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VATICAN

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Sir D. Osborne's audience with the Pope on 10th November

Reports that he was received in audience by the Pope on 10th November during which he took the opportunity to express gratitude for the hospitality extended to him since 1940. Suggests that he might be authorised formally to convey the thanks of His Majesty's Government on this account and for the hospitality shown to British prisoners of war. The Pope expressed his affection for the British people and his desire for friendly relations with His Majesty's Government. He then went on to discuss Russian policy and the repression of the Catholic church in Russia. His attention was drawn to the necessity of broadening the basis of the Papal Curia and he promised that measures should be taken after the war.

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FROM Sir D. Osborne (Holy See).  
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References.

Holy See tel. No. 278 (R6705)  
Y.O. tel. No. 468 (WR 1435/2/48)  
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Southern Italy B

(How disposed of?)

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Next Paper.

R20037

(Minutes)

Sir D. Osborne used some fairly strong language about religious affairs in Russia - see para. 4  
If the two agree we may just thank the Pope on behalf of H.M.G. for his help to Sir D. Osborne and our prisoners of war as proposed at the end of para. 1?

Note the Minister's remarks about the Curia in para. 5.

Northern Dept Yes / h.s. Williams  
Refugee Dept / Mr. G.W.O. 29.11  
Prime Minister / AMM  
20/11

ITALY.

November 23, 1944.

CONFIDENTIAL

SECTION 3.

ARCHIVES

[R 19138/109/57]

Copy No. 8

*Sir D. Osborne to Mr. Eden.—(Received 23rd November.)*

(No. 136.)

*British Legation to the Holy See,*

Sir,

*Rome, 10th November, 1944.*

I HAVE the honour to report that I had an audience with the Pope to-day. I informed His Holiness that, having recently transferred my residence from the Vatican City to Rome, I wished to express to him personally my gratitude for the hospitality which had been extended to me since the 13th June, 1940, and, in fact, I do feel a real sense of gratitude and of appreciation of the courtesy and goodwill which I have enjoyed during the past four years from all officials and representatives of the Vatican City State. I think that only those familiar with the restricted extent and exiguous facilities of this mile-square "State" can appreciate the disturbance caused by its invasion by an ever-growing and encroaching world of diplomats and their families. This diplomatic world, at any rate the South Americans, who came in during the summer and autumn of 1942, expected, in greater or lesser degree, according to their appreciation of war conditions, the creature comforts and social amenities to which they were accustomed in Rome and which were inevitably lacking in the circumscribed territory and monastic conditions of the Vatican City. First the Fascist Government, and then, from September 1943 to May 1944, the Germans, were highly suspicious and resentful of the hospitality extended by the Holy See to the official representatives of their enemies, and the Germans particularly did not fail to mark their resentment. I personally believe that, if the course of the war had not turned against the Germans, they would have invaded the Vatican City and the diplomatic missions harboured within it. Judging by their own methods and mentalities they could not believe that the Pope's guests were not abusing his hospitality by sending political or military information out of the Vatican City in spite of the fact that the diplomatic representatives in question had given their personal word of honour not to do so. The Vatican's hospitality to the Allied diplomats was, therefore, a dual problem and the situation was further complicated when nine British and two American prisoners of war managed to cross into Vatican territory, and had to be interned and accommodated in the barracks of the Papal Gendarmerie. Here again the Vatican authorities did their best to entertain their incongruous guests. His Majesty's Government do therefore owe the Pope a debt of thanks, and I would suggest that I should be authorised formally to convey to him the thanks of His Majesty's Government, both for the hospitality extended to me and my staff for four years and, on behalf of the War Office, for that accorded to the British prisoners.

