

## **Chapter 26**

### **The Syllabus of Errors Squelches the Liberal Catholics**

#### **The Issue of Intellectual Freedom in the 19th Century Church**

The Church's reaction to the issue of intellectual freedom must always be viewed in light of the Church's reaction to The Enlightenment of the 18th century. In the Enlightenment, the philosophical, political and scientific ideas of the great thinkers of the 17th century - Newton, Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Descartes, Spinoza - were revived and expanded by such 18th century thinkers as Rousseau, Hume and Kant.

By and large, Enlightenment thinkers rejected tradition and authority, whether philosophical, political or religious. They posited an uncritical and overly optimistic concept of human reason, which they held to be supreme, and rejected the validity of any kind of knowledge that was not empirically verifiable. Thus any affirmations based on revelation or any unquestioned acceptance of pronouncements from authority figures, especially religious authorities, was rejected outright.

Obviously, this intellectual mind-set was a direct challenge to the Church, which based its beliefs and teachings on revelation found in Scripture and accepted the teachings of the bishops and especially the pope precisely because they were in a position of authority.

Given this challenge the Church could choose either to enter into dialogue with Enlightenment thought - to teach and to learn - or retreat into a defensive, negative and apologetic stance. The hierarchy chose a defensive posture, while many Catholic intellectuals chose to enter into dialogue under the banner of intellectual freedom. This set the stage for conflict between liberal and conservative elements in the Church.

#### **German Catholic Intellectuals and Intellectual Freedom**

German Catholic intellectuals were the leaders in the attempt to address the issue of intellectual freedom in the Church, within the context of the current intellectual culture based on the Enlightenment. They had a distinct advantage for dialogue, because they were the only Catholic intellectual community whose schools of theology were located in secular universities. They had daily contact with a wide variety of intellectuals and thus were aware of the need for dialogue in light of the current research and theories in the areas of politics, science and philosophy.

These German Catholic intellectuals believed that dialogue with the secular intellectual culture of the universities must be entered into by establishing a common ground. This common ground would demand an attitude of scientific impartiality, a break with medieval Scholastic philosophy, and a search for new scientific methods to defend and

explain the faith. This new approach was a break with tradition and thus, by definition, required an atmosphere of intellectual freedom.

One of the most influential German theological schools was in Tübingen, in southwest Germany, founded in 1477. Its students included the astronomer Johannes Kepler and philosophers Georg Hegel and Friedrich Schelling. The university housed a Protestant school of theology and a Catholic school of theology was established in 1817.

In the first half of the 19th century, Catholic scholars at Tübingen, such as Johann Mohler, Friedrich von Schlegel and Joseph von Görres, were leaders in the Catholic revival and were committed to developing a theological synthesis of Scripture and Tradition, historical inquiry and contemporary thought. By mid-century, Ignaz von Döllinger, a Church historian and theologian, was the leader of Catholic liberal scholars.

Döllinger was initially ultramontane and conservative, but through his historical studies he became more liberal. He defended theologians' freedom of inquiry and their vocation to influence public opinion. He then became critical of growing papal absolutism and the revival of Scholastic theology. His pseudonymous critique of papal and conciliar authority was placed on the Index of Forbidden Books in 1869. Later, in 1871, he was excommunicated for his critique of the First Vatican Council's decree on papal infallibility.

### **English Catholic Intellectuals and Intellectual Freedom**

The English historian John Acton (Lord Acton) became a disciple of Döllinger. He studied with Döllinger for four years in Munich and on his return to England he committed himself to introducing English audiences to the German historical method and its spirit of intellectual freedom.

To disseminate his ideas, he collaborated with John Henry Newman in editing *The Rambler*, a liberal Catholic publication. He was highly critical of the power of the Roman Curia, the centralization of authority in the papacy and the efforts of Rome to preserve the Papal States. Later, he was also highly critical of the infallibility decree of Vatican I which he viewed as threat to individual conscience. He coined the phrase; "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely".

