

The Popes and Political Liberty

E. E. Y. HALES, M.A.

Ministry of Education, London, England

In the great conflict of our time between Communism and the free world most Catholics like to regard the Church as one of the bulwarks in the defence of liberty. We like to feel that liberty in Western civilization is at least in part something which it owes to its Christian heritage and that the freedom of the individual which in the moral sense has answered to the Christian doctrines of the soul, is reflected in a freer society than our ancestors of pre-Christian days knew. It is true that we have learnt to recognize other sources of political liberty and man ennobled others, but we like to think of its freedom as being helped in a special way by Christianity, so that Hilaire Belloc was able to exclaim: "Europe is the faith"! Arnold Toynbee takes it for granted that our Western civilization, with its special liberties, is the product of the religion from which it was derived, and that religion is Christianity.

Unfortunately, however, we have to recognize that there is another opinion which, so far as Catholicism is concerned, holds almost exactly opposite views. Writers critical of the Church (and I might quote, as conspicuous as contemporary examples, the books of Mr. Paul Blanchard, in the United States of America, or recent articles by some of the more conspicuous of the younger generation of historians in England, such as Professor Trevor-Roper at Oxford, or Mr. Mack Smith at Cambridge) evidently believe that, so far from being one of the bulwarks of political liberty in Western civilization, Rome, at least in modern times, has been a real danger to that liberty. In nineteenth and twentieth century history, our critics can point to the hostility often shown by the Papacy to movements of National liberation, for example in Italy or in the South American Republics. They point to the Syllabus of Errors of Pius IX in 1864, where he said it was an error to say that the Papacy should be reconciled with democracy, freedom and modern civilization; they point to the democratic character of many of the largely non-Catholic countries, such as Britain and the United States of America and to the lack of democratic liberty in some other Catholic countries such as Spain and Equador; sometimes they go on to suggest that all this is due to the fact that there is something intrinsically undemocratic in the nature of Catholicism, because of its stress upon the principle of obedience and its abhorrence of revolution as such. So in the view of writers of this kind the Church and more particularly the Papacy, so far from being one of the bulwarks of Western freedom, which will help to defend us from

falling into the arms of dictatorship, is rather one of the obstacles to the winning of political freedom, and democracy is in need of defence not only against Moscow but also against Rome.

Of course the arguments about this problem go back at least as far as the Reformation, and much has been written about Luther, or even about Queen Elizabeth, which suggests that they were champions of political freedom against Rome. But no serious historian to-day is likely to imagine that, however robust the hostility shown towards Rome by the Protestant champions of the sixteenth century, what they wanted to put in her place was political freedom. We will confine ourselves here to looking at the attitude adopted by the Popes towards the development of political freedom, since the time of the French Revolution, and to the attitude of Rome to-day to democracy in the contemporary world.

In other words, what is the recent record of the Papacy in this matter, and where does it stand to-day?

Now I am sure that you are all just as well aware as I am what is supposed to be the official opinion of Rome in regard to Governments. It was laid down by Pope Leo XIII as long ago as the year 1882, when he was telling the French clergy, who wanted to see the Bourbons restored to France, that Rome was indifferent to forms of Government and that it was their business to support whatever Government was established in their country which in that case was the Third Republic of 1870. She, had certain requirements to make of any Government in regard to the liberties necessary for the life of the Church; but provided these were granted she should not call upon the faithful to upset existing systems whether they were democratic or despotic. This was not her business.

But two problems confront the student of the Church and Politics in Leo XIII's classic definition of this matter. The first is, has this always been Rome's standpoint? And the second is this: if Leo XIII's classic definition does provide the theoretical position of the Popes, do they in practice show this neutrality or indifference towards forms of Government? Notably in the first question we ought to face frankly the fact that, in the formative period of modern democracy in Europe, from the French Revolution in 1789 up to the critical year 1870, when Germany and Italy were united and the Third Republic was formed in France, her attitude towards republics and the democratic liberties generally was by no means the same as that of Leo XIII.

Why was this?

It was because modern democracy in Europe started with the great French Revolution, and that revolution adopted policies not only opposed to the entire hierarchical structure of the Church and to the Roman element in it, but ended in one of the fiercest persecutions which have appeared since the days of Diocletian, and priests were exiled and guillotined, Mass had to be said in secret and cathedrals and churches in France were used for pagan

