

4. THE FRENCH IN ROME

Napoleon Bonaparte, as we have said, followed a method all his own. The very words that he said to the pope to promise security, contained the threat to occupy Rome; and this corresponded in reality to the orders of the Directory, and Bonaparte did not want to act contrary to them. He preferred, even by occupying the Pontifical States, to keep his distance and just aim the canons of his policies of intimidation toward the old pontiff, since the pope showed himself to be much stronger than his age would suggest.

Acting thus, according to his personal point of view, Napoleon changed the strategic and war-like plans of the government of Paris. But on 19 November 1797 he had to go to the Congress of Radstadt; and he left everything in the free hands of the Jacobines of the Cisalpine Republic, who pressed to suppress religious orders and confiscate church property. A month after General Bonaparte practically turned his authority over to the French army in Italy, there was a rebellion in the Trastevere on the 28 of December 1797. The pontifical army could contain the insurgents who overflowed up to the Corsini palace, at that time the Embassy of France. General Duphot, a famous Jacobine intervened, together with Joseph Bonaparte, representative of France before the Holy See, and controlled the crowd, but a bullet injured and killed him. The Secretary of State immediately sent excuses and expressions of sorrow of the pontiff, but Joseph Bonaparte demanded his passport, and thus there was a diplomatic rupture.

General Berthier received orders from the Directory to occupy Rome and on 10 February 1798 he ordered two officials to take charge of Castle Sant'Angelo. The French General believed that the Roman people

would rise up in his favor and so he counted on the patriots, on the discontented people, and on those with lawsuits, who would rise up to meet him and would open the gates of the city; but none of this occurred. One other probable consequence that the French General had hoped for was that the pontiff would flee spontaneously; or, let us say, that he would simply go to the Kingdom of Naples, where he was disposed to go; but the ancient Pius VI did not move from Rome.

This caused an unpleasant situation for Berthier, who wrote to the government of Paris: "The Pope trusts completely in the generosity of the French without trying to leave Rome, and this puts me on the spot. The people do not react and up until now there has been no activity in favor of his freedom."¹

¹ We shall cite an anonymous passage from a diary which reveals interesting things, even though they are historically inexact in many of its parts, which was published in 1958 by G. Gasparri and V. Giuntella (*Due diari della Repubblica Romana 1798-1799*, Ed. Instituto de Estudios Romanos): "On Saturday 10 (of February), already mentioned, at 17 hours (5:00 o'clock p.m.) three French commissaries arrived and took charge of Castle S. Angelo, previously supplied with provisions for the Sovereign with his ministers in case of necessity. And they allowed three hours for the surrender of the inhabitants. The army was already in the fort of Monte Mario and little by little they were entering the city until there were hundreds of soldiers, and they took possession of the Campidoglio, Mount Vacallo and other places necessary for themselves. (On the 9th the pope had previously published his edict that absolutely no one was to impede the French nation.) On the 11th they fortified the captured sites with guns and they flew the flags of liberty and gave marching orders to all of the brothers of Aracoeli, except those of the sacristy and the infirmary, since space was needed for housing. And they issued two edicts ordering that everything proceed as usual referring to ecclesiastical matters, almsgiving, hospitals, home workers and salaried workers; and those that brought food supplies to Rome should continue to bring them as usual. Everybody was invited to wear a badge indicating his nationality. Day by day other edicts were being published concerning public rules, and that the pope

churches and all of the objects of silver; he suppressed the salaries of all of the ministers of worship. A hundred miles from Nerves they broke all of the crucifixes and images and the feast of "Reason" was celebrated in which some priests abjured, denying worship in radical terms, amid applause and also whistles.³ In Paris on 10 November, in the Cathedral of Notre Dame, a kind of altar of cardboard-stone was built near the choir and on it was placed the temple to Philosophy.⁴ At the same time an actress from the Opera, a "masterpiece of nature" substituted for the "inanimate" objects and personified "Liberty"; she was called the goddess of reason, and similar fiestas were repeated in many cities of France.

In Nantes there was the famous "Drownings" in the river, in which many priests were drowned.

