

# 1775-12-25 – SS Pius VI - Inscrutable

(On The Problems Of The Pontificate)

Pope Pius VI

---

Encyclical promulgated on 25 December 1775.

To the Patriarchs, Primate, Archbishops and Bishops of the Entire Catholic Church.

Venerable Brothers, We give you Greeting and Our Apostolic Blessing.

The mysterious design of divine wisdom, whose works are always marvelous, did not despise Our lowliness but willed instead to make Us the head of the bishops and to honor Us as the guide of His entire Church. Just as He chose the young David from among a thousand and raised him from herding sheep to rule His people on a glorious throne, and make them acceptable to God by means of the rod of guidance, so He chose Us. Others seemed more worthy of the papal tiara, especially since We had just been appointed to the college of cardinals and occupied the last place there.

As We gratefully reflect on His infinite kindness towards Us, We cannot refrain from tears at His beneficent mercy and omnipotence in conferring His graces so generously on one who was not recommended by his own merits. Despite Our lack of strength and merit, He established Us as leader of the peoples in order that, as representative on earth of the Eternal Shepherd, We should feed Israel, His inheritance, and lead it to the holy mountain of Sion, the heavenly Jerusalem.

Since it is most fitting for Us to show Our obedience and devotion as consecrated Pope by offering praise to the Lord, We cannot stifle Our exclamations of exultation as We praise Him and cry with the prophet: "Let Our mouth speak the praise of the Lord and Our soul, spirit, flesh and tongue bless His holy name." [1] "But if it is religious conduct to rejoice at a grace, it is also necessary to be anxious about deserving it. For what is so fearful as toil to the weak, height to the lowly and rank to one who does not deserve it?" [2]

2. Who would not be fearful at the present condition of the Christian people? The divine love by which we abide in God and God in us grows very cold as sins and wickedness increase every day. Who would not be shocked when considering that We have undertaken the task of guarding and protecting the Church at a time when many plots are laid against orthodox religion, when the safe guidance of the sacred canons is rashly despised, and when confusion is spread wide by men maddened by a monstrous desire of innovation, who attack the very bases of rational nature and attempt to overthrow them? Assuredly "with such reason for fear, we would have no hope of escaping slavery except that the Guardian of Israel, who does not sleep, says to His disciples: 'Behold I am with you all days even to the consummation of the world.' He deigned to be not merely the guardian of the sheep, but the shepherd of the shepherds as well." [3]

3. Now since divine graces descend on us most generously when Our prayer ascends to God, We make this special request of you, Our helpers and advisers, in this Our first address to you, for the love by which we are one in the Lord and for the faith by which we grow into one body. Beseech God every day to strengthen Us by His power and to pour out on Us the Spirit of counsel and of courage, in order that We may both decide what measures We should take in these difficult circumstances and that We may have the strength to carry through Our decisions. Therefore pray in the Spirit, and let your prayer be the surest proof of your love for Us and your brotherly union. Invoke the merits of the most holy Mary, mother of God, Our special patroness, and of all the heavenly court, that We may quickly obtain the help We need. Request for Us especially the protection and defense of St. Peter the Apostle. "We rejoice more to serve his See than to occupy it, in the hope that his prayers will make the God of mercies regard the time of Our ministry with kindness and deign to guard and feed the shepherd of his sheep." [4]

4. We urge you to show that you are faithful stewards of the mysteries of God. As the Lord is your portion, you know well what you should do and endure for the Church of God in the courageous fulfillment of your ministry. So We exhort you to rouse up the grace which is in you through the imposition of hands and to omit nothing which contributes to the growth of the body "which is built from Christ and joined together at every point of subministration"[5] in faith and in love.

