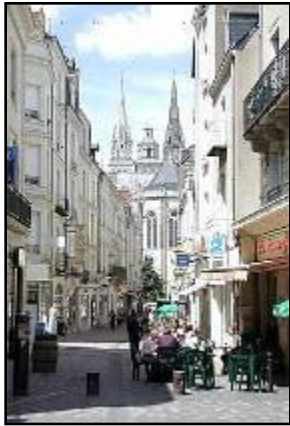


The French Catholic Church on the Eve of the French Revolution



Contemporary Angers

The **Catholic Church in France in the 18th century** was a **bloated** and often corrupt institution. It had a close connection with the French state; and indeed the influence of the state was greater than that of the pope, who was a sort of honorary chairman of the board (this is referred to as **Gallican**). The French state under the Bourbon kings had firm control over the appointment of bishops and all other high ecclesiastical offices, and it also supervised the vast wealth of the French Church.

The French Catholic church was very wealthy and absorbed a large portion of the French national income, often to no useful purpose; the Church owned about 30% of the arable land in the fertile northern province of Picardie.

Monasteries had very large incomes that were often spent on luxuries and on absentee abbots; the monastery of **St. Aubin** in the West of France near Angers was a good example with its absentee abbot who collected 40% of the income of the fabulously rich monastery, its rich diet and cushy lifestyle for the 15 monks actually in residence, etc. Almost everyone in France thought that the monasteries should be abolished and that their wealth should be put to more useful purposes; no one however thought of abolishing the secular church, i.e., the huge network of parishes whose priests served not only the spiritual needs of their people (mass, confessions, burials, etc.), but also many of their material wants, such as relief in times of famine and war.

There was a **serious class divide** in the French church between a fabulously wealthy minority of bishops, abbots, and monks (the bishops were rarely present in their episcopal sees) and the poor worker bees (priests) who did all the work in the parishes; some of the strongest supporters of thoroughgoing ecclesiastical reform in the early days of the French Revolution were parish priests and other lower clergymen.

The Church antagonized most of the intellectuals and middle classes by dominating the country's educational system (the universities were not any good and all the serious intellectual work of the country was done outside of formal academic institutions), and by attempting – somewhat unsuccessfully – to censor print and publications (the famous 'Encyclopedia' of the Enlightenment was published abroad and smuggled easily back into France despite the highly antagonistic opposition of the church). The very inefficiency of Church repression annoyed intellectuals and other leaders even more.



Did the Bishop Loménie De Brienne believe in God?

Many of the leaders of the Church were atheists and deists, or at least were of weak faith. When Louis XV, who was no saint himself, received the suggestion that the agnostic **Loménie de Brienne** be made Archbishop of Paris, he replied, "No! The Archbishop of Paris must at least believe in God!"

Aside from Enlightenment intellectuals, there was not a lot of anti-Catholic feeling in France on the **eve of the French Revolution**: most supported the lower clergy (parish priests) in calling for a thoroughgoing reform of the Church that would include the confiscation of Church land, abolition of the monasteries, higher salaries for the parish priests, and a more constructive relationship of the Church with the French state.

The French Revolution, 1789-1799

The **French Revolution** began in 1789. There was general agreement in the beginning that the French Church needed drastic reform. All the **monasteries** were abolished; and when all the lands of the Catholic Church were confiscated by the state, there were few objections. The **Civil Constitution of the Clergy** (1790) simplified the Church, raised the salaries of the curés (the parish priests), and abolished many useless offices. It retained the Gallican organization of the Church in France with its intimate dependence on the state. Parish priests were to be **elected** by all the active electors in the parishes; the bishops were to be appointed by the state (and consecrated by the pope); all Church officials were to take an oath of compliance to the new constitutional church.

Probably most Catholics **objected** to the virtual exclusion of the pope from the French Church's governance and to the holding of democratic elections in the parishes (wouldn't non-practicing Catholics be allowed to participate in the elections?). Tragically, the reforms soon led to an intense **polarization** of opinion in France between the constitutional clergy who took the oath and the "refractory" or **non-juror clergy** who did not (including about half the parish priests and almost all the bishops). By 1792 all of France was deeply divided over the religious issue.



The execution of King Louis XVI

The monarchy fell in 1792 (King Louis XVI was executed in January 1793), and a Republic was proclaimed under the rule of the **Committee of Public Safety**. The radical phase of the Revolution (1792-94) introduced a virulent anti-Christian campaign in France. The leaders of the new republic ushered in what they proclaimed to be a new age of enlightenment and reason, where there would be no room for superstition such as that promoted by the Church; they considered the old Church politically reactionary and a remnant of a benighted age (of Christianity). A surprisingly bitter and widespread anti-Church feeling (**anti-clericalism**) burst into the public view in most parts of France. Leaders like **Fouché** traveled around France promoting dechristianization (putting an inscription over a cemetery "Death is an eternal sleep", pressuring the clergy to marry, closing as many churches as possible, etc.). Although religious toleration was the official policy, Catholic mass was being said in only a few hundred churches in France at the height of the "Terror" in 1794.



