

THE POPES DURING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND NAPOLEON

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1789 to 1815 mark some of the most turbulent years of Europe's history. The French Revolution and Napoleonic Era shook the core of tradition. Pius VI and Pius VII each presided as Pope during these years. Both men inherited a significantly weakened chair. Both were taken prisoner, and both stood up against those who threatened to eliminate them and their authority altogether. These were dark days indeed for the Catholic Church.

Pius VI

Pope Pius VI was elected to the papacy in 1775 after the death of Clement XIV. He was called to serve as the head of a church that was witnessing its worldly authority being chiseled away. Monarchs had been pushing for greater control over local churches and for greater access to their lands and moneys. But political turmoil was not the only problem. Since the rise of Protestantism in the 16th and 17th centuries, more fundamental challenges were growing over the value of religion as a whole. Intellectuals in Europe, such as Voltaire and Diderot, were turning away from Christianity. As a result, the papacy was beginning to look more and more unnecessary and undesirable: a quaint reminder of the past to some; an obstacle to progress to others. No doubt, the most visible evidence of the Pope's weakness was the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773. The Jesuits had become an annoyance to the Catholic monarchs because they interfered with their power. They stood as a representation of the authority of the Pope against their national interests. Also, they interfered with much of the running of the South American colonies. Portugal, France, Spain, Naples and Sicily all opposed the Jesuits and were able to pressure Clement XIV into suppressing them. It is difficult to imagine what Clement thought in suppressing the order whose main purpose was to obey and defend the Pope. Aemon Duffy, in his book, *Saints and Sinners: a History of the Popes*, puts it this way: it "Was the clearest demonstration

imaginable of the powerlessness of the Pope in the new world order. . . It was the papacy's most shameful hour."¹ Such was the seat Pius VI inherited in 1775.

A wise eye and steady hand would be necessary for these turbulent times, and Pius could not imagine or prepare for what was coming. Duffy says that he was, "A particularly poor specimen."² It did not help matters that Pius carried on some of the less than admirable traditions of earlier popes, such as nepotism and lavish expenditures on the arts. He bankrupted his treasury. J. N. D. Kelly in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Popes*, describes him this way, "Worthy but worldly, proud of his handsome appearance, Pius was concerned for ostentation and obsolete protocol, and proved unequal to the challenges of the age."³ Joseph II of Austria was already transferring authority of monasteries from the Pope to the local bishops, thus placing them outside the reach of Rome. Pius' efforts to discourage the Emperor's decisions proved fruitless, and he was beginning to look as weak as his predecessor.

The monarchy in France, in addition to wanting to weaken the authority of Rome and of the Pope, was suffering from its own internal conflicts. With the American Revolution looming in the background and economic distress in the foreground, political tension was mounting. King Louis XVI attempted to address these problems and called for the meeting of the Estates General in 1789. It has been said that the Church is always in need of reform, but it may just as easily be said that many things are always in need of reform. So many problems in history including those in the Church's history stem from the failure to put proper reforms in place before chaos breaks loose. Certainly, the French economic and political structures were buckling under the weight of extravagance, mismanagement and neglect. Add to that a few years of bad crop and new ideas

¹ Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 246

² Duffy, 251

³ J. N. D. Kelly, *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 301

about liberty and fraternity, and you have the ingredients for a blazing conflagration. Louis XVI's half-hearted attempts at reform failed to prevent the inevitable deluge.

The Revolutionaries established a Constitutional Monarchy and expanded their power. Fueled by the then radical ideas of "liberty, equality and fraternity," they pushed further away from all traditional figures of authority. Late in August 1789, they promulgated The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, in which they basically ignored the existence of the Catholic Church.⁴ At this point the Church became a target for two reasons. First, it had long been associated with the monarchy and many of those in the clergy were French aristocrats who had been installed by French monarchs. The clergy were seen as living lavishly while so many people were hungry. Even many common priests resented the aristocratic clergy. Gemma Bertros, a historian of the French Revolution and the Catholic Church, points out that, "Calls for the reform or abolition of the tithe and for the limitation of Church property were joined by complaints from parish priests who, excluded from the wealth bestowed upon the upper echelons of the Church hierarchy, often struggled to get by."⁵ But more importantly, the Church in France had land and property, and the revolutionaries needed money. In November 1789, the National Assembly confiscated all the Church properties.

The real jolt came in July 1790. The National Assembly put forth the Civil Constitution of the Clergy which redistributed the parishes, and essentially made the Church a department of the state with clergy and bishops being elected by local secular authorities. That November, the requirement that all the clergy should sign a loyalty oath to the Constitution was enacted. In

⁴ Gemma Bertros, "The French Revolution and the Catholic Church," *History Today*, Published in *History Review* Issue 68, December 2010, historytoday.com.

