Bismarck's Conception of a *modus vivendi* with Rome (December 19, 1882)

Abstract

On February 20, 1878, Pope Leo XIII (1810–1903) succeeded Pius IX (1792–1878). The new Pope's policy toward Germany was more conciliatory than his predecessor's and contributed to the de-escalation of the *Kulturkampf* [cultural struggle] between the Catholic Church and the Prussian state. The summer of 1882 saw the start of a slow thaw in relations between Bismarck and the Vatican, but a number of anti-Catholic measures—for example, the Anti-Jesuit Law—remained in place. In this letter from December 19, 1882, addressed to Prussian Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, Bismarck explains his attitude toward the Catholic Church during this period.

Source

Count Hatzfeldt[1] has told me about the private letter from Rome[2], which Your Imperial and Royal Highness has had the good grace to send to him. I consider the characterization of the current Pope found in the letter to be entirely correct, but its worth lies less in its political value than in its value as a natural historical observation. We can change neither the character of the Pope nor the situation, which we have inherited from history, through any political means or negotiations with Rome. The result of such negotiations—if, against all odds, they were to yield any result at all—would always assume the nature of a concordat; it would introduce into Prussian legislation an alien element that is not subject to Prussian sovereignty, a type of international treaty or moral duty of honor that could be dissolved only by consent of the Pope. Anyone who expects that such negotiations will bring an end to a thousand-year-old quarrel between the Kaiser and the Pope is fooling himself. I have led these negotiations personally because the papal side requested them, and because it did not seem useful for us to assume the appearance of irreconcilability by refusing. I never expected, nor do I currently expect, any result from them. I never commissioned Mr. von Schlözer[3] to conclude the conflict with the [Roman Catholic] church through peaceful negotiations; should he reach a stage at which the disclosure requirement is accepted, he would exceed my expectations and would thus considerably facilitate the reconciling forces of time and habituation, but we will always remain just as far removed from settling the perennial conflict between monarchy and priesthood as before. The author of the Roman letter is utterly mistaken with respect to the possibility of a final and lasting understanding between the Protestant Kaiserdom and the Roman Curia; for this reason, he also overestimates the significance of the termination and resumption of diplomatic relations. At the time, the termination was necessitated not by politics, but by official decorum, since the Pope used such incredibly rude language towards His Majesty the Kaiser. In those days, it was not we who treated Rome with condescension, but Rome who treated us "*de haut en bas*" [condescendingly]. If the author of the letter assumes that small brooks "swelled into a stream" only because of erroneous measures and a lack of information, then he is ignorant of the facts and mistaken about the principles that move history. All you can achieve through the small instruments of diplomacy and the pressuring of Roman prelates are concordats, which for Prussia are unacceptable, but you won't be able to cure the old wounds—i.e., the fact that a considerable portion of the German population gives more credence to the political leadership of their priests than to their own king, and that these priests [depend] on a foreign, absolutist monarch who, though, in turn depends on the Jesuits and their money. This is a disease that only time and, above all, education, can heal, though perhaps never completely. Any understanding with the Jesuits is impossible, and it can only provide palliative help with regard to the current Pope. We had an agreement with the Curia, insofar as it is at all possible,

until 1870. Nevertheless, the Catholic parliamentary party under Reichensperger[4] (in those days, 40-60 members strong) resolutely fought any government. It was only natural that the Poles, Guelphs, Danes, and Social Democrats attached themselves to the party, since all of them were intransigently opposed to the basic idea of the Prussian monarchy and the German imperial rule. This “stream” of anti-German elements—the Pope, the Guelphs, the Slavs, etc.—will never dry up completely. It supposedly arose from mistakes by the government but is actually founded on the logic of history and has existed for 1,000 years. Its inherent hierarchical element, the priesthood, has ebbed and flowed over the course of history. There are times when religious emotional life pulsates weakly, and then others when it assumes a stronger presence again. The forces behind fanaticism drive themselves to death in exaggeration, just as the exaggeration of skepticism always leads, in turn, to religious and sentimental zeal. Small diplomatic successes will change elements of this only temporarily.