Robespierre

The government under **Maximilien Robespierre** (the "incorruptible") promoted alternative public cults to be celebrated in public. After trying out the cult of Reason (judged by the revolutionary elite to be too close to atheism for the common people), he settled on the **Cult of the Supreme Being** that would have public ceremonies and its own **secular** saints and days of celebration to replace the outworn and reactionary French ones. Its stated purpose was to combat atheism, to promote virtue in conjunction with the new Republic, and of course to preserve private property and respect for authority. The idea was that people of all former faiths would come together to worship in this patriotic outgrowth of deism and the European Enlightenment.

Paris also teemed with other experimental religions such as Zacharias Werner's crackpot cult of "**Catholic Sexuality**", that preached that "man's soul in its ascent [to heaven] must pass during its earthly life through the purgatory of female bodies." (Paul Johnson) His religion had very few followers; and due in part to his romantic admiration of the Catholic Church (common in Germany at the time), he eventually converted to Catholicism shortly before the fall of Napoleon.



David's famous portrait of Napoleon Bonaparte

After the passing of the first infatuation, most of the new elites were not ready to tumble down the slope of atheism and moral relativity. Even if the leaders were not Catholic and some of them were probably atheists, they were convinced that the Church was an effective guarantor of private property and loyalty to the state; the Church would keep the servants from stealing the silver spoons from their masters. **Sadi Carnot**, the great organizer of the armies of Napoleon, rejected the new public cults, saying “a successful religion needed absurdity and unintelligibility – and in these respects nothing could beat Christianity.”

Napoleon and the Concordat of 1801

The experimentation came to an end with the fall of Robespierre (July 1794) and the coming of **Napoleon** to power in 1799. Napoleon's main objective was to stabilize the political and social situation in France in favor of his clients, the middle classes and the land-owning peasants. Napoleon was a **free-thinker** himself, but he thought a strong Church would be useful to his authority and to the preservation of property (belief in God induces poor people to put up with the privileges of the rich). As he put it:

“What is it that makes the poor man take it for granted that ten chimneys smoke in my palace while he dies of cold – that I have ten changes of raiment in my wardrobe while he is naked – that on my table for each meal there is enough to sustain a family for a week? It is religion that says to him in another life I shall be his equal, indeed that he has a better chance of being happy there than I have.”

He consequently sent an ambassador to Rome in 1800 and informed the Pope that he had a “gift of 20 million Frenchmen” for him; he then came to terms with the Catholic Church in France in the **Concordat of 1801**. The Catholic Church was proclaimed to be “the religion of the majority of Frenchmen,” i.e., not everyone was forced to practice Catholicism. The Church remained strongly **Gallican** with Napoleon choosing the bishops (again with papal consecration) and the bishops choosing the parish clergy from lists of candidates acceptable to the state. Church property such as churches, rectories, etc. now belonged to the state, but they were loaned to the Church for its use. Since all the wealth that the Church had subsisted on in the Old Regime was now lost, all the curés were salaried by the state, and took an oath of loyalty to the head of state – they were treated as more or less another branch of the French civil service. Napoleon wanted the French Church to be his “**moral gendarme**”, i.e. a clerical policeman who helped to keep order in France and to inculcate loyalty to the state.

In separate actions Napoleon also instituted civil marriage, and placed secondary and higher education under the authority of the state. Divorce was allowed under the **Napoleonic Code** (1807), although it was not to be much used for over a century. The land that had been confiscated from the Church and sold off to the wealthy peasants and middle classes was not to be restored to the Church. In many ways the Concordat resembled the Civil Constitution of the Clergy of 1791 -- with fewer democratic provisions and more authority in the hands of the pope.

Another important event under Napoleon was his treatment of **Pope Pius VII (1800-23)**, whom he had arrested in Rome and carried off to imprisonment in France for six years. When he was finally released in 1814, Pius became a kind of martyr for the persecuted Church; his courage and dignity in facing up to the imperial bully gave Catholics a symbol around which to rally.

The impact of the experience of the Revolution and Napoleon was a serious revival of Catholicism in the 19th century; and in particular the value of **ultramontanism**. Compared to his relative powerlessness in the 18th century, the pope was now **supreme ruler (sort of dictator) of the Church**: all lines of authority were gathered in his hands; he was treated with reverence and respect by almost all Catholics, although the doctrine of papal infallibility was not to be proclaimed until 1870. Catholics rallied around the pope to face off secular threats from the outside. (Some Catholic intellectuals and bishops objected; see the discussion of Liberal Catholicism below.)



Pius VII, 1800-1823

The French Church had undergone **major changes since the 1780s**. From a privileged, wealthy, powerful, and spiritually weak church under the thumb of the French state (Gallican), it had evolved into a much poorer (its land was gone) and less powerful (it was subservient to the state and had lost control over secondary and higher education and over social welfare) institution, but it was a spiritually revived organization that continued to depend on (a usually quite secular) French state for financial support but also increasingly looked to the pope in Rome for leadership. The French Church continued to receive financial support from the state under the provisions of the Concordat of 1801, and it continued to dominate elementary education in France (this would last until late in the 19th century). French men and women were no longer obliged to be Catholics, although most of them were still practicing. This **halfway house** was the religious regime in France until the final **law separating church and state in 1905**, over one century later. The French had a long way to go before embracing the American system of separation of church and state.

