the Italian education system, he states that members of Catholic Action, “should loyally and generously participate in the formation of the new institutions, bringing to them the Christian spirit which is the basic principle of order wherever men work together in fraternal harmony.”

In the eyes of the Church, the Italian Catholic movement had been suffering from a crisis of identity and confidence. Officially stated as the sole purpose of Catholic Action, Pope Pius XI reconfigured the unorganized groupings into a mass constituency

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39 Ibid.394.
designed to bring laity within the sphere of the Church so ordinary people could aid clergy in the functions of charity, teaching, and social welfare. Despite its intentions of remaining outside the realm of politics, the fact that Catholic Action was concerned with the education of youth gave it a political mission, as far as Fascism is concerned, because Fascist control starts with the youth. The Holy See quickly understood the severity of this element of fascist ideology as PNF persecution of Christian youth and Catholic Action increased. In his encyclical, “On Catholic Action,” the Pope writes:

And here We find Ourselves confronted by 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. To propose and to promote such a monopoly to persecute for this reason Catholic Action, as has been done for some time more or less openly or under cover to reach this end by striking at the Catholic Association of Youth as has lately been done; all this is truly and literally to "forbid the little children to go to Jesus Christ," since it impedes their access to His Church and where His Church is, there is Jesus Christ. This usurpation goes so far as to snatch the young from Christ and His Church even with violence. His zealous promotion and support of the furthering of Catholic Action represents his most ambitious attempt to assert legitimacy in this divisive time. 

In June of 1921, the Italian Chamber of Deputies sat silent as a newly elected member gave his first speech before them. The men wondered whether this articulation would

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be one of bold dissent, revolutionary rhetoric, or arguable assertions. Instead, his maiden speech bubbled with promises of peace and a newly altered position on the need for reconciliation between Church and State. Diverging from previous anti-clerical rhetoric and abominations of all things religious, Benito Mussolini vivaciously guaranteed his audience, “I affirm here and now that today the Latin and imperial tradition of Rome is represented by Catholicism.” He continued, “…I think and affirm that the only universal idea that today exists in Rome is that which shines from the Vatican.”42 The Chamber was stunned; a Fascist preaching the necessity of conciliazione? This admonition, despite its warm reception, was severely undermined on principle alone. Those who received these words with skepticism were right to do so. Fascism, at its very core, is anti-clerical and sees the State, not the Church, as the embodiment of the Roman tradition, a belief which will be discussed at length in the following chapter. Indeed, his hollow language was representative of a change of policy, not a change of heart. The disputes immediately following the ratification of the Lateran Accords demonstrate Mussolini’s conception of the Church as subservient to the State. Outlining the fascist mentality in a 2006 article entitled, “New Idols: Catholicism in the face of Fascist Totalitarianism,” Emilio Gentile writes, “Fascism was simply a new and updated version of Caesaropapism, which intended to subjugate the

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42 Peter Kent, The Pope and the Duce: The international impact of the Lateran Agreements, 85.
forces of the church to its political aims, since it could not allow them to operate outside the bounds of a totalitarian occupation."43

Between the years of 1921 and 1922, in an effort to reiterate the non-political nature of Catholic Action, the Vatican issued numerous statements that the clergy should absolutely abstain from participation in politics. When Cardinal Ratti was made Supreme Pontiff in 1922, he inherited a disaffected movement that did not see potential in a reconciliation that would aid in the fulfillment of their mission. The Pope’s most foremost priority, that of abridging the gap between believing and believer, could only come to fruition with the support of Catholic Action and the Church’s success in maintaining a position in the education system. The office of the Holy See, while one of extreme power and recognition, is also one of extreme limitation. Like the significance of being the physical embodiment of Christ cannot be overstated, the boundaries inherently set by that position cannot be understated. Despite being a sovereign leader of his own nation, he was not so free as his sovereign secular counterpart, Mussolini. While Mussolini was the State, Pope Pius XI was not the Church. True, his efforts reflected the broad intentions and preferences of the Church. But the Pope operates not as a man of his own personality, but as the Pope; his personality is submerged in his office.44 And thus, Catholic Action effectively served as his mouthpiece. With that


understanding, Pope Pius XI took on the broad endeavor of completely redrafting the composition of Catholic Action to best suit his goals and the needs of his flailing followers. In addition, not only was Catholic Action a design that could best be used to fashion the social purpose of the Church to assert influence youth, but Pius recognized that the laity needed Catholic Action for their own, individual purposes. “The organization provided an alternative for Italian Catholics, a meeting place where they could and did hear other voices besides the gospel according to fascism, where enthusiasm for a regime they disliked was not compulsory.”

Contrary to Mussolini’s previous statements, the PNF clearly wanted to command a total monopoly on schooling and youth initiatives, but the Church stood firmly in its stance. For the Italian Fascist regime, youth was a central and essential concern. Fascism was portrayed as a movement of the young, the daring, and the audacious. The young were courted more assiduously, both by the Fascists and the Church, than any other social group. The Pope, in his ambitious pursuit of broadening Catholic Action, challenged the regime’s attempt to exert totalitarian control over the young. In fact, “the Catholic church proved itself the most formidable obstacle to the regime’s self-appointed mission to mold the ‘new Fascist man.’”