Therefore, since you know that the Church's chief good derives from admitting only those who are fully qualified into the clergy, We do not have to remind you to observe carefully the sanctions established in this matter by the canons. Prevent from entering the Church's service all who lack exceptional moral holiness, who are uninstructed in the law of the Lord, and who give little or no promise of becoming energetic members of the clergy. For instead of proving helpers to you in feeding and guiding your flock, they will increase your toil and troubles. They will hinder you from ensuring that the Lord receives from his workers the fruits of the vineyard which Christ in strictest justice will expect from you at the final judgment. A man who is going to be a priest should excel in holiness and learning. For God rejects as priests those who have rejected knowledge, and only the man who unites moral piety with the pursuit of knowledge can be a suitable worker in the Lord's harvest. Since this cannot occur without careful education, it has been decreed accordingly that each diocese should establish a college for clerics in accordance with its means; if such a college already exists, it should be carefully preserved. For how would young men, whose age impels them down the easy path, persevere in ecclesiastical training or make such progress in humane and sacred studies unless they were instructed in piety and religion from their early years and practiced in the interpretation of literature?

Such colleges have been established and carefully equipped with suitable regulations and even greatly expanded in individual dioceses as Benedict XIV recommended to each of you as an indispensable part of your office.[6] So just as We must praise the outstanding labor and concern shown in founding and expanding these colleges, We must also urge on strongly those in whose diocese a college has not been established or completed.

5. For the same reason you should undoubtedly always give special attention to the beauty of the house of God and the splendor and dignity of objects dedicated to the divine service. Such beauty and splendor often greatly inspire the faithful, and draw them to the veneration of sacred realities. It would be very improper for the bishop's house to be cleaner and furnished more tastefully than the abode of holiness, the palace of the living God. It would make no sense to see holy vestments, adornments for the altar and all the furniture in the church worn out with age and torn or dirty, while the bishop's table is well laden, the priest's clothing very clean and finely coordinated. St. Peter Damian expressed this well: "It is an accusation which brings great confusion on us that some men both offer and lay the Lord's Body on a dirty altar cloth and that they fearlessly place the Body of the Savior in a vessel which no lord, worm though he is, would put to his own lips!"[7] But We know that you are far from committing this sin of negligence of which the holy cardinal accuses those who spend the goods acquired by the Church "not in buying books or ornaments and utensils for their churches" but for their own use as "necessary expenses."

6. We thought it useful to speak to you lovingly on these matters in order to strengthen your excellent resolve. But a much more serious subject demands that We speak of it, or rather mourn over it. We refer to the pestilent disease which the wickedness of our times brings forth. We must unite our minds and strength in treating this plague before it grows rife and becomes incurable in the Church through Our oversight. For in recent days, the dangerous times foretold by the Apostle Paul have clearly arrived, when there will be "men who love themselves, who are lifted up, proud, blasphemous, traitors, lovers of pleasure instead of God, men who are always learning but never arriving at the knowledge of truth, possessing indeed the appearance of piety but denying its power, corrupt in mind, reprobate about the faith."[8] These men raise themselves up into "lying" teachers, as they are called by Peter the prince of the Apostles, and bring in sects of perdition. They deny the Lord who bought them and bring upon themselves swift destruction. They say they are wise and they have become fools, and their uncomprehending heart is darkened.

You yourselves, established as scouts in the house of Israel, see clearly the many victories claimed by a philosophy full of deceit. You see the ease with which it attracts to itself a great host of peoples, concealing its impiety with the honorable name of philosophy. Who could express in words or call to mind the wickedness of the tenets and evil madness which it imparts? While such men apparently intend to search out wisdom, "they fail because they do not search in the proper way... and they fall into errors which lead them astray from ordinary wisdom." [9] They have come to such a height of impiety that they make out that God does not exist, or if He does that He is idle and uncaring, making no revelation to men. Consequently it is not surprising that they assert that everything holy and divine is the product of the minds of inexperienced men smitten with empty fear of the future and seduced by a vain hope of immortality.

