

PAOLO SARPI'S VOW OF OBEDIENCE: CATHOLIC POLITICAL THOUGHT IN EARLY SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY VENICE

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to study the idea of obedience in early-modern Catholic political thought. I focus on early seventeenth-century Venice and on one of its leading political thinkers, Paolo Sarpi. I argue that for Sarpi and the Venetian nobility obedience was a religious, Catholic concept, which they nonetheless applied to a secular system of governance; notwithstanding their refusal to obey the papal ban during the interdict of Venice in 1606-1607, Venetians regarded obedience as an act of piety and an indispensable element of civic life.

KEY WORDS: Catholic political thought, obedience, Venice, Paolo Sarpi, papacy

EL VOTO DE OBEDIENCIA DE PAOLO SARPI: PENSAMIENTO POLÍTICO EN LA VENECIA DE LA CONTRARREFORMA

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es estudiar la idea de obediencia en el pensamiento político católico de la edad moderna, en particular en Venecia en el siglo XVII y en Paolo Sarpi, uno de sus pensadores políticos más importantes. Este artículo argumenta que para Sarpi y la nobleza la obediencia era un concepto católico, que a pesar de ello, aplicaron a un sistema de gobierno secular. A pesar de su negativa a obedecer la prohibición papal durante el interdicto de Venecia en 1606-1607, los venecianos consideraban la obediencia como un acto de piedad y un elemento indispensable de la vida cívica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Pensamiento político católico, obediencia, Venecia, Paolo Sarpi, pontificado

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In this essay I explore the idea of obedience in early-modern Catholic political thought. In so doing, I focus on Venice –the Catholic republic renown for its rivalry with and disobedience to Rome– and Paolo Sarpi (1552-1623), the historian, polymath and adviser to the senate of Venice. Sarpi was a well-known defender of Venice during the interdict crisis (1606-1607), the event which saw pope Paul V excommunicating the senate of Venice (including Sarpi and other advisers) and placing the republic under interdict.¹ While this would have been a major challenge for any Christian's confidence, I argue that the excommunication

failed to undermine Venetian patricians' self-image as good Catholics and obedient sons of the church. Furthermore, I argue that for them –and for Sarpi– obedience remained a pivotal Catholic concept, one that they considered instrumental to pious life. At the same time, nothing suggests that Venetians would have identified disobedience to the papal interdict with violation against God or Catholicism. Rather than an instance of impiety, Venetians regarded their disobedience as a consequence of the pope's abuse of his authority. The interdict of Venice –and the intransigence of the Venetian leadership– posed a major challenge to the papacy, not least because of the enormous publicity it received across Europe.

¹ Bouwsma, W. 1968. *Venice and the denfense of Republican Liberty*: 340-358, 371-415. University of California Press; Cozzi, G. 1995. *Venezia Barocca: conflitti di uomini e idee nella crisi del Seicento veneziano*: 77-120. Venezia: Il Cardo; Wootton, D. 1983. *Paolo Sarpi between*

Renaissance and Enlightenment: 46-76. Cambridge University Press; Kainulainen, J. 2014. *Paolo Sarpi: A Servant of God and State*: 195-203.

Without compromising their faith, Venetians remained loyal to Catholicism, which, they believed, buttressed the social discipline and order within the territory of the republic. As Gaetano Cozzi put it, Venetians' Catholic creed "guaranteed respect to hierarchy, to authority" and, while teaching Venetians the moral norms "indispensable for good coexistence", acted as "an invite to order" and to a calm acceptance of their "lot as subjects".² In this study I suggest that Sarpi and the *giovani*, the political party which was in power during the interdict crisis, identified Catholic obedience with divine right theory and, consequently, with unconditional submission to secular authority. Sympathetic to French Gallicanism and the Oath of Allegiance of James I, the Venetians considered their disobedience to the pope compatible with their Catholic creed.

Paradoxically, it is necessary to acknowledge the Venetians' view of themselves as pious Catholics to understand their disobedience to the pope, the head of the Catholic world. It is also against this background –Catholic, pious, and conservative– that we should read Paolo Sarpi. Only then it becomes understandable how a humble friar could oppose himself to the pope without losing the support of the Catholic leaders of his own community. We also need to pose the question of what exactly Venetians understood by obedience in terms of political and religious thought. As a scholarly topic 'obedience' might seem allusive of obsolete, old-fashioned research about power, submission and social discipline, but –especially in the context of early seventeenth-century Venice– it serves well our purpose to shed light on essential characteristics of Catholic political theory. This study is based on the assumption that in order to understand a Catholic republic's disobedience against the papacy it is crucial to see how closely the Catholic idea of obedience was related to notions of piety and spiritual perfection. This said, it might be possible and –somehow– justifiable to write a study on the interdict of Venice from the point of view of *realpolitik* and economic interests, to omit all references to religion and Catholicism, and yet to find a plausible explanation for Venetians' clash with Rome. However, this would be at the cost of not fully appreciating the significance of Christian virtues and values to early-modern culture, a particularly momentous flaw when trying to grasp a concept as laden with religious history as obedience is, and, furthermore, when analyzing the concept in relation to the papacy.

While it is difficult to say to which extent Sarpi's political thought mirrored the views of his employers, the Venetian nobility, it is nonetheless safe to assume that he did not write –or speak or act– directly against the political goals or ideals of leading Venetian patricians such as Leonardo Donà, Antonio Querini and Nicolò Contarini. By and large, Sarpi's political ideas were in line with those of the *giovani*, the political party led by Donà, Querini and Contarini, who were

particularly eager to assert Venice's independence from any external political forces, including Rome. The *giovani* have been described as an anticlerical party, as a clique chiefly marked by their opposition to the conservative, pro-papal party known as the *vecchi*. While this distinction is essentially correct, it nevertheless blurs concepts such as 'conservative', 'anticlerical', and 'obedience' in the context of early-modern Venetian politics. First of all, I argue that Sarpi, Donà, Querini and Contarini were just as conservative as the *vecchi* in the sense that they considered themselves pious Catholics, and, accordingly, regarded obedience as a fundamental Christian virtue. To label them anticlerical, or anti-papal, is problematic, because they did not attack papacy or priesthood as such, as Christian offices, but merely criticized the abuse of the authority that came with such offices. The distinction between *giovani* and *vecchi* was real and no doubt followed the delineation given above –*giovani* being more critical of the clergy and hence appearing more progressive while *vecchi*, who remained loyal to the papacy, assumed a more conservative outlook–, but we should not ignore the inherently conservative nature of the concept of obedience adopted by Sarpi and the *giovani*. In what follows, I first explore the Christian –and Catholic– roots of the early-modern idea of obedience and then move on to discuss the influence of contemporary political theories such as absolutism and the divine right of kings on the political thought of Sarpi, the most influential figure amongst early seventeenth-century Venetian polemicists.

I begin by briefly analyzing the notions of 'vow' and 'oath', which early-modern church and state employed to kindle religious and civil obedience. In general, a vow was considered a voluntary promise made to God for his honour, whereas oath was seen as a voluntary promise made to men. Oath too was made in honour of God and those who made an oath invoked God as their witness, but, as specified by Thomas Aquinas, of these two only vowing signified an act of religion, whereas that what was sworn in an oath did not necessarily have anything to do with religion, nor did it become a religious act simply because God's name was being glorified in the process of swearing.³ The Oath of Allegiance demanded by James I in 1606 is a famous example of an oath that aimed to strengthen the authority of secular rulers at the expense of that of the pope. As we will see, Sarpi approved of the Oath of Allegiance, but was critical of the king's involvement in theological debates that followed the oath of 1606.

The idea of a vow of obedience can be traced back to the early-Christians' strive for spiritual perfection, which was to be achieved through a series of self-denial. The first steps in turning away from the world consisted of solitude, simplicity, celibacy and penance, but to these was gradually added obedience as a useful means to follow Christ and to achieve absolute renunciation.⁴ At the core of obedience lied the act of renouncing one's own will. According to the Catholic

² Cozzi, G. 1995: 35: "Il cattolicesimo... garantiva il rispetto per la gerarchia, per l'autorità, ispirava ai popoli le norme morali indispensabili per una buona convivenza nell'ambito statale, era per loro un freno, un invito all'ordine, all'accettazione rassegnata e serena della loro sorte di sudditi".

