

TO WORSHIP GOD OR MUSSOLINI? A CASE STUDY ON THE POST-LATERAN RIVALRY BETWEEN FASCIST ITALY AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN 1930 BUCHAREST

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Abstract: This article examines the intricate dynamic of pragmatic alliance and structural rivalry between the Italian Fascist regime and the Catholic Church during the interwar period through a localized, micro-historical lens. While the signing of the Lateran Accords in 1929 was officially intended to usher in an era of institutional pacification between the Holy See and Benito Mussolini, the immediate aftermath revealed deep systemic friction over the socialization and ideological allegiance of youth. Utilizing diplomatic correspondence preserved within the Apostolic Nunciature of Romania collection at the Vatican Apostolic Archive (AAV) and records from the Historical Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome (ASDMAE), this study reconstructs a localized conflict that erupted in Bucharest in February 1930. The dispute centered on a schedule clash between the Italian School's fascist youth organizations (*Fasci giovanili*) and a parish priest, Father Antonio Mantica, who refused to cede Sunday morning hours intended for religious instruction and Mass to secular fascist indoctrination.

Keywords: Lateran Treaties; Fascist propaganda; Church-State relations; Archbishop Alexandru Cisar

A Sunday Dilemma in Bucharest

A tense scene unfolded in February 1930 within Romania's Catholic circles. The protagonist was a simple priest, Antonio Mantica, who served at the Italian Church in the Romanian capital. Unaware of the chain of events he was about to set in motion, he turned to his superiors for guidance, uncertain how to resolve a matter that exceeded his authority. It surpassed his remit precisely because the stakes were not merely local, but directly impinged upon the relations between Mussolini and Pope Pius XI, between the Fascist regime and the Catholic Church. What had occurred? Father Mantica had been requested by the local *Fascio* to deliver "moral lessons" to members of the fascist youth organizations on Sundays around 11:30 AM, in an auditorium at the Italian

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School.¹ These youths were Italian residents in Romania who worked during the week and attended activities on Sunday, their only day off, between 9:00 and 11:30 AM. Had Father Mantica refused, he would have found himself in an awkward position regarding the Italian community he pastored, and more importantly, vis-à-vis the Italian Legation in Bucharest, which supervised the *Fascio's* activities. Conversely, had the prelate accepted, it would have implied his tolerance of the fact that these young fascists would miss Sunday Mass. Uncertain of how to proceed, the cleric appealed directly to the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy See's diplomatic representative in Bucharest. The response, however, came from Archbishop Alexandru Cisar, betraying a simmering fury toward fascist propaganda in Romania. Included below is only the most vehement portion of the prelate's reaction:

We know that the fascist mentality aims to restore the natural order and to consolidate authority, whatever form it may take: the primary authority is God, followed by His Church, for a man can be of sound character even without schooling and sports, but never without regularly practiced religion (...). Do certain figures perhaps wish to habituate the Italian youth of Bucharest to abandoning the church and the holy sacraments? Do they intend, perchance, to lead Italian youth toward modern paganism? Do they truly believe that a citizen who does not obey God and His Church will subsequently obey the laws of the state? I am almost tempted to say here: Italy – represented by the Italian youth in Bucharest – *quo vadis!* [author's emphasis]²

While the practical resolution of this dispute is addressed in the final section of this article, its immediate objective is to demonstrate how this localized episode illuminates the deep structural friction between state-driven fascist propaganda and transnational Catholic authority. Historiography on fascism consistently depicts the relationship between Mussolini and the Vatican as a paradox of pragmatic alliance and bitter rivalry over moral authority and popular loyalty. Outside Italy, both regimes projected their influence across the diaspora, often relying on a tacit partnership rather than open competition. Consequently, this local incident in Bucharest is far from a mere historical anecdote; it serves as a profound microcosm of macro-historical, global tensions between the Holy See and Fascist Italy. The core irony of this case study lies in its timing: the conflict unfolded immediately after the signing of the Lateran Accords (1929), a milestone explicitly intended to pacify relations between the Pope and the *Duce*. Ultimately, this episode is reconstructed through primary sources, drawing on diplomatic correspondence preserved

¹ Archivio Apostolico Vaticano (Vatican Apostolic Archive, hereafter AAV), fond Archivio della Nunziatura di Romania, Segreteria di Stato, Dispacci, box 25, fasc. 99, ff. 73-74.

