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JOHN XXIII

POPE OF THE CENTURY

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Chapter 9

God's consul

Mussolini speaks from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia. The news of the war does not surprise anyone and does not arouse very much enthusiasm. I am sad, very sad. The adventure begins. May God help Italy!

(Count Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's foreign minister and son-in-law, *Diary*, p. 264, June 10, 1940)

Italy's entry into the war was a bitter blow for Archbishop Roncalli. It made his tightrope walk of neutrality considerably more difficult, especially in Greece. The war was unpopular with the Italian people who had not been consulted about it. Many Italians expected that an isolated Britain would soon seek a negotiated peace. Roncalli half-shared this widespread view. On June 21, 1940, he wrote home:

Let's hope that the war with England will soon be over. Otherwise it will be a very bad look-out for our cousin in the navy (Peppino Roncalli). All of you should remember what Bishop Bemareggi wrote on the outbreak of war. His were golden words. At a time like this one should speak little, pray a lot, and impose some sacrifices on oneself.

General Pétain put it very well yesterday. One of the causes of the French defeat was their unbridled enjoyment of material pleasures after the Great War. The Germans on the other hand began to impose limitations and sacrifices on themselves, and so were prepared and strong. It's another form of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (*Famiani*, I, pp. 508-9).

Roncalli must have been one of the few people in Europe capable of presenting the German rearmament policy ('Guns before butter') as an illustration of how to be an evangelical wise virgin.

Roncalli had a long conversation with von Papan on August 12, 1940. He reported on it the next day (*Notes et documents*, 4, pp. 105-11). It was his most important diplomatic despatch to date, and he knew it. Von Papan had just returned from Berlin where he found Hitler's position was this:

He repeated that it had never been his intention to annihilate England, but rather to make it behave more reasonably towards Germany... He would deeply regret having to pass over to an all-out attack; but the attack would surely come, and he would be happy if, after the first blows, England decided to negotiate an agreement.

The way the English and the French are completely deceived about German war resources - von Papan went on - is painful to behold. They have a spirit of hatred and

detestation of Germany that we Germans have never had towards them. We have tried and will continue to try to treat them with respect, and not with the contempt they habitually display towards us.

Von Papan was engaging in diplomatic propaganda, stressing for the benefit of the Holy See the contrast between the 'reasonable' Germans and the obsessed, hate-inspired English. Roncalli noted that von Papan made the next remarks 'in a more lively tone'. Not surprisingly. He had reached the heart of the matter:

Despite the various estimates that may be made of Hitler's character... there are still to many open possibilities, and the future could be rich in surprises. One of them could be that after the war Catholicism would become the 'formative principle' of the new German social order, rather in the way Mussolini had wisely endowed Italy with the concordat and social legislation inspired on some points by the great teaching of Leo XIII.

Von Papan was overplaying his hand here. The notion that Mussolini was inspired by the social teaching of the Church was a pleasant fantasy; and the picture of a Hitler domesticated into Catholicism was even more fantastic.

But it was all part of von Papan's diplomatic propaganda. To pursue his military aims, Hitler needed docile Catholics, and in 1940 he had begun to relax his anti-Church policy with that in view (see Helmreich, p. 348). The whole shimmering prospect that von Papan dangled before Roncalli depended on German Catholics being involved ever more closely in the cares, the sufferings and the joys of this great and noble nation. Von Papan expected the war to be over by November 1940 (they were in August). Then there would be something for Italy too. In the redrawn German map of Europe, Italy would replace France as the major responsible power in the Middle East, be conceded the island of Corsica and some territory around Nice, and the 'Tunisian' problem would be solved in favour of Italy.

Though Roncalli gives it as his opinion that von Papan was a sincere and a good Catholic, he was not listening altogether uncritically. He pressed von Papan on two points. First, was he distinguishing clearly between Hitler's views and his own? What von Papan was saying made some sense as the wish-fulfillment of a German Catholic who still hoped that Hitler could be 'controlled'. But could he really speak for Hitler? The other crucial question was about Hitler's sincerity. Von Papan tried to reassure him on both points.

Roncalli added one last detail, of great importance for the future. While he was closeted with von Papan, his secretary, Righi, was out walking in the embassy garden with Baron Kurt von Lennert, who was supposed to be von Papan's cultural attaché. As a Lutheran, he was an admirable foil to the Catholic von Papan. Roncalli came to like him and trust him. When the two Vatican diplomats got back home to the Delegation, they compared notes and reported:

Together we were allowed to glimpse an outline of the reconstructed Europe of tomorrow: for example, Alsace-Lorraine and Luxembourg would be absorbed into Germany; Belgium and Holland with their independence restored but demilitarized. The same to be said of the new Poland and the protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Finally the cost of the war for the two Axis powers would be borne by the colonial

possessions of Belgium and Holland in the form of raw materials... France would restore the former German colonies and pay war indemnities. Both von Papen and Baron Lersner foresee the end of the war by this autumn.

It was Roncalli's duty to transmit accurately what he had heard, not to comment on it. But at the same time, there is something sinister in this calm recital of the consequences of Hitler's *Neue Ordnung* or New Order. He fully expected to have to live with it. When Roncalli's report arrived in the Secretariat of State, Tardini minuted it: 'This fellow has understood nothing' (*Questo non ha capito niente*). The good-natured Roncalli had been too gullible, and had been taken for a diplomatic ride.

