

Napoleon the Revolutionary

What Reforms Did Bonaparte Make?

Napoleon succeeded in giving the French people "order, efficiency, and victories." He quickly made a number of financial reforms that restored prosperity to France. He also made other reforms which, he claimed, preserved the principles of the French Revolution. Do you think his claim was well founded?



During the very first night after he seized power, Napoleon appointed two committees to draft a legal code. This was the first act of his dictatorship! Until the outbreak of the Revolution, there had been no unified legal system in France. The Revolution brought the promise of such a system. But now, after eleven years, the promise was still not fulfilled. That first summer, three great lawyers were set to work. Four months later, a draft of the Civil Code, later renamed the Napoleonic Code, was ready. In eighteen months the new laws were voted.

This code is still the law of France. It was adopted in many of the lands conquered by Napoleon. Its influence later spread still farther afield to Central America and South America.

All that is new in the Napoleonic Code is drawn from the Revolution. There was no longer a hereditary nobility. All children had an equal share in inheritance. All parents became legally responsible for supporting their children. Jews became equal with Christians before the law. Civil marriage [marriage outside of the Catholic Church] became open to all. Also, it could be legally ended by divorce.

In his new education law, Napoleon established public elementary schools, high schools, and technical colleges throughout the country. There were to be six thousand free scholarships. The Ministry for Home Affairs drew up lists of the "ten best painters, sculptors, composers, musicians, architects, and other artists whose talents make them worthy of support" [by the government].

If there was to be no war and no court life, where would the French find an outlet for their vanity and ambition? Napoleon answered this question by founding the Legion of Honor. The aim of this society was to provide distinctions for all who do good service to the nation.

Emperor Napoleon

How did Napoleon Bonaparte Become an Absolute Monarch?

Napoleon's original title was First Consul. There were two other consuls, who supposedly shared power with him. But Napoleon quickly showed that he was the dictator of France. He abolished freedom of the press; he established a powerful secret police force. Five years later, in 1804, he crowned himself "Emperor of the French."

The following selection is part of the Imperial Catechism. This was a set of questions and answers that all school children in France were required to learn. What do you think was the purpose of this Catechism?

Question: What are the duties of Christians with respect to the princes who govern them? What in particular are our duties toward Napoleon I, our emperor?

Answer: Christians owe to the princes who govern them, and we owe in particular to Napoleon I, our emperor, *love, respect, obedience, faithfulness, military service, and taxes.* We also owe him prayers for his safety and for the prosperity of the state.

Question: Why are we bound to all these duties towards our emperor?

Answer: It is first of all, because of God, who creates empires and distributes them according to His will. He has established our emperor as our ruler and has made him the minister of His power and His image on earth. *To honor and to serve our emperor is to honor and serve God himself.*

Question: Are there not special reasons that ought to attach us more strongly to Napoleon I, our emperor?

Answer: Yes. He has restored and preserved public order by his great and active wisdom. He defends the state with his powerful arm. He has become the chosen of the Lord through the consecration [sacred ceremony], which he received from the Pope.

Question: What ought to be thought of those who are lacking in duty towards our emperor?

Answer: According to the apostle St. Paul, they would be resisting the order established by God himself. They would make themselves *worthy of damnation forever.*

Question: Will the duties to which we are held towards our emperor be equally binding with respect to those who will legally succeed him?

Answer: Yes, without doubt. We read in the Holy Scripture that God, Lord of heaven and earth, gives empires not only to one person in particular, but also to his family.

