



The Pope's Last Crusade: How an American Jesuit Helped Pope Pius XI's Campaign to Stop Hitler

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A conspiracy within the Vatican—to stop an outspoken Pope

In 1938, Pope Pius XI was the world's most prominent critic of Hitler and his rhetoric of ethnic "purity." To make his voice heard, Pius called upon a relatively unknown American Jesuit whose writing about racism in America had caught the Pope's attention. Pius enlisted John LaFarge to write a papal encyclical—the Vatican's strongest decree—publicly condemning Hitler, Mussolini, and their murderous Nazi campaign against the Jews.

At the same time conservative members of the Vatican's innermost circle were working in secret to suppress the document. Chief among them was Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, whose appeasement of the Germans underlay a deep-running web of conspiracy. Pacelli, who would become Pope Pius XII, was joined by Wlodimir Ledóchowski, leader of the Jesuit order, to keep the finished encyclical from reaching the increasingly ill Pope.

Peter Eisner, award-winning reporter and author of the critically acclaimed *The Freedom Line*, combines shocking new evidence (released only recently from Vatican archives) and eyewitness testimony to create a compelling journey into the heart of the Vatican and a little-known story of an American's partnership with the head of the Catholic Church. A truly essential work, it brings staggering new light to one of the most critical junctures in modern history.

The Pope's Last Crusade: How an American Jesuit Helped Pope Pius XI's Campaign to Stop Hitler Details

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From Reader Review The Pope's Last Crusade: How an American Jesuit Helped Pope Pius XI's Campaign to Stop Hitler for online ebook

Fredrick Danysh says

On the eve of World War II Pope Pius XI was about the only head of state to challenge Hilter's treatment of the Jews and his move for territorial dominance. The pope commissioned an American Jesuit priest, Father John LaFarge, to write an encyclical for him on human rights. This is the story of Father LaFarge's efforts to compose the document and the pope's struggle against anti-semitism despite obstacles placed in their paths by Church officials.

Ian says

Sloppily researched; it's more about the story the author wanted to tell than actual history. Readers unfamiliar with the era are likely to be grossly misinformed.

Edit: Since discussed the book with a Jesuit priest of my acquaintance who had also read it, and he agreed with me that it was a poorly researched book that made a lot of unsubstantiated claims.

Second Edit: Since this book has been getting high ratings by readers, I should note that, for a book that claims to tell a story of "The Lost Encyclical" it's pretty fascinating how few quotes there are from the text in question-- perhaps, as inquisitive minds will later find out, the actual contents of the text does not support Eisner's claims.

Third Edit: There's also several pages near the end of the book dedicated to promoting unsubstantiated conspiracy theories that Pius XI fatal heart attack (it was his third) was actually an assassination. Does Eisner have any evidence? No, but he sure likes to spin the innuendo.

Gary Patton says

I love a good spy story ...especially when it is alleged to be true. And as fellow reviewer, Ian, points out below in his comments, you're wise to NEVER forget that this is an author's interpretation of a complex issue in our past ...not documented history. One could argue that this book is much like Dan Brown's fictional novels.

The Catholic Church and its Pope during the 15 years that Hitler and His Nazis ravaged Europe and North Africa are regularly still criticized for not doing much to counter the human carnage.

As an historian, Mr. Eisner never gave me any documentation to support the facts and innuendos recounted in this book so I could discover if the Papacy and some of its senior staff were actually heroes, as implied in "Pope's Last Crusade" ...NOT quiet collaborators for appalling political reasons.

GaryFPatton
(2013-09-21)

Nancy says

I received this book through Goodreads First Reads giveaway.

A non-fiction that reads like a novel. Is it religion or politics? The year 1938, Pope Pius XI had the courage to express his views against Hitler and Nazism...not everyone in the Vatican agreed with him. Some even went so far as to go against his instructions or wishes. A good read!

