

The Free French Church

From 1054 A.D. to the very threshold of our own times, the question of defining the extent of Papal authority continually occupied the growing Catholic Church in the West. A struggle was manifested in two distinct schools of thought.

One school of thought maintained the belief that the supreme teaching authority within the Church rested in the Ecumenical Councils on the ground that all Catholic Bishops have equal pastoral authority.

The other school in opposition advanced the principle called "ultra-montanism", which maintained that the Pope was above the authority of the Councils.

During the 17th Century "ultra-montanism" found its principle resistance in the Church of France, and its principle support among the Jesuits. The Faculty of the Sorbonne proved to be a great bulwark against ultra-montane theories and championed scholars maintaining the French cause.

The entire body of French clergy drew up a declaration in 1682 A.D. in order to protect the canonical rights of the French Church against the encroachments of the Ultra-montanists. In writing this declaration of 1682, the French clergy were mindful of the primitive teaching of the Catholic Church, restated by the Council of Constance (1414-1418), which decreed, it had "its authority immediately from Christ, and everyone, whatever his rank or position, even if it be the Pope himself, is bound to obey it in all things which pertain to the Faith, to the healing of schism, and to the general renewal of the Church." "This document," a contemporary historian says, "is an important document in the history of Old Catholicism." Its contents may be summarized under the following subheadings: (1) The Pope could not release subjects from obedience to temporal power. The authority received by the Church from God is spiritual, not temporal (i.e., "My Kingdom is not of this world."). (2) That the Decrees of the Council of Constance remain in full force in the Church. The Papal authority in no way affects the perpetual and immovable strength of the Decrees of the Council. (3) The independence of the French Church must be maintained -- the authority of the Apostles must be exercised in accordance with the mind of the whole Church. (4) That the decisions of the Pope are not infallible -- his "judgment is not irreversible until confirmed by the consent of the whole Church" (Jervis, Hist. Ch. France ii.p. 50).

The Declaration, signed by 34 Archbishops and Bishops and formulated under the guidance of Bossuet, Bishop of Meaux, reaffirmed the position which had at all times been dear to the French Church. This document became a norm for the conduct of relations between the National churches of Northern Europe and the Roman Curia.

Italian Ultra-montane writers attacked the French clergy. In response, Bishop Bossuet wrote a "Defense of the Declaration" which so powerfully influenced belief in the principles held by the French Church that his learned opponent, Cardinal Orsi, advised the Roman Theologians to abandon ultra-montanism as a hopeless cause.

However, the most powerful factor in preserving the "Old" Catholic tradition in France was the support of such scholars as Arnauld, Pascal, Cyran, Tillimont and others. They carried the standards of Port Royal, the envy even today of scholars, theologians, educators, and churchmen.

Francois Mauriac, whose judgment of Port Royal is obviously biased by personal predilections, nevertheless admits, in his recent book on Port Royal's most celebrated son, that "after three centuries Blaise Pascal is still alive. His slightest thought troubles or charms or irritates, but he is understood instantly. Pascal is the brother of all sinners, of all converts, of all wounded men whose wounds may reopen at any instant, of all whom Christ has pursued from afar, and who trust only in His love."

Port Royal in France was not only the vessel containing the mental and spiritual giants of its day, but it proved a major influence in preserving for our time the Tradition of the Church, that her children believe, and that the Saints knew, loved, lived, and died for.