

# FROM THE CATHOLIC REFORMATION TO THE FRENCH REVOLUTION 1648-1789AD

In this Article, we will look at:

- **Great age of kings**
- **Two false spiritualities**
- **Suppression of the Jesuits**
- **The Church in the Age of Reason and Science**
- **Church's response to modernity**

## Introduction

During the years between the Reformation and the French Revolution, the Church has had more than its share of challenges.

Absolute monarchs in Europe try and often succeed in wresting power from the Church. Official approval of the Church does not translate into official respect for the Church's right to manage its own affairs. In some Protestant countries such as Sweden, Catholicism dies down because it is not the favored religion. In Ireland, Scotland and England, Catholics are persecuted and robbed of their civil rights. Those who immigrate to the New World find intolerance almost everywhere (with the exception of Pennsylvania).

On the intellectual horizon, new challenges arise with the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. Scientists, like Galileo, who have no intention of contradicting Church teaching, are treated harshly by some Church leaders. It will take time for Catholicism to reach the point where Pope Pius XI (1922-1939) can say, "The Church has nothing to fear from the progress of science."

## Great age of kings

We can sometimes lose our freedom without even realizing it. It just slips away—slowly but surely. In many ways, the same thing can be said about the Church in Europe during the period from 1648 to 1789. On the surface, it appears that nothing much happens during this time to limit the Church's freedom. But nothing can be further from the truth.

Between 1618 and 1648, a period known as the *Thirty Years' War*, Protestants and Catholics are still in conflict. In 1648 the *Treaty of Westphalia* brings

an end to the wars of religion, leaving Europe divided into Protestant and Catholic states. The following 150 years will be lived as the *Great Age of Kings in Europe*. A new kind of monarch emerges: the absolute monarch. These rulers have virtually unlimited power over their subjects. They manage to control every aspect of their people's lives, including religion.

In the Catholic countries of Europe, absolute monarchs pose a grave threat to the freedom of the Church. That may seem like a strange comment to make, considering that these same rulers shower all kinds of favors on the Church. They make the Catholic Church the "established" Church in their kingdoms, which means that only Catholics can worship publicly. Protestants even have to be buried in Catholic cemeteries with Catholic ceremonies.

The parish priests are civil officials in charge of such vital statistics as the registration of births, marriages, and deaths. Government announcements are usually made by the priest from the pulpit at Sunday Mass. All schools and charitable institutions are under the control of the Church. The clergy are great landowners and pay no taxes; indeed, they collect their own tax, which is called *tithe*. The tithe—usually ten percent of one's income—is a levy imposed by the Church on its people.

**Government control.** The Catholic Church pays a heavy price for being the established Church. That price is government control. The absolute monarchs in Catholic countries try to dominate the Church much as Henry VIII did in England in his day. Of course none of them ever formally reject the authority of the pope as Henry did, but they try to whittle down his power and that of the bishops as much as they could. Because they usually control the appointment of bishops and abbots, they select candidates who will be obedient to them. Does this sound familiar? It should. It is simply another version of *caesaropapism*, Caesar's age-old desire to be papa—a problem that goes back to Constantine in the fourth century.

Two extreme examples of how powerful kings seek to control the Church are *Gallicanism* and *Josephinism*.

**Gallicanism.** Louis XIV ('Sun King') rules France for 72 years, from 1643-1715, living by the motto, "I am the state." He believes in the absolute power of the monarchy. In the religious sphere, Louis' motto is "One King, One Law, One Faith" which means that the king embodies not only the state but also the French Church. In declaring "I am the State," Louis may as well have proclaimed, "I am the French Church." For Louis, "One Faith" is Catholicism controlled by the State and not by Rome. Catholic France under Louis XIV has no room or tolerance for non-Catholics. He persecutes the Huguenots so much so that many of them flee to England and French Canada.

Louis XIV's claim to French independence from Rome becomes known as *Gallicanism* (Latin for Gaul or France). In 1682, Louis forces the French clergy to promote and teach in seminaries the famous "**Four Articles**" which maintain that:

- The Pope has no power in temporal matters.
- Church councils are superior to the Pope in spiritual matters.
- The papacy must adapt its rulings to the French Church.
- The decrees of the Pope are only binding on the faith when a general council agrees with them.

As a result of these four Articles, the French Church stands independent from Rome, just as the English Church is under Henry VIII.

The pope fights back by refusing to appoint any bishops in France. Eventually, Louis modifies his policies although he will continue to have a strong influence on the French Church for the next century.