³ Gray, J.M. 2010. "Vows, oaths, and the propagation of subversive discourse". *Sixteenth Century Journal* XLI/3: 738-739.

⁴ Schaefer, J. 2000. *The evolution of a vow: obedience as decision making in communion*: 29. Lit Verlag.

doctrine the “root of sin is in the heart of man, in his free will”. Man has the choice to do evil, to abuse his freedom and submit himself to the “slavery of sin”, or to do good and grow in perfection.⁵ The first amounts to disobedience and violation against God, while the latter is achieved by observing the will of God, which is communicated to man in the form of *recta ratio*, right reason. Obedience was thus the Christian’s way towards spiritual perfection and freedom.

The concept of spiritual perfection through obedience, alongside with contemporary philosophies such as Neostoicism and absolutism, are of key importance to our understanding of the obedience that Sarpi showed to his secular sovereign and the disobedience that he expressed against his religious superior. It is equally important to be aware of the popularity of the view –eagerly adopted in early seventeenth-century Venice– according to which secular rulers were divinely appointed executors of God’s will in all temporal matters within their own territories. To a certain extent, this mandate also included religious affairs: “pious Christian princes” who were “principal members of the church”, Sarpi argued, made “many laws” and “judged over many cases”, which pertained to “pure ecclesiastical government”.⁶ These two points –first, that obedience contributed to spiritual perfection, and, second, that secular rulers commanded on a divine mandate– formed the intellectual background for Venice’s opposition to Paul V in 1606. While Venetians were not at all inimical to the idea that papal authority too was of divine origin, they did think that Paul V had exceeded his mandate. Not only did this mean that the pope’s orders were to be considered “unjust, invalid and null” –as the senate replied to the papal nuntio– but it was the duty of the government of Venice to disclose and fight the pope’s abuse of power.⁷ At the same time, Sarpi and other Venetian polemicists insisted that as far as Venetian subjects were concerned, the true obedience –the one that contributed to spiritual perfection and salvation– consisted of the loyalty shown to the republic, not to the pope. As we will see, Sarpi went as far as implying that –in the context of the interdict crisis– obeying the pope equaled to committing sin.

A keen defender of the political autonomy of the republic of Venice against the attempts of the papacy to interfere with Venice’s legislation, Sarpi is the paragon of a political writer who based his viewpoint on the assumption that secular rulers were to be obeyed under all circumstances, because their power came directly from God and was, therefore, absolute and irresistible. Besides being thoroughly absolutistic, his political thought was informed by the divine right theory of kings. Would Sarpi have been French or English and writing in defense of his own king, his position would have been a typical one and in line with the majority

of royalist and anti-papal polemics of the day. What makes his case unusual, however, is the fact that he was a citizen of a Catholic republic and, what is more, a Servite friar. How could a citizen of a republic become a theorist of absolutism and the divine right of kings? How could a Catholic friar advocate absolute obedience to secular rulers and explicitly deny the infallibility of the pope? How could he argue that blind obedience to the pope was a sin? These contradictions, while representing only a fragmentary insight into Catholic political thought, reveal some of the richness and inherent complexities of early-modern Catholicism.

Sarpi never converted from Catholicism, although he did diverge from the more widely adopted Catholic view (most famously defended by cardinal Robert Bellarmine) according to which the pope could exercise indirect power over secular rulers and their subjects also in temporal matters. It should be stressed that Sarpi’s criticism of the papacy does not mean that he was a clandestine Protestant or an atheist, as some scholars have suggested.⁸ He was closely connected –through reading, conversing and corresponding– to the chief intellectual currents of the period and had the outlook of a supra-confessional Renaissance erudite. Beneath the veneer of learned skepticism and anti-dogmatism, there was, however, a friar who longed for a reform of the Church of Rome. Like the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers, Sarpi too allied with the representatives of secular authority. Whether his allies –the *giovani*– were equally interested in a religious reform, however, is a question that needs to be addressed elsewhere.

It has been noted that the first decades of seventeenth century witnessed an important shift in the discourse on political contract. The shift resulted in what has been labeled a “new psychology of consent”, submission to the ruler not anymore out of filial love of the sovereign, but out of self-interest and the individual’s own natural appetites.⁹ While the scholarly discourse on social contract has often been conditioned by a secular reading of the early-modern understanding of contract and obedience, in this essay I emphasize the religious aspects of social discipline and argue that Sarpi’s conception of obedience was fundamentally motivated by Christian notions of piety and spiritual perfection. A good example of the ‘new psychology of consent’ and of a new focus on self-interest and self-preservation as the basis for obedience is Thomas Hobbes’s concept of fear as the most fundamental incentive behind all human action. Although Sarpi’s political theory and natural philosophy contained many elements, which resembled Hobbes’s theories of political power, motion and human psyche, his thought remained traditional –that is, Christian– in that his idea of civil obedience was marked by his belief in the divine nature and origins of secular authority. Furthermore, Sarpi was thoroughly influenced by the Christian concept of spiritual perfection and based his plea for obedience on scripture, although he made the important distinction between the word of God and that of clergy. God’s word as such,

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2000: 389, 409. Burns & Oates.

⁶ Sarpi, P. 1968. G. da Pozzo (ed.), *Scritti Scelti*: 481. Torino: Classici Utet: “*si come già a tutti li fideli toccava parte di questo governo spirituale, così li principi cristiani pii, come membri principali della chiesa, hanno fatto molte legi, giudicate molte cause spettanti al puro governo ecclesiastico*”.

⁷ Sarpi, P. 1968: 220, note 2: “*noi stimiamo questa escomunica ingiusta, invalida et nulla*”.

⁸ Wootton, D. 1983: 3-5, 136-145.

⁹ Kahn, V. 2004. *Wayward contracts: the crisis of political obligation in England, 1640-1674*: 58. Princeton University Press.

as it was written in the Bible, was indubitable, while –he argued– those who interpreted the Bible often distorted the message for political purposes. Therefore, Sarpi concluded that “one shows absolute obedience to God”, but the obedience to the clergy has to be “a limited one” and “within the boundaries of divine law”.¹⁰ While Sarpi’s emphasis on the Bible and suspicion about the clergy as interpreters of the ‘word’ might imply Protestant allegiances in his thought, I would rather see these points as indicative of his being part of the Catholic reformation that criticized corruption and clergy’s involvement in political affairs. Like other Catholic reformers, Sarpi valued spirituality, charity and the discipline of the early church.¹¹

Servites are mendicant friars who take the three vows of obedience, poverty and chastity. Sarpi took these vows when he joined the order at the age of thirteen in 1565. His life was one characterized by monastic duties, ascetism and *contemptus mundi*, but also by political and reformist ambition, which manifested itself in his criticism of the papacy. He was at once a friar who strived for spiritual perfection and a politician whose principal goal was to cleanse the church, papacy and clergy of any aspirations to or assertions of temporal authority. His reformist aims were manifest in his attitude towards the Jesuits, whom he considered the “plague of the century”, because, according to him, their goal was to strengthen the “horrible omnipotence” of the pope.¹² Not surprisingly, a considerable part of Sarpi’s writings were aimed against and responded by the Jesuit cardinal Robert Bellarmine, a prelate, who has been seen as the paradigmatic representative of the Counter-Reformation church of Rome.¹³ The debate between the two Catholic theologians issued mainly from their different understanding of the origins and justification of political power and, more to the point, from their conflicting views about the role of the papacy as far as temporal matters were concerned. Bellarmine famously advocated the theory of *potestas indirecta*, according to which spiritual goals were higher than temporal ones, and, consequently, papal power was superior to that of secular rulers.¹⁴ He rejected the idea that clergy and laity would form “two republics” and insisted that there was only one community, which was the church, *ecclesia*. In this church one authority had to be superior to the other so that there would not have been “two heads in one body” and, for Bellarmine, the superior power was in the hands of the clergy.¹⁵ In Sarpi’s opinion, on the contrary,

temporal power was the superior one and he retorted that Bellarmine’s theory originated from the Church of Rome’s desire to “deprive princes of their power”.¹⁶