Matters of high politics were strictly excluded from his letters home. He told his sisters, instead, how he was rebuilding, at his own expense, the Apostolic Delegation. 'The nasty little entrance you used to know', he wrote, 'has been replaced by a large atrium with four columns' (*Familiari*, I, pp. 514-15). It looked out over the garden which was ablaze with roses and magnolias. He had icons in the chapel and the text *Ad Jesum per Mariam* was inscribed above its door. What he does not tell his sisters, however, is that on the very day he was writing to them, September 5, 1940, he had met a party of Polish Jews who brought grim news from Nazi-occupied Poland. He helped them on their way to the Holy Land. Von Papen's assurances about the 'independence' of Poland were already exposed as nonsense.

A month later - according to von Papen, the war ought to have been over - he began the most sombre retreat of his life at the villa house of the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion. It was at Terapia and overlooked the Bosphorus. But this time there were no twinkling lights of fishing boats out at sea. Following a suggestion of Pius XII, he took Psalm 51, the *Miserere*, as the basis of his meditations. So he was praying this Jewish prayer, in the midst of a community dedicated to ministering to Jews, at a time when the first inkling of the terrible fate that awaited them had begun to emerge. Some things became clearer to him.

The first was simply that no nation can claim to have God on its side. This 'murderous war that is being waged on land and sea and in the air' was certainly no crusade: 'It has been asserted, and it still being asserted, that God is bound to preserve this or that country or grant it invulnerability and final victory, because of the righteous people who live there and the good they do. We forget that although God has made the nations, he has left the constitution of states to the free decisions of men' (*Journal*, p. 257). Men go to war because they want to: 'War is desired by men, deliberately, in defiance of the most sacred laws. That is what makes it so evil. He who instigates war and foments it is always the "Prince of this world" who has nothing to do with Christ, the "Prince of peace"' (*ibid.*).

There was something rather forced in the cheerfulness of his next letter to Ancilla and Maria. He rattles on about what it feels like to reach sixty and reports his latest attempts to keep his weight down. In the evening he has only soup and fruit, with no bread or wine. For breakfast nothing but coffee and fruit. At lunch, however, he eats like a good Christian. He claims that this regime is working well. He is in the best of health, has slimmed a little, and retains 'the freshness and agility of youth' (*Familiari*, I, p. 525). The war breaks in as he wishes them a happy Christmas. For the first time since he arrived in Turkey he will be singing Midnight Mass. Though Turkey is not at war, a black-out has been imposed on Istanbul as a precaution against air-raids.

As part of his keep fit at sixty campaign Roncalli started to go for afternoon walks around the strangely deserted city. Most of the men of military age were away in the army. The removal of the capital to Ankara - Ataturk had been pursuing some atavistic memory of a Hittite capital 4000 years before - had deprived Istanbul's European quarter, Pera Beyoglu, of its vitality. The city seemed moribund. It was like a museum. This had its compensations for those who stayed behind. Roncalli's afternoon walks became archaeological excursions. He particularly loved the Stadion, near the Golden Gate, once a centre of monastic arts and sciences, and used to say the rosary among its ruins. He found plenty of traces of Byzantium in Istanbul, and became something of an expert on Greek inscriptions.

Turkey was just the place for someone with historical imagination. The first great Councils - Ephesus, Chalcedon, Constantinople - had all been held there. Roncalli kept beside him on his desk a list of the 856 (sic) episcopal sees which had once flourished in Asia Minor (*Right*, p. 94). He thought it would be a good joke to send to his old friend Borgogiani Duca, Nuncio to Italy, a post-card from Eraclea of Europe of which he was titular bishop. 'We are here under your jurisdiction', Roncalli wrote from the straggling village, Eregli, that was all that remained.

Then there was Antioch, once the cultural rival of Rome, and equally the city of St Peter, where the followers of Christ were first given the nickname 'Christian'. Roncalli also became familiar with the Greek fathers, especially St John Chrysostom, priest of Antioch, who was press-ganged into becoming bishop of Constantinople and died in exile. Roncalli preached on him at the conclusion of the Octave of Prayer for Church Unity in 1941 (text in Alberigo, pp. 458-63). Living in Turkey gave him a sense of Christian origins and a knowledge of the original tradition. He was delivered from the narrowness of Roman theology.

But his plunge into the past, though it could be used to divert - in both senses - ambassadors of scholarly leanings, could not provide an escape from the present. Early in 1941 von Papen was back with news that the understanding between the Axis powers (Germany and Italy) and the Soviet Union was complete. Since he had just seen Hitler, Molotov, the Russian Foreign Minister, and King Boris of Bulgaria, this seemed like authoritative inside information, and Roncalli hastened to transmit it:

The Triple Pact grows ever stronger, and the basis of a new order in Europe is already laid down. Some nations have already joined the Pact; others are on their way. The door is open for all those who want to join, also for Turkey... I got the impression [Roncalli is now speaking in his own name] that once England is liquidated, the Axis and Russia will not give excessive importance to Turkey and that its independence could be guaranteed in the future redrawing of the map of Europe (*Actes et documents*, 4, pp. 273-4).

