

New Advent

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Ercole Consalvi

[Cardinal](#) and statesman, b. in [Rome](#), 8 June, 1757; d. there, 24 January, 1824.

Family

His ancestors belonged to the noble family of the [Brunacci](#) in [Pisa](#), one of whom settled in the town of [Toscanella](#) in the [Papal States](#) about the middle of the seventeenth century. The grandfather of the cardinal, [Gregorio Brunacci](#), inherited from [Ercole Consalvi](#) of [Rome](#) a large fortune on condition of taking the name and arms of the [Consalvi](#) family. In this way [Gregorio Brunacci](#) became [Marchese Gregorio Consalvi](#), with residence in [Rome](#).

Education (1766-1782)

At the age of nine, Ercole Consalvi was placed in the [college](#) of the Scolopii or Brothers of the Pious Schools at [Urbino](#), where he remained from 1766 to 1771. From 1771 to 1776 he was in the [seminary](#) of [Frascati](#), where he finished his studies in rhetoric, [philosophy](#) and [theology](#); it was there also that he gained the powerful protection of the [Cardinal](#), Duke of York, [Bishop](#) of [Frascati](#). The years from 1776 to 1782 were devoted to the studies of [jurisprudence](#) and [ecclesiastical history](#) in the *Accademia Ecclesiastica* of [Rome](#), where he had among other professors the [Jesuit](#) scholar, [Zaccaria](#).

Service under Pius VI (1783-1799)

He then entered on his public career. Named [private chamberlain](#) by [Pius VI](#) in April, 1783, in 1786 he was made *Ponente del buon governo*, i.e. member of a congregation charged with the direction of municipal affairs. Appointed in 1787 secretary of the congregation commissioned to administer the Ospizio of San Michele a Ripa, in 1790 he became *Votante di Segnatura*, or member of a high court of appeals, and in 1792 obtained the [nomination](#) of *Uditore di Rota*, or member of the [high court of justice](#). He was made [assessor](#) in 1796 of a military commission established by [Pius VI](#) for the purpose of preventing revolutionary disturbances and intervention of the French Directory in the [Papal States](#). In this latter capacity he accomplished his work with such tact, [prudence](#), and foresight that no serious troubles arose, which could have served as an excuse for an invasion of [Rome](#) by the armies of the French Republic.

Unfortunately on 28 December, 1797, the French general Duphot was killed in [Rome](#); he was himself largely to blame, and the event took place without the slightest fault of the Papal Government. Still it was used as a pretext for the occupation of the city. On 10 February, 1798, General Berthier entered [Rome](#) with an army, and five days afterwards the [pope](#) was deprived of his temporal sovereignty, and a Roman republic proclaimed. Consalvi, having been [assessor](#) of the military commission, was placed first on the list of those who were to be handed over to the French Government. He was arrested, [imprisoned](#) in the fortress of Sant' Angelo, sent to [Civitavecchia](#) en route to Cayenne, French [Guiana](#), brought back to the castle of Sant' Angelo, and then sent to [Terracina](#), whence he was finally permitted to repair to [Naples](#).

Consalvi thus recovered his personal liberty; but he disliked to remain in [Naples](#), and wished rather to join [Pius VI](#), who shortly after the occupation of [Rome](#) was taken from his capital and held a captive in a [Carthusian monastery](#) near Florence. Having obtained permission from the [Neapolitan Government](#), he went by sea to [Leghorn](#) and thence to [Florence](#), where he made two visits to the [pope](#); his wish to remain with the pontiff was frustrated by the French envoy at Florence. Towards the end of September, 1798, he took up his residence in [Venice](#).

Service under Pius VII (1799-1823)

After the death of [Pius VI](#) at [Valence](#) in [France](#), 29 August, 1799, the [cardinals](#) assembled in [Venice](#) for the [conclave](#), and Consalvi was chosen secretary by an almost unanimous vote. He had a large share in securing the [election](#) of Cardinal Chiaramonti, [Bishop](#) of [Imola](#) (14 March, 1800). The new [pope](#), [Pius VII](#) (1800-23), soon appointed Consalvi pro-secretary of state; and thus Consalvi accompanied the [pope](#) to [Rome](#), where they arrived 3 July, 1800. Shortly before, the [pope](#) had recovered possession of the [Papal States](#), which were then partly under the control of [Austria](#) and partly under that of [Naples](#).

