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An Imperial Revival:
Government and Religion under the Reign of Napoleon

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The French Revolution had a devastating affect on the Catholic Church, as well as religion itself throughout the nation of France. The Enlightenment had secured the idea that reason was to be worshiped more so than God, and when these ideals met with the radical thoughts inside the mind of Maximilian Robespierre (1758-1794), the church had no chance of survival in Revolutionary France. Interestingly enough the atheistic and deistic ideals of the Enlightenment which brought down the church in the first place would in turn be the same ideals that brought it back into power. In his first substantial political maneuver Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), a man who was not known for being religious, would bring back out of revolutionary exile the Catholic Church in France. This action secured Napoleon's place as a politician, showing that he could be a leader in areas other than the battlefield.

Napoleon's rise in politics, as well as his concern for religion, is a bit ironic when his family life, especially the relationship he had with his father, is taken into account. Napoleon was baptized into the Catholic faith as a child, however, he never became engrossed in the faith. His lack of personal interest in religion coupled with the political

instability of his homeland may have led him to often question his belief in God. On the island of Corsica where Napoleon began his life, the Bonaparte family was one of the most prominent on the island. This prominence was due in part to the Bonaparte family heritage (which originated in Florence, Italy in the late 1200's) and Carlo Bonaparte (1746-1785)'s position in the Corsican Assembly. France had invaded the island and taken it over in 1768, which quickly resulted in the assimilation of the Corsican people into French society. Carlo did little to nothing to fight the French influence, as a matter of fact he very quickly became engrossed into the French nobility.

Napoleon never really forgave his father for betraying his homeland and becoming engrossed into French society and politics, which is why it is nothing short of ironic that Napoleon became so engrossed in government later on in his life. As Napoleon grew in power through the military and eventually in the government of France, the issue of maintaining control throughout the land began to burden the young leader, to the point where something had to be done in order to insure that his domestic support would remain strong.¹ To quote Napoleon's Minister of Internal Affairs, Jean Chaptal (1756-1832), "The boldest operation that Bonaparte carried out during the first years of his reign was to re-establish worship upon its old foundations."²

The ideals of the French Revolution as well as the cruel policies of the Directory had all but wiped Catholicism completely out of France. Having said this, Napoleon seemed to sense that those who were devout supporters of the church had not lost their faith and seemed to want some sort of reconciliation between the church and the new French governing body, the Consulate. Napoleon himself seemed to show respect for the

¹ Andrew Roberts, *Napoleon: A Life* (New York: Viking Press Inc., 2014), 270.

² Ibid.

Pope's ability to organize the people, or to be more specific, his ability to organize uprisings in Italy. This incredible influence the Pope had on the people could prove quite useful toward the Napoleonic cause. If the relationship between the Catholic church and France was finally restored, this action could very well have improved international relations with countries like Belgium, Italy and Switzerland.³

While Napoleon knew that having the churches influence would contribute to a more peaceful and controlled society, he himself seemed to struggle with the ideal of religion altogether. He often asked his secretary, "Did Jesus ever exist? Or did he not? I think that no contemporary historian has ever mentioned him."⁴ Some scholars think that Napoleon is best described as an atheist, however several also hold that he was more of a deist. To define these terms a bit further, an atheist believes that there is not higher power whatsoever, while a deist believes that there is a God who created the earth, but is uninvolved and uninterested in human activity. Napoleon knew that while he may not personally hold to the Christian faith, the influence of the Catholic church on the people who remained faithful would have outstanding long-term effects.

When addressing the Clergy of Milan on June 5, 1800 Napoleon declared the reason for why he decided to reinstate the Catholic church as a political power as well as a religion. He stated that he was "Persuaded that is the only true religion which can provide a well-ordered society with true happiness, and reinforce the foundations of a good government..."⁵ While Napoleon certainly had the power to declare his new decision, he realized he needed the support of the Pope and the full backing strength of

³ Ibid., 271.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John Boyer, Julius Kirshner, and Keith Baker, *University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization Vol. 7: The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 423.

the Vatican in order to successfully accomplish this goal. Thus the stage was being set for what would become one of the most important legislative agreements to be made in the history of the Catholic Church and certainly one of the most important political actions accomplished by Napoleon himself.

