

The Age of Enlightenment

Notes from the faith talk on the 'History of the Church' given by Canon Poucin



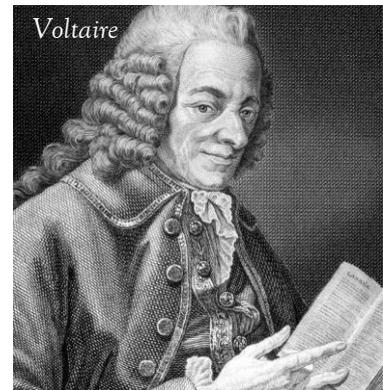
Following the Council of Trent and the labours of holy men and women such as St. Charles Borromeo, St. Vincent de Paul, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Francis de Sales and St. Alphonsus Liguori, there was a reform and strengthening of the Catholic faithful. St. Ignatius of Loyola formed the Society of Jesus - the Jesuits, approved in 1540, in which members were under the direct authority of the Holy Father. Their purpose, being the defence of the faith at home and its propagation abroad, checked the advance of the Protestant revolution and won converts back to the true faith.

The Jesuits stood in opposition to the heresy of Jansenism. This was a spiritual movement, mainly in France, which had misinterpreted the teachings of St. Augustine. The Jansenists believed the grace of God was not given universally but to a select few only. Their moral code was one of great strictness, which greatly discouraged many of the faithful.

The Protestant principle that everyone can interpret Holy Scripture according to his own individual judgment, made reason alone the ultimate criterion of religion. This is known as **Rationalism**. Rationalism evolved into Deism - the belief in a personal God founded on reason and not on revelation or authority. In England, Hobbes (1679) expanded his theories of materialism and proposed the authority of the state came not from God but from the people. This was the seed of democracy. Rationalism found powerful support in the secret organisation of the Freemasons. The first Grand Lodge was founded in London in 1717. It systematically promotes religious indifference with its belief in a 'supreme being' not God as revealed in Sacred Scripture. It seeks to destroy Christianity and replace it with principles based on Naturalism. In 1738 Pope Clement condemned Freemasonry and forbade Catholics to enter Masonic societies.

In France, Voltaire (1694-1778), further developed Hobbes' theories. For Voltaire, the value of man was not derived from his being God's creation - made in "God's image and likeness" but was measured by how useful he could be. Thus people who were unable to work including contemplative religious orders were deemed useless and therefore to be suppressed. This denial of the intrinsic value and dignity of man also justified slavery.

In Germany the enlightenment movement was called Aufklärung. Any doctrine of faith that was deemed inexplicable was dismissed. This meant that all the miracles recorded in the bible were taught as only stories containing no literal truth. Aufklärung influenced German Catholics including the Auxiliary Bishop of Trier Nicolas von Hontheim who wrote a book about the condition of the church which contested the authority of the Pope. The book was placed on the Index of banned books but had wide support among other bishops. The aims of the Enlightenment movement can be summarised as follows: the Church should be subservient to the state, the authority of the Holy See should be curbed, tolerance of non-believers, persecution of contemplative orders and the state should take control of the formation of priests.



The French Revolution 1789

The wide acceptance of the theories of Voltaire and Rousseau meant that change was rapid. In 1789 the state controlled all church property. In 1790 all citizens were given the right to elect their bishops and pastors. Every Priest and Bishop was obliged to take an oath on the new Constitution. Those who refused were deprived of their offices. When Pope Pius VI condemned the oath, and declared the elections to ecclesiastical offices invalid many priest retracted their oath. There thus existed four groups of clergy: those who accepted the conditions of the revolution, those who went into exile (approx. 10,000 found a refuge in England), those who were arrested and imprisoned, (64 were beatified in 1995), those who remained and continued their ministry in hiding. The secularisation of society began. All references to God were removed. The seven-day week was replaced by a ten day one. New Year's Day was September 22nd and year 1 was the first year of the republic 1792. All Holy day festivities were replaced with secular ones. People who remained faithful to the Church were persecuted. A strong resistance was organised in Vendée, led by courageous men such as Henri de La Rochejaquelein, or Francois Charette de La Contrie, fighting against the anticatholic republic, for God and the King.