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Pius XI in the Discourse of Contemporary Spanish Fascist Non-Conventional Political Actors

Abstract. The author demonstrates that the first encyclical of Pius XI has ideological elements that are used in the narratives of some actors within modern European fascism.

The geopolitical context in which the first encyclical of this pope was written is elaborated to understand the interests of the Catholic Church in the interwar period and its attitude towards fascist regimes. The novelty of these results is that the perception of modern European fascists of an ideological war waged by the globalist left similar to what Pius XI called a “holy battle” to defend Catholicism from secularism is supported by the studied document. Though any positive perception of fascism by Pius XI is not clearly demonstrated in the encyclical there are evident accusations against socialism and the Italian government of the time. This position can be used by modern European far-right ideologues to present the Church in a manipulated and equivocal rigid dichotomy between rejecting socialism and approving fascism. As exposed by this work, Pius XI tried to position the Church as a political institution capable of providing the conditions for a durable peace in Europe and as a third political way that rejected socialism, but also nationalism. The significance of these results can serve to clarify how European far-right extremists use historical religious texts taken out of context to justify and promote their political ideology.

Key words: encyclical, Catholic Church, fascism, globalism, Pius XI, ideological war

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Пий XI в дискурсе современных испанских фашистских неконвенциональных политических акторов

Аннотация. В исследовании демонстрируется, что первая энциклика Пия XI содержит идеологические элементы, которые используются в нарративах некоторых деятелей современного европейского фашизма. Геополитический контекст, в котором была написана первая энциклика изучаемого Папы, разработан для понимания интересов Католической церкви в межвоенный период и её отношения к фашистским режимам. Новизна результатов состоит в том, что восприятие современными европейскими фашистами идеологической войны, которую ведут левые глобалисты, подобной тому, что Пий XI назвал «священной битвой» для защиты католицизма от секуляризма, подтверждается изучаемым документом. Хотя какое-либо положительное восприятие фашизма Пием XI в энциклике явно не продемонстрировано, были обнаружены очевидные обвинения в адрес социализма и итальянского правительства того времени. Данная позиция может быть использована современными европейскими крайне правыми идеологами, чтобы представить Церковь в манипулируемой и двусмысленной жёсткой дихотомии между отрицанием социализма и одобрением фашизма. Как показано в данной работе, Пий XI пытался позиционировать Церковь как политический институт, способный обеспечить условия для прочного мира в Европе и как третий политический путь, отвергающий социализм, но также и национализм. Значение результатов может прояснить, как европейские крайне правые экстремисты используют исторические религиозные тексты, вырванные из контекста, для оправдания и продвижения своей политической идеологии.

Ключевые слова: глобализм, идеологическая война, католическая церковь, Пий XI, фашизм, энциклика

Introduction

Some fascist non-conventional political actors (NCPAs) in European Catholic majority countries are using historical references to Catholic writings, thesis and declarations of popes from past centuries to support their nationalist-socialist ideology and the need to implement it in modern societies. That is the case of the Spanish fascist group “European Future” (Devenir Europeo in Spanish) that has published the magazine “Pius XI encyclical and national-socialism” in June 2024. This work aims to present how such historical Catholic writings are used by modern European fascists in what they perceive as the “counter-revolution” of the far-right to progressive globalism and the supposed dominance of that leftist globalism today.

The author works with the hypothesis that fascist European NCPAs see historical similarities in their social and political context that threatens Catholic societies today with those of the interwar period of the 20th c. The novelty of this research is that this is the first work to study the first papal encyclical of Pius XI (object of study) “Ubi arcano dei consilio” with the aim to analyze how its discourse can be transferred from one historical moment to another separated by over one hundred years. The analyzed encyclical was published on December 23rd, 1922, and is one of the thirty encyclicals of Pius XI that can be found on the website of the Vatican (Vatican.va) in various languages. The author tries to answer the question about what elements of the first papal encyclical of Pius XI represent an ideological source for modern European fascism. A historical analysis of the discourse of some of the 72 paragraphs in the object of study will help answer the research question.

This work is relevant today as far-right European political parties strengthen their positions in the continent and this can give thrust to non-conventional political actors like European Future to continue their so-called counter-revolution using the religious element to convince moderate Catholics. The use of such historical and religious materials can be part of a strategy to attract Catholic conservatives who are not yet radicalized by providing members of European Future with pseudo academic sources that can be used to educate others, however, this is out of the scope of this research.

