

Chapter 24

The French Revolution Shatters the Church of the Old Order

On the morning of July 14, 1789, a crowd began gathering in a small square in front of an old feudal fortress on the eastern edge of Paris, long used as a prison, and known as the Bastille. The Bastille had become a symbol of royal tyranny and was believed to house in its dungeons many patriots -- virtuous defenders of an oppressed people.

Inside was Governor de Launay with a garrison of 110 soldiers. As the crowd grew, it began pushing toward the outer gate. Some in the crowd climbed up and cut the chains of the drawbridge, allowing access to the outer court. Sensing the mood of the crowd, de Launay offered to surrender if he and his men were granted safe conduct. However, when the inner gates were opened, the attackers seized and murdered Launay.

Rejoicing in their victory, the attackers opened the dungeons and this is what they found: only seven "victims of tyranny" -- five ordinary criminals and two madmen. There were no patriots to be found! These humble facts were soon transformed into the heroic deeds of the French Revolution.

Birth of a New Age

Historians often look to this event as the beginnings of a new age: The Age of Progress (1789-1914). The Bastille was a symbol of the Old Regime: the absolute rule of the monarch and a traditional feudal society consisting of three Estates -- the clergy, wealthy nobles and the common people. In France's population of twenty-five million, only two hundred thousand belonged to the privileged class of the clergy and the nobility. These two classes controlled half the land and most of the positions of government. The common people often lived in desperate situations and they all suffered from the heavy burden of taxes levied by the Church and State. .

If the storming of the Bastille marked the beginning of the New Age, the French Revolution was the mechanism that made it a reality. This revolution was to be grounded on the rights of the common people and the doctrine of human progress. The leaders of the revolution called for "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity".

"Liberty" stood for individual freedoms in political and economic life. The middle class wanted the right to vote and control a representative government. In economics, they wanted freedom to build factories and amass wealth without interference from the government (*laissez faire*).

"Equality" stood for the rights of citizens irrespective of their family background or their financial standing. While the middle class championed a *laissez faire* capitalism, the working class demanded equality by promoting socialism.

“Fraternity” was a powerful sense of brotherhood grounded in French nationalism. Those who revolted wanted to be masters of their own territory and national destiny. Neither internal nobles, external nobles nor popes would be in charge of their national history.

Amid these currents and other forces, the events of the Age of Progress emerged. No observer at the time could have seen the sweeping changes that would take place, certainly not the Catholic Church. For over a thousand years the Church and State had been linked together in a uneasy and often contentious alliance, but one that had benefited both.

The Church had sanctified the feudal order. She had given divine blessings to kings and the marriage of nobles. The Church hierarchy, long identified with the upper class, gave little thought to the powerlessness of the peasants or the aspirations of the middle class. What counted in this society was not intelligence or achievement, but noble birth and a “calling” to a holy office.

The State had defended the Church, its possessions and its clergy, because it had often influenced the appointments of popes and had installed relatives and friends as bishops within its territory. The State often used the Church to its own purposes. In various ways, the Church and the State were united. And each agreed that they ruled by “divine right”.

The French Catholic Church in 1789

In 1789, the Catholic Church was the established, official religion and its hierarchy enjoyed the privileges of the aristocracy. Their ability of own land and collect taxes made them quite wealthy and thus powerful. Most of their vast land holdings were used for religious and social purposes and did not create a problem. However, the taxes imposed on the common people by the Church did create a problem in the way it was spent. For example, the higher clergy skimmed off about five sixths of the Church’s income. Cardinal de Rohan’s annual income was the equivalent of about \$200,000 a year, while the average parish priest received about \$125 a year.

The French hierarchy were almost all men of noble birth. They had little to do with the parish priests who were “commoners”. Members of hierarchy tended to be active politically and socially, and thus were identified closely with the government. The lower clergy tended to identify themselves with the common people and thus became their spokesmen at the beginning of the Revolution.

The Revolution Begins - Louis Convenes the Estates General

The situation that initiated events leading to the revolution was not the storming of the Bastille, but the economic plight of France. For several years, the French government had been borrowing huge sums of money from European bankers and falsifying records to hide the true state of affairs. High living among the nobles and high church officials, combined with a series of bad harvests in the French wine industry created a sense of

urgency to focus on the economy to avoid a major financial crisis.

To that end, on May 5, of 1789, King Louis XVI convened the Estates General at Versailles. This assembly of twelve hundred delegates, (which had not met in 175 years), represented the three Estates - the clergy, the nobility, and the common people.