Bellarmino attacked the English Oath of Allegiance of 1606. In his view, the oath was mistaken in two fundamental issues: first, it ascribed “spiritual primacy” to the king; second, it deprived the pope of “that primacy”. In both questions, Bellarmine asserted, the Oath of Allegiance contradicted the Scriptures.¹⁷ Bellarmine focused on the question of spiritual primacy, because that is where, according to him, the supreme authority was. As discussed below, Sarpi separated the spiritual from the temporal and thus rejected Bellarmine’s theory of the pope’s indirect power. While the English Oath of Allegiance was compatible with Sarpi’s point of view, he did not approve of the theological contributions of James I. Sarpi believed that the king’s book *Apologia pro juramento fidelitatis* (1607) and the reception of the book were going to “cause a great impact”, although, he continued, “all the weighty matters would remain unchanged”. In the end, he wished that James I would have “rather been a King than an erudite”.¹⁸ This is crucial: contrary to Bellarmine, Sarpi subjugated ecclesiastical authority to that of secular rulers by way of strictly separating the spiritual from the temporal. Bellarmine in turn attempted to infuse ‘spiritual primacy’ with political authority. James I admired Sarpi and invited the latter to England to enjoy his protection. In a carefully formulated letter to Dudley Carleton, the English ambassador to Venice, Sarpi politely rejected the monarch’s invite and asserted his desire to continue serving his own sovereign, the republic of Venice.¹⁹

Besides rejecting Bellarmine’s theory of the pope’s indirect power over secular rulers, Sarpi opposed himself to Ignatius Loyola’s theory of blind obedience. The idea of blind obedience was, Sarpi argued, a “new concept”, traditionally “unknown to the church and to every good theologian”, and, what is more, it “removes the essence of virtue, which is to operate through a certain knowledge and choice”. He then issued a warning against this sort of “abuse”, because it might lead to offenses against God and “cause seditions”, as had happened in the past.²⁰ Sarpi may have been familiar with Bellarmine’s *De obedientia quae caeca nominatur*, which the latter composed as a response to Julien Vincent’s attack against the idea of blind obedience in 1588. In the

¹⁰ Sarpi, P. 1940. M.D. Busnelli (ed.), *Istoria dell’interdetto e altri scritti editi e inediti*. Vol. II: 252. Bari: Laterza.

¹¹ See, for example, Sarpi, P. 1961. Boris Ulianich (ed.), *Lettere ai Gallicani*: 5, 15, 183. Wiesbaden.

¹² Sarpi, P. 1961: 9: “*pestis huius saeculi... Sola decreta pontificum vellent, et recentia prioribus praeponi, ut horribilem illam omnipotentiam facilius confirmare possent*”.

¹³ Tutino, S. 2010. *Empire of souls: Robert Bellarmine and the Christian Commonwealth*: 3-4. Oxford University Press. Tutino’s work nevertheless makes a departure from this traditional, oversimplified view and shows that Bellarmine played an important role in complicating and diversifying the early-modern Catholic political thought.

¹⁴ Höpfl, H. 2004. *Jesuit Political Thought: the society of Jesus and the state, c. 1540-1630*: 339-365. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁵ Bellarmine, R. 1610. *Tractatus de potestate Summi Pontificis in rebus temporalibus*: 133-134: “*clerici, & laici non faciunt duas*

Respublicas, sed unam, id est, unam Ecclesiam... necessario debet, aut subesse, aut praesse, ne sint in uno corpore duo capita”.

¹⁶ Sarpi, P. 2006. Nina Cannizzaro (ed.), *Della potestà de’prencipi*: 50. Venezia: Marsilio: “*che il papa possi levare l’auttorità alli prencipi*”.

¹⁷ Bellarmine, R. 1608. *Matthaei Torti Responsio*: 20: “*Iuramentum tributum spiritualem potestatem ei, cui secundum Scripturas sanctas minime debetur, posterius vero detrahit eumdem Primatum ab eo, cui secundum easdem Scripturas omni iure debetur*”.

¹⁸ Sarpi, P. 1968: 596: “*L’animo mi pronostica che siino per produrre qualche grande effetto queste leggerezze, poiché veggo le cose grandi tutte restar senza effetti. Io vorrei il re d’Inghilterra più re che dotto*”.

¹⁹ Sarpi, P. 1968: 652-655 (the date of the letter is 14 August 1612).

²⁰ Sarpi, P. 1968: 291-292: “*il nuovo nome di obediencia cieca, inventato da Ignazio Loiola, fu incognito alla Chiesa et ad ogni buon teologo, leva l’essenziale della virtù, che è operare per certa cognizione et elezione, espone a pericolo di offender Dio... e può partorire delle sedizioni, che si sono vedute da 40 anni in qua, doppo che questo abuso è introdotto*”; For the Jesuits and ‘blind obedience’, see Höpfl, H. 2004: 29.

treatise Bellarmine argued that blind obedience was “pure, perfect and simple”, a Christian virtue, and expected from every Christian with the exception of such commandments which would entail sin. Bellarmine also pointed out that Loyola was not the first Christian to emphasize the importance of obedience.²¹ It should be stressed that Sarpi attacked the Jesuits rather than the idea of obedience. More to the point, it was not obedience as such that Sarpi was opposed to, but obedience to such prelates who exceeded the boundaries of their *métier* by making claims to temporal authority. Instead of blindly obeying such priests, Sarpi advised Christians to examine the commandment given to them, even when this came from the pope, and to study whether the commandment was “convenient and legitimate and obligatory”. The one who “obeys blindly”, Sarpi concluded, “commits a sin”.²² In another piece of writing he warned against the kind of theology, which aimed to confuse the kingdom of God with the kingdoms of this world and “fools the simple and the unlearned” to believe that “in all things there is an obligation to obey the pope”.²³

Knowledge and information played important roles in the relations between rulers and their subjects, and ignorance could be used as an excuse to avoid submission to an inconvenient rule or commandment. The argument that a vow or an oath was invalid when made without sufficient knowledge or out of sheer ignorance was often used to undermine either religious vows or state oaths. Many English Protestants, for instance, claimed that monastic vows were made in ignorance, because they lasted for a lifetime and the vower could not possibly know whether he or she would be able to keep the vow in future when the circumstances would be different from what they were in the moment of making the vow. Some refused to swear a political oath under the excuse that they did not have adequate knowledge about the matter in question and claimed that to swear an oath under such conditions amounted to perjury.²⁴ While Sarpi readily encouraged this sort of resistance as far as papal authority was concerned, he could not have expressed a more different sentiment with regard to secular authorities. These were always to be obeyed, even blindly, and Sarpi explicitly urged secular sovereigns to rule their subjects by keeping them ignorant of public matters: “the right manner to govern a subject”, he wrote, “is to keep him from knowing public affairs”.²⁵

There is a striking difference, then, between Sarpi's view of obedience to secular rulers on the one hand, and to the papacy on the other. Writing during the interdict of Venice he was particularly keen to thwart the attempts of pope Paul V to interfere in the matters of the republic and to encourage disobedience against what he considered usurpation of

papal power. In his view Venetians were entitled to react against the interdict, because both God and the natural law authorized the victim of an unjust attack to “fight power with power”.²⁶ The obedience that Christians were expected to show to the pope was further justified by the idea of papal infallibility, an idea explicitly rejected by Sarpi: “it is certain that the pope can err in particular judgments”, even if he happened to be diligent and had good intentions, and “many of them have *de facto* erred”.²⁷ Sarpi's rejection of the idea of papal infallibility functioned as a justification for disobedience against papal authority.

