



Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time September 29, 2013 C

Church History (Part 13) From the French Revolution to Vatican Council I (1789-1869AD)

In this article we will look at:

- 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

This week we will look at how the French Revolution impacted the Church, Napoleon's relationship with the Church, and the aftermath of the Revolution. Next week, we will look at the rest of the events mentioned above.

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. (They believe in a God who created the world and refrain 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 remains 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 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.

Have a blessed week,