Anti-Clericalism Among the Liberals: France

In contrast to the USA and England where churches agreed to disagree, religion was a major political preoccupation in 19th century Europe and perhaps the most common source of division. **Anti-clerical (anti-Church) agitation** was already strongly established by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution: recall the angry denunciation of the Church in France by Voltaire and the often violent persecution of the Church by leaders such as Robespierre during the French Revolution.



**Liberal philosopher
John Stuart Mill and
his wife**

The liberal ideology of the early 19th century (developed by writers such as John Stuart Mill and espoused by the middle classes of the major European states) included an insistence on civil liberties (freedom of speech and writing), laissez-faire economics, and some sort of parliamentary-style government based on a limited (tax-based) suffrage. Liberals also espoused religious toleration and the disestablishment of the established religions, or as Cavour, the prime minister of Piedmont proclaimed in the 1850s, “a free Church in a free state.”

Actually, in at least southern European countries liberals went far beyond a demand for toleration and were **anti-clerical and secular** in their attitudes; their

dream was a secularized society where religion would be the business of only a few. They were keen on the reduction of the role of the Catholic Church in society and the creation of a “free, secular and compulsory” public school system that would displace the schools of the churches. Because of the liberal agitation for change, conservatives and Catholics (in Germany Lutheran Protestants) formed conservative parties whose program included the protection of the rights of the churches. Religion was the **biggest political issue in France** in the 19th century, a situation that is a little hard to envision for an American in

the 20th century. The most divisive issue in the history of France's successive regimes was always the relation of the French state with the Church: the Church wanted to maintain its advantages under the Concordat, whereas the anti-clerical forces wanted to reduce the privileges of the Church and eventually separate the Church from state support.

The French liberals thus moved against the French Catholic Church when they finally gained power under the Third Republic toward the end of the 19th century. The prime minister Jules Ferry broke the Church's domination of the **primary school system** in the 1880s by pushing through a series of laws creating a free, secular, and compulsive state-run system throughout France. After that, the Catholic school system shrank dramatically, as did the influence of the Church in many parts of France.

A second development involved the relationship between the Catholic Church and the French state. The Napoleonic solution whereby the Church (and three other churches) was modestly supported by tax monies continued with only minor changes throughout the 19th century. In the wake of the Dreyfus Affair, however, French liberals decided to sever these traditional ties. **The Law of Separation** of 1905 ended the centuries-old Gallican tradition. Henceforth the Church had to stand on its own financially, which was another blow to its traditional position in French society. However, the separation also had the advantage of giving the Church more independence: e.g., now Church authorities could choose bishops independently without having to get the permission of the state.



Camillo di Cavour wanted “a free Church in a free state”

Urbanization and Dechristianization in the 19th Century

Outside the religious organizations: the **19th century** was a time of enormously rapid change in the western world. **Population growth** was extremely rapid in all countries. **Industrialization** proceeded rapidly, especially after about 1850. When they did not emigrate to the New World (especially the United States), the increased number of people concentrated in the cities, some of them old and some of them new industrial ones. Paris about quadrupled its population from 1800 to 1900; some English industrial **cities** that barely existed in 1800 were several hundreds of thousand by 1900. Whereas traditional European cities were largely integrated by class, **the new cities were segregated**, with the working classes concentrated in industrial suburbs, and the middle classes and wealthy people living in the central city. The middle classes were the dominant group of the 19th century; they were quite worried when they looked at the enormous masses of often disaffected workers in the cities.



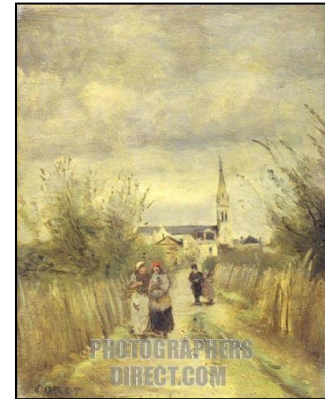
English Textile Mill, 19th Century

One result of these changes was an accelerating **dechristianization** of European society in the 19th century and on into the 20th. Many Christians, especially Catholics, continued to believe, but did not practice; in many parts of Europe entire populations turned against the Church and Christian belief. Dechristianization is usually defined by the decreasing tendency of formerly Christian populations to practice their religion.

This 19th century trend was true even in the **countryside**, where you would think traditional practices would remain strong. France, for example, was divided into two broad regions, one where traditional religious practices continued (in the French West and much of the North for example), and others (in Central France and many regions of the South) where religious practice declined precipitously. It is difficult to explain why this happened (rapid social change in the countryside, stark social and economic

inequality, activity of anti-clerical political parties, etc.). This rural dechristianization was particularly strong in Latin countries like France and Spain.

The process of dechristianization was even stronger in the **cities**. The **working classes** who migrated into the 19th century cities were completely uprooted from their traditional cultural backgrounds that had emphasized religious practice. The mainstream churches were not effective in building urban parishes and other supportive organizations for the workers; the workers were often recruited by anti-Christian organizations like Socialist trade unions and Socialist parties, which were sorts of substitute churches and parishes for working class populations – with mutual support, clubs, Sunday activities, employment exchanges, etc. Exceptions to this trend were areas where the workers were **cultural minorities**, such as the German Catholics in the Rhineland (the western part of Germany after it was annexed by Protestant Prussia), the Polish masses under Russian (Orthodox) rule, and the Irish under British rule in both Ireland and in England. The highest church-going rate in British cities in this period was usually found among Catholic Irish people.



