THE CONTROVERSY OVER EDGARDO MORTARA

Description

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Vittorio Messori, *Kidnapped by the Vatican? The Unpublished Memoirs of Edgardo Mortara* (Ignatius Press 2017)

On Wednesday June 23, 1858, a knock came on the door of Salomone and Marianna Mortara, Jewish residents of Bologna, the second-largest city of the Papal States. Marianna answered; it was the police. “Your son Edgardo has been baptized, and I have been ordered to take him with me,” boomed the man at the door.

It is hard to think of a more horrific occurrence not involving a death. The government has come for a six-year-old child, and there is nothing for the parents to do. Moreover, in this case, the police were representatives of the pope, Blessed Pope Pius IX, who at the time was the secular leader of the Papal States, recognized as both pope and prince.

The son, Edgardo Mortara, had been born in Bologna in 1851. When he was about a year old, he fell ill and appeared on the verge of death. Fearing for his eternal salvation, his Catholic nursemaid, Anna Morisi, secretly baptized him. (He later considered her “as his mother in the supernatural order.”) After he recovered, Anna did not mention the baptism. However, when another Mortara child fell ill and unfortunately died about five years later, she told some friends and her confessor about Edgardo’s earlier baptism. Thus began one of the more controversial moments in Catholic history.

The problem was that while Catholic tradition had long forbidden the baptism of infants whose parents are not Catholic, it made an exception for those in danger of death. (Even today, the Code of Canon Law provides: “An infant of Catholic parents or even of non-Catholic parents is baptized licitly in danger of death even against the will of the parents.”) Moreover, any child who was baptized as a Catholic had to be given a Catholic education.

According to the book, Church officials – who also were state officials – spent about a year trying to work out an acceptable arrangement with the parents. They offered to enroll Edgardo in a Catholic boarding school in Bologna until he reached the age of majority. The Church would cover the expenses, and the parents could visit anytime they wanted. Eventually, however, it became clear that neither this nor any other offer was acceptable. Accordingly, the pope arranged for the six-year-old to be brought to Rome.

While this is the most widely known of such events, it was not the only time something like this happened in the Papal States. In fact, at this time similar matters happened all around the world. The book’s introduction talks about horrific events in Islamic Turkey, but even in the United States, slavery was still the law in many states. In fact, not long after this American authorities began removing Native American children from their parents and sending them to special boarding schools. The Mortara event, however, was different. It involved a pope, and it was part of a significant revolution in European

geopolitics.

The Mortara case has been researched in depth and dissected in articles and books. Never before, however, has the account of the involved child, Edgardo Mortara, been published. Even for those who have read a good deal about the case, there are several interesting insights.

In the first half of *Kidnapped by the Vatican?*, Italian Church historian Vittorio Messori reviews writings from Mortara's personal archive and elsewhere. He strongly defends the papal action – so much so that his analysis has offended many reviewers of the work and spawned an open debate in Catholic circles.

Messori argues that the pope had to follow established Church law to save the child's soul, which was more important than any earthly relationship, even that between a six year old and his parents. He draws an analogy to a modern society that might remove a child from his parents due to physical or other abuse. At what point are such decisions made? One cannot help but think about the U.S. decision to return Elián González to Cuba in 2000.

Still, the more interesting part of the book is the second half, written by Mortara himself. In these memoirs (written in the third person), Mortara describes his "sequestration" as "a miracle of grace." He says that he shed some tears when he was taken from his mother, but after a few kind words, he calmed down and he did not cry anymore or ask about his family.

He reports feeling the warmth of Christianity and quickly developing a great love for Pope Pius IX, who considered the boy as a son. Edgardo still loved his parents, and he prayed for them, but when they asked, he said he would return to them only if they converted to Christianity. This they would not do.

Some previous accounts reported that the family did not practice their Jewish faith. Mortara makes clear that they were devout. At one point, however, his mother was ready to convert so that she could be close to her son, but his father would not consent.

The "kidnapping" made international news and became a rallying cry for those who supported toppling the Papal States. Pius IX, however, was convinced of the justness of his action. To those who urged him to return the boy to the Mortara family, he replied: "*Non possumus*" ("We cannot"). He would incur the wrath of the world, if that were necessary.