Encyclicals and Papal political discourse

One of the previous studies of papal encyclicals is the one by A. Valdez, where the author analyzed the encyclical “Mit brennender Sorge” by Pius XI published in March 14th, 1937, during A. Hitler’s regime. This particular encyclical was aimed at criticizing the Nazi regime for having failed to uphold the agreements part of the Reichskonkordat signed in 1933 between the Catholic Church (the Church) and the German fascist regime, but also for using Christian vocabulary in the Nazi discursive practice, among other issues [Valdez, 2008, 12–15]. Another relevant study of papal encyclicals is a content analysis of these documents from Pope Leo XIII to Pope Francis by M. Zängler. In this comprehensive study the author tries to establish trends in papal communication through encyclicals, for this task he used 231 of these papal documents from 1878 to 2013 [Zängler, 2014, 332–340]. The various text extractions from the analyzed documents expose the perception the Church has had about socialism as a phenomenon that, like civil disobedience, leads to calamity; additionally, some encyclicals evidence the wish to unify the Church and the State to guarantee social obedience and hierarchical structures [Zängler, 2014, 341–342]. Throughout his work, the author also demonstrates how papal encyclicals relate to geopolitical dynamics and are produced to express the position of the Church to its members [Zängler, 2014, 353–355]. In more recent research, F. Dellavedova has studied how the encyclical “Centesimus Annus” by Polish Pope John Paul II, published in 1991 and relevant in the historical context of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the American-led unipolar capitalist system, has been used by American Christian conservatives to justify the superiority of the free-market economy and compatibility with Catholicism [Dellavedova, 2023, 56–68].

Within Russian academia V.V. Simonov and E.M. Rozenblyum studied four encyclicals of Pius XI “Quadragesimo anno”, “Non abbiamo bisogno”, “Divini illius Magistri” and “Mit brennender Sorge”, where the pope criticized some of the political actions of the Italian and German fascist regimes towards the Church and its social organizations that meddled in religious and family education and Catholic values [Simonov, Rozenblyum,

2023, 30–36]. The aim of these fascist regimes was, according to Pius XI, to conquer the Catholic youth to install in them a cult of the State and to one superior race in the case of German Nazism [Simonov, Rozenblyum, 2023, 33–34]. The study of these Russian academics demonstrates that the political position of Pius XI and the Church was not entirely favorable towards Italian and German fascism after 1929, seven years into Mussolini's regime. This leaves the question of the reasons for contemporary European fascist NCPAs use of Pius XI as a figure of reverence in their ideological war against progressive globalism that this work tries to answer.

NCPAs include individuals or groups that “participate in political processes but that are not part of conventional political parties, these actors are ready to use violence to achieve their objectives” [Gonzalez Cedillo, 2024, 137], or to call for the use of it or to justify it. Today, European fascist NCPAs act freely in countries like Spain that allows public demonstrations that praise F. Franco's fascist dictatorship, as well as tolerance to printed materials and speeches that present this extremist ideology as a democratic alternative. The fascist NCPA European Future was officially registered as a cultural association in the Ministry of interior of Spain in 2008 by Ramón Bau who participated in fascist organizations during F. Franco's regime. In the Telegram account of this NCPA there are messages with references to Christianity and Catholicism as part of the anti-Islam identity a national-socialist Spanish society is supposed to have. As evidenced in their Telegram channel their ideology also includes anti-globalism for supposedly destroying the national identity and values of Catholic Spain. Some academics define globalism as a project of some states and their allies to reshape the world based on their interests [Erkhov, Kukhtin, 2023, 51], as a system of block confrontation between states [Erokhina, 2022, 110], but also as any political ideology, structure or network that aims to become internationally dominant [Peters, 2020, 1342]. Globalism can additionally be defined as an ideologically and politically motivated strategy by groups of interests to dominate foreign societies. For the fascist NCPA European Future secularization and the liberation of women, proposed by dominant globalism in the current historical context, threatens the existence of the Spanish Catholic family and the Catholic State. Ideologues of this NCPA try to find similarities in this historical context with the one of 1922 when the studied encyclical was written.

