

## FROM THE FRENCH REVOLUTION TO VATICAN COUNCIL I 1789- 1878AD

In this article we will look at:

- The French Revolution
- Napoleon and the Church
- Aftermath of the Revolution
- 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

### The French Revolution

When Enlightenment ideas give birth to political revolution, people start to believe that human reason will enable them to rule themselves. Fed up with the autocratic rule of monarchs, the eighteenth century ends with successful revolutions against autocracy in America and France.

Many of the Founding Fathers of the new republic in America are Deists (who believe in a god who created the world and refrained from any kind of direct participation in his creation.) Men like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin strongly support separation of church and state and freedom to practice any religion.

In contrast, the French Revolution is a time of great persecution of the Church. Before 1789, the Church in France was prosperous and powerful and very much a part of the social order. The hierarchy held privileged positions and enjoyed all the prerogatives and trappings of the aristocracy. The union of church and state had existed for a thousand years and seemed destined to continue. No one could have foreseen what was about to happen.

In May 1789, King Louis XVI calls a session of the Estates-General (French Legislature) which has not met for over 175 years. The assembly consists of three groups: First Estate (clergy), Second Estate (nobility), and Third Estate (commoners).

The king calls the Estates-General together to collect money after a few bad harvests. The people of the

Third Estate have other ideas as to what France needs. They want to replace the *ancien-régime* (old regime) with a societal system based on the political and economic ideas of the Enlightenment. Like England, they are opposed to monarchy with absolute power and favor constitutional monarchy in which the king's power is shared with an elected parliament. They want to do away with all the privileges connected with birth. When the king refuses to go along with the proposals of the Third Estate, they break away from the Estates-General to form their own National Assembly.

The revolution turns bloody when Louis brings in troops to reestablish his absolute power. In response, the people of Paris storm the infamous and hated Bastille prison and form their own National Guard. General uprisings in the countryside put power in the hands of the revolutionaries.

At first, there was no conflict between the Revolution and the Church. In fact, the clergy are regarded saviors of the Revolution for voting with the Third Estate against the nobility and the king in favor of forming a National Assembly. The clergy cooperate by willingly surrendering privileges and church property, which will eventually result in the closing of all monasteries. The state continues to pay the salaries of the clergy.

***The Civil Constitution of Clergy.*** In July 1790, the National Assembly (Revolutionary Council) issues a decree that splits the French Church down the middle. Known as the *Civil Constitution of the Clergy*, the decree is designed to regulate church affairs in the new constitutional monarchy. As a result, there is drastic rearrangement of dioceses and parishes. Pastors and bishops are to be elected by the people. Essentially, the Church has become another department of the government. The pope is relieved of his jurisdiction over the French Church.

In November 1790, the National Assembly requires bishops and priests to take an oath accepting the *Civil Constitution of the Clergy*. The clergy look to Rome for guidance, but Pius VI remains silent for eight months. In the meantime, some bishops and about half of the priests take the oath and form what

becomes known as the Constitutional Church. The Church in France is now divided. About 40,000 priests who refuse to take the oath are driven from their posts. If they return, they will be sentenced to death.

Finally, the Pope speaks. When he does, he not only condemns the Civil Constitution of the Clergy but the whole Revolution.

**Reign of Terror.** Between September 1793 and July 1794, the French Revolution enters upon its most violent phase. During this bloody period, the king and queen are beheaded and thousands of nobles, priests and nuns are executed. Loyal Catholics are accused of the crime of ‘fanaticism.’

**‘De-Christianization.’** During the reign of terror, there is an attempt to wipe out Christianity and replace it with a natural religion — the “Religion of Reason.” Churches and convents are vandalized and used as stables; priests are pressured into renouncing their priesthood, and a new calendar is designed to wipe out the memory of Sundays and holy days. The Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris is transformed into the Temple of Reason with an actress enthroned on the altar as a goddess.

**Revolution Exported.** Between 1795 and 1799, French armies export the Revolution to other parts of Europe. In all these places, old rulers flee and the French introduce new revolutionary governments. Priests and bishops who refuse to take an oath of perpetual hatred of royalty are exiled, convents are closed and their property sold. Rome is declared a Republic and the Vatican is looted, and many of its art treasures removed. The pope is transported to France as a prisoner where he remained until his death in 1799. Many believe that this is the end of the papacy. The Church has no pope for seven months and the state of the Church is worse than it has been for centuries.

### **Napoleon and Pope Pius VII**

In 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte, a brilliant general, assumes power in France. Though not religious himself, Napoleon witnesses the sad state of affairs brought about by the attempted de-Christianization of France. To have a united France, he will need to heal the split in French Catholicism resulting from the infamous Civil Constitution of the Clergy. To

accomplish this, Napoleon must enlist the help of the new pope, Pius VII, former Benedictine monk and bishop. Pius VII reigns during one of the worst times in the history of the Church, but he turns out to be one of the Church’s strongest popes.

