

HARRISON SMITH

## THE ILLNESS OF PIUS VI AND ITS EFFECT ON THE MALTESE QUESTION

The last tragic year of the 24-year long reign of Pius VI (Giovanni Angelico Braschi) was spent in exile, first in Siena and then near Florence. During this period (February 1798 - March 1799) certain decisions were reached which greatly affected the whole future of the Order of St. John, more commonly called the Knights of Malta, and these decisions were interlocked with much greater ones which affected the hopes of harmony between the Roman Catholic Church and the Russian (Greek) Orthodox Church. Most of these decisions were, like the August Pontiff's reign, a tragedy. One aspect of the disharmony that arose was the Pontiff's desperately deteriorating health. How did this affect the unhappiness that developed between the Pontifical and Orthodox Courts? How did it govern events in the Order (1)?

Pius was deposed, dethroned from all *temporal* power, taken into protective custody, and removed by force under escort as a military prisoner by the French Revolutionary Convention in February, 1798 and upon being forced to travel northward

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(1) Sources: P. BALDASSARI, *Histoire de l'enlèvement et de la captivité de Pie VI*, Paris 1839; M. J. ROUËT DE JOURNEL, S. J., *Nonciatures de Russie: Nonciature de Litta 1797-1799*, Città del Vaticano 1943; Id., *Malte et Russie*, « Annales de l'Ordre Souverain Militaire de Malte », Rome, July-September 1961; M. DE PIERREDON, *Histoire Politique de l'Ordre Souverain de Saint-Jean de Jérusalem, 1789-1855*, Paris 1956; R. FASANARI, *L'Armata Russa del Generale Suvorov attraverso Verona*, Verona 1952; W. PORTER, *Malta and its Knights*, London 1871; E. SCHERMERHORN, *Malta of the Knights*, London 1929; W. HARDMAN, *A History of Malta*, London 1909; P. PIERLING, *La Russie et le Saint-Siège*, Paris 1912; L. VON PASTOR, *History of the Popes*, XL and XXIX quotes Theiner and Gendry, St. Louis 1952; A. VELLA, O. P., *Malta and the Czars, 1697-1802*, Malta 1965.

against his desire he arrived at Viterbo on the 20th and was joined by his favorite nephew, the Duke Braschi, who supervised the 4 men it required to lift the ill Pope from his carriage. Being denied the right to go south to Naples, he went northward in slow stages, nearly overcome by emotion, and he reached the Augustinian Convent at Siena on February 24th, where he remained until May 26th.

Since no prelate was permitted to remain in his presence more than two days, and as all the curial offices were closed, his court was the smallest in the world. The Cardinal-Secretary of State was missing until July, 1798 when he was located in Naples. The Cardinal-Dean Albani went there and then to Vienna. Pius seems to have annexed Archbishop Odescalchi, the Nuncio to the Grand Duke of Tuscany in Florence, to himself so as to have a Corresponding State Secretary, although Ferdinand III of Tuscany was extremely nervous to have such a controversial visitor corresponding from his asylum. Ferdinand had been one of the first rulers to recognize the French Republic. By a treaty of strict neutrality he hoped to remain at peace with France and preserve his throne. Written appeals for help were sent by Pius to the thrones of Europe, including non-Catholic powers like Russia, Britain, and the Germanies. Talk of a Conclave to choose his successor was complicated by the unknown location of some 48 cardinals. The Pope was an embarrassing visitor.

The Brief to Russia was sent to Archbishop Lorenzo Litta of Thebes, the Nuncio to Warsaw who had been sent a year earlier to St. Petersburg with the title « Ambassador of the Pope of Rome ». Pius was well enough to sign this letter in his own hand on March 29th. He asked the Orthodox Czar to mediate with the forces of the French revolution despite their « utter hatred of monarchy ». Since he was no longer able to stand, talk of fleeing to Spain was abandoned because of the dangers of the sea voyage. On May 26th, miraculously escaping from an earthquake which wrecked the convent chapel, he was moved to Villa Poggiarello and Torre Fiorentina, where he heard of General Bonaparte's capture of Malta on June 12th, which drove the medieval Order of knights of the Order of which he was the Supreme Spiritual Head into exile.

