In 2006, in a momentous development long awaited by historians of the Holy See, documents in the Vatican Secret Archives from the papacy of Pius XI (1922–39) were made available to the public. Well before that time, David Kertzer had published three excellent books about papal politics and relations with the Jews. He also had begun examining reams of material relevant to Pius XI in state and religious archives in Italy and elsewhere, as well as memoirs and secondary studies. Kertzer was admirably prepared to deal with the tens of thousands of newly released Vatican documents. In his resulting new book, exhaustively researched, fascinating, and convincing, the papacy of Pius XI reads like a Shakespearean tragedy.

Pius XI and Benito Mussolini came to power in the same year. Initially the pope, distrustful of parliamentary democracy, saw the new Italian head of government as offering great opportunities. Here was an authoritarian ruler with whom he could work, who would not only provide political stability and protection from both Socialist advocates and Fascist extremists but also grant Vatican requests. Mussolini seemed to offer the possibility of what Kertzer calls “a confessional state—one where the machinery of the authoritarian regime would be at the service of the Church” (355). Pius XI’s desire for such an arrangement and Mussolini’s interest in legitimization for his regime resulted in the concordat of 1929 between Italy and the Holy See.

Anticlerical incidents caused primarily by fanatic Fascists continued after the concordat, but at the highest levels the new relationship was amicable. Pius XI helped convince the Italian public that Fascism was preferable to liberal democracy, while Mussolini granted many of the pope’s private requests. Kertzer describes these constant favors: books and films offensive to

the Church were censored; scanty clothing, mixed-gender gymnastics, and public dancing were banned; the rights of Protestants to convene and proselytize were threatened (although Kertzer indicates that Italian judges did not permit the order for curtailment to go into effect); and much more.

When the new chancellor of Germany, Adolf Hitler, denounced communism and appeared ready to cooperate with the Holy See for a few months after January 1933, the pope and his secretary of state Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pius XII, thought they perceived another regime with which they could work to protect Church institutions. The result in July 1933 was another concordat. Again Pius XI gave legitimacy to an authoritarian regime, despite, among other cruelties, the growing persecutions of Jews in the Third Reich.

Papal disillusionment with the führer was not long in coming. Despite his promises, Hitler’s minions harassed Church institutions in Germany much more than Fascists were doing in Italy. Kertzer also refers to deliberately provocative Nazi show trials of hundreds of priests, monks, and nuns accused of corruption and pederasty (466). Nazi doctrines of the superiority of the “Aryan” race, the semireligious cult of the führer, “exaggerated nationalism” (294–96; Pius XI’s term), and the increasing likelihood of German aggression also alienated the pope. And unlike Mussolini, Hitler offered no cooperation. Clearly the pope could not work with this regime. Contrary to the advice of Pacelli and other papal counselors, he issued the encyclical Mit brennender Sorge in March 1937 to condemn certain Nazi doctrines and practices, but he made few other public protests. He never denounced the ongoing persecutions of Jews in the Third Reich, the Anschluss in March 1938, or Kristallnacht in November of that same year. Kertzer stresses the disastrous results of Pius XI’s reticence, suggesting that had the pope publicly condemned Hitler, the Italian people might have been so alienated from Nazism that Mussolini would not have been able to convince them to accept an alliance with the Third Reich.

In many ways, Pius XI’s policies toward Fascist Italy resembled those involving Germany. Kertzer demonstrates that the pope was uncomfortable with Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia and subsequent intervention on the side of Franco in Spain, but he uttered no public objections. He desperately disliked Mussolini’s growing alliance with Hitler, but apart from leaving Rome for Castel Gandolfo during the führer’s visit to the Holy City in May 1938, he did not publicly express his dismay. Then as the duce’s racist and anti-Jewish policies emerged in the summer and autumn of 1938, Pius XI took almost no public position in opposition, although he lobbied hard behind the scenes for the concordat-assigned right of the Church to sanction and conduct marriages