The Holy See and WWII Communications

by Gregorio Pirozzi

“Nulla è perduto con la pace, tutto può esserlo con la guerra!”
“Nothing is lost with peace, everything can be with war!”
Pope Pius XII – 1939

1940 Vatican
Pope Pius
XII ssr

Introduction

World War II disrupted virtually every family, world-wide. During the war, and for several years after the end of hostilities, the Holy See played a significant and largely overlooked role in communications among POWs, civilian internees and separated loved ones, with the establishment and operation of a unique message service. Through a vast international network of diplomatic Nunciatures, Apostolic Delegations, Bishoprics, local parishes and various Catholic organizations, the Holy See was able to establish and maintain communications in often impossible situations. The organizational intermediary for this supra-national communication network was the Vatican Office of Information (Ufficio Informazioni), established shortly after the outbreak of war in 1939. Vatican Radio played a critical role.

In addition, both throughout and after the war, a Pontifical Commission for Assistance was involved in the repatriation of large numbers of POWs and displaced persons and, in some measure, was also involved in communications between separated individuals.

The message service connected the Vatican Office of Information with over fifty nations on every continent. Yet this Vatican communication network is little known.

A survey of a few cases is sufficient to establish both the value and the circumstances, the international scope and wide variety of channels that were used to convey the messages, bringing human scale to the turmoil of this tragic time.

Background in World War I

Vatican outreach had roots in the experience of the Great War, when Pope Benedict XV made several efforts to mediate the conflict. In addition to providing for humanitarian assistance, the Vatican established a limited service, via a network of diplomatic Nuncios, to provide information regarding the status of military personnel. This effort served as both a precursor and model for the much more extensive Office of Information established during WWII (see Figure 1).
1. World War II Vatican Office of Information

At this Vatican Office of Information, in the Palazzo San Carlo, there was established a facility for the public to write messages. In other areas of the building, Religious Sisters transcribed messages, clergy staff dispatched messages, civilian volunteers sorted messages, and a central index card file was maintained.
The Formalities of the System / Tracking POWs

Messages to relatives of servicemen resident in Italy were typed on official monogrammed stationery, and sent by registered mail. The message shown in Figure 2 is the basic typed form letter, with specifics added (here in italics): “From the Vatican 3 September 1943. The Office of Information of the Secretary of State of His Holiness informs you that the Apostolic Delegation in Cairo, in a list sent on 22 July 1943, Infantryman Vittorio Pietrobello #385190 is indicated as a POW located in Camp 313 Egypt and is in good health.” Enclosed with the letter was a form that could be returned to the Vatican office with a message to be sent to the POW via Vatican Radio.

![Fig. 2: Registered letter postmarked September 7, 1943 from the Vatican Office of Information addressed to Torrebelvicino, Italy.](image)

Messages to servicemen, on the other hand, were written on message forms. When one was filled out at, or received by, the Office of Information, an index card was created for the addressee, which was then annotated whenever a message was sent or received. Figure 3 shows a message filled out September 3, 1941 by the mother of Lieutenant Benato Corà: “Yesterday, after a long wait, I received your letter of April 29th and postcard of June 28th. Rest assured of our good health. Our thoughts are always with you.”

The index card created for Corà earlier in 1941 was annotated to indicate that his name appeared on a list of 35,000 POWs transferred from Egypt to India, which the Vatican received in September. The Central Index Card file eventually held nearly four million cards.
Fig. 3: Message form dated September 3, 1941 from Verona, Italy transmitted via the Vatican Office of Information, Secretary of State to a POW in British India. A handwritten notation reveals it was received April 10, 1942.

Lt. Renato Cora’s index cards in the Central Index Card file at the Vatican Office of Information show:
(a) that he was a POW in Egypt
(b) “E.6.C pag. 296” that his name was from a list of 35,000 POW’s transferred from Egypt to India
(c) that his status was a POW in India
Paid Reply / Civilian in Eritrea

The message form could also be used as a reply. In December 1942, a special Christmas form with a background design of the Star of Bethlehem over the Dome of St. Peter’s Basilica, was designed. A recipient could just turn the form over, write a response, and the delivering arm of the Vatican would make sure it was returned to the sender.

