

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

should attend only to that which pertained to religion and to nothing that pertained to secular matters. They proclaimed that they had freed Rome and that they had instituted a Republic.

On the 15th, Thursday before Lent, the anniversary of the election of Pius VI, they raised a magnificent pole of liberty on the Campidogli, with the destruction of the papal coat of arms and distributed the tri-colored insignias - white, red and black - and with parties and discourses in homage to liberty. The inscription around the base of the pole said: "Religion is Freedom. Equality is the law. Liberty is Equality. Sovereignty to the people."

On the following days they erected various other flagpoles in the districts of Rome, one which was erected precisely on the spot where the general died trying to free the people, near the Corsini Palace. In recognition of these feasts it was ordered that there be restored objects made for less than 120 *paoli* and that they put lights in the windows during two nights and that the 18th be celebrated by a free public show. On the 16th the Corsican general Giovanni Bautista Cervoni (1768-1809) - was ordered by General Berthier to enter the pontifical quarters in order to announce the abolition of the temporal power of the pope; cf. D. Spadoni *Il General Cervoni e i corsi nella Repubblica romana de 1789-99*, en 'Archivo storico de Córcega', X, 1939, pp. 569-575 - he named personally to be the head of the national troops the citizen and ex-prince Spada (Giuseppe Spada figures in the acts of the sovereign people as commandant in charge of the civil militia). The day before the flagpole was erected, various princes were taken hostages (Braschi, Camillo Borghesse, Gabrielli, Giustiani), Cardinals (della Somaglia, Rovarella, Carandini, Caraffas, Trajetti) and prelates (majordomo Caraffa, Belvedere and Brancadoro). The Governor of Rome Crivelli was arrested in his home and as also the bankers Barberi, Sartoi and Acquaroni. The Cardinal Deacon Albani fled Rome and his family was taken hostage, as also Cardinal Brusca. The French soldiers acted filthily with the Roman women, but they were severely punished, as also a sergeant who lacked respect in St. Peter's Basilica, and was demoted. A Capuchin who preached against the French was put into prison. The same day the nobility had to pay within 24 hours a contribution of 200,000 duros to the French. On the 17th there was an edict by which all French emigrants should leave Rome within 24 hours. On the same day the brother of Alexander Berthier, general in charge of the army in Rome, left for Paris to vindicate to the Directory what his brother had done in Rome. On the 18th there was a

From this moment on all of the Roman citizens were involved directly or indirectly by the French in the drama of the pope. We can see in the newspapers of the time how the political and military events morally and economically afflicted the population of the city of Rome.

Very soon the persecution was centered on the figure of the ancient pontiff. A few days after the French had entered Rome, a strong contingent of republican soldiers gathered in the St. Peter Plaza. An eye-witness, Msgr. Baladassari, a follower of the pope, writes: "They were half French and half Civil Guard of Rome, commanded by new officials and revolutionary followers. Seeing this, there were new attacks; but we were not deceived. In the name of someone, I don't know who, the leaders of the French army ordered that all of the guards of the pope, the calvary soldiers, the cuirassiers and the Swiss Guard, lined up for an inspection." There was general confusion. When all of the pontifical military forces were joined in the Plaza, thinking that they would get a bonus, or some military honor, all of their arms were taken away, right to the last man. Arms, horses, everything. "The inspection ended with the disarmament and dismissal of all that remained of the papal militia and with the theft on the part of the French of all the arms

meeting of the Cardinals in St. Peter, during which was sung the *Te Deum* in thanksgiving for the recent creation of the unique (*sic*) and undivided Roman Republic. At two in the afternoon they began a party of dancing without masks, as we have already said. On the 19th an edict was published, ordering that all those who had knives and daggers to bring them to General Cervoni, who would use them in the most convenient way. The General in charge, Alexander Berthier, left and was replaced by General Massena.

and horses.”

And the pope now could walk alone in the courtyards of the Vatican palace, holding himself up on a cane; and he would even have to surrender that in the case of aggression.

The immediate consequence of this was that the “apartments of the pontiff” - Msgr. Baldassari² continues - were put under the custody of the civil militia; to which, after the act of rebellion, were added men whose morals were not very holy. So it happened that the living quarters of the Vicar of Christ were obstructed and contaminated by people of the worst character. They sang filthy songs, spoke lascivious songs, and spoke the worst blasphemies and the odor of wine and tobacco could be smelled even in the places where the pope was accustomed to eat and sleep.”

All of this, evidently, was to wear down the pope so that he would decide to leave Rome. But the old man was stronger-willed than they thought; they would have been wrong to take him insecurely to another part; this was hardly prudent. After having cut off the heads of their king, his queen and many princes, the French knew that violence has its counterproductive side and they did not want to put their hands on an octogenarian who was a hero for all. It was necessary to tighten the tourniquet a bit.

In the morning of 17 February, about 10 o'clock, the Swiss banker Haller, who was the general commissary of the finances of the French army in Italy, came with some of his helpers to the Vatican. He inspected the Palace, and without losing heart because of its enormity, wanted to see everything and take anything he wished in the name of the French Republic, instructing that each object be sealed with sealing-wax.