² Ibid.

within the Apostolic Nunciature of Romania collection at the Vatican Apostolic Archive.

The Shift to Fascist Cultural Diplomacy in the late 1920s

The structural relevance of this micro-historical incident is intimately tied to a broader geopolitical matrix, characterized by a specific chronological window and competing ideologies. To contextualize the local friction in Bucharest, the analytical lens must be widened to account for Rome's grand strategy. Following his ascension to power in late 1922, Mussolini systematically consolidated his regime. By the end of 1926, the legal architecture of the fascist state was firmly established.³ Internationally, the regime sought a high-stakes policy of prestige to project an image of Italy as a great power – a core tenet of fascist ideology.⁴ A primary axis of Mussolini's early foreign policy aimed to position Italy as the geopolitical arbiter of the Danubian-Balkan region.⁵ For a brief period, Romania became a central target for the dictator, who envisioned anchoring Bucharest into a regional alliance alongside revisionist powers like Bulgaria and Hungary under Italian patronage. However, Mussolini fundamentally underestimated the intensity with which Sofia and Budapest claimed territories lost to Romania at the Paris Peace Conference. Conversely, the fascist leader overemphasized the personal Italophilia of Romanian Prime Minister Alexandru Averescu, who led the government from 1926 to 1927. Despite his sympathy for Mussolini and, in part, for the fascist experiment, General Averescu was unwilling to distance himself from France – the symbolic guarantor of Eastern Europe's collective security system – or to abandon anti-revisionist allies within the Little Entente. Although a brief political rapprochement occurred in March 1927 following Rome's long-delayed ratification of the Bessarabian Treaty, the diplomatic convergence proved entirely ephemeral, collapsing within a month and leaving a bitter legacy in Italian diplomatic circles.⁶ This brief diplomatic "honeymoon" lasted less than a

³ Emilio Gentile, *Il fascismo in tre capitoli* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2004), 34-35.

⁴ Thomas Row, "Italy in the international system, 1900-1922," in Adrian Lyttleton (ed.), *Liberal and Fascist Italy: 1900-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 83-104.

⁵ H. James Burgwyn, *Il revisionismo fascista. La sfida di Mussolini alle Grandi Potenze nei Balcani e sul Danubio (1925-1933)* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1979), 101-115.

⁶ Archivio Storico Diplomatico Del Ministero Degli Affari Esteri, Rome (Historical Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), fond Affari Politici (1919-1930), Romania, box 1513, telegr. no. 934/June 7, 1927. Cf. Ioan Chiper, "Italy and the Ratification of the October 28, 1920 Treaty concerning Bessarabia," *Revue Roumaine d'Études Internationales*, 26(2) (1992), 101; Giuliano Caroli, "Un'amicizia difficile: Italia e Romania (1926-1927)," in *Analisi Storica* 2(3) (July-December 1984), 299; Georgiana Țăranu, "Una luna di miele" nei confronti dell'Italia fascista e le considerazioni di Nicolae Iorga sul regime di Mussolini (marzo-aprile 1927)," in Augusto Sinagra, Florin Tudor (eds.), *Romania e Italia, la cultura della memoria condivisa degli ultimi cento anni. Memoria e*

month, spanning from the long-awaited ratification of the Bessarabian Treaty on March 8, 1927, to the signing of the Italo-Hungarian Treaty of Friendship on April 5, 1927. By drawing Hungary out of its post-war international isolation, the pact signed by Mussolini and Hungarian Prime Minister Count István Bethlen deeply alarmed Bucharest. It immediately triggered a fierce domestic press campaign in Romania -weaponized by Averescu's political opponents – which openly accused Italy of betrayal. This public outcry infuriated Mussolini. The dictator came to view Romanian diplomacy as inherently fickle and ungrateful. This perception – compounded by Averescu's departure from power in June 1927 – soured even more bilateral relations, prompting Rome to relegate Romania to a secondary tier in its Danubian strategy and shift its strategic alignment toward Budapest and Sofia. Consequently, Rome pivoted toward a nuanced strategy of cultural diplomacy designed to operate beneath official, state-level channels.⁷ This was a phenomenon that the Italian historian Stefano Santoro conceptualized as 'parallel diplomacy', a mechanism systematically deployed to cultivate covert influence among both the intellectual elite and the broader public.⁸