**Josephinism.** In the eighteenth century, rulers throughout Europe imitate Louis' interference with church affairs and hostility towards papal authority over the national Church. Another prime example of state control over the Church in another Catholic country is *Josephinism*. The Emperor Joseph II (1765-1790) of Austria believes the Church should simply be treated as another arm of the government with the state controlling church laws and practices. When Pope Pius VI (1775-1799) goes to Austria to persuade Joseph from placing more restrictions on the Church, he is sent away without achieving his goal. Joseph, greatly influenced by the new

Enlightenment philosophy, closes monasteries and convents throughout the empire judging them to be of no practical use.

### **Two false spiritualities**

During this period of Church history, two false spiritualities develop: Jansenism and Quietism, both misguided efforts at spiritual renewal.

**Jansenism** derives its name from Cornelius Jansen (1585-1638), a French bishop. Its doctrine is somewhat like Calvinism with its very pessimistic view of human nature. Jansenism teaches that God has predestined who will be saved and who will not be saved. Jansenists believe that Christ did not die for all people and that only the most worthy should receive Holy Communion. They maintain that there is an immense gulf between God and people, and that God is an angry God who is difficult to please. They have a negative view of the body, especially of sexuality. Much of the scrupulosity about impure thoughts, so prevalent in the pre-Vatican II Church, comes from Jansenism. Its most famous philosopher and proponent is Blaise Pascal. Long after, the heresy will be condemned by several popes, but will linger on for many centuries.

**Quietism** is inspired by a Spanish priest, Michael Molinos (1628-1696). This false spirituality takes its name from its ideology of complete, passive surrender to the will of God and abandonment of all human effort when it comes to salvation. It teaches that all that is needed to be saved is quiet meditation and trust in God—no "externals" such as statues, rosaries or even the sacraments. One should not even be concerned about resisting temptation. Quietism's most famous advocate is Archbishop François Fenelon (1651-1715). Unfortunately, an overreaction to this heresy provokes a strong anti-mystical response. For the next century or two, spiritual writers will constantly face scrutiny for Quietist tendencies.

In contrast to Jansenism and Quietism, Catholicism teaches that the life of holiness is not just for the few. Spiritual effort is worthwhile. God gives his grace to every Christian. Prayer, frequent reception of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, and works of self-denial and charity towards others are ways all Christians can grow closer to the Lord. Contrary to Quietism, the Church teaches that growth in holiness does take effort. And against Jansenism, the Church

believes that God is a God of justice, but also a God of infinite mercy and forgiving love who provides his children with many opportunities to grow in holiness and to live the Christian life.

### **Suppression of the Jesuits (1773)**

Regarding this sad and unjust event in the history of the Church, the *Encyclopedia of Catholic History – Revised* states:

*By the mid-eighteenth century, the Society of Jesus was known across the globe as a corps of devoted supporters of the papacy and a leading voice in the Church for missionary zeal and adherence to the teachings of the faith. Their loyalty to the Holy See, determination to remain independent of national or secular interference, and the power they wielded in the missions had created many enemies in Europe and its colonial lands. Protestants, in Germany and England most of all, hated the order for its intellectual assaults on Protestant thinking. Gallicanists and Jansenists, joined by the leading lights of the Enlightenment, attacked the Jesuits from a variety of positions. And the Spanish and Portuguese crowns disliked Jesuit independence and habitual interference in the running of the colonies in Central and South America. One by one, various states launched persecutions and then expelled the order: Portugal (1759), France (1764), Spain (1767), and Naples (1768). The expulsions demonstrated the worst excesses of the Enlightenment and the absolutist tendencies of governments at the time, since the priests were cruelly ejected. Not content with the ruthless humiliation of the society, France, Spain, Portugal, and Naples pressed the Holy See to suppress the entire order. (p.487)*

A crisis has been building for years for the popes. Under threat of a total break in relations with these Catholic monarchies, Pope Clement XIV suppresses the Society of Jesus in 1773. This action deals a huge blow to the Church everywhere, especially to education and to the missions. The Jesuits are forced to abandon hundreds of Catholic colleges precisely at a time when the Church needs educated leaders to combat the anti-religious influences of the Enlightenment. Thousands of Jesuit missionaries are expelled from the Portuguese, Spanish and French empires, severely crippling the missionary work of the Church. Finally, when the storm of the French Revolution arrives, the Church cannot count on its best spiritual soldiers.

When the Superior-General of the Jesuits protests the decision, he is imprisoned as are many others for years under harsh conditions. The only places where Jesuits find safety are Prussia and Russia where the suppression decree has not been published.

