

10. PIUS VII IN FRANCE: THE CORONATION OF NAPOLEON

The decision on the part of Pius VII to go to Paris to crown Napoleon had been reached after a lengthy conversation among the more important cardinals. The pope himself had fasted and offered sacrifices and had prayed many hours trying to reach a decision; Msgr Altieri tells that many times he had seen him kneeling with his arms raised to heaven, his face tortured in pain, asking for light to make the correct decision that should be made. There were many arguments against it, and many in favor of the journey. A “yes” or “no” could make a friendly Napoleon or a threatening enemy. If the latter case, it could be devastating for the French Catholics and those of many other nations.

For the Holy See the important thing to seek, in virtue of the extraordinary concession made by the pope to the emperor, was greater advantages for the church; actually, there were many things pending, among them the “Organic Laws of the Clergy” and the “Ministry of Worship and its Execution” of Melzi, all of which impeded a coherent application of the Concordat in Italy. The grave problems concerning the bishops, the treatment that should be given to matrimony, the ordination with patrimony and various other problems formed a vast series of themes that had to be resolved. And this was the propitious time to do it.

Once Pius VII decided affirmatively, his jovial and manifested calm returned.

Napoleon had given assurance for solving some of the problems enumerated above, and for some others he had expressed certain hope.

The trip to Paris was a triumph for Pius VII by the veneration that the people showed as he passed by. To Fouché, when he asked him what he thought of France, he

replied: “Thank God, we passed through a people on their knees.”¹ In Paris, the manifestations of homage for the pope was gigantic. “The abundance of the multitudes at the religious ceremonies” - writes Leflon - “was infinitely more significant than all of the official talks.”²

To the churches visited by Pius VII came such a great multitude that in the church of St. Nicholas des Champs there was danger of people being suffocated; and in Saint-Merry the Holy Father had to leave by the door of the sacristy and not by the front door. All perceived the spiritual strength of his person: the humility, the goodness, the perfect dignity - all revealed his religious strength, his total commitment to Christ.

In the midst of this strident worldliness, this haughty and improvised court and the high hierarchy, the arrival of a pope, so somber, simple and smiling, was a strong refreshing sight. Even the common people could speak with him and all left with a lively impression. This happened even for the higher functionaries, to the representatives of the Senate of the Legislative body and tribunal: the speakers of the three assemblies carried on a competition in eloquence and devotion: Francois de Neuchateau, former Jacobine and Minister of the Interior under the Frutiorian administration, spoke with unction of the first-born daughter of the Church; the atheist Lalande, in the name of the Longitudes, and doctor Guillotin, the inventor of the “Guillotine”, in representation of the Office of Vaccine, pronounced discourses filled with praises.”³

In reality, after the coronation of the emperor of the French, and in continuation, of the King of Italy, Napoleon felt more than ever the heir of Charlemagne and he sought to

¹ Cf. Leflon, *Op. cit.*, p. 405.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

force himself higher, each time more boldly, in church affairs. Meanwhile a general theme, both political and military, ever more explicit, was devised to impose, in a more determined manner, on the pope as a temporal sovereign of the Papal States.

The first practical show of this was in 1805.

In September of that year a continental war had started between France and the powers of central-eastern Europe, and Napoleon went into action, necessary by his standards, and he occupied the port of Ancona on 18 October 1805. Pius VII very profoundly considered this a violation of the pontifical sovereignty, since it happened so shortly after the extraordinary proof of the goodness and confidence that he had given the emperor on the occasion of the coronation in Notre Dame. He wrote in his own hand a letter that was not like any diplomatic letter before it; he spoke of the “cruel affront” and the “bitterness” and concluded: “We, we do not know how to reconcile (an eventual refusal to restore the port of Ancona) with the continuation of good relations with the Ministries of His Majesty, for such relations would result contradictory with the form in which they are being treated.”⁴

This letter reveals the personality of the pope which Napoleon had underestimated, both in energy and firmness. Remembering this in his memorial on St. Helena, he said: “Pius VII used the pen of Gregory VII.”⁵

But the war in Europe ended once again with the victory of the emperor, who, by means of the treaty of Pressburg⁶, dated the 7 January 1806, reached a position more dominating than ever on the continent.

