

THE POPE CONSIDERS SEEKING ASYLUM  
IN MALTA, 1881-1889

by

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On more than one occasion, about a hundred years ago, the Pope considered coming to Malta. Not, as has become routine practice today, to fulfil a pastoral duty or to assert the influence of the Church in some disturbed region of the world. Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) considered abandoning Rome altogether and taking up residence in Malta, and presumably setting up in these islands the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church.

The last decades of the nineteenth century were difficult years for the papacy. In the process of Italian unification the Pope, who had ruled over Rome and the Papal States as a temporal prince, had lost to the new Italy all the territory over which he had been sovereign. The City of Rome was the last piece of papal territory to become absorbed into the Italian state, in 1870.

Theoretically still a sovereign entity, the Vatican was now a state without an inch of territory. In the years that followed 1870, the Vatican and Italy were, to all intents and purposes, at war. The papacy would not submit to the reality that Rome was no longer hers and left no stone unturned trying to recover it.

The confrontation hardened after the election of Leo XIII into the papacy in 1878. Politically one of the shrewdest popes of modern times, Pope Leo XIII conducted an intensive diplomatic activity aimed at the recovery of the temporal power and the building up of the papacy's prestige and influence in international relations. Though he failed in the former objective, he was quite successful in his effort to assert the Vatican as a significant political force in world affairs. Often this success was a source of great discomfort to the Italian Government, not only because the Vatican attempted to use this acquired prestige to force Italy to negotiate, but also because other states were only too eager to exploit Italy's weaknesses for their own ends. Italian Governments were equally

exasperated by the destabilizing influence on the newly born Italian state of the persistent refusal of the Roman Church to come to terms with Italy, or even to recognize it. This internal warfare between church and state, too, was open to exploitation by Italy's rivals. It perfectly suited the French, who hoped that continuing instability would topple the Italian monarchy and turn Italy into a republic, friendly with, and subservient to, the French republic. All this, and much more, resulted in a growing resentment in Italy against the papacy. Anticlericalism was rampant also at the popular level.

It is against this background that on more than one occasion in the 1880s Pope Leo XIII carefully weighed the advantages and disadvantages of quitting Rome altogether. Malta was one of the countries, along with Austria and Spain, considered as possible places for the papacy to move to.

The first reference to this possibility occurs in 1881, following a particularly nasty outburst of anticlericalism in Rome. On July 13, the remains of Pope Pius IX, who had died in 1878, were exhumed from St. Peter's to be reburied in the church of San Lorenzo. The coffin was carried at night in what had been intended to be a quiet and dignified procession. During its course, the procession came under attack from an anticlerical crowd that attempted to throw the coffin into the Tiber. Though this was hardly an isolated anticlerical outburst, the outrageous nature of the attack caused understandable alarm in Church circles and concern about the personal safety of the living Pope.<sup>1</sup>

A few weeks later it was leaked in the Roman daily *Il Diritto* that the Pope was very seriously considering leaving Rome. The *Diritto* article stated that the Pope had practically decided on leaving and that he was only being discouraged from doing so by certain foreign governments who advised him to allow more time for the problems with Italy to be settled. On the other hand, the cardinals of the Sacred College favoured departure. The *Diritto* also stated that the Pope had chosen Malta as his place of refuge and that if the departure were to materialize he would be accompanied by the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See.<sup>2</sup>

The British Embassy in Rome had been strangely unaware of all this, as no request for asylum had been made to the British Government. On making enquiries at the Vatican about the truth or otherwise of the report, the British Ambassador in Rome was told by the Secretary of the Congregation *De Propaganda Fide* that the Pope personally did not wish to depart from Rome, but that an entourage of 'intransigent' cardinals were trying to bring to a head

the church-state crisis so as to leave the Pope with no alternative but to depart. It was these same cardinals who had, against Leo XIII's better judgement, prevailed on him to allow the transportation of Pius IX's remains to take place. However, the British Ambassador was told, although the Pope's departure was not imminent, it was by no means improbable, the more so if the current violence escalated and the Holy See continued to be harassed. Nevertheless, were the Pope to leave Rome, he would probably go to Austria rather than Malta.<sup>3</sup>