He was horrified to learn that the Temporal Head, the 69th Grand Master Ferdinand de Hompesch, had capitulated

without a struggle and had sailed on the 18th into exile to the Austrian port of Trieste with either 10 or 16 bailiffs and the three most valuable relics of the Order.

There was little time to act since the Pope was moved again on July 1st, this time to the 16th-century Carthusian Monastery of Galluzzo d'Emma some four miles from the center of Florence. He was reported « dangerously ill » and certainly unable to proceed to Sardinia, of all the suggested places. Grand Duke Ferdinand of Tuscany, his frightened host, arrived at the Certosa to welcome his August Visitor, now over 80 years old, and immediately ordered as « few visitors as possible ». Duke Braschi was banished, Odescalchi was confined to stay in Florence making only three trips a week out to the Convent for the purpose of carrying the pontifical mail, much of which seemed to be with Cardinal-Dean Albani in exile with the title Legate of the Pope to the Emperor of Austria in Vienna.

The Pontiff raised Monsignor Spina to the title Archbishop of Corinth, and this prelate became his nearest companion — at times almost his only one — during the nine months of confinement to convent life, which came to an abrupt end on March 29, 1799 with the fall of Tuscany to the French revolutionary army and when Pius was deported incommunicado to France. En route he died.

Father Baldassari, an eye witness, says at Certosa he was only well enough to go to the window of his cell, he soon gave up his daily work, and he could no longer sit erect. He was even forced to give up saying Mass, and week by week he grew worse and worse. Talk of a Conclave in Vienna and exile to Cagliari, Sardinia was revived. It was at this point that correspondence with St. Petersburg suddenly increased.

On July 13th Nuncio Litta wrote to Nuncio Odescalchi that Czar Paul was deeply concerned for Pius' destiny. They had met in person and with unusual affection in early 1782 when the former as Grand Duke travelled to Rome with his wife, Princess Sophie Dorothea of Württemberg.

Malta had fallen and Napoleon was at Alexandria, Egypt by July. Some ten cardinals were gathered in Naples, but talk persisted of trying to assemble the scattered college in Venice under the Catholic Emperor's protection.

Meanwhile on July 25th from Trieste Hompesch had written to the brother of Nuncio Litta to « carry on in Russia » ac-



according to the statutes. Count Jules René de Litta was a dashing court favorite, an admiral, a professed knight in the Order, and its Ambassador to the Czar. The two brothers had been given the Worontsov Palace with two chapels for their respective embassies. In reply, the Prince de Condé, a French Bourbon in exile, wrote in his new capacity as Grand Prior of Russia (to denounce Hompesch; all his acts; his treaty of capitulation) on August 26th and again on the 29th. The Russian Grand Priory declared the Grand Master deposed, freed the knights from their vow of obedience, and reasserted the importance of the role of the Czar as the « Protector of the Order » in accordance with the Treaty of 1797 signed between Russia and Malta. The Russian signatory was Count Alex. Bezboródko, Imperial Chancellor, while Count de Litta was the signatory for Grand Master de Rohan.

Count de Litta wrote Pius on September 27th summarizing the actions taken in August by the Priory. Pius had written Nuncio Litta, his envoy, on the 2nd of the same month concerning their mutual fears about the celebrated Roman Catholic Archbishop Siestrzencewicz of Mohilev whose personal chauvinism threatened to upset the developing Catholic rapprochement with the Czar. Paul was the first czar ever to insist at his coronation he be publicly announced as the Head of the Orthodox Church, and thus his role in the new developments was greater than his predecessors.

On October 17th Pius wrote Count de Litta saying « Chevalier Hompesch » was under censure due to the protestation of the knights in Russia, but this was insufficient to declare him fallen from office as they must await the view of the other priories while investigating the unhappy events. Even so, the Pope did say the knights in Russia might « depute » another knight to act with the « authority of the Grand Master ». It was this concession that was to be enlarged upon.

Pius also wrote Hompesch the same day, refusing his requests for dispensations for knights still with him in Trieste, telling him of the Russian charges against him, and even mentioning his approval of a deputy in Russia. Hompesch himself had five days earlier repudiated the whole cession of Malta in a letter to King Ferdinand IV of Naples, his suzerain, adding that he was now « free » from any duress. He observed he had never consented to signing any capitulation. Hompesch even

wrote the Czar on the 30th denying any complicity in the fall of Malta and begging Paul's mercy.