On 30 January Napoleon wrote to the pope and said: “Your Holiness is the sovereign of Rome, and I am your emperor.”

What does this mean? Surely it does not just mean honorary titles; it treats rather of practical and solid values. The new Caesar had created a “continental” system of fighting against enemy states, above all against England; he demanded that the Pontifical States be part of the coalition by following the same international politics as France. Eventually this would also demand that the Papal States provide military forces; but, meanwhile, the Papal States had to put into effect the closing of its ports to the enemies of France, especially the English ships, and the expulsion from the Papal States of all foreigners politically contrary to France.

In this sense the emperor expressed himself very clearly: “Your Holiness should not show deference to any powers which, from a religious point of view, are heretical and are excluded from the church; and considered from a political point of view, they are powers far from the States and by this, incapable of being protected. All Italy is under my laws. I will not violate the independence of the Church and I will pay the expenses that the movements of troops demand, but the conditions are these: that His Holiness have the same attitude towards me in temporal affairs that I have for him in spiritual affairs; that he stop showing unnecessary admiration towards heretics of the Church and towards those powers that can afford nothing good. Your Holiness is the sovereign of Rome, and your relations with me are the same as with Charlemagne. Your Holiness is the sovereign of Rome, and I am your Emperor. My enemies should also be yours. It is not fitting, therefore, that any agent of the King of Sardinia, any Englishman, Russian or Swede reside in the Papal States and that no ship of these powers enter your ports. I will always

⁴ Letter to Cardinal Caprara, 3 July 1806; cf. Leflon, *Op. cit.*, pp. 420-421.

⁵ *Mémoires de Napoléon*, IV, 204.

⁶ Pressburg, also known as Bratislava, chief city of Slovenia, Czechoslovakia.

show to Your Holiness, as head of the Church, this filial deference, which I have always shown in the past in every circumstance, but also I must give an account to God that I wished to serve under oath to reestablish religion.”⁷

With this, Napoleon assumed the actual protection of the State of the Church: “Like my predecessors of the second and third dynasty, I consider myself the first-born son of the church, and I am the only one who has the sword to protect it and defend it from being contaminated by the Greeks and Mussulmen.

Having received this message, the pope was frightened: he had to recognize that an agreement on reasonable bases was impossible with the Napoleonic superpower; that he, as pope, had attended the coronation in Paris against the will of the majority of the cardinals, especially of the “Zealots” and now he feared that the Sacred College would denounce the line of conduct that he was following. And so, giving proof of a notable humility and prudence, he wanted to call to an urgent meeting all the cardinals residing in Rome (32) in order to report to them the imperial notification and to learn their opinion. Cardinal Pacca, referring to the letter we quoted, said⁸:

“Pius VII, at reading it, was deceived in the end and recognized how false had been the praises that he had received from Napoleon. He remembered then the conduct that he had followed, in circumstances as grave as these, his pontifical predecessors who lived in the times of greater splendor of the Roman court, and he called to his presence all of the Sacred College that he consulted. On

⁷ Correspondence of Napoleon, I, *cit.*, XII, n. 9806.

⁸ B. Pacca. *Memorie storiche sul ministro, sui due viaggi in Francia e sulla prigionia nel Forte di Fenestrelle*, Roma 1830, col. I, p. 40.

8 March the 32 cardinals went to the Quirinal; and once they were in the living quarters of the Holy Father, he put forth in a brief form the grave and important dangers he had been given; he distributed to each one of them a copy of the letter of the Emperor and the note of Cardinal Fesch⁹ of 2 March; and so that they would have time to reflect on the problem and judge the affair, he said that they would return to the Quirinal the next morning, on the 10th, in order to give their written and oral opinions, returning the copies of the letters that they had been given.

