Peter Eisner

The Pope's Last Crusade: How an American Jesuit Helped Pope Pius XI's Campaign to Stop Hitler. New York: William Morrow, 2013. Pp. 304. Hb, \$27.99.

Ever since publication in 1997 of Georges Passelecq and Bernard Suchecky's *The Hidden Encyclical of Pius XI*, the story of Pius XI's request to John LaFarge, S.J., in 1938 to draft an encyclical denouncing racism and anti-Semitism has attracted great attention. In *The Pope's Last Crusade*, Peter Eisner, a well-respected American journalist, offers an account for a broader public. It tells a dramatic story. The aging Pius XI, increasingly viewing Nazism and Fascism as the greatest enemies Western civilization faced, and especially upset by the racism and anti-Semitism they were propounding, struggled with the prelates surrounding him who sought to keep him from alienating either Hitler or Mussolini. To get around them he turned to an obscure American Jesuit known for his anti-racist writings in the United States to draft the encyclical. The book has the strengths of one authored by a skilled journalist. Eisner knows how to tell a gripping tale for a broad public, and of course this is his intended audience. Yet the story it tells is in some respects misleading.

The most significant interpretive problem of the book, from this reviewer's perspective, is the author's frequent lumping together of Pius XI's attitude toward Nazism and Italian Fascism. Following the pope's illness in late 1936, Eisner reports, he devoted himself "to continue, even accelerate, the pace of his attacks on Hitler and Mussolini" (31). Yet Pius XI viewed the two very differently. By 1936, he despised Hitler, guilty of seeking the destruction of the Roman Catholic church in Germany. By contrast, he was still working closely with Mussolini, not least through his trusted (pro-Fascist) intermediary, Pietro Tacchi Venturi, S.J. The pope viewed Italian Fascism as having substantially strengthened the position of the church in Italy. Eisner also tells us that "Pius XI criticized both governments for imposing harsh limits on civil society" (33). In fact, Pius XI never showed any interest in the restriction of civil liberties in Fascist Italy, other than in those cases where church prerogatives were involved. Indeed, in areas of concern to the church he urged the Fascist regime to adopt greater restrictions on civil liberties. It is also inaccurate to state that by June 1938 "Hitler's anti-Semitic campaign had become the pope's great preoccupation" (51). The pope's great preoccupation was Hitler's campaign against the Roman Catholic church.

As might be expected from a work written by an American journalist, this book is overwhelmingly based on English-language published sources. What is potentially new in the book comes from the U.S. archives Eisner consulted: Mons. Hurley's archive in Florida, as well as various papers at Boston College,

Georgetown University, and the National Archives. The book can be frustrating for scholars, not so much for its historical errors—which I do not have the space to enumerate here—but because much of what seems new in the book is not linked clearly to any source offering confidence that the account is accurate. He tells us, for example, that Achille Ratti was elected pope in 1922 only “after one other prelate had turned down the job” (31). I am not aware of any primary source that indicates anyone “turned down the job” and none is cited here. Eisner also reports that in April, 1939—two months after Pius XI’s death—Pius XII met with Włodzimierz Ledóchowski, superior general of the Society of Jesus, to discuss the draft encyclical Father LaFarge and colleagues had prepared. The new pope, Eisner tells us, claimed he had never before seen the draft. Ledóchowski counseled the pope to bury it and so Pius XII did. If all this is accurate, it would be the most significant contribution the book makes to the history of the hidden encyclical. Yet Eisner cites no source for this meeting and so it is impossible to judge how much credence can be placed in it.

In *The Pope’s Last Crusade*, Peter Eisner tells an intriguing story about an important episode in what today remains a controversial history involving the two popes who faced Italian Fascism and Nazism. It is not likely, however, to offer anything new to scholars in the field.

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