



# The Holy See

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## ***SPESSSE VOLTE***

### ENCYCLICAL OF POPE LEO XIII ON THE SUPPRESSION OF CATHOLIC INSTITUTIONS

*To the Bishops, Clergy and People of Italy.  
Venerable Brethren and Most Dear Children,*

*Health and Apostolic Benediction.*

Often times during the course of Our Pontificate, moved by the sacred duty attaching to the apostolic ministry, We have had to complain and protest against the acts designed for the detriment of the Church and of religion by those who, after the changes now so well known, are at the head of public affairs in Italy.

2. It is unpleasant for Us again to have to speak upon so serious a matter which fills Our soul with profound sadness. We allude to the suppression, recently decreed in various districts of the Peninsula, of so many Catholic institutions. This undeserved and unjust rigour has called forth the reprobation of all honest men, and to Our great sorrow We see that it includes and makes even still more cruel the injuries which now for years past We have had to suffer.

3. Though the facts are well known to you, Venerable Brethren, We nevertheless deem it opportune to go back upon the origin and necessity of those institutions, which are the fruit of our solicitude and of your devoted care, in order that all may understand the thought that inspired them and the religious end, both moral and charitable, which they had in view.

*A Retrospect*

4. After the downfall of the civil power of the Popes the Catholic Church in Italy was gradually robbed of her elements of life and action as well as of her native secular influence in public and social life. By a progressive series of systematized oppressions the monasteries and convents were closed; by the confiscation of ecclesiastical property the greater part of the patrimony of the Church was taken away; military service was imposed on the clergy; the freedom of the sacred ministry was shackled by unjust exceptions. Persistent efforts were made to deprive all public institutions of their religious

and Christian character; dissident religions were favoured; and whilst the widest liberty was given to the masonic sects, intolerance and odious repression were reserved for the one religion which was ever the glory, the stay and the strength of the Italian people.

5. We have never failed to deplore these grave and reiterated outrages. We deplored them on account of the danger to which they exposed our holy religion, and we deplored them too, and we say this from Our heart, on behalf of our country, for religion is a source of a nation's prosperity and greatness and the principal foundation of all well ordered society. Religious feelings raise and ennoble the soul and instil into it notions of justice and honesty, and when they are weakened men fall away and abandon themselves to their savage instincts and to the pursuit of material interests. The logical outcome of this is bitterness, dissension, depravity, strife and the disturbance of the public peace - evils which will find no certain or effective remedy in the severity of the law, the rigours of the courts, or the employment of armed force.

6. In letters addressed to the people of Italy We have more than once warned those on whom falls the serious responsibility of power of this natural and necessary connection between religious decadence and the development of the spirit of revolution and disorder. We have also drawn attention to the inevitable progress of socialism and anarchy and to the endless evil to which they expose the nation.

7. But We were not listened to. Paltry sectarian prejudice seemed to blind the public mind, and the war against religion was continued with unabating energy. Far from any measure of redress being undertaken, a persistent attempt was made in books and the daily papers, in schools and universities, clubs and theatres, to scatter broadcast the seeds of irreligion and immorality, to shatter the principles which give birth in a people to morality and uprightness, and to spread the maxims which have for their result perversion of the mind and corruption of the heart.

#### *A Call to Action*

8. It was then, Venerable Brethren, that foreseeing a dark future full of peril for our country We thought the moment had come for Us to raise Our voice and say to Italians: Religion and Society are in danger; it is time to unfold all your activity and to meet the evils which threaten you with a solid opposition of word and work, by associations and committees, in the press and at public congresses, by confraternities for mutual charity and prayer, - in a word, by every peaceful and lawful means which was calculated to maintain a people's religious spirit and relieve the misery which, ever an evil counsellor, had become so deep and general through the shameful economic condition of Italy. Such were Our recommendations, several times repeated, and particularly in the two letters which We addressed to the Italian people on October 15, 1890, and on December 8, 1892.