Pius VII reinstates the Society of Jesus in Italy in 1804 and restores it to the universal Church in 1814. When the order gradually regains its strength, it is often singled out for persecution, arrest and even death, in areas undergoing political upheaval. Today, the Jesuits number about 25,000 priests, working in over a hundred countries.

### **The Church in the Age of Reason and Science**

While European explorers are discovering new worlds, in Europe itself new discoveries and new ways of thinking are developing that will greatly challenge the Church and her beliefs.

The period from the middle of the seventeenth century to the present time is a new era in human history, often called the Modern World. What makes this era different? Three developments: 1) emergence of modern science, 2) new approach to philosophy based solely on human reason, and 3) introduction of a new political system which replaces the monarchy and the divine right of kings. These three developments shake Western civilization to its core and pose severe challenges for the Catholic Church.

### **Science and faith**

While some Catholics are off discovering new lands, others are discovering more about the world in which we live. They include Albert the Great, who begins the study of geology, and Nicholas Copernicus, who proposes that the sun—and not the earth—is the center of the universe. The Jesuits produce a huge number of scientists. Angela Secchi initiates the study of astrophysics, Francesco Grimaldi comes up with the wave theory of light and draws the map that will remain the basis of all modern moon maps. Seismology is often called the “Jesuit science” because members of the Order have contributed so much to its development.

Having outlined how much the Church has been in the forefront of scientific developments, this is not to say that the popes at the time are supportive of all scientific discoveries. Church authorities especially get nervous when it seems that some of the new theories challenge the church’s interpretation of Scripture, especially of the creation story.

Today, the Church has its own Pontifical Academy of Science founded by Pope XI in 1936. Many members of this prestigious group have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The academy's role is to provide a framework for interdisciplinary cooperation among scientists through meetings, conferences and publications. (For more on this part of the Church's life, read *The Catholic Church – A Brief Popular History*, pp 254-261.)

**The Enlightenment.** The term *Enlightenment* refers to a new way of thinking about the universe and life in general. Most Enlightenment philosophers believe that only human reason—separated from religious belief—can bring people into the light. They see themselves as bringing the light of science into a world submerged in the darkness of religious superstition. Their philosophy, known as *rationalism*, stresses the power of human reason to explain reality apart from Divine Revelation and religious authority. The Enlightenment confronts the “*authority of tradition*” with what it considers the superior opposing “*authority of reason.*” People who live their lives based on religious beliefs are looked upon as unenlightened and living in the past. The Catholic Church, one of the most tradition-centered institutions in history, naturally becomes the target of Enlightenment thinkers on the European continent. One can quickly see how this new way of thinking got Church authorities very nervous, to say the least.

While some of the new breed of philosophers denies the existence of God, others believe in a God who created the universe, though not involved in its evolution. These rationalist philosophers are known as *deists*. The typical deist images God as a watchmaker. Just as a watchmaker has nothing to do with his watches after they leave his shop, a deist believes that God allows the laws of creation to govern without any involvement on his part. In Deism, reason—not Divine Revelation—governs human lives. American statesmen Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin and the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau were deists.

**Political revolution.** Enlightenment ideas give birth to political revolution. People believe that human reason will enable them to rule themselves. Fed up with the autocratic rule of monarchs, the eighteenth century witnesses successful revolutions against autocracy in America and France. Christian churches play less and less of an active role in directing and shaping the political life of European nations.

Finally, during this period, a new scientific method of approaching the Bible is developed, which seeks to analyze and evaluate the Bible with the same literacy and historical methods that are being applied to any other ancient book. It will take the Church another hundred years to see how such an approach to Scripture can enhance her understanding of it. Of course during this period of history, many of the new philosophers and historians look upon the Bible as just another ancient book and not as a source of Divine Revelation.

Finally, it can be said that Enlightenment thinking has influenced many people to begin to regard religion as only a small part of their lives. It has also created in people a skeptical outlook about everything and a stance toward religion as a private affair with little to offer public life. This attitude, known as **secularism**, is a dominant belief system in today's world.

### The Church's response to modernity

While the Church has produced many of the great scientists of the era, some do not deal well with all of the new discoveries occurring before or during their time. Pope Gregory XVI (1831-1846) is one of the Church's most reactionary popes. He opposes freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, and the separation of church and state. He even denounces the introduction of railroads in the Papal States. He strongly believes in monarchical regimes and is opposed to democratic movements. Of course, he witnesses the utter destruction the French Revolution has brought to the Church. As we will see in the next Article, Gregory's successor, Pius IX, also has a very negative reaction to modernity.

### Reflection questions

1. What speaks to you most in this Article?
2. What did you learn about this era of Church history?
3. What are some of the main areas of tension between church and state today?