

Cholera and the *Salus Populi Romani*

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Abstract: According to legend, Pope Gregory I processed an icon now known as the *Salus populi romani* in order to halt a plague epidemic then striking Rome. During the procession, Gregory beheld a vision of the Archangel Michael sheathing his sword – a sign that the city would be spared. Many years later, in 1835 and 1837, Pope Gregory XVI had the same icon processed in response to a cholera epidemic. While the processions could be seen as belonging to the reactionary impulses of a rigidly traditionalist regime, they were in fact occasions for the papacy to experiment with new technologies of social, spatial, and spiritual organization. Through the processions, the regime adapted modernizing attitudes towards public health, coopted and centralized popular devotion, while at the same time reinscribing the urban fabric with new associations that consolidated regime's authority through its links to the divine and a legendary past.

*Si ce fléau fût tombé au milieu de nous dans un siècle religieux, qu'il se fût élargi dans la poésie des mœurs et des croyances populaires, s'il eût laissé un tableau frappant.*¹

If this scourge had fallen upon us during a religious century, if it had found a place within the poetry of the popular imagination, it would have left a striking picture.²

Instead, Chateaubriand is writing of Paris during the 1832 cholera epidemic – in the era of life as usual, of medicine, of progress. If only, Chateaubriand bemoans, there were wailing penitents, preaching itinerant monks, piles of burnt corpses; incense, bells, and candles; the viaticum; but most of all, a procession of the relics of Saint Geneviève. This penitential procession dominates Chateaubriand's picture of how Parisians ought to have responded to the epidemic.

Two such processions were actually carried out in Rome in response to cholera: one in 1835, when cholera entered the peninsula;

another in 1837, after illness struck the Eternal City. On both occasions the icon of the Virgin and Child from S. Maria Maggiore, then known as the *Regina Caeli* and today as the *Salus Populi Romani*, was processed through the streets of Rome (**Fig. 1**).

Though the name *Salus Populi Romani* was only applied to the icon in 1870 by Pius IX, the name consciously evokes the supernatural defenders of ancient Rome: the Goddess *Salus* and the Palladium.³ *Salus*, which can mean security, health, wellbeing or salvation, personified the welfare or common good of Rome.⁴ The phrase *salus populi* connoted responsible government, as Cicero immortalized in his *De legibus: Salus populi suprema lex esto* – “the common good of the people will be the highest law.”⁵ The basic concept of *Salus* mixes religious (salvation) and political (welfare) notions. In ancient Rome, a wooden statue of Athena, the Palladium, was supposed to have preserved the *Salus populi*. The

¹ Chateaubriand 1848, 482.

² Chateaubriand, trans. and cit. in Kudlick 1996, 143.

³ For more on the later history of the icon, see Wolf 1990, n. 83, 254.

⁴ Wolf 1990, 5.

⁵ Cicero, *De legibus* III.3,8.



Fig. 1 *Salus Populi Romani*
(Amato 1988, fig. 1)

security and safety of the city was bound up in the object, which Cicero called the “divine pledge of our security.”⁶ Believed to have once defended the city of Troy, the powerful statue wound up in Rome. There it was hidden in the Temple of Vesta lest it escape and wreak havoc on the city.⁷

Legends ascribed the icon from Santa Maria Maggiore an analogous role in protecting Medieval Christian Rome. When the Tiber flooded in 590, it washed the rotting carcasses of snakes and a dragon up on the banks.⁸ The plague followed. In response, Pope Gregory I (c. 540–604 CE) held a penitential procession using the *Regina caeli* icon. As the crowd sang the litany, the Pope beheld a vision of the Archangel Michael standing above Hadrian’s tomb. The angel sheathed his sword, signifying the end of the blight.

⁶ Cicero, *Pro scauro* 48. See Wolf 1990, 3.

⁷ Faraone examines the *Palladium* as a “dread goddess” (Faraone 1991, 136–140).

⁸ Wolf 1990, 131–160; see also Stathakopoulos 2004, 320–1.

