

The Catholic Response to Enlightenment and Modernity in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*

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Abstract

Despite a belief that the Catholic Church lost its central place in European society from the eighteenth century, the process of *secularisation* allows us to see how the Church succeeded in regaining its social role in the nineteenth century. Thus, although the Enlightenment and the French Revolution displaced the Church as a spiritual as well as a temporal power throughout much of Europe, it gradually became possible for the Church to come to terms with “modernity.” It was aided in this by the momentum of Romanticism, which embodied a longing for the values and sentiments of the Middle Ages, and thus provided an environment in which phenomena such as apparitions gained the popular imagination as well as that of many intellectuals and allowed the Church once more to play a popular role in a society which was developing in terms of science, gender behavior and the politicisation of the masses. The appeal of Rome, through the Ultramontanist movement, encouraged a Liberal Catholicism which, despite an autocratic

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attitude by some popes (Gregory XVI, Pius IX) and the proclamation of Papal Infallibility, led to the modern possibility of a Christian-Democratic alliance in politics.

Key Words: Catholic Church, secularisation, Enlightenment, modernity