



Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time October 13, 2013 C

Church History—Part 13 From the French Revolution to Vatican Council I Part 2

Two weeks ago, we had Part One of this period in church history. This week we will look at:

- Liberalism, nationalism and the Church in the nineteenth century
- Nationalism in Italy brings an end to the Papal States
- Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* condemns liberalism and progressive thinking Catholics
- Vatican Council I and papal infallibility

Liberalism, nationalism and the Church in the nineteenth century

As the Church moves into the second half of the nineteenth century, it has had to deal with liberalism and nationalism—two movements inspired by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution—which are very much in the people's minds.

Liberalism is a general term for a movement that favors change and the establishment of a new order. Liberalism in politics supports constitutional and representative governments (instead of monarchies—especially monarchies with absolute power), religious toleration, separation of church and state, freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, and education.

Catholics opposed to political liberalism fear a recurrence of anarchy, chaos of the French Revolution, and suppression of the Church. Conservative Catholics want to maintain the alliance between the Catholic Church and the state so that only the Catholic view of the truth will be advocated and upheld by government. They are opposed to a “free market” of ideas in which truth and error are put on the same plane. Also, many of liberalism's ideas are anti-religious. Liberals in the nineteenth century see the Church as part of the old order that is passing away and needs to be pushed aside. Social reformers like Karl Marx (1818-1883) see religion as “opium of the people,” which keeps them content in their station in life.

At first, only a few Catholics support political liberalism since it is so radically different than the way society has

operated for centuries. In 1830, French priest Félicité de Lamennais (1782-1854) begins to advocate political liberties as a way of freeing the Catholic Church from political ties and enabling it to pursue its spiritual mission. Lamennais declares: “*Let's not tremble before liberalism. Let us catholicize it.*” But the French bishops are given to trembling. When Lamennais makes no headway with the French bishops, he and his colleagues go to Rome to appeal their case. After waiting for three months, Pope Gregory XVI issues an encyclical that is a scathing condemnation of the doctrine of liberal Catholicism. The encyclical rejects separation of church and state, denounces liberty of conscience as madness, and freedom of the press as detestable. As an absolute ruler of the Papal States, Gregory has no desire to adjust his worldview to the thinking of people like Lamennais. But Lamennais is in fact a true prophet. It will take Church leaders many decades to see the wisdom of his worldview.

Nationalism is a movement aimed at unifying nations that are divided into mini-independent states. This movement is interspersed with liberalism to create the modern states of Germany and Italy.

Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) helps create Germany by uniting smaller German states into an empire under the King of Prussia. In Bismarck's plan to unify Germany, he considers the Catholic Church—and especially the papacy—as an obstacle. So he sets out to end papal influence in Germany by setting up a national church. He also expels the Jesuits and other religious orders and places clergy and schools under state control. But with the growth of socialism in his country, Bismarck comes to realize that the Catholic Church is a force for stability. With the election of Pope Leo XIII in 1878, the anti-Catholic laws are gradually moderated.

Nationalism in Italy brings about the end of the Papal States. For centuries, Italy has been divided into small duchies ruled by rival dukes. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, a movement to unify Italy is born. The Papal States are seen as a big block to the unification movement since they stretch across the whole of central Italy, cutting off the south from the north. The Papal States have been given to the Church by Pepin in 755. Popes through the ages have felt that they need the income from these territories to pay for the administration of the Church in Rome. In addition, ownership of such

territories seems to enhance the pope's standing as spiritual, temporal and political leader. Sadly, many popes are focused more on their temporal rather than their spiritual role.

Pius IX (1846-1878)

Affectionately known as "Pio Nono" (Italian for "Pius the Ninth"), is pope during this period. He is destined to have the longest pontificate to date in the history of the Church, i.e., 32 years. He reigns during a time of tremendous social and intellectual upheaval. Initially, Pio Nono with his charming personality is hugely popular and is thought to be a liberal or progressive pope, open to social change and experiments in democratic and representative government.

However, the pope's popularity disappears overnight after he vetoes a vote by his own parliament (of the Papal States) to join with other Italian forces to declare war on Austria for taking over a section of Northern Italy. Driving out the Austrians is part of the unification movement. While the pope is very sympathetic to the cause of Italian unity, he cannot envision his army in a war against Catholic Austria, which explains his veto. This decision enrages the people of Rome, and riots break out. When the pope's Prime Minister is assassinated, Pius IX flees Rome dressed as a parish priest.

Soon after, Giuseppe Garibaldi, a leader of the Italian liberation movement, seizes Rome and declares it a Republic. Between 1850 and 1865, the armies of the liberation movement gradually take over the territories of the Papal States.

In exchange for the renunciation of all claims to the Papal States, the pope is guaranteed complete independence and liberty in the administration of church affairs, full jurisdiction over the selection of bishops (which he previously did not have), ownership of papal palaces and galleries, and mutually agreed income for the papal court and clergy.

One wonders why the pope would not agree to a settlement that would have relieved him of the burden of being a temporal ruler. For some time, the matter has hung in the balance. The more progressive members of the Curia urge Pius IX to accept the government's offer. But in the end, the conservative element of the Curia wins the day. They persuade the pope that freely handing over the Papal States would be a triumph for liberalism. Pius IX used to say: "If the Lord wants me to lose the Papal States, then let him take them away. I cannot hand them over." Willingly or unwillingly, Pius IX has to realize and accept that the time has come for the Church to give up its temporal power. So in 1879, after 1,000 years of being a

temporal and political leader in Europe, the pope is free to focus totally on the spiritual mission of the Church.

