



Maybe you have never heard of Consalvi, but he was an important character:

My Life for the Pope

You students may find it difficult in your modern world to understand how a person could devote his whole life in the service of the Church and the Pope.

Well, let me tell you my story and you'll see at least how things used to be.

My ancestors came from Pisa, of an ancient noble family, but my grandfather settled in the Papal States. There he met Ercole Consalvi (not me), who gave him a large fortune provided he changed his family name to Consalvi. My grandfather agreed (his name was Gregorio) and moved to Rome.

I was born in Rome on June 8, 1757 and was destined for Church service as soon as I was born. After all, my family was influential and guaranteed me a swift rise. At age nine I began my education in Catholic colleges. My education lasted until 1783, and I studied rhetoric, theology, law, and philosophy. In 1783, I began a brilliant career in the service of Pope Pius VI, but then the French Revolution broke out.

The French crossed into Italy and looked for a pretext to invade the Papal States. I was put at the head of a military commission to make certain that no disturbances would occur and no pretext would be given. On December 28, 1797, though, a French general was killed in Rome and in February a French army under General Berthier took over the city. The French removed Pius VI,



putting him in confinement, and arrested me and threatened to send me to French Guyana. Later they released me, and when they refused to let me join the Pope, I went to Naples and then Venice. Pius VI died in August 1799 and with the election of Pius VII I was made a cardinal and Secretary of State.

By 1800, the Austrians and Neapolitans had expelled the French from Rome and the Pope and I returned. I protected the interests of the Pope in the negotiations with the big powers (excellent experience for later, as you will see), but I soon got on the bad side of Napoleon because I opposed his policies toward the Church. In 1809, Napoleon annexed the Papal States and had Pius VII arrested. I went to Paris but refused money from Napoleon. In fact, I opposed his second marriage to Princess Marie Louise until the Pope had made a decision on the status of his first marriage. Napoleon got so mad at me that he kicked me out of his palace and gave orders to have me shot. Luckily, he didn't go through with it but forced me (and other cardinals who opposed him) to wear black instead of red vestments and exiled me. I didn't mind because I wrote my memoirs.

After Napoleon fell, I negotiated with the large powers and succeeded in getting the Papal States restored to the way they were before the French Revolution. Let me tell you, it was a hard sell, but I did it. When we returned to Rome, I tried as much as possible to pass reforms and attempted to abolish the privileges of the nobility because I thought it was just and because I thought those stupid, reactionary zelanti [zealots] would provoke more revolutions if they



had their way. I ran into a lot of opposition, which I was able to weather with the support of Pius VII. I also made Rome more beautiful and transformed it once again into a center of art. I succeeded as well in negotiating a series of concordats with other states.

When Pius died on August 20, 1823, I lost my job and influence. In fact, the Papal States fell into its old repression and corruption (a foreign statesmen called the state “the negation of God,” what an embarrassment) and provoked revolutions. I retired and planned a monument in his honor that would be placed in St. Peter’s Church, but before I could fulfill that ambition, I died on January 24, 1824. I am considered to have been one of the greatest statesmen the Church ever had. In fact, they built me a tomb in the Church of San Lorenzo and took my heart to the Pantheon in Rome (the ancient temple transformed into a church), where you can still see a monument to me when you visit there.

When you come, please take a moment out of being a tourist to pray for me.

God bless you, students.

Ercole Consalvi
Cardinal