Nuncio Odescalchi on 20 October and 3 November tried to caution Nuncio Litta that the other priories must be consulted, and it would be indelicate not to act in concert.

Meanwhile on the 27th, without waiting further for Pope or ex-Grand Master, Paul had been proclaimed the 70th Grand Master of the Order. The action was a result of the Russian Grand Priory and « all other members of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem assembled in St. Petersburg, the Chief Place of Residence of our Order ». Most of his supporters were the noble French in exile. Some say the greater bulk of the knights was there.

Before any news of this action reached the West, Pius wrote on 5 November to Count de Litta at great length. We can only presume he had Hompesch's explanation of his conduct sent from Trieste on 12 October, since in general the mails were less than a week in the Adriatic area - General Bonaparte was in the Near East. The Pontiff expressed absolute horror at Hompesch's « atrocious crime » and expressed delight at Paul reestablishing and reassembling the broken parts of the Order at St. Petersburg. He noted the measures taken to release from obedience those knights who clung to Hompesch, and he asked if the same could not be used against all who in any way were associated with this horrible surrender scene, and added he would like the names of others. Hompesch stood accused by the Bailiff de Tigné. Pius urged de Litta on further when he asserted « we shall cooperate with the authority needed ». He certainly seems to have been well enough this week to preside actively over all the despatches going in and out of his bed room.

The Pope wrote again on the 16th of November, this time to Hompesch calling him « High Magistrate ». He ruled that Hompesch had not effectively *disproved* the charges made by the Russian knights against him, and certainly it was impossible at this moment to reestablish the overrun *Langues* of the Order. He rejected any possibility of punishing rebels against « your former authority ».

We can safely presume he did not yet have the news that on the 13th of November Paul had accepted the Grandmastership of the Order (nor the news of the agreement to accept on 27 October), and thus did not yet know the flag of the Order



had gone up on the Admiralty Palace in Russia, thereby asserting the sovereignty of the Order had been blended with the Throne of Russia. Paul carefully asserted he meant no harm to his allies.

November was a busy month in St. Petersburg. Paul made great concessions to the Church and reorganized the Order of St. John. In fact, he saved the Order from oblivion. Most everything the Pope dreamed of was conceded in the reorganization and restoration of some 9 sees, 6 Latin and 3 Ruthenian; compensation for properties lost, concessions to the Jesuits who still existed in Russia, and even the troublesome Podolia was restored. Mohilev acquired the metropolitan rights over Lemberg in Galicia. It was from here that the whole development of the knights of St. John originated. Polotsk was another diocesan dispute. Similarly, and quite interlocked, the Order was broadened to include a Grand Priory for the Orthodox (thus two in Russia), and his generous spirit opened the Order to « any gentleman of any Christian country duly qualified ». He always asserted he was in complete accord with the *ancient* principles of the Order. Of course, the Order had changed its role so many times in history, it would be difficult to say what principles retained any continuity. He handed out grand crosses to ambassadors, courtiers, and foreign emigrés.

Pius is curiously silent. Was he displeased, or was he reflective for a moment as he realized that *his* enthusiasm had carried the Litta brothers and then the Czar (easily moved into extremes) far closer into the bosom of the Church via the Order than he was prepared to explain to those taut critics in his scattered and lost flock?

We have one clue in November from Certosa. Pius gave Cardinal Albani (Dean of the College) authority to fix the place of the papal election so as to avoid a papal schism. He was very reluctant, but he consented to a Catholic *venue* where the « greatest » number of cardinals might be able to assemble. He must have been weaker, for the moment. Odescalchi was greatly relieved from the fear of a schism. Letters of grief poured into him from French bishops exiled to England.

An eye witness, the Abbé Pietro Baldassari, does not tell us *how* these views were solicited or received in the lonely cell at Certosa, but he summarizes the reaction to Paul's assumption of the « deputy » role as follows:

Les cardinaux étaient unanimes à blamer un tel choix, mais ils différaient sur le parti qu'il convenait de prendre. Les uns étaient d'avis, pour ne point blesser un prince aussi puissant que Paul Ier et aussi bien disposé pour Le Saint-Siège et la personne du Pape, de garder silence absolu en n'approuvant ni ne désapprouvant la conduite du prieuré de Russie.