Women returning from Church in France

The **middle classes**, who had been widely Voltairean, skeptical and anti-clerical in the early part of the century, tended to migrate back to religious practice in mid-century, perhaps mainly because of their **fear of social revolution** (the Revolutions of 1848 in Europe had been quite violent and scary). Middle class families in the Victorian Era tended to practice Christianity regularly.

In both working class and middle circles **women** tended to be more practicing than men. Especially in Latin countries men would often be indifferent to religious practice, but expect their wives to practice religion themselves and to bring up their children in the church (especially their daughters). A common sight in French small towns were the men drinking red wine and playing *boules* (bocce) on Sunday morning while their wives and children went to Sunday mass. This “domestic Christianity” promoted a sort of **feminization** of the churches, especially the Catholic Church, in the course of the 19th century.

In sum, a lot fewer people – especially among the working classes – were practicing Christianity in Europe in 1900 than in 1800, and a lot less in 2000 than in 1900.



Basilica of Sacré Coeur

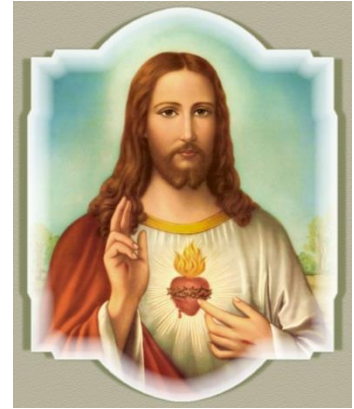
The Revival of the Church: Popular Catholicism in 19th Century Europe

After the doldrums of the 18th century, the 19th century In Europe and North America experienced a dynamic **Catholic revival**. In response to dechristianization and the anti-clerical campaigns of secular liberals, the Church organized a campaign to recatholicize the masses in Europe. The movement was not intellectual or philosophical, but was **ultramontane** (emphasize devotion to the pope), **popular** (oriented to influence the mostly uneducated masses), **devotional** (involve the masses in rituals such as pilgrimages, Stations of the Cross, etc., that inculcate the habit of religious practice), **Marian** (characterized by devotion to the cult of the Virgin Mary), **female** (nuns, female church-goers and saints, etc.), and **anti-modern** (taking a defensive stance against liberalism and secularism).

One reflection of Catholic dynamism was the founding and flourishing of **religious orders**. The Marists and Redemptorists were founded in the early 19th century, as were hundreds of women’s religious orders. **Large numbers of nuns** was a defining characteristic of 19th century Catholicism. In France in 1877

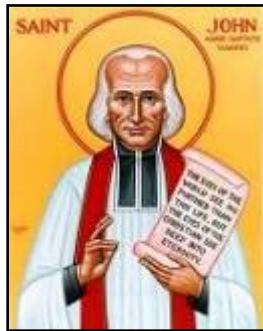
there were over 30,000 priests and 127,000 nuns; secular people felt they were being overrun by the religious orders! The Oblates of St. Joseph, founded in the late 19th century by Venerable Joseph Marello, was one of these orders; the Oblates serve St. Mary parish in East Sacramento.

Devotions (ritualistic religious practices among Catholics aside from attending mass and receiving the sacraments) were popularized in the 19th century. **Pilgrimages** to places like Lourdes (the site of the appearance of the Virgin to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858) and to the Basilica of the Sacred Heart (**Sacré Coeur**) in Paris were very popular. The famous church on the butte of Montmartre was built by a public subscription among French Catholics in the 1870s to “atone” for the sinfulness of the country that had led, it was thought, to the disastrous defeat in 1870 in the Franco-Prussian War; construction was not actually finished until 1914. (French Catholic Jansenists however denounced the Sacred Heart devotion as “cardiolatry.”) Catholic authorities in France and Germany took advantage of new telegraph technology and railroads to increase the ease and size of pilgrimages to various parts of Europe. **Marian devotions** like the **rosary** (originating in the Middle Ages but strongly emphasized by 19th century popes such as Leo XIII) and the sodality celebrations in the month of May were very common. Catholics were also encouraged to wear **medals** (like Catherine Labouré’s miraculous medal) that – with the right spiritual intent – would bring the wearer important spiritual benefits.



The Sacred Heart of Jesus

Throughout the 19th century, the Church promoted the practice of **frequent reception of the Eucharist**. This was particularly true of the reactionary pope **Pius X (1903-13)**, who declared that the frequent



reception of Holy Communion was “the shortest and safest way to heaven,” who lowered the statutory age of **First Communion** from 14 to 7 (defined as “the age of discretion”), and who urged all Catholics to go to **confession** frequently to make themselves worthy of receiving the Eucharist. He is known as “the Pope of the Blessed Sacrament” and as a dedicated repressor of liberal tendencies within the Church.

There was a large number of Catholic **saints** in the 19th century, most of them from **humble (poor)** backgrounds and often marginally educated. They tended to be women and to promote devotions to the Virgin Mary.

