Fascism, Catholicism, and Italian Youth

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*How did Fascism challenge the Catholic Church’s influence on Italian youth?*

History HL Internal Assessment

International Baccalaureate Diploma Program

May 2018

Word Count: 2173

#### Section 1: Identification and evaluation of sources

This investigation, examining the changes to education and youth organizations brought about by the Fascist government between 1922 and 1943, and the extent to which traditional values and the Catholic church’s influence in these realms were challenged, will explore the question: How did Fascism challenge the Catholic church’s influence on Italian youth?

The first source to be evaluated is Giuseppe Bottai’s “Carta della Scuola”[[1]](#footnote-1), the 1939 charter outlining the restructuring of Italian schools and how the changes reflect Fascist goals. Bottai had examined the school system closely as Minister of Education for three years before drafting this charter to fix the shortcomings he saw in Giovanni Gentile’s 1923 reform. This source has value as it originates from within the Mussolini government and reflects the goals of the Ministry of Education. However, its usefulness is limited as it cannot show the extent to which the plans outlined in the charter were translated into practice. Bottai’s purpose in writing this charter was primarily to further fascistize education, but also to find support for the new plans from Mussolini and other figures of the Fascist government. The explanations for each declaration, given in the *Relazione al Duce*, are valuable in their illumination of what the Fascist party believed Italians valued, or would come to value, in their children’s education, and how the government chose to implement these ideas. This charter has value as the reflection of ideology in law, and as a point of comparison to examine the relationship between real and intended outcome.

The second source that will be evaluated in depth is Lorenzo Minio-Paluello’s book, Education in Fascist Italy[[2]](#footnote-2), published in 1946, that thoroughly describes and comments on Italian education from 1859 until World War II. Having experienced Italian education first as a student and then as a teacher from 1933-35, Minio-Paluello is able to describe more accurately the effect of legislation, in contrast with idealistic official reports that may overestimate. As an educator, he likely had ready access to decrees and curriculum notes, which contribute to this source’s value as a well-researched evaluation. His careful skepticism towards Fascist policy is also reflected in his refusal to join the party. His position in post-war Britain likely allowed him to candidly publish this book without fear of retaliation from the Fascist government. Much of this book was written before the fall of Fascism, and thus only briefly acknowledges its failure in wartime. While the lack of long-term impacts of Fascist education is a significant limitation, it avoids basing the shortcomings of indoctrination attempts on Fascism’s eventual failure, known only in hindsight. This book’s purpose is to provide a nuanced examination of the changes and continuity of education practices from the unification of Italy in 1860 until the start of WWII, organized primarily chronologically and secondarily on areas of change within each period, in order to suggest aspects of education that British and American administers in post-war Italy should consider either changing or keeping. The detail necessary to inform these policy-makers is a strength also for this investigation.

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#### Section 2: Investigation

In 1922, the Fascist government rose to power in Italy with the March on Rome, and without using violence against the state and King Vittorio Emanuele II, Benito Mussolini was given orders to form a new government. Consent to these actions was broad due to the ongoing violence between socialists and the Fascist *squadre d’azione*, and the failure of Prime Minister Giolitti to resolve Italy’s economic struggles following the First World War. Once in power, Mussolini sought to establish a society in tune with the principles of Fascism in order to gain greater support for his authoritarian state. To create the *uomo nuovo fascista* (new Fascist man), Fascist ideology had to compete with traditional beliefs, predominantly Catholic ideology, and conflicts arose when the personality cult of Mussolini, developed through propaganda, gave *Il Duce* godlike characteristics.On a more practical level, the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF) and the Catholic church vied for dominance in the realm of education and for membership in their youth groups. Conflict between the Catholic church and Fascism occurred in two main ways: dialogue between the Pope and the Fascist government on ideological grounds, and violence between youth groups. However, through compromise, the Catholic church increased their influence on youth, while the Fascist regime gained greater legitimacy.