Young Edgardo understood that he was "the little Mortara" who was at the center of an international dispute. Revealing passages show that this both embarrassed and frightened him. Having once been seized by authorities and taken from his family, he feared that those who opposed the pope would remove him from his new "father." Neither he nor the pope wanted that to happen. Pius vowed: "I declare to everyone that not even all the bayonets of the world will force me to hand this child over to the clutches of the Revolution and the devil."

In these memoirs, Mortara wrote that Pope Pius IX "neither stole nor kidnapped a child from his parents, as the anti-Catholic press repeated tirelessly." Instead, the pope tried "all possible methods of persuasion and conciliation," including "gentle, paternal measures," to persuade the parents to provide a Catholic education. Only when that failed and due to the "extreme and imminent danger incurred by the child's soul," did Pius IX sequester the child from his parents.

As Mortara saw it, the pope “rescued this soul from Hell so as to restore it to the One who predestined and chose it, to Christ, the son of the true God, the invisible Head of the Church.” In fact, Mortara saw sacrifice in the pope’s actions: “For him I was the child of tears, and he loved me like a mother who prefers the son who has made her suffer the most.”

At age 16, Mortara decided to become a Catholic priest. He joined the Order of the Canons Regular as a novice. When he told his parents, they said “if that was his decision and if he had made it freely, they had no objection, and were completely satisfied.” Others, however, did not take it as well.

Political agitators plotted to kidnap him from his seminary in Rome. He wrote: “The controversy over the Mortara child was only a pretext. What they wanted was to humiliate the Church by discrediting the papacy, so as to put an end to it with its temporal power.” Mortara fled to South Tyrol (a region in the Alps then under Austrian rule) in disguise.

Mortara eventually was ordained as Reverend Father Pio Maria Mortara, C.R.L. He was scholarly and fluent in several languages. He maintained good relations with his family, regularly corresponded with them, and constantly prayed for them.

His father having passed away, Fr. Mortara tried to convince his mother to convert to Catholicism, but she “would begin crying, and what can one say to a weeping mother? What other response can one make but a respectful silence?” He referred to her as the “poor lady, who, in the famous Mortara case, was and always will be the lady of suffering.” While writing of her love for him, he explained that he was both her “son of sorrow” and her preferred child. These are very similar to the terms he used when writing about Pope Pius IX.

Fr. Mortara spent most of his priestly life outside Italy, eventually settling in Liege, Belgium. He preached and encouraged others to come to Christ. He also never ceased to champion the cause of Pius IX. His dearest hope was that Pius would be named a saint. Here are his exact words:

“There will come a day, yes, and it is not far away, in which, once they have stopped listening to the calumnies and the “*Crucifige*” of the dregs of humanity, posterity will accept the poor arguments of the Mortara child so as to tie them into scented garlands of immortal flowers that will adorn and decorate the altar on which the Catholic world will greet, with enthusiastic acclamation, PIUS IX, THE SAINT.”

Fr. Mortara died in 1940, at the age of 88. Forty years later, St. John Paul II declared Pope Pius IX blessed.

Kidnapped by the Vatican? has created something of a firestorm in the Catholic press, primarily because both the first half of the book (written by Messori) and an early influential review endorsed the actions of Pius IX. At least one noted author suggested that Messori doctored Mortara’s writings to make them appear more favorable to the Church. Press clippings from the late 1800s, however, show Mortara saying things largely consistent with his words in the book. Of course, that still leaves the argument that Mortara suffered from some combination of brainwashing and the Stockholm Syndrome. That’s not an easy sell, and others have raised some interesting questions.

In the foreword to the book, Roy Schoeman, a Catholic convert from Judaism and author of the book *Salvation Is From the Jews*, explains that this case sits at the crossroads of the greatest social

transformation of modern times: from a fundamentally religious view of the world to a fundamentally materialistic one. Schoeman asks, “What if the teaching of the Catholic Church is true? What if, once created, the human person lives for all eternity, and the nature of that eternity – whether perfect bliss or unending misery – is dependent on the sacraments and on the person’s moral formation?” If that were the case, would the pope have been justified?

Vatican II’s “Declaration on Religious Freedom” proclaimed that secular power cannot be used to coerce in matters of religion. For most Catholics, this is uncontroversial, but the Mortara case does more than reveal a problem with the Church of the 1800s or any church having temporal authority. It raises questions about the very nature of faith. How, for instance, does one weigh the saving of a soul against the natural rights of parents and children? Good people of all faiths can and should ponder these questions, and this book is not a bad place to start.

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