On 11 August, 1800, Consalvi was made [cardinal](#) and appointed definitively secretary of state. In this capacity he first endeavoured to restore better [conditions](#) in the [Papal States](#). He abolished the [custom](#) of furnishing food to the people at low prices, introduced free trade, withdrew from circulation all depreciated money, and admitted a large number of [laymen](#) to Government offices. He did much to embellish [Rome](#) and to make it an art-centre by designing public promenades along the Tiber, restoring the ancient monuments, and filling the museums with [statues](#) unearthed by excavations made under his direction.

In his negotiations with the various courts or Governments of [Europe](#) he was ever watchful in safeguarding the interests of the [Holy See](#), both temporal and spiritual, the latter especially, in which the [pope](#) as the head of [Christendom](#) was primarily concerned. In this respect he rendered an incalculable service to religion in signing the [French Concordat](#). The

negotiations commenced for that purpose by [Monsignor Spina](#), [Archbishop of Corinth](#), and Father Caselli, former Superior General of the [Servites](#), seemed to lag; in order not to interrupt them completely Consalvi was sent to [Paris](#) in June, 1801. Long and painful discussions followed with [Napoleon Bonaparte](#), then First Consul of the French Republic, or his commissioners, until finally, on the 15th of July, the [Concordat](#) was signed by the [papal](#) and the French commissioners, and afterwards ratified by the [pope](#) and the French Government.

Consalvi left immediately for [Rome](#), where he arrived on the 6th of August. With what are known as the "[Organic Articles](#)", added by the French Government to the [Concordat](#), Consalvi had nothing to do; on the contrary he condemned them unequivocally as destructive of the [Concordat](#), of which they pretended to be commentaries. He was also prominent in the negotiations that preceded the Italian [Concordat](#), concluded with the Cisalpine Republic on the 16th of September, 1803.

When [Napoleon](#) was proclaimed emperor in 1804, Consalvi urged [Pius VII](#) to accept [Bonaparte's](#) invitation to crown him as the new sovereign of [France](#) and during the [pope's](#) absence (November, 1804, to May, 1805) Consalvi acted as his representative to the entire satisfaction of his master. When the discussions between [Napoleon](#) and [Pius VII](#) commenced, Consalvi was blamed for the refusal of the [pope](#) to consider himself a vassal of the French emperor. The suspicions of [Napoleon](#) were confided to [Cardinal Fesch](#), then French ambassador at [Rome](#); and the dismissal of Consalvi was insisted upon. Consalvi, [hoping](#) to secure peace for his master, asked repeatedly to be relieved; but only after long hesitation did the [pope consent](#) to the demand. Consalvi left the secretariate of state on 17 June, 1806, but was often consulted privately on matters of importance.

The imperial [persecution](#) of the [pope](#) reached its climax with the annexation of the [Papal States](#) to the French Empire (20 June, 1809) and the deportation of the [pope](#) to [Savona](#) during the night of 5-6 July. Consalvi was forced to depart from [Rome](#), 10 December following; in company with Cardinal di Pietro he journeyed to [Paris](#), where he arrived 20 February, 1810. There he lived in retirement as much as possible, and refused a pension of 30,000 francs assigned to him by the French Government.

On the occasion of [Napoleon's](#) marriage to the Archduchess Marie Louise of [Austria](#), Consalvi with twelve other [cardinals](#) declined to assist at the civil and religious [ceremony](#), held 1-2 April, 1810, though he was present at the semi-solemn reception at Saint-Cloud, 31 March, and went also to the Tuileries in [Paris](#) for the great reception, on 3 April. He did not wish to appear as approving the second marriage of [Napoleon](#), as long as the [pope](#) had not pronounced on the validity of the first. [Napoleon](#) was so incensed at his action, that he expelled him with the other [cardinals](#) of like sentiments from the Tuileries on 3 April, and in the first moment of passion gave orders to have him shot. However, he modified his rash judgment and [decreed](#) that Consalvi and the twelve other [cardinals](#) should be deprived of their [property](#)

and of their [cardinalitial](#) dignity. From that moment these [princes of the Church](#) were compelled to wear black garments, whence their name of "black [cardinals](#)", and on 11 June they were all banished to various cities of [France](#). Consalvi was sent to [Reims](#); it was there in his enforced retirement that he wrote his memoirs.

