



Vix Dum a Nobis

On The Church In Austria

Encyclical Of Pope Pius IX

March 7, 1874

To Our Beloved Sons, the Cardinals and Our Venerable Brothers the Archbishops and Bishops of the Austrian Empire.

Greetings and Apostolic Blessing.

Scarcely had We announced to the Catholic world in a letter dated last 24 November that a vast persecution had been stirred up against the Church, especially in Prussia and Switzerland, when a new concern was added to Our grief. News arrived concerning other injustices. The Church can now justly complain: "they have added above and beyond the pain of my wounds." [1] We are especially grieved by these injuries because they are inflicted by the Government of the Austrian nation, which in the great days of the Christian republic fought strenuously for the Catholic faith.

Hostile Laws

2. Indeed, some years ago that Empire had enacted certain laws and arrangements plainly hostile to the sacred rights of the Church and to our solemn pacts. In Our Allocution to the Cardinals on June 22, 1868, We condemned and nullified these laws. [2] Now, however, new laws are proposed and approved by the public assembly of the Empire; these intend that the Catholic Church be subjugated to the civil authority. This is, of course, against the ordination of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ecclesiastical Authority

3. God equipped the Church with the divine gifts of an infallible teaching authority for handing on sacred doctrine and of a most holy priesthood. He also equipped it with the power to pass laws, exercise judgments, and employ salutary coercion in all matters which pertain to the kingdom of God on earth.

4. This supernatural power of ecclesiastical rule is different from and independent

from political authority. For this reason the kingdom of God on earth is a perfect society, which is held together and governed by its own laws and its own rights. Its own overseers keep watch in order to account for souls not to the rulers of civil society, but to the chief Pastor, Jesus Christ, from whom come pastors and teachers subject to no earthly authority in carrying out the task of salvation.[3] Wherefore, just as the duty to rule belongs to the holy bishops, so all the faithful, as the Apostle points out, are bound to obey and be subject to them; therefore, Catholic people have a right not to be impeded in this divinely imposed duty of following the doctrine, discipline, and laws of the Church.

5. Indeed you yourselves know-what a grave violation of this divine constitution of the Church and what an intolerable subversion of the rights of the Holy See, holy bishops, and Catholic people is promulgated in the proposal before the Austrian assembly.

Intent of the New Laws

6. For, according to these laws, the Church is held completely subject to the control of civil authority; and this is practically stated openly in that exposition of Motivi, which explains the force and meaning of those laws. Here also it is expressly stated that the civil government can pass laws for ecclesiastical matters because it must watch over and control the Church just as it does for any other private society within the boundaries of the Empire.

7. And so the civil government arrogates to itself the judgment, authority, and control over the constitution and rights of the Catholic Church. It can exercise this partly by itself through its laws and action, partly by ecclesiastics hired by itself. Hence it comes about that the judgment and power of earthly rule is substituted for the sacred power divinely instituted for the rule of the Church, the work of its ministry, and the building up of the body of Christ. Against such usurpations of sacred things, in defense of what is right and Catholic truth, Ambrose the Great replies "It is alleged: the emperor can do anything, everything is his. I respond: do not trouble yourself by thinking that you have an imperial right in those things which are divine. Do not extol yourself, but be subject to God. It is written: the things of God belong to God, those of Caesar to Caesar. The palace belongs to the emperor, the Church to the priest."[4]

8. As far as the laws themselves go, to which the exposition of Motivi mentioned before is affixed, although they may perhaps seem to present an appearance of moderation, if they are compared with the recent laws of Prussia, in reality they have the same intent: they prepare the way for the same destruction of the Catholic Church in Austria.

9. We do not intend to go through the individual headings of these laws, but We cannot in any way pass over the most grave injury which is done to all of us and the whole Catholic population of your Empire by their very proposal. The

Convention We entered into with the most serene Emperor in the year 1855[5] was reinforced by a solemn promise by the same Catholic prince and promulgated in the form of public law to the whole empire. The imperial assembly now proposes to abrogate and nullify this Convention. They propose this without even having contacted Us, indeed with open contempt of Our just complaints.

10. What could not even be attempted in prior times when public faith was strong, is now attempted and carried out in these lamentable circumstances. Against this violation of a solemnly pledged Convention, We again protest before you or rather, with deep sorrow in Our hearts, We denounce and condemn this injury inflicted in the whole Church. The excuse for the abrogation of this concordat and other related laws is boldly given as the definition of revealed doctrine promulgated by the Ecumenical Vatican Council. These Catholic dogmas themselves are impiously labelled as innovations and changes in the doctrine with regard to faith and the constitution of the Church.[6] Indeed, even if some Austrians, because of these nefarious fictions, have abjured the Catholic faith, your august Prince, along with his glorious ancestors and with his whole imperial household, retains and professes it. And by far most of your people for whom these laws are passed also hold and profess it.