First encyclical of Pope Pius XI and the historical context

The encyclical “Ubi arcano dei consilio” was published ten months after Pius XI began his papacy in February 6th, 1922, and almost two months after fascist dictator Benito Mussolini was proclaimed Prime minister of Italy in October 30th of that year. Seven days after this first encyclical was published, the Soviet Union was created in December 30th, 1922. In April 16th, 1922, the Weimar Republic and Soviet Russia signed the Rapallo Agreement to reestablish diplomatic relations and economic cooperation. For V.I. Lenin this was a political success for the future of the first socialist State and the workers' revolution in Europe that had been increasing, but also in the reactionary capitalist counter-revolution and fascism. This encyclical can be divided in the following sections, based on the content of the paragraphs: 1) the evils that affect society, 2) the causes of those evils, 3) ways out of these difficulties, 4) characteristics and abilities of the Church, and 5) Catholic activism.

Pius XI considered the evils that affected society included sentiments of two types: 1) among people and 2) among nations, these had to do with nationalist sentiments among the former and of exploitation and unfairly representation among small and great powers, respectively; the war of classes that was “a chronic and mortal disease...which like a cancer is eating away the vital forces of the social fabric, labor, industry, the arts, commerce, agriculture...” [Pius XI, Ubi arcano dei consilio, 1922]; the desire for the possessions of others, riots, government repression, protection of private interests by political parties; the revolutionary spirit that destroyed peace, love and the family through “the evil seeds of dissension” and the increased freedom of morality resulting in disobedience to the authority; “the destruction of purity among women and young girls, as evidenced by the increasing immodesty of their dress and conversation and by their participation in shameful dances...” [Pius XI, Ubi arcano dei consilio, 1922], and the spirit of revolt that replaced the essence of peace that damaged Christian civilization and society and made them recede to barbarism [Pius XI, Ubi arcano dei consilio, 1922].

Pius XI considered the causes of these evils were of two types, rooted between: 1) individuals and 2) nations. The causes rooted between individuals had to do with the lack of spiritual peace in “the hearts of men, who still cherish the desire to fight one another” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922], despite governments having signed peace agreements, this as “men today do not act as Christians, as brothers, but as strangers, and even enemies” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922]. From these quotes it can be understood that the pope meant nationalism was the main problem and he intended that Christianity unified all Europeans regardless of nationality. Redistribution of wealth was also a cause of evil as “the more they [possessions] are divided among men the less each one has and, by consequence, what one man has another cannot possibly possess unless it be forcibly taken away from the first” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922]. The causes rooted between nations had to do with uncontrolled desires to dominate over other nations; the “unsuppressed desires” and love for the resources of others that are “the source of all international misunderstandings and rivalries” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922], state nationalist ideology that ignores the humanity of other nations and their equal rights to life and prosperity; government immorality; state secularism that deprived society from a stable foundation and led to the domination of “supreme special interests”; secularization of marriage and the family that turned them into “a mere civil contract”, and secular, atheistic and anti-religious education [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922].

Pius XI mentioned some ways out of these difficulties that included the need for spiritual peace and reconciliation in Christianity that could lead to “the peace of Christ... (that) is the love of God... is the only true peace” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922]. By these quotes, it can be considered that the pope insisted that the different previously belligerent nations of Europe could overcome nationalist sentiments by finding a common cause in their historical Christian faith. Additionally, controlling “the unrestrained desire for earthly possessions” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922] and keeping them “within bounds” would defeat the false peace that weakened “the binding force of law and lack of respect for authority” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922] that was the result of secularism.

From paragraph forty two to fifty two Pius XI mentioned the characteristics and abilities of the Church that were useful against those evils in that historical context, this included the role as mediator, authority and enabler of peace. The pope considered the Church “possesses in any complete and true sense the power effectively to combat that materialistic philosophy” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922], “is able to set both public and private life on the road to righteousness by demanding that everything and all men become obedient to God” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922], due to its universal teachings “better than any other agency which We know of, contribute[s] greatly to the securing of the same peace for the future, to the making impossible of war in the future” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922]. He considered Christianity had demonstrated this role of mediator and enabler of peace in the past as it served as the “true League of Nations” of the Middle Ages, therefore as an institution, the Church is “able to safeguard the sanctity of the law of nations” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922] as it “is part of every nation; at the same time it is above all nations” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922] and it has “...the highest authority” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922]. Finally, the pope insisted in the natural social order of “divine origin” that had to be accepted by Christian societies, so subjects had to respect the commands of their authorities to avoid chaos [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922]. This could be interpreted as a message against socialist revolutions and workers’ demands in Italy and other European countries during 1920-1922. The pope called Christians to participate and help to reestablish “Christ’s kingdom” and the social order to work on a lasting world peace [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922].

