

## 5. THE DEATH OF PIUS VI - THE CONCLAVE OF VENICE - PIUS VII

The pontifical coach and its entourage went slowly on a road hardly passable in many places, leading to Acquapendente, and climbed to the pass at Radicofani, and then went down to Florence. Before they got there they stopped at the hill of Galluzzo, where Pius VI had to stop to lodge in a Carthusian monastery.

There they were practically isolated, and not even the monks had free access to him. It was a time of sorrow and resignation. The ancient pontiff knew that it had become impossible for him to remain in Rome, and this cut off his strength. From the Carthusian monastery he wrote to his English bishops: "You know that by God's will the church was born for the cross and suffering, and by its light it passed to the darkness of error, from her progress to the assaults of its enemies and by his force to privations and adversities. It is for this reason there has never been more intense the splendor of the Church when men have tried to overtake it; in effect, just as fire purifies the gold, so too the Christ of tribulation tests the true friends of God."<sup>1</sup>

In September 1798 things became more complicated when Fernando IV, King of Naples, send an army to free Rome. Against this new enemy, General Championnet believed that it was necessary to join all of the French forces in a place able to bring about rapid tactic of dispersement and for this reason he evacuated Rome. This gave the Neapolitans to chance occupy the city and restore the papal power. The majority of the Romans passed three weeks of great euphoria, content for having reestablished the ancient

authority. But meanwhile the French reorganized and made a counterattack, with results that were much greater that they had foreseen.

The soldiers of Fernando IV, caught by surprise, took their turn to abandon Rome, and did not miss the opportunity, as is always the case, of causing damage to people and things. It is said that they did not miss the chance to take what the French could not take.

But once Rome was without the Neapolitan soldiers, the conflict did not end, but rather continued with the persecution by the French up to the very borders of the Papal States. The army of the king was in shatters, and although there were skirmishes and sporadic resistance, the French reached the capital, and Ferdinand had to take refuge in Sicily.

Naples was then called the Parthenopean Republic, a copy of the Roman Republic, that is, of an inspiration completely French and revolutionary.

But this reality that seemed so easy at first glance in the midst of the stupor of the Neapolitans, but at second glance it showed itself to be impossible. The populace of this great city, hungry and irritated, could not at first force themselves to repel the invader. But the people of the countryside began a guerilla warfare best defined as "banditry" and carried on in a form that was very subtle and difficult to counterattack. These guerillas prepared for the expulsion of the French from central Italy when in 1799 they began the grand revolt upheld by the second European coalition.

Actually, the Austrians marched toward the Po in the spring of 1799; and confronted with this threat, the Directory decided to move Pius VI to France; he had been a prisoner in the Carthusian Monastery in Florence. Because of this Pius VI, who had had a brave period of peace, now had to

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<sup>1</sup> Schmidlin, *Historia des papas de l'epoquer contemporaine*, I, Pius VI, p. 4.; cited by Leflon, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

endure another Way of the Cross.

Loaded into a carriage and accompanied by a very small entourage of papal dignitaries, he was taken into an exile much longer and more painful. The journey began on 18 March 1799 and after various steps the group crossed over the Apennines and stopped in Parma. Then they continued on to Turin. During this trip there were varying demonstrations of affection for the pope and also disconcerting vileness. In some places where they had to spend the night, among the prominent citizens no one would open the door for the prisoner pope, such was the fear that induced such an uncomprehensible cowardice. But apart from this, almost all the people rendered homage with a spontaneity that revealed their true faith.

In Briançon the people received the pope with manifestations of affection; they wanted to visit the apartment in which he was lodged, but, being that this was impossible because of the large number of visitors, many gathered under his windows, shouting for him. The parish of Briançon was directed by a "schismatic" pastor, who, none the less, celebrated in his honor a solemn *Te Deum*, giving thanks for the happy arrival of His Holiness.

This devotion, so warm and spontaneous, lessened the bitterness of the situation in which the prisoners found themselves. They were not aware that in the political circles there was a secret project to spread the news that the pope had died, so that there would be a new election in Rome and also in other chosen sites; in other words, they were trying to create a number of popes; they would then try to return Pius VI to the scene in order to create a multiple schism and chaos which would contribute to the destruction of the church.

But the war continued, and the Russians under General Souvaroff crossed

over to Switzerland, occupying Susa. The French government, fearful that someone would try to free the pope, which would awakened values and triumphal signs, was concerned with taking Pius VI to another place. So the journey began again, with a new calvary by way of Embrun, Grenoble and Valencia. Here the prisoners were locked up in a castle.

The pope in reality had had to put up with an incredible pain, both spiritual and physical. Reduced to an extreme low, he repeated over and over that he pardoned his persecutors, and on the 19 of August on his death bed, he said once again, with his eyes turned to heaven: "With all my heart, with all my heart."

He had shown, in the presence of suffering and humiliations a strength and generosity that would serve as a example to the church and the world.

A parallel chronology between this history and that of Gaspar shows a coincidence of certain dates: in 1798, the invasion of Rome on the part of the French militia; the "dethroning" - according to revolutionary criteria - of the pope, his deportation, and the enormous impact on the citizenry ... and precisely then the choice, on the part of the 12 year old Gaspar, for the consecrated life.

On 9 November of 1799 Napoleon Bonaparte, once he dissolved the Directory, proclaimed himself the First Consul of the French Republic. In Rome, meanwhile, everyone was waiting for the new pope, especially at the end of 1799 when the city had been freed from the French and occupied by troops of the King of Naples.<sup>2</sup> On his part Bonaparte permitted the cardinals and the

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<sup>2</sup> Immediately after this the recapture of Rome took place by the Neapolitan militia, allied to the European coalition.

prelates to return to their homes.

The Conclave could have been held in Rome, but the Cardinal Deacon Alcani was afraid that King Fernando IV would want to make good his work of liberation in order to influence, in some way, the papal election. On the other hand Pius VI, foreseeing difficulties for the conclave, had published three decrees: one brief, dated 17 February 1797, increased the prescribed time, although asking at the same time to speed it up; one bull, dated 30 December 1797, granted the Cardinals the right to determine the place and date of the meeting; and another bull, dated 13 November 1798, established that the oldest Cardinal would set the territory, the Catholic prince, the city in which it would be held, and that he would convene the Sacred College.

The Cardinal Dean Albani, for reasons already described, preferred Venice as the seat of the Conclave; the Emperor of Austria offered very advantageous conditions for the lodging of the Cardinals: the Benedictine Monastery on the Isle of St. George and a financial help of 24,000 ducads.

It took five months for the Cardinals to get together; of the 42 Cardinals still living and capable of traveling only 36 were able to come together; one of them, Cardinal Merzan, sent by the Emperor of Austria, arrived on 12 December, while the Conclave has started on the first of the month.

The Conclave was described as a prolonged attempt of a ploy on the part of the Emperor of Austria in favor of Cardinal Mattei, very well known for his stand against the Cisalpine Republic and the Revolution. But it was not possible to reach an agreement to elect him, and the election was taking a long time. Thirteen weeks followed, of searches and scrutinies, and during the fourteenth week they rapidly reach a unanimous vote in favor of Cardinal Chiamonti, a Benedictine and bishop of

Imola, a pious man and very well loved by his order for a profound spiritual bond that he always confessed and demonstrated, including his practice of wearing the color of his habit under the vesture of bishop, cardinal or pope.

On 3 July 1800 the new pontiff entered Rome, being acclaimed with universal jubilee. Eight months later, on 19 February 1801, the Peace of Luneville reestablished the Pontifical States.