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46 Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 123.
Before the guarantees were made in the accords, the line between Church and State began to blur as the Duce grew in power. In schools across Italy, this coalescence was sung in prayer. Dutifully, each morning, school children were forced to express their shared loyalties, regardless of their true belief. With its cute taken from the Nicene Creed of the Church, it read,

I believe in the high Duce, maker of the Black Shirts,  
And in Jesus Christ his only protector.  
Our Savior was conceived by a good teacher and an industrious blacksmith.  
He was a valiant soldier; he had some enemies.  
He came down to Rome. On the third day, he reestablished the State.  
He ascended into the high office.  
He is seated at the right hand of our Sovereign.  
From there, he has come to judge Bolshevism.  
I believe in the wise laws, the Communion of Citizens, the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of Italy and the eternal force. Amen.\(^{47}\)

However, the Church refused to let this stand. Pressing its rights in education, Pius argued that Italian society could be reclaimed solely through the leadership of the Catholic Church; neither side was prepared to surrender. In 1923, Pius reorganized Catholic Action in a series of reforms that reinforced the unabbreviated persona of the organization and fortified its dependence on the church hierarchy. After the reform, Catholic Action was formally divided into four distinct groupings.\(^{48}\) They were divided as following: adult males, adult females, youth, and university students. Overall


initiatives were articulated and driven by Pope-appointed officials and authority was passed down through diocesan and parish councils. Impressively organized and efficient in execution, Catholic Action allowed a forum for Catholic followers that had not really been existence before. Through journals, newspapers, and its own social activities, the Pope was able to use the resources of Catholic Action to influence the lives of Italians in the most effective way possible. In the eyes of the Holy See, political parties divided Catholics, but Catholic Action would emphasize those things which united them, like fundamental ethical principles. In the months following the ratification of the Lateran Accords, Catholic Action saw an increase in activity, manifesting in nearly 250 diocesan committees, 4,000 men’s sections, and some 5,000 youth and university groups.

As negotiations for the Lateran Accords progressed, it was clear that the guarantee of legal protection for Catholic Action and the maintenance of the Church presence in education were Pius XI most fundamental conditions for reaching an agreement. There were caveats throughout the Catholic movement, however, that questioned the real value of the concordat from its inception. Fierce arguments were made from inside Catholic Action; notably, Monsignor G. B. Montini, later Pope Paul VI, voiced his doubts. “If the liberty of the Pope cannot be guaranteed by the strong faith of a free people, and by especially the Italian people, then no territory and no treaty will

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49 Kent, *The Pope and the Duce*, 47.

be able to do so.” These fears were echoed throughout the nation as believers wondered if a viable solution would be possible through a political agreement. The possibility of secular means justifying a Catholic end was viewed with skepticism and the years of abuse and attacks on Catholic Action demonstrated just how contentious it would truly be.

Closing in on the final agreements, it was clear that Mussolini realized that in order to fulfill his ultimate goals, the concession of guaranteeing the legal recognition of Catholic Action was indisputable. The concordat, and particularly article 43, provided Pius the opportunity for a new beginning. After the violence and harassment of the previous years, article 43 now seemed to give Catholic Action the chance to develop free from Fascist interruption and opportunity to recruit youth as never before. The PNF was furious, yet Mussolini had done what was necessary to secure his position, both personally and for his regime. Evidence demonstrates that in reality, Mussolini never intended for education to remain within the sphere of religious power. Three months later, in talks with the Upper and Lower houses of Parliament, Mussolini proclaimed, “We refuse to surrender into the hands of others the education of the young...Teaching must belong to us....”

51 Pollard, The Vatican and Italian Fascism, 54.
The Pope was not unaware of the enormity of the challenge that lay ahead. The first major instance that signaled how contentious the situation would be between the two powers came years before the signing of the Concordat in 1926 over the *Esploratori Cattolici*, the Catholic Boy Scouts. Founded in 1916, the Catholic Boy Scouts was another group of numerous young people brought together to learn various skills and gain a multitude of experiences, just within a Catholic context. But, the uniformed ‘soldiers of Christ’ made those in power nervous. Seen as a dangerous rival with numbers in the hundreds of thousands, the Blackshirts began attacking the Scouts. The fascists disrupted Scout gatherings, wrecked meeting halls, and even beat up a few members and their clerical directors. The Church’s retaliation came through the incidence’s coverage in numerous international and domestic newspapers that shocked the nation with the unnecessary violence of the regime. Although the Pope denied that the State had any power to dissolve church organizations, the Holy See dissolved all branches of the Catholic Boy Scouts, detaching the *Esploratori* from the institution of Catholic Action in order to protect his organization’s youth groups from a similar fate. However, the issue was not resolved. In 1927, police agents noted increasingly frequent confrontations between Catholic and Fascist youth. Later in the

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54 Kent, *The Pope and the Duce*, 150.

year, serious incidents were reported in the north.\textsuperscript{56} This made the inclusion of Article 43 of the concordat that much more urgent. February 11, 1929 was supposed to be the solution not only to the “Roman Question,” but the solution for Catholic Action as well.

Of the Lateran Accords, Article 43 of the concordat embodies how the Pacts, which ostensibly seemed so unassuming and relatively straight-forward, in actuality represented the contentious interpretations that would be the catalyst of tension for years to come. The explosive divide over the influence of youth so immediate and withstanding after the Conciliation led many to refer to it more commonly as the ‘disconciliation.’\textsuperscript{57}

Now, not only was religion to be taught at both the primary and secondary levels of education, and with church-approved textbooks no less, but with its inclusion Catholic Action was legally protected so long as it remained apolitical. To the testament of the Pope Pius XI, the wording of the article has not changed in drafts of the agreement over the years. The Concordat was Pius’ greatest accomplishment. Thanks to the explicit protection articulated in article 43 and the promotion of the Pope, Catholic Action unleashed a revived determination to recruit Italy’s youngest generations. The Church decisively sought to incorporate the participation of the youth and the university students and develop this demographic to become future leaders of

\textsuperscript{56} Koon, \textit{Believe, Obey, Fight}, 123.

