

C. S. Peirce in Rome (1870) and the Issue of Papal Infallibility

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"I would with all my heart join the ancient church of Rome if I could.
But your book is an awful warning against doing so."
C. S. Peirce, *Letter to George Searle*, August 9, 1895 (L 397)²

1. Introduction

Charles Sanders Peirce stayed in Rome three times over the course of his life. These visits took place during his first European trip (June 18, 1870–March 7, 1871) on the occasion of the American expedition to observe the solar eclipse in Sicily on the 22nd of December of 1870.³ There are two delightful letters from his first stay in Rome in October 13-20(?): one on the 14th of October to his mother and another on the 16th to his Aunt Lizzie describing with pleasure his touristic visit to the "City of the Soul", as he calls Rome, using Lord Byron's expression.⁴ We barely have information about his second stay in Rome on the way to Sicily (December 1-8), but we have quite precise information about his third stay in Rome upon his return from Sicily in the first week of January 1871, since he recorded the main data in an agenda (*MS 1614*).

In my presentation I want to describe some of Peirce's feelings while in Rome, his admiration of the beautiful artworks, but also his hostility to the papacy—typical of New England in his time—, and reinforced by the declaration of the dogma of papal infallibility approved by the first Vatican Council just a few months earlier, on the 18th of July of 1870.

[Both issues —Peirce's views about Rome and papal infallibility— are extremely interesting and we have no time available to go into all the details, which we have

¹ I want to express my deepest gratitude for the Charles S. Peirce Society's invitation to take part in this panel with some respected colleagues in one of the two Society Sessions in the XXV World Congress of Philosophy, celebrated at the La Sapienza University, in Rome 1-8 August 2024. I want to thank Rosa Maria Mayorga for her corrections and suggestions.

² Peirce's letters are identified as usual by the numbers of the Robin Catalogue available at <<https://peirce.sitohost.iu.edu/robin/rcatalog.htm>>.

³ For a complete information about these European journeys, see S. Barrena and J. Nubiola, *Los viajes europeos de Charles S. Peirce, 1870-1883*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 2022, and "The Cosmopolitan Peirce: His Five Visits to Europe", C. de Waal (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Charles S. Peirce*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2024, 26-42.

⁴ Both letters are available at <<http://www.unav.es/gep/Roma14.10.70.html>> and <<http://www.unav.es/gep/Roma16.10.70.html>>.

published elsewhere⁵. Also I want to illustrate my presentation with some images, if it is possible.]

2. Peirce in Rome

Charles S. Peirce was in Rome for the first time in mid-October 1870. He probably arrived on the 13th, on his return from preliminary exploration in Sicily. In his two letters from Rome, Peirce describes in considerable detail his impressions and expresses well his admiration for the art he is discovering. I want to transcribe here his description of a day spent sightseeing in Rome included in the October 14 letter to his mother [including some photographs of Rome of the time]. It is a long quotation but it deserves our attention (L 341)⁶:

[...] I then went first to the Palazzo Doria where is the largest collection of pictures in Rome. Most of them I found very uninteresting. I went through this gallery & then went to the Palazzo Barberini (stopping on the way to see a beautiful fountain).⁷ Here there is a small but interesting gallery. I first saw in a private saloon of the palace into which I wandered some fine frescoes. In the gallery I saw in the first place the celebrated picture of Beatrice Cenci by Guido Reni⁸ together with interesting portraits of her mother & mother in law. Then the celebrated Fornarina of Raphael. Then a picture by Raphael Mengs of one of his daughters. Then a curious picture by Albrecht Durer of Christ among the Doctors. There were some other pictures there which were doubtless interesting to connoisseurs. I then took a carriage & drove to the Forum & from there to the Colloseum. I was astonished to see how demolished this amphitheatre is. It is a mere shell. Hardly anything is left of it. On rather a vast deal but a very small proportion of the original pile. [...] From the Colloseum I drove to the church of Santa Maria Maggiore. This church is one of the very finest & largest in Rome. It was originally built about A. D. 350! Old enough! But as it is its general effect belongs to work done upon it a hundred years later. It is very rich & beautiful. Here is a picture of the Virgin which they pretend was painted by St. Luke. I was greatly struck by this church. Before going to this church I had been to the Lateran. I now drove to the Forum of Trajan where is among other antiquities Trajan's column.⁹ From here I drove over the Ponte Sisto to St. Peter's. This impressed me & exhilarated me greatly. It is wonderful & great indeed. But not equal to Salisbury Cathedral. [The letter includes here a map of his tour]

There is an absence of true belief about St. Peter's.¹⁰ It's got up. It confirmed me however in thinking that St. Paul's in London is really a very fine church. It is the enormous size & perfect proportions of St. Peter's that impresses one. Beyond that there is nothing great about it.