and secular functions. When the revolution crossed the Alps into Italy, the same sort of thing occurred. In 1799, Pope Pius VI, who was 81 years old, was dragged away from Rome into France where he died at Valence. Now the people who did these things, though at first they were called Jacobins, had come by the end of Napoleon's time, that is to say after the year 1815, to be called Liberals, and the result was that in the 1820's and 30's the name liberals meant, at Rome and also at Vienna or at Paris, exactly what to-day we mean when we talk about Bolsheviks. There were only two ideas in the minds of these people. One was called the Revolution, which meant the secularist anti-clerical regime set up at Paris, at Milan and even at Rome as a result of the French revolution. And the other was what was called Legitimacy which was the traditional order of monarchical government. It was only very gradually that men began to see developing a system in the political order, which expressed some of the principles advocated by the French revolutionists when they talked about liberty, equality and fraternity. Rome was on the whole slower than most European capitals to recognize this; and this was because the revolution had not only carried with it such dire consequences for the Papacy and for the Church, but had despoiled the Popes of their own states in central Italy and had tried to set up a secular system there. Only very gradually did any leading Catholic figure begin to think that it was possible for the Church to be reconciled with the Revolution. One of the first was that very great Benedictine Bishop Chiaramonti at Imola, in the republic set up by the French in Northern Italy. He was later to be elected Pope, and as Pius VII signed the Concordat with Napoleon and came to crown Napoleon Emperor at Paris. Napoleon's later treatment of him was so appalling that it was generally supposed to be a judgment on the Pope for having been so unwise as to show the slightest sympathy with revolutionary ideas. It was not until the time of the Breton priest Lamennais, who ran the revolutionary paper "*L'Avenir*" in 1830-1831, that any important Catholic figure seriously suggested that the so-called democratic liberties were something which the Church should not only accept but should encourage as being for her own good as well as for the good of society. These liberties preached by Lamennais were freedom of the press; freedom of education (by which he meant that any group or individual and especially the Church should be free to run schools); toleration of all religions and of none; separation of Church and State; and a legislative assembly to be elected by universal suffrage. This programme, it will readily be seen, was of a very extreme nature and not at all likely to be given a warm welcome in the Europe of 1830. On the other hand it provides a very important landmark because in the long run most of the liberties which Lamennais was preaching came to be adopted over much of the Western world, because his campaign marked the first serious attempt to "Christianise" the democratic liberties and to assert that, so far from being

irreconcilable with the Christian conception of society, they in fact provided the true basis for such a society.

Pope Gregory XVI, who had just been elected when Lamennais was conducting his campaign, condemned his programme as being absurd, ludicrous, and worthy of eternal reprobation; he was impressed with the need for a condemnation by the fact that revolutions were at that date in progress in Poland, in Belgium, and specially in the Papal States, and Gregory had no doubt that Lamennais' writings intended to incite to revolution and were therefore the work of the Devil. Gregory took this view because of the Pope's recent experiences of revolution, but it was felt that the language which he used in condemning the liberties invoked by Lamennais implied that these liberties were by their very nature always harmful.

The next landmark in this story of the Popes' relations with the liberals is Pius IX's Syllabus of Errors of 1864. That syllabus lists no less than 80 errors which were being promulgated at the time and it ends, in Proposition 80, with the famous phrase already quoted which said that it was an error to say that the Popes should reconcile themselves with freedom, democracy and modern civilization. This Syllabus caused the greatest stir throughout the world and it must be admitted that it still hangs heavily round the neck of the apologists for the Church. For by the year 1864 the principles of democratic liberalism has become respectable especially in France and Great Britain and the America of Abraham Lincoln. Unfortunately however, the experience of liberalism in Italy and specially of Mazzini and Garibaldi who had run the secular republic at Rome in 1849 and of Cavour who had conducted his campaign against the Church, were so hostile to the Church that Pius IX accepted the view that by its very nature liberalism was anti-Catholic and that it must be condemned.

It was only after the death of Pius IX, in 1878, and after the Papal States had been irretrievably lost, that Leo XIII gave clear expression of the Papacy's acceptance of democracy, and that Popes began to take a rather different line about the various liberties claimed by Lamennais. I think we ought to recognize that what had made Pius IX unable to accept a different standpoint in these matters was the existence of the Papal States. It was quite impossible for the Pope to be an absolute sovereign in respect of the Church and at the same time to accept limitation of his sovereignty in respect of his States. When Pius IX tried this for a few months in 1848, it was a total failure. However, since the Pope had no choice but to be absolute sovereign in the Papal States, it was natural that he would sympathize with the absolute monarchs everywhere. So Leo XIII, after the loss of the Papal States, was in a much stronger position than were his predecessors to take a more sympathetic view of democracy.

I have tried this far to explain why it was that the Popes adopted what must be called a hostile attitude towards the development of democracy in

continental Europe during its growing period between 1789 and 1870. It seems to me that that part of the modern criticism of the modern Papacy must be accepted as generally fair, but that what we know to-day should serve to remind our critics that the development of democracy in those days was a very nasty thing and extremely dangerous to the Church and of course to remind us too that when the Popes make pronouncements on political questions, even in a fairly formal document like the Syllabus of Errors, they are not making infallible pronouncements.

I would like now to outline in conclusion the other aspect of our critics' case, which is that, although since Leo XIII the Popes have often stated their indifference to forms of Government, they have in practice shown and are still showing a preference for dictatorial forms of Government.

On this I think it should be said, first, that there is one form of dictatorial Government which is always and everywhere opposed and that is Communist dictatorship from Mexico to Moscow, and from Peking to Paris. That of course is because of its materialist philosophy and because of its persecution of the Church.