St. John Vianney, d. 1859

St. John Vianney, the curé (parish priest) d’**Ars**, came from a modest background (he was a shepherd until the age of 18); he was not a good student (he had great difficulty with learning Latin), but he was ordained largely because of his impeccable moral reputation. He spent most of his life in the small town of Ars, where he lived very humbly, practiced **self-mortification** (flagellation, some say) in his belief that the priest is responsible for expiating the sins he hears in confession. He was especially famous for his attentiveness to the moral needs of his parishioners, and for hearing confessions. Every year thousands of people came from all over France to be confessed by him, reportedly 20,000 of them in 1855; he was so popular that a train line was laid to Ars from the nearby city of Lyon. Canonized in 1925, he became the patron saint of parish priests.



The Miraculous Medal

There was a particularly large number of woman saints, many of them receiving visions of the Virgin Mary. **St. Catherine Labouré** was very pious as a child, and she joined the Sisters of Charity, an order of nuns tracing their origins back to St. Vincent de

Paul (a 17th century French saint known for his devotion to the poor). She lived a very humble life dedicated to the service of the sick and the poor. She received several **visions** from the Virgin Mary, who according to Catherine, told her in the **Virgin's usual defensive (and anti-liberal) tone** that “times are evil in France and in the world” and that “There will be much persecution. The cross will be treated with contempt. It will be hurled to the ground and blood will flow.” Then in 1830 after appearing to Catherine in a “faint swish of silk”, the Virgin designed the **Miraculous Medal**, commanding Catherine to have it struck and circulated and popularized with all its spiritual benefits; the medal included the inscription “O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee” (a reference to the cult of the **Immaculate Conception**, which was becoming popular at that time and which would be proclaimed an official doctrine of the Church in 1854). Catherine’s body was discovered in 1933 to be “incorrupt”, i.e. it was still in the same condition that it had been in at the time of the saint’s death.



The “incorrupt relic” of St. Bernadette Soubirous

Bernadette Soubirous was a **sickly and uneducated peasant girl** in the Pyrenees (she did not speak French, which she would have learned if she had attended school), who received, she said, 18 appearances of the Virgin Mary in 1858. Rather than give Bernadette her name, the Virgin, who appeared with a rosary in her hand, proclaimed “**I am the Immaculate Conception,**” reinforcing belief in this doctrine just four years after its proclamation as a dogma of the Church. She then told her to spread the message to pray and do penance for the sins of the world (again a reference to the hostile secular trends of the 19th century), bathe in the spring that had just become active in the grotto, and build a church on the site. Despite rigorous interrogation by secular and religious

authorities, Bernadette stuck by her story and ended up convincing many Catholics that she was telling the truth. Bernadette went into a convent; when she died, her body also remained incorrupt and is still on display. **Lourdes** became a favorite pilgrimage site up to the present for Catholics seeking **miraculous cures**, of which many are recorded. She was canonized in 1933. (A sensitive treatment of her life can be found in the 1943 film ‘The Song of Bernadette’, starring Jennifer Jones as the saint).

St. Theresa of Lisieux, the Little Flower, was also a nun who lived a short uneventful life (she died of tuberculosis at 25). In her extensive writings (for which she was proclaimed a ‘**Doctor of the Church,**’ one of three women who now have that title) she preached the values of humility, personal insignificance, and complete devotion to **Jesus** (“O Jesus, my love, my life....How can I realize the desires of my poor little soul?”). She was known for being cheerful, smiling and pleasant. Unlike Catherine and Bernadette, she was not particularly Marian, nor did she emphasize visions from any source. Her principal idea is that you don’t have to do famous and great things to be a saint, but “**little**” things will do; she is often referred to as the “Little Flower.”

“The only way I can prove my love is by scattering **flowers** and these flowers are every little sacrifice, every glance and word, and the doing of the least actions for love.” “True glory is that which will last eternally, and to reach it, it isn’t necessary to perform striking works but to hide oneself and to practice virtue in such a way that the left hand knows not what the right is doing.” She said she sought “an elevator which would raise me to Jesus, for I am too small to climb the rough stairway of perfection”, and that she found that elevator in “**Your arms, O Jesus!**” (A moving and beautiful film about Thérèse is Alain Cavalier’s ‘Thérèse’.)



St. Theresa on her Deathbed

The cult of littleness and humility among **19th century saints** provides an instructive contrast with the outgoing, socially active, and more public saints of the Counter-Reformation. These 19th century saints

came from humble backgrounds and did humble things; their celebration was meant to connect the Church to the common people that the Church was trying to evangelize.

The **large number of female saints** all of whom went out of their way to proclaim their “littleness” and humility, the frequent appearance of the Virgin Mary in recorded visions, the increasing cult of the Virgin including the celebration of the Immaculate Conception, and the large number of female religious (nuns) indicates a kind of **feminization of Catholic culture** in the 19th century. The Catholic Church appeared



to recognize that an increasing proportion of its faithful was female, and that if the Church wanted to appeal to its women, an emphasis on the feminine principle in the Church was necessary. Of course the authority structure remained firmly under the control of men.

