

The Mortara Affair

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The story of Edgardo Mortara is a scandalous example of Christian theological cruelty and arrogance towards Jews. In the mid-nineteenth century, six-year-old Edgardo Mortara was seized by the Church from a Jewish family in Bologna, Italy. Bologna's inquisitor, Father Pier Feletti, had heard that Edgardo had been secretly baptized as a baby, by a Catholic woman working in his family's home when she thought he was about to die from an illness. As a result, the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition declared Edgardo to be irrevocably a Catholic, and ordered that he be taken from his family and brought up by the Church, since the Papal States forbade members of other faiths to raise Christian children.

An appeal was made to Pope Pius IX to reject the decision and return Edgar to his distraught parents and siblings. But despite a public outcry in Europe and the USA and a desperate campaign by his family, the pope refused to relent. On the contrary, he kept the boy firmly in his care and out of the public eye and refused access to him. It became a matter of principal, a desperate attempt of the papacy to assert its declining power as secularism began to erode its authority. It was the equivalent in its time of the sexual scandals that have undermined the moral authority of Catholicism in our day. In all such cases the Church's priority was protecting its own interests at the expense of human suffering.

Father Feletti was prosecuted for his role in Edgardo's seizure after pontifical rule in Bologna ended in 1859. But he was acquitted, when the court determined he was simply following superior orders (shades of Nazism). The Pope continued to act as father to Edgardo, who trained for the priesthood in Rome until 1870, when the city was captured by the Kingdom of Italy and the Papal States were brought to an end. Edgardo then left Italy for France, where he was ordained three years later at the age of 21. He stayed outside of Italy most of his life and died at the age of 88 in Belgium.

Many felt that the Vatican's actions in this case epitomized all that was wrong with the Papal States and showed pontifical rule to be anachronistic. Some historians consider the event to be one of the most significant of Pius IX's papacy and . Some say it accelerated the end of papal rule over parts of Italy and sped up the Italy's reunification. But it also shows how entrenched antisemitism was in the Vatican, how the Church's theology taught contempt for Judaism and Jews, and indeed would continue in this way until Pope John XXIII began to change Catholic teaching. It illustrates the profoundly embedded disdain for Jews that prevailed then. It remains a disease that metastasizes in many European and Christian societies to this day despite the valiant efforts of recent Popes to change such prejudiced attitudes.

Two things brought this sad affair back to my mind. The first was hearing that Steven Spielberg is working on a film about the Mortara affair. The

other was receiving a copy of [Writing for Justice: Victor Sejour, the Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara, and the Age of Transatlantic Emancipation](#) by a descendant of Edgardo Mortara, Elena Mortara. Until reading the book I confess I had no idea who Sejour was.

At the same time as the Mortara affair, the USA was in the throes of the vicious retreat from its founding egalitarian ideals. The hopes for the emancipation and equality of blacks and were cruelly being denied. The implications of the Declaration of Independence were being ignored. And after the Civil War, gains were reversed. In France many of the intellectuals who fought against anti-Semitism also fought for the emancipation of blacks in the USA.

These two issues were combined in the work of a remarkable man, now largely forgotten. Victor Sejour was an American-born black poet and writer who moved to France and became a celebrity. Amongst the many plays he wrote was a fictional adaptation of the Mortara affair, in which the abduction was of a young girl. Thus, themes of anti-Semitism, racial discrimination, and the inferior position of females were all combined into one play, which was so successful in its day that it was translated into five European languages. It was called *La Tireuse de Cartes* ("The Fortune Teller") after the mother of the abducted child who disguised herself as a fortune teller to find and stay close to her lost daughter.

This theme of the inhumanity of the Church has also been brought to the fore by the television series [The Young Pope](#), masterfully directed by Paolo Sorrentino. I really loved it, although my brother, who really knows what goes on in the Vatican, was not impressed. It is beautifully shot and directed. It centers on what happens when the conclave of cardinals appoints a compromise candidate as pope, a young American idealist, acted impressively by Jude Law. The series deals courageously with the conflicting demands of spirituality, honesty, and the politics of the largest religious centralized institution in the world, where corruption lurks under every cassock.

"The young pope" is a man struggling with the position and his conscience. He tries to be honest with himself and others and struggles for a purity and honesty that conflicts with the interests of the cardinals and the establishment of the Church. The series shows exactly how and why a less sensitive pope could allow himself to become so inhuman. It illustrates why the Vatican failed in its Christian mission and rallied around the pope over the Mortara affair. Even today we witness how the good intentions of Pope Francis are often thwarted by a more traditional curia. And it saddens me that chief rabbinate exhibit exactly the same pathologies of political intrigue, vested interests and power plays.

I have always resented religious authority, precisely because it invariably subordinates individuality, sensitivity, and the ordinary man or woman to the demands of order. To preserve its power and mystique, it allows itself to be manipulated by vested interests and a fear that if it makes concessions or allows for exceptions the whole structure will collapse.

Leaders, regardless of what other talents they may have, are invariably

involved in trying to root out dissent, and they resent challenge. They often betray their integrity for the sake of the position, while convincing themselves they are doing the best to preserve the dignity of the position. The best of leaders is rarely willing to be honest and admit to doubts. Of all the major rabbis I am aware of, the great Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik was the only one to confess publicly to such personal, human limitations.

In the end, all governments and powers, religious, secular, left or right (even governing bodies of sports) are or become corrupt. Failure of moral authority, a dearth of courageous leaders is a disease that has infected the majority of human institutions. Anything that can be done to mitigate this, and ameliorate hatred and prejudice must be encouraged and supported. Elena Mortara's fascinating, well documented, and scholarly study is a very welcome and eloquent description of the issues and a plea for change.