But those deceitful sages soften and conceal the wickedness of their doctrine with seductive words and statements; in this way, they attract and wretchedly ensnare many of the weak into rejecting their faith or allowing it to be greatly shaken. While they pursue a remarkable knowledge, they open their eyes to behold a false light which is worse than the very darkness. Naturally our enemy, desirous of harming us and skilled in doing so, just as he made use of the serpent to deceive the first human beings, has armed the tongues of those men with the poison of his deceitfulness in order to lead astray the minds of the faithful. The prophet prays that his soul may be delivered from such deceitful tongues. [10] In this way these men by their speech "enter in lowliness, capture mildly, softly bind and kill in secret." [11] This results in great moral corruption, in license of thought and speech, in arrogance and rashness in every enterprise.

7. When they have spread this darkness abroad and torn religion out of men's hearts, these accursed philosophers proceed to destroy the bonds of union among men, both those which unite them to their rulers, and those which urge them to their duty. They keep proclaiming that man is born free and subject to no one, that society accordingly is a crowd of foolish men who stupidly yield to priests who deceive them and to kings who oppress them, so that the harmony of priest and ruler is only a monstrous conspiracy against the innate liberty of man.

Everyone must understand that such ravings and others like them, concealed in many deceitful guises, cause greater ruin to public calm the longer their impious originators are unrestrained. They cause a serious loss of souls redeemed by Christ's blood wherever their teaching spreads, like a cancer; it forces its way into public academies, into the houses of the great, into the palaces of kings, and even enters the sanctuary, shocking as it is to say so.

8. Consequently, you who are the salt of the earth, guardians and shepherds of the Lord's flock, whose business it is to fight the battles of the Lord, arise and gird on your sword, which is the word of God, and expel this foul contagion from your lands. How long are we to ignore the common insult to faith and Church? Let the words of Bernard arouse us like a lament of the spouse of Christ: "Of old was it foretold and the time of fulfillment is now at hand: Behold, in peace is my sorrow most sorrowful. It was sorrowful first when the martyrs died; afterwards it was more sorrowful in the fight with the heretics and now it is most sorrowful in the conduct of the members of the household.... The Church is struck within and so in peace is my sorrow most sorrowful.

But what peace? There is peace and there is no peace. There is peace from the pagans and peace from the heretics, but no peace from the children. At that time the voice will lament: Sons did I rear and exalt, but they despised me. They despised me and defiled me by a bad life, base gain, evil traffic, and business conducted in the dark." [12] Who can hear these tearful complaints of our most holy mother without feeling a strong urge to devote all his energy and effort to the Church, as he has promised? Therefore cast out the old leaven, remove the evil from your midst. Forcefully and carefully banish poisonous books from the eyes of your flock, and at once courageously set apart those who have been infected, to prevent them harming the rest. The holy Pope Leo used to say, "We can rule those entrusted to us only by pursuing with zeal for the Lord's faith those who destroy and those who are destroyed and by cutting them off from sound minds with the utmost severity to prevent the plague spreading." [13] In doing this We exhort and advise you to be all of one mind and in harmony as you strive for the same object, just as the Church has one faith, one baptism,

and one spirit. As you are joined together in the hierarchy, so you should unite equally with virtue and desire.

The affair is of the greatest importance since it concerns the Catholic faith, the purity of the Church, the teaching of the saints, the peace of the empire, and the safety of nations.