The fact that Sarpi questioned the pope's authority over secular rulers and asserted the latter's sovereign power over the clergy provoked critical responses from writers such as Antonio Possevino, the Jesuit controversialist, according to whom Sarpi aimed to “castrate” books of “sane theology” and to use the “mutilated” books in order to erase the “light of truth” and the “proper obedience to the church of God”.²⁸ Sarpi's thoughts were poisonous, another Jesuit argued, and his writings led to a “loss of faith and Catholic religion” and left his followers with nothing but “misery and unhappiness”.²⁹ Paul V himself confirmed that “the books of fra Paolo are replete with exorbitant heresies”.³⁰ As the case of William of Ockham shows, Sarpi was by no means the first friar in history to criticize his religious superiors. Both attacked the idea of *plenitudo potestatis* and the pope's right to interfere in temporal matters, and both were punished with excommunication. In general, Sarpi's political thought was in line with Ockham's and Marsilius of Padua's criticism of papal authority and this was also understood by his contemporaries: Sarpi's writings consist of “things taken from Marsilius of Padua, condemned and damned already for two hundred years”, Possevino argued in his polemic reply to a Venetian senator.³¹

Besides Ockham and Marsilius of Padua, Jean Gerson—the French scholar and a leading figure in the conciliarist movement—numbers amongst those late medieval thinkers

²⁶ Sarpi, P. 1968: 465: “Questo rimedio è de iure naturali, che chi ingiustamente è assalito possi vim vi repellere. Concede Dio e la natura che quando l'avversario contro ragione usa la forza, la ragione nostra sii sostenuta colla forza”.

²⁷ Sarpi, P. 1940. Vol. III: 22-23: “Questo è certo, che il pontefice può fallare nelli giudicii particolari, eziandio avendo usato ogni diligenza, e anco con buona intenzione: e molti de facto hanno errato”.

²⁸ Possevino, A. 1606. *Risposta di Teodoro Eugenio di Famagosta: 57*. Bologna: “I libri di sana Teologia... sono da due anni in qua stati castrati da Fra Paolo Servita... & mandati fuori colle parti mutilate, acciò che si togliesse la luce della verità, & della dovuta ubidienza alla chiesa di Dio”.

²⁹ Della Bastida, H. 1607 *Antidoto alle velenose considerationi di Fra Paolo di Venetia*: 188. Roma: “perdere la fede, & Religione Cattolica... non gli resta altro che miseria, & infelicità”.

³⁰ I quote from Pin, C. 2006, ““Qui si vive con esempi, non con ragione”: Paolo Sarpi e la committenza di Stato nel dopo-Interdetto”, in C. Pin (ed.), *Ripensando Paolo Sarpi. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi nel 450° anniversario della nascita di Paolo Sarpi*: 351. Venezia: Ateneo Veneto: “I libri di fra Paulo sono ripieni di essorbitanti eresie”.

³¹ Possevino, A. 1606: 6: “sono cose lievate da Marsilio di Padova già dugento anni convinto & dannato”. On Sarpi, Ockham and Marsilius of Padua, see Kainulainen, J. 2014: 166-167. See also Frajese, V. 1994. *Sarpi scettico. Stato e chiesa a Venezia tra '500 e '600*: 409 note 62. Bologna, for the argument that Sarpi was familiar with Marsilio's *Defensor Pacis*.

²¹ Tutino, S. 2010: 61-62.

²² Sarpi, P. 1940. Vol. III: 21: “chi ubidisce alla cieca, pecca”.

²³ Sarpi, P. 1940. Vol. III: 64: “bisogna guardarsi dal teologizzare in questo modo, col quale si disforma e disordina e il regno di Dio e quelli del mondo, e sono ingannati li semplici, e indotti a credere che in tutte le cose vi sia obbligo di obedire al papa!”.

²⁴ Gray, J.M. 2010: 744-745, 755.

²⁵ Sarpi, P. 1968: 534: “il vero termine di regger il suddito è mantenerlo senza saputa delle cose pubbliche”.

who influenced Sarpi's political thought. Sarpi translated into Italian Gerson's tract on the validity of excommunications.³² Published during the interdict crisis, Gerson's treatise served Venice's propaganda against the ban. Commenting on the publication of the treatise in his history of the interdict Sarpi mentioned an "anonymous letter" (in reality written by Sarpi) attached to the tract, exhorting Venetian priests "to attend their churches without any fear of offending God by disobeying the interdict".³³ Again, Sarpi made the crucial distinction between the word of God and that of the clergy. In his view it was possible to resist the clergy without violating against God, because divine and ecclesiastical authorities were not identical. Elsewhere Sarpi opposed himself to those who claimed that the "pope is a God, almighty" and even capable to "square the circle".³⁴ He argued that the greatest political problem of the period was the popes' claim to temporal power: "I think", he wrote to the French lawyer Jacques Leschassier, "that all the religious controversies that trouble the world, can be reduced to this one: the power of the pope".³⁵ Sarpi was troubled by the views of writers such as Agesilao Mariscotti who considered "pontifical power" superior to any other authority also in questions related to temporal affairs.³⁶ Furthermore, Sarpi observed that the popes themselves encouraged this line of thought and accused Paul V of considering it his principal task to expand ecclesiastical authority.³⁷

Sarpi's response was to separate the spiritual from the temporal sphere. The spiritual power, he specified, "is not from this world, it is from the kingdom of heavens" and this is why spiritual and temporal authorities "do not walk the same way". In his view, spiritual power did not have any of the qualities of the temporal one.³⁸ Although Sarpi separated religion from politics, this separation did not bestow any civil privileges on the clergy. As far as the common good was concerned, Sarpi argued that the clergy had no special status and was "not exempt from the observance of civil laws or from the power of the lawmaker".³⁹ On the other hand, "ecclesiastical authority" was valid only as far as it

regarded the "eternal salvation"; it could not have "anything temporal as its goal".⁴⁰ Elsewhere Sarpi specified that God had established "two rules in the world, one spiritual, the other temporal", both being "supreme and independent from one another". The first, "ecclesiastical ministry", pertained to the popes, while the latter, "political rule", was the realm of secular rulers.⁴¹

Besides distinguishing between spiritual and temporal spheres, Sarpi divided the spiritual into two distinct fields: one that dealt with "the kingdom of heavens" and another which took care of the "external discipline".⁴² This separation has a long history and is better known as the division of ecclesiastical authority into power of order (*potestas ordinis*) and power of jurisdiction (*potestas jurisdictionis*), the first of which consisted of the administration of the sacraments, while the latter denoted the administrative, judicial and legislative aspects of the church government; the first was exclusively spiritual by nature, but the latter often competed with the authority of secular rulers.⁴³ Sarpi readily acknowledged the clergy's power of order, but most of his written work aimed to set limits to the clergy's power of jurisdiction.

Whether the ecclesiastical *potestas jurisdictionis* included the power to coerce was one of the most crucial questions in early-modern debates on church-state relations. In contrast to writers like Robert Bellarmine who argued that the pope possessed coercive power also over secular rulers,⁴⁴ Sarpi maintained that neither Christ nor the apostles ever claimed to have "coercive temporal authority over sins". In the passage in question Sarpi denied the pope the authority to judge over every sin, because this sort of exclusive power would have made him the only prince on earth. Furthermore, Sarpi rejected the idea that the pope would have been the "head of Christianity", because Christianity meant not only the Christian church, but also Christian republics and kingdoms. Admitting that the pope was the head of Christianity would have invested papacy with such power, which would have kept Christianity in a state of "eternal perturbation".⁴⁵ Bellarmine, on the other hand, invested the papacy precisely with such power, arguing that the pope was the head of an "empire of souls" –that

³² Micanzio, F. 1974. *Vita del padre Paolo dell'ordine de'servi e teologo della serenissima repubblica di Venetia*, en C. Vivanti (ed.), Sarpi, P. *Istoria del Concilio Tridentino*, 2 vols: 1334-1335. Torino.

³³ Sarpi, P. 1968: 287: "A questo s'aggionse una lettera senza nome dell'auttore, che esortava li curati ad attendere alle loro chiese, senza timore di offender Dio non servando l'interdetto".