But what about Rome's relations with other modern dictatorships, and especially those of Hitler, Mussolini and General Franco? It is undoubtedly true that she accorded early recognition to the Hitler régime and quickly concluded a Concordat with him although for years she had failed to conclude one with the democratic German Government of the twenties and thirties. But this was strictly a business deal. The Pope's business was to protect the life of the Church in Germany by securing her freedom in running schools, her freedom in training her own priests, and her communications with Rome. Hitler appeared to be ready to give her these things where his predecessors had not been, and so was concluded the Concordat with him. Hitler later broke this agreement and interfered with all the liberties he had undertaken to respect. The Pope declaimed against these infringements and many other of his appalling policies (especially his treatment of the Jews) with unsurpassed vigour, especially in the famous encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge*. It cannot be said that Pius XI's relations with Hitler were such as to suggest that he had a natural liking for dictators.

The case of Mussolini is more difficult on account of the delicate question of the special position of Rome; yet it is essentially similar. It is true that Pius XI helped to put Mussolini into power but only in the sense that he gave little encouragement to the Christian Democratic Party which was led by the pacifist egalitarian Sicilian priest Don Sturzo and what he feared was that the weak democratic and leftist parliamentarians were going to yield power to the Communists. Power was actually voted by the chamber of deputies to Mussolini and the Pope's part in the matter was indirect. Ever since the unification of Italy in 1870 a struggle had been waged between the new state and the Church. The state interfered in every possible way with the

Church's freedom and the Church retaliated by refusing to recognize the loss of the Papal States or to co-operate in any way. It was to the credit of Mussolini's government and to the credit of Pius XI that they succeeded in 1929 in ending this disastrous state of affairs, by agreeing to the Lateran treaties by which the Pope abandoned his claim to the Papal States and received in return the Vatican City and the Concordat of the same date by which the position of the Church in Italy was regularized. But after that the friction between Pope and dictator rapidly developed, chiefly because Mussolini was trying to push the Church out of education but also because of the development of his ideas on the glories of war and on the Jews. Pius XI's denunciations of Mussolini's totalitarian principles in the 1930's are only less fierce than his denunciations of Communism.

The attitude of Pius XI and Pius XII towards Franco has been very different from their attitude towards Hitler or Mussolini and generally speaking this has been because they saw him (and not without some reason) as the freer of Spain from Communism, and because on the whole he has respected the rights and liberties of the Church and has not adopted the absurd attitude of the other two on the subject of race. In short Rome's attitude towards the dictators has been neither 'friendly' nor 'unfriendly' but 'correct' and 'opportunist'. And what of Papal relations, since the days of Leo XIII, with the great democracies, as they have been developing gradually? The most remarkable has been the case of France because of the pressure that the French Church and the French royalist movement made upon Rome to lend them support in their efforts to upset the Third Republic and either to restore the Bourbons or to set up some dictatorial régime. In spite of the fact that the Third French Republic persecuted the Church in France and all diplomatic relations between Paris and the Vatican were severed, Rome called upon her to show neutrality in this vexed question of the form of the French Government and to support the existing Republic. And eventually in 1926 when the Action Française was developing its fierce campaign against the Republic with the leadership of Charles Maurras, Pius XI condemned his paper, effectively helping to kill his movement.

If General de Gaulle has been given a more cordial welcome than was accorded to President Coty of the Fourth Republic it would surely be a mistake to suppose that this is because the Vatican wishes to show her preference for what may become a more authoritarian form of Government than France enjoyed under the Third and Fourth Republics; it is rather her tribute to a devout Catholic. In regard to Franco, Rome has been scrupulously careful to follow Leo XIII's principle.

No doubt in relation to the British Government and the United States the question of Roman preference for one form of Government rather than another has had no reason to arise because these respective democracies have been so long established and Roman influence has been relatively so weak

that there has not been any possibility of the Papacy indulging in political preferences. That is not to say that the possibility doesn't exist in the back of some minds in the United States to-day, or that suspicion hadn't shown itself very clearly in the Presidential campaign of 1928, but we hardly needed the assurances so liberally given by the potential Democratic Catholic candidate in the United States to reassure most reasonably minded Americans that even a Catholic President would not upset the traditional liberties of the United States, while the long term of office of the Catholic Prime Minister of Canada, and the present prospect of a Catholic Governor General there have not generally been held to be a threat to political freedom in that great country.

The fact surely is that in the sphere of politics Rome has one over-riding interest, namely her determination upon the maintenance of those liberties necessary to the Church to enable her to do her legitimate work without interference, and the free communication of the Church with Rome. When these liberties have been taken away from her by so-called democratic governments she has fought these governments; when they have been denied to her by dictators or near-dictators, such as Napoleon, or Bismarck, or the Czars of Russia, or the modern dictators, she has fought these as fearlessly. It is true that for a limited time in the first half of the nineteenth century she showed a hostility towards democratic governments as such, but that was because they were a new form of government which came to prevail through a violent expression of hostility to the Church and appropriation of the Papal States. It could be argued that Gregory XVI and Pius IX were opposed on principle, and everywhere to the democratic liberties, and I have tried to show the special reasons why this was so. But since the days of Leo XIII she has not shown a preference on principle for dictatorship and she has shown a warm appreciation of the liberties enjoyed in the Anglo Saxon countries.