Fig. 4: Vatican messages to and from an internee. Above: message form dated December 21, 1942 from Camiore, Italy to Giulio Vecoli, a civilian at the Naval installation in Embatalla, Eritrea; Italian East Africa (British occupation); Asmara, Eritrea transit, April 3, 1943. The reverse (above, right) shows the reply message of April 21, 1943, returned via the Apostolic vicar of Eritrea and the Italian Red Cross: “With an emotional heart I return your greetings with all my affection and all my strength of soul and spirit.” Right: a message form dated December 22, 1944 from Massawa, Eritrea sent to Italy by the Apostolic Vicar of Eritrea.
Forwarding to the U.S. / Sailor ‘Sees’ his Child

In addition to the church’s own global network, and the communications network of the Red Cross, the postal services of many countries besides Italy and its allies got involved – as can be seen by censorship markings. A message from Maresca, Italy, was sent to the Taranto Naval Base. The Vatican then redirected the message to an internment camp in New Mexico.

Fig. 5: Message form dated May 26, 1943 from Maresca, Italy to Sirio Ciatti, an Italian sailor at the Taranto Naval base serving on the San Marco, forwarded by the Vatican and redirected to Camp Lordsburg. On the reverse (right) the reply message of February 7, 1944: “Dear Rina, I have hurried to answer your message that was received yesterday. I have received great pleasure in seeing your writing again. Concurrently, I have received your photo and that of our baby. It has been the greatest joy that I have tasted in my life to see you again. I am well. Do not worry yourself. Pray that the time passes quickly that I may soon see all of you again.”

Initial request from Ciatti’s wife; he is given the file # 00794646. Then his Lordsburg POW status.
London War Enquiry Department / Easter Greetings to British Mum

Auxiliary Vatican offices were in several cities. The War Enquiry Department in London was at 11 Cavendish square. A message form, specifically printed for Easter 1943, was transmitted via the Vatican Secretary of State to the Apostolic Delegation in London.

Fig. 6: Message form dated April 18, 1943 from A.V. Dowding, a British POW in Camp 65, Gravina, Altamura, Italy, transmitted via the Vatican to POW Department at the Apostolic Delegation in London, who sent it through the British mails to Kent, enclosing an instruction notice.

Printed message forms indicate the global reach of the Vatican network of communications. I have seen examples from Jerusalem, Bangalore, Caracas, Madrid, Nairobi, Washington, D.C., Rhodes, Vichy.
D. C. Apostolic Delegation / Captured Seaman in Montana

The U.S. Apostolic Delegation at Washington handled messages to and from a seaman on the S.S. Conte Biancamano, who was interned at Fort Missoula, Montana. The ship was an Italian luxury liner that had been seized in the Canal Zone earlier in 1942. It was modified as a troopship by the U.S. but was returned to Italy and refitted as a liner after the War.

Fig. 7: Message forms to and from Giovanni Rossi, an Italian seaman interned at Fort Missoula, Montana, dating from April and December 1942, transmitted via the Washington D.C. Apostolic Delegation. Above, April 1942 message front from Rossi in Montana to Genova with, above right, the verso with the message on the top and, on the bottom, the reply from Italy, 4 months later in August. Right, message from Rossi’s family filled out in Genova and sent to Montana in December.
POW at Two U.S. Camps

Another POW in America communicated via the Washington D.C. Apostolic Delegate to Naples, the reply following him to a different camp.

Fig. 8: Message form dated July 1, 1943 sent by Vittorio Montuori from Camp Florence, Arizona, transmitted via Washington D.C. Apostolic Delegate to girlfriend Palmira Cuomo in Napoli, Italy: “By means of the Holy See, we have been able to send the following message. I am well as I hope you all are. Kisses.” The reply was added on reverse, December 8, 1944, and the form re-addressed to Camp Fort Meade, Maryland. In files: Vittorio Montuori, status (a) missing in action aboard the R.I. Colleoni (b) POW in Egypt (c) POW in Camp Florence.
Message Undeliverable / Miner in Katanga

There were, however, some areas closed even to the Vatican. In June 1944, a message sent from the Union Minière Mining Camp (the key strategic source for the uranium ore used in the build the first atomic weapons by the U.S.) in Sofwe, Katanga, was returned to the sender by the Leopoldville Apostolic Delegation, Belgian Congo.