Despite its association with Gregory I’s procession, the *Salus Populi Romani* is not a processional icon. There is little evidence of its existence in 590.⁹ Before Gregory XVI’s processions of the icon in 1835 and 1837, the icon moved little – at most it had gone out to meet the Lateran icon of Christ on the night before the Feast of the Assumption (August 15). The two icons met, bowed to each other, and were processed around the basilica before being set beside one another inside the nave. This procession dramatized the Dormition of the Virgin, when Christ visited his Mother on her deathbed.¹⁰ Pius V, however, banned that procession in 1566.¹¹ The icon of the Virgin was thereafter confined to the church of S. Maria Maggiore. Gregory XVI’s processions of the icon in 1835 and 1837 would have been striking for their novelty: They represent the end of a two hundred year intermission, during which the icon was not moved.¹²

While the icon was an important part of these processions, its visibility was limited. Within the procession, its power would have rested largely in the perception of its presence. As a novel reflection of the regime’s complicated ideological stance towards modernity, the processions could be regarded as a means of inscribing urban space with new symbolic associations.¹³ At the same time, however, the processions obscured their novelty through traditional forms and vague references to mythic precedents. The effect was one of reinvention, reinscription, remapping, and reclaiming.

The cholera epidemics of the 1830s played a crucial role in the modernization of Europe. France in particular was “provided a clear impetus for change” that “opened the way for new scientific discourses, new administrative practices, and new conceptions of social

⁹ Wolf suggests the sixth or seventh century for the icon’s manufacture, though other dates range from the 5th to the 13th century. Wolf 1990, 24; idem 2005, 33–4.

¹⁰ Belting 1994, 72; Wolf 1990, 58, 189.

¹¹ It had been around over 700 years. Wolf 1990, 37.

¹² Wolf 1990, 249.

¹³ On mapping in France, see Ozouf 1988, 133ff.

order, and hence ushered in a long period of experimentation with spatial/scientific/social technologies.”¹⁴ Although Gregory XVI’s regime often had an uncompromisingly reactionary agenda characterized by its hostility to modernization, its response to cholera also belongs to this history of experimentation with new spatial/scientific/social technologies.¹⁵ But in contrast to France the papal regime’s response to cholera deployed rationalist modernizing medicine in conjunction with the traditionalist agenda of the Catholic revival, namely, by recreating public devotional displays that had only ever existed in myth. Gregory XVI thereby redefined the relationship between a romantic ideal of the sacred, as the revival of legendary devotional forms, and the forces of profane modernity, the rationalist medical establishment. This compromise between sacred and profane belongs to the history of the modern Catholic Church’s invention of a modernized conception of sacrality, often in the guise of ancient tradition, although in compromise or conversation with a profane and rationalist modernity.

Cholera

Originating in 1817 along the banks of the Ganges, cholera slowly spread west, hitting Prussia in 1830/1, England in 1831/2, and France in 1832.¹⁶ A deadly import from the East that afflicted large numbers of people, cholera struck contemporaries as a return of the terrible plague epidemics of the past.¹⁷ Gregory XVI’s decision to process the *Salus Populi Romani* icon twice in response to the disease consciously played on this association. Like the plague, cholera baffled the medical establishment.¹⁸ The path of its transmission would not be discovered until 1854, and even

then, effective treatment would elude science until the end of the century. Physicians and officials furiously debated how to halt the disease. The contagionist theory of disease, in which disease is believed to pass person to person by an invisible agent, led officials to adopt quarantines and sanitary cordons.¹⁹ In contrast, the newer infectionist theory of disease, which saw the disease as radiating from specific localized sources, recommended that people move away from sources of disease as well as the elimination of those sources through public hygiene. Both theories were politically inflected. Bureaucrats were believed to favor quarantines in order to extend governmental control and combat incipient social disorder, while advocates of free trade, philanthropists, hygienists, and property owners tended to prefer infectionism, because they either disdained the restriction of movement or promoted the removal of dirty sources of infection.²⁰

By 1835, cholera had already ravaged much of Europe. Still, many in Rome were optimistic. *The Times*’s first report of cholera in Rome noted that before the disease struck the city, its citizens were unconcerned, that “with their [sanitary] cordon and the especial protection of the Madonna, they were perfectly safe from these evils.”²¹ Once the disease had passed, the favor of God through the intercession of the Virgin was credited for the relative mildness of the epidemic.²²

The 1835 Procession

On September 8, 1835, Pope Gregory XVI ordered a procession of the *Regina caeli* icon from S. Maria Maggiore to S. Pietro in the Vatican, where it would be displayed for eight days before returning to its home.²³ The procession began with some difficulty at 9:30 in the evening due to strong winds and inclement weather. The icon was placed into a *piccola macchina* and carried in a procession com-

¹⁴ Rabinow 1989, 15.

