

Thanks to New York
Herald-Tribune for
this Lippmann re-
print. Thanks to

University of Notre Dame
Religious Bulletin
February 15, 1939.

networks for broad-
casting the funeral.
(operation) mother
of Victor Assad, Bro.

Pius XI.

by Walter Lippmann.

Though he died saying that there were still "so many things to do," the commanding influence of Pius XI has only begun to make itself felt. In the deep disorder of his time he discerned the root of the disorder; in the savage struggles of his time he defined the issue at the heart of the struggle; in the darkness and the confusion he clarified the idea upon which the civilization of the West is founded, by which it will be restored and preserved.

This idea is the mold in which Western civilization has been formed. It is that because he is endowed with reason and can, therefore, choose between falsehood and the truth, man is an inviolable soul; that because he is an inviolable soul, man must never be treated as if he were a thing; and he can never finally surrender to arbitrary unreason and to brute force. Upon this conception of man depend all the institutions of Western civilization: The true liberty of the individual, the very conception of law, the grounds of justice, and unity among rational persons.

The pontificate of Pius XI was one long protest against the denial of this conception of man. He protested in Russia, in Mexico, in Spain, in Germany, in Italy; what made the protest an influence which will shape the course of history was that it rose out of a clear understanding of that faith which, despite all the political and sectarian and dogmatic differences that divide them, is the basic and universal faith of Western men.

Thus he made plain to the discerning what will eventually become clear to almost all-- that the essential issue is not between Fascism and Communism, not between authoritarianism and democracy, not between liberty and order, not between license and discipline, but between the faith which affirms and the heresies which deny that men are inviolable, responsible, rational and free. Because he defined the real issue at the center of the whole immense disorder, Pope Pius XI exercised a spiritual influence beyond that of any pope in modern times.

Though in many parts of the world his church is persecuted, it is the fact, and experience will prove it, that under his guidance its foundations have become stronger and more nearly universal than they have been for several centuries. Not for many generations has the moral energy of his church been so abundant; not for a long age has its intellectual life been so vigorous, so clarifying and creative.

Pius XI was equal to the historic test which he was called upon to meet. For he had the inner virtue of great men, which is that, when they are put to the test, they know how to draw from that which is most essential in tradition, the understanding and the power to meet the test.

An uninspired and mediocre man might easily have fallen into confusion and weakness. But this pope was a great man. And so, as the disorder developed, he drew from that which is most fundamental and most universal in the tradition of his church, the capacity to see clearly and the strength to speak resolutely.

For that he is venerated in every land. Because of that the Prime Minister of Great Britain paid him a visit, not as a matter of perfunctory courtesy but of acknowledgment that he represented that conception of human life which civilized men cannot and will not surrender. That visit was an event without precedent in modern times, and its symbolic significance was immense. For in making that visit the Prime Minister acted on behalf of all those who, though they have different creeds, have one faith. He was expressing their gratitude to the Pontiff who had declared its faith to a world that had almost lost it but is increasingly aware that the world must return to it. For this Pius XI will be long remembered, since his influence will be long felt.

And so when in the future men come to define the place of Pius XI in history, they will perhaps say that he was in modern times the most catholic, in the sense of the most universal, defender of the faith that makes men civilized.

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