First, the type of loyalty that the Fascist government and PNF sought to indoctrinate youth with was seen as a threat by the Catholic church. In and beyond the classroom, the personality cult of the Duce was forged, and militant and nationalistic ideals promoted. Textbook restrictions in 1926 and the establishment of the *Testo unico di stato* in 1930 was one way the government attempted to influence the mentality of schoolchildren. The creation of Fascist youth groups with military-like activities also contributed to the instillation of Fascist principles[[3]](#footnote-3). This new culture being promoted was met with disapproval from the Catholic church. In his 1931 encyclical, “Non abbiamo bisogno”, Pope Pius XI condemned the regime’s “pagan worship of the state,”[[4]](#footnote-4) and its attacks on *Azione Cattolica* youth organizations, impeding children’s ability to experience the Catholic religion. Youth were key to both institutions as they could ensure the long-term survival of beliefs and a loyal population. Both powers had the goal of winning over the hearts and mind of youth, and both claimed to be responsible for their education. Stating that “education belongs pre-eminently to the Church”[[5]](#footnote-5), the encyclical “Divini illius Magistri” (1929) set forth the view of the Vatican on the relative responsibilities of family, church, and state in education, contrary to the tighter connections that the PNF hoped to form with the schools[[6]](#footnote-6).

The establishment of Fascist youth groups, such as the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* and *Gruppi Universitari Fascisti*, gave children more opportunities to participate in activities, but also competed for membership with Catholic youth groups. Membership in Fascist youth organizations became practically compulsory[[7]](#footnote-7), and by 1939, approximately 6.7 million children were enrolled[[8]](#footnote-8). Conflict between the Pope and Mussolini was reflected in street violence between Fascist and Catholic youth. The question of Catholic youth groups was an important point of dispute during the negotiation of the Lateran accords from 1926 to 1929, and several times, Mussolini threatened to suppress them. Under the protection of Article 43 of the Lateran Concordat (1929), Catholicyouth membership rose from 600,000 in 1928 to 692,000 in 1930[[9]](#footnote-9), prompting Mussolini, in the spring of 1931, to attempt to disband *Azione Cattolica* youth groups once again and accuse the organization of political involvement, which had been prohibited. Violence between Fascist and Catholic university students, especially in Rome, increased[[10]](#footnote-10). The Pope initially responded conciliatory to avoid inciting more violence, but took a stronger stance in his encyclical, “Non Abbiamo Bisogno”, trying to gain support from Catholics around the world and to persuade Mussolini to once again negotiate. As both feared uncontrollable violence, the widespread conflict between Fascist and Catholic youth had a decisive role in pressuring Mussolini and the Pope to reach an agreement in September 1931 that limited the activities of the *Azione Cattolica,* but ensured its right to exist[[11]](#footnote-11).

While the Fascist government and Catholic church experienced periods of conflict, they mutually benefited from compromise. In contrast to the anticlericalism of the previous Italian government, the Fascist government expressed a willingness to negotiate with the Church and respect Catholic traditions, allowing more religious influence in schools, and in return benefitting from the legitimacy gained by the partnership.

Under the liberal Italian government that maintained power from the unification of Italy in 1866 until 1922, the Catholic church’s influence in schools had been gradually declining. Though the Casati Laws of 1859, which established a basic structure for elementary education, made religious instruction compulsory, the 1877 Coppino Act abolished religious instruction in primary and secondary schools, unless requested by parents. Despite this restriction, a 1897 survey shows that religion was still taught in schools to 1,500,000 out of 2,300,000 pupils[[12]](#footnote-12) - reflecting that the teaching of religion continued to be a encouraged by families. However, the influence of the Catholic church was further restricted by the Orlando Law of 1904, which gave municipalities greater control over the provision of religious instruction[[13]](#footnote-13). Because of the limitations that had been placed on the Catholic church’s influence on education in preceding years, the reintroduction of religious teaching in Giovanni Gentile’s 1923 educational reform was met with praise[[14]](#footnote-14). Though Gentile intended for religious instruction to be used simply to develop critical thinking rather than to promote Catholic thought, this concession gave the Catholic hierarchy greater opportunities to influence youth[[15]](#footnote-15).

