

# 5:31 AM on February 10, 1939. The Timely Death of Pope Pius XI For Mussolini & Hitler.

When the British surveyors in India first calculated the height of Mount Everest, they obtained an exact measurement of 29,000 feet above mean sea level. They added 29 feet to increase credibility of the preciseness of their measurement which turned out to be a figure closer to the true height of 29,031.7 feet. Their reported figure 29,029 feet added a symmetry of 29s that also, I suspect, intimated to some that more thorough examination was required in the future, because the bookend matching numbers again projected unlikelihood. I wonder if some in the surveying party pushed for that number--29,029---to communicate that very message?

--Author

Cardinal Eugene Tisserant of France, the lone outspoken anti-Fascist cardinal, wrote in his diary after Pope Pius **XI's** death that the pontiff was murdered. The pope had suffered two heart attacks several hours apart on November 25, 1938, and had been quite ill since suffering the set back and the Vatican physicians' prognosis for him was poor. At 81-years old, he had marked cardiac insufficiency that accentuated his bronchial attacks and left the dying cleric struggling for breath. He suffered a third heart attack while in bed in the very early morning hours of February 10, 1939. At four AM those at his bedside understood that his end was fast approaching but Pius XI hung on to life for another hour and one-half; eleven minutes before his death Cardinal Lorenzo Lauri whose responsibility was to administer the final sacrament was summoned but the confessor arrived less than a minute too late. Dr. Rocchi, one of the attending physicians, thought that after the pope had spoken his last clear words earlier, his lips moved slowly, and he thought the agonized pope was mouthing a Latin prayer. His last audible words, spoken firmly were: "My soul parts from you all in peace. Peace, peace!" Previously, others at his deathbed also heard him say: "We still had so many things to do." The sense of surreal sadness permeated the bedchamber as those awaiting his imminent passing softly recited psalms. About 30 seconds before expiring, he raised his right hand and feebly tried to make the sign of the cross to bless those around him. His face was covered with a white veil and his appointed chamberlain, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, lifted the thin veil and gently tapped his forehead with a series of light blows, three times as he called him by his Christian name, *Achille*. After pausing, hearing no reply he followed protocol and spoke in Latin to all present, "Truly the pope is dead." The time of death was meticulously listed as 5:31 AM. Pius XI had scaled mountains both figuratively and literally; in his robust youth, he was an accomplished mountain climber who has peaks in the Alps named after him not as a gesture of respect as pope but because he was the first to ascend them. His birthday was **May 31**, and he was born in 1857 as the youngest son of a silk cloth factory owner, in Desio outside of Milan, and was christened with the name of Ambrogio Damiano *Achille* Ratti.

For Benito Mussolini-*il Duce* [pronounced DOO-Shay] the pope's death was not soon enough. Mussolini had become the Italian Prime Minister the same year as Pius XI was elected pontiff--1922. The new pope, in his early years, helped the Italian dictator acquire credibility helping him consolidate his power, but the cleric had fumed about Mussolini's close alliance with Adolf Hitler and German Nazism. The pope was no wallflower, and he vocalized his alarm; that, the Nazis, through their attacks on the Catholic Church were creating a pagan religion of 'blood and soil' with Hitler -its blasphemous idol. The pope saw through their ideology that only the fate of

Germans mattered and condemned the blind-allegiance to the twin pillars of Germanic Nazism: *Blut und Boden*—as symbols of the return of Teutonic paganism.