The First Estate was the clergy. Two hundred and five of the 308 clerical delegates were priests, the rest were abbots and bishops. The Third Estate of commoners were represented by six hundred delegates. Because this assembly rarely met, its powers and procedures had never been clearly defined. Therefore, the first critical issue of the Assembly concerned voting. The clergy and the nobility, wishing to preserve their traditional privileges, wanted each Estate to vote as a unit, thus three votes on each issue. This would place these two privileged Estates in control.

To avoid this situation, the Third Estate of common people wanted each delegate to vote as an individual. Since they already comprised fifty percent of the delegates, they figured on support from some liberals in the other Estates, which would give them control.

In the debate that ensued, many of the clergy sided with the commoners on the issue of voting. At first the King resisted, finally he gave in and allowed the three Estates to meet together as a newly formed National Assembly.

In one of the first acts of the Assembly, the nobility and clergy gave up all the hated privileges they had enjoyed since medieval times - hunting rights, grist mill taxes and other taxes. Next the clergy surrendered the tithe. This large income producer was the major financial support of the clergy. The clergy asked the State to pick up the tab, but the Assembly refused. Thus, the clergy needed to become government employees or starve.

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy

At first there was no conflict between the Church and the Revolution, because many of the clergy had supported the members of the Third Estate at Versailles. The clergy had also gone along with the suppression of many of its privileges. However, when the Assembly proposed the "Civil Constitution of the Clergy", the ground was laid for strong resistance from the clergy and disastrous retaliation by the State.

Since the National Assembly soon had financial difficulties, one of the solutions was to include in the Civil Constitution of the Clergy the right of the State to confiscate and sell Church property. They also "released" nuns and clergy from their vows and "dissolved" the religious orders. With the suppression of the tithe, the Government also agreed to provide income for the clergy, who would now be under the control of the State. For Gallicans, this seemed only proper.

The Constitution was passed in July of 1790. Under its provisions, the clergy were now on the State's payroll and subject to the State. Affiliation with Rome was all but severed. Pastors were to be elected by all the citizens, Catholic and Protestant alike. Bishops

would simply inform Rome of their election and installation.

Most clergy agreed that reform was needed and many of the proposed reforms were accepted -- dissolution of the cathedral chapters, decent income for the priests, logical parochial and diocesan boundaries. However, when they proposed the virtual democratization of the French Church, virtually severing the control of the Pope over internal French Church affairs and called for the election of bishops and priests like civil servants, the clergy balked.

The Constitution could not become law until signed by the King. Louis XVI hesitated, but finally signed it into law in August of 1790. Pope Pius VI opposed the legislation, but did not publicly condemn it for fear that even worse measures could be adopted.

While the Constitution was now law, the majority of the bishops and priests basically ignored it. In reaction, the Assembly proposed an "oath of compliance" on the clergy. Those who refused would forfeit their office. The oath obligated them to "maintain the Constitution decreed by the National Assembly and accepted by the King". Anyone who refused could be accused of being disloyal to the Revolution. There were two major problems. First, the Constitution which they were asked to uphold was not yet completed. Secondly, the oath included any future actions by the government - a blank check.

There were only two ways to officially secure permission for the clergy to take the oath -- a national council of bishops or an appeal to the Pope. The National Assembly ruled out a bishops council for fear of a negative outcome, so the clergy appealed to Pius VI. In March of 1792, the pope issued a condemnation and forbade the clergy to take the oath.

All but seven of the bishops and half the clergy refused to take the oath. Even those lower clergy who supported the Revolution felt that this was a direct assault on the Church. Those clergy who did sign pointed out that the King has accepted it and that it followed Gallican thinking, which most accepted. Furthermore, they felt that it was an endorsement of a much needed Revolution,

In any event, the Catholic clergy were almost evenly split over the matter and thus many Catholic communities were split. Catholic laity were presented with "constitutional" clergy who supported the State and "nonconstitutional" clergy loyal to Rome. This caused many disruptions in local communities.

Persecutions of the Church

Those clergy who refused to sign the oath were evicted from their rectories and churches and came to be regarded by many as disloyal to the Revolution. Therefore, in 1792, as the Duke of Brunswick approached Paris to overthrow the Revolution, the September Massacres began. Within the first two hours 120 priests were dragged from the prisons and executed without trial. Overall, 3 bishops and 220 priests lost their lives.

During the "Reign of Terror" (1793-94) the Revolution began to take on a religious

character that was anti-Christian. Louis XVI was executed in January 1793 and in the same year the Constitutional Church, established in 1790 by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, was replaced by the "Religion of Reason". The Gregorian calendar was replaced by a Republican calendar which abolished all holydays and Sundays and instituted natural feast days, such as the Feast of Labor and the Feast of Genius. Notre Dame Cathedral was converted in the Temple of the Goddess of Reason, and a dancing girl was placed on the altar as the new goddess. Church bells and chalices were melted down. And now all priests were being persecuted.