**Concordat of 1801.** A concordat is an agreement between the Holy See and a secular ruler. Napoleon sees the relevance of a concordat between France and Rome as a way to unite French Catholics. The Concordat of 1801 decrees that all bishops in France

hand in their resignation to the pope, who will then install new bishops. As this would oblige bishops to look to Rome for leadership, Napoleon craftily adds on 77 articles to the Concordat to make it very difficult for Rome to communicate with the bishops. The Church will not get back land and property confiscated during the Revolution; the state will pay the salaries of clergy; churches closed by the Revolution will be reopened; and Catholics can freely practice their religion.

The relationship between Pius VII and Napoleon starts to unravel when the pope refuses to grant Napoleon an annulment of his marriage and to join with other European leaders in Napoleon’s effort to invade England. When Napoleon seizes the Papal States, Pius VII excommunicates him.

In retaliation, Napoleon has the pope arrested and carried off to France where he spends six years. Pius VII continues to refuse to submit to any of Napoleon’s demands, e.g., to install or agree to any new bishops for France. In 1814, when Napoleon finds that his enemies are about to defeat him, he allows Pius VII to return to Rome where he is welcomed as a hero. The pope’s resistance to a powerful emperor is greeted with great applause throughout Europe. The papacy as an institution regains much stature.

### **Aftermath of the Revolution**

With Napoleon defeated and exiled, the *Congress of Vienna* (1814-1815) brings peace to Europe after 30 years of war. The same Congress turns its back on the Revolution, reinstates the French monarchy with limited power, and restores the Papal States to the papacy.

Ultimately, the Spirit of Enlightenment and the forces of the Revolution are responsible for changing

### **Reign of Terror**

**A period of violence that occurred after the start of the French Revolution, marked by mass executions of “enemies of the state.”**

forever the situation of the Church. A secular and anti-clerical mentality infects France. In Germany, princely bishops lose their privileges. Many Catholics are placed under Protestant rulers, and the Church is reduced to a state agency, with schools and clergy supported by the state. Spanish colonies in the New World undergo a number of revolutions that throw off Spanish colonial rule. Unfortunately, some of the new governments are openly hostile to the Church, which they see as too aligned with the old order. In Mexico, for example, Church property is confiscated and priests are killed.

**England and Ireland.** In Ireland, a layman, Daniel O’Connell, founds the Catholic Association to secure civil rights for Ireland and England. O’Connell pioneers the civil rights techniques that will later be used by Mohandas Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King. In 1829, the *Emancipation Act* is passed in the English parliament giving Catholics in England and Ireland freedom to practice their faith after a long period of intense persecution.

### Fruits of the Enlightenment

Writing about the Fruits of the Enlightenment, Gloria Shalin writes:

*In his reflection on politics and history in “Memory and Identity,” Saint Pope John Paul II had this to say about the Enlightenment:*

*The European Enlightenment not only led to the carnage of the French Revolution but also bore positive fruits, such as the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, values which are rooted in the Gospel.... The French Enlightenment paved the way for a better understanding of human rights. (Page 107)*

*Among the positive effects of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution that Pope John Paul II names are the rights of nations to exist and to exercise political sovereignty and the abolition of feudal traditions. The latter outcome directly affects our own history, as the war for American independence and the ratification of the U.S. Constitution took place in the shadow of the Enlightenment. As John Paul II also notes, the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity espoused by the Enlightenment were also critical to the enunciation of the values of social justice rooted in Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels. (Church History, pp 168-169).*

As we shall see, it will take our church leaders some time to embrace the views expressed above.

### 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 from the way society has operated for centuries. In 1830, French priest Félicité de Laménais (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. Laménais declares: “*Let’s not tremble before liberalism. Let us catholicize it.*” But the French bishops are given to trembling. When Laménais 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 Laménais. But Laménais 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") Pius IX 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.

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 On, p.104).

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.

***Syllabus of Errors.*** In the nineteenth century, a new wave of progressive faithful Catholics wants 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 deadly 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, including individual rights established in the United States Bill of Rights.

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 are being strongly opposed, this is 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 for centuries had been accepted by the 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.

***Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.*** In 1854, Pope Pius IX declares the *dogma* of the Immaculate Conception. This doctrine states that Mary, through a special grace of God, was preserved from all stain of original sin. This belief is hinted at when the Angel Gabriel addressed Mary as “full of grace” (Luke 1:28). We might say the doctrine was affirmed in **Lourdes, France**, four years later when Mary appeared to a fourteen-year old girl, Bernadette Soubirous (1844-1879). When Bernadette is told to ask her heavenly visitor her name, Mary declares: “*I am the Immaculate Conception.*” Many miracles have occurred at Lourdes. Today, about five million pilgrims visit Lourdes each year.

***Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897)***, also known as the *Little Flower*, belongs to this era. Her spiritual autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, became a bestseller after it was published. In the book, Thérèse explains her “Little Way” to sainthood.

### **Reflection questions**

1. What spoke to you most in this article?
2. What did you learn? What surprised you or shocked you?
3. Do the terrible things that happened to the Church, especially during the French Revolution, help you to believe in its *divine* nature?
4. Do you have any questions about this period?