Servitude to God and State

Papal Power

Sarpi lived in a period that has variously been labeled the “century of genius”, the “age of reason”, “age of absolutism”, a period of “crisis”, and, more precisely, the period of “crise de conscience”.¹ In addition to this, the political development of early-modern Europe has been characterized as a “theologico-political problem”.² This was no doubt true about the political climate of the late sixteenth century, a period marked by the post-Tridentine religious turmoil. While some thinkers and politicians continued to merge religious insights into their political views, others made a resolute attempt to keep these two strictly separated. It nonetheless was the case that most political discourse of the day was flavoured with the “theologico-political problem” in the sense that even those who were in favour of the separation dedicated much of their time to writing about church-state relations. Especially after the turn of the sixteenth century some of these writers—including Sarpi—advocated the independence of the state from the church through absolutistic language. What interests us here is that, besides the absolutistic tenor, Sarpi’s choice of words often expressed an eagerness to obey and serve. Both the absolutistic and the submissive aspect were present for example in his very first consulto for the senate of Venice, in which he claimed that he desired nothing in his life “more ardently, than to be in some way capable to serve” his “prince”.³

Many of the choices Sarpi made throughout his life convey his willingness to submit himself to a higher power, whether this was the common opinion, fate, temporal authority or God. The will to serve was in the heart of his religious, ethical and political thinking, and one of the dominating characteristics of his personality. But why did he choose to serve the state rather than the church or the pope, his religious superior? In order to answer this question, we need to understand what he thought of the church and the papacy on the one hand, and the state on the other.

¹ The Reformation in historical thought, Dickens, Tonkin, Powell, 1985, p. 93.
² Manent 1996, p. 4.
³ Sarpi, SS, p. 444: “nissuna cosa ho desiderato più ardentemente alla vita mia che di poter esser atto in qualche maniera di servire la Serenità vostra, mio principe”. 
According to Sarpi the most important political problems issued from misconceptions about the nature of the papacy. In a letter to Leschassier he declared that “all the religious controversies that trouble the world” can be reduced to one source, namely, “the power of the pope”.4 Salvatorelli, for instance, has termed Sarpi’s obsession with this idea a “fixation” in the very psychological sense of the word, although in his view Sarpi’s interpretation of the nature of the papacy was far from unambiguous.5 Salvatorelli’s criticism derived from Sarpi’s tendency to define the papacy almost exclusively through negation—by declaring what the pope was not supposed to do—or, on other occasions, to hurl a forthright invective at the pope and his supporters without specifying what it was that he actually understood by the papacy. What is evident, however, is that the nature of papal power was the behemoth that haunted Sarpi throughout his life. He explicitly denied the pope any power in temporal matters outside the Church State and, at the same time, remained silent about such power within the Church State. Despite Salvatorelli’s doubt, the message seems sufficiently clear: in Sarpi’s view the papacy was exclusively a spiritual institution and this was supported by his depiction of the Church as a congregatio fidelium and the clergy in general as an institution void of coercive power.

Sarpi acknowledged the pope’s leadership in purely spiritual matters and noted that no one who had read history could deny the “primacy, or rather, principality of the Apostolic See”. The problem was, however, that the popes gradually began to aspire not for “primatus”, but for “totatus”, a concept, with which Sarpi denoted sovereign, all-embracing power. This was achieved by “abrogating every order”, after which “everything becomes completely assigned to one”, the pope himself.6 While conciliar theorists adapted their idea of ecclesiastical hierarchy to secular governmental system, some canon lawyers began to describe papal authority with concepts drawn from legal and political discourse. Jacques Almain, for instance, defined the pope’s public power as one, which included the right to compel and “to punish sins, confer benefices, promulgate laws, excommunicate, degrate, confer indulgences”.7 This

4 Sarpi, Lettere ai Gallicani, to Leschassier, 7 December 1610, p. 98: “Ego id divino fore, ut tandem omnes controversiae, quae de religione orbem turbant, in hanc unam, quae de papae potestate est, desinant”.
5 Salvatorelli 1953, p. 331.
6 Sarpi, Lettere ai Gallicani, to Gillot, 15 September 1609, p. 134: “Apostolicae sedis primatum, imo et principatum, nemo gnarus antiquitatis et historiae negavit . . . non est primatus, sed totatus . . . abrogato omni ordine totum omnino uni tribuit”.