Once again the new order and its consequences are accepted with what looks like equanimity. The use of the typically totalitarian word 'liquidated' is chilling. And there was a lack of political perceptiveness in swallowing uncritically von Papen's assurances about the solid friendship that bound Germany and the Soviet Union together. Within six months Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi attack on Russia, was launched to prove the hollowness of that claim.

But Roncalli was now in deep water, caught up in plots and counter-plots. The Baron von Lersner was up to something, and Roncalli begins to do favours for him and report

in conversations. Von Lersner was an anti-Nazi who secretly wanted the removal of Hitler so that a deal could be done in the West (see *Actes et documents*, 4, pp. 367-8). But the removal of Hitler could only be achieved on the hypothesis that there existed 'good' Germans who were prepared to take the risks involved. This was precisely what the allied doctrine of 'unconditional surrender' - already applied in practice - excluded. Though the United States was not yet in the war, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's moral and economic support for Britain strengthened British resolve to fight on to the bitter end. On January 6, 1941, Roosevelt declared that he would not deal with the Nazi regime and that 'no one can tame a tiger or turn it into a charming kitten' (Dreyfus, p. 97).

This robbed the anti-Nazi Germans of hope. It made von Lersner very angry indeed. Roncalli reports him saying: 'No one loves peace any more. Roosevelt has now torn off the mask. His first statements suggested sincerity. But he was play-acting to secure reelection. Once he won, he behaved like everyone else' (*Actes et documents*, 4, p. 382). Now that Roosevelt had joined the baying pack, Lersner was forced to look elsewhere for moral leadership and peace initiatives. He attributed the following remark to 'an important Turk', but it was clear that these were his own views: 'Today, the greatest man in the world, much greater than Hitler or Churchill or Mussolini, would be the one who had enough moral influence to bring governments to consider concrete peace proposals' (*ibid.*, p. 380). But there was only one candidate for this historic role: Pope Pius XII.

Roncalli's report remains as detached as usual. But it would be surprising if he did not feel a certain *fission* of excitement. For here was a German Lutheran proposing papal mediation to end the war. What Benedict XV had been rebuffed for attempting in August 1917 was now being offered to his successor. Moreover, to demonstrate his sincerity, von Lersner casually revealed details of German plans for the Balkans. The next month, March, German troops 'peacefully' entered Bulgaria and in April twenty-one divisions fell upon Yugoslavia and Greece, to help out the Italians who were being held. This was impressive, but it was not impressive enough. It was known in the Secretariat of State that the allies would not depart from their policy of 'unconditional surrender', and that the language of 'peace' was regarded as reasonable in Nazi Germany. So nothing could be done.

There was a division of opinion within the Secretariat of State. Tardini continued to denounce 'unconditional surrender' as barbarous and iniquitous. Montini, on the other hand, had a better understanding of why it was insisted upon. That Roncalli was aware of this difference in broad terms is shown by the fact that he wrote a private letter to Montini recommending von Lersner to him (Saggio, p. 32. Letter dated April 23, 1942). Presumably Roncalli wrote - unusually - to Montini because he had already had enough abuse from Tardini about his naiveté. He was prepared to be naïve for peace.

But what he did not know was that Montini had already concluded that the insistence on 'unconditional surrender' meant that Italy could only achieve a separate peace by switching sides. Italy's only alternative to continuing the war on the German side was to dump Mussolini, abandon the Axis, and wager on an Allied victory (see *La Repubblica*, September 7, 1983; interview with ex-Queen Maria José of Savoy). But since such a scheme was perilous, treacherous even, it is unlikely that anyone would risk talking about it to a Vatican diplomat in such a nest of spies as Istanbul. In any event, Roncalli was completely taken by surprise when it actually happened.

He was also taken by surprise by the German attack on Russia on June 22, 1941. Only three days earlier he reported that Germany had signed a non-aggression pact with Turkey. Roncalli saw it merely as a feather in von Papen's cap and not as a necessary scouring of the night flank before the attack on Russia: 'It crowns the tenacious and fortunate endeavours of von Papen ... It is a step towards peace, and it demanded an act of courage on the part of Turkey in view of its commitments to Great Britain' (*Actes et documents*, 4, p. 560). Roncalli shared in von Papen's success with some enthusiasm. The same day - June 19, 1941 - he wrote to his sisters: 'This very day a treaty was signed between Germany and Turkey who will not grab each other by the throat. What more can one ask? I believe that Italy will now do the same. Now try to say that your brother was not a prophet?' (*Famiglia*, I, p. 543). But his prophetic gifts were strictly limited. Not only had he failed to foresee the long-planned Operation Barbarossa, but on the word of von Papen had frequently informed the Vatican that the relationship between Germany and Russia was in good shape.

Von Papen and von Lersner flattered Roncalli by taking him into their confidence. But they did not tell him everything. The weakness of his one-sided reliance on German sources became apparent. It was not that Roncalli got on badly with the British ambassador, Sir Hugh Knatchbull-Hugessen. It was simply that when they met, they met for tea. They never discussed strategic or political matters; their talk was confined to technical questions about - for example - the transmission of Vatican correspondence, aid for starving Greece or Italian refugees in the Middle East. Unlike von Papen, Sir Hugh did not think it was any part of his mission to win over the apostolic delegate to his country's cause (Righi, pp. 202-3).