The 19th Century Papacy: The Struggle for the Soul of the Catholic Church

All was not quiet in the outwardly monolithic Catholic Church in the 19th century.

The Lourdes Grotto with Crutches

The public history of the Catholic Church in the 19th century was dominated by the competition between the **ultramontane traditionalists** who favored an authoritarian model of Church governance centered on the decision-making power of the pope, and the **liberal Catholics**, who were strong in the northern countries of England, France and Germany, and who were trying to introduce open discussion and perhaps a participatory decision-making process into the Church. Many of the liberals believed that important decisions in the Church should be taken by large Councils. The liberal Catholics also favored the uncoupling of the Church from the state so that the Church would be free from outside influence. (While they were ideologically related to secular liberals and shared many ideas and goals with them, the liberal Catholics were quite different from secular liberals, who were as a whole strongly anti-Catholic.)

The first act in the drama was the campaign initiated by **Félicité de Lamennais** in the 1820s to ally liberty in the Church with the papacy. He favored the **separation of church and state** (the Church in France should be “poor”), Church members should be free to express their opinions, and the papacy should join forces with the Liberals to promote these aims. **“Let us not tremble before liberalism; let’s catholicize it!”** Perhaps somewhat naively, he and some of his followers went to Rome in 1832 to ask the support of the pope, only to be rejected rather brutally in the encyclical **Mirari Vos**. After this declaration, it was hard to believe that the papacy would ally itself with the forces of change within the Church.

Pius IX: the Liberals and the Ultramontanes

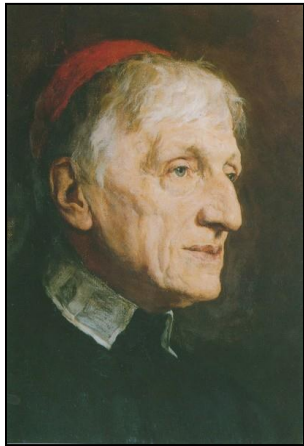
Pius IX (Pio Nono, 1846-78; satirized as “Pio No-No” because of his taste for denouncing things and saying “No”), the longest reigning pope in the post-ancient history of the Catholic Church, had started off as a relatively “liberal” pope when elected, but because of the Revolutions of 1848 in Rome when he was an exile for a while, he became by 1850 a dedicated reactionary who saw enemies of the Church on all sides. He was a person of limited intelligence and experience, but he was a kind and genial man with great personal magnetism, and his practice of papal **audiences** (reserving part of the day for meeting with visitors from many countries)



Pius IX, 1846-1878

helped make him very popular among ordinary Catholics. He was largely responsible for the birth of the **cult of the papacy**, in which the person of the pope is treated with great veneration and respect. He was assisted by Cardinal Antonelli, his Secretary of State.

Both men were obsessed by the **Italian Question** in the time of the Risorgimento (the process of Italian unification). Italy, while having more or less a common history and language was not united in 1850 (the Austrian Chancellor Metternich called Italy a “geographic expression”). Italian nationalists (who were also liberals) wanted to unify Italy and establish liberal institutions; both would be at the expense of the secular, “temporal” power of the papacy, which would lose **the Papal States** in the process. Most Catholics were aghast, since they thought that if the pope lost control of the Papal States, the papacy would fall under the control of godless secular powers and their liberal ministers. **Camillo di Cavour**, the liberal Prime Minister of the relatively powerful northern Italian kingdom of Piedmont, pressed for the



John Henry Newman

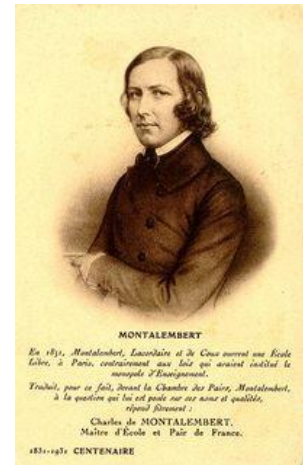
unification of Italy and the existence of “**a free Church in a free state.**” Pius was determined to resist this campaign at all costs. Much of his inflexibility was due to his obsession with events in Italy.

In the rather unequal political struggle for the “soul” of the Church in the mid-19th century, the **Liberal Catholics** (quite different and fewer than secular liberals) had limited popular support; but they were illustrious intellectuals and orators. They pushed for a more participatory decision-making structure in the Church (they were however certainly not democrats seeking elections and one person/one vote), freedom of discussion and research within the Church, and separation of Church and state on the outside.

Lord Acton, the English Liberal Catholic and coiner of the phrase “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” argued strongly for freedom of thought and discussion inside the Church. He thought that Catholic scholars should be actively involved in research in secular subjects like history, language, literature, Biblical studies, etc. In contrast with the Ultramontanes, he thought theological discussion would be “self-correcting,” in that errors would be opposed by other scholars and that under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the truth would triumph in the end (see John Stuart Mill for a similar idea in the secular realm, minus of course the Holy Spirit). Pius IX was to contradict this principle in his ‘Syllabus of Errors’ 1864.