Out in the provinces, fanatics like the ex-priest Fouché turned parish churches into Temples of Reason. The Commune in Paris ordered all churches closed. Under pressure and often motivated by fear, many priests and even bishops abandoned their ministry and took wives. Of the 4,000 priests who married, some did so willingly, others would marry their housekeepers *pro forma* (in form only) to protect themselves from persecution.

Most of the clergy who had refused to sign the oath, simply left the country. They numbered some 40,000. Of those who had signed the oath, many left the priesthood and remained in France. In all, some 20,000 clergy resigned. To say the least, the Church in France was now in disarray. However, the Catholic religion did survive through the efforts of a small band of priests and the loyalty of the rural people.

Attempts at a New Religion

The revolutionaries had tried to destroy Catholicism, but they were still convinced that a successful State needed a State religion. There were several major attempts.

Deism -- The first attempt was Deism, which arose out of the Enlightenment's exaltation of reason. It sees God as an intelligent creator-deity who simply sets the world in motion. It denies revelation and substitutes reason as a guide for morality and speaks only of natural religion. The Deists imitated the placement of the Goddess of Reason on the altar of Notre Dame and sent out to the provinces young girls decked out as Reason, Liberty or Nature and led processions through towns to altars dedicated to this new religion of the Revolution.

Cult of the Supreme Being -- Maximilien Robespierre was one of the most powerful leaders of the extreme element of the Revolution (Jacobin). He too felt the State needed a religion, but judged Deism to be atheistic. He saw his cult, of which he was the high priest, as one which would unite Catholics and Protestants around one dogma (the immortality of the soul) and one precept (do your duty as a man). Neither Robespierre nor his cult lasted very long.

Before long, these and other attempts at a new religion simply faded away. Finally, a decree issued in February of 1795 guaranteed freedom of religion and this sparked a revival of Catholicism.

The Revolution Attacks the Pope

In 1795 a new French government was established, which was to last until 1799, known as the Directory. The Directory ordered a war of conquest against Italy. In 1796, during his first Italian campaign, General Napoleon confronted the pope, not as a religious leader, but as a temporal sovereign.

Napoleon had occupied Milan and set up a number of puppet republics in Northern Italy. The pope was no match for the French army, but Napoleon spared Rome. He affirmed the pope's sovereignty over the Papal States, but, in the Treaty of Tolentino (1797), he forced the pope to cede part of the papal states to one of his puppet republics, pay an indemnity of 330 million francs, surrender 100 works of art, close his ports to English commerce and promise not to aid France's enemies.

When a corporal of the pontifical guard assassinated a French general in December of 1797, General Berthier seized Rome and established the Roman Republic. The pope was expelled from Rome to Siena and then to France, where he died in August of 1799. That same year a new pope was elected -- Pius VII.

The Church and Napoleon Negotiate

It fell to the new pope to deal with Napoleon, who had seized power in a *coup d'etat* in 1799. During the conclave which elected Pius VII, Napoleon again entered Italy, defeated the Austrians and became master of Italy. The future of the Church as a temporal power seemed to be in his hands.

Napoleon appeared to the French people as an odd combination of a liberal revolutionary and an absolute monarch. It was said that he thought himself to be heir to all that was "reasonable, legitimate and European in the revolutionary movement." In fact his "Code" did contain the elements of the Revolutionary movement. It declared the equality of all citizens before the law, the right of the individual to choose his profession, the supremacy of the lay state and a tolerance for all religious beliefs. On the other hand, he was willing to curtail individual liberties "in the interests of the State" and many of his policies were seen as autocratic, i.e., coming from an absolute authority.

The persecutions of the Revolution had, in fact, provoked a widespread religious revival in France. France was still predominantly Catholic. Napoleon understood this and he was anxious to settle the religious problem in France for political reasons - he wanted and needed a united France.

Therefore, after his defeat of the Austrians in Italy (1800), Napoleon let the pope know that he wanted to settle the religious problem in France. A major problem was to reconcile the clergy -- those who had taken the oath and those who had refused. He wanted to go back to some form of the old Civil Constitution, which Pius VI had condemned in 1792. Negotiations began immediately.

After much opposition from various parties in France, an agreement was finally reached.

It was contained in the Concordat of 1801. Historians view the Concordat as a victory for both Napoleon and the Church. The major problem, the division between the French clergy, was solved, at least in principle. The Concordat had five major items:

1. All bishops, those who had taken the Constitutional oath and those who had not, were to resign.
2. The French government was given the right to appoint bishops and the pope retained the right of canonical installation which made the appointments valid.
3. The Church gave up the right to recover their confiscated property and would not contest its ownership in the future.
4. The clergy would be financially supported by the French government.
5. The practice of the Catholic religion would be subject to government regulations to preserve public order.