Gaining the backing strength of the Vatican would seem to be a daunting task. One would assume that the Pope would hold an immense grudge over the country of France due to the incredible violence that was shown to clergymen during the Terror. Fortunately for France, the rise of a newly appointed Pope would prove very useful in accomplishing the Napoleonic goal. Pope Pius VII (1742-1823) was appointed in March of 1800, a man who was always open to modern ideas. Prior to his papacy he served as the Bishop of Tivoli, a position in which he would prove himself to be a great leader in times of political change.⁶ In 1797 he delivered a sermon stating the radical idea that there was no conflict between Christianity and democracy, an idea that would be put into practice three years later in negotiating with Napoleon.

Negotiations for what would become known as the *Concordant* began in July of 1800. In order to ensure that his plan for the reinstatement of the Catholic church would not be harmed, Napoleon himself did not take part in the negotiations themselves (though his influence was present throughout the entire process). The bulk of the negotiations were held between Napoleon's brother Joseph Bonaparte (1768-1844), along with the former Vendean leader Etienne-Alexander Bernier (1762-1806). The Vatican sent its own ambassadors to this meeting, one man being the Pope's theological advisor Charles Caselli and the Papal legate Cardinal Giovanni Caprara.⁷ Do to the nature of the

⁶ John Kelly, *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 303.

⁷ Roberts, "Napoleon: A Life," 272.

negotiations and the vast amount of change that would be brought about because of the outcome, these negotiations were held in absolute secrecy.

It was the full intention of the Pope to reform the Catholic church to what it had been before the Revolution. That is to say that the church would play a role in the politics of France, if not directly than indirectly behind the scenes. Before the Revolution the church had been the entire body of the First Estate and therefore had significant influence within the Estates General, however with the rise of Robespierre and the supporters of the Revolution who were keen to the ideals of the Enlightenment their power began to fall. Pius VII saw the outcome of the negotiations as a large step in establishing the Catholic church as a power in western Europe after many years of deception and ridicule, and the negotiations which brought about the *Concordant* gave significant advantages to the church.⁸

Once it became official that the Catholic church would be restored as the main religion of France, Napoleon began to work out another piece of legislation which became known as the Organic Articles.⁹ Under this set of laws the States' hold over the church in France was tightened so as to not allow anything to get out of hand. These laws also restricted papal intervention in France, allowing Catholicism to be brought back into power, but with Napoleon keeping complete control. In speaking about this Napoleon once stated, "One should render to God that which is God's, but the Pope is not God."¹⁰

The articles proposed by Napoleon hamstrung the church by limiting its freedoms, or at the very least ensuring that the church can do nothing without the government's

⁸ Kelly, "Dictionary of the Popes," 303

⁹ Kelly, "Dictionary of the Popes," 303

¹⁰ Napoleon Bonaparte and R.M. Johnston, *The Corsican: The Virtual Diary of Napoleon Bonaparte* (Tucson: Fireship Press, 2010), 120.

knowledge. Article One states that, “No bull, brief, rescript, decree, injunction, provision, signature serving as a provision, nor other documents from the court of Rome, even concerning individuals only, can be received, published, printed or otherwise put into effect, without the authorization of the Government.”¹¹ Laws that regulate items such as this fill the many pages of the Organic Articles. It was becoming all the more obvious that while Napoleon had the utmost respect for the Catholic Church, he had a greater mission. This mission was to use the church as a means of governing the people rather than bringing religion back to the recuperating nation that was early nineteenth century France. He felt that this reinstatement of Catholicism would raise the morale of the French people so that they would be more open to the changes and ideals that were being set forth by the Consulate. However Napoleon did not stop at limiting the contact between the Catholic Church in France and the Pope, as it can be seen later on Napoleon's grip over the church grew ever tighter.