D'autres pensaient que des considérations temporelles ne devaient point d'emporter sur les intérêts d'un ordre plus relevé et qu'il fallait que le Saint Père s'élevât hautement contre une détermination aussi contre aux décrets apostoliques qu'aux droits du Saint-Siège.

On ne suivit ni l'un ni l'autre de ces deux avis, et l'on s'arrêta à un troisième parti dont toute le monde demeura satisfait. Ce fut de ne point répondre aux dépêches du balli de Russie que annonçaient les nouvelles mesures, mais d'envoyer des instructions au délégué apostolique à Petersbourg, Mgr. Litta, afin qu'il donnât aux chevaliers les avertissements dont ils avaient besoin.

It is significant that the strongest opinion was one of neutrality, and in the end abstention, which is in effect declining to approve, but similarly declining to refute openly or announcing the sentiment of disapproval; in summary this is what took place.

Late in November on the 27th the aged and infirm Pontiff was thrilled to hear from Monsignore Tosi how King Ferdinand IV of Naples had reversed the tide of revolution and counter attacked, thus reoccupying Papal Rome. But His Holiness refused to make it a « war of religion » and join the issues, which is what Cardinal Albani urged. On the 28th the great Nelson seized Livorno (Tuscany's only port). The consequent violation of Tuscany's promised neutrality to France placed both Ferdinand III and Pius in immediate jeopardy of French retaliation.

But the relief and enthusiasm was brief. Cardinal Ruffo was to replace the King by December and in January the King, together with several cardinals, were in full retreat and when he sailed for Sicily they went to Messina or Corfu or Trieste. On January 19th the King and Queen of the Piedmont (Charles Emmanuel IV of Savoy) fleeing southward to Livorno and to Sardinian exile paused to call on Pius in Certosa, and they found him too ill to stand, although he tried. The French Ambassador to Tuscany (Commissioner Chipault), the Pope's jailor, tried to force Pius to go with them, but he had to admit his August prisoner was dying and far too weak to go even to Livorno, let alone board a seagoing vessel. Can we not, therefore, assume that during these critical weeks of relations with the Czar, Pius



was not in command of the situation, which had slipped through his fingers, and was in effect now in the hands of the two Litta brothers? We can rightfully wonder.

There follows the whole month of December, the many despatches of which have been analysed for us from research in the Vatican archives by the historian, Father Rouët de Journal. They mostly concern the overly enthusiastic reports from the Littas which described Paul's enthusiasm as Grand Master. Czar Paul's zeal for his new role as the head of the Christian knightly Order was intense; it was marked by his pronounced mysticism. But he clearly also promised to preserve the « role of the Pope as the Head of the Church » in the Order. Paul was delighted when allowed to read Pius' letter to Count de Litta; presumably he was shown the passage concerning « depute » a knight in Russia. Father Andrew Vella, a current Maltese historian, would point out that Paul's own knighthood was an honorific, despite his role as Protector. In more than one instance he clearly offered to send troops to save the Pope and the King of Naples from the revolutionary forces, and his personal letter to Pius on 14 December in his own hand urged restoration of the Papal Kingdom or invited him to come to Russia in the interim; similarly he urged war against their common enemy. The Litta brothers were urging Paul on and on. Rome was unstably in the hands of General Acton.

On January 2nd almost a hundred new commanderies were created and Nuncio Litta explained to Odescalchi that the Holy See need not bother to approve or comment on the activities of the Russian Orthodox Priory since it 1) strengthened Catholic diplomacy in general in Russia by opening the Order to a wider religious basis and thus increased the Catholic position in Russia and 2) it was a « separate thing » from the rest of the Order and thus would merely pay into the « common treasury ».

Very curiously neither in December or January does Odescalchi speak against what was done in connection with the knights. It is your author's presumption that he referred this whole subject to some prelate or prelates elsewhere. By his silence the Littas were encouraged even more. On January 5th Odescalchi sent Litta approval for the rearrangements the latter had made for the dioceses. Odescalchi seems so disturbed on this occasion for fear Tuscany was falling that he departs from the policy urging Russia to send troops and temporarily suggests



Litta can use all the means the brothers have at their command. He mentioned Cardinal Antonelli was well again and writing a Memorandum of the Litta actions regarding the dioceses. It is not clear to your author where Antonelli was after he was separated from Pius at Siena, but he must have been nearby. Was he one of those in the prison at Civitavecchia? Much later, in fact in May 1799, he turns up in Vienna where Albani was.