the movement. The Catholic University Federation, or FUCI, was a powerful and active center of culture and individual thought throughout the Fascist period.\(^{58}\) Established in 1896, the FUCI were early and on-going targets for the squadristi. Pope Pius XI reorganized the FUCI in 1925 in an effort to ease Church-State tensions, and similar to the other reforms made in 1923, provided that all the officers of FUCI would be appointed by him, rather than elected by group members. “The existence of a ‘Catholic cyst within the Italian body politic’ alarmed the Fascists and certainly contributed to the violence...aimed at excising that irritating presence.\(^{59}\)

Apart from the spiritual redirection and education of its members, Catholic Action also waged a crusade against what it deemed public immorality. Catholic Action protested films, plays, and books that the movement considered inappropriate or against Christian doctrine. As the voice of Catholic Action grew louder, the Pope’s influence throughout various spheres of Italian life grew, and further legitimated his pontificate. What Mussolini’s fascist regime displayed with violence, Catholic Action displayed with calculated thought governed by a strict moral code. While the PNF propagandized from a platform of new questionable ideology in need of legitimization, Catholic Action was able to revitalize the nation with rhetoric and tradition that dated back thousands of years, an effort that would be mirrored by the PNF and will be covered further in Chapter 3. The Pope’s educational and community-oriented


\(^{59}\) Koon, Believe, Obey, Fight 138.
initiatives, contrary to those instated by the Premier, had little objection from any group, international or at home, other than those made by fascists themselves. By the end of 1930, the total membership of Catholic Action rose above the one million mark for the first time in over a decade. The continually climbing numbers of students involved in the organization and mounting influence exerted by Catholic Action created a social climate that was now wholly intolerable to the Italian government. The atmosphere was ripe for crisis.

The year of 1931 marked the beginning of the PNF’s second large-scale offensive against Catholic Action that was so complete it was rivaled only by its first offensive in 1926. Attacks on Catholic Action constantly called into question the language of the Concordat’s Article 43. With each violent action, the Pope reiterated the legal guarantees made in the Lateran Accords, maintaining, “The fact that an organization exists does not mean from that very fact that the end and purpose of the organization is political.” This once again shed light on the dark subject surrounding the issue of interpretation; simply because the concordat assured the legality of Catholic Action did not assure its mutual understanding. In March 1931, Il Lavoro Fascista, the mouthpiece of the Fascist labor party with circulation in the hundreds of thousands, began an official attack against Catholic Action.

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60 Kent, The Pope and the Duce, 147.

In celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the issuing of Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, ‘Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor,’ the members of Catholic Action had special plans. 62  *Rerum Novarum* was extremely influential and articulate in its assertion of class struggles and the conditions of the working class. Although labor-oriented in its discussion, the encyclical was and continues to be celebrated by Catholics across the globe as a testament to the general rights of man and the necessity for an internal harmony between worker and man. Lay people and clergy alike worked diligently to facilitate a manifestation of social Catholicism in the form of an international congress. The congress was to be a peaceful gathering held in May 1931 in the heart of Catholicism, the city of Rome. 63  Catholics world-wide were energized about the opportunity to engage in a collective demonstration of devotion and value. As Catholics, both young and old, celebrated the opportunity to come, Fascists, both young and old, unleashed a fury against the character of their organization and their future plans.

Orchestrated by *Il Lavoro Fascista*, the paper led charged against Catholic Action, claiming that these “were but ‘camouflaged syndicates’ and accusing the organization of welcoming members who could ‘no longer conceal their antifascism’ and were openly

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hatching plots to supplant the regime by using Catholic Action.”\textsuperscript{64} The anti-Catholic Action campaign, unable to be quarantined quickly became a disease that spread cancerously throughout Italy. From within his Vatican walls, Pope Pius XI sat enraged but unwilling to yield to Fascist demands. Steadfast as the stone built around him, he rejected requests made by the Italian ambassador to the Vatican to moderate all Catholic press and further circumscribe the capabilities of Catholic Action. Reflecting his strength of character and religious conviction, it must be noted that Pius personally attended these meetings, choosing to fight his battle in person unlike his secular adversary, who instead sent emissaries and used the Fascist press. The Pope proved himself a formidable match time and time again.

Catholic Action, strong in their resolve and with the potential of 10,000 or more Catholics from around the world expected to attend their congress, continued to plan their important event.\textsuperscript{65} However, their road to celebration would not be without obstacles. Between March and May, anti-fascist flyers began circulating around Rome, to the shock of Catholic Action, and the outrage of the Blackshirts.\textsuperscript{66} Denouncing the regime as illegitimate, the flyers presented Italians as repressed workers who were manipulated by a totalitarian government. Ultimately, the actions were realized to be

\textsuperscript{64} Pollard, \textit{The Vatican and Italian Fascism}, 133.


\textsuperscript{66} Koon, \textit{Believe, Obey, Fight}, 134.
the work of an underground Milan-based anti-fascist group that was not in any way connected to Catholic Action, yet the animosity towards Catholic Action remained.

On May 15, a vindicated Catholic Action professed its strength in the thousands of foreign and native worshipers and activists that danced the streets of Rome and memorialized the triumph of social Catholicism. The Pope, asserting his own unique power, issued the encyclical, “On Reconstructing the Social Order.” Reiterating the poignancy of Leo XIII’s insights on social justice while simultaneously recognizing the active Fascist threat, he wrote:

All these things which Our Predecessor has not only suggested but clearly and openly proclaimed, We emphasize with renewed insistence in our present Encyclical; and unless utmost efforts are made without delay to put them into effect, let no one persuade himself that public order, peace, and the tranquility of human society can be effectively defended against agitators of revolution.67

Unfortunately, the Pope would not be the one with the last word. Instead, the physical demonstration of the success of Catholic Action only reignited the fascist’s enflamed determination for the organization’s destruction. Fascist newspaper remained adamant in their desire to dismantle Catholic Action, especially after witnessing an international cascade of Catholics demonstrating in their streets. Between May 21 and May 24, *Il Lavoro Fascista* and papers like it published a series of exposes that placed the integrity of the Totalitarian State above the maintenance of good relations with the