Interestingly enough, the Organic Articles were carried out shortly after Napoleon promoted himself to First Consul in 1802. The reason for the delay in passing this piece of legislation must be linked to Napoleon's growth in power. He knew that with his growth in political popularity the Articles would pass with ease. Whatever the reason, Napoleon passed the articles without first seeking the permission of the Pope. It angered Pius VII that he had not been made aware, or agreed to, the new suffocating terms brought forth by the young ruler. In 1804, the year in which Napoleon declared himself

¹¹ "The Organic Articles," The Napoleon Series. April 8, 1802, accessed March 3, 2015. <http://napoleon-series.org>.

Emperor over of the country of France, Pope Pius VII traveled from his home in the Vatican in Italy to Paris to take part in the coronation ceremony.¹²

The unexpected visit was not meant to pay tribute to the new young ruler (though it may have appeared to be so). Pius hoped that Napoleon would accept some modifications in the Organic Articles, as well as restore lands that belonged to the papal state currently under French control. Both of these hopes were proven fruitless, as Napoleon seemed not to budge on his hold over the church. As the years progressed, the relationship between Napoleon and Pius VII would only grow farther and farther apart. Napoleon was renewing war within Europe and fully expected the Pope's support, however Pius preferred to stay neutral. It is well known that Napoleon attempted on several occasions to invade and conquer the country of England, though he would prove unsuccessful in every attempt. When Pius refused to support Napoleon's continental blockade of England, the young Emperor-General occupied Rome on February 2, 1808.¹³

With Napoleon now taking over the negotiations with the Pope and forcing his own ideas into how the church was to be reinstated, the Vatican seemed to be quickly running out of options. Pius' response to Napoleon's occupation of Rome was to excommunicate, as he put it, "all robbers of Peter's patrimony", which he did without specifically mentioning Napoleon by name.¹⁴ Bonaparte, however, figured out rather quickly that this excommunication was to include himself. In an angry letter to his Marshall of France, Joachim Murat (1767-1815), Napoleon wrote, "If the Pope preaches

¹² Kelly, "Dictionary of the Popes," 303

¹³ Ibid., 303

¹⁴ Ibid., 303

revolt, then you must arrest him."¹⁵ Napoleon would write several more letters to Murat, all of which warranted the same angry and threatening tone. However threatening these letters seemed, they did not in essence amount to the kidnapping of Pius VII, which unfortunately was the result.¹⁶ In the middle of the night on July 5, 1809 French General Etienne Radet (1762-1825) led a small force inside the walls of the Vatican City to kidnap Pope Pius VII.¹⁷ The process was not an easy one as the French guards quickly compromised themselves and came very close to jeopardizing the entire operation, but eventually the Pope was taken captive and placed under arrest.

When Napoleon heard about the arrest he was livid. In a letter to one of his ministers he stated that the kidnapping of the Pope was "madness."¹⁸ However, with the Pope now in custody, Napoleon saw no need in letting him go back to Rome as the deed had already been done. Bonaparte kept the Pope under a form of house arrest for five years, in which he would force the religious leader to agree to his terms within the Concordant.¹⁹

Was Napoleon involved in the kidnapping of Pius VII? An answer has never been reached, however the evidence that supports the idea of Bonaparte not giving an order for the Pope to be kidnapped is somewhat in his favor. By the account of the letter to his minister in which he called the taking of the Pope "madness," it appears to most historians that General Radet may have acted on his own account and may have simply misinterpreted Napoleon's statement, "If the Pope preaches revolt, then you must arrest

¹⁵ Hicks Peter, "Napoleon and the Pope: From the Concordant to the Excommunication," accessed March 29, 2015, Napoleon.org .

¹⁶ "Napoleon and the Pope: From the Concordant to the Excommunication," par 3.