⁵ See the webpage of Grupo de Estudios Peirceanos at <<https://www.unav.es/gep/PeirceRoma.html>>, and also J. Nubiola, "C. S. Peirce and G. M. Searle: The Hoax of Infallibilism", *Cognitio* IX/1 (2008), 73-84, available also at <<https://www.unav.es/users/PeirceSearle.html>>.

⁶ It is available at <<https://www.unav.es/gep/Roma14.10.70En.html>>.

⁷ It is most probably the Trevi Fountain, very close to the Palace.

⁸ Today this portrait of Beatrice Cenci is attributed to Elisabetta Sirani (c.1662).

⁹ Many years later, in "The Editor's Manual. English Spelling" (MS 1180) Peirce notes: "I remember in Rome, in 1870, an Egyptian obelisk, covered with hieroglyphs, surmounted by a gilt cross and resting on a base with an inscription of Trajan. This monument pleased me greatly, as an epitome of Rome. Probably, ere this, the cross has been removed by those to whom it seemed barbarically unhistorical. They were unconscious that it was their own proceeding that was barbarously oblivious of history. But I would not have it restored; for its removal bespeaks the spirit of a new historical phase of the eternal city".

¹⁰ Peirce's reaction to St. Peter's Basilica reflects well the anti-papist prejudice of New England. When in November 1873 William James visited Rome for the first time, he described St. Peter's in a letter to his father: "The building-i.e. its skeleton-is one of the titanic acts of the human mind—but it so reeks as it stands now with the negation of that Gospel which it pretends to serve, is so perfectly explosive a monument of human pride insolence, presumption or whatever other words express transgression of those 'bounds where all must pause' that for the moment I felt fully like Martin Luther or any modern evangelical fanatic who sees in Rome the incarnation of Satan." Letter of November 30, *The Correspondence of William James*, IV, 462.

What I want to highlight is how Peirce describes his impressions of what he has been visiting: the impact that all those buildings and works of art had in his mind or his heart. My colleague Sara Barrena and I have worked extensively on this issue suggesting that here is the germ of Peirce's late aesthetics. We are convinced that the feelings that Peirce experienced in Europe were seeds that bore fruit in later years. The point that we want to underline is that Peirce in his first trip not only “discovered” Europe, and in particular Rome, but also learned the great importance of the sensations that things produce in us, and thus the importance of the aesthetic experience. Throughout his life, Peirce tried to elaborate on the connection between sensations and the imagination. For Peirce, science—and also art—had to be derived from experience and observation. In this sense it can be said that his European voyages and his visit to Rome certainly belonged to the process that Peirce described in 1903: “I have gone through a systematic course of training in recognizing my feelings. I have worked with intensity for so many hours a day every day for long years to train myself to this; and it is a training which I would recommend to all of you. The artist has such a training.” (CP 5.112)¹¹

From this first visit to Rome there is also kept a second letter addressed to his aunt Lizzie on October 16, 1870. I will quote only a fragment that fully confirms what I have just said (L 336)¹²:

From here I went down to examine the Forum a little more minutely than I had done before. I went over it with some care & noted everything I could. From here I went to see the Forum of Augustus where there is a triplet of fine columns with entablature which belonged to a Temple of Mars –inconceivably battered. Also a very lofty & extraordinary wall. From here I went to take another look at the Forum of Trajan, where there are some considerable remains & columns strange to say of a Basilica & the celebrated Trajan’s Column now absurdly crowned with a statue of St. Peter as the other finer column of Marcus Aurelius is with St. Paul, -finer in my humble opinion, the *correct* opinion is quite entirely the reverse. From here I went to the church of SS. Apostoli. There are two monuments by Canova here. One of them very striking.¹³ I greatly admire Canova. My opinions on the subject of painting & sculpture I am generally hold very timidly but not this one. I think Canova great –very, very great. I was first struck –indeed quite overwhelmed- by his Theseus Killing the Minotaur in Vienna. Then I was greatly pleased with his Pauline Borghese¹⁴ & now this monument of Clement XIV I think has great power. The church also has some fine frescoes & an ancient eagle in relief from the Forum of Trajan.¹⁵ I then went into the monastery adjacent to this church & saw a monument by Michael Angelo. But to appreciate Michael Angelo’s statues requires more knowledge of the history of art than I have got. They seem to me horrid misshapen misproportioned things.