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Church, denouncing Catholic Action as a threat to order, labor, and nationalism. Factually deficient, the exposes were printed in a whirlwind of deceit and for Mussolini, proved to be the last straw.\textsuperscript{68} Throwing up his arms in rage, Mussolini violently condemned Catholic Action and required his government to close over 15,000 Catholic clubs.\textsuperscript{69} Charges against the group and its many ‘political activities’ were abundant. Members of Catholic youth organizations were routinely beaten up, especially the \textit{Fucini}. Offices and meeting halls were broken into with no regard for property or privacy. \textit{Fascisti} of all rank disturbed religious ceremonies, burnt books, broke statues, and staged parodies of Catholic rites. Pope Pius laments in a later encyclical over slogans by neo-\textit{squadristi} shouted throughout the streets of Italy: “Death to the traitor Ratti!” “Down with FUCI!” “Down with the Pope!” and “Death to Catholic Action!” \textsuperscript{70} Then, on May 30, Mussolini dealt Catholic Action its most devastating blow yet: he ordered the complete disbandment of all Catholic youth organizations.

Although religious instruction was still a factor in the education system, the balance of power in the ability to influence youth through socialization was severely shifted. This action was an assertion of his authority and challenged Catholic Action to ever fully recover. The members of Catholic Action were devastated and defenseless.

\textsuperscript{68} Koon, \textit{Believe, Obey, Fight}, 134.

\textsuperscript{69} Anne O’Hare McCormick, “The Drama of the Pope and Premier.” \textit{New York Times}, August 6, 1939.

The advances gained by Concordat seemed all but vaporized. Pope Pius XI, carrying the fate of Catholic Action on his shoulders alone, decided to respond in the most significant way he knew how. Fully aware that the vigilant and infiltrating Fascists would be able to intercept any written work before it had reached Italian papers, the Holy See sent copies of his yet-unreleased encyclical to Paris to ensure its publication. The text was published abroad before Italians would read it in the traditional mouthpiece of the Church, Osservatore Romano. His action, while clearly reiterating the limitations of his position, also showed his extreme commitment and devotion to the continuance Catholic Action. Written in Italian instead of Latin to give impact and urgency to the Pontiff's words, Pope Pius XI issued Non Abbiamo Bisogno, or ‘On Catholic Action,’ on June 5, 1931. The excerpt below articulates the anger of the Church over the violence against Catholic Action while providing a rare insight into Papal recognition of the true motivations of the venomous Fascist regime:

They were attacks and measures such as to lead one seriously to doubt whether the former benevolences and favours were indeed actuated by a sincere love and zeal for religion, or whether they were not rather due to pure calculation and to an ultimate goal of domination. And if the question of ingratitude is to be considered, it should be rather the ingratitude now shown towards the Holy See by a party and by a regime which, in the opinion of the whole world, from the fact of establishing friendly relations with the Holy See, gained a prestige and a credit in the country and outside it, which some people, both in and out of Italy, considered excessive, inasmuch as they deemed the favours on Our part too great, and the trust and confidence which we reposed too full.

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With its deliverance, the global community could now bear witness to the atrocities made against Catholic Action. As internal and international pressures mounted for yet a second reconciliation, a truce was negotiated with the Vatican on September 2, 1931.\textsuperscript{73} While the rhetoric of the agreement was largely devastating to the Pope’s most beloved organization, clauses such as Clause 3 that set a ban on Catholic Action’s sponsorship of sporting or athletic events for Catholic youth groups, in essence, already was in existence as law after the agreements made in 1927.\textsuperscript{74} Reformulated and reorganized as it may have been, the continued existence of Catholic Action at all was an accomplishment of enormous implications. The Concordat allowed for the continued presence of Catholicism in Italian education, thereby allowing Catholic socialization of youth to continue despite major setbacks.

At the end of his pontificate, Pius issued over 30 encyclicals, writings reserved among the numerous types of papal letters to express solemn treatment of more serious problems.\textsuperscript{75} Culturally astute and lyrically gifted, Pope Pius XI asserted the legitimacy and mobilizing potential of social Catholicism. Despite the State’s volatile opposition and efforts to counter, by assuring the Church an involved position in the Italian school system and attaining legal protection for Catholic Action, Pope Pius XI was able to instrumentally utilize youth to indoctrinate lasting social Catholicism.


\textsuperscript{74} Pollard, \textit{The Vatican and Italian Fascism}, 165.

\textsuperscript{75} McLaughlin, \textit{The Church and the Reconstruction of the Modern World}, 5.
IV. The Myth of Fascism

In late 1923, the Fascist Party in Italy officially absorbed the Italian Nationalist Association, the national party of the country, forging a union that held significant political and symbolic implications. In the previous year, the great fascist March on Rome occurred, an important event that symbolizes the rise of Italian fascism to power.\textsuperscript{76} Although the ideology had already existed, after fascism swept the crucial capital city, the regime realized the need to further strengthen the connection of fascist ideology to a national identity that rested on a shared heritage. Acknowledging the potency of indoctrinating citizens at the earliest stages of development and foreseeing the potential that youth held in fascism’s future, the PNF began a campaign of aggressive socialization, targeting the education system and youth groups.\textsuperscript{77}

Just over 60 years after Italian unification, regionalism still highly defined the nature of the young nation’s civil society. Italy remained adamantly fragmented as citizens continued to identify with one another on a local, rather than a national level. This kind of identification continues to exist today, but to a much lesser extent than during the Fascist regime, and obviously than during the period of unification. Benito Mussolini inherited a nation that was divided along regional lines and practices – a