¹⁵ Aubert 1980, 260. Gregory XVI represented the “zealot” party within the Catholic Church. While the “political” party favored extensive diplomacy and reliance upon Austria, the “zealots” favored radical autonomy and independence.

¹⁶ For accounts of the disease in Prussia, Dettke 1995; England, Morris 1976, Durey 1979; France, Delaporte 1986; Italy, Tognotti 2000.

¹⁷ Delaporte 1986, 49, 104; Snowden 1995, 149–154

¹⁸ Delaporte 1986

¹⁹ On the medical theories and models, see Delaporte 1986, 115–137, 139–163.

²⁰ Delaporte 1986, 176–178.

²¹ *The Times*. 16 September 1837, pp. 3 col. d.

²² Bolton 1895, 60–61.

²³ Chigi 1966, 92–93.

posed of the students of S. Michele, orphans, secular and regular clergy, and finally, at the end, the Cardinale Vicario, Carlo Odescalchi, who held the office 1834–1838, and who was also the president of the *Congregazione Sanitaria*.²⁴ The Pope did not participate in this first part of the procession.

The crowd recited the rosary and other prayers as it moved down the street of Bambino Gesù, to Madonna de' Monti, past Trajan's Column, the Piazza di S. Marco, il Gesù, and down the Strada Papale (today called Via del Governo Vecchio). The area around the Forum and Column of Trajan brought the procession near the Chiesa di Ss. Luca e Martina, and basilica of Ss. Cosma e Damiano, the patron saints of physicians, and protectors of children and orphans.

Inclement weather forced the procession to stop at Chiesa Nuova (Santa Maria in Vallicella). Agostino Chigi records that in the confusion many people, soaking wet from the rain, continued on to S. Pietro in the Vatican. A sonnet written three days later by Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli, *La Madonna de la Bbasilica Libbreriana* (the doubled consonants are characteristic of the Romanesco dialect), captures the chaos of a procession reduced to a stampede by three “ddiluvi scatenati,” floods unleashed.²⁵ While the throng sang litanies, the priests and friars drenched beyond recognition, came to resemble drying laundry, wet chicks, tripe, colanders, and pickles – “panni stesi, purcini abbaggnati, trippette, scolabbrodi, sottasceti.”

The icon would stay there for seven days due to high winds and rains.²⁶ The Chiesa Nuova was, nevertheless, an appropriate setting for

the icon. The church is dedicated to both the Virgin and St Gregory. It already had a resident icon of the Virgin, the Madonna of Mercy, installed above the main altar in an elaborate tabernacle. Among the relics deposited beneath the main altar were not only those belonging to St Gregory, but also – appropriately enough – those of St Giovanni Nepomuceno, who defends against floods and drowning.

Improved weather on Tuesday, September 15, 1835 allowed the procession to continue to S. Pietro at 8:30 in the evening.²⁷ The procession now passed over the Ponte Sant'Angelo and past the Castel Sant'Angelo, where Pope Gregory I was said to have witnessed the Archangel sheathing his sword. Chigi records in his diary that Gregory XVI, preceded by 20 cardinals, walked before the icon, carrying a torch in front of it. Gregory himself illuminated the icon, though in doing so, it also acted as a backdrop for him to assert a connection to his famous namesake. Once the procession arrived at S. Pietro, the crowd sang the Litany of the Madonna. The Icon remained at S. Pietro for eight days.

On Tuesday, September 23, the icon was again processed from S. Pietro to the centrally located Il Gesù, where it would remain for another seven days.²⁸ The final procession back to S. Maria Maggiore occurred on Wednesday, September 30, 1835. Agostino Chigi gives few details. The Pope participated along with a number of cardinals. It lasted two hours.