Fig. 9: Message form dated June 12, 1944 from Sofwe, Katanga, returned to sender via the Leopoldville Apostolic Delegation, Belgian Congo, with an attached note returning the Postal Money Order: “Leopoldville, 8 July 1944. Mr. Prina, Union Minière Camp, Sofwe, Katanga. Sir, We are obliged to return to you the postal money order for 5,000 Francs sent from the bank of the Belgian Congo on May 27 intended for Madam Prina. Due to the current (wartime) conditions, the Vatican cannot for the moment transmit this remittance. When Northern Italy is liberated, we will again attempt to contact your family. Accept Sir my best salutations, The Apostolic Delegate.”
POW Dossiers / Disgruntled POW in Australia

The Vatican index card for POW Giorgia Madureri of Milan provides the details of numerous messages transmitted to and fro – and his is the most thoroughly documented case I have researched. A message from him on Apostolic Delegation stationery of November 5, 1943: “Dear Mother, Sister. Received your letter of 29 July. Awaiting a telegram. Do not worry yourselves. I am well. Stay prudent. Kisses. Giorgio.” Records from the Australian archives show that Madureri was captured in Tobruk, North Africa, in January 1941 as a 36 year old lieutenant. He arrived as a POW on the Queen Mary at Sydney on August 16, 1941, was transferred to Murchison, then Myrtleford, then New South Wales, and repatriated via the SS Andes, embarking at Sydney August 3, 1945. During his captivity, Australian Camp officials kept a summary dossier of the messages sent and received by Madureri. From February 1, 1944 to his brother-in-law, a POW in India: “I asked after the declaration of war on Germany to go and fight in Italy but do not expect that it will be permitted. … I read, play tennis, go swimming, curse my Fate and Fascism in three languages and twelve dialects, grow pumpkins and flowers and await better times. Here there are many idiots and semi-idiots. I speak of those inside the wire.” From October 1, 1944, to the same brother-in-law: “During 3 years of my captivity, these people tried to crush me … They changed their names but their brainless heads are always the same!”

Fig. 10: Message form November 5, 1943 from an Italian POW in Camp Myrtleford, Australia, transmitted via the Sydney Apostolic Delegation to Milano, Italy.

Mug shot & POW summary profile from the Australian archives.
Ecumenical Service / Two Rabbis

The Vatican Office of Information was ecumenical in its message-bearing. In 1943, it exchanged messages between two Rabbis, Jerusalem to Nagy-Ida. About 110 Jews lived in this Hungarian town prior to the war; none were there at the end.

![Message form, 1943, from Jerusalem transmitted by the Apostolic Nuncio in Budapest to Nagy-Ida, Hungary via the Vatican Office of Information, with the reply on the reverse.]

2. Vatican Radio

Vatican Radio began broadcasting with the call sign HVJ on two shortwave frequencies using 10 kilowatts of power on February 12, 1931, with the pontifical message “Omni creaturae” of Pope Pius XI. Guglielmo Marconi was a personal friend of the Pope’s and was the new system’s technical director. In 1933, a permanent microwave link was established between the Vatican Palace and the summer residence of the papacy, Castel Gandolfo. In 1936, the International Radio Union recognized Vatican Radio as a “special case” and authorized its broadcasting without any geographical limits. On December 25, 1937, a Telefunken 25 kW transmitter and two directional antennas were added. Vatican Radio broadcast over 10 frequencies.

At the outbreak of war, Vatican Radio was transmitting on a limited basis a variety of religious and news information programs in four languages to a world-wide audience. Following a December 1939 report from Cardinal Hlond of Ponza detailing the oppression of the Catholic Church in Poland, Pope Pius XII decided, among other measures, to use Vatican Radio to provide “information regarding the condition of the church in Poland.” Germany quickly banned Vatican Radio’s news broadcasts.
As the activities of the Office of Information increased, transmissions over Vatican Radio became almost entirely devoted to passing messages. These included the reading of lists of POWs reported at certain camps.

The Vatican Radio message service grew in scope from contacts with Papal representatives in eight nations in 1940 to thirty nations during 1943-1944.

A total of 1,240,728 messages were transmitted from 1940-1946 in 12,105 hours of transmission time.

Transmission Confirmations / POWs in Middle East and India

A message form was sent confirming the broadcast, such as this example from Cairo.

