

Can the Church Be Destroyed?

Our Catholic Heritage

Napoleon Vows to Crush the Church

By MSGR. JAMES F. CONNELLY

The control which the rulers of France (Gallicanism), Germany (Febronianism) and Austria (Josephism) attempted to exercise over the Catholic Church in their countries indicates the strength of those autocratic monarchs, ruling by "divine right" and the weakness of the Catholic Church in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Europe.

These Gallican forces came to the fore during the French Revolution (1789-1799), when the organized Church was almost destroyed in the land of her "oldest daughter." In 1790, the delegates of the Estates General meeting at Versailles (including representatives of the clergy) had confiscated all Church property for the state; rearranged diocesan boundaries; provided for the election of bishops

and pastors by all those (even atheists) who lived in the territory of the dioceses and parishes; and divided French Catholics by setting up a Constitutional Church independent of Rome.

A few bishops and half the priests of France supported the schismatic church. The rest refused and remained loyal to Rome. These French Catholics, therefore were judged anti-revolutionary and anti-republican and thousands of them, including hundreds of priests, were either exiled or killed during the Reign of Terror (1793-1794).

The French revolution ruined the established institutions of monarchy and Church in France. The revolutionaries outlawed the Catholic religion in France; proclaimed a patriotism which defied the French nation; and established a Religion of Nature, which saw a prostitute, dressed as the goddess of nature,

dancing on the high altar of Notre Dame Cathedral.

Sensing the general dissatisfaction of the French people with the revolutionary government, General Napoleon Bonapart seized power in a coup d'etat. A baptized Catholic, Napoleon had lost his religion in the excitement of his military career. He once remarked: "I see in religion not the mystery of the Incarnation but the mystery of order in society." He was determined to use the Catholic Religion of the French people as the cement of his cherished empire.

Napoleon secured peace with the Church by signing a concordat with the Holy See in 1801. This treaty was a personal victory for Napoleon and a benefit to the Church, because the religious troubles of the revolutionary period were put to rest and the French schism was healed.

At the same time Napoleon unilate-

rally promulgated the Organic Articles, which were drawn up without the Holy See's approval or knowledge and were designed to give Napoleon control over the Church in France and his expanding empire. When the Holy See protested Napoleon's treachery, Napoleon screamed at the Cardinal Secretary of State: "I can crush the Church!" He almost did.

In 1809, he annexed the Papal States and took Pope Pius VII (1800-1823) as his prisoner to France, just as the French revolutionaries had treated Pope Pius VI (1775-1799). Pope Pius VI died in France. Pope Pius VII returned to Rome in 1814.

Three years later, when Napoleon had met his Waterloo and was exiled on the rocky island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic, Pope Pius VII forgave him his wrongdoings and sent him a chaplain. The man who vowed to crush the Church died in exile in 1821. It was the end of an era.

St. John Vianney — Unsung, Silent, Heroic

By MSGR. JAMES F. CONNELLY

On May 8, 1786, three years before the French Revolution began, a boy was born to a poor farmer in Dardilly, France. His name was John Vianney and he was to live through the terrible years of the French Revolution, the wars and defeat of Napoleon and the splendid revival of the Catholic Church in France.

Dardilly had a schismatic "constitutional" priest whom John's parents avoided. Always loyal to Rome, they assisted in secret at the Masses of a hunted priest who had refused to leave the unity of the Catholic Church. It was from him that John received his first Holy Communion in secret.

Never intelligent, but always pious, John entered the minor seminary when he was 20 years old. He did not remain there long. Three years later he was drafted into Napoleon's army even though he was studying for the priesthood. Then, through a series of misunderstandings, he failed to join his designated company and was declared a deserter. He was able to return home only when Napoleon granted an amnesty in 1810 on the occasion of his marriage to the Archduchess Marie-Louise.

John then went to the major seminary at Lyons where he was ordained a priest in 1815, five days before the Battle of Waterloo. He was ordained despite the fact that he knew little theology and less Latin. His goodness was deemed sufficient to offset his lack of knowledge.

His first pastorate was the parish of Ars-en-Dombes, a little village of some 230 souls a few miles from Lyons. During his first six years there



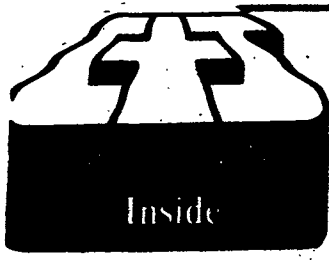
he lived on nothing but potatoes as a sacrifice for the indifference and vices of his "feeble flock." Eventually he was able to reform the entire village by the sheer force of his personal holiness.

Father John began to gain a reputation as a discerner of souls, as a spiritual director and confessor. So many people came from all over France to receive absolution from him that he was constrained to spend 12 to 18 hours a day in the confessional. The devil paid the supreme compliment to his holiness by attacking him with the strange phenomena of unexplainable noises, voices, and personal violence day and night.

Three times he left his parish to join the Carthusians and three times he returned to Ars to absolve the sinners who needed him. Some of his fellow priests thought him a "quack" and reported him to his bishop, who denied their appeal. "Gentlemen," he said, "I wish that all my clergy had a small grain of the same madness."

Despite all his prayers, his fasting, the ridicule which came his way, his physical hardships in the poor parish, the most difficult and extraordinary work which the Cure of Ars did was his own self-discipline. Like most dedicated parish priests, he did his ordinary work for souls in an unsung, silent and heroic way.

St. John died in 1859. The Church canonized him in 1925 and Pope Pius XI made the Cure of Ars the patron saint of parish priests in 1929. His feast is observed on Aug. 4.



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