

20. PIUS VII: FROM SAVONA TO FONTAINEBLEAU

One other prisoner, giving an example, went on his way to exile; the eyes of all peoples turned toward him.

Pius VII found himself still in Savona, in complete isolation.

Even though the Emperor had given the order “that nothing is to be lacking that could contribute to the comfort of the old man, and that he was not to be given the impression that he was in prison”, and even though “the guards assigned to the pope were to give the impression that they were a guard of honor”, Pius VII considered himself a prisoner, he refused to go out in a carriage or go walking and he repeated what he said in Grenoble: “When I get into my carriage, it will be to return to Rome.”

Meanwhile, he lived in isolation. His real punishment consisted in solitude; no cardinal could get near him, nor any adviser; occasionally he received a visit from the Count of Chabrol, the Imperial Prefect of the department, whose treatment was cordial and he sought ways to convince the pontiff, by way of long conversations, to accept Napoleonic projects. But Pius VII opposed with an unchangeable resistance: “I will be patient;” he replied, “I have been able to overcome my natural fiery and impulsive temperament and now control myself sufficiently in order not to do anything without first weighing it. But when you know me, you will understand that I never give in to fear; death itself means nothing to me.”¹

On his part, the emperor followed his dream: to remove the Chair of St. Peter in Rome and move it to Paris. In his mind the

pontiff should live in the city where the new Carlemagne lived. At that time the cardinals were called to Paris and the archbishop’s quarters were refurbished at a huge expense so that it would be turned into a new Vatican.

But Pius VII did not give the idea even a vague possibility. As a “slogan” which summarized the situation, he repeated continuously, “Just let me be pope.” Nevertheless, he was denied any communication with the exterior. He himself made the note: “Pius VI was accompanied up until his death by a cardinal, by a prelate, by secretaries and by a minister of the exterior court, to whom the republican government permitted that they reside with him.”²

Pius VII, impeded from freely exercising his mission of Supreme Pontiff, would not give canonical institution to the bishops designated by the emperor for the vacant sees of France. The situation turned worse than ever when the centenarian archbishop of Paris, Cardinal De Bellay, died on 10 June 1808. Paris was the pilot diocese, the leader of the church in France; it remained headless and the pope would not appoint Cardinal Maury, nominated in 1810 by the emperor; on the contrary, he declared that all the administrative acts which Cardinal Maury would do, would be done without authority.

The situation, by itself very grave, became even more complicated in 1810 with the divorce between Napoleon and Josephine, and the subsequent marriage with Maria Luisa of Austria. Of the 27 cardinals present in Paris, 14 took part in the religious ceremony and in the official parties; 13 of them, with Consalvi at their head, rejected the entire affair and fell into disgrace with Napoleon; he forbade them, under pain of arrest, to use the

¹Report of Chabrol, 4 February 1810; Mayol de Lupé, *La captivité de Pie VII*, 2 vols., Paris 1916, 1, 464. Cf. Leflon, *Op. Cit.*, p. 434.

² Report of Lebseltern to Metternich, 31 May 1810; in: Mayol de Lupé, *Op. cit.* I, 539. Cf. Leflon, *Op.cit. Ibid.*

cardinal's cassock or insingia, their goods were confiscated and they were confined to the provinces where the people were more loyal to the emperor than to the pope. From that time on, the 13 dissident cardinals were called the "black cardinals"; but Pius VII approved the situation.

Napoleon continued to try to influence the pope; now he turned to a relative near the emperor of Austria, Francis II, to get him to send to Savona the count of Lebzeltern so that he would try to convince the pontiff to grant canonical investiture on the bishops; but the pope, even though giving signs of cordiality to Napoleon, responded in categorical form: "When opinions, supported by the dictates of conscience and a sense of duty, are definitive and there does not exist the force of the world, neither physical nor moral, then it could maybe make me change."³