“On the following morning the 32 cardinals returned to the meeting. Pius VII, with ashen face and trembling voice proposed an adjustment and asked each cardinal to give his opinion orally. I suspected then that the pope feared that the major part of the cardinals, unhappy with his ministry and ignorant until that day of the relations that had been carried on with the French, would break out in respectful but strong complaints for having been consulted only, as the proverb goes, when you had sunk up to your neck in the water, and when it was difficult to find a remedy for the evil. My suspicions were not badly founded, but with just recognition of my colleagues I must say that things worked out completely differently.

“The venerable Cardinal Antonelli, Dean of the Sacred College, standing up, and taking his hat off, gave thanks in the name of his colleagues to the Holy Father for the confidence that he put in the sacred College and he assured him that the cardinals, putting aside their particular interests, would give the advice that came from the voice of their own consciences and the oaths made when they were elevated to the dignity of cardinal. Later he put in brief form the reasons for rejecting

⁹ Great Uncle of Napoleon, to whom had been entrusted the diplomatic relations with the Holy See.

the strange demands of the Emperor.

“Twenty-eight¹⁰ of the cardinals present upheld the Dean, rejecting with indignation the propositions of the French government; and although they spoke vehemently, no adverse criticisms against the pope or his ministers were voiced for what they had done up until then. Only three cardinals vacillated and did not have the courage to follow the example of their colleagues, giving as reasons the doleful consequences that they feared from the indignation of an irritated Napoleon.

“The unanimous vote of the 28 cardinals was that the pope neither as head of the church nor as prince of the temporal state, could accept without grave reservations the strange demands and pretensions of the emperor; neither could they bring themselves to perpetrate an act of hostility by throwing out of Rome and its surrounding area the citizens of powers with whom they were at peace, and from whom they had received no threat of aggression, such as England, Russia, Sweden and Sardinia. This would be contrary to the public rights of Europe and would be a manifested injustice. Even though some of these governments did not profess the Catholic religion, nevertheless they recognized the friendly power of the Pontifical Government and felt a veneration and respect for the person of the pope.

“Only three cardinals present, not for censurable principles, but because of fear that the refusal would increase even more the spirit of the emperor, did not have the courage to go along with their colleagues. As the cardinals expressed their opinions against the propositions of the French government, the face of the pope changed visibly, returning each time to be more serene. And when he

heard the vote of the Sacred College, he said in a strong and clear voice that he could not hope for any other suggestion nor any other advice more worthy or just than that expressed; that he personally approved it and that he would follow it, whatever the consequences. Then, turning to the three cardinals that has shown themselves intractable to follow their colleagues, he refuted the reasons that they had adduced and he encouraged them to have a greater bravery and strength.”

Some days later the pope responded to the emperor in a long letter, in which he indicated the reasons for which he could not accept the requirements, refuting at the same time the inconsistent and calumnious statements which the emperor’s letter contained; he did this with great force and energy, although he did not put aside his usual calmness.

The very sentiments of Pius VII we can discover from the following passage from a letter to Cardinal Caprara written on 3 July of 1806: “Our determination is irreversible, nothing can change it, neither threats nor the fact that the threats are taking place. These are our thoughts and you can consider them as our testament, that, if necessary, we are disposed to defend with our blood, strengthened, should a persecution follow, with the words of our divine savior: “Blessed are they who suffer persecution for the sake of justice.”

“From that moment on” - continues Cardinal Pacca - “the history of the distancing between Pius VII and Napoleon was a perfect repetition and representation that we read in the first and second chapters of the Book of Job. Each time that something arrived from the post office of France, there also arrived a note of the ministry which Talleyrand presided in the name of the emperor, transmitted to the Secretary of State Cardinal Caprara, in which there were false and

¹⁰ Twenty-nine, if you include the one who wrote this.

calumnious accusations against the pontifical government, or also new inadmissible demands for the pope neither as head of the church nor as prince of the temporal domain; and all of this with the malicious end, whether the pope accepted what he demanded or offended another external government, or even an entire nation; and if he refused, it would be a new justification for complaints always accompanied with threats to take away from the Holy See her temporal domains.”