\textsuperscript{76} Mabel Berezin, \textit{Making the Fascist Self – The Political Culture of Interwar Italy} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 8.

reality that was not conducive to national governance. Unification further created an additional fracture of Italian citizenry, as Pope Pius IX challenged Italians to assert allegiance to their Catholic Church rather than their new state. Now, the people were divided by region and by personal allegiance. Even though the Lateran Accords helped consolidate the Italian people by solving the “Roman Question,” the Pacts ignited a calculated response from the government that fully confronted the parallel initiatives of the Catholic Church. The Premier saw the necessity of uniting Italians under the common banner of fascism and began to integrate fascist ideology and rhetoric with nationalist ideology and rhetoric. The unification of the two parties in late 1923 was a key component in Mussolini’s pursuit of political power; the immersion of the Nationalist Association into the PNF gave the new regime a necessary tool of governance - a symbolic acceptance of the legitimacy of Mussolini’s government.

Driven by this success, the fascists began to promote a rhetoric and dogma that relied on citizens relating to the regime as they would to the nation itself. Since the Italian people were still divided along regional lines, fascist creed boldly promoted the common historical heritage shared by the citizenry. Drawing upon a great source of pride for all Italians, the regime exploited the richness of ancient Rome to achieve political ends, cementing the cult-like glorification of antiquity known as Romanità. Fashioning himself as a modern-day Caesar who would restore Italy to the glory of imperial Rome, Mussolini set out to promote a sense of shared national identity that had not existed before. The State was to be the fruit from which all other activities
stemmed. Mussolini clearly articulated this in his 1932 ‘Doctrine of Fascism’: “The Fascist conception of the State is all embracing; outside of it no human or spiritual values can exist, much less have value. Thus understood, Fascism is totalitarian, and the Fascist State - a synthesis and a unit inclusive of all values - interprets, develops, and empowers the whole life of a people.”

In an effort to visually articulate the State’s reinterpretation and redevelopment of the Italian people, Mussolini, a master of theatrics, initiated enormous public works projects to illustrate fascism’s link to the grandeur of Romanità. With Catholic symbols and structures splattered across Italy, the fascists utilized construction plans of their own to serve as testimonies to the power and vitality of their regime. Public works projects allowed the regime to demonstrate ties to its ‘Roman past’ and buildings provided a visible and immediate display of fascist power. Not only did public works showcase the government’s image of itself, but they also projected what they thought their people wanted their authority to represent. Fostering a shared history on a foundation of fascist construction allowed the PNF to pursue control while masking its failures and shortcomings. Building programs allowed for an increase in national pride by displaying the glories of Rome’s past, and by extension, creating faith in the future.

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In the resculpting of history, Romanità proved to be the Fascists most useful tool. The cult of Romanità served as justification for the excavation, restoration, and reuse of the city’s ancient monuments and sites and Rome became redesigned as a stage for the display of contemporary politics.\textsuperscript{80} The grandeur of Ancient Rome served as a central component of the Fascist identity, and, in turn, the collective identity that could be shared by all Italians, despite regional disparities. For instance, in 1929, and notably after the signing of the Lateran Accords, Mussolini strategically moved the fascist headquarters to Palazzo Venezia, a large central area in the heart of Rome. From the balcony of the Palazzo’s piano nobile, the Premier was able to address enormous masses assembled below. This massive relocation was not enough, though - he desired a public works project that visually expressed his own divine right to govern, a right he argued was passed down to him through time from the great rulers of Rome. Further, in a discussion of the influence Romanità had on fascist doctrine, historian Romke Visser writes, “The ‘Roman revolution’ (133-27 BC), as a ‘permanent revolution’ (just like fascism pretended to be) which transformed the republican society into an imperial one, leading to the golden age of Augustus and the \textit{pax romana}, was treated as a ‘model’ on which the fascist revolution and the totalitarian imperialistic society should be based.”\textsuperscript{81}


Seeking to extend the historical implications of Romanità into the fascist present, huge demolitions occurred. Buildings that surrounded the imperial structures of the Capitoline Hill and the Forums, including houses, a Baroque church, and numerous other types of edifices were knocked down to liberate the Capitoline from intervening centuries. A new road was constructed linking the Colosseum with Palazzo Venezia. Via dei Fori Imperiali (later renamed Via dell’Impero) was completed. As he had envisioned, this path through the core of Rome now physically and symbolically connected the government of the Caesars with the government of Mussolini. Another monument was built on the newly constructed road to project a grand physical and symbolic display of power. This monument stands today as it did then, depicting a map of Mediterranean Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Italy, and the colonies of the Fascist empire (Libya and Ethiopia) that couples the myth of the founding of Rome with the myth of emerging empire.

The Mostra della Revoluzione Fascista (The Exhibit of the Fascist Revolution) served as another significant venue in which the fascists asserted their long and proud history. As Catholics were able to point to the plethora of churches, museums, and artworks that stand as evidence of their historic record, the PNF decided to establish their own exhibition of history aimed at creating a feeling of tangibility to fascist history.

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84 Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self*, 111.
and recognition of national community. Inaugurated in 1932, the *Mostra* lasted for two years, functioning as a museum of fascist memorabilia, showcasing oversized posters and murals of Mussolini next to images of fascist eagles and swords. Most interesting, the “exhibition hall in the center of Rome was designed to resemble a modernist cathedral and functioned as a shrine to fascism.”

Although it will not be discussed at length here, it is worth mentioning that this reality, the construction of the *Mostra* to resemble a cathedral, visually displayed an instructive and poignant characteristic of fascist style – the use of religious imagery and religious lexicon in discussing and promoting their ideology.

