Having witnessed a pope give up the burdens of the office, we might do well to recall one who resolutely bore those burdens to his deathbed. Except among students of the modern papacy, Pius XI (Achille Ratti) remains an obscure figure. His pontificate (1922-1939) has been overshadowed by that of his controversial successor, Pius XII (Eugenio Pacelli), whose silence in the face of Nazi genocidal policies during World War II has generated a veritable library of popular and academic studies, including two biographies in the past few months alone. It is an irony of history that the pope who was vocal in attacking Nazism and fascism is less well-known than the pope who was not.

Peter Eisner, a former reporter and editor at The Washington Post, believes that Pius XI deserves better from history. He reminds us that during the 1930s this pontiff became an increasingly powerful — and often lonely — voice against the pretensions of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini and the claims of their Nazi and fascist regimes. In a series of encyclicals, speeches, letters and audiences, Pius XI attacked racialism, militarism and the cults of the leader and the state as incompatible with Christian principles and dangerous to religion, human justice and world peace.

The pope’s criticisms reached a crescendo in 1938 — the year of Anschluss, Kristallnacht, the Munich Agreement and Italy’s anti-Semitic “Manifesto on Race” — when Pius planned two major initiatives. The first was an encyclical against racism in general and anti-Semitism in particular. The second was an address to a convocation of Italian bishops planned for Feb. 11, 1939, the 10th anniversary of the Lateran Accords, which regularized relations between the Italian state and the Catholic Church. Pius intended to use his speech to accuse Mussolini’s regime of systematically violating its commitments and responsibilities under the accords.

Pius would compose the speech himself, but to prepare the encyclical he turned to John LaFarge, an American Jesuit priest whose book “Interracial Justice” the pontiff admired. Assisted by a German Jesuit, Gustav Gundlach, LaFarge completed his task in the late summer of 1938 and, in September, personally delivered a draft of the encyclical to Father Wlodimir Ledochowski, the superior general of the Jesuit order. Ledochowski promised to deliver the text promptly to the Holy Father. That’s when things began to go wrong.

In the fall of 1938 Pius XI was a sick man. Two heart attacks in November were harbingers of the approaching end. The pope begged his doctors to keep him alive until he could address the Italian bishops in February, but they could do little to slow the decline. As the pope weakened, the
administration of Vatican affairs passed into the hands of functionaries in the papal bureaucracy. Eisner argues that these conditions provided an opportunity for those inside the Vatican who preferred conciliation with Hitler and Mussolini rather than the dying pontiff’s confrontational approach: They could circumvent the pope’s plans by stalling. Ledochowski was the principal culprit.

Eisner describes the Polish Jesuit as a rabid anti-communist and anti-Semite who feared that Pius’s previous criticisms of the Nazis had seriously endangered the Catholic Church in Germany and distracted the papacy from its real enemy, the Soviet Union. Once published, LaFarge’s draft encyclical, tentatively titled “The Unity of the Human Race,” would only worsen relations with Germany. Playing for time, Ledochowski simply delayed delivery of LaFarge’s draft to the pope in the expectation that the Holy Father would die before being able to order publication.

The plan worked. In late January 1939, Pius learned that the Jesuit superior general was sitting on the encyclical and ordered its immediate delivery. But by then the failing pontiff had little time and less energy. Pius XI died on Feb. 10, 1939, the day before his scheduled address to the bishops. LaFarge’s draft still lay on the papal desk, alongside the pope’s handwritten notes for his undelivered speech. Immediately upon the pontiff’s death, Cardinal Pacelli, then the Vatican secretary of state and another proponent of appeasement, ordered both the encyclical and the speech suppressed. A few weeks later, Pacelli was the new pope.

The fate of the “lost encyclical” is a good story but one that has been told before. Eisner contributes details concerning LaFarge’s role in the drama, but the effort to move the American Jesuit to center stage, including digressions into LaFarge’s family life and European travels, cannot dispel the impression that he remained a minor character in a performance that played out more in the corridors of papal power than in the study of an earnest and naive priest. This is Ratti’s story, and Pacelli’s and Ledochowski’s, not LaFarge’s, and recently opened records in the Vatican Secret Archive suggest that the principals in Rome were more complex and conflicted characters than the author suggests. Historians increasingly find labels such as “anti-communist” and “anti-fascist” not very useful in explaining the motivations of Vatican personalities and the direction of papal policies in the 1930s.

Finally, it is impossible to know how much was lost with the lost encyclical. Eisner rightly concludes that the document was an important statement against racism, but it is less clear if he believes that its publication would have had a significant impact. Earlier declarations by Pius had had little discernible effect on the dictators. Of course, statements of principle may be necessary for their own sake regardless of their potential impact. Appeasers in the Vatican, however, had little confidence in principled gestures. Perhaps they recalled the outcomes of other crusades.

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