Set free on 26 January, 1813, he hastened to [Pius VII](#), then at Fontainebleau. At his suggestion the [pope](#) retracted (24 March) the concessions made to [Napoleon](#) in a [Brief](#) from Savona and in a new [concordat](#) agreed upon at Fontainebleau; as a consequence Consalvi was restricted in his free intercourse with the [pope](#). When [Pius VII](#) left Fontainebleau for [Italy](#) (23 January, 1814) Consalvi followed a few days afterwards, at first under a military escort as far as Beziers. Having heard of [Napoleon's abdication](#) in Fontainebleau (11 April, 1814) he asked for a passport and rejoined [Pius VII](#) in [Italy](#). He was at once reappointed secretary of state by [papal](#) letter written from [Foligno](#), 19 May, 1814.

Before taking office Consalvi went to [Paris](#) for the purpose of claming from the allied Powers of [Europe](#) the restoration of the [Papal States](#) under the sovereignty of the [pope](#). With the same object in view he went also to [England](#), and assisted afterwards at the Congress of [Vienna](#) (September, 1814, to June, 1815). He was successful in his negotiations, and obtained the [restitution](#) of all [papal](#) territory such as it had been before the [French Revolution](#), with the exception of [Avignon](#), Venaissin, and a small strip of land in the legation of [Ferrara](#).

After his return to [Rome](#) Consalvi continued to work for the welfare of the [Papal States](#) and of the [Church](#). He abolished the ancient [privileges](#) of the nobility and of the [papal](#) cities, devised a new plan of administration for the [papal](#) territory, readjusted the finances, prepared a new civil and criminal code of [laws](#) reorganized the system of [education](#), and provided for public safety. He continued the elaboration of his plans for the embellishment of [Rome](#) and the improvement of the Campagna; he endeavoured, as already said, to make [Rome](#) a centre of art, and extended his protection to such famous artists as [Canova](#) and Thorwaldsen. At the same time he maintained with firmness the [rights](#) and sovereignty of the [pope](#).

When in 1817 the [Carbonari](#) tried to bring about a rebellion, a few of their leaders were prosecuted, banished, or [imprisoned](#); and in 1821 a [Bull](#) was issued against these disturbers. During this period several [concordats](#) or similar agreements were concluded with foreign Powers: with [Bavaria](#) in 1817, with [Prussia](#) and the princes of the [Upper Rhine](#) in 1821, with [Hanover](#) in 1823, with Victor Emmanuel of [Sardinia](#) in 1817, with King Ferdinand I of the Two Sicilies in 1818. The French [Concordat](#) concluded in 1817 with King Louis XVIII never received legal force in [France](#); hence that of 1801 continued in [existence](#).

Retirement and Death (1823-1824)

The career of Consalvi came to an end with the death of [Pius VII](#) (20 August, 1823). After his retirement his thoughts were devoted to the erection of a monument at [St. Peter's](#) in [honour](#) of his former master; only a few months afterwards he was carried himself to his [tomb](#) in San Lorenzo, while his heart was taken to the Pantheon. Appropriate monuments were erected to his [memory](#) in both places.

Appreciation

Ercole Consalvi is to be regarded as one of the greatest statesmen who has ever served the [papal](#) court; his eminent qualities were at all times apparent during the great trials of the [papacy](#). If not always successful in his enterprises, it was largely because of the scarcity of means at his disposal and the prejudices of his age. The purity of his life was the more admired because in his position he had to mingle much with a worldly [society](#). He was devoted to [works of charity](#) and religion; the [poor knew](#) him as their friend, and in his exercises of devotion he was most punctual.

Finally he was very unselfish and disinterested. He served the [pope](#) and the [Church](#) loyally without looking for personal advantage. He never asked for a position, except for that of Uditore di Rota, which appeared desirable owing to the studies he had made and the great opportunities it offered for travelling during the vacation months. The many gifts, pensions, or [legacies](#), offered him, and at times persistently, by friends, admirers, and patrons, were invariably declined. All in all, both for the work he accomplished and for his personal [character](#), Consalvi is one of the purest [glories](#) of the [Church](#) of [Rome](#).

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