At Certosa there was much gloom. Lucca was falling, Rome and Naples were served and lost, Piedmont had fallen to General Joubert, Nelson left Livorno so that Tuscany was virtually surrounded except for a difficult exit to the north through the mountains into the Duchy of Parma.

The war in 1799 was now being intensified in every way. Paul was masterminding the Second Coalition to break the Treaty of Campo Formio settlement with Russia, joined by Britain, Austria, Naples, Portugal, Turkey and the Papacy. Austria's General Mack plunged over the Alps into Italy to attack France, despite the latter's successes under General Championnet in Naples. Barras, as one of the Directors, was determined to get the Pope out of Italy to Cagliari on Sardinia, but there was no convenient means of moving him, as Sardinia (or Spain) meant an extended ocean voyage and Pius had a known aversion to the sea. Ambassador Chipault was as perplexed as General St-Cyr had been with the issue. How to move a dying Pope? All this talk directly affected his condition.

On January 26th he was seized with violent convulsions, spasms and paroxysms. These fits, this time, were far reaching in effect. High fever and talk of operating on his bladder, together with the administration of ointments for fever blisters occupied the little group at Certosa. On February 7th the report was that these measures had no success and he was much worse. Cramps and fever continued. Extreme unction was administered. Four doctors from Florence came out to attend him. They issued a medical bulletin; the Pontiff was « more like a corpse than a living person ». They could not tranquillize him, he was agitated and had no repose that night. The French again insisted he depart for Sardinia. These *démarches* always brought on another attack and Odescalchi now confessed to Litta that he feared each one would be fatal.

Then two days later several letters were sent from Certosa to Litta in Petersburg. In the first, Odescalchi reported the Holy

Father was collapsing and he could die at any moment. A vigil was set around his bed. The French had been told he could not be lifted. In the second, Odescalchi seems to be taking matters into his own hands and chastizes Litta for going ahead on approvals for bishops and the legate without waiting for the required bulls to be issued at Certosa. As he refers to Litta's despatch of 18 December he must surely have Paul's letter to Pius, and Litta's to Odescalchi on 20 December, and maybe even the one on 2 January. All these messages had been to confirm Paul's desire to fight together against the common enemy as the hope of Europe. This also means, however, that Count de Litta had by now Pius' hesitant note saying « your priory alone must not decide » the Maltese question. Why is Odescalchi still silent on the central theme? If he does not mention it, could it be that he has sent the papers to someone else to study? But by not saying so, the Littas had a false sense of security and approval, thus encouraging them to continue to push Paul further along the path of reconciliation with Rome. Why this delay? Was this not a dangerous tactic?

A third letter was personally from Pius to Paul, presumably dictated, apologizing for the fact that Pius *could not write*. In it he thanks Paul for the offer of the Russian Imperial Army to attack the French forces and capture the Pope, carrying him off to safety, but he goes on to explain he must decline it as his character does not conform to this solution to his calamity. Paul's zeal is approved, but Pius won't instigate a project for the use of the Russian Army in Italy. Why does he not mention the Czar is now the Grand Master, since he specifically thanks Paul for the letter of 14 December? He has had time to receive the one of 20 December with the glowing report of the splendor of the Russian enthronization ceremony as Grand Master. Is it possible he was not shown these?

In the last letter despatched that same day to Litta, Odescalchi says it was the 25th anniversary of Pius' pontificate, and although Pius had once declined a similar demand from a Spanish archbishop, he was able to celebrate Mass in bed, when he could manage to sit up.

On the 16th of February Odescalchi writes the Pope is better! But again he says nothing to Litta about Paul's Order of St. John. He does say he has finally found where many of the cardinals have been who fled Naples. Only Tuscany and



Parma now survive the French axe. The French Commissioner at Florence has agreed to delay Pius' forced deportation for a « little while ».

On March 2nd Odescalchi chastizes Litta once again for the reorganization of the Russian dioceses without waiting for bulls of authority. Either Odescalchi is making decisions for himself, or delaying until he can communicate with someone else whom he does not identify to Litta. Even so, he approves of Litta's acts, but remains silent on the knights. Now more than two months of silence has led the Littas to continue down the fatal path.