9. And here it is gratifying to Us to declare that Our exhortations fell upon fruitful soil. Through your generous efforts, Venerable Brethren, and through those of the clergy and of the faithful confided to your care, such happy results followed that we were able to hope for still happier in the near future. Hundreds of associations and committees arose in various parts of Italy, which by their zeal established rural banks, cheap bakeries, night shelters, clubs for recreation, and catechism classes, whilst others had for their object the visitation of the sick, the protection of widows and orphans. There were besides many other charitable institutions which were welcomed with gratitude and blessings by the people, and which received the praise they so well deserved even from the lips of men who belonged to the parties opposed to them.

Indisplaying this praiseworthy Christian activity, Catholics, having nothing to conceal, worked according to their custom in the full light of day, and at the same time kept themselves well within the limits of the law.

10. But, alas! then came those ill-fated riots which resulted in so much disorder and bloodshed, and which flung several districts of Italy into mourning. No one suffered more deeply in his heart's depths, no one was more grieved, than We at this sad spectacle.

11. We did think, however, that in seeking the secret causes of these riots and civil strifes, those who have the direction of public affairs would recognize the baneful though natural fruit of the evil seed which had been so widely, for so long and with such impunity, scattered over the Peninsula. We thought that tracing effects to their causes and profiting by the sharp lesson they had just received, they would again have recourse to those Christian rules of social organization by the aid of which nations, unless they wish to perish, should reform themselves; and that they would therefore restore to a place of honour those principles of justice, uprightness, and religion, from which the material well-being of a people flows. We thought that, at least, in searching for the authors and ringleaders of these riots, Ministers would be sure to seek them amongst those who hold Catholic teaching in abhorrence and who excite in men's minds all lawless desires by naturalism and scientific and political materialism, and amongst those who hide their guilty intentions in the shadow of sectarian assemblies, where they whet their arms against public order and the safety of society. And indeed, even in the camp of our adversaries, men of elevated and impartial minds were not wanting who understood, and had the praiseworthy courage to proclaim in public, the real causes of these deplorable disasters.

12. Great then was Our surprise and sorrow when We learned that, under a ridiculous and ill-concealed pretext, in order to lead public opinion astray and more easily to accomplish a long premeditated plan, people dared to lay at the door of Catholics the stupid charge of disturbing the peace in order to saddle them with the blame and the disastrous results of the rioting enacted in several parts of Italy.

13. Our sorrow increased the more when these calumnies were followed up by violent and arbitrary action, and when several leading outspoken Catholic journals were suspended or suppressed, diocesan and parochial committees proscribed, the sittings of congresses disallowed, some institutions rendered powerless and others menaced even amongst those whose only end and aim was the development of piety amongst the faithful, or public and private charity; and finally, when numerous inoffensive and useful societies were dissolved, to the destruction, in a few stormy days, of the patient and modest charitable work which had been accomplished during long years by noble minds and generous hearts.

#### *Inconsistency of the Ministry*

14. In harking back to these excessive and odious measures the public authorities put themselves at the outset in complete contradiction to their previous professions. For some time past they had sedulously represented the population of the Peninsula as in hearty agreement with themselves in their work of revolution and hostility against the Papacy. Now, however, they turn round and belie their former professions by having recourse to exceptional legislation in order to stifle innumerable associations spread throughout Italy for no other reason than their devoted loyalty to the Church and the cause of the Holy See.

15. Such measures strike at the foundations of justice and even at the regulations of existing laws. In virtue of these principles and regulations it is lawful for Catholics as for all other citizens to combine their forces for the promotion of the moral and material well-being of their neighbours, and to devote themselves to practices of piety and religion. It was therefore a most arbitrary proceeding to dissolve so many Catholic charitable societies, which in other countries are allowed to exist peaceful and respected, and that without any proof of their guilt, without any previous examination, and without any documentary evidence which would show their participation in the disorder that had come about.