Today, in all Catholic countries, in France, Italy, Portugal, Belgium, and even Spain, the power of the Roman church is declining; in Germany and in England, it draws its vitality from the friction with Protestant governments and their legislation. When the doctrine of papal infallibility was issued, it was my impression that the exaggeration of clerical pretensions entailed by it would prove dangerous to these same pretensions in the long run, and that a setback would follow as the natural result of this exaggeration. I still believe this, and for my part, I would not have intervened in this conflict with the church if the Catholic section of our government under the influence of the Radziwills[5] had not become subversive to the point of Polonizing parts of the German population.[6] The purpose of eliminating this section required my personal involvement, and from that point onward, the aggressive opposition was directed against me. With the [anti-clerical] May Laws, I merely demanded the constitutional changes that eventually resulted, and I demanded that they be implemented in a more sweeping manner than my fearful colleagues wished to authorize; I even allowed my colleagues of the juridical school of thought to undertake all of the detailed juridical lawmaking. Here, in my opinion, lies the only thing that the Roman correspondent may rightfully call an “erroneous measure,” and with respect to the juridical rather than the political part of the May Laws, I would have been more accommodating in German speaking-areas than my current colleagues are; in the Polish-speaking area, however, anything that we concede to the priests would be used as a lever for national revolutions.

The Roman correspondent views things through a microscope that exaggerates the size and importance of the small slice of the historical and political field that is visible to the Vatican, and his rebuke of past events is that of a dilettante far removed from practical business. He offers me a welcome opportunity to express once again to Your Imperial and Royal Highness my conviction that, with respect to the church question, diplomatic negotiations will achieve nothing but concordats or concordat-like moral obligations of honor that are binding nonetheless, and this entire area is, in my view, unacceptable for Prussia. I have always made every effort to rob Mr. von Schlözer of any hope that his mission might bring about an acceptable agreement concerning peace or an armistice or a lasting *modus vivendi*; I believe that I was finally able to get through to him on this point and to convince him that it would be our biggest mistake to show any zeal or need in Rome for a change in our situation. The state can bear the status quo for longer than the church, and the struggle must be conducted *cunctando* [with procrastination]. In the establishment of the embassy and the affairs thereof, I see nothing but a patient continuation of the *status quo*, until such time as the force of habit may give rise to a de facto *modus vivendi*. This may require generations of steadfast politicians who expect their success to come not from the art of diplomacy but from official educational policy. We will never win over the priests; they will always remain sworn officers in the army of a non-Prussian sovereign. In my view, the education of laypersons is the only effective weapon available to the state, and it might be managed even more resolutely than in the past. The objective of our operations cannot focus on Rome and the Pope, not even on our bishops, but on our Catholic lay population in Germany and their opinions about the state, the church, and the priests.

NOTES

[1] Count Paul Hatzfeldt, State Secretary in the Foreign Ministry. [Unless otherwise noted, all footnotes are adapted from Ernst Rudolf Huber and Wolfgang Huber, *Staat und Kirche im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Dokumente zur Geschichte des deutschen Staatskirchenrechts*, vol. 2, *Staat und Kirche im Zeitalter des Hochkonstitutionalismus und des Kulturkampfs 1848–1890*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1976, pp. 832–35.]
[2] The author of this letter cannot be ascertained; the approximate content of the correspondence may be inferred from Bismarck's explanations.
[3] Kurd von Schlözer (1822–1894), German ambassador to the United States from 1871 to 1882, was named the Prussian representative to Rome in 1882; he was primarily concerned with paving the way for the laws of 1886/87 that virtually ended the *Kulturkampf*.
[4] August Reichensperger (1808–1895), leading member of the German Center Party.
[5] The persons alluded to are Prince Boguslaw Radziwill (1809–1873), an influential Catholic-clerical politician; his son, Prince Ferdinand Radziwill (1834–1926), the leader of the Polish parliamentary party in the Reichstag, of which Prince Boguslaw was a member from 1874 to 1918; and Prince Anton Radziwill (1833–1904), the nephew of Prince Boguslaw. Prince Anton was a Prussian general and since 1866 aide-de-camp to, from 1885 to 1888 adjutant-general of King and Kaiser Wilhelm I. All three Radziwills were members of the Prussian upper house and stood in good repute at court.
[6] i.e., making them like Poles—trans.

Source: Otto von Bismarck, *Die gesammelten Werke* (Friedrichsruh Edition), edited by Gerhard Ritter and Rudolf Stadelmann, vol. 6c, *Politische Schriften 1871 bis 1890*, edited by Werner Frauendienst. Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Gesellschaft, 1935, pp. 266ff; also reprinted in Ernst Rudolf Huber and Wolfgang Huber, *Staat und Kirche im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Dokumente zur Geschichte des deutschen Staatskirchenrechts*, vol. 2, *Staat und Kirche im Zeitalter des Hochkonstitutionalismus und des Kulturkampfs 1848–1890*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1976, pp. 832–35.

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Recommended Citation: Bismarck's Conception of a modus vivendi with Rome (December 19, 1882), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1839> [October 10, 2026].