The Lateran Pacts of 1929 (composed of a treaty and a concordat) also marked a turning point in state-church relations. With the Lateran Treaty, the Roman Question regarding the powers of the pope over the former Papal States that had arisen during the Risorgimento, was settled and the Vatican city-state established. The Catholic church was given financial compensation for the loss of the Papal States, and Catholicism’s position as the state religion was reiterated[[16]](#footnote-16). The Lateran Concordat outlined relations between the Holy See and the state, including regulations on education and youth groups. Among the articles regarding education, religious instruction in secondary schools would be developed like that in elementary schools under the supervision of the Catholic church[[17]](#footnote-17). In addition, Mussolini conceded that the hours of operation of the Fascist youth groups *Avanguardisti* and *Opera Nazionale Balilla* must not impede with religious practice and school[[18]](#footnote-18), and recognized non-political organizations under the *Azione Cattolica*[[19]](#footnote-19), thereby allowing them to continue. The cultural authority of the Catholic church was recognized, and thus strengthened, by the Lateran Pacts. The symbolic partnership forged by the Fascist government and the Catholic church also benefited the state. The small concessions made to the church allowed Mussolini to gain the consent of the Catholic population without losing much of the state’s role in education and the Fascist party’s maintenance of youth groups.

Italian Fascism posed a significant challenge to the influence of the Catholic church, as evidenced by the debates over educational control and the attempted suppression of Catholic youth groups. However, because the Fascist government recognized the advantages that could be gained by forming an alliance with the church, concessions were made, specifically in the Riforma Gentile (1923) and Lateran Concordat (1929), that increased the Catholic church’s opportunities to teach youth. Not only did this have an immediate impact on school curriculum and the membership in *Azione Cattolica* youth organizations, religious instruction in schools continued beyond the Fascist period until the 1984 revision of the Lateran Concordat, influencing the lives of millions of children.

#### Section 3: Reflection

During this investigation, I have examined a variety of primary and secondary sources discussing the implications of Fascism for Italian youth, and have experienced some of the work that historians do. I learned that the greatest difficulty in investigating challenges to traditional values is the lack of information that would be necessary to determine the strength of ideological commitment. I had difficulties finding sufficient statistical data, and what was available was subject to over- or underestimation depending on the purpose and methodology of the investigator. In addition, there can be several different reasons for engaging in an activity, recorded by the census, that often do not correspond to belief. Even video footage of cheering crowds does not guarantee that a dictatorship was popular[[20]](#footnote-20). The data is also unable to demonstrate how firmly those beliefs were held, in contrast with data in scientific fields that clearly reflects the qualities of what is being observed. With the limitations of general statistics in mind, the historian then turns to first-hand accounts of experiences which convey the author’s attitude toward the subject.

While primary sources are limited in scope, historians use them to understand viewpoints or to collect facts, depending on the source’s content and its reliability. In order to evaluate a source, the historian must keep in mind how perspective influences the presentation of information, for which I’ve found that it is necessary to examine a multitude of primary sources. My mother recounts that many were silent on their experiences during the regime and on controversial topics in the post-war period, such as religious instruction in public schools, following the painful experience of World War II, which had become associated with Fascism. In addition, the dominance of the Democrazia Cristiana party limited the amount of criticism that could be expressed. This presents a challenge for historians in finding first-hand accounts.

Secondary sources present individual perspectives as well, whether they aim to influence or to explain the past. Werner Peiser and Lorenzo Minio-Paluello, for example, were concerned with how education should be de-Fascistized post-war, and seek to influence views and actions by supporting their argument with selected evidence, as is the role of the historian. Thus, all historical interpretations are incomplete and cannot show the full complexity of an event or process, but they nonetheless allow scholars and historians to gain knowledge of various interpretations and methods of analysis, which contributes to the depth of understanding we have on the topic.

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2. Lorenzo Minio-Paluello, *Education in Fascist Italy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Richard Bosworth, *Mussolini’s Italy* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Pius XI, *Non Abbiamo Bisogno*, Encyclical letter (Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1931), [44], http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\_p-xi\_enc\_29061931\_non-abbiamo-bisogno.html [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Pius XI, *Divini Illius Magistri*, Encyclical letter (Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1929), [15], http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\_p-xi\_enc\_31121929\_divini-illius-magistri.html [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bottai, "La Carta della Scuola", 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Minio-Paluello, *Education in Fascist Italy*, 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bosworth, *Mussolini’s Italy*, 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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11. Ibid., 626. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Anthony Scarangello, "Church and State in Italian Education," *Comparative Education Review* 5, no. 3 (1962): 202, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1187086. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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15. Minio-Paluello, *Education in Fascist Italy*, 118-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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17. Ibid., Concordat Art. 36 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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19. Ibid., Concordat Art. 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Bruce Pauley, *Hitler, Stalin, And Mussolini*, (Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1997.), 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)