⁵ *ibid.*

Rome, Pius did nothing. Duffy says, “At this fateful moment, Pius VI was silent.”⁶ John O’Malley, S. J., in his book, *A History of the Popes - From Peter to the Present* says he “dithered.”⁷ In a slightly less negative tone, Kelly says he was “cautious, at first taking no action.”⁸ The result was a split in the Catholic Church in France. About half of the priests, known as the juring priests, signed. The non-signing clergy were known as the non-juring or refractory priests. Urban priests, especially in Paris, were more likely to sign. Of course, these labels do not constitute a good priest/bad priest distinction, because the situation was very complex. As mentioned above, there were many clerical abuses and some of those who did sign, did so in solidarity with the poor. According to Duffy, “The clergy of France were in an agonizing dilemma. So far as anyone knew, the Pope had not spoken. Most clergy detested the new arrangements, but many were committed to the Revolution in broad terms, unwilling to destabilize it by rejecting its religious provisions.”⁹ Finally, in May 1792, Pius strongly denounced the clergy’s loyalty oath to the constitution. Because of anti-Church sentiment, those who did not sign it were persecuted, exiled and even killed. The Pope was helpless and was himself considered an enemy of France.

In 1794, with the radical Jacobins in power, the French revolutionaries denied Christianity altogether and replaced it with the Church of Humanity and the Cult of the Supreme Being. All the monasteries and convents were closed. There was now an all out civil war within France among Catholics, with anyone loyal to Rome and the Pope considered an enemy of the republic. In what had been an overwhelmingly Catholic country Catholics were killed to assert the absolute power of the revolutionary state over the Church. At least 100,000 loyalist peasants were

⁶ Duffy, 255

⁷ John W. O’Malley, S. J., *A History of the Popes: From Peter to the Present* (Plymouth: Sheed and Ward, 2010), 228

⁸ Kelly, 302

⁹ Duffy, 256

killed in the countryside, specifically in the Vendée region and Lyon, for their support of refectory priests or for the Church. O'Malley reports that as many as 30,000 priests fled the country, and many were guillotined or drowned.¹⁰ Church properties that had been earlier confiscated were sacked and all of their possessions were sold. Many of the great churches of Paris were rehabilitated to be used as revolutionary places of worship and burial. Nothing like this had ever been seen before and it looked as if the Church, at least in France, was doomed.

Some of the powerful nations of Europe began moving against France in a coalition. Pius, again, was paralyzed. He was afraid that if he acted against France that France might invade Rome, and he wanted to remain neutral among competing Catholic nations.¹¹ Pius found himself in the position of not only having to defend the Church in foreign lands against monarchs and revolutionaries, but of having to protect Rome itself. The French Republican troops under Napoleon entered Lombardy in 1796 and “negotiated” with Pius to leave Rome in peace. In the Peace of Tolentino, 1797, Napoleon’s demands were draconian: he annexed much of the Papal States; the French were to have access to all papal ports; Napoleon was free to take any pieces of art or historical documents; and a very large sum of money was turned over as ransom. In addition, Pius was to recognize the legitimacy of the revolutionary government. In the next few years, France would come and go in a series of uneasy occupations of Italy .

This all came to a very bad ending for Pius. In December 1798, a French general was killed during a Roman uprising. The French sent troops to occupy Rome and establish a Roman Republic, seizing the Papal States. The Pope refused to give up his authority and was taken prisoner. Matthew Bunson in *The Pope Encyclopedia* describes his departure this way: “Already old and ill, Pius defiantly refused to hand over the Ring of the Fisherman and faced his captors with

¹⁰ O'Malley, 228

¹¹ Duffy, 258

such equanimity that the Spanish ambassador, an avowed atheist, expressed his deepest respect. As the pontiff left Rome, throngs of Romans knelt silently in the rain while he passed in his carriage."¹² He was first taken to a monastery near Florence, but then moved to France near Avignon. He was 82 at this time and in no condition to make such an arduous journey. He died six weeks after his arrival. Suspecting that he might die soon, he left instructions for the convening of the next conclave. No one in France officially recognized his passing, and he was not given a proper Christian burial. He was acknowledged by his birth name and job title of pontiff. Nothing more.

Pius VI may have acted too slowly, but it is debatable how much difference a quicker response to the oath would have made. Could Pius have averted the split within France? The Church in France was already internally polarized. A quicker response might have made a small difference, but not enormous. This is especially true when one considers that even after Pius denounced it, not all the clergy followed. What is certain is that his denunciation of the oath defined the split. There was no longer any uncertainty about what the clergy were expected to do. The scope of the Revolution was nothing that Pius could have imagined, and he stood up to the revolutionaries' demands and remained steadfast against Napoleon. The ignominious circumstances of his death affirmed his fierce opposition and, despite his weaknesses and shortcomings, he would later be remembered with respect. At the time of his death, however, many feared that the Church in Rome was mortally wounded.

