

CATHOLICISM AND BONAPARTISM: CATHOLICS AND THE COUP D'ETAT OF LOUIS NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

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This study examines the attitude of Catholics, represented by their newspapers and bishops, towards the coup d'etat of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte. An analysis is made of Catholic opinion before, during, and after the coup to determine its importance to the success of authoritarianism. The evidence leads to the conclusion that Catholic support only became important after the coup, and was obviously motivated by opportunism. This support was countered by the growth of an opposition movement led by two Catholic newspapers, which replaced the episcopate as the voice of Church independence.

The Revolution of 1848 had initiated in France the second experiment with a republican form of government since the great Revolution of 1789. This new republic was cut short by the assumption of dictatorial powers in the *coup d'etat* of December, 1851. The coup was accomplished by the President of the Republic, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, nephew of the first Napoleon, who had played a similar role during the first revolution. Some historians would argue that such an event was a product of the French character, a process typical of French history. Indeed, present day observers of the French scene see fresh evidence for this in the example of Charles de Gaulle.

It is generally assumed that the Catholic Church in France was one of the strongest contributors to this rightist tendency. Catholic clergy and faithful are believed to have been Napoleon's strongest supporters. This paper will focus on the Catholic attitude towards Napoleon before, during, and after the *coup d'etat*, to determine the exact nature of Catholic involvement. In order to define this attitude it is necessary to examine some of the major sources of Catholic opinion at that time. These were the proclamations of the bishops and the articles in the three major Catholic newspapers, *L'Univers*, *L'Ami de La Religion*, and *Le Correspondant*. The bishops had been the leaders of opinion in the Church for centuries. On the other hand, the Catholic newspaper press had been prominent only since 1840.

First, let us examine the Catholic attitude towards the Republic and its President,

Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, before the coup. Catholics supported the new republic when it was established in 1848. They found that it respected the Church and were willing to permit it a greater degree of freedom than had the previous monarchical regimes. After the social uprisings of June, 1848, Catholics flocked to the party of order, favoring any leader who could control the radical elements in society. Louis Napoleon, elected president in December, 1848, was regarded by Catholics and all other conservatives as a guarantor of peace and order. He rewarded their support by curtailing radical meetings, censoring the radical press, and allowing Catholics greater prerogatives in education. But the trouble started when he tried to revise the Constitution to increase his power and lengthen his term of office.

What was the attitude of Catholics toward this revision of the Constitution? Did they emerge as ardent Bonapartists? Did they support the revision? The most widely circulated of the Catholic newspapers, *L'Univers*, did support it. But it clearly distinguished itself from the ardent followers of Napoleon. Louis Veuillot, the vigorous and talented editor of *L'Univers* favored the revision of the Constitution hoping that it would gain time for a restoration of the monarchy. Bonaparte was not favored by *L'Univers*; however, *L'Univers* recognized his services and his overwhelming appeal for the French people (1).

The other two major Catholic newspapers did not agree with this qualified support of Bonaparte. *L'Ami de La Religion*, also mot

archist in sympathy, saw more to be feared from a Napoleonic dictatorship than from anything else (2). *Le Correspondant*, the most liberal of the Catholic newspapers, admired Louis Napoleon as a savior from socialism. However, they were worried over the imminence of a coup, which would inevitably put an end to parliamentary government. The bishops were silent during this whole revision quarrel. Thus, there were no real active Bonapartists in the Catholic press or episcopate on the eve of the coup d'état.

If no Catholic Bonapartists pushed Napoleon into dictatorship, what was their attitude in the midst of the coup? The bishops immediately supported Napoleon. Some of them issued statements recommending that their clergy and faithful vote "yes" in the plebiscite called by Napoleon. Most of them willingly sang a *Te Deum* praising God for the 92% majority which Napoleon received in that plebiscite. One elderly royalist bishop wrote: "Providence gives us at this moment only this means of salvation" (3).

The bishops had little alternative. They were appointed by the state largely because of their political prudence and moderation. Moreover, they depended on the state for all Church funds. Under these circumstances, their acceptance of Bonaparte was the easiest path to follow. By quickly rallying to Bonaparte, they believed that they would win even greater benefits for the Church. There were only a few who could not forget their royalist or liberal principles, but even they limited their protest.

In comparison, the response of the Catholic press to the coup showed much more independence. Their remarks were especially brave because the Minister of the Interior had ordered that any newspaper which published unfavorable comments on the coup was to be suspended or suppressed. Two of the three most prominent Catholic newspapers, *L'Ami de La Religion* and *Le Correspondant*, broadly hinted at their disapproval by promising to discontinue political commentaries in their journals. The editor of *L'Ami* stated:

After all, politics has never been anything but an accessory for us, a consequence of our religious principles. If we can only be silent, we will resign ourselves. Silence is one of the forms of dignity (4).