Perhaps the most important English intellectual of the period was John Henry Newman. As mentioned in Chapter 25, he was a leader in the Oxford Movement which produced a deep theological and spiritual renewal in the Anglican Church. Over time, some of his writings were considered "too Catholic" and were denounced by the Anglican Church and Oxford university. In reaction, Newman resigned his position at the university and his clerical status. After years of intellectual and spiritual struggle, he converted to Catholicism, became a priest and later was made a cardinal in 1879.

Like Acton, he was committed to reconciling the Catholic faith with modern culture, insofar as possible. However, he was less polemic in his speech and less liberal than

Acton. He was also critical of the rigid discipline which Rome imposed on intellectuals, but he deplored the liberal “free thinkers” of the universities.

In 1851, Newman founded the Catholic University of Ireland and justified a Catholic liberal education in his book *The Idea of a University*. In 1859, while editor of *The Rambler*, he published a paper entitled “On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine”. When this paper was reported to Rome, he was promptly asked to resign his editorship of *The Rambler*, which he did. While Newman had a liberal side, he also had a conservative side. He believed in papal infallibility, but did not favor a conciliar definition of it. He also continued to defend the freedom on the individual conscience.

### **European Catholic Intellectuals Outside Germany and England**

Outside of Germany and England the intellectual life of the Church was at a very low ebb. In France, the Revolution had driven out many Catholic clergy who were intellectuals and who had taught in the schools and seminaries. It was only at the end of the 19th century that French clergy could again pursue a university education.

One bright spot was the University of Louvain in Belgium. It was the oldest continuously operating Catholic university in the world, founded in 1425 by Pope Martin V. Among its famous students was Erasmus of Rotterdam who studied there from 1517-21. However, there was no one like Erasmus in the 19th century. In 1857, the university established an American College to train priests for North America.

Unfortunately, the intellectual life in the Catholic countries of Austria, Poland and Spain was also at a very low ebb. Few, if any, notable Catholic intellectuals were produced in these countries in the 19th century.

### **The Rise of Neo-Scholasticism**

As we noted earlier, there was a conservative reaction to the culture of intellectual and political freedom generated by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. This reaction took many forms - defense of the monarchies, the dream of restoring Christendom, restoration of the Index of Forbidden Books, condemnation of the idea of freedom of conscience and of the press.

It also included an effort to restore Scholasticism, a system which had dominated the universities from the 12th to the 16th centuries, but had disappeared in the Enlightenment period. It was another attempt by conservatives in the Church to return to the “good old days” prior to the Enlightenment and the advent of “modern philosophy” begun by Descartes (1596-1650), continued in the writings of philosophers like Spinoza (1632-77) and Kant (1724-1804) and espoused by the Enlightenment.

At the beginning of the 12th century, Scholasticism was introduced an innovative teaching technique, not a philosophy. Before that time, teaching and learning had centered in the monasteries located in the countryside. The “monastic method” of

teaching and learning was a rather passive system, with little input or argumentation from students or professors. The texts to be studied and learned, e.g., the Bible and writings of the Church Fathers, were simply read to and hopefully absorbed by the students. For example, the *Rule of St. Benedict* required monks to sit passively and merely listen to what was read to them during meals, a procedure known as the “*lectio divina*” (selected divine reading). Just as the monks were forbidden to question the authority of their abbots, the “monastic method” prevented monastic students from questioning the texts read to them.

Around the year 1100, schools began to emerge in the towns and cities. The urban atmosphere was much different from that of the monastic countryside. Urban centers were focused on trade, with its constant haggling and bargaining. This lively atmosphere generated an argumentative form of learning which was the hallmark of Scholasticism.

Like the “monastic method”, the Scholastic method would start with texts from Scripture, the writings of the early Church Fathers or other noted authors. However, these texts would then be submitted to critical, rational thinking in order to understand them more fully and answer objections to them. For example, the process would begin with a statement “There are three Persons in the Trinity”. This statement would be followed by four or five objections to that statement, then there would be a paragraph or two of rational explanation about the nature of the Trinity based on reasoned argumentation, then each of the four or five objections would be answered or refuted by the use of logic and making subtle distinctions.