Later it was the turn of Cardinals Spina and Carmelli, sent from Paris, who could not get the pontiff to accept the Napoleonic demands. Simultaneously the emperor tried to work on the French clergy, forming an ecclesiastical committee in 1809, interfering in the election of Maury as archbishop of Paris and arresting the vicar general of Paris, D'Astros, who was sent to the prison in Vincennes. He also arrested Portalis, the cousin of D'Astros and an important member of the State Council. He named a second ecclesiastical committee, called together its members, together with all the clergy and other representatives of dicasteries and administrative offices of the state, to a meeting which should be called "spectacular", but which decided results very different from that which the emperor wanted. In effect, during this agitated meeting, Emery, the general superior of San Sulpice, the

outstanding figure of the clergy of France in those years, addressed the group and with intelligent reasoning, which was sharp and perfectly thought out, he made Napoleon modify, at least in part, his own directives.

Meanwhile - writes Leflon⁴- the watching over of Pius VII grew progressively tighter, for the pope, now deprived of every secretary, himself wrote his own letters, and at time used the domestics to transcribe his correspondence and his letters were sent by secret messengers. Chabrol reached the extreme trying to control the garments which the Holy Father sent in the basket for washing; he brought in spies as personal domestics, among them a doctor Porte, whose qualifications were doubtful.

In January 1811 the orders became even more severe.

Chabrol removed from the residence of the pope any suspicious individual; he forbade visits and little by little took away from Pius VII books, paper, pen, ink, and in general anything with which he would write. He dismissed the chaplain Soglia, surgeon Ceccarini, chamberlain Morelli and the prelate Doria. The family of the pope was denied every means of writing to him; and when the pope asked for a confessor during Lent, the prefect answered that "it is necessary to find someone of great security who is not suspected of anything."⁵

Napoleon sent to Pius VII, who continued to be in Savona, three bishops very devoted to the emperor: Barral, Duvoisin and Maury, entrusted substantially to bring the following notifications: the emperor is resolved to convoke a Council of Paris and to denounce the Concordat; but he would avoid both things if an agreement is reached on

³ Cf. Leflon, *Op. cit.*, p. 443.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 435.

⁵ *Ibid.*

these things: a) approval of the 30 named bishops and b) general solution of the Roman question. The emperor would establish the Holy Father in Paris, or Avignon, with a substantial gift; also he would permit him to return to Rome, as long as he did so “as a simple spiritual head of Catholicism” and after having made an oath, as bishop of Rome, to the supreme emperor.

As to the first point, that is, the approval of bishops, the pope was resigned. But as to the second point, his moving to Paris or Avignon, he declared himself completely opposed. Then the play of intrigue began: Chabrol acted in a manner that made the pope “disturbed”, including because of the visits he received from him. On the other hand, the pontiff was upset and could not sleep; the medication the doctor prescribed - not doubting that it was the correct medication - depressed Pius VII. On the 13 June 1811 the bishops brought him a note which contained four articles, of which the first three regulated the question of institutions and the fourth referred in a general form to a somewhat novel solution to the “Roman Question”.

At first Pius VII refused to examine the note and left it indignantly on the mantle. Days of anxiety followed; he saw clearly the ambivalence of the danger for the church, whether he accepted it or rejected it, and realization of it tormented him profoundly. On the sixth day after receiving the note and in the presence of the three bishops, he opened it, read it very attentively without objection or commentary, as if in a resigned agreement; the bishops express thanks and on the following morning left Savona.

As soon as Pius VII got up, he called for Lagorse, his “guard”, and told him to get in touch with the bishops who were leaving in order to notify them that he accepted that it is necessary to suppress the last paragraph of the fourth article in which the pontiff would admit

implicitly future “negotiations for different agreements relative to the government of the Church and to the exercise of pontifical authority”.

The order was carried out and the paragraph erased. And when the three bishops came into the presence of Napoleon, he said to them: “You have done well, My Lords; you have not surrendered my interests nor those of the Church.”⁶

On 11 June Napoleon began the Council, which was inaugurated on the 17 in Notre Dame with six cardinals, eight archbishops and 81 bishops; of these 95 prelates, 42 were Italians.