Peirce's impressions about his first visit to Rome are fully captured in these two long letters. Charles Peirce passed through Rome again in early December when he was heading with his father Benjamin, his wife Zina, his brother Bertie and the rest of the American expedition to Sicily to observe the eclipse of the sun on the 22 of December. They stayed at the Hotel de l'Europa in the Piazza di Spagna, which was a common accommodation for North American travelers. We have no more references of this second

¹¹ Cf. S. Barrena and J. Nubiola, "The Cosmopolitan Peirce: His Five Visits to Europe", C. de Waal (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Charles S. Peirce*, 30.

¹² It is available at <<https://www.unav.es/gep/Roma16.10.70En.html>>.

¹³ Those two monuments by Canova in the Church of the Holy Apostles are the funerary monument of Clement XIV, of which he speaks below in this letter, and probably the funerary stele (1807) of the engraver and antiquarian Giovanni Volpato, a personal friend of Canova. It is somehow surprising that this funerary monument is one of the works that most impressed Charles S. Peirce during his stay in Rome; today it occupies a very secondary place.

¹⁴ Peirce would have seen this statue a couple of days earlier at the Borghese Gallery.

¹⁵ It is the bas-relief of an imperial eagle of the II century, rescued from the forums, that Card. Giuliano, nephew of Pope Sixtus IV, had installed in the portico of the Holy Apostles.

stay, but we have a detailed register of his third stay on his way back of Sicily in the first days of January 1871.

In this last stay Peirce and his wife suffered bad weather and the consequences of the *alluvione* of the river Tevere on the 28th of December, registered on the walls of Piazza Navonna and in other several places. He was able to visit St Peter and the Vatican museum. I will only copy two of Peirce's references in his notebook: "St. P[eter]'s very beautiful in the dim light." [January 2]. "Vatican. Sixtine chapel an overrated affair. Stanzas, the gems." [January 7].

Peirce will not come back to Rome, although in Brent's biography¹⁶ a new visit is mentioned in October of 1883 for the seventh Geodesic Conference, but we know that on September 8, Peirce and Juliette embarked in Le Havre on the steamer *France*, which arrived in New York on September 18, without going to Rome as was initially planned.

3. The Issue of Papal Infallibility

I have argued elsewhere that for Peirce, scientific activity is a genuine religious enterprise, perhaps even *the* religious activity *par excellence*, and that to divorce religion from science is antithetical to both the scientific spirit and the genuine Peirce.¹⁷ In this vein, I suggest that Peirce's framework for the relations between science and religion, reason and faith in the last decades of his life seem congenial to the Roman Catholic tradition. Perhaps the strongest conflict between Peirce's view on science and Roman Catholic faith may be epitomized in the dogma of papal infallibility, declared by the Vatican Council I and Pius IX on July of 1870, only eleven weeks before the first visit to Rome by the young Peirce. As is well known, since it was first enunciated, the doctrine of papal infallibility has been a permanent object of mockery and derision in the cultivated circles of Anglo-American intellectuals. As the late Rorty wrote, Pius's decision "was making Catholicism look ridiculous".¹⁸

All of you recall that Peirce identified pope Pius IX in "The Fixation of Belief" (1877) as "the most perfect example in history" of the method of authority (*CP* 5.379; *W* 3.250-1). His two letters during his days in Rome are sprinkled with negative comments about the pope, who was in the middle of a terrible conflict with the newly established Italian state: "Had I been at the head of the Italian government, I would have dealt ruthlessly with the pope" (letter to his mother of 14 October), or "this goose of a pope", as he said in the letter to his aunt Lizzie (letter of 16 October).¹⁹

We know that for Peirce science is an essentially fallibilistic endeavor. "Indeed, out of a contrite fallibilism, combined with a high faith in the reality of knowledge, and an intense desire to find things out, all my philosophy has always seemed to me to grow" (*CP* 1.14, c.1897). This famous quotation from the concluding paragraph of the preface

¹⁶ J. Brent, *Charles S. Peirce. A Life*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2nd ed, 1998, 144.

¹⁷ J. Nubiola, "Il lume naturale: Abduction and God", *Semiotiche* 1/2 (2004) 91-102, available online at <<https://www.unav.es/users/LumeNaturale.html>>

¹⁸ R. Rorty, "Acting Fallible. Review of G. Wills: *Papal Sin. Structures of Deceit*", *The New York Times on the Web*, 11 June 2000, available online at <<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/06/11/reviews/000611.11rortyt.html>>.