Since it concerns the entire body of the Church, it is a special concern of yours because you are called to share in Our pastoral concern, and the purity of the faith is particularly entrusted to your watchfulness. "Now therefore, Brothers, since you are overseers among God's people and their soul depends on you, raise their hearts to your utterance,"[14] that they may stand fast in faith and achieve the rest which is prepared for believers only. Beseech, accuse, correct, rebuke and fear not: for ill-judged silence leaves in their error those who could be taught, and this is most harmful both to them and to you who should have dispelled the error. The holy Church is powerfully refreshed in the truth as it struggles zealously for the truth. In this divine work you should not fear either the force or favor of your enemies. The bishop should not fear since the anointing of the Holy Spirit has strengthened him: the shepherd should not be afraid since the prince of pastors has taught him by his own example to despise life itself for the safety of his flock: the cowardice and depression of the hireling should not dwell in a bishop's heart. Our great predecessor Gregory, in instructing the heads of the churches, said with his usual excellence: "Often imprudent guides in their fear of losing human favor are afraid to speak the right freely. As the word of truth has it, they guard their flock not with a shepherd's zeal but as hirelings do, since they flee when the wolf approaches by hiding themselves in silence.... A shepherd fearing to speak the right is simply a man retreating by keeping silent."[15] But if the wicked enemy of the human race, the better to frustrate your efforts, ever brings it about that a plague of epidemic proportions is hidden from the religious powers of the world, please do not be terrified but walk in God's house in harmony, with prayer, and in truth, the three arms of our service. Remember that when the people of Juda were defiled, the best means of purification was the public reading to all, from the least to the greatest, of the book of the law lately found by the priest Helcias in the Lord's temple; at once the whole people agreed to destroy the abominations and seal a covenant in the Lord's presence to follow after the Lord and observe His precepts, testimonies and ceremonies with their whole heart and soul."[16] For the same reason Josaphat sent priests and Levites to bring the book of the law throughout the cities of Juda and to teach the people.[17] The proclamation of the divine word has been entrusted to your faith by divine, not human, authority. So assemble your people and preach to them the gospel of Jesus Christ. From that divine source and heavenly teaching draw draughts of true philosophy for your flock. Persuade them that subjects ought to keep faith and show obedience to those who by God's ordering lead and rule them. To those who are devoted to the ministry of the Church, give proofs of faith, continence, sobriety, knowledge, and liberality, that they may please Him to whom they have proved themselves and boast only of what is serious, moderate, and religious. But above all kindle in the minds of everyone that love for one another which Christ the Lord so often and so specifically praised. For this is the one sign of Christians and the bond of perfection.

9. These are the chief matters on which We wanted to address you in the Lord, Venerable Brothers. We urgently ask that We may personally experience the pleasure of us all harmoniously preserving faithfully the deposit entrusted to Our keeping. But Our sins prevent Us from obtaining this without the prior help of the Lord's mercies.

May He favorably aid Us first with his blessings. So, may He forgive Us and strengthen Our weakness in order that Our common prayer may more speedily come into His presence. At the same time as We send you this letter, We are sending another letter granting a jubilee to all the faithful, hoping in God who is merciful and pities us, that as He gave Us the power of binding and loosing on earth for the building up of His Body, He may grant to you also and to your flocks for salvation that you may advance from virtue to virtue, strangers to every error. This is Our heartfelt prayer as We impart most lovingly to you, and to the peoples entrusted to your care, the Apostolic Blessing.

Given at Rome in St. Peter's, 25 December 1775 in the first year of Our Pontificate.

## ENDNOTES

1. Ps 144.21.
  2. St. Leo the Great, serm. 1, chap. 2, and serm. 2, chap. 1 (ed. Ballerin, Venice).
  3. Ibid., serm. 5 (4), chap. 2.
  4. Ibid., chap. 5.
  5. Eph 4.16.
  6. Encyclical epistle of 1741.
  7. Bk. 4, ep. 14 (Works, vol. 1, Rome, 1606).
  8. 2 Tm 3.
  9. Lactant, <divin. instit.>, bk. 3, chap. 28 (Paris 1748).
  10. Ps 119.
  11. St. Leo the Great, serm. 16 (15), chap. 3.
  12. Serm. 33 on the Canticle, vol. 4, no. 16, Paris 1691).
  13. Epistles 7-8, chap. 2, to the bishops throughout Italy.
  14. Jdt 8.21.
  15. Reg. Pastor. 11, <Operum,> vol. 2, chap. 4, Paris.
  16. 4 Kgs 22-23.
  17. 2 Paralip. 17.7f.
-