Pius VII

Pius VII, like his predecessor, arrived upon a terrible scene. In 1799 Napoleon took control of the French government. Pius VII was elected in 1800. Pius' first act of determination was

¹² Matthew Bunson, *The Pope Encyclopedia*, (New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks, 1995), 280

to return to Rome in July of 1800, restoring the Papal States. Both Napoleon and Pius, having seen the Revolution, sought a more practical working relationship. While not a religious man, Napoleon recognized that the people of France were Catholic. He knew that it would serve his vision of France to be on working terms with Rome. Also practical, Pius VII was well read and understood modern Enlightenment thinking. Pius was aware that his only authority derived from his Papal chair. Napoleon, however, also recognized that this authority was important to the people of France. As an act of good faith, he allowed Pius VI's body to be returned to Rome from France for a Catholic burial.¹³ After much give and take, they agreed to the famous Concordat of 1801. Catholicism was relegalized in France, and some of the churches were returned to the clergy.

An idea that had been brewing for some time in France was Gallicanism, or the idea of a national French church. Pius weakened the thrust of this idea by reorganizing the dioceses and requesting that many bishops, not having been installed by the Pope, resign. This was a significant event. As Duffy states, "At a stroke, the entrenched resistance of the French church to papal authority was undone, the entire hierarchy reconstituted by an unprecedented exercise of papal power. Though few people grasped the full implications at the time, a new era in the history of the papacy, and the Church, had begun."¹⁴ Nevertheless, the government kept the lion's share of the Church's property and wealth, the clergy were required to swear an oath to the government, and the state was to nominate bishops with the pope's final approval. Neither was perfectly happy with the result, but Pius knew that he could not get more. In fact, shortly after the Concordat, Napoleon added the Organic Articles which gave more authority over the Church to France.

¹³ O'Malley, 234

¹⁴ Duffy, 265

The relationship between Pius and Napoleon was always strained; Napoleon wanting more power and land, and Pius wanting to protect the Church and the city of Rome from French military incursion. It was a very difficult dance, and Napoleon's coronation as emperor in 1804 gives witness to this. Napoleon invited Pius to Paris with plans to put him in his place. One of his tactics being to crown himself as a public demonstration of his independence from the Pope. Pius was unsure if he should go, because it would legitimize Napoleon and the Concordat, and possibly offend some of the other European leaders. On the other hand, if he did not go, he would strain relations with Napoleon even further. In the end he decided to go, and the outcome was not at all what Napoleon had expected or wished. As Pius traveled through France, he was cheered and adored. This made a very loud and clear statement of how important the Pope was to the French people. Napoleon was not pleased. What had been intended as a show of Pius' lower status backfired and ended with Pius being given more attention and honor than he was.

The next challenge arose when Napoleon demanded that the Pope support him in his political conflicts and side with him in the blockade against Britain. Pius could not declare war against Britain, because he maintained that the Church must remain neutral in worldly affairs. Napoleon invaded Rome again in 1808 and retook the Papal States. Pius excommunicated Napoleon, who then ordered that Pius be imprisoned. In 1813, Pius was called to Fontainebleau by Napoleon to sign a new agreement. Pius, ill and unaware of Napoleon's accumulating military failures, weakened as Napoleon badgered him mercilessly. As Duffy says, "Eventually the Pope gave in, and signed a draft agreement on a scrap of paper for a concordat which totally surrendered the temporal power. The Pope would be sovereign of Rome no longer."¹⁵ This was the low

¹⁵ Duffy, 271

point of Pius' reign. Unlike his predecessor, however, he did not die in captivity. Pius immediately regretted his action and recanted. Napoleon was quickly losing political ground, and Pius was released and returned to Rome in 1814. The Congress of Vienna restored the Papal States, and the revolution, at least as far as political power went, was behind them.

Pius worked tirelessly to come to good terms with the other countries in Europe. Pius, described by Kelly as being more concerned with spiritual and doctrinal matters, ended his reign pushing for positive reform and modernization within the Church. In 1814, he reinstated the Jesuits, who had been suppressed in 1773. As Kelly describes, "He made a real attempt to adapt the papacy, within limits, to the modern world, and when he died it enjoyed a respect which it had lacked when he entered on his office; it was beginning once more to be regarded as a supra-national authority."¹⁶ Kindly to the end, in a fondly remembered act of charity and mercy, Pius offered refuge in Rome to some of Napoleon's relatives after his exile.

Looking back over the years of the two Pius', then, there are some striking similarities about their pontificates. Both inherited seriously weakened offices. Both had to deal, not only with internal Church matters and prevailing political powers, but with a true radicalization of ideas about the role of the Church and the truth of religion. It is nearly impossible to imagine how The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen shocked the world. Pius VI could not have been prepared for it. Perhaps he did not have the best temperament to deal with it. While it does not appear that he did everything as well as some others might have, he held his own and did not abdicate. Pius VII was better qualified and prepared to deal with the circumstances he was given. Yet, this does not make the challenges he faced trivial. Napoleon would not have

¹⁶ Kelly, 304

been an easy sparring partner. Pius VII never veered seriously from his path. Both of these Piuses gave Catholics of the 19th century something to be proud of and to look back to for direction in a time when many of the political revolutions were behind them, but new ones were fomenting.

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