On the 8th Litta announces to Odescalchi that Field Marshal Count Suvorov has been recalled and will be coming to Italy to save the Pope. He also announced he was anxious to be recalled from his assignment. He told Odescalchi he was entirely dependent on the favor of his brother at Court and the latter's ability to stay in good favor with the Czar in the Order.

He seemed to sense these two might fall apart, and thus his Papal Mission jeopardized. He suggested his auditor, Mgr. Giovanni Benvenuti as chargé until someone else could arrive.

This same day Odescalchi had sent several bulls of reorganization, but still not one word about the Grandmastership. The crash was now to come.

The long and even today unexplained silence was abruptly broken. On March 14th, Chancellor-Prince Bezboródko suddenly sent for Litta to inform him that Pius had disapproved of the decisions taken by Paul in saving the Order and that the Russian Throne knew that Litta was concealing this situation. Horrified, Litta pleaded totally ignorant and with much intensity. The Chancellor went on to say that he had heard all this *from a friend in Florence!* This must mean someone close to Odescalchi had deliberately let out the information in advance, with a view of ruining the Litta mission and angering the Russian Court. It did just that. In a few days Count de Litta was disgraced and confined to his estates. This was the first step in the total destruction of the Litta Mission.

Siestrzencewicz openly defied Litta by assuming a new role as « legate of the Holy See » and then announcing all ties to Rome via Litta or his future replacement were severed. No papal bull was to be valid in Russia without his visa and later, the imperial placet. The three days of banqueting and celebra-



tions which began in the archbishop's palace on March 17th gave great offense to Litta. Thus the Russian prelate must have known the information the Chancellor possessed. His attitude toward the Pope, of course, was unspeakable for a Roman Catholic just honored with a red hat.

Back at Certosa three documents were to be prepared for the Russian case. One, a letter from Pius to Paul dated March 15th, two, a despatch from Odescalchi to Litta dated 16 March, and three, a *Pro-Memoria* Memorandum summarizing the Czar's irregular assumption of power in the Order of St. John, also dated 16 March, according to some. These three constituted the *last* voice of Pontifical Authority and are somewhat mysterious.

On the 25th the French forces occupied Florence, the Grand Duke Ferdinand of Tuscany having fled, and on the 28th Pius was ordered off to Parma, from whence this tragic, paralyzed, delirious, and half-dead Pontiff was to be carried from town to town ahead of the enemy armies. He was convulsed in pain and too weak to raise his hand in blessing. Over the Alps, carried by litter, our tragic figure went and on into France where along the way at Valence he expired in what can surely be described as conditions close to martyrdom.

In the first of these letters, Pius wrote to Paul in Latin with no comment on the knights, but thanked him for all he was doing in the Church relations. He authorized the insignia of « the purple » for Siestrzencewicz as if he were a cardinal. It is not signed by anyone at Certosa.

The second is written from Florence one day later and Odescalchi 1) recites the confusion in the communications between Hompesch in Trieste, the Littas in Russia, and the Pope in Certosa, concluding that Pius had been greatly disturbed at the time by the timing of events which led to a precipitous action by Paul, and 2) the Holy See reserves its right to judge the election of the Czar to the Order's Grandmastership about which there were many outcries at Certosa, implying these were from kings, proirs, and high officials, and 3) asks how can it be said the authority of the Order only survived in Russia. Moreover, the Russian Priory in stabilizing the Order only could perform under Papal Authority. So for all the above reasons Odescalchi must now abstain from saying anything that would seem to tolerate or excuse any previous despatches on this whole Maltese question.

What is so strange it that he makes no apology for this abrupt reversal in tone and thought, and he totally ignores the long months during which his silence made a material contribution to these events. Why does he say these things now? This is in March and he had all the despatches of December and January long before. At the moment he chose to say something the French armies had threatened Tuscany, in fact on the 18th, Monday, and they seized the city of Florence on Easter Sunday, the 24th. In this letter Odescalchi even goes back to the Treaty of 1797 to challenge it by saying this Protectorate of the Czar over the Order could do irreparable harm. Why say this now?

Odescalchi reports that His Holiness is in bed, *so ill he chose not to tell him* the French Commissioner was here again, insisting the dying Pope must go to Sardinia at once. The Nuncio again persuaded him he was much too ill to go even to Livorno. Can we not wonder how much Pius knew of these despatches on this last day of his official business in Italy?