¹⁷"Napoleon and the Pope: From the Concordant to the Excommunication.," par. 3

¹⁸ "Napoleon and the Pope: From the Concordant to the Excommunication," par. 4

¹⁹ "Napoleon and the Pope: From the Concordant to the Excommunication.," par. 4

him" taking it as a direct order. On the other hand the fact that Napoleon had no idea of the Pope's possible kidnapping appeals to most historians as being a bit of a stretch. Other than the years of waiting on an agreement to the terms of restoring the Catholic Church to France, Napoleon did not need anything else from the Pope. He once wrote, "From the Pope I demand nothing; I ask him for no oath, not even to recognize the annexation of Rome to France; I have no need for it."²⁰

This statement would prove to be false when the Pope was transferred to house arrest at Fontainebleau. It was in this location that Napoleon realized the Pope was at his disposal. Bonaparte forced the Pope to sign a draft of a new convention, which were essentially the same stipulations as the Concordant but combined with the Organic Articles that had been proposed by Napoleon a few years earlier. This new piece of legislation, which became known as the "Concordant of Fontainebleau", called for certain surrenders, including the renunciation of lands held by the papal states.²¹ In essence Napoleon would not allow the Pope to leave until he agreed to sign the new Concordant terms, an act which was, reluctantly by the Pope, fulfilled.

Amidst all the negotiations and the stressful work that Napoleon and Pius VII went through in order to restore the Catholic Church to France, it was the Emperor not the Pope who gained the glory. The people of France saw Napoleon as their savior and restorer of the faith and greatly expressed their gratitude for the "restoration of the alters."²² The people's appreciation was even shown in the newspapers of Paris, more specifically in the political cartoons. One particular cartoon shows Napoleon in full military dress uniform, sword drawn, protecting Jesus, who is depicted hanging on the

²⁰ Johnston Bonaparte, "The Corsican: A Virtual Diary of Napoleon Bonaparte," 263.

²¹ Kelly, "Dictionary of the Popes," 303

²² Felix Markham, *Napoleon* (New York: Mentor, 1966), 94.

cross, from Satan.²³ The praise for Napoleon's restoration of the church was exactly what the young politician had hoped for when he first began this undertaking, which furthers the question that many historians have raised: Did Napoleon do this for the people or for himself?

It is clear that Napoleon sought to restore the church in France in order to ensure that he would have the loyalty of the people, but many historians have wondered exactly how much personal gain Napoleon sought as a result of the Concordant. This may amount to nothing at all, however the harshness of the negotiations combined with Napoleon's incredible thirst and desire for power are undoubtedly key factors in this debate. He had the power on the battlefield, that much was known by many, however when it came to politics, especially early in his political career, he needed to show that he had command of the government just like he had command of the military. All evidence points to the conclusion that while Bonaparte may have seen the political gains to be held by reestablishing the church, he saw the personal reward to be greater.

It also appeared that Napoleon may have even seen himself as superior to the Pope. At his coronation ceremony on December 2, 1804 Napoleon refused the Pope the right to place the imperial crown on his head, and instead placed the crown on his head himself. Napoleon also took it upon himself to crown his first wife Josephine Empress, once again not allowing the Pope to do so.²⁴ With the final acceptance of the terms of the Concordant, along with Napoleon's passing of the Organic Articles, could the young leader have come to the conclusion that his rule was supreme, even to the Pope? His thirst for power combined with his incredible desire to rule most all of Europe certainly

²³ Tim Clayton and Shelia O'Connell, *Bonaparte and the British: Prints and Propaganda in the Age of Napoleon* (United Kingdom: British Museum Press.), 138.

²⁴ David G. Chandler, *Napoleon* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1973), 62.

attest to the fact that he wanted the Pope under his authority. When speaking about his love for power Napoleon said, "I love power. But it is as an artist that I love it."²⁵ From this one can grasp that it was not just the pursuit of easily governing a nation which led Napoleon to negotiate the Concordant.

The irony of the entire situation should not be ignored. The French Revolution had virtually wiped Catholicism out of existence in the country, all because of the radical ways in which the Enlightenment had evolved. Many of those involved with the Enlightenment movement were either atheist or deist, meaning that God was not a deciding factor in many of the developments brought about by the Enlightenment thinkers. Ironically, several years after the death of Robespierre (an extreme deist) Napoleon, also a deist, was able to bring back the church which had so brutally been discriminated against only a few years earlier.

About the author

Justin Butler is a junior history major at Kentucky Christian University. He hopes to become a history professor in the future.

²⁵ Johnston Bonaparte, *The Corsican: The Virtual Diary of Napoleon Bonaparte*, 127.