The irascible, strong-willed, and aging pope could not be reined in, and many of the more diplomatic clergy among the Vatican hierarchy were fearful that his caustic remarks and criticism especially of Mussolini might detract from the privilege status that the Church held in Fascist Italy. Mussolini, had always strived to be on good terms with the Vatican, but Pope Pius XI had become an obstacle against his alliance with Germany. The pope had no delusions about Mussolini's lack of religiosity, but worse to the pope Mussolini had grown to think of himself as becoming infallible, and after his 1936 conquest of Ethiopia he displayed greater hubris in dreaming of greater conquests. He felt that Rome after two thousand years was rebuilding an empire that had to break free of the Mediterranean confinement, epitomized by his slogan, 'March on to the [Atlantic] Ocean.' When Mussolini promulgated Italy's first anti-Jewish laws that paralleled what Hitler had implemented three years earlier, the pope questioned why Mussolini had to 'ape' the Nazis, the thin-skinned Italian dictator was insulted, and he angrily complained about the pope's injurious barbs. Mussolini never felt comfortable around priests and the pope told many people around him listening that the Fascist leader was a *farceur*—a buffoon. Italian reticence to the Germans was historical, and the Great War debacle that Italy had suffered from their alliance with Germany did not warm the Italian populace to another military partnership. Italian pomposity and bombastic rhetoric were part of their political theatre, but the Nazis were zealots especially in espousing their doctrine of Aryan superiority. The barrage of attacks against the Germans that appeared on the front pages of the Vatican's daily '*giornale*', *L'Osservatore Romano*, further infuriated *il Duce* by publicizing a litany of Nazi measures that threatened Catholic life as well as the Church's influence over the German laity. Early in January 1939, *il Duce's* ambassador to the Vatican received confirmation on what the Fascist informant and spies had also formerly gleaned, Pope Pius XI was about to issue an encyclical denouncing racism and the Italian Fascist partnership with the Nazis. He had sent out official invitations to every Italian bishop to come to Rome ostensibly to mark the tenth anniversary of the Lateran Accords. The concordat was negotiated by none other than Eugenio Pacelli who had served as *nuncio* for the Vatican to Germany, living there for twelve years and knew the country well. Shortly after Hitler came into power, the agreement was signed as a guarantee of the Church rights under the new German government that most other European leaders were doing their most to ignore or isolate. Hitler received diplomatic recognition and his pariah government a modicum of legitimacy by signing the Vatican agreement, but almost immediately he failed to live up to his promises as the Nazis were disciplined in trying to lessen Catholic influence over the German *volk*. Pacelli was pro-German and although he was no lover of Nazism and Hitler, he was weary of antagonizing the Fuhrer fearing that it would only worsen matters. He saw Hitler as a brilliant agitator for social change in Germany but was at first skeptical that he was a 'man of government.' Pius XI had condemned the glorification of the Nazi *swastika* as 'a sign of another cross that was not the cherished Cross of Christ'. Pacelli had returned to the Vatican in late 1929 and for his work promoting the Church in Munich and Berlin, Pacelli was awarded by an appreciative Pius XI, the prestigious red cardinal hat. After receiving his cardinalate, he was promoted within a few months to the vaulted position of Vatican Secretary of State on February 7, 1930, becoming the second in command after the pope. Cardinal Pacelli viewed the rise of German power as a bulwark for Europeans against atheistic Communism—an ideology that he loathed more than Nazism. The pope and Pacelli were an odd couple as they worked together for nine years because they were opposites that offset each other; the pope was temperamental and bluntly outspoken whereas Pacelli was the consummate diplomat. He had a calm, quiet, disciplined demeanor that counterbalanced the pope's insensitivity that often 'roiled the waters.' With Pacelli, every word was measured, whether spoken or written; he always wrote out every word of his lengthy speeches, leaving nothing to chance or mindless adlibbing, but he often at the podium spoke from memory alone, never glancing at his well-prepared script. The pope rather, spoke always from notes and extemporaneously freelanced off script, consequences be damned. Pacelli was thin, looking unhealthily emaciated, whereas the pope was heavyset and robustly full-chested.

Throughout his 12 years in Germany, Pacelli felt most at home when he socialized with the conservative Catholic upper classes. In his comfortable residence in Berlin, Pacelli often hosted the German elite including the German