As a home for the papacy, Catholic and conservative Austria was almost an automatic choice. It was to the Austrian Emperor Francis Joseph that Leo XIII appealed for protection in the aftermath of the above incident. Not only was Austria-Hungary Catholic and conservative, but she had no reason to sympathise with united Italy, united to a large degree by wars waged on Austria. In March 1882 Francis Joseph sent a special mission to Leo XIII as a sign of solidarity. The Austrian emissary promised asylum in Austria if the Pope were forced into seeking it, but urged him to resist and stay in Rome. The transfer of the papacy from Rome to Austria at this stage was bound to embarrass Francis Joseph. For concurrently secret negotiations were under way leading to the inclusion of Italy into the Triple Alliance along with Austria-Hungary and Germany. The inclusion of Italy was the result of strategic expediency, but when he found out about the alliance the following year the Pope was nonetheless bitterly disillusioned.<sup>4</sup>

In the event, the Pope remained in Rome, but the idea of a possible departure continued to be entertained for years to come.

In 1882, the idea of quitting Rome was still being considered. The Pope had received information from Paris that Leon Gambetta, the French republican leader, was sounding the Italians as to the possibility of doing away with the monarchy and making Italy a republic. The Pope reckoned that his position in Rome would become even more difficult if this materialized, for anticlericalism was expected to thrive more in a republic.<sup>5</sup>

About the possibility of leaving Rome he talked to the French Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, the Primate of the Catholic Church in Africa and a fervent patriot who worked harder than anyone else to reconcile church and state in France. The Cardinal was alarmed that the Pope might ultimately take refuge in Austria, fearing that once there, he would be persuaded to transfer to Austria the much coveted French Protectorate of Catholics in the East which had always been an important support to French influence, especially within the Ottoman Empire. And, of course, Austria-Hungary was

allied to Germany, France's chief adversary. Therefore, Cardinal Lavigerie suggested that if he were to leave Rome the Pope ought to seek asylum in Malta, where the population was *ultra-Catholic*. Whereupon the Pope replied: 'Go then, and see how they will receive a Cardinal'.<sup>6</sup>

Cardinal Lavigerie did, indeed, come to Malta on a ten-day visit in July 1882. On first hearing of the proposed visit, the British authorities here became highly suspicious, readily interpreting it as an attempt to generate sympathy in Malta for the French at a time when Anglo-French tension in the Mediterranean was rising. They also learned that demonstrations were planned in favour of the Cardinal and feared that political agitators might turn these into expressions of anti-British feeling. Governor Sir Arthur Borton therefore asked Bishop Pietro Pace of Gozo for help. Pace discreetly conveyed the Governor's fears to Lavigerie and asked him to consider postponing the visit.<sup>7</sup> However, Lavigerie did not change his plans. In view of this, the Governor once again asked for, and obtained, the support of Bishop Pace, this time to make sure that the demonstrations planned for the Cardinal's reception were restricted to a minimum and were non-political in character. In this, Pace succeeded.<sup>8</sup> In this way, if the Pope really wanted Cardinal Lavigerie, as it were, to test the ground for him, the Bishop of Gozo had unwittingly obstructed him.

On the other hand, the Bishop of Gozo would not regret his collaboration with the British Governor. When, a few years later, the succession to the archbishopric of Malta came up for consideration, this incident was cited as an outstanding example of his good disposition towards British rule and the British successfully pushed his candidature against that of Bishop Antonio M. Buhagiar, a protégé of none other than Cardinal Lavigerie.<sup>9</sup>

After 1882, the plan to abandon Rome seems to have been laid aside for several years. After the first years of his pontificate, Leo XIII made great progress in re-establishing the image and prestige of the Vatican by his skillful diplomacy. The fears of the first decade following the loss of Rome that the Vatican might become extinct as a political entity gave way to a new self-confidence and a growing influence in world affairs. This can be seen from the significant diplomatic achievements in the Vatican's relations with non-Catholic powers. In his church-state struggle known as the *kulturkampf* Bismarck was ultimately compelled to seek reconciliation with the Vatican. In 1882 he re-established diplomatic relations. Russia, having broken diplomatic relations in 1865, repaired its relations in the course of the 1880s, eventually to restore

full diplomatic relations in 1894. Britain too, throughout the 1880s courted the Vatican constantly, trying to enlist its support in Ireland and in Malta, and came very close to paying the price demanded by the Vatican – diplomatic relations. In 1889 a fully accredited British Ambassador would go to the Holy See on a temporary mission officially to discuss questions related to the Maltese Church.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the Vatican's relations with Italy did not improve. Indeed, the rising international prestige of the Vatican was a constant cause of concern to Italian statesmen such as Francesco Crispi, who tended to see the hand of the Vatican in all of Italy's misfortunes. Initiatives for reconciliation were not lacking, but none was successful. After 1887, with the appointment of Mariano Rampolla as Cardinal Secretary of State, papal diplomacy took the path of intransigence, and the cold war between Vatican and Quirinal hardened further.<sup>11</sup>