The third paper is the now celebrated and lengthy *Pro-Memoria*. It summarizes the whole year of events concerning the knights from the fall of Hompesch and the whole case of Paul. It now seeks to establish Pius was caught unprepared by the rapidity of Paul's actions, and it holds that his speed prevented Pius from giving his judgement on either Hompesch or Paul in the form of « Pontifical sanction ». It reviews Count de Litta's letters to Certosa. It admits His Holiness believed His Imperial Majesty's intentions were the best in sustaining and reviving the Order, but the Pope is also responsible to the Order, its Membership, and to other Sovereigns for prerogatives, constitutions, and traditions. It cites other disputes such as a deposition on Rhodes of a Grand Master by an elected successor, and again a dispute in Malta wherein the Pope had to intervene in a constitutional issue. The Memorandum cites the Constitution of Gregory XIII and the Ceremonial Code of Urban VIII, which seem not to have been followed. The Grand Priory of Germany has adopted a « constitutional neutrality »; this may be a reference to the Ambassador of Bavaria being sent home by Paul at the time of his assumption of power, and there is the suggestion that a new Elector of Bavaria may raise further objections. It suggests a spirit of concord and conciliation toward the other *Langues*, ignoring the difficulty in finding them. It goes on to praise the Czar.



His Holiness, it continues, is mindful of the noble revival of the glory and the power of the Order, the protection and assistance of the Czar so that infinite benefits have fallen from this imperial dignity to Catholics in this vast empire, and also his fond wishes to restore the lustre of the Order. But, it continues, Paul's great spirit needs no stimulation, and it would be enough to pledge his power by deposing Hompesch without uniting his dignity to that of the Czar. In conclusion, His Holiness is mindful of the Sacred Deposit of His Authority, the Apostolic Constitution, the Statutes of the Order, and he thus *abstains* himself from those acts and claims which are *apostolic* in foundation taken by the Grand Priory of Russia. He observes with paternal admonition the repeated promises of the Czar to keep the Order's privileges, freedom of the Catholic religion, the statutes of the Order, and the religious subordination of it to the Holy See.

It is not signed, curiously. Whoever wrote it had the Litta correspondence, and surely must have known of historical disputes among the knights in the past, and may have been unfavorable to the reconciliation with Orthodoxy. Rouët de Journal published it as unsigned in his research in 1943 in the Vatican archives. But Michael de Pierredon published (posthumously) in 1956 the signature of titular bishop Spina under this same Memorandum. Again, curiously Rouët de Journal does not date it, but the celebrated papal historian Pastor (using Theiner as a source) gives the date of January 20, 1799 - which if Odescalchi did not tell the Pontiff of the attempt to move him to Sardinia the day this Memorandum was posted, can one postulate that he may not have told him about this Memorandum at all?

The Memorandum was written in clear language, but the covering note accompanying it was put into *code*. The coded note is extremely interesting. It instructs Litta to use all possible delicacy so as to have the minimum effect on the favorable disposition of the Czar toward the Catholic religion, maintaining the constant friendship of the Czar *and the Order* which the Pope esteems because the Czar is so kind to the Church and the Pope. Tell the brother, it goes on, the Pope used great prudence in not replying to the Proclamation of the Grand Mastership, and it is not the moment to question the Treaty of 1797. In code it adds the Pope has begun to reestablish his health.



Why code the instructions to Litta and then leave the criticism of the Czar in plain language? Was it planned that the pouch was to be opened in Vienna and handed to the Russian Ambassador who sent it on to the Russian Chancellor first before it reached Litta? If the Pope tolerated rather than approved of the rich gifts of the Czar, would it not be better to have allowed Litta some latitude in adjusting matters slowly. If Litta was to have the discretion to reveal only parts of the Memorandum and thus save the Czar's sensibilities from pain, then he could only do so if both messages were in code.

Spina was a domestic prelate who joined the Pope at Siena. The role he played was somewhat obscure, but seems more to have been an attendant and secretary-like role - more a gentleman of the household. He was raised to bishop *in partibus*, but Odescalchi never refers to him as having any political or diplomatic role at all. Doubtless he could have access to Pius' correspondence with the Litta brothers, but the Memorandum suggests someone more knowledgeable in the history of the Order. Odescalchi changes his attitude with the despatch of this document. He never explains why. It is quite unclear who altered papal diplomacy.