cabinet ministers and president Paul von Hindenburg. In 1917, he was consecrated a bishop in the Sistine Chapel by Pope Benedict XV and was stationed in Munich as the *nuncio* to Bavaria. In 1925, the same year that Hitler's *Mein Kampf* was published, Pacelli transferred to Berlin as the Vatican's high-ranking ambassador to the German government. He was erudite, intelligent on many far-reaching topics, and multilingual—easily switching from one language to another. He engaged in enlightened conversation and repartee that was appreciated by his special guests. His facial features were rather gaunt, with the darkest of eyes magnified by his thick lens spectacles and he smiled too little. Eugenio as a young child was frail, bespectacled and preferred his violin to outdoor play with other children. Although not an athlete, he returned to his childhood pastime of horseback riding at Eberswalde Woods, but his demanding work schedule limited his equestrian endeavors that a German benefactor bought him an electric horse that mechanically galloped that he regularly mounted in Berlin, and he later shipped back to Rome. He also took a German woman with him, Sister Pascalina Lehnert who had entered his life as a twenty-three-year-old Bavarian nun in Munich. For Pacelli, she was indispensable, managing his household and although she deeply adored him, and was protective of him, and despite constant rumors, it is not thought that they were physical lovers. She was the constant female presence in his life that got things done the way he liked them, and she was a fierce guardian that shielded his homelife from outside stress. She cleaned, cooked, laundered, and made his life pleasant—she appreciated that he depended on her private counsel. Others found her troublesome especially those who frowned and resented her hold over a cardinal at the core of the Vatican hierarchy. The cultured Pacelli had his merits for diplomacy, but other cardinals in the administration at Rome, especially the 54-year-old Cardinal Eugene Tisserant of France, disliked him. They saw Pacelli as being too weak and too prone to manipulation and bullying by others; he possessed a character 'meant to obey' those more forceful than he and would bend to their will if pressured. Pacelli, however, despite these misgivings, was given a solid chance to succeed Pope Pius XI.

Just before his death, Pope Pius XI prayed that the Lord would let him live long enough for him to give his final message to the Italian bishops but was so weak he was confined by the Vatican physicians to bed on February 6<sup>th</sup>; 1939—other than his medical retinue, only Pacelli met with him. The cardinal, beaten down by the sharp downturn in the pope's fragile health, urged the pontiff to postpone his anniversary message. Pius XI refused, he was running out of time, but fearing that his breathlessness might prevent his upcoming speech from being heard throughout the immensity of St. Peter's Basilica, he ordered that his encyclical speech be printed for distribution to the bishops. Pacelli wasn't the first finagling a delay in the encyclical's release, for Pius XI had been wary of not only Cardinal Pacelli but other prelates in the Vatican inner circle that argued against it. The pope from the beginning had taken precautions. As an assurance against those close to him who were trying to talk him out of it, the pope turned to an American clerical journalist, Jesuit priest John La Farge, known for his anathema to racism, to research and write the draft text of the encyclical secretly in Paris in strict silence. He finished it and sent the text to his Jesuit superior general for perfunctory review expecting it to be forwarded to the Vatican within days. The Jesuit leader first assigned two more conservative clerics to review and edit the manuscript and with their input they diluted the message to a more equivocal stance. On the one side, they condemned racism as heretical and advised that all persecution of the Jews must end. But they undercut the pope's message that he often spoke: "Antisemitism is inadmissible, spiritually we are all Semites." They temporized his initiative in that they added clauses that still blamed the Jews for their own sins and failings and emphasized that the Church's doctrinal inheritance concerning the Jews was not easily jettisoned. They stopped short of proclaiming followers of the Nazi *Hakenkreuz*—the crooked cross—were promoting evil. When La Farge heard nothing from Pius XI, sensing that his treatise was being sabotaged by delay, he promptly wrote a letter to the pope, who demanded that the draft be delivered to him. The Jesuit chief, Father Włodimir Ledochowski, a Polish antisemite, stalled the transfer until mid-January 1939 and submitted it only then with a cover letter urging the pope to forgo its publication. Eugenio Pacelli was unaware of the Pope's intent to issue *Humani generas unitas*—his far-reaching encyclical that would denounce racism, antisemitism, European exploitative colonialism, and the aggressive nature of Teutonic nationalism.