2. I asked His Holiness if he had any further complaints to make to me (see my telegram No. 278) in respect of his treatment by His Majesty's Government. This he vigorously repudiated, almost as if he regretted his words on the occasion of my last audience, and proceeded to assure me, with the utmost emphasis and with the appearance of deep feeling, of his affection for the British people and his earnest desire for the closest and most friendly relations with His Majesty's Government. This he repeated again, with equal fervour, when I left. I do not know what was the particular motive of this impassioned declaration, but I have no doubt that it was genuine. It is possible that His Holiness compares our attitude with that of the United States Government—or, more correctly, with that of President Roosevelt, since Mr. Myron Taylor represents the President personally and not the Government of the United States—and feels that we are not as cordial towards him as the Americans. This is undoubtedly true, but we have had no Presidential Election with an Italian vote playing an important rôle. The Pope again assured me of the pleasure the Prime Minister's visit had given him and he fully appreciated the reasons which had prevented you from seeing him.

3. I had a long discussion of Russian policy with him. Referring to the ill-treatment of the Jews in Hungary and to the suggestion that he should make a public appeal on the subject (see your telegram No. 468), he said that he was being pressed to issue a public denunciation of Russian maltreatment of the populations of Poland and the Baltic States. He had not come to any decision on this point and in any case his condemnation would be anonymous, as in the case of his condemnation of German misdeeds in the past. I urged him most earnestly and strongly not to condemn the Russians, at any rate by name. For I said that this would have the worst possible effect in Moscow, and only slightly less unfavourable repercussions in London, and probably Washington. A specific denunciation of alleged Russian misdeeds would be compared with the absence of any specific condemnation of German crimes against the populations of the Occupied Countries. Here His Holiness interjected that there was no question of any reference to Russia by name. I went on to say that I had no information as to Russian conduct in Eastern Europe, but I was quite certain that nothing the Russians might do could approach the atrocities committed by the Germans in many lands. To this His Holiness did not demur. To give only one instance, I added, history offered nothing to compare with Hitler's mass condemnation to extinction of the Jewish race or with the methods—gas-chambers, starvation, &c.—by which it had been, and still was being, put into effect. With this the Pope agreed.

4. He then went on to talk of Bolshevist atheism and the repression of the Catholic Church in Russia, where, he said, there was only one Catholic priest left, an American Father at Moscow. I reminded him of the recent official revival of the Orthodox Russian Church and said that this constituted an official repudiation by Stalin of the atheism plank in the Constitution, even if, failing proof to the contrary, it might by some be regarded as only a temporary political expedient. But I did not disguise from him that I anticipated that, whatever latitude or encouragement were given to the Orthodox Church in Russia, the Catholic Church would not be given similar sanction. Religion in Russia was to be, like everything else, of a strictly nationalist brand. But, I pointed out, a distinction must be drawn between the rejection and oppression of Christianity and of the Catholic Church. The latter was not the sole representative of Christianity, and if a country, or a Government, elected to discourage the Catholic faith in favour of its own particular national brand of Christianity, this was not at all to foster atheism. The Pope took this argument, on which I insisted strongly, quite well.

5. I took the opportunity of this discussion to say that I hoped that, in the interests of the Catholic Church, His Holiness would see to it that, after the war, some effective measures were taken to broaden the national basis of the Roman Curia and to inject into the administration of the Holy See some non-Italian blood and influence. I explained that, as the representative of a Protestant country, it was not for me, or for the Government which I represented, to take the initiative in criticism or suggestion. But I was aware that many of my Catholic colleagues felt very strongly on the subject, and I therefore felt entitled to speak in support of their thesis. From my own personal, neutral and objective point of view I could say that I clearly saw the need of dramatic measures to affirm the supernatural and catholic nature of the Church. His Holiness said this was a problem that he had in mind.

6. In reply to my enquiry he said that he had no information regarding conditions in Germany, but he added that he had been much encouraged by the opinion expressed by an important American General, whom he had seen recently, to the effect that the war would be over by Christmas. I said that I thought it would be very unwise to bank on that. He professed very grave anxiety over the situation in Italy. I agreed that it was disquieting, but I did not feel that it was already as nearly disastrous as he seemed to think. We did not, however, pursue this subject.

7. His Holiness seemed to be in good health and spirits, and he repeated to me what a pleasure his daily receptions of Allied officers and troops were to him, and how very favourably he was impressed by the bearing, character and conduct of all ranks.

I have, &c.  
D. G. OSBORNE.