

**Le pontificat romain dans l'époque contemporaine**  
**The Papacy in the Contemporary Age**

sous la direction de | edited by Giovanni Vian

## **Conclusion**

### **The Papacy in the Current Age: Between Modernity and Globalization**

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**Summary** 1 From the Pope Being “Jesus Christ Himself, living in his Church” to the “Conversion of the Papacy” – 2 Papacy and Modernity: from Radical Opposition to Modernity to the Gospel of Mercy in an Ultramodern, Global Society.

This volume offers reflections on important but specific aspects in its journey through a century full of milestones for the history of the papacy. Therefore, it is appropriate to develop some more general final considerations.

#### **1 From the Pope Being “Jesus Christ Himself, Living in his Church” to the “Conversion of the Papacy”**

The primary topics under consideration are the papal office itself and the public perception of the pope’s role.<sup>1</sup> In July 1870, facing a crisis that directly challenged all the political dimensions of the papacy, the First Vatican Council attempted to compensate for the loss of the papal temporal power, which would be fully complete only a few weeks later with the capture of Rome by Italian troops (September 20, 1870). The council did so by approving the dogma of the infallibility of the Roman pontiff on matters of doctrine and morality within certain conditions, affirming as Catholic truth that the Roman pontiff has full and supreme jurisdiction

1 Quotations in the title: respectively, from Sarto, *Giubileo pontificale*, 7 (original text: “lo stesso Gesù Cristo vivente nella sua Chiesa” (in 1903 Sarto was elected pope with the name of Pius X); and Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation*, 29: “Since I am called to put into practice what I ask of others, I too must think about a conversion of the papacy. It is my duty, as the Bishop of Rome, to be open to suggestions which can help make the exercise of my ministry more faithful to the meaning which Jesus Christ wished to give it and to the present needs of evangelization”.

over the whole Church, with regard not only to doctrine and morals but also extending to the discipline and the governance of the Church. From that point on, the magisterium began to develop and to emphasize the office and image of the pope, making the office of the papacy the absolute summit of the Catholic Church. It was a process fueled both by the approval of traditionally Catholic constituencies – to a large extent this was a spontaneous effect – and by the hierarchy – in a more intentional way – in order to move the Church toward more direct leadership by the pope. This move was pursued in the belief that it would allow the Church to deal more successfully with a multitude of new problems it was confronting and would continue to confront as it looked toward the future. “Il definitivo affermarsi di un riconoscimento ufficiale della santità dei papi dell'età contemporanea” (the definitive affirmation of an official recognition of the sanctity of the popes of the contemporary age) is certainly one part of this exaltation of the papal role.<sup>2</sup> It is no accident that, out of the eight popes of the last century, the sainthood of three has already been affirmed by canonization (Pius X in 1954, John XXIII and John Paul II both in 2014), one has been beatified (Paul VI in 2014) and two have been named as venerable (Pius XII and John Paul I, in 2009 and in 2017, respectively).

Vatican I's new account of the role of the Roman pontificate in its time received its first, somewhat limited, reconsideration almost a century later, during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), with the affirmation of the doctrine of episcopal collegiality.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, under the impulse of ecumenical dialogue, Pope John Paul II declared in his encyclical *Ut unum sint* (1995) his readiness to find “a way of exercising the primacy [of the Roman pontiff], which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation”.<sup>4</sup> Yet, as he admitted his current successor, Pope Francis, in November, 2013, “we have made little progress in this regard”.<sup>5</sup> On the same occasion, Francis mentioned the need to proceed toward “a sound ‘decentralization’”,<sup>6</sup> recognizing that “the papacy and the central structures of the universal Church also need to hear the call to pastoral conversion”.<sup>7</sup>

Pope Francis, after reflecting on the demands imposed today by the need for evangelization and all the while operating intentionally within

2 Rusconi, *Santo Padre*, 13.

3 However, as is well known, it was Paul VI's intention that the new emphasis on collegiality would not undercut the prerogatives of the pontiff as they had been promulgated by Vatican Council I.

4 John Paul II, *Ut unum sint*.

5 Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation*, 29.

6 Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation*, 16.

7 Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation*, 29.

the perspective of ecumenical dialogue (matters which are both of major importance for him), is moving toward a new modality for the exercise of papal authority. He is directing the pontificate toward this goal amid some resistance from those who still nostalgically believe in the model of a papacy acting as a kind of super-episcopate, the absolute leader of the Church. Pope Francis's perspective is a very evident and broad-ranging shift which aims to locate authority in a more synodal dimension, reserving to the bishop of Rome a specific role of service in the pursuit of communion and unity among the Christian churches. His approach is quite different from the statement elaborated two centuries ago by Joseph De Maistre, according to which the pope is "the great *Demiurgus* of universal civilization". This formulation was upheld as an emblematic affirmation throughout a very long season of Roman Catholicism.<sup>8</sup>

## 2 Papacy and Modernity: from Radical Opposition to Modernity to the Gospel of Mercy in an Ultramodern, Global Society

The various contributors to this volume deal with the question of the relationship between papacy (and the Catholic Church) and modernity from a variety of perspectives. In fact, this relationship between the Church and modernity is one of the main themes of the most recent history of Christianity as a whole. This complex and in many respects decisive relationship, which had been expressed during the nineteenth century in terms of harsh criticism of modernity on philosophical, scientific and political levels, was further radicalized during the pontificate of Pius X (1903-1914). As a matter of fact, the Church took a strong stand against religious reformism and against any attempt to rethink Christian doctrines and ecclesiastical institutions in light of the transformations of European and North American societies in the early twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