John Henry Newman, the most illustrious intellectual in the 19th century Church, started as an Anglican minister promoting the Oxford Movement, which emphasized tradition, beauty and mystery in the Church of England. To the scandal of English public opinion, he converted to Catholicism in 1846 (he said he needed to have an irrefutable principle of authority). He was made a cardinal by Pius IX. Although loyal to Church authority and the pope, he strongly argued for freedom of thought within the Church, he styled ultramontanism as a “Church within a Church,” and he opposed the proclamation of the Doctrine of Infallibility in 1871. Newman gave a broad interpretation of Pius IX’s Syllabus of Errors similar to the celebrated pamphlet of bishop Dupanloup (see below).

The **Count of Montalembert** charted a more moderate course for French Liberal Catholicism after the departure of Lamennais. He gave a famous speech at Malines (Belgium) in 1863, in which he argued for the Church to deal frankly with the 19th century trend of liberty and to accept the separation of church and state (it had worked in Belgium); he also rejected all sorts of religious intolerance and religious persecution. His opinions did not appease



Liberal Catholic Count De Montalembert

the pope; they were partly responsible for the proclamation of the Syllabus of Errors in the following year. In a move typical of Liberal Catholics, he revived in Paris the *Correspondent* (1855), in which he set himself to fight against what he saw as both extremes: the fanatical party of Pope Pius IX and the Syllabus of Errors, and the free-thinking secular Liberals of the *Revue des deux mondes*. He passionately opposed the proclamation of the doctrine of infallibility, but he submitted to the decision of Council after it was proclaimed.

On the other hand, the **Ultramontanes**, known often as the **Integralists** in France where they were most active, thought that only a near dictatorial power of the person of the pope could counter the secular, impious trends of the 19th century. They considered liberal Catholics to be traitors in the life and death struggle of the Catholic Church against the impious campaigns of the secular liberals. They greatly revered the person of the pope (the cult of the papacy), and considered an unreformed **Tridentine Church** as the only reliable **bastion** against the secular trends of the modern world. Examples of (mostly French) Ultramontanes were the scurrilous populist journalist Louis Veuillot, who wrote that Pius IX was “Christ on earth;” Bishop Mermillod, who said that, after Jesus and the Eucharist, the pope was the third incarnation of Christ; and Cardinal Pie, who decried the secularization of state and society in the 19th century, declared that Jesus Christ was the cornerstone of all social order, and proclaimed the reign of Christ the King on earth, and who supported the campaign to find Jesus’ **prepuce** (foreskin), the only part of Jesus’ body remaining on earth.

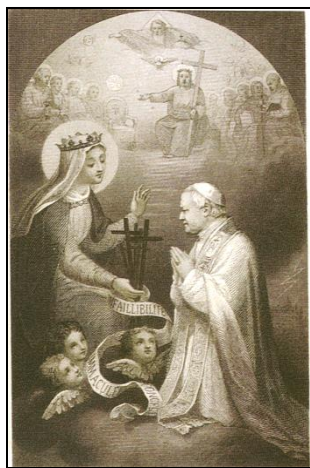


The Immaculate Conception

Pius IX’s Triumphal Progress, 1854-1871

Pius IX, who after 1848 never considered appeasing the Liberal Catholics, pursued a consistent and persistent policy of ultramontanism beginning in the 1850s.

The first step was the proclamation of the dogma of the **Immaculate Conception in 1854** (this does not refer to the Virgin Birth of Jesus, but that the Virgin Mary was the only human being conceived without original sin):



Pius IX as the pope of the Immaculate Conception

“the doctrine that asserts that the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin is a doctrine revealed by God and, for this reason, must be firmly and constantly believed by all the faithful.”

It was proclaimed without calling a council or any participation by the body of bishops, but decided and proclaimed solely on the authority of the pope. The dogma itself was a sort of gauntlet thrown at the liberal secular world – “I really don’t care if you believe this. I am the pope and I have spoken!” The feast is celebrated on December 8.

A second act in Pius IX’s ultramontane campaign was the issuing of the **Syllabus of Errors** in 1864. It was in part a response to Montalembert’s Malines speech in the previous year in which he had advocated the separation of church and state, but it was directed primarily against the anti-clerical actions of the Italian state (the occupation of the Papal States, the separation of church and state, etc.) since the Italian Wars of 1859-60. It was not a freshly composed

document, but a compilation of previous pronouncements, many of which had been directed specifically at the political situation in Italy in that era. Many historians think that its tone was much more rigid and adamant than intended.

The ‘Syllabus’ came across as an **uncompromising condemnation of modern civilization**, including separation of church and state, freedom of worship in the modern state, freedom of discussion within the Church, and a free, secular, public school system, and modern biblical criticism (the ideas that the



**The First Vatican Council (1870)
was held in Rome**

miracles narrated in Holy Scripture are “the fictions of poets”). The ‘Syllabus’ also condemned the campaign against the independence of the Papal States, as well as the belief of liberal Catholics that “the Church ought to tolerate the errors of philosophy; leaving to philosophy the care of their correction” (i.e., Acton and others). In the famous conclusion the pope proclaimed it an error to assert that the Church could be reconciled with **“progress, liberalism and modern civilization.”**

The European world was agog over the extremism of the pronouncement. American Catholics were perhaps even more disturbed, since they were living – and prospering – in a country defined by separation of church and state. **Bishop Dupanloup** of

Orléans “saved the day” for the pope with his pamphlet in which he asserted that it was being interpreted out of context and that its different propositions had to be understood in light of their original specific function. He made his famous distinction between the **thesis** (the ideal world, which was what the pope was really talking about) and the **hypothesis** (the real world in which we live). The pope had been speaking about what he would like if he lived in an ideal (entirely Catholic) world; he was not condemning specific real situations like the separation of church and state in the USA. The pope admitted that the ‘Syllabus’ was “raw meat needing to be cooked” and he thanked Dupanloup for his explanation of its argument; but he made it clear in private that he had not modified his ideas and that he had no regrets for his public proclamation.