Disaster struck rapidly. The diplomatic pouch was broken open in Vienna and Russian officials in the Embassy there forwarded it to the Vice-Chancellor of the Empire - either Count Panin or Kotchoubey, the nephew of the Chancellor. When Litta finally received his confidential correspondence it had been violated. He was, therefore, totally prevented from using the delicacy and discretion that would have prevented the painful reaction of the Czar - who it could be expected would fly into a rage. Unknown culprits in the plot must have been delighted.

Litta went to the Chancellor to explain, but he received cold rebukes. Bezboródko was dying and Kotchoubey was at his side. Count Rostopchine of the Foreign Office was coolly disinterested in *any* explanations. The Czar would not receive him. No one at the Russian Court, of course, had been able to read the *coded* message which put an entirely different construction on the Memorandum.

On May 9th Nuncio Litta was ordered to depart from the city and empire that same day; Count Pahlen, the Governor of St. Petersburg, offered no explanation. He was later one of the leaders in the plot to murder the Czar. Litta left Worontsov

Palace in great haste and with the help of a police escort reached the Prussian frontier safely.

The day the violated documents were known to the imperial officials, the dying Pius had reached Piacenza, near which he was nearly captured twice and nearly drowned in the Trebbia River once. He could hear the guns of the Austro-Russian forces sent to liberate him as his carriage paused on the banks of the Po; the French hustled him on to Voghera. On the 4th of May Marshal Suvorov entered Milan with Grand Duke Constantine Pavlovitch at his side and made his public announcement: « I have come to save the Pope ».

On the day Litta fled for his life from St. Petersburg the dying Pontiff had reached the fortress at Briançon in France after transiting the Alps in a litter borne by stalwart men through heavy snow. Here rumors circulated through this French frontier town that Marshal Suvorov was on his way into France.

Was the intrigue confined to those in St. Petersburg against the new friendship of the Czar for the Pope and the consequences this suggested? Was it confined merely to someone lurking in Florence who disliked the thought of ecclesiastical reunion with the Orthodox? Was it related to the Bavarian opposition to Paul's assumption of the Order? Was it related to the violation of the diplomatic pouch in Vienna? In June Austrian Emperor Leopold sent the noble Prévôt Maffei's brother to force Hompesch to formally abdicate, such action to be addressed to both the Austrian Emperor and the Czar. Cardinal Antonelli the week after Pius died in France suggested that Cardinal Albani could be sent from Vienna to St. Petersburg to placate the Czar's wrath, and *maybe* after matters had cooled off another election might be held in which an Austrian archduke would be elected Grand Master, being dispensed from the vow of celibacy. Thus Paul was more objected to on the grounds of his Orthodoxy and schismatic status than his marital status? Certainly the plot seems to center around Vienna in some way.

Perhaps we can eliminate Britain from the plot, since Lord Nelson was writing in October to the Czar as the Grand Master of the Order and the sovereign of the Island, anxiously awaiting General-Prince Wolconsky's arrival from Corfu to take over the Czar's rights to Malta as a governor.

Not too clear is the role of a Jesuit Father Gabriel Gruber who had great influence on Paul shortly after these events.

Gruber was clearly pro-French, friendly to republicanism, and hostile to King Louis XVIII in exile in Mittau Castle in Russian Courland, now a member of the Order. The Bourbon heir had approved the election of Paul, and as a member of the Order. But his name has not been linked to this particular conspiracy by any historians. Jesuit John Anthony Grassi was rector of the College of Nobles at Polotsk and a friend of Paul. He came from Colorno in the Duchy of Parma where the Grand Duke lived, but no evidence implicates him in this particular plot.

In any event, diplomatic relations between the Orthodox Czar and the Pontifical Court were soured. The cardinals when they gathered at Venice to elect a new pope were keenly aware of the damage done. The knights of the celebrated Order had clearly been split in schism between those who were « czarist » and those who were « papist ». They still are today. Irreparable mischief had been done by mischievous hands. Many actions during His Holiness' illness remain unexplained. It is not too much to conclude that both the Order and Russia had not been handled with the harmony and generosity that marked all his actions when he was well enough to handle matters himself. The result was that his intentions were not realized.