³⁴ Sarpi, P. 1968: 34: "invenient papam deum esse, omnia posse... et tandem etiam circulum quadrare".

³⁵ Sarpi, P. 1863. F.-L. Polidori (ed.), *Lettere*, vol. II: 167 Firenze: "Io per me tengo che tutte le controversie religiose che turbano il mondo, vadano a risolversi in quest'una: del potere del papa".

³⁶ Mariscotti, A. 1607. *Aviso sicuro contro il mal fondato aviso del Signor Antonio Quirino Senator Veneto*: 72. Bologna: "la Podestà pontificia, è come superiore ordinata a regolare tutte l'altre, e che il Papa... è Padrone della spada temporale, non meno, che della spirituale".

³⁷ Sarpi, P. 1968: 169: "assonto al pontificato, niuna cosa si propose per scopo e somma dell'officio suo, se non agrandire l'auttorità ecclesiastica".

³⁸ Sarpi, P. 1968: 604-606: "At ea potestas non est de hoc mundo, regni caelorum est; nihil quidquam mutuae operae a terreno rege suscipiet, aut praestabit. Quid mirum? Non in eodem ambulant, obviare non possunt".

³⁹ Sarpi, P. 1968: 482-483: li clerici non sono esenti dall'osservanza delle legi temporali, né dalla potestà di chi le statuisce".

⁴⁰ Sarpi, P. 1968: 483: "L'auttorità ecclesiastica non riguarda altro che la salute eterna, né li è concesso aver per fine alcuna cosa temporale".

⁴¹ Sarpi, P. 1968: 290: "Dio ha instituito dui governi nel mondo, uno spirituale, l'altro temporale, ciascuno di essi supremo e indipendente l'uno dall'altro... si che li uni non possino intrromettersi in quello che agl'altri appartiene".

⁴² Sarpi, P. 1968: 603-604: "Ego de potestate ecclesiastica distinxit, ut altera sit quae ad regnum caelorum spectet, altera quae hanc externam disciplinam regat".

⁴³ Oakley, F. 1991. "Christian Obedience and Authority, 1520-1550", en J.H. Burns (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450-1700*: 162-163. Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁴ Bellarmine, R. 1610: 156: "arma ipsa spiritualia possunt cogere Remp. temporalem, & eius Principem".

⁴⁵ Sarpi, P. 1940. Vol. III: 64-67: "se al pontefice romano appartiene metter le mani sopra ogni peccato... non vi è più principe alcuno, se non il papa... con questa dottrina (that the pope is the head of Christianity), o bisogna levar ogni principato, o tener in perpetue perturbazioni la cristianità... esempi di Cristo e de'santi apostoli, li quali non hanno mai preteso sopra li peccati autorità temporale coattiva".

is, the universal church—, an entity, which included all the secular rulers confessing Christian faith.⁴⁶

In thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas listed obedience amongst chief virtues and claimed that man's first sin was disobedience. This was reflected in God's plan according to which Adam's original sin—his disobedience against the divine rule— was eventually atoned by Christ's voluntary obedience to his Father.⁴⁷ Sarpi was, needless to say, familiar with Aquinas' work and approved of the latter's definition of sin as "deprivation of good". In line with this argument, Sarpi asserted that the "good that deprives disobedience" is a private 'good' of a subject, in other words, his "virtue of obedience". Sarpi nevertheless continued that "good government of the church" was a greater virtue than obedience, because "public good is greater than private". It follows from this that abuses in ecclesiastical government, being public by nature, were greater vices than disobedience, which was a private vice. Sarpi claimed that abuse of power could lead to much worse than a "hundred disobediences" and therefore the one who had power had a "greater obligation from God to his duty".⁴⁸ At the same time, he never made such concessions to disobedience as far as temporal authority was concerned. In the quotation above Sarpi aimed to justify Venice's disobedience against Paul V who, according to Venetians, had abused his power when he placed Venice under the ban of interdict. At the same time, however, the passage shows that for Sarpi obedience was a religious concept, one that was closely tied to Christian concepts of sin, virtue and man's obligations towards God.

Aquinas helped his readers to submit themselves to God by classifying "three kinds of human goods" which a man could renounce "for God's sake". The lowest ones of these were external goods, the intermediary level consisted of things related to the body, while the highest ones were "the goods of the soul". Of these, in turn, the supreme good was the will. This was why the "virtue of obedience, by which we despise our own will for God's sake, is more praiseworthy than the other moral virtues by which we despise other goods for God's sake".⁴⁹ In the same passage Aquinas specified that the act of renouncing these goods had to be done out of obedience as much as out of charity, which, he continued, could not exist without obedience. In keeping with his claim that the renunciation of one's own will was the greatest act a man could do in God's honour, Aquinas based his soteriology on the idea of Christ's absolute obedience to God. It should be stressed, however, that Aquinas' concept of absolute obedience did not entail loss of freedom of the

will. As noted above, Aquinas held that Christ's obedience was voluntary. More precisely, Christ obeyed out of charity, "out of love, to the Father's command", and such obedience was never based on necessity.⁵⁰ It followed from this that it was possible to obey God's commandments without losing the freedom of one's own will. This was because God was the creator and the cause of all things: "St. Thomas said well", Sarpi wrote, "that nothing, which is moved by its cause, is moved violently; and if men were moved by God, their works would be voluntary".⁵¹ But were men moved by God? Sarpi answered in the positive in his *De Auxiliis*, a short treatise, which commented on the dispute over grace and salvation between the Dominicans and the Jesuits. In the treatise Sarpi argued that it was a "fundamental article of Christian belief" that man needed "grace, that is, divine help, in order to obtain salvation".⁵² He then explained that grace was divine motion, which turned the will from its evil inclination and guided it towards good. While this motion was physical action inside the will, it did not violate the freedom of the will, because it originated from God.⁵³ Sarpi confirmed his belief in the divine and natural origins of the free will in one of his *consulti*.⁵⁴ In line with the Augustinian interpretation of grace and free will Sarpi concluded his *De Auxiliis* by noting that "as St. Augustine says, we do not acquire divine grace by our freedom, but by divine grace we achieve freedom".⁵⁵ Freedom, like obedience, was a Christian concept for Sarpi. In his view, freedom depended on the elevating force of divine grace.

In the Christian tradition, obedience to God was a peculiar mixture of submission, affection, freedom and atonement for Adam's sin. In Sarpi's view these elements were present in civil obedience too, because the obedience that was performed to legitimate rulers was, ultimately, obedience to God. He made this point with a reference to St. Paul's letter to Romans: "for there is no authority except from God" and who resists civil authority, which is "not human, but divine", (s)he perforce "resists the divine will".⁵⁶ Elsewhere Sarpi stated that man was "subject to the laws and orders of his spiritual and temporal superiors" simply "because God has commanded that he showed obedience

⁴⁶ Tutino, S. 2010.

⁴⁷ Armitage, M. 2010. "Obedient unto death, even death on a cross: Christ's obedience in the soteriology of St. Thomas Aquinas". *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, Vol. 8, No. 3: 509, 513, 525.

⁴⁸ Sarpi, P. 1940. Vol. III: 103: "San Tomaso... sempre dice il peccato esser privazione del bene... il bene che priva l'inobediencia è un bene privato del suddito, che è la virtù sua dell'obediencia; il bene che priva l'abuso della potestà è il buon governo della chiesa: questo è bene molto maggiore, si perché il ben pubblico è maggior del privato... è causa di maggior rovina un abuso di potestà che cento inobediencie; e la persona del superiore... ha maggior obbligo da Dio di far il debito suo".

⁴⁹ Aquinas, T. 2002. R.W. Dyson (ed.), *Political writings*: 64. Cambridge University Press.

⁵⁰ Armitage, M. 2010: 525.

⁵¹ Sarpi, P. 1996. L. Cozzi e L. Sosio (eds.), *Pensieri naturali, metafisici e matematici*: 154. Milano-Napoli: "Ben disse adunque S. Tommaso, che niuna cosa mossa dalla sua causa è violentemente mossa; e se gli uomini fosser mossi da Dio, le opere loro volontarie sarebbero".