John McDonald says

John LaFarge was the unassuming and scholarly Jesuit Editor of America magazine during pre-World War II years. America, published in New York, was read by Catholics worldwide for its reporting on issues and events important to Catholics. It appears it was also read by Achilles Ratti, Pope Pius XI, a mountaineer of reknown and an outspoken critic of Adolph Hitler and Nazism at time when the Vatican timidly tip toed around Nazism and the Vatican's political relations with Germany and Italy.

LaFarge had written an important work on racism in America, based largely on his experiences as a parish priest in St. Mary's County, Maryland, a work that was read with great interest by the Pope, who believed it was his duty to promulgate an unwavering and powerful statement against anti-Semitism, Adolph Hitler, and the alliance that Mussolini had formed with Hitler. The Vatican Secretary of State at the time, Eugenio Pacelli who would become Pope after Ratti's death, was reticent to speak out against Hitler because of uncertainty surrounding the enforcement of the Concordats with Germany finally ratified in the late 1920s by the Vatican.

Pope Pius XI read LaFarge's arranged a secretive and private meeting with LaFarge, outside the knowledge of the Vatican Secretary of State and anyone else in the Vatican bureaucracy. Pius directed LaFarge to pen an encyclical opposing anti-Semitism and Hitler in the strongest possible language and to do so privately, secretly, and quickly.

Pope Pius' views opposing anti-Semitism were strong and based on the correct perception that racism and anti-Semitism were threats that would eventually engulf Catholics in German occupied lands and worldwide. Pius told LaFarge that no one other than LaFarge, the Pope, and the 2 assistants who LaFarge would name and swear to secrecy, were to know about his work.

LaFarge was an obedient Jesuit. He understood the importance of his vows and he arranged through the Jesuit Provincial General, known as the Black Pope for the influence wielded by the Jesuit Provincial General in Vatican politics, a man named Wlodimir Ledochowski to work do his work in Paris together with 2 other Jesuit scholars.

From the beginning Ledochowski acted to scupper the publication of the Encyclical because of his ambivalence toward anti-Semitism but because of his belief that of two evils, Nazism was less troublesome than Communism which the Nazis seemed to oppose. He also, in a manner that was Machiavellian in conception, scope and implementation acted to ensure that LaFarge's final product was given to him for delivery to the Pope--something Pius wanted to avoid by having LaFarge deliver it personally--and to delay its delivery in the belief that the Pope would succumb to heart disease before the encyclical was ever published to the world.

Ledochowski's deceit prevailed and the important worked entrusted by the Pope to LaFarge, a genuinely good person known as Uncle John to the Jesuits at his provincial house in New York City, was never published.

When he succeeded Ratti as Pope Pius XII, Pacelli, the Secretary of State under Ratti, destroyed all copies of the Encyclical penned by LaFarge and the Church's strong voice opposing Hitler, Mussolini, and the Nazis was lost forever. Some believe to this day that the Church abided evil by not speaking out more forcefully against Hitler, but in fact the Church's voice was silenced by 2 important prelates with influence in the power structure of the Vatican.

The author bases the story on an after dinner conversation LaFarge had with some of the younger Jesuits on America's staff, a conversation that held the other Jesuits spellbound for hours. It was a story never told before by LaFarge or anyone else, including Grundlach, his Jesuit contemporary who assisted him in the writing and repeatedly admonished LaFarge to deliver the Encyclical personally to Pius XI, as the Pope directed LaFarge.

It is a story well told with important lessons about where duty to a larger good begins and obedience as an unnecessary restraint ends or should end.

Ethan says

The year was 1938. Hitler was in complete power, leading Nazi Germany on a campaign through Europe, to spread his views. In the Vatican, Pope Pius XI, who was slowly declining into failing health, sought the assistance of an American Jesuit Priest, John LaFarge. LaFarge was a scholar, whose expertise on racial injustices perfectly fit into the Church's views on the situation. His goal was to publicly denounce the Nazism and anti-Semitism that he feared would destroy the teachings of the church. Coming from the Pope, the highest leader of the Catholic Church, this condemnation of Hitler could potentially impact the views of other world leaders, and in turn, World War II itself.