Parallel to this unproductive diplomatic dialogue, the fascist regime had, since its inception, actively sought to export its ideological influence abroad through the organization of the *Fasci italiani all'estero* (Italian Fascis Abroad). These efforts primarily targeted nations with expansive Italian diaspora communities, such as the United States and Argentina; however, smaller communities numbering only a few thousand individuals, such as the one in Romania, were by no means neglected.⁹ Officially, the regime rationalized the establishment of these foreign branches of the National Fascist Party under the pretext of safeguarding the interests of Italian emigrants and promoting Italian culture.¹⁰

identità nel dialogo romeno-italiano: spazi simbolici, aspetti giuridici, storici e filosofici, (Roma: Aracne Editrice, 2018), 625-654.

⁷ Alberto Basciani, "La penetrazione culturale italiana nei Balcani nel periodo interbellico. Il caso dell'Istituto di Cultura di Bucarest," *Annuario dell'Istituto di Cultura e Ricerca Umanistica Romana di Venezia*, anno 5 (2003), 474-483; Stefano Santoro, "The cultural penetration of Fascist Italy abroad and in eastern Europe," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8:1 (2003), 36-66.

⁸ Stefano Santoro, *L'Italia e l'Europa orientale: Diplomazia culturale e propaganda fascista nei Balcani (1918-1943)* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2005), 24.

⁹ Katharina Schembs, "Fascist youth organizations and propaganda in a transnational perspective: Balilla and Gioventù italiana del Littorio all'estero in Argentina (1922-1955)," *Annals*, 12 (2013).

¹⁰ Emilio Gentile, "I Fasci Italiani All'Estero: The 'Foreign Policy' of the Fascist Party," in *Fascism Outside Europe: The European Impulse against Domestic Conditions in the Diffusion of Global Fascism*, ed. Stein U. Larsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 95-96.

In reality, from its very inception, the regime aimed to enforce control and ideological indoctrination over the entire diaspora. As early as 1923, Camillo Pellizzi, an uncompromising fascist intellectual, vividly articulated this ambition when he wrote:

... at least today we no longer hear the ridiculous claim that Italian emigrants should remain apolitical: we want... Italian communities to get involved in militant politics. They must become fascist communities. It does not matter that we will lose some fellow citizens... It is so good to be a few, good men! 24.¹¹

Fascist propaganda sought to monopolize and control every facet of life for the Italian youth in Romania, absorbing them – beyond their school hours – into leisure-time organizations modeled after those already operating across the Peninsula.¹² This escalating level of indoctrination, enforced by fascist authorities upon their own ethnic compatriots living in Romania, ultimately became deeply unsettling to the leadership of the Catholic Church. By the late 1920s, the fascist regime had subordinated not only the diplomatic apparatus but also all Italian schools and cultural institutions abroad. In Bucharest, the focal points around which the Italian diaspora coalesced were the Italian School, closely tied to the local Fascio, and the Italian Church – the exact institutions that, in February 1930, presented Father Mantica with a conflicting schedule for the same Sunday morning time slot.

The Post-Lateran Paradox

Evaluating the religious life of these Italian residents in Romania reveals this core ideological conflict: while Mussolini's regime sought to enlist them into the fascist apparatus, their spiritual allegiance belonged to the Catholic Church. Indeed, the Holy See had signed a Concordat with the Romanian government in May 1927 (ratified in 1929), which legally recognized its transnational authority over practicing Catholics within the country.¹³ Concurrently, the signing of the *Lateran Accords* in February 1929 had resolved the sixty-year-old dispute between the Papacy and the Kingdom of Italy, establishing a legal framework to govern relations between the fascist state and the Catholic Church. Through this historic compromise, the Pope was no

¹¹ Cited in Luca de Caprariis, "«Fascism for Export?» The Rise and Eclipse of the Fasci Italiani all'Estero," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35(2) (2000), 156.