The most acute phase of the Catholic Church's criticism of modernism ended with Benedict XV (1914-1922), but the anti-modernist spirit never completely disappeared, and it remained for decades one of the key reference points of the magisterium. Time after time, the issue of the relationship between the Church and modernity was reiterated above all in terms of an opposition to secularization, and secularization was understood to express itself in the emancipation of women and men from the principles

8 De Maistre, *The Pope*, 237. Original text: "le grand *Demiurge* de la civilisation universelle" (*Du Pape*, 425). This Savoyard thinker was one of the most prominent theorists of the later so-called cattolicesimo intransigente (intransigent Catholicism), an ideology accepted by the papacy starting with Pius IX.

9 See in this volume: Arnold, "Pius X., Merry del Val".

and norms taught by the Church.<sup>10</sup> Of course, during this same period the Church had to begin paying attention to the modern needs of an apostolate that was taking on a global expansion.<sup>11</sup>

The ongoing struggle against certain forms of modernity – particularly with regard to its implications for the autonomy of human beings in the construction of civil society and its positive view of individual human freedom – did not prevent the Roman pontificate's implementation of various modernization strategies that were found to be acceptable. Used for the first time in a meaningful way by Leo XIII (1878-1903), these strategies provided a basis for positive concepts, institutions and "modern" tools to make more effective the realization of a Catholic civilization as an alternative to the secular one, the one tainted by modernity. After Pecci, the same strategies were used, among other popes, by Pius XI (1922-1939).<sup>12</sup> On a doctrinal level, however, the resistance of the Catholic Church to post-Enlightenment, rationalist and liberal modernity remained profound and continuous through to the end of the pontificate of Pius XII (1939-1958).<sup>13</sup>

John XXIII (1958-1963), by contrast, created some openings that,<sup>14</sup> along with the developments of the Second Vatican Council, significantly transformed the history of the Catholic Church and its attitude towards contemporary society. The importance of this change cannot be underestimated, even if during Paul VI's pontificate (1963-1978)<sup>15</sup> there were still very evident limits within which the Church was prepared to recognize the autonomy of the individual.

With John Paul II (1978-2005), the papacy adopted the perspective of an "adapted intransigentism". He succeeded in bringing about a significant modernization of many institutional structures within the Church, but he still maintained the Church's harsh criticism of the agnostic position, one of the heirs of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.<sup>16</sup> He also tried to "catholicize" modernity by developing alternative models on the anthropological level.<sup>17</sup>

10 Cf. in this volume Lesti, "Contre les 'erreurs modernes'".

11 As noted by Dieguez in this volume: Dieguez, "Documents".

12 See in this volume Perin, "Vatican Radio".

13 See in this volume Menozzi, "Perfidie judaïque".

14 See in this volume Vian, "Living the Gospel".

15 Cf. in this volume Vian, "Paul VI".

16 See in this volume Portier, "Jean-Paul II".

17 See in this volume Ciciliot, "John Paul II's Canonization Policy".

The program to realize a legitimate Catholic alternative to modern liberalism was at the center of the pontificate of Benedict XVI (2005-2013).<sup>18</sup> His efforts ceased with his surprising resignation, which in a way was an admission of the failure of a certain way of exercising the papal office.

The pontificate of Pope Francis, by contrast, has so far developed a new attitude towards the principle of the autonomy of the individual. He has repeatedly called attention to the role of individual conscience and its primacy over norms, without however abandoning the importance of normative consciousness. Above all, he has emphasized that the work of the Catholic Church is a service to humanity, situated in history and subject to its rules. Therefore, this service is removed from the logic of any heteronomous foundation of the fundamental principles of civil society, to which, in another way, his most recent predecessors had referred.

In the meantime, nevertheless, the global context has changed significantly, and especially in recent decades. Radical modernity – or ‘ultramodernity’ – has widened the effects of secularization by expanding them from the religious sphere to the whole sphere of human existence, destabilizing the commonly shared certainties on which Western society has traditionally been founded.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the decisive and ever-changing confrontation between Catholicism and modernity has been gradually overtaken by processes of globalization. These factors, among others, have led to a new contextualization of the demands of radical modernity, placing it within a broader scenario in which they show an ability to affect and generate results that are much more varied and diversified (but in some regions rather limited, when not decisively opposed). As a result of these processes and of the progressive shift of the epicenter of Christianity towards the south of the planet, the papacy has begun to modify its priorities. As a result, Pope Francis has placed at the center of his pontificate the announcement of the Gospel, understood above all as the Gospel of mercy: that is, as God’s responsibility towards man and man’s responsibility towards one another, to be exercised in the context of the present moment and its problems. With a perspective that is attentive to the dynamics between the “global” dimension and local realities, the current pope intends for the Church to make a commitment to contribute to the solution of the problems of poverty, injustice and inequality which still deeply influence the lives of the peoples in the South as well as of numerous groups and individuals in the West and in the North.<sup>20</sup>

18 See in this volume Baudry, “Identité”.

19 Cf. Bourgin, Famerée, Scolas, *Dieu au risque*.

20 See in this volume Vian, “Le pape François”.

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