Of course, this process was easier said than done. Pius XI found himself in the midst of an Italian government that seemed to be, whether out of fear or agreement, embracing Hitler's Germany. They even invited the leader to visit their country. Pius XI would have nothing to do with the fanfare of Hitler's arrival. Instead, he retreated to a private Vatican estate, outside of the city, in a quiet protest. Met by resistance from even members of his own church who would rather keep peace with Hitler than provoke him with a damning proclamation, Pius XI stuck to his guns, to denounce what he knew was wrong.

I've always been fascinated by the many pieces to the giant puzzle that is World War II. This time in our history seems to show the best and worst aspects of our world, and I think there are many things to be learned. I was unfamiliar with the story of Pope Pius XI, but with all of the recent actions taking place in the Vatican, it seemed like a good time to delve deeper into the church's history. I was immediately drawn to Pius's unassuming, humble ways. He really comes off as a kind of quiet force. This book gives interesting insights into the mysterious protocols and inevitable politics of the Vatican. Despite its rather brief length, the book is a detailed, suspenseful account of this Pope's history making actions.

H.E. Regis says

I received a copy of this book through a goodreads giveaway. It was truly a masterfully written book. Extremely informative and yet very enjoyable to read. Definitely one I would recommend!

Lee says

It read well, but could get repetitive at times. It was odd that the never-published encyclical was said to be the "first" blast at Nazism & anti-Semitism, at the same time to be reading of the pope's radio addresses and other public statements covering the same topics.

Cardinal Pacelli (Pope Pius XII) comes out looking poorly, as a Vatican insider who slow-rolled the Pope's statements in the interest of preserving the Church.

Vincent says

I won Peter Eisner's *The Pope's Last Crusade: How an American Jesuit Helped Pope Pius XI's Campaign to Stop Hitler*, as a Goodread's Giveaways. Eisner introduces us to the Jesuit John LaFarge. An American Jesuit who dedicated his life to racial justice and the pursuit of equality for all.

The book read more like a series of newspaper articles, but clearly details the political intrigue behind the Vatican walls. Pope Pius XI was a staunch enemy of Hitler, Mussolini and all their anti-Semitic policies. Yet, within Pius's inner circle, we learn of the attempts to stonewall the ailing pope and the release of an encyclical denouncing the Nazi and Fascist policies.

Enter John LaFarge, a Jesuit true to the definition of humility. Eisner's depiction of LaFarge would make the reader believe the American Jesuit was a true hero lost to history. The first few chapters created a sensationalism surrounding LaFarge as if he would be the savior of Pius's cause. Eisner seems to reach for a story that doesn't appear fully researched.

Eisner attempts to provide insight into the key players surrounding the events of this would-be encyclical. Of particular interest is Pius XI's successor, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli and the Jesuit Superior General Wlodimir Ledochowski. The conservative Pacelli is the key player other than the pope himself. Eisner's depiction of Pacelli appears inflated at times and may not give the reader an accurate depiction of the future Pope Pius XII. Eisner reaches conclusions regarding how Pacelli would react to events based on past behavior. The research doesn't appear complete enough to support such conclusions.

Historical figures like Hitler, Mussolini, and Franklin Roosevelt are secondary to the reader, but integral to understanding the historical importance of what Pope Pius XI was attempting. Eisner's work makes the reader wonder how different our history would be had the Vatican's role prior to and during the Second World been different.

Maria Kiguthi says

Very well researched and presented. This book focuses on Pope Pious XI and John LaFarge and the encyclical that could have changed the course of history had it been published. I received a copy through

Goodreads First Reads.

Anna says

(July 1938, Paris) "As for Hitler, they explained to me, there was really nothing to worry about," LaFarge wrote. "Nous sommes si calme," people kept telling him. "But when you have heard people tell you four or five times a day how calm they are, you wonder just how deep is that tranquility?"

