Chapter 6

Vatican City-Italy Wall: Consolidating Social and Political Peace

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Introduction

The story of the Vatican Walls is a highly complex one, bound up with the thousand and more years over which the history of the city of Rome has unfolded. Piecing together their various metamorphoses is an enterprise that has engaged experts in urban history and art historians, but it goes beyond the scope of this paper.

The focus of this contribution is dictated by the history of Italian unification, starting with the events that led to the conquest of Rome by the troops of Savoy and the unification of Italian territory under the Kingdom of Italy with Rome as its capital. The date symbolising this process is September 20th 1870, when the Piedmontese light infantry flooded into Rome through the breach at the Porta Pia, forcing the Pope-King to relinquish temporal power over the city and thereby putting an end to the Papal States and the temporal power of the Popes. From here begins the analysis of the Vatican Walls and the political and religious consequences of the succession of situations that concerned them in the subsequent decades.

Law of Guarantees (1871)

The first situation is one of what may be termed irreconcilable hostility, characterising the period between September 20th 1870 and February 11th 1929. The act of war with which the Piedmontese army invaded and occupied Rome was met by Pope Pius IX with a rejection of any dialogue with the Savoy monarchy. (Lanza 1938; Mori 1967; Sardo 1969; Manfroni 1971; Fiorentino 1996; Kertzer 2005; Bianchi 2011). He retired within the Vatican Walls in what amounted to a deliberate and contemptuous exile in an attempt to stigmatise the invasion and make the violence he had suffered known to the world at large.

The breach of Porta Pia was indeed an epoch-making event, not only because it marked the unification—immediately geographical and subsequently
political—of Italy, but because it represented the coup de grace for the Papal States and thereby for the Popes’ temporal power, founded on the *Donatio Constantini*, a document proved by thorough historical and documentary research to have been bogus (Henderson 1912:319–329; Valla 2001:20–183). Though at the time the loss of the Papal States was seen by Pius IX and the doctrine of the Curia as a serious wound to the Church, the events and above all the reflections that followed showed that in actual fact it was an act of providence which served to restore the Church’s proper image and bring it back to the genuine presence and mission assigned to it by history.

For a full and clear understanding of the Pope’s position reference should be made to the protest encyclical *Respicientes ea omnia* (Pius IX 1870), published on November 1st 1870, a few weeks after the breach of Porta Pia. This document formally opened the “Roman question” (Jemolo 1938; Pirri 1951; Spadolini 1970, 1973) which would torment a great many Catholics, and some lay people, for almost 60 years. Through a detailed and documented account of the events, in his encyclical Pius IX roundly condemned the action of the Italian army, protested against the capture of Rome (a “sacreligious invasion”), declared the Holy See to be a *de facto* prisoner and proclaimed the excommunication, the severest punishment laid down by canon law, of all those who had taken part and assisted in the invasion of the Catholic State. A number of expressions used in the document are of particular interest because they give a clear and direct exposition of the facts as seen from the ecclesiastical standpoint and provide an insight into the factors adduced in support of the Pope’s position. The Pope was at pains to list the facts and circumstances which preceded, accompanied and followed the events of September 20th, drawing the bitter conclusion that “every day We realise more painfully the imprisonment to which We are subjected and the lack of the proper freedom which the world is mendaciously told We have been given to exercise Our Apostolic Ministry and which the invading government claims it has decided to confirm with what it calls the necessary guarantees” (Pius IX 1870). He justified his uncompromising position, reiterating previous pronouncements “so as not to be reproached before God and the Church for remaining silent and thus tacitly consenting to such a disastrous upheaval” (Ibid.). He declared that “any act of usurpation, carried out now or hitherto, is unjust, violent, vain and null and that all the acts of rebels and invaders, those already committed and those which may be committed in the future to consolidate such usurpation, are by Us now condemned, annulled, rejected and abrogated” (Ibid.). He also solemnly stated, “with the authority of Almighty God and the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul and Our authority” (Ibid.) that “all those distinguished by any dignity, even worthy of special mention, who have perpetrated the invasion, usurpation or