⁵² Sarpi, P. 1968: 157: "È articolo fondamentale della fede cristiana che l'uomo ha bisogno della divina grazia, cioè del divino agiutto, per ottenere la salute".

⁵³ Sarpi, P. 1968: 163: "Sarebbe contro il libero arbitrio, se alcuna causa exterior alla volontà la movesse; ma quando la volontà muove se stessa o veramente è mossa da Dio che è più interno alla volontà che essa stessa, il moto è libero".

⁵⁴ Sarpi, P. 1940. Vol. III: 69: "il libero arbitrio, il quale è naturale e da Dio".

⁵⁵ Sarpi, P. 1968: 163-164: "come S. Agostino dice, non per nostra libertà acquistiamo la grazia divina, ma per grazia divina conseguiamo la libertà".

⁵⁶ Sarpi, P. 2006: 34: "non enim est potestas, nisi a Deo... Non è cosa umana, ma divina il pubblico governo; chi se gli rende contumace resiste alla volontà divina".

to them".⁵⁷ God gave the power to rulers and that power as such entailed obedience. Here Sarpi's position came close to that of Pierre Charron (whose work he was familiar with) who, like Sarpi, justified absolute obedience with references to St. Paul. Charron argued that one had to obey rulers not because they were good, but simply because their authority was legitimate.⁵⁸ Sarpi went as far as claiming that even wicked rulers were to be obeyed. Should such a prince give him a "prejudicial commandment", Sarpi stoically asserted that "I cannot assent, but I will obey".⁵⁹ His friend Fulgenzio Micanzio –another Servite friar and adviser to the senate of Venice– made the same point in one of his sermons: "one has to obey princes, even if they were wicked and infedel".⁶⁰ In Sarpi's opinion, this was because all princes, even the wicked ones, were ministers of God and therefore executors of divine will.⁶¹ Furthermore, he noted that there were times when God reckoned it necessary to punish people with a wicked prince and times when God preferred to favour them with a good one.⁶²

Throughout his writings Sarpi recommends total submission to the will of God, a tendency, which suggests that he regarded obedience as an act of piety. Furthermore, he argued that people felt "natural affection" for their rulers whom –as discussed above– he considered ministers of God.⁶³ That Sarpi considered secular, legitimate rulers representatives of God suggests that he regarded the affection that subjects felt for their sovereign as an act of piety, an instance of man's love of God. If we couple this point with the great emphasis that Sarpi put on the necessity of obedience to secular rulers, it follows that his concept of obedience encompassed Aquinas's idea of the inseparability of obedience and charity (or love of God). While the obedience that subjects showed towards their ruler reflected their love of God, it was the task of the ruler to inform the subjects about God's will, which, in turn, was identical with right reason:

"Nothing more correct is said, than that good action is that, which is in conformity with the right reason; the right reason in turn is that, which is in conformity with the right appetite; right appetite is indeed the will of God, and it appears to men as that, which is approved of by everyone or by majority or by those, who are considered to be prudent".⁶⁴

⁵⁷ Sarpi, P. 1940. Vol. III: 10: "*l'uomo sia soggetto alle leggi e precetti de' suoi superiori spirituali e temporal, perché Dio ha comandato che si presti obediienza loro*".

⁵⁸ Kogel, R. 1972. *Pierre Charron*: 135. Genève.

⁵⁹ Sarpi, P. 1996: 692: "*Al comandamento pregiudiciale... Non posso assentire ma ubidirò*".

⁶⁰ I quote from Rein, G. 1904. *Paolo Sarpi und die Protestanten*: 224. Helsingfors.

⁶¹ Sarpi, P. 1968: 488: "*(principe) è un ministro di Dio*".

⁶² Sarpi, P. 2006: 43: "*quando è utile all'uomini l'esser ammoniti con li castighi, Dio li dà un principe cattivo, quando è utile loro esser favoriti, li dà un buono*".

⁶³ Archivio di stato, Venezia, *Consultori in iure*, 17 December 1618, f. 13, c. 240r: "*Prencipi, verso quali hanno la naturale affettione*".

⁶⁴ Sarpi, P. 1996: 227: "*Nihil rectius dicitur quam eam actionem esse bonam, quae rectae rationi conformis est; recta vero est ratio, quae appetitui recto est conformis; rectus appetitus vere est voluntas Dei,*

The rivalry between spiritual and temporal authorities over loyal subjects often resulted in political controversies, which were nevertheless represented as religious issues. The topic of clergy's marriage, for instance, was commonplace amongst many Protestant writers who advocated the marriage and thereby undermined the monastic vow of chastity and, more importantly, the authority of the Church of Rome.⁶⁵ Being a Catholic friar himself Sarpi did not openly criticize the vow of chastity, although it has been suggested that he did sympathize with the idea of married clergy, because this turned the clergy's affection from the pope to their wives, family and country, which in turn subverted ecclesiastical hierarchy and papal authority.⁶⁶ While many Catholic writers regarded the clergy as exempt from temporal jurisdiction, from the point of view of Protestant writers and those Catholics who –like Sarpi– allied with secular authorities in hope of a reform, the question of the clergy's right to marry embodied the individual churchman's problematic position as a subject of both spiritual and temporal authorities. Jean Bodin's argument that family was the "true image of the commonwealth" and, conversely, that commonwealth could be defined as "the rightly ordered government of a number of families" reflected the importance of marriage to the sixteenth-century political discourse.⁶⁷ Bodin's argument put emphasis on the importance of family as a fundamental constituent of a state and by so doing implied that marriage tied a priest more closely to the social and hierarchical structures of the state than to those of the church. Marriage at once strengthened the priest's obligation to obey his temporal sovereign and weakened his loyalty to the pope. The civil element of marriage was understood also by Martin Luther, according to whom marriage was the "mother of all earthly laws" and whose followers regarded marriage not as a sacramental institution, but as a social estate of the earthly kingdom.⁶⁸ Furthermore, Lutheran theologians claimed that the monastic vow of chastity was subordinated to the vow of marriage and that those canon laws, which prohibited the marriage of clergy were unscriptural and therefore to be considered null.⁶⁹ Marriage was, in this respect, one of the most conspicuous acts of defiance in front of the Church of Rome (not surprisingly, Luther, Calvin and Zwingli were all married).

As we will see, Sarpi supported the clergy's right to marry in his history of the council of Trent. His position was thus in line with that of the Lutheran theologians who subordinated the monastic vow of chastity to the vow of marriage. Since marriage pertained to temporal sphere, Sarpi's choice to favour the vow of marriage over that of chastity advanced his general goal to vindicate and promote civic obedience. In his history of the council of Trent

hominibus autem ille videtur, qui probatur omnibus aut pluribus aut iis, qui prudentes putantur".

⁶⁵ Gray, J.M. 2010: 732.

⁶⁶ Bouwsma, W. 1968: 579.

⁶⁷ Reus-Smith, C. 1999. *The moral purpose of the state*: 95. Princeton University Press.

⁶⁸ Witte, J. 2002. *Law and Protestantism: the legal teachings of the Lutheran Reformation*: 200-201. Cambridge University Press.

⁶⁹ Witte, J. 2002: 202, 241, 243.

—a critical response to Sarpi's *Istoria del concilio Tridentino*—cardinal Sforza Pallavicino asserted that the council “rightly” confirmed the celibacy of the clergy, “despite all the opposing forces”.⁷⁰ Sarpi made no references to these ‘opposing forces’ in his history, but related how, towards the end of the council, a group of Catholic theologians from Germany approached the council in the hope of revoking the prohibition of the marriage of priests. Sarpi reiterated the reasons given by these theologians, starting with the fact that many of the apostles were married and by noting that in the early church the marriage of the priests was considered “free and licit”. Furthermore, civil law did not prohibit the marriage of the clergy. Although celibacy would have been desirable and recommended, most men were weak and only few were such that they did not feel the “carnal stimulation”. Marriage would put an end to adultery and lead to a chaste way of living, Sarpi remarked, while prohibition of marriage only decreased the number of priests and led to the absurd situation, in which married priests were rejected and “fornicators” tolerated.⁷¹ That the prohibition of marriage would lead to sin was a “frivolous argument”, Pallavicino replied and claimed that the benefits of the prohibition were weightier.⁷² We can, however, safely conclude from Sarpi's treatment of the marriage question in his history of the council of Trent that he shared the German theologians' desire to revoke the prohibition.