The guillotine, meanwhile, could not go any faster: Louis XVI mounted the platform, and after him his queen, Marie Antoinette. Other members of the royal family and the more outstanding persons of the old regime followed. After that it was the turn of the Girondists and the very Jacobins ... the Revolution was devouring itself□

Also in Rome, in the homes the Lords and in the homes of the more humble they talked about these massacres. Gaspar at that time was seven years old. The rumors that circulated were diverse; some knew little and others knew too much; they spoke of thousands of priests that were decapitated, and that religion was completely wiped out. The

little boy Gaspar and his group of friends heard these stories and at night, with their eyes open, they thought and continued to think of these incredible tragedies. One thing was clear in these little minds: the most populous nation had murdered God and invited other nations to do the same. This is what these little infantile souls felt.

In reality there were all kinds of thing about this tragic conflict which, apparently developed among men, but actually it was something between heaven and earth. There are enemies of God, but there are also heroes of God. There are vacillating souls, there are souls solidly believing in the death of God; there are apostles, there are weak ones, there are cowards, there are the indifferent ... Each life, each soul is implicated and is graded according to the strength with which it reacts.

But the external values provoke, as in this case, a taking of an interior position. Resistance, in order to be sustained, has to be superhuman.

These are the antecedents of the first and second "Terror"; the years that followed between ups and downs, moderation and restrictions, signaled a fight in the first stage against the "reactionary" or "non-constitutional" priest, that is, against the priests who had refused to take the oath to the Republic. But in the second stage, during the attempts to dechristianize by the Directory, the fight was even against the "constitutional" priests.

Nevertheless that which made the relation between the Holy See and the Directory very strained, was without doubt the presumption on the part of the Directory that the pope encourage the clergy, whether constitutional or not, to swear fidelity of the Republic and to the government that represented it. Only on this condition would the Directory permit the continuation of

³ Leflon, *Op. cit.*, p. 168.

⁴ The underlying substrata - the philosophy - of the French Revolution is known. It is the tendency to philosophize which dominated the XVIII century, shown in diverse manners and under diverse aspects of the numerous protagonists of the "Enlightened", beginning with the more famous: Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, Rosseau, D'Alembert.

Catholicism in France.

Pius VI therefore came up against a cruel choice; and seeing that the Directory was intent on having public order, or at least diminishing the disorder that France was suffering, he saw the exhortation to take the oath as the only means of reconciliation between the lay power and the French Church and of ending the persecutions, the blasphemies and the blood-shedding. On the other hand, how could you encourage priestly consciences to swear fidelity to a government that was the personification, under new aspects, of the spirit of the greatest deicide that there had been in any revolution up until then?

This is the principal theme of the second movement (that of 1796 and following) that the armies of the Directory tried to resolve with the sword, threatening to invade Rome, suppress the Papal States and dethrone the very authority of the Holy Father.

The French army arrived in Italy in 1796 and war broke out in the northern regions; but there were very few in Rome, for the moment, that supposed that this conflict would be dangerous for the States of the Church. In the eternal city even the most informed could be found in the same state of mind that certain farmers have when they observe a far away storm and they feel safe.

But Piedmont was weakened, Milan had fallen and Lombardy was occupied; Emilia, Romagna and the Marches were practically under the control of France.

Pius VI, advised by the Cardinals, wanted a reconciliation with Bonaparte; actually, he knew that the Directory, in its antireligious action, wanted the army to march on Rome in order to “stir up the flame of fanaticism, overthrow the throne of stupidity and raise up the standard of freedom.”

The mediator for the Holy See, the

Spaniard Azara, with the same official credentials of his government, arrived in Milan and started the negotiations. These ended in Bologna on 21 June 1796, and it set the armistice between both sides.

The conditions dictated to the Holy See were: give up Ferrara, Bologna and Ancona; pay 15 millions and another five and a half millions as loans and merchandise; hand over 100 works of art and 500 manuscripts.

Nevertheless, given that the war continued between the French army and the imperial army, the general conditions remained fluid, which gave the Holy See a certain hope. With each counterattack of the Austrians, the pontifical politics tended to be less disposed to surrender.