Only *L'Univers*, of the three major Catholic newspapers in Paris, decided to support Napoleon if he remained a friend of the Church. Its support was very significant, because it had the largest following. Its editor, Veuillot, encouraged reconciliation of all friends of order, legitimists, and Catholics, with the new government. Only one Catholic newspaper, therefore, supported Napoleon during the period of the coup, and even it placed some reservations on its approval.

During the year after the coup, the opposition of the Catholic press to Napoleon became clearer. The opinion of the press crystallized after the publication, in late 1852, of a brochure by the prominent Catholic parliamentarian, Charles de Montalembert. Although he had supported the coup, Montalembert, still liberal in bias, became disillusioned with Napoleon's authoritarianism. In his brochure, he bemoaned the loss of parliamentary government and bitterly criticized *L'Univers* for its slavish praise of absolutism. Montalembert believed that parliamentary government was essential to the freedom of the Church. He urged Catholics to remain aloof from this new authoritarian government, and discretely assert discontent and opposition. By doing this, Catholics would insure that the Church would be respected in the inevitable reestablishment of a liberal regime.

Montalembert's brochure divided Catholics into Bonapartists and liberals. The Catholic newspapers, *L'Ami de La Religion* and *Le Correspondant*, already implying disapproval of Napoleon, quickly rallied to Montalembert's support. The editor of *Le Correspondant* openly committed himself to Montalembert's political position, stating:

He again makes religion compatible with the forms of modern society; he judges representative institutions from the viewpoint of the interests of the Christian conscience, and he demonstrates with a force of reason which seems irresistible to us, that today Catholics should be the last to disengage liberty, to which they owe their progress and their triumphs (5).

L'Ami de La Religion was much more cautious in expressing approval of the brochure, making certain reservations. From this time, these newspapers were firmly committed to a policy of political opposition.

L'Univers, however, opposed Montalembert's pamphlet. Veuillot commented that Montalembert was not really liberal, but only yearned for days of power in the legislature. The editor reminded Montalembert that in those days "we said that the Church had the right to the same liberties as everyone, not that everyone had the right to the same liberties as the Church." Furthermore, Veuillot argued that it could only hurt the Church in France if Catholics opposed the prevailing government. It seemed foolhardy to him to "flatter the future enemy at the expense of the present friend" (6).

Other organs of the Catholic press had been reserved in their support of Montalembert's political opposition in order to avoid suppression by the State. However, they could attack *L'Univers* with impunity and they did so after Veuillot's criticism of Montalembert. *L'Univers*, not one to avoid a fight, replied in the same vituperative polemic. The political differences between the Catholic Bonapartists and the Catholic parliamentarians had produced an irreparable split. The split was deepened by the personal attacks which accompanied this debate. The division was never overcome during the entire reign of Louis Bonaparte.

The bishops, intriguingly enough, avoided the whole quarrel. They greeted Montalembert's brochure with reserve, but praised his intentions and past service to the Church. Among the bishops of the 81 dioceses in France, only one, Mgr. Dupanloup of Orleans, agreed with Montalembert. However, his practical recommendations were not vastly different from those of his fellow bishops who supported Napoleon. He insisted that the Church should not commit itself to any political regime, but that it should accept any help offered to support its work (7).

There were many bishops, 65 at least, who were considered very loyal to Napoleon. The Minister of Worship kept careful surveillance over all the bishops' pastoral letters, and filed reports assessing them as "good," "very good," "very hostile," and so forth (8). The Minister also kept account of their attendance at official ceremonies. Those who showed loyalty and devotion to Bonaparte were amply rewarded. For example, he appointed some bishops to the Senate, named some to the Legion of Honor, and gave gifts of art work or money to the churches and diocesan properties of others.

Generally, the entire Church benefited from the support which the bishops gave to Napoleon. He allowed religious schools and religious orders to proliferate throughout the country. Old laws which restricted the freedoms of the church were left unenforced.

The image of a Bonapartist Church, therefore, is based on the attitudes of the bishops and the most popular Catholic newspaper, *L'Univers*. However, it is clearly evident that this support for Napoleon came only after the *coup d'état*. The reason for the action of the bishops is apparent; it was the natural response for salaried employees of the state. Cooperation assured them the favor of the government. On the other hand, the Catholic newspaper press became the new voice of the independent Church. Operating without state or church funds, they could, and did, follow a path which was independent of both the hierarchy, and the state.

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5. *Le Correspondant*, November 10, 1852, p. 173.
6. *L'Univers*, November 6, 13, 1852.
7. *Le Correspondant*, November 25, 1852, pp. 307-08.
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