¹⁹ See also Ch. J. W. Kloesel, "Scattered Remarks on Peirce and Italy", *VS Quaderni di Studi Semiotici* 55/56 (1990), 9.

of *The Collected Papers* is extracted from the MS 865, which was tentatively titled by Richard Robin as "Notes on Religious and Scientific Infallibilism," and which was summarized in the following way: "Anticipated awakening of religious life, with greater simplicity of belief and greater spiritualization of the creeds. The Church's claim to infallibility is sound enough if by 'infallibility' is meant practical infallibility".²⁰ This summary reflects well Peirce's mind in his Arisbe period.

"Though infallibility in scientific matters seems to me irresistibly comical" (*CP* 1.9, c.1897), it would be quite a misunderstanding of the doctrine of fallibilism to suppose that it means that we cannot count with accuracy, or that we cannot attain a sure knowledge of the creations of our minds, "it only says that people cannot attain absolute certainty concerning questions of fact" (*CP* 1.149, c.1897)²¹. One quotation of *Minute Logic* will be useful to summarize Peirce's view against absolute or *theoretical* infallibility and in favor of *practical* infallibility:

There is nothing at all in our knowledge which we have any warrant at all for regarding as absolute in any particular. Absolute infallibility may belong to the pope and the ecumenical councils: it is outside my province to discuss that question. But I am quite confident it does not belong to the multiplication table. If I must make any exception, let it be that the assertion that every assertion but this is fallible, is the only one that is absolutely infallible. But though nothing else is *absolutely* infallible, many propositions are *practically* infallible; such as the dicta of conscience. (*CP* 2.75, c. 1902).

The idea of an "absolute truth" is for Peirce simply bad metaphysics, totally incompatible with a sound understanding of what science is. I quote now from Peirce's August 9, 1895 letter to his former colleague in the Harvard Observatory, George Searle, (who became a Paulist father in 1905), with whom Peirce dealt in depth about the issue of papal infallibility²²:

We all fully accept the judgment of common sense [...], without in the least pretending that common sense is infallible in any metaphysical sense, but simply that *practically* the dicta of the heart ought to be accepted *practically* as infallible, then, i. e. if Rome were content with as much authority as *that*, and it is mighty, there might be a strong probability of her uniting the entire *Christendom*. In short, the great foe to Rome is metaphysics. It is her malady.

If Rome, instead of claiming *theoretical infallibility* — "a phrase that logical analysis proves to be a mere jingle of words with a jangle of contradictory meanings", Peirce writes two years later (*CP* 1.661, 1898)— were to content herself with *practical* infallibility, she could attract the entire *Christendom* to unity.

²⁰ R. Robin, *Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, MA, 1967, MS 865. The complete manuscript is available at Digital Peirce Archive (<<https://rs.cms.hu-berlin.de/peircearchive/pages/home.php>>). There is a Spanish translation by S. Barrena in Charles S. Peirce, *El amor evolutivo y otros ensayos sobre ciencia y religión*, Marbot, Barcelona, 2010, 191-198.

²¹ The text continues: "Numbers are merely a system of names devised by men for the purpose of counting. It is a matter of real fact to say that in a certain room there are two persons. It is a matter of fact to say that each person has two eyes. It is a matter of fact to say that there are four eyes in the room. But to say that if there are two persons and each person has two eyes there will be four eyes is not a statement of fact, but a statement about the system of numbers which is our own creation."

²² C. S. Peirce, Letter to George Searle, August 9, 1895 (*L* 397); see J. Nubiola, "C. S. Peirce and G. M. Searle: The Hoax of Infallibilism", available at <<https://www.unav.es/users/PeirceSearle.html>>.

4. Conclusion

Rome was important for Peirce. In his three short visits in the fall of 1870 and the first week of January of 1871 Peirce was deeply impressed by the weight of its history and the beauty of its works of art: Rome and the other places of Europe that he visited planted in his mind the seeds that bore fruit in the aesthetics of his later years. Also, although the young Peirce was very hostile to the pope and his recently-declared infallibility, in his later years Peirce held that he could accept it if it were understood in terms of *practical infallibility*, like a Supreme Court decision to finish a discussion. For this reason he wrote to his former colleague these words that I have quoted at the beginning of my talk: "I would with all my heart join the ancient church of Rome if I could. But your book is an awful warning against doing so."

I can add that in last June, the Vatican has published a document of study to promote the union of Christians proposing a reinterpretation of the papal infallibility along the lines suggested by Peirce.

[Thank you very much for your attention]