It would have required superhuman powers of detachment - or consummate acting skill - to hide all signs of partisanship in such a complicated situation. Roncalli claimed to be on good terms with all the belligerents by being *neque pro, neque contra* (neither too distant nor too close): 'I read in the Old Testament that Jacob also had sons who disagreed among themselves. But he, the father, *non tunc considerabat* - pondered the matter in silence' (Trevor, p. 186). It was a text he would make use of as Pope, by which time he was old enough to play the patriarchal role more successfully.

Just when he thought he had found a method for dealing with the problems of Istanbul, he was ordered to Greece. This time he was told to stay as long as was necessary finally to resolve the question of Vatican diplomatic representation. His dependence on the Germans was such that he needed a visa from von Papen to travel to Greece, and used German air transport for most of the journey. Greece was in chaos. He was told he would have to go via Sofia. What had been a mere stop-over became an important diplomatic mission. He met King Boris, Queen Giovanna, leading politicians, and the Orthodox metropolitan, Stefan. These were all old acquaintances. His patient work during ten years in Bulgaria now paid off.

King Boris revealed that the Russians had been putting pressure on him to attack Turkey, the traditional Bulgarian enemy. He resisted their blandishments and threats. This inevitably brought him closer to the Germans. But Boris would say very little about the Germans. He preferred to steer the conversation towards Italy, 'in which he has complete confidence', and to reminisce about King Victor Emmanuel III, his father-in-law. When Boris told him that last time he was in Rome he had gone incognito into St Peter's, said his prayers at

others altar and kissed the foot of St Peter's statue, Victor Emmanuel said: 'Bless, you did well' (*Actes et documents*, 5, pp. 91 and following).

King Boris then recounted the story of the Serbian Orthodox patriarch, Gavriilo Dozic, who had allegedly fled to some rocky mountain refuge with a stock of ham to keep him from hunger and a vast collection of records, especially those of Josephine Baker, the famous black dancer, to keep him from melancholy. But this tale of the pusillanimous patriarch was a calumny, a product of the German propaganda machine. The truth was that Patriarch Gavriilo was arrested in a monastery, brutally beaten up, and eventually sent to Dachau for refusing to collaborate with the Nazis (Alexander, pp. 10-11). That Roncalli should have repeated the calumny without raising any critical questions about it is scandalous. Contained in an official report, it would have reinforced the Vatican prejudice against the Serbian Orthodox.

The most astonishing feature of this interview was the way King Boris asked the papal diplomat to help him deal with the anglephile leanings of the Orthodox metropolitan, Stefan: 'Monsieur, do try and see him'. Roncalli sought out the metropolitan and reported to Rome on his meeting:

He showed himself still somewhat under the spell of the Anglo-American organisations which on the pretext of charity pursue the illusion of world peace through the union of Christians (*ibid.*).

This embarrassing text was not published until 1969. It shows that, at sixty, Roncalli still had a lot to learn about ecumenism.

He was on surer ground when he urged the Vatican to support Bulgaria's border claim against Yugoslavia. The Bulgarians wanted Ochrida, site of the monasteries of Sts Clement and Naoum, disciples of St Cyril and Methodius. 'Poor as they are', King Boris explained, 'they represent the Jerusalem of the Bulgarian nation'. Roncalli comments: 'It is the highest wisdom not to upset or offend against the psychological characteristics of different peoples'. The truth was that Bulgaria, so far, had done rather well out of the war. All Bulgaria's gains depended on its alliance with Germany and the acceptance of Hitler's 'New Order'.

Roncalli's work was now in devastated Greece. Travel by road was difficult: so many bridges had been blown up in a desperate attempt to slow down the German advance. So whenever possible, Roncalli travelled by air, and he found hunger as well as destruction, for the British had imposed a food blockade. Roncalli summarised his impressions in an early report to the Vatican:

At Salonika they are still not too badly off compared with Athens; and it also seems that life is tolerable in the country and on the islands. But here we are in a situation where *parvuli petunt panem*, children beg for bread, and there is not enough bread. Strict rationing has been imposed on the city, quite inadequate for the ordinary nutrition of a young person, a robust man or a mother with children (*Actes et documents*, 5, pp. 99-100).

Roncalli's sympathy with the defeated Greeks comes through very clearly in this passage; and he soon translated it into practical help. But his very presence was ambivalent: he was in Greece only by favour of the Germans and the Italians. When he discovered that there were Bergamesque troops in Athens. On July 28, 1941, he wrote home: 'There are many good

soldiers here from Bergamo. Their chaplains speak highly of them. They are part of the occupying forces, and naturally prefer that to being at the front. But they are good soldiers who have already been at the front and won honour for themselves' (*Familiari*, I, p. 546).