The pugnacious, no-nonsense pope, who was readily prone to outbursts when foiled, now sickly, could be defied but when healthy, no prelate--- no matter how high up in his ecclesiastical position---would dare oppose the strict, bellicose pontiff. Pius XI was a rigid practitioner of his beloved Catholic faith who possessed a vaulted sense of the status and dignity of his esteemed office. He always thought it only proper to eat alone and refused to not dine with underlings, he refused to rise from his seat to greet high-ranking politicians, and he insisted that his brother and sister make an appointment to meet with him and that they refer to him by his formal title. He was demanding, authoritative and set high standards and not averse to displaying his temper in front of spectators to those who had disappointed him. Once following a diplomatic blunder in Bulgaria, he demanded that Monsignor Angelo Roncalli kneel in front of him for three-quarters of an hour as dutiful penance. Learning later that the future Pope John XXIII was not fully culpable for the gaff due to circumstances unseen, the pope apologized to Roncalli, which was contrary to his usual stance on the impropriety of his high office rescinding a papal reprimand. Pius XI had a status in conflicted Europe, on the brink of war, like no other holy man. To many, especially the most faithful he as the successor to St. Peter, he possessed unquestionable moral authority from God. He exuded a forceful charisma in Italy that rivaled Mussolini's own magnetism and was independent of the fascist regime. The Italian dictator had a persuasive, cultlike hold over some Italians and even Hitler as he plotted and scheme his way to power kept a bust of Mussolini in his office. Hitler saw Italian Fascism and its dynamic leader as a strong role model. Hitler's regard for Mussolini only grew stronger after his May 1938 visit to Italy when an emotional Mussolini told Hitler at the train station in Florence upon his departure home, "no force will ever be able to separate us." The Fuhrer's eyes moistened noticeably before becoming wet with tears. When visiting Italy, heads-of-state typically visited Rome to meet with the pope, but Pius XI would grant the German leader an audience only if Hitler pledged to change his course in dealing with the Church in Germany. Hitler refused to do so and in protest the pope left Rome for the Castel Gandolfo papal palace, closed the Vatican museums, and shut off the lights illuminating the Vatican at night. The visit to Rome had not at first gone to Hitler's plans as he assumed he would be accompanied by Mussolini as they were cheered by an adulating crowd, but protocol demanded that the German chancellor be hosted by King Victor Emmanuel III. Both men despised one another; Hitler thought that the short, introverted monarch was weak-willed and his much taller but plain-faced wife, Queen Elena, bore resemblance to one of the horses pulling their ornate, antique carriage along the way on the Roman streets.

Mussolini's son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano who also served as Mussolini's foreign minister, wrote in his diary entry on February 10, 1939: THE POPE IS DEAD. On hearing the news his father-in-law made no effort to hide his glee. "That stubborn old man is dead, at long last he's gone!" he told his son Bruno. His death could not come at a more opportune time, just one day before his speech to the Italian bishops and the public release of his encyclical condemning fascism in Italy and Germany. Some suspiciously assumed that the Fascist had somehow engineered his death as a last-minute reprieve against the blow that the pope was on the verge of delivering to their aggressive ambitions. Overjoyed privately, the Fascist government's official reaction could not have been more dignified in reverent mourning for the loss of the Holy See. The fascist press that day wrote countless articles reverential to the newly deceased pope. Ciano ordered Italian flags lowered to half-mast, then went that very evening to the pope's wake at the Sistine Chapel, where he rendezvoused with Cardinal Pacelli. The two men got on their knees, facing where the pope's body was laid out, a photographer captured a photo of the two men next to one another in prayer surrounded by Vatican prelates and the Italian aristocratic elite. Mussolini balked at going to any of the funeral rites, but his son-in-law argued that his absence might tarnish their efforts in the upcoming election enclave and his snub would not go over well in Catholic Italy. The dictator, always reluctant regarding the Church, attended one of the funeral ceremonies the following week. Two days after the pope's passing, still anxious about the status of his encyclical, Mussolini had his ambassador meet with Cardinal Pacelli. The ambassador inquired if any printed copies remained and if so, he advised that their release would not be prudent. Pacelli confirmed that hundreds of copies were printed and that he would order the Vatican printing department to destroy all copies to prevent any inadvertent distribution of the speech. The vice director assured Pacelli that 'not a comma' would remain of the text and that the plates set into the printing presses would also be

destroyed. Copies of the text did survive but the finalized official document never went further than the dying pope's bedside. Even the watered-down version was too much criticism of Fascism for Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli.