The first procession of the *Regina caeli* icon in two hundred years seems to have centered in many ways on the reenactment of Gregory I's legendary procession in response to plague. Its complex itinerary established the presence of the icon throughout the city and linked it, and by extension the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, to a number of urban spaces and sanctuaries relevant to the Virgin, the Gregory I Legend, and the fighting of plague in general. The procession thereby enacted a notional network linking together the city's sacred protec-

²⁴ Teodonio - Negro 1988, 88.

²⁵ “Il primo è nel bellissimo sonetto dell'11 settembre *La Madonna de la Bbasilica Libbreriana* (Vigolo 1632), nel quale I tre ‘ddiluvi scatenati’ riducono la procession ad un paradossale fuggi-fuggi di personagi irricognoscibili, ma finalmente svelati e inverati nella loro autentica essenza di ‘panni stesi, purcini abbaggnati, trippette, scolabbrodi, sottasceti...’” Teodonio 1987, 70.

²⁶ Chigi 1966, 93. Chigi notes that an attempt was made to continue the icon's journey on September 13, but that it was abandoned because of a thunderstorm.

²⁷ Chigi 1966, 93.

²⁸ Chigi 1966, 94.

tors against disease. It did not have in fact the character of a purely penitential procession, but rather unified, sanctified and re-mythologized urban landscape that had been challenged more recently by modernizing forces, such as the French directed Roman Republic of 1798–1799. After the 1835 procession, the Virgin made her presence known throughout the city. Reports multiplied of her images in the homes, businesses, chapels and streets of Rome performing miracles – they were seen opening and moving their eyes, sweating, and crying. Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli remarked in November 1835 that the last time there had been so many Marian miracles had been during the French republic in Rome.²⁹

The 1837 Procession

While the 1835 procession had marked the arrival of cholera in the peninsula, the disease eventually appeared in Rome at the end of July 1837. By Friday, August 4, 1837, the Cardinale Vicario announced that the icon from S. Maria Maggiore would again be processed in the city on the following Sunday.³⁰ This time, however, it would only go so far as Il Gesù, where it would remain for eight days before returning to S. Maria Maggiore on August 15, the Feast of the Assumption. The decision to take the procession only as far as Il Gesù could be attributed to a desire to avoid the Tiber's disease infested western bank – The same day that the procession began, Chigi notes that there were new cases of cholera reported in the rioni of Borgo and Trastevere.³¹ The decision to hold the procession and still heed as far as possible at least some of the advice of the medical establishment may indicate the regime's attempt to balance a public health policy based on rationalistic science with a particular politi-

cal agenda and a sincere faith in traditionalist forms of public devotion. Processions would have been anathema to the sanitary cordon, and hence unsupportable according to contagionist theories of the disease. But the ongoing medical debates over the nature of the disease would have by then undermined strict adherence to the sanitary cordon.

So it was, against the advice of many, that the icon was translated late in the evening on Sunday, August 6, from S. Maria Maggiore to Il Gesù by a procession of the secular and regular clergy.³² The procession traveled up along the Strada delle Quattro Fontane and then turned down towards Monte Cavallo, where it met the Pope and the Sacro Collegio. The Pope took his position in front of the icon accompanied by 21 cardinals. The procession then wound down the hill, through the narrow Via delle tre Cannelle to S. Romualdo (now called Via C. Battisti), then along S. Romualdo to Il Gesù. The path up the Strada delle Quattro Fontane to Monte Cavallo took the procession to higher ground and a less densely populated area. This decision, like the avoidance of Borgo and Trastevere, may have been due to considerations of public health, especially as low ground and heavily populated areas were then equated with higher disease risks. The path to Monte Cavallo also brought the procession by the Pope's palace on the Quirinal. The procession, therefore, intimately connected the pope himself with the procession and the icon from Santa Maria Maggiore. Interestingly, the Quirinal had also been the location of the Roman temple of Salus.³³

On the night of the following Wednesday, August 9, Chigi notes that pictures and statues of Virgin were illuminated throughout the city.³⁴ Devotion to the Virgin spread. Friday through Sunday, August 11–13, Chigi reports that many visited the icon in Il Gesù, while smaller processions were held everywhere in the city.³⁵ Many of the streets, especially the

²⁹ “Già nel tempo della repubblica francese in Roma fu creduto da infiniti fanatici di vedere le Madonne delle pubbliche vie aprir gli occhi, girarli, e versar lagrime. Nel 1835, avvicinandosi il colera al nostro Stato, alcuni o creduli o impostori cominciarono a sparger voce della rinnovazione di un tanto miracolo.” Belli cit. in Teodonio 1987, 71.

