

NOMINATION OF MR. REY

(21 August 1831)

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When Bonaparte believed that the Catholic religion was vital for the welfare of France and for his own prominence, he dealt with it as a very aloof man. He wished for two things: that the Church be a captive and that she be respected. By their very nature, these two conditions are incompatible, but they were not in his day. Then, all the world was enslaved, even glory. The Church could be such a one with a kind of honor, but Napoleon hid the bondage from her with boundless cunning. It was in a treaty between the Republic and the Holy See, before the public restoration of worship, and in taking as his base the ideas and customs dedicated in the Church of France that the able consul set the principles of his domination of the clergy! Then, while Catholics were in a state of lethargy, raising his name up to heaven, he signed the *Organic Articles* as an explanation of the Concordat, certain that the complaints of the pope would be lost within the universal joy. Indeed, who would have been able to support those complaints? The remnants of the French Clergy wandered outside the country; there was hardly enough time to assemble here and there a few stones to set up an altar. Everybody raised his eyes and hoped for better times. As soon as Bonaparte had set the foundations of his power in the spiritual order, and behaved with dignity toward religion — since a prince is not afraid to be seen as a bigot or as a Jesuit, and knows what he is doing — he called the Supreme Pontiff from Rome and presented him to all Paris, which was astonished to hear the blessing of the Holy Father below the windows of the Tuileries. He himself, as first captain of his century, received from the Pope in Notre-Dame Cathedral the imperial anointing. Moreover, it was not only by solemn actions that he sought to tie religion to himself — I mean the authority that religion always possesses — it was also by a genuine protection, by making honorable choices for the episcopacy. During his lifetime, no one dared to offend a cross and neither would anyone have dared to ask him for a see for a priest whose morals or faith would have attracted the contempt of Christians. How

often did he entreat Mr. Emery, respected superior of Saint-Sulpice, to accept the insignia of the bishopric! How careful he was to choose as ministers of worship men whose speech and behavior would inspire confidence in the clergy! On reading speeches of that period, one can see that Mr. Portalis never opened his mouth without remembering that he occupied a religious function, in a way, and that a righteous dignity was expected of him. Later Bonaparte committed irreparable wrongs against religion for which he often expressed bitter regret, even when he was the only one to have committed them.

This return to a time already remote from us was necessary to appreciate the conduct of the actual government in its dealings with Catholicism; it is difficult to imagine a more startling contrast. Bonaparte had offered us security and respect in exchange for a servitude prevalent throughout the world, one that was better disguised for us than for others, because of the Gallican regime to which previous courses of action had accustomed us. These courses brought us the collapse of our crosses, the removal of our statues, the pillage of our churches, the abandoning of our rights to the discretion of passers-by, the spiritual sovereignty of our mayors, and finally the speeches and the bishops of Mr. de Montalivet in exchange for a servitude that no one has to tolerate any longer. Evidently, the bargain was not acceptable. When one wishes to act like Napoleon, besides having the desire to become a tyrant, one must have his power to protect servitude and his glory to comfort it. When one wishes to act like Napoleon, he should not fear a Mass; he should attend with his ministers, his marshals, and his soldiers, look all around himself and if he finds a priest of virtue and talent, solicit him and tell him, in the tone of Napoleon to Maury: You are the archbishop of my fair city. . . Then, if God allows, one can seduce a clergyman. But to tremble at the prospect of being seen making a sign of the cross, to hide in one's room when three men cry out against a church, to have ministers demanding respect for the sanctuary in the name of the fine arts of Greece and of Rome, to look in unpretentious places for some very servile and strongly despised, or at least suspect priest, then to send him, in confidence, two months before daring to say it, a miter in the three national colors, and to believe — with the help of all that — that one will find a clergyman so stupid as to place himself under the four feet of the throne, is enough of a folly to make posterity die laughing.

Nonetheless, I hasten to acknowledge that it is impossible at the Ministry to act otherwise. Men do not perform marvelous deeds willingly: when we see them stoop to a certain degree of nonsense, we can be sure it is not completely their fault, and that they are in a position contrary to the general laws of humanity. It is true that it is their personal task to get out of it, but ordinarily this is by a sacrifice that their mind does not understand, or that their heart refuses to fulfill. At the time he was living, in the current state of minds, and again because of his amazing personal rise, Bonaparte was able to find virtuous and respected priests to fill the vacant sees. Moreover, he had nothing to fear from talent and from virtue. Today, however upright the intentions of the Ministry in the choice of bishops, it is impossible for an honorable priest to accept a bishopric from the hand of authority. I will give several reasons for that. The first is that never has the Church allowed men who had not made profession in Christianity to name the successors in the apostolate of Jesus Christ. The Concordat itself is very explicit on this point. The feeling is that a religion which accepts as chiefs men who do not believe in it falls below contempt. Now it is in this position of unbelieving men that the Charter has placed our ministers with regard to Catholic faith and with regard to any other faith. Then, would it be convenient for a priest, after he has seen the throne of France placed not long ago in the very location where God had an altar, to come and kneel down before this throne and receive there the name that the apostles had received from God? Would this be desirable for a priest? . . . But infamy is not desirable for anybody, especially for those to whom it was said: *You are the light of the world.*