To adjust the balance, Roncalli also visited the German wounded and the British prisoners of war. But the hungry, defeated Greeks were his main concern. He explained how he saw his role in a despatch to the Vatican dated August 4, 1941, as one of 'God's Consuls', that is, as a bishop who has the holy freedom to present himself to the conqueror in the name of a spiritual authority, and in the name of the interests of the conquered people' (*Actes et documents*, 5, p. 125). On September 9, 1941, a group of Greek laymen approached Roncalli and asked him to get the Holy See to intervene, to allow through a shipment of 360,000 tons of grain, already paid for, from Haifa in Palestine. He made a quick dash to Rome and saw Pius XII. But the needs outstripped the resources, and Roncalli was under no illusion that the trickle of Vatican aid could 'solve' the problem of famine in Greece.

An important engagement was on May 17, 1942, Whitsunday. Roncalli always liked to celebrate Pentecost in his cathedral, dedicated to the Holy Spirit; there was pomp and clouds of incense and afterwards forty guests were entertained to lunch at the Delegation. But on this Pentecost Sunday he also had the duty of celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the episcopal ordination of Eugenio Pacelli, Pope Pius XII, then uneasily reigning. It was an anniversary that no papal diplomat could possibly miss. Roncalli reminded his congregation that Pacelli had been ordained bishop in 1917, at the very time when the three peasant children at Fatima had their first vision of Our Lady. But that was not really what he wanted to say. If the episcopacy must be seen against the background of the whole people of God, showered with the gifts of the Spirit, then the papacy itself must be seen against the background of the whole episcopal college. Only in this way would the papacy become intelligible to those Orthodox or Protestant Christians who rejected its claims as extravagant, unfounded or even blasphemous.

Roncalli went on: 'All the Apostles received an equal mandate from Jesus, but Jesus entrusted to Peter a pre-eminent place as pastor and father' (Righi, p. 255). Carefully avoiding any 'Wear of Christ' terminology (a thirteenth-century innovation), he calls the pope repeatedly 'the Bishop of Rome' and speaks of his 'seat' (*sedes*) and 'chair' (*cathedra*) (see Tillard, p. 92 and following, for the importance of this usage). This was a return to an earlier tradition, before the division of East and West. It was another instance of going back in order to go forwards. Long before he became pope himself, he had already thought much about the office, and clarified his vision of an essentially *pastoral* papacy. He concluded his Pentecost sermon:

Whatever concerns the Bishop of Rome makes the hearts of believers in Christ beat faster, wherever they may be, scattered throughout the world, without distinction of language or race or nationality: for he is the *sign of unison* amid so many passions and conflicts of interest, and represents an *invitation to order, gentleness and reconciliation* (Righi, p. 255).

He was speaking, of course, of Pius XII, but it is legitimate to see the passage as prophetic. The papal ministry is for service, not power.

The same is true of the episcopal ministry. In July 1942, Roncalli was back in Greece to

confirm those Italian soldiers who had somehow slipped through the parish net. There were moving incidents. When he visited the headquarters of the Italian Eighth Army, a corporal broke ranks, approached Roncalli, knelt and kissed his ring. 'What is it, my son?' asked Roncalli. The corporal replied: 'Monsignor, may I embrace you in the name of all of us?' He did so, to applause from the men (Righi, *ibid.*). This very 'Italian' event on a remote hillside in a devastated country says as much about Roncalli as the most elaborate treatise on his idea of episcopacy. He managed to create an atmosphere in which such things could happen and seem natural.

In late 1942 Roncalli, in his role as God's consul, had the experience of failure. In December he made repeated appeals to Field Marshal Wilhelm von List, the German commander in Greece, to spare the lives of a group of Greek partisans. But the orders could not be changed. The executions went ahead as planned.

Though no one knew it, the turning-point of the war had been reached. Early in 1943 the Germans, surrounded at Stalingrad, suffered their first serious defeat – cynically sacrificing the Italian expeditionary force. By the end of February German and Italian resistance in North Africa was practically over. The number of prisoners held by either side was now about the same. Tracing prisoners of war became Roncalli's main work during this period. Along with the Red Cross, the Vatican acted as a clearing house for information about prisoners of war on all sides. The Russians, however, did not join in this scheme, for the chilling reason given by Ernst von Weizsäcker, German Ambassador to the Holy See: 'The Soviet regime is not interested in the fate of its own prisoners of war because it considers them traitors' (*Actes et documents*, 9, p. 238). So one could not bargain information about them in exchange for news of the German and Italian prisoners in Russia. But Roncalli was ordered by Tardini to do what he could on March 18, 1943. He thought that if anyone could pull it off, it would be Roncalli.

Rather than risk a rebuff by going to the top and speaking with the ambassador in Ankara, he preferred to start with the consul general in Istanbul, Nicholas Ivanov. They had a fascinating discussion on the Soviet Union's attitude to religion, but on the substantive issue of the prisoners of war held in the Soviet Union, Roncalli got nowhere, either with Ivanov or the ambassador. He surmised, correctly, that they were acting under orders from Moscow. A note of disappointment, almost of despair, creeps into his report to the Vatican: 'I will continue to keep you informed, though I feel a wrench in my heart at the gloomy prospect of persistent refusal by the Russians, unless the Lord, having listened to so many prayers, grants a miracle' (*Actes et documents*, 9, p. 238). He was now working closely with Raymond Courvoisier, director of the Red Cross in Ankara, who was able to confirm Moscow's unremitting hostility. So there was nothing he could do. He had spent three months banging his head against a diplomatic brick wall. It was another failure on the part of God's consul to modify the harshness of war.