Besides the vows of chastity and obedience, Sarpi took the vow of poverty. Prior to becoming a political adviser Sarpi had no salary at all. As far as his needs were concerned, “he had none”, Micanzio noted, since he was “most rich in his poverty”, focusing on three things only: “service to God, studies and conversations”.⁷³ Also later, when he already received a salary for his work as the senate's adviser, his attitude towards earthly goods remained indifferent. His hostility towards luxury is evident in a *consulto* on taxation, which he wrote in 1617. While being willing to let landowners and (great) merchants off easily, Sarpi was eager to tax medics, advocates and shop-keepers, not only because it was easier to uncover and assess their property (as opposed to landowners, for example), but also because they lived off the community and were therefore obliged to support the community in return. More to the point, Sarpi remarked that for the most part these professions were “futile and even harmful”, like everything that created “pomp, luxury and selling of words”.⁷⁴ In the same counsel Sarpi observed

how difficult it was to get correct information about people's personal estate and salary for taxation purposes and noted that in Germany and the Netherlands this information was customarily given under an oath. However, Sarpi concluded that this would not work in Italy, because there were many rich people who preferred to appear poor and vice versa. Also, there were many merchants who would have been cast to bankruptcy if their real possessions, or lack of them, would have become known.⁷⁵ Like any mendicant friar, Sarpi was indifferent, or even hostile, to riches and luxury. This ascetic attitude was in line with his reformist outlook, which manifested itself in criticism of corruption and admiration for the simplicity of the early church.

Sarpi's brief analysis of ecclesiastical benefices in a letter to Jacques Leschassier suggests that he was fully aware of an oath's potential to generate weighty consequences. In the letter Sarpi first asserted that while papal bulls could present the nominal beneficiary, a confirmation from the senate was nevertheless required in order to make the nomination valid. Since bestowing a lucrative benefice on somebody was a certain way to gain this person's loyalty, the confirmation from the senate was necessary in order to guarantee that the beneficiary would give his loyalty to Venice instead of Rome. Sarpi then moved on to express his discontent over the fact that beneficiaries did not “take any oath or make any promise to the prince”, which was why the republic was perpetually at odds with the Roman curia. “It would be an excellent measure”, he continued, “to add some kind of an oath should the opportunity arise”. This clearly shows that Sarpi approved of the English Oath of Allegiance, and he specifically mentioned in the letter that he was familiar with the oaths that were in use in England and France.⁷⁶ The opportunity to introduce such an oath in Venice never arrived, however, and in 1619, eleven years after the letter to Leschassier, Sarpi wrote a *consulto* in which he plainly discarded the idea that a member of the clergy could give an oath of allegiance to a temporal ruler. This was simply because all churchmen would already have pledged their allegiance to the pope and this would “always end up badly” from the sovereign's point of view, because a “second oath cannot prejudice a former one”.⁷⁷

Sarpi's writings provide plenty of evidence for the claim that he embraced the theory of absolutism. For instance,

⁷⁰ Pallavicino, S. 1803. *Istoria del concilio di Trento*, libro XXIV: 392: “Meritamente il S. Concilio di Trento malgrado tutti i contrari sforzi ha raffermando il Celibato”.

⁷¹ Sarpi, P. 1835. *Istoria del concilio Tridentino*, libro VIII: 175-178. Mendrisio.

⁷² Pallavicino, S. 1803: 392: “Che poi questo vietamento purga materia a molti peccati, è opposizione assai frivola”.

⁷³ Micanzio, F. 1974: 1308: “quanto a' bisogni, nessuno n'aveva... ricchissimo nella sua povertà, senza entrate... tutta la sua vita era in tre cose occupata: il servizio di Dio, i studii e le conversazioni”.

⁷⁴ Archivio di stato, Venezia, *Consultori in iure*, f. 13, cc. 83r-83v: “medici... avvocati... bottegghieri... questi possono esser gravati con maggior giustizia, perche se essi guadagnano essendoli prestata quella commodità dal publico, il dover vuole che lo sovvenzano... sono inutili, anzi dannosi, come tutti li artefici, che servono in cosa di pompe, o lusso, et tutti quelli che vendono parole”.

⁷⁵ Archivio di stato, Venezia, *Consultori in iure*, f. 13, cc. 83r: “In Germania, et nelli Paesi bassi in questi tempi lo fanno col giuramento... molti sono ricchi, che vogliono parer poveri, et molti poveri, a chi mette conto parer ricchi. Et sarebbero assai mercanti di molto credito, che se fosse scoperto il vero del loro havere, sarebbero fatti fallire”.

⁷⁶ Sarpi, P. 1961: 18: “Quod attinet ad beneficiorum ecclesiasticorum possessionem... Beneficiarius vero nihil principi iurat aut promittit. Pro hoc iure perpetua est controversia reipublicae cum romana curia... Aliquod iuramentum addere optimum consilium foret opportunitate observata. Anglicum vidi. Formam iuramenti quod episcopi Galliarum regi praestant, putavi esse fidelitatis tantummodo, si forte alia est, rogo te, ut euis exemplum videam”.

⁷⁷ Archivio di stato, Venezia, *Consultori in iure* 13, 12 Agosto 1619, c. 323v: “il giuramento di fedeltà, il quale li Chierici non possono prestare per un'altro giuramento di fedeltà precedente, che hanno prestato alli loro superiori... perche il secondo giuramento non può pregiudicar al primo”.

when Paul V accused Venetian patricians of tyranny on the grounds that they made laws, which restricted individual subjects' disposition of their property, Sarpi pointed out in his reply that the pope himself had argued that in the Church-state he could make whatever statutes he pleased and that these statutes were to be obeyed. This, Sarpi observed, justified the position of the Venetian patricians and acknowledged their "license" to "dispose property arbitrarily" and without any "hindrance from law", because the patricians had exactly the same authority in Venice as the pope had in the Church-state.⁷⁸ More explicitly in line with the theory of absolutism, Sarpi claimed in his *Della potestà de'prencipi* that any sovereign ruler was *legibus solutus* and responsible only to God:

"He who has the majesty commands everyone and no one can command him... he is not subject to any human law whatsoever, but he even commands all the laws... the king who is sovereign does not command according to laws, but (he commands) the laws themselves, and remains obliged only to God and his (own) conscience".⁷⁹

Sarpi also claimed that supreme power was "natural", given by God, and impossible to be "restricted or limited by any creature".⁸⁰ His idea of hierarchy was fundamentally at odds with that of the representatives of the Church of Rome. Many Catholic writers who expressed their support and loyalty to the papacy regarded the pope as the supreme head of both spiritual and temporal matters and went as far as investing the pope with *ius gladii*, the power to impose capital penalties.⁸¹ In contrast to this, Sarpi denied the pope and the clergy any temporal authority and claimed that all priests were subjects to secular authorities and as such obliged to obey the commandments of their sovereign ruler. The "ecclesiastics are citizens and part of the republic", he wrote, and the "republic is governed by the laws of the prince", which is why the clergy is "subject to them". He concluded that it was absurd to claim that the clergy was "not subject to secular laws" because this amounted to saying that they had "no laws at all".⁸²

Sarpi bestowed all power to secular rulers who governed through civil legislation. At the same time, he made it clear that this power –and legislation– was of divine origin and subject to the inexplicable will of God. Although positive

laws may have appeared arbitrary, they had to be obeyed, Sarpi argued, because "good laws" guaranteed that subjects remained "in peace and in abundance". He then added that the aim of civil laws was to look after the "public good and tranquility and the commodity of the individual".⁸³ Any violation of positive law equaled to rebellion against God, Sarpi argued, because civil laws were "commanded by God" and "in conformity with the will of God".⁸⁴ In the same passage Sarpi explained that prior to the making of a civil law there was "no obligation by reason to act in one way rather than the other". This is to say that positive law was not based on any idea of absolute justice or truth, but "once the law is made", Sarpi wrote, "the obligation comes by virtue of it, and not of reason". In other words, civil legislation was valid because it issued from God's will, not because it stated a truth that was established by human deliberation.