Instead, therefore, of being able to bend the knee before the illustrious captain who had overpowered anarchy and the foreigner and from whose hands a bishop still found some traces of sacred oils, today we can only bow before that man who is nothing if not the man of freedom and to complain that he wishes to give bishops to a people whose religion he did not protect and who has the right to have only that religion that pleases him, for as long as it does please, in the manner that it pleases him, except to answer to God for it. These realities are perceived by every priest who has a bit of heart and that is why he will not accept from Mr. de Montalivet the position of bishop he would have accepted from Napoleon. Should there be one whose conscience misleads him on this point, he is not the one whom the Ministry will seek. It understands perfectly well that Catholicism slips by authority because

of freedom, that all the efforts of the world in favor of freedom benefit Catholicism and soon, only Catholicism. Indeed, the nature of things is such that, sooner or later, truth is the only thing oppressed and, consequently, the only thing needing freedom. Now, in a parallel situation, those who are afraid of freedom, because of truth, do not wish to give the support of a virtuous man to either one. They have only one hope, to spoil; only one concern, to seek in the mud insects that are holy and are for sale; only one delight, to have found one. Then, if you insist on guessing at the enigma in its entirety, you will perhaps find at the bottom of this fear of freedom some kind of pleasure, that I am unaware of, in placing a miter on an unworthy head so that the pleasure might be even greater. A certain minister, sitting in his official chair, considers the Church of France, and turning with self-satisfaction towards an intimate: What do you think of so-and-so for such-and-such a see? He is said to be. . . But, my goodness, what is that to me? And this, Catholics, is history.

As for Mr. Rey, the *Moniteur* presented us with his personal background this morning: he was born in 1773, has been a canon at the Church of Aix for 23 years, twice was elevated by the chapter to the rank of Vicar General; Mr. de Fontanes valued greatly his Gallican theology, and finally, he is constitutional [i.e., sworn to the government - Trans.]. This is the official translation of what we were saying about him yesterday; but for us, Mr. Rey holds another title: he was named bishop of Dijon by Mr. de Montalivet. The pope “will appreciate” his qualities.

[Do pardon me!] I am wrong in speaking of the pope. The *Temps* [a newspaper - Trans.] will not forgive *that someone lodges protests with him for a decision made by the French government*, it fears *illicit communications that would expose us, in the final analysis, to the penalties against those who link indictable reports with a foreign sovereign*, and advises us *that we must take care that independence does not degenerate into treachery*. These are the counsels that the *Temps* gave us today concerning the nomination of Mr. Rey. We could refer the paper to the Concordat; there, it would see that the Sovereign Pontiff has the right to question the bishop-elect and to refuse him canonical appointment — something that is completely impossible since French Catholics are forbidden to enlighten the religion of their mutual Father. But we are not accustomed to defending ourselves with the weapons that we have from despotism. Freedom protects itself. It is in the

name of freedom that we claim the separation of Church and State and that we refuse to place our confidence in the bishops that the State wants to impose on us. Undoubtedly, *one decision by the French government* does not force us to believe in a symbol, to receive blessings. Undoubtedly, *one decision by the French government* cannot create a successor to the apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul. This is why when we protest before the Holy See that the symbol of a man appears suspicious to us, that his blessings alarm us, we are not protesting *against a decision of the French government*, providing the decisions of the French government prescribe only symbols that should not be suspect, blessings we should not fear, and do not create successors to the apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul, which up to now is more than questionable. One does not protest against a nonexistent thing. What is it that exists when a bishop is named by the State? Nothing, except for a prayer by which Mr. de Montalivet says to the vicar of God: Most Holy Father, Mr. de Montalivet does not believe that you can make a man cease to be a man, but, as for us, we do believe it and since this belief results in our being the only ones interested in the matter, we entreat your paternity to let this man be simply a man. On that point, the *Temps* cries out: Treachery!

ENDNOTE [Trans.]

1. Ernest Portalis, (1816-1891) 19th Century French politician, deputy from Toulon.

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