Peter Eisner

I think this story would fall under a "missed opportunity" of history.

Of course, intrigue and secrecy are the foundation for the lost encyclical of Pius XI. The characters of the title are Pope Pius XI and Fr John LaFarge. The moment in question is May 1938 through February 1939 when Hitler and Mussolini are still trying to solidify their alliance and the Western powers were still guessing at motives and formulating strategies.

Eisner does a good job of keeping the events straight in a chronological order as well as the five main characters that figure in this story in addition to the other historical figures. We have the outspoken Pope, who is elderly, already suffered a near-fatal heart attack, and is trying to find different outlets to get his message out to the wider world outside of Fascist Italy. He is surrounded by others like Cardinal Pacelli, who is currently the Vatican Secretary of State and will later become Pope Pius XII. He is more diplomat in the vein of Neville Chamberlain than a spiritual figure. Also in a position of power, is the superior general of the Jesuit order, Wlodomir Ledochowski who comes from a noble family that had been connected with the Hapsburg court and seems to be the most murky character and to have ulterior motives to suppress the encyclical. We also have fellow Jesuit Gustav Gundlach who is a Vatican insider assigned by Ledochowski to "help" with the secret project. And lastly, we have Fr John LaFarge, the American priest who has been secretly summoned by the pope to draft the encyclical that linked anti-Semitism to racism ...

"He was to write a papal declaration such as never had been seen before, one that firmly and categorically represented the church's vision of the conflagration facing Europe. This would be the church's strongest statement ever, an encyclical that rejected anti-Semitism and the Nazi doctrine that espoused it. So doing, LaFarge would articulate church policy, and his thoughts and words about race and humanity would be inscribed in Catholic doctrine and would be parsed for guidance worldwide."

Lorraine says

Very interesting book....lots of questions regarding the catholic Church in WWII. Hopefully many things will become clear after 2015 when more files become open.

Kathy says

What intrigued me to read this book was the title "American Jesuit helped Pius XI Crusade to stop Hitler" Even though I am a Catholic, I know Pius XII was the pope during WWII and I knew nothing about Pius XI. It was a very good read and really gave me pause to wonder what would have happened if Pius XI had lived and published the encyclical that he had the Jesuit, John LaFarge, write secretly condemning in no uncertain terms Hitler and Mussolini. He died in 1939 and realized the evil and inevitability of a war. It was eye-

opening for me.

HJ says

good book, I loved learning about this little discussed aspect of WW2. As a former catholic and history buff I found it interesting and an easy read

Patricia says

A well researched, very interesting book about the last days of Pope PiusXI and his campaign against Mussolini and Hitler and their policies of hate and racism against the Jews. Pius had selected an American Jesuit who had already written extensively about racism in the American South where he spent his early career working with the poor in southern Maryland. Pius arranged to meet him in secret while Fr.LaFarge was traveling in Europe for America Magazine published by the Jesuits. The Pope indicated he wanted to publish an encyclical which would firmly lay out the Church's position on the policies of Facism and Nazism. Fr La Farge was assisted by Fr.Gundlach,a German Jesuit who had more experience liturgical language. The Pope had requested that it be brought to him personally on completion but Fr. Lafarge's health was suffering and one of his brother's was ill so he handed it to his immediate superior, the head of the Jesuits in Rome. Unfortunately, he was not in favor of the Pope's strong language against the forces at work in Europe and held onto the document. He may not have been alone in his sentiments since the Vatican Secretary of State was Eugenio Pacelli who later became Pius XII. Having spent a number of years in Germany, he was the consummate diplomat, the exact opposite of the forceful PiusXI. The document was finally given to the Pope but his health was deteriorating and they essentially waited him out. He had planned a big meeting of bishops and died the day before it was to take place. Pacelli took the name Pius II and unfortunately he and the Church's silence regarding the extinction of the Jews is what people today remember.