The debating of these objections was known as *disputatio* (disputation). The resolution of these apparent contradictions was known as a *determinatio* (determination). This method was reflected in St. Anselm’s (1033-1109) saying: “faith seeking understanding”.

Later, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) would adopt Aristotle’s philosophy and use this rational philosophy and its system of syllogistic logic within the Scholastic method to analyze the Catholic faith. Since Aquinas’ thought dominated the medieval universities, Scholasticism came to be identified with Aquinas’ philosophy (Thomism).

This attempt to restore Scholasticism was called neo-Scholasticism. It began around 1850 and would continue until the 1960’s. This restoration was sought because many theologians felt that orthodox theological concepts could not be easily expressed using the approach of “modern philosophies”. Thus, in 1879, Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical, *Aeterni Patris*, which held up the “Christian philosophy” of Aquinas as the best model of a *philosophia perennis* (perennial philosophy) for all Catholic education, especially in the seminaries. Since the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas was adopted as a model, the approach was often referred to as neo-Thomism.

Leo had also urged that this philosophy should try to assimilate the best of modern thought. This attempt at assimilation yielded a variety of results or schools of thought and these various schools of “Thomism” carried such labels as “existential”, “historical”,

“traditional”, and “transcendental”.

### **The Church in Relationship to Modern Culture - Two Approaches**

By 1850, two schools of thought had developed around the question of the Church’s proper relationship to modern culture: the conservative school of Ultramontanes led by the neo-Scholastics of Mainz, Germany and the liberal school led by Doellinger of Munich, Germany.

The Conservatives - The conservative school held that modern culture born of the Enlightenment was hopelessly rationalistic, secular and hostile to the Church. They adopted a siege mentality and authoritarian methods. To protect the faithful from the evils of this culture they trained seminarians in schools isolated from the culture, trained to keep the laity free from secular contamination.

They promoted authoritarian control of the Church by Rome and kept a careful eye on any theologian who was suspected of not adhering to the dogmas of the Church or the ordinary teachings and instructions of the Curia. They demanded complete adoption of the Scholastic tradition as sanctioned by Rome.

The Liberals - The liberal school led by Doellinger, was more optimistic about the Church’s ability to enter into dialogue with the modern culture. As a historian, Doellinger pointed out that while Christianity was born in a Jewish culture, it had adapted itself to an intellectual culture formed by Greek thought. Furthermore, Aquinas, whose philosophy the conservatives supported, had taken as his philosophical base the philosophy of an ancient Greek pagan, Aristotle. Therefore, the Church should follow these examples by establishing common ground and entering into dialogue with the modern culture, rather than simply condemning it. Doellinger was joined in his assessment by Lord Acton.

In his *Essays on Church and State* Acton wrote:

(the Catholic scholar) must meet his adversaries on grounds which they understand and acknowledge...(he must discuss) each topic on its intrinsic merit--answering the critic by a severer criticism, the metaphysician by closer reasoning, the historian by deeper learning, the politician by sounder politics and indifference itself by a purer impartiality. In all these subjects...(he) discovers a point pre-eminently Catholic, but also pre-eminently intellectual and true. (p. 84)

### **Liberals and Conservatives in Conflict**

As we have seen in the previous two Chapters, the middle of the 19th century marked a moment of decision in Rome and among Catholic intellectuals - how were each to react to the modern political and intellectual culture and how were they going to react to each other?

As the liberals and conservatives began to square off against each other at mid-century, Rome was experiencing a momentous political crisis (see Ch.25). In February of 1849, Garibaldi, the leader of the Italian liberation movement, entered Rome and set up a democratic republic. The pope was under siege by the political liberals and the stage was set for the demise of the Papal States when Victor Emmanuel took over Rome in 1870 and created the “Roman Question”.

Given this situation of the humiliation and defeat of Pius IX by political liberals, it is not surprising that Rome would now turn to the intellectual conservatives, rather than the intellectual liberals. In the confrontation of liberals and conservatives, Rome took the side of the conservatives. To that end, Pius IX sent his nunico (messenger) into the heart of the liberal’s camp in Munich to support the conservative’s campaign against them.