³⁰ Chigi 1966, 113

³¹ Chigi 1966, 114.

³² Chigi 1966, 114.

³³ Wolf 1990, 5. The location is mentioned in Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, ix.43, 25; x, 1, 9.

³⁴ Chigi 1996, 114.

³⁵ Chigi 1966, 114.

Corso, were lit up.³⁶ Reports of Marian icons miraculously opening or moving their eyes also proliferated. In an alley in Trastevere, one of the rioni with many cases of cholera, a picture of the Virgin was said to have opened its eyes. Before the end of the night, witnesses carried the picture in an impromptu procession to a nearby chapel. Over a week later, on Friday, August 18, Chigi mentions that other Marian pictures were seen to have moving eyes.³⁷ In the midst of these numerous demonstrations of popular devotion, and in spite of organizing the procession against many physicians' advice, the government was still working closely with public health officials and the medical establishment. On Saturday, August 12, an order was announced permitting the consumption of meat on Fridays and Saturdays for as long as the disease remained in Rome.³⁸ On the same day, Chigi reports that a meeting of physicians was held.

The icon was finally processed back to S. Maria Maggiore on Tuesday, August 15.³⁹ The procession began at 9 pm and the city was again illuminated. That the return of the procession coincided with the Feast of the Assumption must have been intentional. Earlier that day, the Pope issued a solemn blessing from the Quirinal.⁴⁰ A report in the *Diario Romano* notes the spectacular quality of the city's devotion, in particular the illumination of various sites.⁴¹ The illuminations notes par-

ticular sites associated with church and state, such as the Quirinal or S. Pietro. The *Diario Romano* explicitly connects the illuminations to the restoration of Pius VII. The illumination of the city would have then borne an unmistakable political message reaffirming the authority of the Pope and his regime. The illumination of the city would have more practically created an atmosphere of surveillance, with the benefit of allaying widely held fears that poisoners were secretly spreading disease throughout the city.⁴²

The processions of 1835 and 1837 shored up the precarious position of the papal regime. The early days of Gregory XVI's pontificate were marked by a rebellion involving four-fifths of the Papal States. Though Rome remained faithful to the Pope, the revolt was only put down with the assistance of Austria.⁴³ Resentment of the Austrian presence led in turn to the rise of the Neo-Guelph movement, which sought to unify Italy with the pope as king.⁴⁴ Political instability and the threat of rebellion constantly plagued Gregory XVI's pontificate. The regime must have been aware of the risks posed by cholera. Turmoil always threatens to strike in the wake of a catastrophic epidemic. In fact, on the August 19, 1837,

re la ricchezza, il gusto, la varietà di sì magnifico e commovente spettacolo, il quale, cancellando come il Sole lo splendore della crescente Luna, ha volte in chiarissimo giorno le tenebre della notte. Può averne un'adeguata idea solo colui che le ha vedute, o colui che nel maggio 1814 fu testimone della memorabile illuminazione, colla quale i fedelissimi Romani solenizzarono il sospirato ritorno del diletto loro Sovrano Pio VII di santa ed immortale ricordanza."

³⁶ Chigi 1966, 115.

³⁷ Chigi 1966, 116

³⁸ Chigi 1966, 115.

³⁹ Chigi 1966, 115.

⁴⁰ Teodonio – Negro 1988, 98.