Only a few weeks before his death Sarpi summarized his political theory as follows:

"But the care of the common good, this God has entrusted only to the prince together with the majesty; wherefore it pertains to him (prince) exclusively to prescribe the ways in which to conserve and maintain this good, whether with impositions, with war, with laws or other means, and in this matter whoever it would be, a confessor or somebody else, who would like to become a judge or a censor, offends the majesty and acts against that respect and reverence –which nature instills and God in holy Scriptures commands– which every person has to show to the prince, who is His (God's) vicar and lieutenant".⁸⁵

In my view Sarpi was a deeply religious person who nevertheless felt that the common good of Christian citizens was best protected by the state, not by the church. Without renouncing the vow of obedience that he had made at the moment of joining the Servite order, he directed his obedience and loyalty from his religious superiors to the secular government of Venice. This shift was in line with Sarpi's absolutism, with his adoption of the divine right theory and, more specifically, with the idea that secular rulers were ministers of God. At the same time, he remained a Catholic friar. Sarpi's position as a Catholic critic of papal authority and as a defender of secular rulers' absolute sovereignty was in line with that of the contemporary political Gallicans who regarded their own monarch not just as a head of state,

⁷⁸ Sarpi, P. 1968: 179: "il pontefice... proponendo la diffesa della libertà ecclesiastica, non diffendeva quella, ma la licenza delli secolari di dispor delli beni ad arbitrio senza freno delle legi".

⁷⁹ Sarpi, P. 2006: 52: "Chi ha la maestà comanda a tutti e nessuno può comandar a lui... non è soggetta a nessuna legge umana, sia qual si voglia, ma egli comanda eziandio a tutte le leggi... Il re che è sovrano non comanda secondo le leggi ma alle leggi stesse, resta obligato solo a Dio e alla sua coscienza".

⁸⁰ Archivio di stato, Venezia, *Consultori in iure*, 18 October 1618, f. 13, c. 214v: "potestà naturale, data da Dio alla Rep., la quale non può esser ristretta, ò limitata da alcuna creatura".

⁸¹ See, for example, Stephanus, J. 1586. *De potestate coactiva*: 73. Roma.

⁸² Sarpi, P. 1968: 483: "Li ecclesiastici sono cittadini e parti della republica; ma la republica si governa con le legi del principe; adunque essi li sono soggetti... Quelli che dicono li ecclesiastici non esser soggetti alle legi secolari danno in grande assordità, perché è tanto come se dicessero che sono senza legi... tranquillità publica mondana... Dio l'ha data alli principi secolari solamente".

⁸³ Sarpi, P. 1968: 460: "buone legi che mantengano li sudditi in pace et in abondanza et abbino per fine il bene e la tranquillità publica et il comodo de' particolari".

⁸⁴ Sarpi, P. 1968: 486: "Tutte le cose comandate dalle legi umane sono tali, che inanzi la lege non ci era obbligo di ragione di operare più a un modo che all' altro; ma fatta la lege, l'obligazione nasce per virtù di essa, e non dalla ragione... sono fondamenti della republica"; p. 460: "utile allo stato suo, necessaria al buon governo e comandata da Dio"; p. 461: "conforme al voler di Dio".

⁸⁵ I quote from Pin 2006: 392 note 98: "Ma la cura del ben comune Dio l'ha commessa al Principe solo insieme con la Maestà: per il che a lui solo sta prescrivere li modi di conservare e mantenere questo bene, se con impositioni, se con guerra, se con leghe od altri mezzi, et in questo chi che sia, o confessore od altro, che se ne voglia fare giudice o censore, offende la Maestà et opera contro quel rispetto e riverenza che la natura instilla e Dio nelle Sante Scritture comanda che ogni persona debba portar al Principe, che è suo vicario e luogotenente".

but also as the head of the church of France. For Sarpi, as for the French Gallicans, the pope was a figurehead –the leader of a universal, spiritual church– who had no political power over the emerging nation states.

CONCLUSION

In this essay I have pointed towards certain complexities in early-modern Catholic political thought. As we have seen, Catholic theorists did not agree even on such basic notions –basic for Catholic theorists, that is– as the nature of papal power. This confusion complicated other important issues, including the question of obedience. I have argued that notwithstanding their opposition to the papacy Venetians regarded obedience as a Christian concept, which –while being applied to a secular system of government– remained an important means to express piety and devote submission to the will of God. This said, obedience was for Venetians a key constituent of social discipline and therefore an integral part of the myth of Venice as a peaceful, harmonious republic. The fact that Venetians considered obedience an act of piety and yet associated it in the first place with secular government complicated their relationship with the papacy. Their message was that true piety did not require absolute obedience to the pope. On the contrary, following the theory of the divine right of kings –which attributed divine origins to secular authority– Venetians (especially Sarpi and the *giovani*) identified piety with unconditional obedience to the sovereign government of Venice. Alongside events such as the English Oath of Allegiance, the interdict of Venice marked the weakening of papal authority in front of the emergence of absolutistic nation states.

In terms of Christian –or Catholic– tradition, Sarpi followed St. Paul, St. Augustine and St. Thomas in his interpretation of obedience as an act of self-abnegation and piety. For St. Thomas and Sarpi the renunciation of one's own will was the highest form of self-abnegation and thus the greatest manifestation of love of God. It is hardly a surprise that Sarpi, a Servant friar, insisted on this point and time after time asserted that every man was utterly dependent on God's grace. It is unlikely that the senate –or the majority of the senate– would not have shared Sarpi's view of obedience as an instance of piety. What is more surprising, however, is the decisiveness with which the senate (and Sarpi) urged Venetian citizens to direct their obedience –and piety– from the papacy towards the secular government of Venice. That they succeeded in this was largely due to the fact that Sarpi –and other Venetian polemicists– depicted obedience as a religious and pious concept. Furthermore, the shift of Venetians' loyalty from Rome towards their own secular government reflected not only their patriotic pride over the republic's repute as an independent and peaceful city-state, but also the fact that Venetians were keen to imitate the politics and political discourse performed in the absolutistic monarchy of France. Paradoxically, Venetian nobility's eagerness to preserve the mythical social harmony of the republic led them towards the adoption of the language of absolutism.

Venetians' idea of obedience was inseparable from their understanding of Christian values, which –as Sarpi's case suggests– were gleaned from the Catholic tradition established by saints such as Paul, Augustine and Thomas. At the same time, Venetians resorted to absolutism and the theory of the divine right of kings in their attempts to justify their independence from and disobedience to the papacy. Sarpi's idea of obedience was also shaped by his reformist tendencies, a fact, which further encouraged him to challenge his religious superior. Although fully in line with contemporary trends in political theory and practice (especially in France and England), early seventeenth-century Venice offers a paradoxical case of early-modern Catholic political thought: a Catholic republic at odds with Rome and at once proud and neglectful of its own republican past; a case, which questions facile assumptions about concepts such as republicanism, absolutism and Catholicism, and shows that historical phenomena were rarely, if ever, just one thing or another. The way in which early seventeenth-century Venetians merged the divine and the secular when they ascribed divine origins to Venice's government and questioned the authority of the pope no doubt mirrored the contemporary power struggle between the papacy and secular rulers such as James I of England. That this struggle –and Venetians' political attitude– should be seen as a part of a process of secularization seems an overly teleological interpretation of a period, which, at least to my mind, was conditioned by a constant overlapping of the secular with the spiritual and by a marked confusion about the proper scopes and duties of the church and the state.

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