Finally, the pope referred to Catholic activism of the clergy, religious orders and organizations of young people, like the group Catholic Action, that helped in “the holy battle waged on so many fronts to vindicate for the family and the Church the natural and divinely given rights which they possess over education and the school” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922]. The many fronts of this holy battle can be interpreted, based on the historical context, as the emergence and popularization of political ideologies, like

socialism and communism, that looked to emancipate people from Church-controlled education and moral authority in Catholic countries like Italy and Spain, but also Germany. The pope considered this was a consequence of the First World War as “false ideas and unhealthy sentiments have, like a contagious disease, so taken possession of the popular mind” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922]. The Church was the option against what the Pope called “a species of moral, legal, and social modernism which We condemn” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922] as Catholicism is conscious about “social authority, the right of owning private property, on the relations between capital and labor, on the rights of the laboring man, on the relations between Church and State, religion and country, on the relations between the different social classes, on international relations...” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922], as he considered. The previous is an evident call for Catholics of that time to chose the authority of the Church over that of popularizing political ideologies.

In the last ten paragraphs, Pius XI made the following: 1) called those who have left the Church to return to contribute to create peace in Europe, as he mentions some European leaders had looked up to the Church to renew past “bonds of amity and friendship” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922] between nations and as a historical authority it could not ignore this call; 2) mentioned the treaties signed by Benedict XV with other states for the safety and freedom of the Church; 3) claimed that Italy was the most unfriendly country towards the Church as its liberties and rights were being violated; 4) claimed that the Church would not meddle in political affairs of Italy as “Italy has not nor will she have in the future anything to fear from the Holy See” [Pius XI, *Ubi arcano dei consilio*, 1922]; 5) prayed for the pacification of society.

The following narratives can be identified from the analysis of this papal encyclical:

1. The major threat for the Church, as perceived by Pius XI, was the changing social order and structures motivated by workers’ demands, like the Russian Revolution of 1917, the German Revolution of 1918 and the massive strikes in Italy from 1919 to 1920.

2. The Church considered itself to have some type of supranational institutional authority in Europe, as it did in past centuries, that could help erase nationalist sentiments and prevent a new war and the rise of socialism.

3. Socialism was a threat to European Catholic societies as it promoted secularism of social institutions like marriage and education, but also questioned the role of women in conservative societies, subjugation to authorities and social and economic disparities.

Conclusions

It can be concluded that conservative institutions considered socialism was perceived as a type of ideological globalism in the historical context of the interwar period that aimed to unify European workers under a new internationalist identity with specific ideological interests to transform societies. Today the NCPA European Future finds similarities between socialism of that context and the dominant globalist ideology in Western European countries that promotes multiculturalism, more prominent roles for women in positions of power and the reinterpretation of the role of family in society. Though, the first encyclical written by Pius XI does expose the position of the Church as an actor opposing to socialism, it does not explicitly mention any references to fascist ideology. Based on this document, the position of the Church in 1922 was of a third way, not of socialism, and not of nationalism, however, it was very critical of the Italian socialist and centrist governments. Though, that feud between the Holy See and Italy had additional motivations, like the territorial disputes for the Papal States that were later resolved with the signing of the Lateran Treaty in June, 1929, by Pius XI and the fascist dictator B. Mussolini.

Though, during the papacy of Pius XI the Reichskonkordat between the Holy See and the Nazi regime was signed in July, 1933, his encyclical in German “*Mit brennender Sorge*” was critical of the fascist regime for the violations of the agreement by the Nazis, as demonstrated by previous Russian and foreign academics. More research about other encyclicals of Pius XI can be conducted to determine a more accurate position of the Church in that historical period. This research has, however, demonstrated the ideological similarities that modern European fascist NCPAs see in the historical context of their

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societies today against leftist globalism with that of the 1920's against socialism and that they use to justify their use of Catholicism in their extremist political rhetoric. Future research should also consider the historical context in which the Church and Pius XI were and that threatened the former as a dying social institution and that the latter, as a man with political power, tried to defend by aligning with those that could guarantee the existential interests of the Church.

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Submitted for publication: September 10, 2024.

Accepted for publication: October 10, 2024.

Published: March 27, 2025.