While there were talented men in both camps, many in the conservative side were not interested in dialogue and took an anti-intellectual approach of simply asserting their opinions as true orthodoxy and condemning outright anyone who did not agree with them. They seemed to have little knowledge of nor interest in the positive results of historical and modern biblical research as promoted by Doellinger and others.

With the pope on their side the conservatives managed some “victories” as in the condemnation of the Austrian philosopher and theologian Anton Gunther. Gunther opposed the neo-Scholastic movement and had argued the existence of God from an analysis of self-consciousness, but was condemned for reducing supernatural truths to truths of reason. His books were placed on the Index of Forbidden Books in 1857. In his attempt to take a modern approach to theology he had many followers including Cardinal Schwarzenberg the bishop of Vienna. After the definition of infallibility in the First Vatican Council in 1870, some of his followers broke from the Church and joined the Old Catholics, a group rejecting papal infallibility.

Doellinger and the liberals reacted to the conservatives with bitter attacks on the neo-Scholastics and sarcasm directed at the low level of intellectual learning in Rome. However, in an effort of reconciliation, Doellinger sponsored a meeting of leading German scholars - both liberal and conservative - to meet in Munich in September of 1863. With the exception of the Tübingen faculty and the Jesuits, most of those invited came to the meeting.

The keynote address of this Munich assembly of scholars was delivered by Doellinger and was titled “The Past and Future of Theology”. In this address he made the following points:

1. German Catholic theologians must take the lead, because....
2. German theologians were the best trained in modern philosophy and history.
3. Modern philosophy and history would now shape the content of theology.

4. Scholasticism was not up to the task and was obsolete.
5. Catholic scholars must have intellectual freedom
6. Intervention by Church authority was needed only in the rare cases of obvious contradictions of dogmas of the Church.
7. In most cases ongoing theological study and debate would correct any mistakes.
8. The only effective weapons against error were the weapons of science, not authoritative Church censure.

Doellinger's address was hailed by Acton as the dawning of a new era in theology and stated that Doellinger had respected Church authority in submitting himself to defined dogma.

A month before Doellinger's meeting, a similar meeting of French theologians, cardinals, bishops, priests and laymen had taken place in France at Malines. Charles Montalembert, the leader of French liberal Catholics, delivered the main address. His remarks included the following points:

1. The Church should embrace the liberties of the modern culture.
2. Belgium operating under a liberal constitution is an example of how the Church can flourish in an atmosphere of civil liberty.
3. Catholics should be the first to applaud the final demise of the old regime of intolerance, Inquisitions and the union of Church and State.

The gathered crowd, including the Archbishop of Malines, gave full approval to his remarks. There would be no such approval coming from Pius IX.

### **Pius IX Reacts to the Liberals - *The Syllabus of Errors*.**

Pius IX was deeply disturbed by the liberal speech of Doellinger and his severe criticism of Scholasticism. In a letter to the archbishop of Munich he laid down a hard line: The Catholic scholar must be subject to the ordinary magisterium (teaching authority of the Church) as well as to the decrees of the Roman congregations (Curia).

The meetings at Munich and Malines had convinced the pope that the spirit of liberalism was running wild through Catholic intellectual circles and could infect the entire Church. Therefore, he felt the need to issue a general summary condemnation of what he considered to be the errors of liberalism, which he had condemned in other writings over the last fifteen years.

This summary was contained in the famous (infamous) *Syllabus of Errors* attached to an encyclical, *Quanta Cura*, issued on December 8, 1864. The *Syllabus* was an outline of eighty errors that included rationalism, naturalism, socialism, and liberal capitalism.

Criticism of the *Syllabus* - The contents of the *Syllabus* were not intended to be taken as an independent document. But, when the eighty outlined errors were considered on their own, apart from their source in other papal documents (as they were), they created an enormous uproar, not only in intellectual and political circles, but in the general public as

well. The general public in 1864 was no longer as politically or culturally conservative as it was some thirty years before, when *Mirari Vos* was published without much notice or objection (see Ch. 25). Of course, the liberals saw this document as a papal endorsement of the strongest views of the ultraconservatives.