Napoleon followed a double strategy: he bragged of his disdain for the Roman atmosphere and he writes to Cacault, the French representative to the Vatican: “You have to get rid of that old fox;”⁵ and on the other hand he protected the Pontifical Court. Here is how he expressed it in a letter to Cardinal Mattei: “Whatever happens, I plead with you that you assure His Holiness that he can remain in Rome without any shadow of uncertainty.” As First Minister of Religion he will encounter, by this title, the protection for himself and for his Church. My particular desire is that there be no change in the religion of our parents.”⁶

And writing to Cacault, he says: “I prefer the title of savior to that of destroyer of the Holy See.”⁷

The armistice of Bologna, dated the 19th of February 1797, became the Peace of Tolentina. The Holy See renounced the

⁵ Correspondence of Napoleon I publiée par l'ordre de l'empereur Napoleon III 32 vol., Paris 1858-1870, II, n. 1107; cf. Leflon, *Op. cit.*, p. 202.

⁶ *Id.*, II, n. 410.

⁷ *Id.*, n. 121.

Embassies to Ancona, Avignon and court of Venice and agreed to close its ports to the enemies of France; it also had to pay the 20 millions promised, and another 15 million and turn over a series of works of art.

Having considered these preliminaries in order to evaluate Gaspar adequately, we must follow the double lines that we already know - one of which is the development of the heavenly life of him, and the other, which is the life of fire and blood sketched out by the revolutionary expansion into Italy. Even though this fire and blood of the subversive method reanimates the constancy on his own road, certain steps of the revolution appear each time to reconfirm him, internally and externally, in his priestly vocation.

We will relate here, in a succinct form, the steps Gaspar took. In 1797, in the Chapel of St. Aloysius of the Roman College, he received his First Communion. He was eleven years old, but he knew very well what he was doing: he understood this through love and understanding. In any case, the effects of this were not slow in showing themselves in his behavior, his speech, his actions, his use of time - all was reflected in his manner of feeling and thinking.

Until now he was just a young lad on the edge of adolescence, but now he acquired the maturity of a man.

The following year, 1798, he started to wear the habit of a "little monk"; here we must clarify something. He finished this first external act of his curriculum in an atmosphere clouded with what was going on, already mentioned: the French were in Rome as conquerors and messengers of decide. Against this offensive, yet unknown, against Christ and his Church, there occurred a succession of dates related to his vocational path, which we anticipate by opening up a window to the future.

On 12 April 1800 he receives the

tonsure in the Basilica of St. John Lateran, after a month's retreat in the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem in Rome.

On 7 June of the same year (1800) he is ordained Porter and Lector.

On 14 September, yet in 1800, he signs up for the Work of Ecclesiastical Help, in St. Basilica dei Funerari, and there he gives the first signs of his eloquence.

On 4 April 1801 he is ordained Exorcist and Acolyte in the Lateran Basilica.

In 1802 he preaches the holy sermon and panegyrics in the Church of St. Basilica; we must remember that on this date he is still only a student and is 17 years old.

In 1804 he proposes a club among his fellow students with the purpose of joining in prayer on determined days and hours. The monks of St. Prudencia grant him a chapel for this purpose. The monk Franco Anviti, the director, offers Mass on this occasion.

On 13 January 1805 he is named secretary for the Work of Catechism in the Oratory of Santa Maria, where he preaches and gives instructions.

In 1806 he attends the Ecclesiastical Academy of Abbot Marchetti and receives lessons from Monsignor Bacolo: he perfects himself in sacred eloquence. Meanwhile, he is elected director of the Pious Union of Santa Galla (we will speak of this again in the course of this book) and this institution flourishes. At the same time he continues to teach the villagers and wagoners. In the Plaza Montanara he organizes First Communion classes for children that are sheltered in Santa Galla.

On 2 February 1807 he was ordained Subdeacon in the Basilica of St. John; we will see at this moment the great significance of the fidelity included in the act of perseverance in his ecclesiastical life.

On 30 July 1808 he is named an active

Canon of the Basilica of St. Mark, and on the following day, 31 July, he is ordained Priest in the church of the Missionaries of St. Vincent de Paul in Montecitorio.

On 1 August 1808 he preaches on Divine Providence in the Basilica of St. Peter before the “Remains of the Holy Martyrs”.

On 2 August he celebrated his First Mass in the Basilica of St. Mark.

And, for the moment, we arrive here: the great goal has been reached; Gaspar is a priest of Christ. His fidelity has not vacillated and his activity has developed from now on with a dedication ever grander; we have followed him step by step. The great tests will arrive, starting with 1808.

But now, in order to evaluate better, as we have said, the road taken between 1798 and 1808, let us return to the other parallel road that we have mentioned, that is, the events between which he follows this road.