

CHURCH

## The death of Cardinal Ruini, a leading figure of the Wojtyła era

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ECCLESIA

17\_06\_2026



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In the current issue of the Italian magazine *Il Mulino*, historian Guido Formigoni has described the 'Wojtyła-Ruini era' as a unified whole, characterised by specific dynamics of ecclesiastical politics and a vision of how to indirectly guide politics.

**Following the death yesterday of Cardinal Camillo Ruini**, we can say that this interpretative framework holds true. Chronologically speaking, the timeline fits perfectly, and there is good reason to speak of a 'Wojtyła-Ruini era'. From 1991 until the death of John Paul II, Cardinal Ruini served as the Pope's Vicar for the Diocese of Rome, President of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) and of the Lazio region, and President of the Italian Church's Cultural Project. To tell the truth, in these capacities, he also served alongside Benedict XVI for a number of years, confident that he would continue along the same path. Formigoni's characterisation is valid not only because of the coincidence of dates, but also in terms of substance.

**The 1990s were characterised by two major phenomena of change** that had affected both the Church and Italian society and, naturally, their mutual relations as well. On the Church's side, John Paul II's project to revitalise the Church's social doctrine was coming to fruition, particularly with the encyclical *Centesimus annus* (1991), dedicated to the historic turning point of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. As far as the Italian Church was concerned, this revival had been paved the way by the shift signalled by John Paul II at the Ecclesial Conference in Loreto in 1985: the Church had something of its own to offer Italian society, including from a cultural and political perspective, thereby moving beyond the previous stance of a 'religious choice' that no longer engaged with the task of judging reality.

**Whilst this was taking place within the Church**, Italian society was witnessing the crisis of the party system, the end of the Christian Democrats as the main recipient of the Catholic vote, the increasing political fragmentation of Catholics, the resurgence of the People's Party and its marginalisation. A new framework was needed, to be conceived in conjunction with Wojtyła's encyclicals, which sought to restore cohesion to the Church's evangelising mission, including through its public presence. Cardinal Ruini was the leading figure of this highly complex era; he sought to organise this new presence in line with the Polish Pope's conceptual and programmatic approach, without, however, causing excessive upheaval, but rather by maintaining unity. He was well aware that there were many dissenting factions, both within the Church and amongst Catholic politicians in the democratic camp.

**In 1991, Cardinal Ruini wrote the foreword to the Directory on Social Pastoral Care**

'Evangelising the Social Sphere', which, in terms of structure and content, was entirely in the spirit of Wojtyła. The Directory provided precise guidelines on how every member of the Church, from the bishop to the layperson, should act to serve the Church's social doctrine: something that is almost unthinkable in our day. In the wake of this renewed enthusiasm in the face of new challenges, the Italian Church funded the Centre for the Study of the Church's Social Doctrine at the Catholic University of Milan, promoted the SFISP in every diocese,

**Schools for Formation in Social and Political Commitment**, pushed for the formation of new lay groups active in lobbying, such as the National Forum of Family Associations—led for a long time by Luisa Santolini and later chaired by Cardinal Ruini himself—and then established and funded the Italian Church's Cultural Project. As can be seen, the revival of Social Doctrine and the conviction that the Church should play a role going beyond mere spiritual guidance inspired that Ruini era, despite the predictable difficulties.

**Among these were those who adhered to the alternative line** led by Cardinal Martini, or those who accused this new 'presence' of having abandoned the spirit of the Council – such as Father Bartolomeo Sorge – and those who, despite the new teachings, continued to regard as ideological the claim that a coherent Catholic doctrine should guide pastoral care, and not the other way round. Credit must be given to Cardinal Ruini for steering the ship through the storm, for sharing John Paul II's vision, and for striving to put it into practice in our country. Perhaps he could have avoided trying to maintain unity with everyone. If we look at the organisation of the numerous conferences of the Pastoral Project or the initiatives it promoted, we discover that not all of them consistently followed the Cardinal's line.

**When it came to relations with the political sphere, Cardinal Ruini played many of his cards.** His plan was to influence politics indirectly through Catholic politicians present in all parties. These were men with differing political views but united on what would later be termed the 'non-negotiable principles'. In itself, the idea tied in well with the revival of the Church's social doctrine, but formation was still taking place in a patchy manner; much underlying resistance persisted, and the presence of members across all parties also led to a lack of focus regarding the very values to be defended. His final attempt in this regard was his call to boycott the polls during the 2004 referendum on artificial insemination. It was immediately successful, but the cardinal was also accused of overstepping the bounds permitted to a member of the clergy. The event, however, clearly demonstrated his vision of an indirect Catholic presence.

**Cardinal Ruini also found himself at ease with Benedict XVI;** he embraced his approach and, through the Cultural Project, organised the conference – which later became a book – entitled 'With God or without God, everything changes', an initiative that also attracted many secular thinkers – then pejoratively referred to as 'devotees' – interested in a renewed discourse on truth.

**It does not, however, appear that our cardinal** — now 'retired' — felt at ease during Francis's pontificate. Upon his death, in the spring of 2025, he set out four conditions that the new Pope should fulfil: sound doctrine, a capacity for governance, a spirit of communion, and the strengthening of the faith. Quite a few saw in these hopes requirements that ran counter to those embodied in the pontificate that had only just come to an end.