American Catholics, offended by the condemnation of many standard American practices such as separation of church and state and free public education, simply ignored the pope’s pronouncements. This looking the other way when challenged by embarrassing papal statements became known as **Americanism**.

The final act was the declaration of the doctrine of **papal infallibility** in 1870. Pius IX supported the desire of ultramontanes, particularly Jesuits, who wanted to declare the official pronouncements of the pope infallible so as to protect the Church against the attacks of the secular liberals. Liberal Catholics like Newman, Darboy of Paris, and Germans like Döllinger were opposed, but they were in the minority against the groundswell of support for the “Holy Father.” The curia organized the **First Vatican Council** so that the declaration would be a foregone conclusion. About 60 of the opponents left before the final vote, avoiding the scandal of open opposition to the will of the pope and the majority. The pope at first resisted any significant limits on his authority (when it was suggested that the pope must consult Catholic tradition before making an infallible declaration, he replied “La tradizione son’io!”), but calmer heads inserted limits into the declaration.

The final definition of the pope’s infallibility has several delimitations. In order to qualify for an **infallible pronouncement**, 1) the pope has to speak *ex cathedra*, from the Chair of Peter – i.e., officially as the head of the Church; 2) it has to be on **faith and morals** (and not, say, on local Italian politics), and 3) it has to be for all Catholics of all nationalities and culture throughout the world and not for a particular subgroup. The infallible power was associated with the *office* and not the person of the pope: the

document stated that the divine redeemer had willed the power “to his Church” (and not “to the pope”). The pronouncement ends: “If anyone shall have presumed to contradict this, our definition, which may God avert, let that one be **anathema**.”

The Council dispersed rapidly in the summer of 1870 when Italian troops entered Rome at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. There was some opposition to the doctrine especially in Germany, but it was repressed within the Church and it died out.

The infallible power has **not been used often** since then. Most scholars agree that the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception was an example of an infallible pronouncement. The only clear instance of its exercise since 1870 was the declaration of the doctrine of the **Assumption of the Virgin Mary** (she did not die like ordinary humans, but she was “assumed” body and soul into heaven when her health was failing) by Pius XII in 1950; the language of his decree made his invocation of infallibility very clear: “We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma.... ” Most teachings of the pope (Church) in the 20th century have been from the **ordinary magisterium**, the regular teaching authority of the Church; and whereas they are considered binding on Catholics (e.g., the 1968 prohibition against the use of artificial methods of birth control), they are not considered infallible and “irreformable” (unchangeable, valid forever), and it is implied that they could be changed at some point in the future.



Rubens’ version of the Assumption of the Virgin

Together with the ‘Syllabus’ the proclamation of the doctrine of Infallibility was a clear gauntlet thrown at the feet of modern civilization in the 19th century and a clear illustration of the **bastion mentality** of the 19th century Church. The way for the Church to prosper in this aggressively secular world is to line up in discipline behind the **authority of the Roman Pontiff** and to defy secular civilization on every level.

The Modernist Controversy, 1903-1914

A **postscript** to the story is the **Modernist** controversy under the pontificate of **Pius X (1903-14)**.

“Modernists” (not modernist artists) were a smallish group of extraordinary Catholic scholars in France and Britain, who at the end of the 19th century were trying to adapt Catholic biblical studies to the findings of Protestant (German) biblical scholarship. The French scholar **Alfred Loisy**, for example, taught that Jesus did not claim to be God but that he was a prophet who had a consciousness of being the Jewish messiah and who taught the imminent end of the world; but that after his failed ministry and his death his followers were forced by historical circumstances and guided by the Holy Spirit to create the Church to carry on the preaching of the gospel.



St. Pius X, 1903-1914

Although they had been tacitly encouraged to pursue their studies under Pius’ predecessor Leo XIII (1878-1903), Pius X changed the policy and came down hard on them in his encyclical ***Pascendi* in 1907**. He condemned all aspects of the new scholarship, forbade that it be taught in Catholic seminaries and universities, and then set up committees of vigilance in France to report on the activities of “modernists” in France, and to make sure they no longer held positions of authority; in effect he sent papal spies into French dioceses. Most of the scholars submitted,

and Liberal Catholicism went underground for several decades until its dramatic reemergence in the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). The intellectual dynamism of the Catholic Church was gravely compromised by this instance of repression: e.g., contrary to the clear conclusions of biblical scholarship, Catholic seminary students were taught in subsequent decades (20th century!) that it is possible that the story of Jonah in the stomach of the whale was literally true and that he could have survived there for a long time; and that **Moses** personally composed all five books of the Pentateuch.

