

PARISHES OF  
**ST PIUS X, ALDERLEY EDGE, ST BENEDICT'S, HANDFORTH**  
**AND**  
**SACRED HEART & ST TERESA'S WILMSLOW**  
**WEEKLY REFLECTION**

**Sunday 13th July 2025: 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**The Leonine Popes: (4) Leo XII**

In this short series sketching the lives of some of the previous Popes who took the name of Leo<sup>1</sup>, I last dealt with Leo X who died in 1521. Leo XI sadly survived only three weeks in 1605 and the name was not again chosen until the arrival of Leo XII in 1823. He remained as Pope until his death in 1829.

Leo XII followed the footsteps of many of his namesakes in becoming Pope at a time of massive upheaval. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars had riven Europe. Their consequences reverberated throughout the continent. There was a backlash against radicalism and its many facets including the change in the social order and hostility towards the Church and clerics. Most notably in Spain Ferdinand VII had reinstated the Inquisition and the Jesuits, both hated by liberal radicals. The Church was widely regarded by liberals as identified with tyranny and coercion. Under Leo's predecessor, Pope Pius VII, as ruler of the Papal States (much of central Italy), was considered by many to be the most reactionary ruler in Europe. Cardinal Consalvi had tried to introduce reforms, particularly within the Papal States and the Vatican. His moderate reforms were fiercely resisted by vested interests.

Into this cauldron came Leo XII, a conservative, very sickly man aged 63. He was elected by zealous cardinals as someone whose policy would not be dictated by political prudence and who would give strong spiritual leadership. Some years before he had been humiliatingly dismissed by Cardinal Consalvi from the papal diplomatic service on grounds of incompetence. Now it was Consalvi's turn to be dismissed as secretary of state. though Leo later came to appreciate Consalvi's merits shortly before the Cardinal's death in 1824. Duffy describes Leo XII as pious, puritanical, confrontational and lacking political realism. In the Papal States he introduced gaol sentences for those who played games on Sundays and feast days. Tight-fitting dresses for women were outlawed, as were encores and ovations in theatres, on the grounds that Leo believed that they facilitated displays of seditious political feeling.

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<sup>1</sup> Articles based primarily on Professor Eamon Duffy's Book: *"Saints & Sinners: A History of the Popes"* and the *Catholica Encyclopaedia*

Roman bars were forbidden to serve alcohol which had to be bought at grills fitted in the street. This was both unpopular and massively increased drunkenness in public.

Jewish citizens, who had previously been liberated from restrictions, were ordered back into their ghettos and locked in at night. They were not permitted to own property and business transactions between Christians and Jews were forbidden. Further, 300 Roman Jews were required to attend special Christian sermons each week. Wealthy Jews reacted by voting with their feet and their exodus exacerbated the Vatican's already serious financial problems.

The Catholic Encyclopaedia makes the positive points that the Jubilee of 1825 promoted the devotion of the Catholic world and that, under Leo XII, the persecution of Catholics in the Netherlands was faced and overcome. Also, the movement for the emancipation of Catholics in the Britain was managed and encouraged till success was assured. The Encyclopaedia summarises Pope Leo XI in this way:

*“There is something pathetic in the contrast between the intelligence and masterly energy displayed by him as ruler of the Church and the inefficiency of his policy as ruler of the Papal States. In face of the new social and political order, he undertook the defence of ancient custom and accepted institutions.....He had a noble character, a passion for order and efficiency, but he lacked insight into, and sympathy with, the temporal developments of his period. His rule was unpopular in Rome and in the Papal States, and by various measures of his reign he diminished greatly for his successors their chances of solving the new problems that confronted them.”*

Stephen S.