

# How the Lateran Treaty created Vatican City

Ninety years ago, on Feb. 11, 1929, a series of treaties were concluded by the Holy See and the Italian government that significantly impacted the papacy, the Catholic Church and world history. Signed in the Lateran Palace, the treaties ended a 59-year-old conflict between the two signatories and created Vatican City as an independent nation with the pope as head of state. The conflict leading to this momentous agreement, the Lateran Treaty, began in the late 19th century.

## Papal States

By 1860, an area known as the Papal States sliced through the center of the Italian Peninsula. Comprising more than 16,000 square miles with over 3 million inhabitants, these states were under temporal rule, governed by the Holy See. Geographically, the lands lay from the Po River in the north to the mouth of the Tiber River in the south, including important commercial and industrial areas such as Corsica, Palermo, Bologna and Parma, as well as the city of Rome and key ports on the Adriatic Sea. The Papal States essentially separated northern and southern Italy. These lands had been conferred to the Vatican by different monarchs, going back at least 11 centuries, which made the popes' temporal reign longer than any other European dynasty.

Beginning in 1850, King Victor Emmanuel II of Piedmont-Sardinia started his quest to consolidate all of Italy under one government and become the king of a unified Italy. The largest of the many independent Italian states were those controlled by the pope, who at the time was Pius IX (r. 1846-78), a serious stumbling block to Italian unification. The king, either through negotiations or threat of force, began annexing areas of Italy under a new national government.

Pope Pius refused to relinquish any of his holdings, but the king occupied one Papal State after another, until by 1860 he had seized all the papal holdings except for the city of Rome. The new central government wanted Rome as the nation's capital city, but the pope would have none of it. Protected by a French garrison, Pius refused to recognize Victor Emmanuel's government and decried what he considered to be the robbery of the Papal States: the seizure of Church property belonging to all Catholics.

## Law of Guarantees

On September 20, 1870, after the French garrison protecting the pope departed to fight in the Franco-Prussian war, King Victor's army forcibly occupied Rome. The papal domain, once over 16,000 square miles, was reduced to the Vatican's one-sixth of a square mile. Victor, by now king of all of Italy, offered considerable concessions to Pope Pius IX if he would acknowledge the new government and the annexation of the Papal States. These concessions, called the Law of Guarantees, recognized the pope as the head of the Catholic Church in Italy, accorded the pope all the rights of a sovereign monarch and provided compensation to the Church for the Papal States. The pope adamantly declined, believing that such agreement would be tantamount to placing the papacy under the rule of and subject to the king of Italy. Pius wrote in his May 1871 encyclical *Ubi nos* ("On Pontifical States"): "Therefore we can submit to no agreement which would in any way destroy or diminish our rights, which are the rights of God and of the Apostolic See. ... For if the Roman Pontiff were subject to the sway of another ruler, but no longer possessed civil power, neither his position nor the acts of the Apostolic ministry would be exempt from the authority of the other ruler" (No. 7). Pius subsequently denied Italian Catholics from voting in national elections and excommunicated everyone involved with taking over the papal territories.

# Roman Question

Pope Pius and his four successors remained voluntarily secluded in the Vatican for the next 59 years and dubbed themselves “prisoners of the Vatican.” Throughout those years, the popes continued to deny the legitimacy of the Italian national government and its rights to the Papal States. This situation would become known throughout the world as the Roman Question.

## PRISONERS OF THE VATICAN

*These popes isolated themselves inside the Vatican for a cumulative total of 59 years:*



Pope Pius IX: 1870-78



Leo XIII: 1878-1903



St. Pius X: 1903-14



Benedict XV: 1914-22



Pius XI: 1922-29

Enter Pope Pius XI (r. 1922-39) and the notorious fascist dictator Benito Mussolini (d.1945). As King Victor III's prime minister, Mussolini recognized two significant political issues: First, Italy was 97% Catholic; and second, the

majority of Italians wanted peace between Church and state. He and Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, the secretary of state for Pope Pius XI, began two and a half years of negotiations leading to the 1929 Lateran Treaty and ending the Roman Question.

## Lateran Treaty

The treaty was signed on February 11 and ratified on June 8, 1929. Among the treaty agreements, the Holy See acknowledged the legitimacy of the Italian government and its right to the Papal States; the Vatican was, in turn, financially compensated; and Vatican City was created and designated a sovereign nation, independent of Italy, with the pope as head of state. Catholicism became the religion of Italy; marriage laws were placed under the rule of the Church, and Catholic religious training was included in every school. The Italian government provided Vatican City with a train station, a telephone and telegraph office, a post office and a radio station. The pope was once again ruler of a sovereign nation and in no way subject to an earthly potentate.

Some of that era concluded that the pope had legitimized a fascist government and, as such, lost much of the prestige afforded the pope as temporal ruler of the Papal States. Mussolini and others were convinced that by isolating the pope's rule to Vatican City (108 acres of land) that the pope's influence on political issues would be greatly diminished. The dictator said, "We have not resurrected the temporal power of the popes; we have buried it." These observations turned out to be shortsighted, as the pope today is heralded as both head of state and spiritual leader of a religion encompassing over a billion people. He is hugely popular and widely influential among Catholics and non-Catholics everywhere. The Lateran Treaty catapulted the pope onto the world stage. In 1984 the treaty was changed, including eliminating Catholicism as the official religion of Italy, and made Catholic schooling for children optional.

### **Key Points of the Lateran Treaty**

- The pope recognized the Italian government and gave up all rights to the Papal States. (The exact treaty language reads, "The Holy See ... declares the Roman Question to be definitely and irrevocably settled and therefore eliminated and recognizes the Kingdom of Italy under the Dynasty of the House of Savoy, with Rome as the capital of the Italian State.")
- Compensation to the Vatican for the Papal States was the equivalent of approximately \$92 million in currency and bonds.
  - Vatican City was created as a separate nation-state independent of Italy, with the pope as head of state. He would have all the privileges of that position and his person was considered both sacred and inviolate.
  - The Italian government agreed to build and fund, inside Vatican City, a railway station with access to the Italian train system, telephone and telegraph capability, a radio station and a post office. Certain buildings outside the Vatican, traditionally part of the Church, were restored to the Holy See.
- Roman Catholicism was identified as the official religion of Italy, the Church would rule over Italian marriage laws and the teaching of the Catholic religion in schools was mandatory.
  - The Catholic clergy would take no part in politics, and each bishop would take a vow so stating. Nominations for new bishops would be reviewed by the Italian government.