⁴¹ Cit. in Teodonio – Negro 1988, 98: "Il Popolo Romano, che per la tenera e costante sua divozione verso la Gran Madre di Dio ha sempre potuto e adesso può ancor più chiamarsi il Popolo di Maria, non pago di aver nelle sere precedenti onorata con pompose e brillanti illuminazioni, e con preci divote or l'una, or l'altra delle sacre Immagini della VERGINE MADRE, che, sparse in gran numero per le vie della città, rammentano quasi ad ogni passo al pio pellegrino la Salute degl'infermi, il Rifugio de' peccatori, la Consolatrice degli afflitti, ha voluto, per uno slancio spontaneo ed universale di pietà, nelle due sere della vigilia e del giorno della gloriosissima Assunzione di MARIA al Cielo onorarle tutte insieme con una straordinaria e generale illuminazione. Tenterebbe l'impossibile chi imprendesse a descrive-

⁴² Chigi reports that on the evening before the Feast of the Assumption, a Prussian English teacher named Kinsel was beaten to death by a rowdy mob on the eastern slope of the Campidoglio. "Nella sera del quattordici un Kinsel, maestro di lingua inglese, alle falde orientali del Campidoglio fu massacrato da una turba di popolaccio, che sulla stupida indicazione di una femminuccia lo credette un avvelenatore." *Il Diario Romano*, cit. in Teodonio – Negro 1988, 97. Chigi provides other details: "un prussiano a via di Monte Caprino, sospetto 'di aver dato qualche cosa di avvelenato ad un ragazzo (sospetto che puo troppo regna nel popolo)', viene assalito e malmenato dal popolo inferocito, tanto da uscirne moribondo, o forse proprio morto."

⁴³ Aubert 1980, 310.

⁴⁴ Aubert 1980, 316.

a plot by some “uomini perversi” to capture the Castel Sant’Angelo was uncovered.⁴⁵ While the processions reflect Gregory XVI’s commitment to belief in the supernatural in the face of rationalistic medicine – even while taking it into consideration when possible or necessary – , they were also political strategies to redirect the attentions of (and thereby better control) a frightened and potentially dangerous population.

Conclusion

On Sunday, October 15, the people of Rome streamed into S. Maria Maggiore to celebrate the end of the epidemic.⁴⁶ Rome had experienced 9,572 cases, 5,479 deaths, that is, about 36.4 deaths per 1,000 people.⁴⁷ The Pope walked to the church and led everyone singing the *Te Deum*. The Roman people honored the icon for the clear role it played in preserving them, although death rates had actually risen during the procession of 1837.⁴⁸ Yet from the regime’s perspective the icon played an essential role in securing the *Salus populi* or the common welfare of the people. The regime could hardly attribute much of the success to medical science. Physicians had little idea how to treat or respond to the illness. As Richard Wrigley has noted in his work on attitudes to malaria,

cultural phenomena broadly speaking, provided the certainties. By contrast, in medical science, the commitment to empirical analysis of problems resulted less in confident progressive assertions than apologies that such initiatives had been inconclusive, and the recognition that the answer to manifold medical problems was, as yet, beyond the grasp of existing techniques of diagnostic assay.⁴⁹

The fact that the papal regime still actively sought out medical advisors and apparently implemented some of their policies and directives suggests the regime desired to take advantage of any knowledge and technologies that could allow it to govern more effectively. The processions allowed the papal regime to assert its commitment to belief in the sacred, in traditionalist forms of public devotion, and to deploy these beliefs as tools for governing and controlling the population. And yet the decision to process the icon in the first place was in fact more a consequence of modernity, romanticism, and the Catholic revival than it was from long held, traditional practices and beliefs. In doing so, the regime was able to co-opt popular devotion in response to cholera, and to redirect potentially volatile forces towards the consolidation of papal power throughout the city.

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⁴⁵ Preto 1987, 129: “Un editto del 19 agosto deferisce alla commissione della Sacra Consulta gli ‘uomini perversi’ che diffondono le ‘inique menzogne dei veleni’; nel frattempo un progetto dei ‘settari’ di occupare Castel sant’Angelo viene sventato dalla polizia con un’ondata di arresti.”

⁴⁶ Chigi 1966, 118

⁴⁷ Messina 1984, 437–438.

⁴⁸ Teodonio – Negro 1988, 98–99.

⁴⁹ Wrigley 2000, 209.

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