Fig. 12: Message dated September 1941 transmitted via Vatican Radio to the Apostolic Delegation in Egypt and Palestine located in Cairo. Forwarded to a POW held in the Middle East: “The Apostolic Delegate, Msgr. Gustavo Testa, has the pleasure of letting you know that yesterday, by means of the Vatican Radio, your loved ones have sent the following message: Received your postcard. Do not worry yourself. God will watch over you always and our hearts will always be near you. We are all well. Kisses from all. Mother. The same Apostolic Delegate, happy to be able to convey this message, and in anticipation of your response, sends his special benediction.” Manuscript arrival notation, November 19, 1941. Right, the Vatican Radio Station and transmission tower.
In the record files, the radio messages are marked RT for Radio Trasmissione.

Fig. 13: Vatican Archive Central Index File cards for General Ruggero Tracchia show, top, his status as a POW in Egypt and bottom, his transfer to Camp 39, Bangalore, India. Both have RT’s listed for the radio transmissions sent him.

Fig. 14: Message form dated January 19, 1944 transmitted via Vatican radio to the Apostolic Delegation in Bangalore, India. Forwarded to General Tracchia held in POW Camp 39. Manuscript arrival notation, February 4, 1944. The printed text reads: “Msgr. Apostolic Delegate has the pleasure of communicating this message received yesterday via Vatican Radio.” The message, from Colombo: “Affectionate greetings. Have courage. God will save our homeland.”

Fig. 15: Message confirmation dated June 10, 1943 from a New Zealand POW in Camp 85 - Tuturano, Italy transmitted via Vatican Radio to the Apostolic Delegation in Sydney, Australia and forwarded to his mother in St. Kilda, Dunedin, New Zealand, forwarded through Archbishop Panico.

In Australia, Archbishop Giovanni Panico (1895-1962) was the Apostolic Delegate from 1935 to 1948. Under his leadership, links were established in 1941 with the Australian and New Zealand governments to initiate the Vatican message service between POWs and internees. He personally visited many of the POW and internee camps throughout Australia as an important part of his humanitarian mission. Nearly 8,500 POWs from New Zealand were held by the Italians and Germans in WWII.

In the record files, the radio messages are marked RT for Radio Trasmissione.

Fig. 13: Vatican Archive Central Index File cards for General Ruggero Tracchia show, top, his status as a POW in Egypt and bottom, his transfer to Camp 39, Bangalore, India. Both have RT’s listed for the radio transmissions sent him.

Fig. 14: Message form dated January 19, 1944 transmitted via Vatican radio to the Apostolic Delegation in Bangalore, India. Forwarded to General Tracchia held in POW Camp 39. Manuscript arrival notation, February 4, 1944. The printed text reads: “Msgr. Apostolic Delegate has the pleasure of communicating this message received yesterday via Vatican Radio.” The message, from Colombo: “Affectionate greetings. Have courage. God will save our homeland.”

Fig. 15: Message confirmation dated June 10, 1943 from a New Zealand POW in Camp 85 - Tuturano, Italy transmitted via Vatican Radio to the Apostolic Delegation in Sydney, Australia and forwarded to his mother in St. Kilda, Dunedin, New Zealand, forwarded through Archbishop Panico.

In Australia, Archbishop Giovanni Panico (1895-1962) was the Apostolic Delegate from 1935 to 1948. Under his leadership, links were established in 1941 with the Australian and New Zealand governments to initiate the Vatican message service between POWs and internees. He personally visited many of the POW and internee camps throughout Australia as an important part of his humanitarian mission. Nearly 8,500 POWs from New Zealand were held by the Italians and Germans in WWII.
Personal Assistance: London Newspaper / British POW in Japan

In London, the Vatican Apostolic Delegation was assisted by James Walsh of the *Catholic Times* who printed postcards to let families know of news received by Vatican Radio. The periodical also published individual messages and lists of POWs. Mrs. Bonnes discovered in this way that her son was held as a POW at Camp Fukuoka. Located on the island of Kyushu, the camp was in operation from January 1942 to September 1945 and housed over 10,000 POWs in 18 satellite camps throughout the area. Of the 130,000 POWs held by Japan in WWII, approximately 50,000 were British, a quarter of whom died in captivity.