He got to the quarters of the pontiff

² Above he is called Msgr. Baladassari, and here he is called Msgr. Baldassari. The original Italian also has the same confusion. Editor's note.

and entered the private library filled with books that Pius VI had collected or received as gifts. There were valuable volumes, bound in uniform binding, and they were the personal property of the pope. But Haller expropriated them, carefully sealing them with wax; shortly he came to a private clothes-closet where some paintings and sculptures were stored, which for the greater part were given personally to Pius VI. Haller said:

“You have not given me the key to this door.”

The attendant said that he did not have the key.

“Then who has it? If we cannot open the door with a key, then we will use an axe.”

“The key,” explained the attendant, “is in the hands of His Holiness.”

“Good,” ordered Haller in a disdainful way, “have him give you the key; otherwise we will tear the door off. I must and will immediately see all that it contains.”

The pope at this time was at the table. The papal attendants sensed that they should give in rather than humiliate the ancient pope, but they had no other choice but to tell him about it. The pope gave them the key immediately. Nevertheless they got the impression that he was irritated by it.

Haller opened the clothes closet and “legally” confiscated everything in it.

Afterwards he went to the dining room and entered; Pius VI, as we said, was seated at the table. Haller was accompanied by several functionaries, and each one had something in his arms: one with a candlestick with a lighted candle to melt the sealing-wax, another with the great seal of the Republic, others with rolls of paper, ink well, etc., etc.. The entire group entered. The leader directed himself to the pontiff and spoke in a loud voice and with a deceiving, supercilious look.

In front of the pope there was a adorned box. Haller asked:

“Does that box have jewels in it?”

“Sir,” serenely answered the pope, “it has only cookies.”

And directing himself to his attendant, said:

“You can have some too.”

Haller accepted it and with him one of his attendants; and they ate them.

Then a more direct pressure was put on the pope. Haller put on his face a more agreeable and confidential look; he came closer to him, and sat at his side, and putting his elbow on the table, said:

“Look, we are under imperious circumstances; and it would be to His Holiness’s advantage it he would leave Rome. The Roman Republic need this palace. But there is more: your person runs the risk of being mistreated by the fury of the people. In the beginning of the revolutions, up until the new government was able to establish itself in a stable way, there are upheavals and violence; there are many reasons to fear that the same will happen in Rome. Your Holiness ought to accept graciously my advice, and I hope that your spontaneous and prompt departure will contribute to your own security.”

The pope answered firmly:

“In this enormous palace we live in only a few of the rooms; all the rest is under your power. In respect to the security of our person, we do not fear in the least that the people would do us any harm. Let me remind you that we demand from you the guarantee you publicly gave us just three days ago. As the visible head of the church we have great obligations to fulfill and by our own will we will never leave this residence.”

Haller did not expect an answer so precise and lucid from this ancient, 80 year old man. He was disturbed and muttered some

words under his breath. Shortly he changed the subject to a conversation about practical territory and spoke of jewels, alluding to the jewels that were in the Holy House of Loretto; and remembering that the pope had already turned that over to the French, Haller said:

“Forgive me, but I have not yet visited your bedroom.”

Then the pope “tossing glances of his majestic look” - as an eyewitness reported - got up from the table and led his visitor to his room, opened with his hand a box where he was supposed to be hiding jewels and showed him the inside of it. There remained only one ring with a enlarged flat diamond.

He took it out and showed it to him and said energetically:

“These are the jewels that we still have. But I am not the owner of them: this ring passes from pope to pope and I must pass in on to the successor that God disposes.”

And with that he put the ring back in the box.

Haller said nothing and left.

But the final pressure could not be long in coming.

In the afternoon of the 17 of February, Cardinal Doria Panfili was received in audience by Pius VI and they had a long conversation; he explained clearly the impossibility of remaining in Rome, in view of the decision taken by the invaders. The pope was reconciled to leaving and chose as his residence the city of Florence.

But three hours before dawn on the 20th of February 1798, there was the noise of many horses as they entered the principal courtyard of the Vatican palace and alerted the inhabitants that a numerous guard was ready for the imminent departure of Pius VI. Two French officials, leaders of a battalion, together with other officials of the troops of the palace guard, entered the private quarters

of the pope.

Pius VI was already kneeling in his private chapel, vested in a white cassock, for he had just assisted at a Holy Mass with profound devotion. Coming out of the chapel, he put on a red cape and the papal hat. Because of his age and his infirmities he could hardly stand up. He had a cane in his right hand and was supported on the other side by Monsignor Caracciolo, the head chamberlain. He had a serene countenance. His carriage arrived, he entered it, and in front of him was seated Cardinal Caracciolo, head of the household and Cardinal Rossi, both in priestly cassocks, while the rest of the people of his entourage was accommodated in another carriage. Nevertheless his departure caused painful discussions: at the last minute there were no horses for his “companions”, the officials of the Republic. Only when the coach was ready did they move from the Vatican Palace to the Puente Molle in order to take the road to Toscana.