He needed Raymond Courvoisier and the Red Cross (known as the Red Crescent in Turkey so as not to upset Islamic susceptibilities) in the other task which now engrossed him: aiding Jews. Von Papen, speaking on oath to the postulator of Pope John's beatification cause, claimed that he 'helped 24,000 Jews with clothes, money and documents' (see Zisela, in *Ogri*, April 13, 1963). It is difficult to translate charity into statistics. It would be better in this context to follow the Talmudic verse which says, 'He who saves a single life, saves the

'world entire' (Keneally, p. 371). Roncalli had been made aware of the problem at a relatively early stage of the war, through refugees from Poland. He was haunted by the fate of the Struma, which left the Romanian port of Constantza in December 1941 carrying a human cargo of 769 Jewish refugees. It was mysteriously blown up by a mine, and there was only one survivor. Roncalli wrote to Mother Marie Casilda, a Sister of Our Lady of Siem, 'Poor children of Israel. Daily I hear their groans around me. They are relatives and fellow-countrymen of Jesus.' (*Actes et documents*, 9, p. 310: Letter dated April 14, 1943).

Istanbul played a key-role. Turkey was still neutral, and the last escape-route out of Nazi-occupied Europe led through the Balkans and via Istanbul. It also led to Palestine, then under British mandate. But the British argument against accepting more than a limited number of refugees in Palestine was that 'there might be spics among them', and that Jewish expansion ought to depend upon Arab consent that was unlikely to be forthcoming (see Wasserstein, Bernard, *Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945*). Istanbul was at the crossroads of information if not of immigration. Roncalli was better informed than his superiors in the Vatican. The Jewish organisation had offices in Istanbul and was desperate for help. Chaim Barlas of the Jerusalem Jewish Agency met him on January 22, 1943. It was the first of many meetings that culminated a year later in a visit from the Grand Rabbi of Jerusalem, Isaac Herzog.

In January 1943 Chaim Barlas asked Roncalli to transmit three very modest but basic requests to the Vatican. Would the Vatican sound out neutrals like Portugal and Sweden to see if they would grant temporary asylum to Jews who managed to escape? This would involve no financial liability. American Jewry would look after them. Second, would the Vatican inform the German government that the Palestine Jewish Agency had 5000 immigration certificates available? Finally Barlas wanted Vatican Radio to declare loud and clear that 'rendering help to persecuted Jews is considered by the Church to be a good deed' (*Actes et documents*, 9, pp. 87-8). That such a statement was thought necessary was a measure of how deep the roots of Christian anti-Semitism were. Though Roncalli's task here was simply to transmit, not to explain or justify, there is no reason to believe that he regarded these requests as anything other than reasonable and fulfillable.

The Vatican thought otherwise. Its reply came in the form of a letter from the Secretary of State, Cardinal Maglione, to Fr Arthur Hughes, the *chargé d'affaires* in Cairo, who worked closely with Roncalli. They conferred in Istanbul on January 12, 1943. Maglione's answer was disappointing, pompous and disconcerting. The Holy See had helped Jewish emigration in the past by taking soundings and providing subsidies, but 'unfortunately this help has increasingly encountered no slight difficulties which, for the time being, are insurmountable'. Since no 'subsidies' had been requested, it was impossible to understand why 'taking soundings' should run into such insurmountable difficulties. Maglione said nothing about what Vatican Radio might do, and was distinctly cool about 'the transfer of Jews to Palestine, because one cannot prescind from the strict connection between this problem and that of the Holy Places, for whose liberty the Holy See is deeply concerned' (*Actes et documents*, 9, p. 137).

Maglione's words were worse than any of Pius XII's 'silences'. Yet they represented the firm and considered position of the Vatican. On May 4, 1943, Maglione wrote to Mgr William Godfrey, apostolic delegate in London, to say that 'the religious feelings of Catholics

throughout the world would be offended and they would fear for their rights if ever Palestine came to belong exclusively to the Jews' (*Actes et documents*, 9, p. 272).

Roncalli was not a party to such callous indifference. He did what he could. He managed to give some practical help to the Jews of Slovakia. Capovilla sums it up:

'Through his intervention, and with the help of King Boris of Bulgaria, thousands of Jews from Slovakia who had first been sent to Hungary and then to Bulgaria and who were in danger of being sent to concentration camps, obtained transit visas for Palestine, signed by him' (*Cosmologia*, p. 578). That he did succeed, and rapidly, in this affair is proved by the fact that on May 22, 1943, Chaim Barlas thanked Roncalli for his intervention (*Actes et documents*, 9, p. 307). Two months later, Roncalli tried to use the same channels again. He wrote to King Boris on June 30, 1943, in an ambiguous style designed to flatter his prejudices and yet lure him into compassionate action:

I know that it is only too true – according to what I read coming out of Bulgaria – that some of the sons of Judah are not without reproach. But alongside the guilty, there are also many that are innocent; and there are many cases where some sign of clemency, over and above the great honour it would bring to a Christian sovereign, would be a pledge of blessings in time of trial (*Actes et documents*, 9, p. 371).