In fairness, Pacelli was a strong believer like other leaders in the Church during the 1930s and 1940s in the supreme importance of the sacraments. In catechism teachings, there could be **no** salvation without the holy sacraments for Catholics and except for baptism only the clergy could administer them. The means of eternal salvation were so precious that to ensure that they were not taken away from the flock, accommodation and compromise were necessary even with undesirable forces. The fear of *apostasy* of the faith in Germany and beyond had a chilling effect on the Church protesting what they did perceive as Nazi paganistic barbarism. They also feared that more vocal, open protest by Church leaders might cause patriotic Germans to abandon their faith. The Nazis were adept at manipulating this fear, encouraging Church appeasement, forcing the Church to always 'pull its punches' to abrogate full-scale, all-out Nazi persecution. The Nazis removed crucifixes from school classroom walls and showcased trials about alleged immorality among brothers and monks but such attacks were done more to threaten the Church into silence. Like many other enterprises and institutions doing business in Germany, the Church tried to steer clear of intense criticism of the Nazis 'to avoid the worse.' When the Nuremberg Laws materialized in Nazi Germany during 1935 the Church did not protest. Some German clerics, notably Bishop Konrad von Preysing in Berlin, did urge the Vatican to display greater firmness with Nazi transgressions and to express solidarity with the oppressed German Jews. But such sentiments were in the minority. Some Church authorities rationalized that the ruling popes had imposed restrictions on European Jewry especially those they directly governed in the papal states in Italy before national unification in 1870--- so it was hypocrisy to protest similar Nazi regulation nowadays. The Church remained silent in 1938 when Nazi-inspired mobs burnt down synagogues, smashed Jewish homes and businesses in a murderous riot of extreme terror against Jews during *Kristallnacht*. As Mussolini emphasized when he passed his first set of antisemitic laws in Italy in 1938, which excluded Jews from the Fascist party, the military, teachers in public education, members in Italian honor societies, revoked Italian citizenship granted to Jews after WW-I, limited the size and value of businesses and estate properties they could own—he was just continuing measures that the Church historically utilized to prevent the Jews from corrupting the faith of the true believers.

One week after Pope Pius XI's death, the Italian and German ambassadors met to formulize their common strategy. They needed to mobilize their efforts to lobby the cardinals for Eugenio Pacelli. Diego von Bergen, had already spoken with the Vatican Secretary of State who emphasized that he wanted Adolf Hitler to know that he wished for more harmonious relations with Germany despite their differences. He was, in other words, a man the Fascists, Italian or German, could work with. Bonifacio Pignatti, Italy's 61-year-old ambassador, a good practicing Catholic and an experienced diplomat, also assured his German counterpart that the new pope would surely be more suitable to the Fascist regimes. As the conclave neared, the two embassies continued to lobby for Eugenio Pacelli. Traditionally conclaves were held among cardinals that could be assembled within several days of the former pope's passing to elect a new pope. Cardinals from countries far from Rome were usually not able to attend so the election was mostly a parochial affair where the Italian cardinals and those from nearby countries dominated the voting. The conclave was not scheduled this time until March 1—two and one-half weeks later—to accommodate the foreign cardinals travelling from afar to Rome. Uncharacteristically, the Italian contingent would have less of a say in the election because of the new scheduling format. The Italian cardinals who formed most of the Sacred College of Cardinals that would convene, had fair-minded concerns about the elevation of Pacelli. Pignatti reported that "the obstacle to his election will come from the Italian cardinals, among whom he does not enjoy much sympathy."

The opening ceremonies started with a morning Mass on March 1 at the Pauline Chapel in the Apostolic Palace. That afternoon, the cardinals marched escorted by an aristocratic Roman escort to the Sistine Chapel. Small-canopied wooden tables for each of the 62 cardinals attending were set up and atop each one were pen and inkwell, blank stationery for ballots, a stick of red wax and a candlestick with matches for lighting. The voting began the next morning and on the third casting of vote—at 5 pm--forty-eight cardinals scrawled Pacelli's name on

the blank ballots. He received the two-thirds majority needed to be elected. Outside a white smoke emanated upward from the chimney of the Apostolic Palace as the crowd gathered in the piazza below cheered. *Il Papa è fatto!* The pope is made. Thirty minutes later, aided by a large loudspeaker, the cardinal deacon came to the balcony over the front door of the basilica and following protocol, announced: *Habemus Papam!* He continued to speak in Latin telling the jubilant crowd that the conclave had elected Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, who is taking the name of his predecessor to become Pope Pius XII. Pacelli then stepped out onto the elevated *loggia*, dressed in the traditional snow-white papal robe, and blessed the ten of thousands who dropped to their knees as the new pope slowly made the sign of the cross in large sweeping gestures.