Boulogne, bishop of Troyes, opened the first meeting with a discourse which will be memorable as far as it emphasized the unity of the Church: “We will never abandon these immutable principles which binds us in unity, this corner stone, this key-stone, without which the whole edifice would collapse; never let us separate ourselves from this first link without which all the others would be scattered and would leave only discord and ruin.”⁷

After this, all the members of the Council, first of all “Uncle” Fesch, pronounced the following strict oath:

“I recognize the Holy Catholic Roman Church as mother and teacher of all the churches. I promise and swear true obedience to the Supreme Roman Pontiff, the successor of St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles and Vicar of Jesus Christ.”

Such was the beginning of the “Council”, a beginning which presages clearly an unfavorable development for the grand plans of the emperor.

This reflects all the drama and

⁶ Mayol de Lupé, *Op. cit.*, II, 228. Cf. Leflon, *Op. cit.*, p. 450.

⁷ Cf. Leflon, *Op. cit.*, p. 451.

surprising truth of the situation: Pius VII, the disarmed prisoner, terribly isolated, besieged, infirm, oppressed is nevertheless stronger than the new Charlemagne, the most powerful man known in human history.

After dissolving the Council and putting in prison those who showed themselves frankly opposed to his policies, such as Hirn, DeBroglie and Boulogne, Napoleon used a new trick - ingeniously advised by Cardinal Cambacérès, to seek the approval of the Imperial Decree, refused by the Council, of each bishop individually; and he was successful: the bishops signed the approval one by one, and on 2 August 1811 he reopened the "council"; during the first session there were 80 votes in favor of the Imperial Decree, with 13 against.

After this, another commission was sent to Savona, more important than the previous one: five cardinals and eight bishops pestered the tormented Pius VII; the negotiations went from the 3rd to the 20th of September 1811. The pope showed himself a conciliator - and accepted the imperial decree, repeating nevertheless in his brief response, that the Church of Rome is "mother and teacher of all the Churches", refusing to recognize the "Council" in the episcopal meeting of 2 August in Paris, which approved that the metropolitan bishop could fulfill the canonical institution, but only "in the name of the pope". Napoleon declared this papal brief unacceptable and moved Pius VII to Fontainebleau in May of 1812.

This transfer was organized in a manner almost like a novel, and a great mystery: on 9 July 1812, at midnight, there arrived for the pope a carriage whose windows had been covered over, the wheels wrapped in cloths and the horses without horse-shoes, all this to eliminate any noise. This fantasy carriage left at night; and in the palace in which the pope lived the usual

routine continued for 15 days: regular meals were prepared, the light were lighted as usual in the living quarters of the Prisoner and every night Chabrol went to a meeting with someone - who did not exist.

For two weeks no one in Savona knew that the pontiff was no longer there.

Even the people of the village who saw the carriage were unaware of what happened; the pope was dressed in black, his white slippers were dyed and the curtains of the carriage were permanently closed.

But Pius VII suffered a severe attack of suffocation; it was necessary to detain the trip for ten minutes, and he, very tired, declares: "I will throw myself on the road, asking you to leave me there to die."⁸

In this way they arrived at Moncenisio. Things were heading for ruin: Pius VII looked like a dying person. The doctor of the locality, Doctor Claraz, visited the sick man.

"To continue this trip while he is this way," he said, "would kill him."

Lagorse, the "guardian" of the pope, sought urgent instructions and the reply was not slow in coming: "Keep going, whatever the cost." They prepared a bed in the carriage, the pope received Holy Viaticum and the carriage departed, traveling as fast as possible.

They were terrible moments. When they went through Lione, where the pavement of the streets was old and very irregular, the carriage swayed awfully and the sufferings of the sick man were excruciating. Doctor Claraz was holding the pope's head, and he groaned and at the same time exclaimed: "May God forgive them, as I forgive them."

On 19 July 1812 the carriage entered the patio of Fontainebleau and a poor human

⁸ Lagorse al principe Borghese, 13 June 1812 (Mayol de Lupé, *Op. cit.*, II, 405).

being, now without strength, was carried up the magnificent stairs to the apartment that he used at the time of the coronation.”