The Concordat seemed to be good compromise for both sides. However, unknown to the pope, Napoleon framed, published and unilaterally promulgated the “Organic Articles.” These put all religions of France on an equal basis and made them subject to the State. No papal legates, messages, or even decrees of an ecumenical council could enter France without the express permission of the government. There were other provisions regulating the manner of worship and, finally, the Four Gallican Articles of 1682 were to be taught in all the seminaries. Napoleon wanted to reestablish the Gallican Church.

Napoleon and the Church in Conflict

The Concordat solved some problems, but others arose. While Pius VII attended his coronation, Napoleon found out that it was not a sign of humble obeisance. The pope had attended the coronation in the hope of obtaining two concessions from Napoleon: revocation or modification of the Organic Articles and the removal of divorce from the new code of civil law. Napoleon treated him rudely by receiving the pope in muddy hunting clothes and at the coronation he seized the crown from the pope’s hands and put it on his own head.

The pope returned to Rome humiliated, but not subdued. Later he refused to annul Napoleon’s marriage to Josephine, even though the French bishops finally granted the annulment. The next conflict was more serious.

The Papal States had a history of neutrality in the European conflicts, thus when Napoleon asked the pope to join in a blockade against England, the pope refused. Immediately, Napoleon seized Rome and annexed the Papal States. The pope returned the favor by excommunicating Napoleon.

In July of 1808, the pope, who was seriously ill, was arrested and taken out of Rome to exile in Savona which he endured in monastic solitude for six years. While in exile the pope refused to approve the canonical installation of any French bishops and by 1814 there were many vacant dioceses.

Following this, things did not go well for Napoleon. He asked the French bishops and his uncle Cardinal Fesch to judge the papal bull of excommunication. They agreed with the pope that Napoleon's invasion of ecclesiastical property was sufficient cause for excommunication. And when asked about the pope's refusal to canonically install French bishops, they replied that forcing the pope into involuntary exile was sufficient grounds for the pope's refusal of canonical installation.

In response, Napoleon cut off all communications between the pope and the French hierarchy. In turn, thirteen of the twenty-seven cardinals refused to attend Napoleon's second marriage. They were exiled, forbidden to wear the robes of their office and threatened with death. They were nicknamed the "Black Cardinals".

Napoleon moved the pope (now quite ill) to Fontainebleau, near Paris and through envoys and even a personal visit tried get the pope to agree to concessions on the installation of bishops. Napoleon devised the Concordat of Fontainebleau in 1813 in which Pius was to renounce the Papal State and give in on the issue of the installation of bishops. The pope agreed, but revoked his agreement within twenty-four hours. Napoleon suppressed the pope's revocation and published the Concordat.

The Fall of Napoleon and the Victory of the Papacy

By 1812, Napoleon's political and military situation was becoming desperate. His campaign in Russia had been a disaster and in 1813 he was thoroughly defeated in the Battle of the Nations at Leipzig. On January 21, 1814 he gave orders that the pope should be taken back to Savona and on March 10 he should be restored to Rome.

On his way back to Rome through France, Pius VII was cheered by crowds of well-wishers and when he entered Rome on May 24, 1814 he was greeted with great joy and celebration. A frail and weak pope had outlasted and triumphed over the great Napoleon. However, the pope was very gracious. Settled in Rome he exhorted the people to forget the past and to give Napoleon his due for restoring Christianity to France.

The Congress of Vienna and Beyond

The Congress of Vienna (1814-15) exiled Napoleon and brought general peace to Europe. War had raged for some thirty years and now peace would reign for a hundred years. The old order was restored with the Bourbons back on the throne. The pope was also restored as the absolute monarch of the Papal States. However, Christendom, with its unique union of Church and State, was a thing of the past, replaced by a strong trend toward secularization and widespread anti-clericalism. The Church and the State now often defined their relationship through Concordats - some good, some bad.

In France the active Revolution was over, but some of its effects would last till the present. The prince-bishop was happily gone as were the vast holdings of the Church. Unfortunately, the monastic orders were dealt a severe blow, because of the confiscation of their property, the break up of their houses of studies and the self imposed exile by

many of their number.

In all the Church was strengthened as a result of the Revolution and it demise. The papacy was stronger, the Gallican spirit was being replaced by one that looked to Rome as the center of Christianity and to the pope for guidance - this new outlook was labeled "ultramontane" (beyond the mountains). The Church was adapting to a new social order which in the long run would benefit her true mission, which was to live and spread the Gospel.