Boris replied that he would do his best, but pointed out that his own position was threatened. On August 28, 1943, King Boris died mysteriously during a return flight from Germany after seeing Hitler. It was assumed that he was killed as an unreliable ally. His six-year old son, Simeon, succeeded him. With Boris's death went Roncalli's last slim chance of influencing events in the Balkans.

In the midst of these dramatic events, on July 26, 1943, Roncalli acquired a new Secretary. The pint-sized Mgr Righi departed to be replaced by the giant (or so he seemed) Irishman, 30 year old Mgr Thomas Ryan. 'He comes from good farming stock like ourselves', Roncalli told his family, 'and he speaks Italian just like us' (*Familian*, I, pp. 629–30). The Secretariat of State may have believed that Ryan, as an Irishman, ought to get on better with the Allies. However that may have been, he spoke English and began to teach Roncalli the rudiments of the language.

Throughout this time there were dramatic events in Italy. The war in North Africa was over by May 13, 1943. 'Everyone knew' that the invasion of Italy was next on the Allied agenda. On the night of July 9–10 the Allies landed in Sicily and met with little resistance, some Italian regiments joyfully surrendering while others simply melted away. It was the end of the road for Mussolini. He was arrested, having forgotten to shave. It was July 25, 1943. 'By midnight, the news had spread through Rome and the whole complex fabric of fascism, which people had taken to be so strong and durable, disintegrated in minutes' (Mack Smith, p. 347). There began the curious inter-regnum of the aged Marshal Badoglio, who introduced himself to the nation on the same July 25 with the inauspicious slogan, 'The war goes on' (*La Guerra continua*), but soon began to negotiate with the Americans through neutral Lisbon while swearing to the Germans that he was doing nothing of the kind. It could not last.

On September 8, feast of the Birthday of Our Lady, Italy signed the armistice which took it out of the war. Confusion reigned. As King Victor Emmanuel fled southwards with a

much loot as he could carry, a Committee of National Liberation was founded. It was an alliance of Communists, Christian Democrats (including many of Montini's former students), Liberals and Socialists. Its aim was to oppose the Nazis who overnight had become the occupiers instead of the allies of Italy. There was a hiatus of power. The Germans swiftly poured in eight divisions to hold the line in the south. The Badoglio government played for time, and then submitted to the inevitable. Italy declared war on Germany on October 13, 1943.

This was a startling reversal. What did they think of it in Sotto il Monte? On October 16, 1943, when the reversal of alliances was completed, Roncalli has little to say to his family except that they should keep their heads down:

The war, a great punishment of the Lord, has been brought down on the heads of Italians. This is not the moment to be apportioning blame. We have to suffer, be silent, and do our own duty in the painful circumstances of the present. But above all and always we should remain at the disposition of the duly constituted government, and behave like men who continue to work away even when the temporal order is about to burst into flames. Each one of us should be intent on the duties of his own household or milieu, letting the soldier be a soldier, and leaving politics to those who want to be politicians; your business is to pray, suffer, obey, and be silent, silent, silent. This sacrifice will bring down on you a blessing in time (*Familian*, I, pp. 633A).

One cannot say that Roncalli's imagination was fired by the prospect of the Italian resistance movement. He did not see it as a second *Risorgimento*, in which Italians could purge their guilt and contribute towards their own liberation. 'Letting the soldier be a soldier and the politician a politician' was a prudent, unheroic recipe for a quiet life. But Roncalli's refusal of partisanship can be read more positively as a commitment to peace. He genuinely believed that there would have to be reconciliation in the end. So on October 16, three days before Italy's declaration of war on Germany, he goes out of his way to remark that 'my relations with the Germans, in Greece and in Turkey, were always good and remain good now' (*Familian*, I, p. 633).

The immediate consequence of Italy switching sides was that the country including Rome became in effect German-occupied. It was urgent therefore to get the remaining Italian Jews out of the country as soon as possible. Many were put on ships heading for Palestine. Roncalli protested to Cardinal Maglione, not at the fact that they were helped to escape, but at their destination. Since this was the only instance of Roncalli questioning the wisdom of a Vatican decision, his feelings must have been very strong. On September 4, 1943, he wrote to the Cardinal Secretary of State:

I confess that this convoy of Jews to Palestine, aided specifically by the Holy See, looks like the reconstruction of the Hebrew Kingdom, and so arouses certain doubts in my mind... That their fellow Jews and political friends should want them to go there makes perfect sense. But it does not seem to me that the simple and elevated charity of the Holy See should lend itself to the suspicion that by this co-operation, at least an initial and indirect contribution is being made to the realisation of the messianic dream. Perhaps

this is no more than a personal scruple that only has to be admitted to be dissolved, so clear it is that the reconstruction of the Kingdom of Judaea and Israel is no more than a utopia (*Notes et documents*, 9, p. 469).

After this outburst, Roncalli never referred to the matter again. But his scruple was rather disconcerting, because in 1943 the problem was to find any country at all that would take those who had escaped the extermination camps.