In June 1889, a statue of Giordano Bruno, who had been burned for heresy in 1600, was unveiled in Rome. In itself the event, commemorating an eminent victim of ecclesiastical repression, was an affront to the papacy. Furthermore, the occasion set loose a vigorous anticlerical outburst, reminding the Pope of the state of siege he was in. He called a meeting of the cardinals and once more announced that he was seriously considering leaving Rome. The British Ambassador in Rome got an account of the secret consistory from a reliable source:

The Pope, after pronouncing the allocution concerning the inauguration of the statue of Giordano Bruno, left the throne and seated himself on a low stool amidst the Cardinals. His Holiness then said that after the events of 9th June last, the continuation of his stay in Rome seemed to him to have become impossible. It would be equally impossible in the event of war breaking out between Italy and another power, and he asked the advice of the Cardinals as to the place of his retreat.

Both Spain and Malta were proposed and favourably considered, His Holiness himself inclining himself towards the latter as a place of residence. No decision was, however, arrived [*sic*]. The age and infirmities of the Pontiff and of a large number of the Cardinals rendered the question of leaving Rome peculiarly difficult and this point was prominently brought forward, especially connected as it must be with a long sea voyage.<sup>12</sup>

Alarmed on other occasions by the domestic and international implications of a papal 'flight' from Rome,<sup>13</sup> this time the Italian Government let it be known that if the Pope wanted to leave he

was free to do so, but that once gone, he would not be allowed to return.<sup>14</sup>

Four months later, the idea of taking refuge in Malta was still apparently being considered. It so happened that at this time negotiations were going on between Britain and the Vatican in preparation for the special diplomatic mission that was to go to the Vatican to discuss questions relating to the Maltese Church. This event was to be an important landmark in Anglo-Vatican relations, the first of its level in two hundred years. A few days before the diplomatic mission, headed by former Malta Governor Sir Lintorn Simmons, arrived in Rome (mid-November 1889) the Papal Nuncio in Munich raised the question of the mission with the British Ambassador and practically asked for asylum in Malta for the Pope, in case the latter were to leave Rome. The Nuncio suggested that the Simmons' mission might have another purpose besides the official one:

He had an idea that there might be something beyond this and he hoped so ... it may have something to do with the present precarious position of His Holiness and General Simmons who is well known for his high and disinterested character may have been charged to offer the Pope an asylum in Malta, if events should prevent his remaining any longer in Rome. If it is so it will give me [Nuncio] great joy.<sup>15</sup>

The transfer of the papacy to Malta, or for that matter to anywhere else, did not materialize, of course. The Pope remained in Rome, a self-defined and self-confined 'prisoner at the Vatican'. Apart from one further occasion in 1891, following a clerical demonstration by French pilgrims in Rome and a riotous reaction by the anticlericals,<sup>16</sup> the idea of quitting Rome does not seem to have been further entertained seriously in the 1890s.

What is surprising in this whole matter is the lack of any recorded reaction to these suggestions on the part of the British Government, excepting a solitary observation by a Colonial Office official that 'if there were any serious idea of the Pope going to Malta this Department should have early intimation, as many serious questions would be involved'.<sup>17</sup> Serious questions indeed, considering the Vatican's deep involvement in international politics; and considering Malta's function as a vital military base at a time of mounting international tension when the outbreak of a great war was not considered an improbability.

The lack of recorded remarks over the prospect of the Pope's seeking asylum in Malta leaves unanswered the questions of why was Malta among the countries considered for asylum, and would

the British be prepared to grant such asylum. The answer to the first question partly may be found in Cardinal Lavignerie's description of the Maltese as *ultra Catholique*. It would have been hard to find another nation with such a high percentage of practicing Catholics and at the same time without a significant anti-clerical movement. Part of the answer is also to be found in the deep concern of the British in Malta to maintain the best possible relations with the Catholic Church. Britain not only had an unrivalled record of non-interference in the affairs of the Church in Malta, but made co-operation with the Church a fundamental principle of her policy. As a seat for the papacy, at least a temporary one, Malta possessed good qualifications.