11. Now a new kind of law is proposed and a new power claimed for the civil government so that it can set up and decree, according to its arbitrary will, anything that pleases it concerning spiritual and ecclesiastical matters. These powerful laws would impede the inviolable liberty of the Church to care for souls, to rule the faithful, to carry out religious instruction of the people and the clergy as well, to exhort to evangelical perfection, and to administer and possess goods. They would also introduce the perversion of Catholic discipline, encourage defection from the Church, and strengthen the coalition and conspiracy of the sects against the true faith of Christ.

12. We could speak at great length on the nature and extent of the resultant evils if such laws are passed, but it cannot escape nor deceive your own prudence. To wit, all offices and ecclesiastical benefices, even the exercise of pastoral duties, would become subject to the civil power. If holy bishops acquiesced to these new laws, they would no longer retain control over their dioceses, but would be compelled to regulate them according to the will and decision of those who preside over the state. For what could be expected of these proposals which are drawn up concerning the recognition of the religious orders? To be sure, their purpose and hostile intent is so clear that no one fails to recognize that they have been invented and conceived for the destruction of religious families. The threatened loss of temporal goods is so great that it is scarcely different from open confiscation and plundering. Indeed those goods would be brought under the control of the government. It would then claim the right to divide and to tax them so heavily that whatever remains could only be conceived as scornful and as a cover for injustice.

Role of the Clergy

13. Thus, you can clearly see how these laws threaten the flocks entrusted to your care. For the unity and peace of the Church is called into danger, and there is question of depriving it of its liberty, which St. Thomas of Canterbury calls "the soul of the Church without which it has no strength or force and cannot avail against those who seek to possess for their inheritance the sanctuary of God." [7] St. Anselm, the other intrepid defender of this liberty, earlier expressed the same opinion: "God loves nothing in this world more than the liberty of His Church; those who wish not to promote it so much as to dominate it are certainly known to be enemies of God: God wishes His bride to be free, not enslaved." [8] Wherefore We urge you all the more to strive to avert the danger which threatens. Greatly resolve to meet the test in a way worthy of your virtue. For We are certain that your spirit and virtue will be no less than that of those venerable brothers elsewhere who, publicly exposed to insults and violence amidst the most sharp vexations for the liberty of the Church, not only happily accepted being stripped of their belongings, but also underwent suffering in prison. [9]

14. Moreover all our hope is placed not in our strength but in the power of God; for at stake is the cause of God Who by an unfailling prophecy warned and aroused us thusly: In the world you will have distress, but have confidence, I have conquered the world. [10] And so We have become the leader in this atrocious war against the Church. We promise what the holy martyr of Canterbury once expressed. His words are appropriate to this age and danger: "The cause which the enemies of the Church exercise against us is between them and God, since we seek nothing from them except what God left to his Church in eternal testament. Therefore, join Us in defending the Church with the authority and prudence granted to you. Withstand those men to whom no amount of success suffices if the Church of God enjoys liberty. We are all the more confident in you since the cause is God's. As for us, be assured, that we are more willing to undergo temporal death than to continue enduring the straits of wretched servitude. For the outcome of this controversy will have consequences for future times, that is, whether the Church grieves with perpetual distress or enjoys perpetual liberty." [11]

15. Meanwhile you must strive to forestall with your authority, prudence, and zeal the dangers which threaten. Consult with each other to determine how to acquire more certainly and efficaciously the proposed goal. As long as the rights of the Church are attacked, you must rise up and place before its adversaries a wall for the house of Israel; your bulwark will be more solid and your defense more valid if your labors are united and your plans are foresighted. Wherefore We urge you to assemble together as soon as possible and with mutual counsel draw up a clear norm by which you may bravely defend the liberty of the Church and unanimously repel, in keeping with the nature of your office, the attacking evils. We must give you this admonition in order not to be deficient to Our office in such a serious matter. But We are persuaded that even without Our exhortation, you would have done this of your own accord. For the rest, We have not lost all hope that God will

divert the impending calamities. We are moved to hope for the best by the piety and religious observance of Franz Joseph, Emperor and King. Today We have strenuously implored him in a new letter never to willingly permit the Church in his dominion to be handed over to a dishonorable servitude and never to permit the Catholic citizens of his Empire to be brought to such extreme straits.

16. Since many strive against the Church and any delay is always a danger, it ill befits you to be negligent and inactive. May God preside over your counsels and aid you with his powerful protection so that you may decide upon and bring about those things which pertain to the glory of His name and the salvation of souls. As a guarantee of this heavenly protection and a testimony of special benevolence, We lovingly impart the Apostolic blessing to each and all of you, beloved sons and venerable brothers, and to the clergy and faithful committed to your vigilance.

Given in Rome at St. Peter's, 1 March 1874, in the 28th year of Our Pontificate.

1. Ps 68.27.
2. Actor vol. 4, p. 407.
3. Heb 13.17; Eph 4.11; I Pt 5.2.
4. Saint Ambrose, epistle 20, no. 19.
5. Actor, vol. 2, p. 459.
6. Motivonum Expos., p. 25.
7. St. Thomas of Canterbury, epistle 75 to the bishops of England.
8. St. Anselm, epistle 9 to King Baldwin.
9. Heb 10.32 f.
10. Jn 16.33.
11. St. Thomas of Canterbury, epistle 33.