16. It was also especially insulting to Us who had organized and blessed these useful and peaceful associations, and to you also, Venerable Brethren, who had promoted their development with so much care and watched over their steady progress. Our protection and your vigilance ought to have made them respected and placed them above all suspicion.

17. We can no longer refrain from declaring how pernicious such measures are to the interests of the people, to the social well-being and the real good of Italy. The suppression of these societies only increases the misery, moral and material, of the people whom they sought to humanize by every possible means; it deprives society of a powerful conservative force, for their organization and the spread of their principles was a bulwark against the subversive theories of socialism and anarchy; in a word, it aggravates more and more the religious conflict which all men who are free from sectarian passion regard as fatal to Italy, whose strength, cohesion, and harmony it undermines.

18. We are not ignorant that the Catholic associations are accused of tendencies opposed to the actual political situation in Italy, and are therefore regarded as subversive. Such an imputation is, however, founded on an equivocation which has been invented, and is designedly maintained, by the enemies of the church and of religion in order to place in a favourable light before the public the hateful ostracism which they wish to inflict on these associations. But we intend that this mistaken idea should be dissipated forever.

#### *The Attitude of Italian Catholics*

19. In virtue of the well known and immutable principles of their religion, Italian Catholics will have nothing to do with any conspiracy or revolt against the public authorities, to whom they render the obedience which is due to them. Their conduct in the past, to which all men of unbiassed mind can bear honourable witness, is a guarantee of their future behaviour and should be sufficient to secure for them the justice and liberty to which all peaceable citizens have a right. We go farther: by the doctrine they profess they are the staunchest supporters of order, and so they are entitled to respectful treatment. If their worth and merits were properly appreciated they would, moreover, have a right to the regard and gratitude of those at the head of affairs.

20. But, at the same time, the Catholics of Italy, for the very reason that they are Catholics, cannot renounce the desire to restore to their Supreme Head the necessary independence and full and effective freedom which are indispensable conditions of the liberty and independence of the Catholic Church. On this point their sentiments are not to be changed either by threats or violence. They will put up with the present situation of affairs, but so long as it shall, at the instigation of anti-religious sectaries, aim at the downfall of the Papacy, they will never be able, without violating their most sacred duties, to uphold it by their adhesion and support. To expect the active co-operation of Catholics for the

maintenance of the present order of things would be unreasonable and absurd, for they would then no longer be able to obey the teaching and precepts of the Apostolic See. On the contrary, they would have to act in opposition to that teaching, and to depart from the line of conduct observed by the Catholics of all other nations.

### *Why They Refrain From Politics*

21. This is the reason why, in the present state of affairs, Catholic action, keeping outside politics, concentrates itself upon social and religious work, and looks to raise the people by rendering them obedient to the Church and her Head, by shielding them from the perils of socialism and anarchy, by inculcating respect for the principle of authority, and by lightening their load of poverty by the manifold works of Christian charity. How then can Catholics be called enemies of their country and be confounded with the parties which threaten law and order and the safety of the State? Such calumnies fall to the ground before plain common sense. They rest solely upon the idea that the destiny, unity and prosperity of the nation consist in the deeds that have been perpetrated to the detriment of the Holy See, and which are deplored by men above suspicion who have plainly pointed out the error of provoking a conflict with that great Institution divinely established in Italy, which was, and will ever be, her special and incomparable glory: that wondrous Institution which dominates the course of history and by which Italy has become the successful teacher of nations, and the head and heart of Christian civilization.

22. Of what then are Catholics guilty when they long for the end of this long quarrel which is the source of the greatest injury to Italy in the social, moral, and political order; when they demand a hearing for the fatherly voice of their Supreme Head, who has so often claimed the reparation which is his due, demonstrating at the same time what incalculable good would result to Italy?