In the effort to cultivate nationalism, and by extension, a sense that fascism, in effect, be the only “religion” a citizen need accept, the fascist rhetoric utilized religious jargon in an emblazoned manner. To highlight this message, words were used such as, “‘martyr,’ ‘sacrifice,’ ‘rite,’ ‘altar,’ ‘redemption,’ ‘communion,’ ‘mission,’ ‘commandment,’ and hierarchy.’ Fascism was a ‘sacred’ or ‘holy’ struggle; war the ‘supreme sacrifice’; service to the nation a ‘divine commandment.’”

Italians, a religious people throughout recent history, could identify with that type of speech and were now encouraged to apply it to their secular lives. In this way, Mussolini and his regime were able to instill a religious fervor into fascist ideology bolstered with a myth of origin that made use of the same lexicon as the Catholic Church. Similarly, this intellectually firmer-

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based ‘religious message’ impressed educated Italians, silencing doubts that questioned Mussolini’s ‘Godsent’ omnipotence.\(^{87}\)

Shortly after the Lateran Accords, Mussolini delivered a speech that illustrates how rhetoric was used to seamlessly blend assertions of fascist collective identity, a necessary role in education, and the ideals of Romanità such as the regime’s transcendence of time:

The State, as conceived and realized by Fascism, is a spiritual and ethical entity for securing the political, juridical, and economic organization of the nation, an organization which in its origin and growth is a manifestation of the spirit. The State guarantees the internal and external safety of the country, but it also safeguards and transmits the spirit of the people, elaborated down the ages in its language, its customs, its faith. The State is not only the present; it is also the past and above all the future. Transcending the individual's brief spell of life, the State stands for the immanent conscience of the nation. The forms in which it finds expression change, but the need for it remains. The State educates the citizens to civism, makes them aware of their mission, urges them to unity; its justice harmonizes their divergent interests; it transmits to future generations the conquests of the mind in the fields of science, art, law, human solidarity; it leads men up from primitive tribal life to that highest manifestation of human power, imperial rule.\(^{88}\)

As explained in Chapter 2, after World War I, the world stage was looking quite dreary. Citizens needed something to believe in amidst all the political, social, and


economic hardships hanging the new international atmosphere. *Romanità* became a powerful political theme in fascist rhetoric and practice as the Duce recognized the efficacy of myth and the promise it held to reinvigorate the citizenry. Echoing this sentiment, important Italian politician and philosopher, Benedetto Croce wrote in 1929, “Italy’s history…must be rewritten. The revision and correction is necessary and cogent. Italy and Rome must begin to appear as one thing only, to be treated as one thing only.”89 Fascism was presented as the destined fate of history, a new, third Rome, when in 1922 Mussolini boldly declared, “After the Rome of the Caesars, after that of the Popes, there is today a Rome, Fascist Rome that once again commands the admiration of the world.”90 The combined effects of nationalist ideology, bold public works, expansive exhibitions, loaded rhetoric, and a call for return to the grandeur of imperial Rome multiplied the allure of fascism for the entire Italian citizenry, but especially for one group in particular. As the Duce had hoped, the resurgence of *Romanità* was most successful in its mass appeal to youth. Through fascist socialization both in the education system and in recreational youth groups, the PNF found, in youth, what would become the most mobilized and specialized organ of their regime. And it would also constitute their most promising defense against the further penetration of Catholic Action into the youngest generation.


Carlo Scorza, editor of *Gioventu Fascista*, the Fascist youth magazine, wrote to the Premier in 1931, “It is necessary to give a Myth to the youth, because youth needs to believe blindly in something.” Declaring that the necessary myth existed in Mussolini himself, he continued, “‘The Mussolini Myth equals LOYALTY-COURAGE-THOUGHT-LIGHT-BEAUTY-HEROISM-ETERNITY.’” In this spirit, the myths embodied by fascism, ideals carefully and deliberately chosen by Mussolini, were forced into the schools and into youth groups. Although Article 36 of the Lateran Pacts reiterated the historic and continued role of the Catholic Church in primary and secondary schools, the success of Mussolini’s state depended on a significant amount of influence on youth by way of education.

To ensure this access, significant legislation was passed by Royal Decree on July 16, 1923, announced by Mussolini’s newly reorganized Organization of Ministry of Public Instruction. The year before, Mussolini asked his Chamber of Deputies to award the first Minister, Giovanni Gentile, unconditional power of reform over the Italian educational system. Together, Gentile and Mussolini solidified the fascist strong-hold in schools, a hold that did not waiver even after the regime’s 1929 Concordat implication. By Royal Decree No. 1735, Article 1, the fascists declared “The Ministry of Public Instruction has charge of elementary, secondary, and higher education, and of the antiquities of the fine arts.” Article 4 of the same decree further showcases how

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centralized the committee was under Mussolini and the inextricable role it intended to play in youth education: “The minister governs and promotes public instruction and national education; supervises the private schools under the care of state institutions; is responsible for public order, morality, and culture....”\(^{93}\) In just its first year, the Ministry of Public Instruction implemented sweeping reforms that completely refocused the purpose and redrafted the practices of the Italian school system. And although Gentile lasted just a short twenty months, his reforms were upheld and elaborated upon by each Minister thereafter.

A complete upheaval had occurred. In February 1929, in an effort to offset the gains made by the Catholic Church in the Concordat by Catholic Action and the Church’s continued influence education, the State forced all primary and secondary school teachers to swear an oath of loyalty to the regime.\(^{94}\) The Ministry of Public Instruction was renamed the Ministry of National Education and became dramatically centralized, utilizing a classic top-down system, with Mussolini at the apex. The name change of the ministry itself is indicative of the motives of the government. In addition, new cornerstones of the curricula were classes that reflected fascist ideals.

