

---

## PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA: 1463—1494

### *A Study of an Intellectual Pilgrimage*

BY

THE REV. DR. PHILIP EDGCUMBE HUGHES

*(continued from last issue)*

IV

### THE ADVANCE TO ROME

It was towards the end of 1486 that PICO completed the compilation of his *Nine Hundred Theses*. On the 12th of November of that year he wrote from Fratta to his friend GIROLAMO BENIVIENI to say that since the latter's last visit the number of the propositions for public debate had grown from 700 to 900 and, indeed, that they would have increased to a thousand had he not called a halt<sup>77</sup>. He adds that the symbolism of numbers also seemed to him to indicate that 900 was a good stopping-point, as mystically signifying the soul that is excited by the frenzy of the Muses returning into itself<sup>78</sup> — an indication of the importance which he at that time attached to the significance and potency of numbers.

Two days previously, in replying to a letter received from an unknown friend, he makes it evident that all was now in readiness for his grand venture. He would answer the points raised by his correspondent in greater detail, he says, were it not that his books were no longer to hand, but had preceded him to Rome, like forerunners ahead of their master (*"me illi iam Romam quasi anteambulones dominum praecesserunt"*), and that he himself was on the point of setting off for the capital<sup>79</sup>. To another friend, THADDEO UGOLINO, he writes excitedly: "I am hurrying off to Rome where I am about to put my learning to the test, though to do so may well prove hazardous" (*"Romam propero ubi de nostris studiis periculum, uel cum periculo, faciemus"*)<sup>80</sup>. The play upon words in the Latin bespeaks an insouciant confidence in the heart of the young scholar who was thus zestfully on the point of galloping into the academic lists. Nor should we write off his evident self-assurance as the conceit of an immature youth: it was not without stern preparation and prolonged

---

<sup>77</sup> L. DOREZ: *Lettres inédites*, p. 358. "*Disputanda per me publice dogmata ante tuum a me discessum 700is claudebantur. Postquam abisti ad 900 excreuerunt progrediebanturque, nisi receptui cecinissem, ad mille*".

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* "*Placuit in eo numero, utpote mistico, pedem sistere: est enim (si uera est nostra de numeris doctrina) symbolum animae in se ipsam oestro Musarum percitiae recurrentis*".

<sup>79</sup> *Opera Pici*, p. 385.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 366.

discipline that he was now, as he believed, ready to pit his erudition against that of the intellectual leaders of his day. His great natural abilities had been fostered and improved by the closest application to studies which were extensive as well as deep, and the moment of conquest towards which he had been moving intellectually he now felt to be at hand. At the same time, however, we should not discount his nephew's statement (for it is doubtless a record of what PICO himself told him in later years) that in making this sally to Rome he was impelled by a desire for the praise and glory of men, for (the comment is added) the love of God had not as yet been kindled in his breast ("*humanae laudis et gloriae cupidus, nondum enim divino amore caluerat*")<sup>81</sup>.

And so it was that in the month of November, 1486, PICO set out for Rome intent on winning the acclaim of the universe of letters. Upon arrival in the capital he affixed copies of his *Nine Hundred Theses* in the city's prominent places and also circulated them through all the universities of the land, offering to debate them publicly with all comers. Their author undertook to postpone the public disputation until after Epiphany (January 6), 1487, and declared his willingness to defray from his own pocket the expenses of those who should travel from a distance to accept his challenge<sup>82</sup>. In this way the youthful philosopher hoped to ensure that every scholar of repute in the whole country would be present to lend lustre to the hour of his triumph.

In his theses PICO purported to deal with every branch of knowledge ("*de omni re scibili*") and their comprehensive scope may be gauged from the prefatory paragraph with which they were introduced: "JOHN PICO OF MIRANDOLA, Count of Concord, will debate in public the accompanying nine hundred opinions—dialectical, ethical, physical, mathematical, metaphysical, theological, magical, cabalistic—not his own only but those also of the Chaldean, Arabian, Hebrew, Greek, Egyptian, and Latin sages"<sup>83</sup>. It should be added that PICO had taken care to seek and obtain the permission of Pope INNOCENT VIII to display his *Nine Hundred Theses* for public disputation, promising at the same time to submit them to any correction which the Apostolic See might impose—a fact of which he was later reminded by ALEXANDER VI in a papal edict dated the 18th of June, 1493<sup>84</sup>. The latter portion of the theses, comprising five hundred original

<sup>81</sup> *Vita*.

<sup>82</sup> "*Conclusiones non disputabuntur nisi post Epiphaniam. Interim publicabuntur in omnibus Italiae gymnasiis; et si quis philosophus aut theologus ab extrema Italia, arguendi gratia, Roman venire uoluerit, ipse pollicetur Dominus disputaturus se uaticae expensas illi soluturum de suo*". This guarantee is printed in the early editions of the *Opera*. It is confirmed by PICO's nephew in the *Vita*: "... cunctaque simul publicis locis, quo facilius uulgarentur, affixit, pollicitus se soluturum eis impensas qui ex remotis oris disceptandi gratia Romam se contulissent".

<sup>83</sup> *Opera Pici*, p. 42. "*De adscriptis numero noningentis Dialecticis, Moralibus, Physicis, Mathematicis, Metaphysicis, Theologicis, Magicis, Cabalisticis, cum suis tum sapientium Chaldaeorum, Arabum, Hebraeorum, Graecorum, Aegyptiorum, Latinorumque placitis, disputabit publice Ioannes Picus Mirandulanus, Concordiae Comes*".

<sup>84</sup> "*Cum primum ad Innocentium Papam VIII praedecessorem nostrum et Romam curiam te contulisses, et noningentas in theologia et aliis facultatibus conclusiones, ex permissione praefati praedecessoris, publice (ut moris est) disputandas affixisses, quas sub Apostolicae sedis correctione te sustentare offerebas...*" The text of this edict is prefixed to the *Opera Pici*.