### *The Position of the Pope*

23. No; Italy's real enemies must be sought elsewhere; they must be sought amongst the men who, urged on by the spirit of irreligion and having no hearts to feel for the evils and dangers which menace their country, reject every real and effective solution of present difficulties, and endeavour by guilty design to protract and increase their bitterness. It is to such men as these, and to no others, that the rigorous measures aimed at useful Catholic associations should be applied—measures which afflict us profoundly for a higher reason that regards not only the Catholics of Italy, but those of the whole world. These measures place in fuller light the painful, precarious, and intolerable position to which we have been reduced. If certain events, in which Catholics had no part, have been sufficient to bring about the suppression of thousands of guileless charitable works, in spite of the guarantees they possessed in the fundamental laws of the State, every sensible and fair-minded man will understand what is the value of the assurances given by the public authorities for the liberty and independence of our Apostolic ministry. To what a point is our liberty reduced when, after having been deprived of the greatest part of the ancient moral and material resources with which Christian ages had enriched the Apostolic See and the Church in Italy, we are now even deprived of those means of religious and social action which our solicitude and the admirable zeal of the Bishops, clergy, and people had got together for the defence of religion, and for the good of the Italian people? What is this pretended liberty when another occasion, any incident whatsoever, might serve as a pretext for going still farther along the road of arbitrary violence, and for inflicting fresh and deeper wounds on the Church and on religion?

24. We wish to point out this state of things to our children in Italy and in other nations. To all of them, however, we would say that if Our sorrow is great, not less great is Our courage, nor less firm Our confidence in that Providence which governs the world, which so constantly and lovingly watches over the Church and which identifies itself with the Papacy according to the beautiful words of St. Ambrose "Ubi Petrus, ibi Ecclesia." Both are divine institutions which have outlived every outrage and attack and which have seen the centuries go by unshaken, drawing from their misfortunes fresh force, energy and constancy.

25. As for Ourselves, We shall never cease to love this beautiful and noble country in which we first saw the light, happy in spending our remaining strength in preserving for it the precious treasure of religion, in keeping its sons in the honourable paths of virtue and duty and in relieving their misfortunes as long as We are able.

26. In this noble task We are sure that you, Venerable Brethren, will assist Us with the effective co-operation of your zealous care as enlightened as it is constant. Yes, continue in this holy work, stirring up piety amongst the faithful, preserving souls from the errors and seductions with which they are on all sides surrounded, consoling the poor and the unfortunate by every means that charity can suggest. Whatever may be the trend of events and the opinions of men, your labours will not be in vain, for they have an object higher than the things of earth; and so, no matter how your toil may be rendered powerless, it will serve to free you before God and man of all responsibility for the evil that, owing to the hindrances placed in the way of your pastoral care, may befall Italy.

27. And you, Catholic Italians, the chief object of Our care and affection; you who have been the butt of the most painful vexations because of your nearness to Us and your unity with this Apostolic See, you have for your support and encouragement the firm assurances which We give you; as in past times and in the midst of serious and stormy circumstances the Papacy was always the guide, defence, and safety of Catholic peoples, and especially of the people of Italy, so in the future it will never fail in its great mission of defending and demanding your rights, and of assisting you in your difficulties, with all the more love the more you are persecuted and oppressed. You have given, and especially during these late times, numerous evidences of self-sacrificing activity in well doing. Do not lose courage, but keeping rigorously, as in the past, within the limits prescribed by faith, and in full submission to your pastors, follow out the same line of action with genuine Christian enthusiasm.

28. Should you encounter fresh contradictions and fresh signs of hostility on the road, do not allow yourselves to be cast down; for the righteousness of your cause will become clearer day by day for the very reason that your adversaries will be compelled, in order to meet you, to have recourse to similar weapons, whilst the trials you will have to suffer will increase your merit in the eyes of all good men, and what is much more important, before God.

29. And now, as a pledge of heavenly favour and a token of our special affection receive the Apostolic Blessing, which from the depths of Our heart We lovingly impart to you, Venerable Brethren, to your clergy, and to the Italian people.

*Given at St. Peter's, Rome, the 5th day of August, in the year 1898, and the twenty-first of Our pontificate.*

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