In education, the fascist regime saw both an opportunity to indoctrinate the targeted youth population with their own set of while recognizing that religious education remained a component of national stability. As modifications to the system

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\(^{94}\) Marrarro, Nationalism in Italian Education, xxvi.
continued, it became increasingly evident to the Papacy that the overtures made in the
Concordat were insincere and self-motivated. On December 31, 1929, the Pope issued
his encyclical, “On Christian Education,” in response to the ever-growing crisis of
competition for influence in the education. For Pius XI, there was no question as to who
should be awarded access to the enrichment of young minds. Addressed to, ‘All the
Faithful,’ Pius underlines the divine and most necessary right and role of the Church,
rather than the State, in youth education:

Again it is the inalienable right as well as the indispensable duty of the Church, to
watch over the entire education of her children, in all institutions, public or
private, not merely in regard to the religious instruction there given, but in
regard to every other branch of learning and every regulation in so far as religion
and morality are concerned... Every method of education founded, wholly or in
part, on the denial or forgetfulness of original sin and of grace, and relying on the
sole powers of human nature, is unsound. Such, generally speaking, are those
modern systems bearing various names which appeal to a pretended self-
government and unrestrained freedom on the part of the child, and which
diminish or even suppress the teacher’s authority and action, attributing to the
child an exclusive primacy of initiative, and an activity independent of any higher
law, natural or divine, in the work of his education. 95

By using the avenues of education and social interaction, the Pontiff could
attempt to establish his own version of an Italian national identity, a necessary counter-
operation to the national identity that Fascism was trying to formulate. Just as the PNF
used myth to bolster support and influence, the Church utilized the stories and myth of
Catholicism and the Old Testament to evoke a similar collective identification. For the

95 Pope Pius XI. “On Christian Education,” in The Church and the Reconstruction of the Modern World – the
regime to reconcile the continued presence of religious education in primary school, the reforms did not allow religious instruction to be based on Catholic dogma or belief, and instead felt that religion encouraged a venue for the awakening of the imagination and an invigoration of the soul. Fascism and religion became consistently linked in primary education in this manner: “For every religious maxim, there was a parallel fascist maxim: children should be taught that they owed absolute loyalty to fascism just as they owed blind obedience to God; mysteries of the faith should not be discussed or debated, nor should the truths of fascism; just as the church had its martyrs, so, too, did fascism.”

In an effort to transform students to embody the ideals of the fascist man and to further the glorification of the cult of Romanità, the most significant reforms were implemented in secondary education. Latin was reintroduced in almost all secondary schools. The study of the ancient classics and philosophy, which was already studied in the system, was given a new prominence that changed the study from one of grammar and rhetoric to an examination of the whole of the ancient world, focusing on Greek and Roman history. In the true spirit of Romanità, educators claimed that the refocus on imperial history allowed youth to carry an image of the world-past that would re-energize their spirits and strengthen their belief in present and future possibilities. Italian history suddenly held an influence over curricula and youth as it never had

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96 Koon, Believe, Obey, Fight, 71.

97 Marrarro, Nationalism in Italian Education, 51.
before; the reorganization and reinvigoration of history in the secondary schools strengthened sentiments of nationalism and fascism as students united behind a shared culture and identity.

Radical changes were also made to the exam system. No longer were oral and written exams administered by instructors at the end of each term. Instead, state examining boards, totally unconnected to the schools and students they were in charge of testing, administered a single test at the very end of one’s secondary education. Their rationale was that an exam given at the culmination of a student’s secondary schooling, which lasted three to four years depending on the type of secondary school, would now test students’ intellectual progress and reflect on the development of pupils’ minds and characters. In essence, state exams served as a vehicle for driving cultural direction. Richard M. Marrarro, a former professor at Columbia University, in a work entitled, *Nationalism in Italian Education* in 1927, lends a telling perspective on the reactions to the reforms. Published simultaneously to the events in question, and an educator himself, he not only defended but acclaimed the modifications, perhaps suggesting how the reforms were received by many Italians. He writes, “The changes introduced by Gentile are the logical result of the new conception of Italian culture. The Gentile Reform does not overlook the historical reality of the school and impose extrinsically an abstract law to concrete life, but on the contrary, aims to bring about a nobler realization of this concrete life.”

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98 Marrarro, *Nationalism in Italian Education*, 87.
The revision of curriculum and the drastic change in state exams are key examples of how the fascist regime impressed its own ideology in students by permeating the education system. However, schools served a greater function in the scheme of the fascisti; while the fascist undertakings in education were significant, their most significant attempt to assert influence was realized in the regime’s youth groups programs. Mussolini and the PNF recognized that the school and youth groups could be a primary palette for fascism propaganda, function, and most importantly allow fascist ideology to have a direct influence during the earliest and most impressionable years of one’s life. Despite Catholic Action’s reiterated apolitical stance, the youth groups of the Church were continuously viewed by the PNF as its most formidable and potentially threatening opponent. The fear Catholic youth groups bred in Mussolini led him to unleash a campaign to exponentially increase the size and viability of fascist youth organizations. Schools, obviously bubbling with children, became the most preferred hunting grounds for youth group recruitment. Under severe pressure to join and with the coercion of career incentives, teachers were co-opted into participating as group leaders in youth groups of the PNF and became proselytizers of fascist ideology.⁹⁹ And in 1933, the regime went so far as to make PNF membership a prerequisite for

employment in state schools. To add pressure, the State forced school principals to regularly send membership counts to the capital.