The second question – would Britain grant asylum – is not easy to answer. There might be serious implications on Anglo-Italian relations; Britain might become embroiled in the affairs of other powers in view of the hyperactive Vatican diplomacy and of the 'ultramontane' power of the Vatican in states with large Catholic communities; and so on. Such considerations doubtless would have to be taken into account were a specific request for asylum made. The other aspect of the same question is: what effect would the Pope's presence in Malta have on the British government of Malta and the Maltese? The 1880s were unusually active years in Anglo-Vatican relations, Ireland and Malta being the areas mostly discussed. The Pope took steps to restrain the Irish Church from supporting anti-British agitation and in Malta appointed as Archbishop the British-backed candidate. Britain sent a diplomatic mission. In the course of negotiations, the British Government had come to appreciate the value of having a good relationship with the Vatican. 'Although Malta is very defensible with a friendly population', wrote Lord Salisbury, the British Prime Minister, in 1889, in connection with the mission, 'its defence will be both costly and precarious if the population is hostile. The Pope is, therefore, to be looked upon in the light of a big gun, to be kept in good order and turned the right way.'<sup>18</sup> Governor Henry Torrens for one was convinced that the Pope invariably would assist Britain if he were to come to Malta. 'If there is a possibility', he advised in 1889, '... I would welcome his advent with pleasure in view of the material prosperity and wealth which would follow and with the confidence that his influence would be most powerfully exercised to maintain British rule in every emergency'.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Christopher Seton-Watson, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, (London 1967), p. 111.

<sup>2</sup>*Il Diritto*, 10 Aug. 1881.

<sup>3</sup>Public Record Office, London. Foreign Office (FO) series 45, vol. 430, Macdonald (Rome) to Granville (Foreign Secretary), 17 Aug. 1881.

<sup>4</sup>Seton-Watson, pp. 215-217.

<sup>5</sup>In later years, papal anti-republicanism gave way to sympathy for the French Republic, as Vatican diplomacy placed more and more hope in French support for its objectives.

<sup>6</sup>'*Allez donc voir comment ils accueilleront un Cardinal*', Paul Cambon to Mme. Cambon, 20 Aug. 1882, in Paul Cambon, *Correspondence 1870-1924*, (Paris 1940), I, p. 186.

<sup>7</sup>Public Record Office, London. Colonial Office (CO) series 158, vol. 261, paper 10916, Borton to Kimberley (Colonial Secretary), 15 June 1882; CO 158/272/1403, Simmons (Governor) to Derby (Colonial Secretary), 21 Jan. 1885.

<sup>8</sup>CO 158/261/13214, Borton to Kimberley, 22 July 1882; CO 158/272/1403, Simmons to Derby, 21 Jan. 1885.

<sup>9</sup>CO 158/272/1403, Simmons to Derby, 21 Jan. 1885.

<sup>10</sup>For Vatican diplomatic relations with other states, see Robert Graham, *Vatican Diplomacy*, (Princeton 1959).

<sup>11</sup>On Vatican diplomacy in the 1880s, see Crispolito Crispolti and Guido Aureli, *La Politica di Leone XIII, da Luigi Galimberti a Mariano Rampolla*, (Roma 1912).

<sup>12</sup>CO 537/7, Nevill Dering (Rome) to Salisbury (Prime Minister), 7 July 1889.

<sup>13</sup>See William L. Langer, *European Alliances and Alignments*, (New York 1966), p. 232.

<sup>14</sup>Seton-Watson, p. 222.

<sup>15</sup>CO 537/7, Drummond (Munich) to Salisbury, 12 Nov. 1889.

<sup>16</sup>Seton-Watson, p. 223.

<sup>17</sup>CO 537/7, C.O. minute, 5 Dec. 1889.

<sup>18</sup>Christ Church, Oxford, Salisbury Papers, Class A, vol. 68, Salisbury to Dufferin (Rome), 15 Nov. 1889.

<sup>19</sup>FO 45/661, Torrens to Knutsford (Colonial Secretary), 18 Apr. 1889. This despatch preceded the 'Giordano Bruno' incidents and Torrens' observation was not made in connection with any specific suggestion that the Pope was seeking asylum.