Roncalli's practice was better than his theology. He continued to help Jews on their way to Palestine, and earned the following testimonial from Isaac Herzog, grand rabbi of Jerusalem:

I want to express my deepest gratitude for the energetic steps that you have taken and will undertake to save our unfortunate people, innocent victims of unheard-of horrors from a cruel power which totally ignores the principles of religion that are the basis of humanity. You follow in the tradition, so profoundly humanitarian, of the Holy See, and you follow the noble feelings of your own heart. The people of Israel will never forget the help brought to its unfortunate brothers and sisters by the Holy See and its highest representatives at this the saddest moment of our history (*Notes et documents*, 10, p. 161; letter dated February 28, 1944).

But the situation on the ground was getting more and more desperate, as the last escape routes were systematically sealed off. On March 23, 1944, the Germans entered Hungary and began deporting Jews to Auschwitz. The limits on Roncalli's ability to help Jews were now cruelly apparent. There was very little room left for manoeuvre. On April 25, 1944, Mgr Dell'Acqua, Roncalli's former Secretary now in the Secretariat of State, wrote a despairing memo which probably referred to the attempt to find a ship for 7000 Jews whom the Romanians wanted to let go, if transport to Palestine could be found:

I do not think that Mgr Roncalli can do anything in this matter. His position vis-à-vis the Turkish government is very delicate. The government considers the Apostolic Delegate to be a 'distinguished guest', and no more. Farther, I think that if the refugees boarded a Turkish ship, that would mean the Turkish government had given its permission. One could think about an approach towards the German Ambassador in Ankara, von Papen, in view of the good relations which exist between him and Mons. Roncalli; but it does not seem to me to be opportune (*Notes et documents*, 10, p. 243, fn. 4).

But the friendship with von Papen was now of no avail. Von Papen got his orders from Berlin on April 6, 1944. They were clear. The German view was that Palestine is an Arab country, and so Jewish emigration there was not to be encouraged, and such a concession would upset our counter-espionage and our sea strategy' (ADAP, doc. 326). Yet one or two ships still managed to get through. The most useful thing Roncalli could do was to forward to the Vatican diplomats in Hungary and Romania the 'Immigration Certificates' issued by the Palestine Jewish Agency. They conferred no real rights, but they sometimes worked and were better than nothing. It was these 'Immigration Certificates' that gave rise to the myth that Roncalli issued 'baptismal certificates' to Jews. This story was popularised by Ira Hirshman in his book *Caution to the Winds* (New York, 1962).

Von Papen — it was his refereeing feature — had certainly helped Roncalli in his work for Jews. As nuncio to France Roncalli wrote an unsolicited letter to the President of the International Tribunal on Nazi war crimes at Nuremberg. It probably saved von Papen's life. Roncalli wrote: 'I do not wish to interfere with any political judgement on Franz von Papen. I can only say one thing: he gave me the chance to save the lives of 24,000 Jews' (*Ziolla*, Ogg. April 13, 1983). Von Papen reported this on oath to the Pope John beatification tribunal. He also described their last meeting in Turkey:

When I had to leave — recalled by Berlin — he came to greet me at the first stop after the main station. For ten minutes we paced up and down on the platform like old friends. In the end, I knelt down and asked for his blessing. I did this because I thought it would be the last time I would see him, since the Allies would certainly hang me. Then the Apostolic Delegate put a letter in my hands. Now it is in the American Archives. I read it in the train. A brother could not have written with greater cordiality (*ibid.*).

One event stands out like a beacon in the otherwise grim year of 1944, Roncalli's Pentecost sermon gleams with the conviction that the war is drawing to a close, that it is time to think of post-war 'reconstruction', and that the Holy Spirit is still at work in the world, mysteriously but powerfully. Only the Spirit can break down the barriers set up by races and nations, he said, surveying his mixed congregation. Catholics in particular liked to mark themselves off from the others — 'our Orthodox brothers, Protestants, Jews, Moslems, believers or non-believers in other religions'. The list was comprehensive enough for Istanbul. However:

My dear brothers and children, I have to tell you that in the light of the Gospel and the Catholic principle, this logic of division does not hold. Jesus came to break down all these barriers; he died to proclaim universal brotherhood; the central point of his teaching is charity, that is the love which binds all men to him as the elder brother, and binds us all with him to the Father (Righi, p. 259).

'Catholic' should be a unifying, inclusive term — not a mark of exclusive distinction. So he prayed for 'an explosion of charity' to realise this vision. It was the most 'visionary' or 'utopian' homily delivered by Roncalli in Istanbul. Yet it came from a darkened and grieving world.

On December 6, 1944, out of the blue, Roncalli received a telegram from Tardini announcing that he had been appointed nuncio to France. Mgr Joseph Guillois, who had been with him the day Italy declared war on France, congratulated him on this happier occasion. But Roncalli's feelings were more mixed, as his diary recalls:

Late at night Tardini's coded telegram arrived, like a thunderbolt. I was astonished and dismayed. I went to the chapel to ask Jesus whether I should elude the burden and the cross, or just accept it; but as calm returned I decided to accept according to the principle *non recuso laborem* [I do not refuse work] (*Letture*, p. 287).

His amazement and apprehensions were justified. Forgotten in the East for nearly twenty years, he was moving from what, but for the war, would have been a minor diplomatic post to the most prestigious Nunciature in the Pope's gift.