Pius IX rejects the government's offer and declares himself a "prisoner of the Vatican." He also forbids Catholics to vote in political elections which would give the more radical element a free hand in the running of Italy.

Syllabus of Errors. In the nineteenth century, a new wave of progressive faithful Catholics desires to bring the Church's leadership into the nineteenth century in order to effectively dialog and hopefully influence other scholars who are not only hostile to the Church but also to Christianity. This new breed of Catholic scholars within the Church wants the Catholic faith to be examined and presented within the context of modern philosophy, scientific advances and new methods of historical study.

At the same time, a group of conservative Catholics bonds together to protect the Church from what they perceive as evil influences of liberalism and secularism. This group becomes known as the ***ultramontanes*** which means "over the mountains." The ultramontanes look over the mountains (the Alps) to Rome for support and leadership in their battle against the liberal ideas inside and outside the Church. They are known for their very strong devotion to the pope and want very much to strengthen his *spiritual* authority at a time when he is losing his temporal power.

The ultramontanes have no time for Catholic scholars who are trying to bring the best of liberal ideas to bear on how Catholicism presents itself to the modern world. One of the new breed of progressive thinkers at that time is Oxford professor John Henry Newman, later to become one of England's most famous converts to Catholicism. While Newman has little time for much of what the liberals are presenting to the world, he is a strong advocate of free enquiry. In one response to the ultramontanes who are deadily opposed to all liberal ideas, Newman says: "*We are shrinking into ourselves, narrowing the lines of communication, trembling at freedom of thought, and using the language of dismay and despair at the prospect before us.*" In their fight against liberalism, the ultramontanes appeal to Pius IX, and the pope does not disappoint.

On December 8, 1864, Pius IX issues the encyclical *Quanta Cura* to which he appends the famous *Syllabus of Errors*. In it, the pope presents the Catholic position on the liberal ideas circulating in his time. He also lists 80 propositions that are false and which Catholics should reject, e.g., rationalism, socialism, liberal capitalism, materialism. The *Syllabus* rejects the proposition that "it is possible to please God in the Protestant church as well as in the true Catholic Church." It condemns, among

others, the concept of separation of church and state and the belief that “each person should be free to adapt and follow that religion which seems best to the light of reason.” In the final catchall proposition, Pius IX considers erroneous the premise that the pope “can and ought to recognize and harmonize himself with progress, with liberalism and with modern civilization.” This final statement has made the Catholic Church the enemy of all contemporary developments.

We should remember that the *Syllabus of Errors* was issued at a time when in some places, ‘modern civilization’ and ‘progress’ denote instances where church property was seized, religious orders were expelled from their houses, and belonging to a religious community was illegal. Given that historical context may help one to understand the reactionary tone of many of the propositions.

The publication of the *Syllabus of Errors* arouses fierce reaction. In some places, it is publicly burned. In France, bishops are warned that they will be arrested if they read it from the pulpit.

Clearly, the Church in Pius IX’s day is not ready to open its windows to the winds of change occurring in the world.

Vatican Council I and papal infallibility

As a result of the Enlightenment, the question of the relationship between faith and reason is raised. Some Enlightenment thinkers have made a god out of human reason and deny the value and role of Divine Revelation. Also, in the years prior to the First Vatican Council, the role of the pope in the Church was receiving a lot of attention. Now that the pope has relinquished his *temporal* power with the loss of the Papal States, the ultramontanists are pushing to strengthen the spiritual power of the pope.

The First Vatican Council opens on December 8, 1869, attended by 714 bishops (including 46 bishops from the United States). The Council lasts less than a year due to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. The Council passes two constitutions: 1) the relationship between faith and reason, and 2) the infallibility of the teaching authority of the pope in matters of faith and morals. This latter issue causes much heated discussion.

While believing in the infallible teaching authority of the Church in matters of faith and morals, many bishops believe that in an age when the absolute power of monarchs were being strongly opposed that this was not a good time to declare the absolute authority of the pope. Furthermore, these same bishops believe that the exercise of papal infallibility should only occur *with* the

participation of the bishops (which in the final decree is excluded). Some 60 bishops of the minority group—unable in conscience to give assent to the definition, and unwilling to expose their dissent to the public eye by voting in the negative—quietly pack their bags and leave Rome with the knowledge of the pope.

The doctrine of papal infallibility does not mean that the pope can create new dogmas or beliefs. Rather it means that he can declare as infallibly true a belief that was already for centuries a belief of church. Papal infallibility states that the pope is preserved from error when teaching *ex-cathedra* (“from the chair”) on matters of faith and morals. The doctrine confirms what most Catholics already believe. The Church will have to wait until Vatican Council II (1962-1965) to take up the unfinished business of Vatican I defining the role of bishops, priests and the laity in the Church.

Many historians believe that Pius IX’s real success is his contribution to the interior life of the Church. Under his guidance, many of the old religious orders are revitalized and new ones founded. The sacramental life of the Church is revived and devotions to the Sacred Heart and to Mary become very popular.

Despite the fact that Pio Nono has become very unpopular with the Romans until his death, he is liked by the faithful outside Rome. He is the first pope to promote papal audiences and has a great way with people. Yet prior to his death, he realizes that his way of dealing with changes occurring in the world demands a new attitude and style. At the end of his pontificate, he states: “*I hope my successor will be as much attached to the Church as I have been and will have as keen a desire to do good; beyond that, I can see that everything has changed; my system and my policies have had their day, but I am too old to change my course. That will be the task of my successor*” (Quoted in Church History –Faith Handed, p.104).

Have a blessed week,