¹² Georgiana Țăranu, „Mussolini în sala de clasă: propagandă fascistă în școlile italiene din România interbelică (1922-1940),” *Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane „Gheorghe Șincai”*, XXV, 2022, 61-78.

¹³ Mózes Nóda, “The Historical, Political and Ecclesiastical Background of the 1927 Concordat between the Vatican and Romania”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 9, 27 (2010), 281–301.

longer deemed a "prisoner of the Vatican", while Mussolini secured the official endorsement of a religious institution to which 99% of Italians belonged.¹⁴

The episode in Bucharest unfolded in February 1930, precisely one year after the signing of the Lateran Treaties. It might be assumed that such a historic milestone – which had triggered a wave of euphoria among Catholics both within Italy and abroad – would automatically mitigate local tensions in the field. In reality, as British historian John Pollard noted, the three years following the Lateran "conciliation" – from 1929 up to Mussolini's visit to the Pope in February 1932, were marked by far more frequent conflicts than the preceding seven (1922-1929) or the following seven (1932-1939).¹⁵ This volatility arose because both the Pope and Mussolini quickly grew suspicious that they had conceded too much ground, leaving the opposing party with a distinct strategic advantage. The Pope sought to leverage the dictatorial power of the fascist state to enforce a "Christian restoration of society", an ambition explicitly signaled by the Vatican's official outlet, *La Civiltà cattolica*.¹⁶ In response to the ecclesiastical enthusiasm that Italy would soon become fully re-Catholicized, the dictator delivered one of his most famous speeches. Addressed to the Chamber of Deputies on May 13, 1929, Mussolini's speech remains a historical reference point defining the exact place reserved for the Catholic Church within the fascist state: "The Fascist State fully reclaims its ethical character: it is Catholic, but it is fascist – Indeed, above all, exclusively and essentially fascist. Catholicism integrates it, and we openly declare this, but let no one think, under any philosophical or metaphysical guise, of changing the rules of the game on us."¹⁷ Mussolini was thus arguing that Catholicism is merely a *component* or an attribute that fits *inside* the larger framework of the Fascist State, rather than the State being subject to the Church. Mussolini's aggressive stance made it clear that the domestic truce was fragile. While the majority of the clergy applauded the pacts and looked toward the future with optimism, John F. Pollard points out that this diplomatic harmony quickly dissolved as both sides bickered over the interpretation of the treaty.¹⁸

¹⁴ David I. Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini. The Secret History of Pius XI and the Rise of Fascism in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 17.

¹⁵ John F. Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism, 1929–1932: A Study in Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 2-3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁷ Benito Mussolini, *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 24, *Dagli accordi del Laterano al dodicesimo anniversario della fondazione dei fasci (12 febbraio 1929 – 23 marzo 1931)* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1934), 89.

¹⁸ John F. Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism*, 50-54.

The Bucharest Compromise as an Omen of Accommodation

The controversy in Bucharest in February 1930 surfaced precisely within this volatile transitional climate, prefiguring the tensions accumulating beneath the surface that would erupt a year later between the Catholic Church and the fascist regime. That later confrontation manifested in a series of diplomatic disputes, press polemics, and cutting public statements from both leaders. Crucially, as in the Bucharest incident, the primary bone of contention would be the ideological indoctrination of youth. The Pope fiercely defended the operational autonomy of the youth branches of Catholic Action (*Azione Cattolica*), the Church's mass organization. These branches periodically bore the brunt of fascist violence under the pretext that they harbored anti-fascists. This critical phase was eventually defused in September 1931 through a compromise that, in principle, appeased both factions. There followed another seven years of relatively harmonious cooperation within the parameters of this bizarre partnership, a "marriage of convenience" established between the dictatorship and the Catholic Church.¹⁹