By 1926, youth groups were organized into the ONB, the *Opera Nazionale Balilla*. Three years earlier, the expansion of fascist youth groups found their foundation in the pact of fusion between the Italian Nationalist Association and the PNF in an article that states, “The Little Italians and the Nationalist Vanguards will combine with the *Balilla* and the Vanguards of the National Fascist Party.” Like the youth groups of Catholic Action, the ONB was divided by primary, secondary, and university ages and by sex. The favor was towards secondary and university-aged males, and it was among these men that *Romanità* found many of its most loyal and outspoken devotees. For it was not necessarily the political doctrine of the State that unified these young men, but really, a desire to believe in what *Romanità* promised – a return to Roman glory, the virtue of patriotism, and the valor of heroism. Roman myth permeated every aspect of youth organizations. In 1935, a handbook published for ten-year-old-boys makes plain the power of the cult of *Romanità* and the myth of Mussolini:

> If you listen carefully...you may still hear the terrible tread of the Roman legions...Caesar has come to life again in the Duce; he rides at the head of numberless cohorts, treading down all cowardice and all impurities to reestablish the culture and the new might of Rome. Step into the ranks of his army and be the best soldiers.

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100 Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 65.


As youth group membership continued to rise, Mussolini understood the powerful impact youth demonstrations could have when executed in his new areas of public renovation, such as down the newly constructed Via dei Fori Imperiali. Moreover, as fascism continuously tried to substantiate its claim of a long ‘history,’ the Duce saw an opportunity to legitimize his regime by pairing youth demonstrations increasingly with war veteran demonstrations. “Youth and war veterans were visual representations of historical continuity. Their presence at events, together and apart, linked the past to the future and suggested generational succession.”

The youth of Catholic Action simultaneously saw their numbers climb as well, furthering fascist belief that they served as an intolerable threat.

As late as 1941, after Italy had entered World War II, most fascist youth organizations continued to carry a loaded schedule of activities. These activities ranged from gymnastic camps and summer camps for soldier’s children, to amateur theatrical presentations and musicals. In fact, during the same year, the PNF boasted a 99% participation rate in its youth groups among all students enrolled in the State secondary school system. This number is certainly bloated, as PNF record keepers were notorious for arbitrarily adding names to their rosters, but still indicative of how all-

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104 Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism*, 120.


encompassing youth group membership had become. Sports became a central activity within youth groups, as the PNF saw the benefit of not only healthy, physically capable *balillas,* but encouraged the competitive urge that sports induces. In this sense, fascist socialization of youth actively promoted youth militarization. The attacks on Catholic Action in the 1930s by members of the ONB are indicative of the militarized approach undertaken by the PNF and the way in which a soldier’s mentality was forced upon growing children. In 1927, *The Nation* reprinted a short article on fascist culture from the anti-fascist paper, *Liberte.* Signed only as “S.,” the author writes,

> The Fascist regime instills into the boys a passion for arms (formerly the crossbow, now the revolver), rather than a love of books. Youth is becoming pugnacious, instead of studious. Unconsciously they imitate Mussolini, who once boasted of never having visited a museum. In former times the schoolmasters made their pupils read Manzoni; the professors explained Cicero and Dante. Now the poor schoolboys have read to them, with comments, Mussolini’s discourses.  

Ironically enough, the forebodings of war would ultimately mark the gradual demise of fascist youth groups. By the beginning of World War II the fascist efforts of youth socialization had already begun to show signs of weakening.  

Throughout the mid-1930s, the newer ONB members were becoming disheartened by the regime as they witnessed the same veteran Blackshirts holding key positions in the fascist government with little indication of turnover. For so long, in both schools and youth groups, the young had been subjugated to a force-feeding of ideology that correlated


fascism to the nation. The war would soon demonstrate that those efforts would not hold lasting effects. By the time Italy enters World War II in 1940, the general sentiment of young fascist had become characterized by disillusionment and skepticism.\textsuperscript{109} The boastful characterizations previously awarded to fascist youth groups and its members were gradually deflated to seem superficial and opportunistic.\textsuperscript{110} Ultimately, the advances made by Mussolini to socialize and specialize youth through initiatives driven by inflated historical claims, coerced participation, and at some times, violence would deteriorate as the war continued and antifascist sentiment increased.

\textsuperscript{109} Berezin, \textit{Making the Fascist Self}, 123.

\textsuperscript{110} Koon, \textit{Believe, Obey, Fight}, 217.
V. Conclusion

Since however the younger generations must be trained in the arts and sciences for the advantage and prosperity of civil society, and since the family of itself is unequal to this task, it was necessary to create that social institution, the school. But let it be borne in mind that this institution owes its existence to the initiative of the family and of the Church, long before it was undertaken by the State. Hence considered in its historical origin, the school is by its very nature an institution subsidiary and complementary to the family and to the Church. It follows logically and necessarily that it must not be in opposition to, but in positive accord with those other two elements, and form with them a perfect moral union, constituting one sanctuary of education, as it were, with the family and the Church. Otherwise it is doomed to fail of its purpose, and to become instead an agent of destruction.¹

In the battle for lasting influence over Italian youth, the Supreme Pontiff would stand victorious. The statement above, issued by Pope Pius XI in 1929 in his encyclical, “On Christian Education,” foreshadows the demise of Benito Mussolini and his fascist regime. Had the agreed compromises made in The Lateran Accords been upheld by both the Church and the State, a harmonious relationship could have ensued and the “Roman Question” could have stood resolved in actuality, rather than just in treatise. Instead, as Pius warned, the controversial initiatives pursued by the PNF in direct opposition to the Accords and the Vatican commanded only temporary allegiance and the regime did, indeed, fail. Mussolini passed from the scene. The myths of fascism and the ethos of Romanità are examined today as testaments to the power of rhetoric and myth to captivate a nation. But, as history shows, rhetoric and myth are only as durable

as the people who adhere to them. Where Mussolini ultimately failed in this, Pope Pius XI succeeded tremendously. His efforts to bolster Catholic Action, socialize youth, and maintain a foothold in education proved lasting and have transcended his Papacy. Italian governments will always be temporal and transitory, rising and receding like the tide. As an extension of the divine, the Vatican, on the other hand, is a steady sea of eternal power.
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