

# Not Power But Glory | Shalom Carmy

## *Authors*

Jews and Christians alike pledge a higher loyalty that they honor in ways that seem incomprehensible to the world.” So writes Fr. Romanus Cessario in “Non Possumus” (February). As an example of such incomprehensible devotion, he cites the kidnapping of the child Edgardo Mortara in 1858. The Mortaras’ Christian servant had baptized the boy. Baptism irrevocably and indelibly marks one as a Christian, and the Church, acting through the police force, was obligated to do everything possible to facilitate his education in the faith.

Fr. Romanus claims to “understand why the Jewish community of the time interpreted Edgardo’s relocation as an act of unjust religious and political hegemony.” The reason he gives is that the “mark is invisible.” The truth is altogether different. Birth to a Jewish mother, according to Jewish doctrine, indelibly marks one a Jew, and Jews are obligated to do everything possible to enable him to remain one.

So Fr. Romanus and I are in agreement that Jews and Christians pledge a higher loyalty to God that is incomprehensible to others. I suppose we are in general agreement that coercion is a flawed and undesirable means to the propagation of religious devotion, allowable, if at all, only as a necessary evil. I infer this from the language of the Vatican document “Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past,” which broadly condemns “the use of force in the service of truth,” as well as from Fr. Romanus’s eagerness to demonstrate Edgardo Mortara’s happiness as an adult called to the priesthood. I believe we are in agreement that the forcible removal of a six-year-old child from his family would be a moral outrage were it not for the overriding divine imperative that he be brought up in the true faith.

Lastly, we are in agreement about the most important fact in the case: The papal authority had the gendarmes at its disposal; the Jewish community and the Mortaras did not.

The Mortara story is bygone history from a time when the pope commanded temporal power. When one reads “Memory and Reconciliation,” with its talk of lack of respect for the consciences of persons to whom the truth was presented, it is impossible not to think of the Holocaust. We all have heard of Christian clergy and laity who risked their lives to shelter Jewish children. When the war ended, they were faced with a dilemma: to restore these children to their families and the faith of their people or to uproot these children in the name of higher religious allegiance, using such power as they had and the significant influence they had earned. Though it is not for outsiders to determine what church teaching was or ought to have been, one cannot help appreciating what was at stake.

The integrity of the family is central to the divinely ordained way of life. To be sure, family is not an absolute. There are painful, tragic circumstances when loyalty to God transcends the bonds that unite parents and children; many times, parents exercise

poor judgment on behalf of their children in small or large matters. But it is not our task to multiply or to exacerbate such conflicts. To the contrary, we must strive to avoid them, and we must treat the institution of the family with respect if at all possible. This is true whether we explain the status of the family in terms of natural law or orders of creation or divine law.

The past century has given additional urgency to our cherishing of parental authority in the family. Nazism and communism elevated the state and its brute power above all other values. In particular, they taught children to defy and denounce their parents when the parents failed to conform to state-enforced ideology. Secular progressivism has likewise insisted that its agents know best, and that they are therefore entitled to promote their goals and values in place of those maintained by less enlightened citizens, and in particular to replace ways of life and beliefs deriving from traditional religious teaching. One's judgment of these views and their practical realization will depend, of course, on whether one accepts the respective claims made by Nazism, communism, and militant progressivism. For those who reject these claims, the family today is not only a divine blessing but a bulwark against evil. Pope Pius IX may not have anticipated all this 150 years ago. Sadly, we have seen the future.

Was it necessary, from the Church's point of view, to forcibly take possession of the six-year-old Edgardo Mortara in order to properly introduce him to the faith? Plenty of non-Jewish parents in 1858 in the Papal States neglected to raise their children to be good Catholics, yet they were left alone. Moreover, kidnapping the boy or leaving him in peace were not the only alternatives. What would have happened had Edgardo been left with his parents for the time being, rather than "relocated" as Fr. Romanus gently puts it? Several years later, in this scenario, when he is no longer a child, he is informed that, according to Catholic teaching, he is obligated to adhere to the Catholic faith. Everything is the same as it was. The pope would still be ready to lavish extraordinary solicitude on this one boy, bringing to bear his charisma and the enormous prestige of his office, his loving concern in no way diminished by the passage of a few years. Only the police knock on the door and the forcible relocation are missing.

In this sequence of events, Pope Pius would not mobilize his power, but the glory and magnificence of the Church would still be at his disposal. If divine Providence wanted Edgardo to become an exemplary Catholic and a dedicated priest, his education to that end would not have been impossible at that later date. Presumably, if kindly Providence can work through the religiously questionable instruments of state coercion, that same Providence would be able to bring Edgardo into church precincts after he reached the age of majority.

When I consider a question about which feelings run high, I often look for parallel cases. In 1958 the Schumacher family immigrated to Israel from the Soviet Union. They settled on a staunchly secular kibbutz, but due to financial difficulties sent their son, Yossele, to live with his zealously Orthodox maternal grandparents. The grandparents declined to surrender the boy when his parents were ready to take him back. Determined to ensure Yossele's education to a life of religious observance and belief, they had him abducted. For almost three years, activists on three continents kept the boy in yeshiva and away from the increasingly frustrated Israeli secret service.

What started as a high-stakes domestic dispute ended up fueling widespread ill will

between secular and rigorously Orthodox Israelis. One day a construction worker on Agrippa Street in Jerusalem tossed a piece of caked mud in my direction and angrily shouted, “Where is Yossele?” as if I, a modern-looking Orthodox boy Yossele’s age, was in on the conspiracy. For a moment I felt just a little bit of unearned satisfaction at the unwarranted identification. Did I not uphold, at least nominally, the kidnapers’ goal of religious observance? And how could one not feel sympathy for the underdogs, their defiant *non serviam* hurled at a muscular secular regime that had not infrequently treated them with contempt?

The intervening decades have made me ever more aware that ultimate commitment to God (or to the various substitute gods of contemporary culture) is often incomprehensible to outsiders. If I am now less likely to romanticize such clashes and if I am more inclined to seek ways of averting or mitigating them, I don’t think this is due to a loss of religious zeal. Perhaps, to the contrary, it is because I have come to a different understanding of what religious dedication is about, and how the employment of force is more likely to distract us from our relationship to God than to build us up.

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