The question remains how these two opposing doctrines – each vying for the hearts and minds of the Italian people – managed to achieve ideological reconciliation. This coexistence was particularly striking given that, as David I. Kertzer noted, "the pope and the Duce entered into a peculiar partnership. Each saw himself as heading a 'totalitarian' organization, a term they both embraced."²⁰ Briefly stated, the resolution lay in mutual pragmatism; each leader recognized his dependence on the other. The Vatican chose to maintain diplomatic relations to secure institutional autonomy and influence in civil society, while accepting coexistence with the regime's political project. Mussolini, conversely, required popular legitimacy for his regime, and rallying the Catholic clergy behind his cause proved to be an exceptionally effective strategy. Rather than delineating two distinct spheres of action – the material and the spiritual – the two leaders chose to overlap them. Consequently, the necessity to choose between being a good Catholic and a good fascist was ostensibly eliminated; instead, the two identities were to be understood as "two sides of the same coin", as Kertzer phrased it.²¹

Returning to the dilemma of Father Mantica, Archbishop Cisar ultimately resolved the matter by securing the following arrangement: the fascist youth associations would attend Sunday Mass starting at 9:00 AM, after which Father Antonio Mantica would deliver a religious lesson at 11:00 AM. In this specific instance, the regime conceded ground, agreeing that the youth should

¹⁹ Ibid., 166.

²⁰ David I. Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 121-122.

²¹ Ibid., 178.

participate in the liturgy rather than attend independent secular lectures.²² Religion, much like language, constituted an essential pillar of identity for the Italian diaspora, a reality the fascist regime could not afford to ignore. This was a pragmatic choice rather than a defeat: the regime realized that in an Orthodox-majority country like Romania, stripping Italian identity of its Catholicism would probably alienate the diaspora and weaken the community's cohesion, defeating the purpose of propaganda. The resulting compromise proved acceptable to both parties and served as a clear precursor to the broader accommodation that would later occur in Rome once the post-Lateran crisis was resolved. Indeed, in Italy, priests would eventually become structurally integrated into fascist youth organizations. Conversely, fascist rituals would typically commence in the morning with a Catholic Mass. Ultimately, loyalty to the Catholic Church was meant to seamlessly translate into loyalty to the fascist dictatorship.

Conclusion

The micro-historical incident that unfolded within Bucharest's Catholic circles in February 1930 serves as a case study of the global, structural friction between state-driven fascist expansionism and the transnational authority of the Catholic Church. Occurring in the fragile chronological window just one year after the celebrated Lateran Accords, the dilemma of Father Antonio Mantica exposes the immediate limitations of the conciliation when confronted with the irreconcilable totalizing claims of both regimes. Both Mussolini's state apparatus and Pope Pius XI's Holy See aimed for absolute dominion over the socialization, moral formation, and ideological allegiance of the youth. When the local *Fascio* attempted to annex Sunday morning hours for secular indoctrination under the guise of "moral lessons," it directly encroached upon the spiritual monopoly of the liturgy, forcing a localized breakdown of the post-Lateran peace.

Ultimately, the resolution brokered by Archbishop Alexandru Cisar illustrates that the broader institutional survival of this "marriage of convenience" depended not on seamless ideological alignment, but on absolute pragmatism. In the Romanian context, the fascist regime's decision to concede ground – adjusting its schedule to ensure that fascist youth first participated in the Catholic liturgy – reveals awareness of diaspora mechanics. In an Orthodox-majority state, Rome could not afford to strip Italian identity of its traditional Catholic core without alienating the emigrant community and/or undermining its own parallel cultural propaganda.

²² AAV, fond Archivio della Nunziatura di Romania, Segreteria di Stato, Dispacci, busta 25, fasc. 99, f. 75.

By accommodating the Church's demands rather than forcing a rupture, the Bucharest arrangement prefigured the precise architecture of the compromise that would defuse the major domestic crisis over *Azione Cattolica* in Rome a year later. In both instances, the boundaries between the spiritual and the material were deliberately blurred rather than separated. By integrating Catholic rituals into fascist youth programming, the dictatorship successfully reframed religious devotion as a civic duty to the totalitarian state. Thus, the local compromise achieved in Bucharest stands as an early, vivid testament to how two fundamentally competing worldviews learned to coexist and yet continued to compete as rivals seeking control over the hearts and consciences of the Italian people.