---

**Fig. 16:** Privately printed postcard dated September 22, 1943 from the periodical Catholic Times (London) relaying a notice transmitted via Vatican Radio of a British POW in Fukuoka, Japan.

---

One of the many sub-camps in the Fukuoka region.
Private Assistance / POW recorded

Anonymous benefactors also helped Vatican Radio messages get through. Antonio Restivo printed postcards that warned: “N.B. Please be aware that I do not have an office that is involved in obtaining information regarding military personnel or civilians. I listen only to the Vatican Radio (transmission time 7:30-8:00 PM, short wave frequency 50.26) and when I am able to receive transmissions, which are not always clear, I take note of the messages (due to atmospheric disturbances I cannot respond to any eventual omissions or errors). I forward these messages without prior solicitation and of my own initiative, as a sentiment of Christian charity, without cost to the recipient even if they are not known to me.”

3. Pontifical Commission for Assistance

Towards the end of the war, the Holy See established a Pontifical Commission for Assistance for the benefit of tens of thousands of refugees and repatriated POWs. In addition to a central Vatican Office, branches of this Commission operated from Archdioceses located throughout Italy. Since the Commission was involved in a major humanitarian mission, the branch offices were granted the franking privilege by the Italian government.

Cardinal Ildelfonso Schuster (1880-1954) Archbishop of Milan, met with Mussolini on April 25, 1945 but was not successful in an effort to mediate peace. Mussolini was executed by Italian partisans three days later.
Commission for Assistance / Ex-internee’s Accidental Death

The Pontifical Commission for Assistance in Cardinal Schuster’s diocese sent a message on August 21, 1945, to communicate the death by aerial bombing of an ex-internee returning from Germany on April 18, 1945. It was addressed to the local Pontifical Commission for Assistance in Abbiategrasso, whose job it was to locate the family (see Figure 20).

Commission for Assistance / Forwarding a Hand-Carried Note

A letter hand carried by a repatriated internee from Kenya to Naples, was forwarded freely via the Vatican Pontifical Commission for Assistance, Napoli. “July 28 1946 Nanyuki [located 100 miles north of Nairobi, with several thousand Italian POWs captured in the Ethiopian campaign] Dearest Antonietta, I am writing the present letter to let you know that I am in good health as I hope you, the baby and the entire family. Dear, I am sending this letter by a friend who is departing shortly and will mail it from his town on arrival. I hope shortly that also I will depart …” (See Figure 21.)
Fig. 20: Notice of the death of an ex-internee sent August 21, 1945 from the Pontifical Commission for Assistance, Diocese of Milano, addressed to the local Commission in Abbiategrasso, Italy.

Fig. 21: Folded letter dated July 28, 1946, from an internee in Kenya to Rignano Garganico, Italy, hand-carried by a repatriated comrade to Napoli and transmitted free of charge via the Vatican Pontifical Commission for Assistance in Napoli.
Vatican Requests / Status of Wake Island Internee

The Vatican also initiated requests for information about particular internees – acting as middleman. Figure 22 is a request for the status of one of 1,150 civilian contractors employed by the Morrison-Knudsen Company building an airfield on Wake Island when the Japanese invaded in December 1941. Although most of the captured military and civilians were removed from the island in January 1942, 98 civilian workers were left behind, and executed on October 7, 1943. Rolland Light of Noonan, North Dakota, was one of them.

![Figure 22: Message form dated August 19, 1944, the Pacific Island Employees Foundation (incorporated June 1, 1942, to aid families of the internees on Wake Island) inquiring the status of Rolland E. Light, transmitted via the Apostolic Delegation in Washington D.C. to the Vatican Office of Information. The fate of the “contractors' employees” was not known until after the Japanese surrender in 1945.]

Gregorio Pirozzi, PhD., of Maryland, has for many years been an active member of the Vatican Philatelic Society. This paper is based on his presentation to the Winton M. Blount Symposium on Postal History, at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum, October 2008.

Acknowledgments


La Chiesa e la Guerra. Documentazione dell’Opera del L’Ufficio Informazioni del Vaticano. Città del Vaticano, 1944.


National Archives of Australia: Series MP1103/1, MP1103/2 - PWI47126, Series A7919 – 101114

Daniel Piazza – Smithsonian Institution, National Postal Museum

Professore Marino Carnevale-Mauzan