The format of the *Syllabus* was styled as a condemnation of each of the listed errors. For example, No. 55 stated: “The Church should be separated from the State, and the State from the Church”, (condemned). No. 77 stated: “In our times it is no longer necessary that the Catholic religion should be the only religion of the State to the exclusion of all others whatsoever”, (condemned). No. 80 stated: “The Roman Pontiff can and should reconcile and align himself with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization”, (condemned). These statements taken by themselves were well known themes of liberal thought and when each was condemned, many reached the conclusion that not only the themes, but also the liberals who articulated them were being publicly condemned. It seemed clear that Pius IX had indeed sided with the conservatives. This judgment was reinforced when conservatives hailed it as an official affirmation of their views. The separation of Church and State, religious toleration and the acceptance of the modern liberal culture were ideas that were accepted by a majority of citizens both inside and outside the Church and certainly among the liberal intellectuals and politicians. The condemnation of these principles caused an international scandal.

Defense of the *Syllabus* -- As noted above, the *Syllabus* was a summary list or index that was abstracted from earlier documents and not intended to be read as an independent document. Every one of the eighty condemned propositions was drawn from one of Pius IX’s previous encyclicals or speeches and reference was made in each case to the source from which the condemned proposition was taken. The *Syllabus* was attached to the encyclical and sent to the bishops. It was assumed that the readers would be bishops and priests who would reference the original document.

In any event, taken by themselves, out of context, they were easily misinterpreted, especially by those of a liberal bent. For example, No. 80 (see above) condemned the phrase that “The Roman Pontiff can and should...align himself with...modern civilization”.

Taken by itself this seemed like a wholesale condemnation of modern civilization. However, when put in its original context, the word “civilization” had a more precise and acceptable meaning.

The original context was a speech beginning with the word *Jandundum* (lit. now for a long time) in which the phrase “modern civilization” was used by Pius IX to refer to the new “liberal modern civilization” experienced by the Church in the Piedmont under Victor Emmanuel and his Prime Minister, Camillo Cavour, where laws were passed that attacked the Church, abolished religious orders, imprisoned clergy and closed Catholic schools (see Ch.25, p.8).

In his speech the Pope concludes:



Can the Roman Pontiff ever extend a hand to this kind of civilization or cordially enter into alliance and agreement with it? Let their real names be restored to things, and this Holy See will be ever consistent with itself. For truly has it always been the patron and nurse of real civilization: the monuments of history bear witness and prove that in all ages from this Holy See have gone forth, even into the most remote and barbarous nations, right and true humanity, moral culture, and wisdom. But if under the name of civilization is to be understood a system devised to weaken and perhaps even to destroy, the Church -- no, never can the Holy See and the Roman Pontiff come to terms with such a civilization.

It is easy to see that in context the word “civilization” has a very specific meaning which could rightly be criticized by the pope.

In an effort to stem the damage, the brilliant, liberal bishop of Orleans, Felix Dupanloup, published a pamphlet containing a commentary on the *Syllabus* that placed its propositions in their proper context so that Catholics and others would not see propositions such as No. 80 as a wholesale condemnation of all the functioning liberal constitutions of Europe.

Dupanloup accomplished his task by making a distinction between *thesis* and *hypothesis*. The former is an ideal that can only be realized in a perfect society, the latter is what is possible or just in the existing order of things. For example, the union of Church and State may be held as an ideal, but not an absolute ideal. Such unions had worked in the past and in certain ideal circumstances might conceivably work in the future. But in the present real world, this is only a hypothesis and, in fact, not possible or prudent in the present order.

Dupanloup’s explanation was a major success. The pope and 630 bishops gave their enthusiastic approval to Dupanloup’s explanation of the *Syllabus*. Of course, Ultraconservatives did not approve of the explanation and certainly Pius IX had not become a liberal. However, liberals and their liberal ideas could now be understood in a context that would keep them from condemnation and possibly being branded as heretics. Nevertheless, the *Syllabus* and Pius himself put all liberals on the defensive and the liberal movement in the Church was held somewhat in check until the Second Vatican Council of the 20th century.