During the first several months of the new papacy there was a dramatic easing of tensions between the Vatican and Germany. On April 20<sup>th</sup>, the pope instructed his nuncio in Berlin to bring the Fuhrer the pope's warm birthday wishes and the bells across the German countryside in Catholic churches pealed in celebration while parishioners heard their priest praying to the Lord to bless the Nazi leader. Relations in Italy also improved, and Mussolini counted his *lucky stars* for the new pope. A holy man who was willing to make far-reaching concessions to the Fascists provided that the Church interest and principles were not imperiled.

The stars above had lined up in favor of the Roman dictator, but they as the Romans say, they do favor the bold. Benito Mussolini usually did not have to wait for the night sky to see the stellar twinkling above. In the 15<sup>th</sup>-century *Palazzo Venezia* down the hall from his cavernous office was the Zodiac Room which had emblazoned on its azure ceiling the stars of the constellations that comprised the Sun's path during the passing months as it travelled across the backdrop of the stationary stars. There he met almost every afternoon his 26-year-old young mistress as she eagerly waited for him. Although he was long married, and had many other lovers too, including bastardized children, the curly-haired Clara Petacci, was special. She had impressive drive and ambition. She was a high school dropout who despite her own marriage two years earlier that was personally blessed by the pope, she pursued Mussolini with undaunting persistence, winning him over. She began her affair in 1936 with Mussolini, talking to him on the telephone daily, and she recorded most of her conversations with him in her personal diary. He was obsessed with her and their lovemaking and she despite her youthful pursuits that included music playing the violin, sketching, and drawing, designing clothing, and writing poetry—placed all of them far behind her deep devotion to him. He, a lover that was four months older than her own father. Her father was a prominent Roman physician. He was Dr. Francesco Petacci, who served as a Vatican physician. He was the primary physician supervising the care of Pope Pius XI in his final days and he was responsible for administering the stimulant drugs meant to increase the circulation of blood from the failing heart of the terminally ill pope. Some of the bishops questioned and criticized their use after learning that if not used cautiously they could tax the metabolic demand on the failing heart.

Pope Pius XI was a Gemini, being born on May 31<sup>st</sup>. The sign of the two twins, Castor, and Pollux of Grecian and Roman mythology. His death was meticulously recorded as occurring at 5:31 AM, marking a time designation that would bookend and parenthesize his whole lifespan with the 5-3-1 numerals. Coincidence and a curiosity, perhaps? A hidden message, maybe? His timely demise was the most fortuitous of last-minute reprieves for the Fascist cause in Italy and Germany. Perhaps like those who first measured the height of the world's tallest mountain, someone concerned at the pope's deathbed possibly saw the symmetry of recording birth and death times to set a flag about a deed that would set in motion Nazi crimes whose evil extent and sheer magnitude dwarfed the highest reach of the Himalayan peaks. Pius XII would never stand up to Mussolini nor to Hitler. Both men intimidated him, and they recognized that early on. Despite his many talents, Eugenio Pacelli was most at ease feeding his pet canaries with delightful crumbs from his morning breakfast. How many men who participated in the wartime persecution of the Jews, rounding them up for wholesale murder were at least nominal Roman Catholics? Especially in Italy, there is no question that the Catholic clergy had great influence and a crusade against demonizing the Jews would have had impact. What if Pius XII, who was told repeatedly about the extent of the atrocities against the Jews had excommunicated Hitler and Mussolini? It would have at least ended the farce that the Fascists of Italy and Germany invested in to portray themselves as conservative defenders of Christianity.

The pope's silence was not golden but deadly, not for one victim but for over 6 million Jews. Historian Peter Hayes in his book to explain *why* the Holocaust occurred rightly proclaims: Beware the beginnings! His warning reiterates an old German proverb: *Wehret den Anfangen!*

By R. Anthony Saritelli

February 3, 2023.

My birthdate--May 31, 1953. [05/31/1953]

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