

THE CATHOLIC REFORMATION 1545 - 1648AD

In this article, we will look at:

- **Catholic reform prior to the Council of Trent**
- **Council of Trent**
- **Implementing the Council**
- **The Jesuits**
- **Catholic mystics and activists**
- **Enduring legacy of Trent**

There is no doubt that the Catholic Church is in dire need of reform when Martin Luther posts his *Ninety-Five Theses* on the door of the Church in Wittenberg in 1517. Many of the popes and other Church leaders lead scandalous lives and neglect the pastoral care of their people. Having said that, some people within the Church try to bring reform.

Cardinal de Cisneros, a Catholic leader in Spain from 1495 to 1517, brings about many reforms in his country, which is the main reason Spain is not hugely impacted by the Reformation. In Italy, the *Oratory of Divine Love*, a society founded by lay people, is a shining example of what a holy life should be. From this Oratory will come many future leaders in the Church, including Pope Paul IV.

The *Capuchin* friars, an offshoot of the Franciscans, revive the spirit of poverty and service intended by Francis. A new religious order called the *Theatines* (1524) emerges, whose aim is to improve the educational level and spiritual formation of the clergy. The *Ursuline* nuns, established in 1535 by Angela de Merici, are dedicated to educating girls and working amongst the sick and the poor. Then in the 1520's, a new religious order called the *Society of Jesus* is founded by Ignatius of Loyola. They promise obedience to the Pope and vow to go wherever they are sent—"whether to the Turks or to the New World or to the Lutherans."

Despite the many attempts to resolve the problems confronting the Church, no reform is possible without the involved leadership of the pope. Recall that when Luther posts his *Ninety-Five Theses*, **Pope Leo X** dismisses it as a "squabble between monks." In addition, Leo is much too busy with the construction of St. Peter's Basilica to pay attention to Luther's protestation.

Hadrian (1522-1523), often called Adrian, succeeds Pope Leo X. He is a respected scholar and former teacher of Erasmus. This Dutchman is the last non-Italian pope until the election of John Paul II in 1978. Leo is in Spain when elected pope. But before leaving for Rome, he writes a stern letter to the College of Cardinals stating that he is coming not to celebrate with them but to chastise and correct them. He also writes to secular leaders throughout the Empire, criticizing them for creating a culture prone to clerical corruption.

In one such letter to a Prince, Hadrian said: "*All of us, prelates and clergy, have turned aside from the road of righteousness and for a long time now there has been not even one who did good.... You must therefore promise in our name that we intend to exert ourselves so that, first of all, the Roman Curia, from which perhaps all this evil took its start, may be improved. Then, just as from here the sickness spread, so also from here recovery and renewal may begin.*"

Unfortunately, Hadrian's papacy lasts only a year when he dies in 1523. Had he lived longer, chances are he would have reconciled Luther with the Church.

After Hadrian, the Cardinals return to their corrupt system of electing wealthy Italians from powerful families. Hadrian's successor, **Clement VII**, totally underestimates the gravity of Luther's challenge. He is also too involved with political issues to heed Luther's admonitions. Emperor Charles is one person who could have stemmed the spread of Lutheranism. But Clement gets him so mad about some issue that he sends his army to Rome. When Rome is ransacked, Clement is fortunate to get out alive. Some see this event as God's punishment on a corrupt church.

The Council of Trent (1545-1563)

Pope Paul III (1534-1549). Clement's blunders lead to his successor's call for a reforming council in 1553. Yet it will be several years before the Council will actually start due in part to conflicting views on its venue. The pope wants it in Rome; Emperor Charles wants Germany. As a compromise, they settle for Trent, a small German town inside the Italian border.

Little do the attendees know that they are going to participate in one of the most important councils in the Church's history. The results of the Council of Trent will shape the Church for the next 500 years until Vatican Council II (1962-1966)—and, really, to this day.

The Council takes place over a period of 18 years, comprising three sessions (1545-1547, 1551-1552, and 1561-1563) and interrupted by various wars. In its first session, only 35 bishops, mostly Italian, participate. The numbers increase to 237 during the final meetings. The pope is represented by three papal legates.

Pope Julius III. After the death of Paul III, who called the opening session of the Council, Julius III is elected Pope. He convenes the second session (1551-1552). A lover of the arts, Julius names Michelangelo as chief architect of St. Peter's. He dies between the second and third sessions of the Council.

Pope Paul IV (1555-1559), who nearly wrecks the Council. After being elected pope, he refuses to reconvene the last session thinking that he can reform the Church himself. How? By persecuting heretics and burning books that he dislikes. Even writings by Erasmus are burned. He also nearly dissolves the Jesuits and persecutes a Cardinal who had been a leader at the earlier sessions of the Council. Paul IV is succeeded by **Pius IV** who reconvenes the final session of the Council (1561-1563).

Defining Catholic faith and practice. Undeniably, the Church is in need of much reform. Actually, the Church, like every individual, is in *constant* need of reform. The purpose of the Council of Trent is to clarify Church teaching on several doctrinal issues that have been called into question by Luther and others, to bring much needed change, especially to the Roman Curia, and to correct the way bishops and priests conduct their ministry. The following are some of the *doctrinal* and *disciplinary* issues that Trent addresses and clarifies:

- In the Catholic Church, the Christian faith is handed down to us through Scripture *and* Tradition. [For more on the role of Tradition, see my Catechism Article #2.] Trent reaffirms that when it comes to the correct interpretation of Scripture, the Church's Magisterium has the final word. Luther maintained that Christians should only believe what is explicitly stated in the Bible

(*"sola scriptura"*) and that individual Christians can rely on the Holy Spirit to give them the correct interpretation of the Bible. Such private and individual interpretation of Scripture has been the main reason for the divisions within Protestantism. Today there are hundreds of Protestant churches, each claiming to be the true church.

- We are saved *not* by *faith alone*—as Luther stated—but by faith that expresses itself in good works. St. James reminds us that “faith without good works is dead.” This is an area that Catholics and Lutherans today agree on. Both profess that we are saved by faith in Jesus, but it is a faith that must express itself in good works.
- Of the seven sacraments, Luther recognized only two: Baptism and Eucharist. Trent states that there are seven sacraments intended by Christ.
- Christ is truly present in the bread and wine at Mass. The Mass is both a *meal* and a *sacrifice* – an extension of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. While Luther believed in Christ's presence in the Eucharist, other reformers like Calvin deny it. All the reformers reject the sacrificial nature of the Mass.
- Purgatory exists and the souls in purgatory benefit from our prayers. Indulgences, when properly carried out, have spiritual value as does veneration of the saints. But Trent condemns the superstitious abuse of relics, statues, and indulgences.

The Council also addresses matters of *discipline*. For example:

- Bishops are to reside in their own diocese and visit their parishes. Previously, some bishops who were more like princes or nobles had two or more dioceses from which they received revenue even though they never lived in them.
- Likewise, priests are to live in their own parishes, monks in their monasteries, and nuns in their convents.
- Seminaries are to be established for the training of priests.
- Commissions are set up to produce a *Missal* that will standardize the prayers of the Mass, a *catechism* that will give a summary of Catholic beliefs, and a *breviary* with daily prayers for priests.

- The Council compiles an *Index of Forbidden Books* which it has kept up to date until about 1960.
- The Council bans nepotism (which was common before and during the Renaissance period).

Implementing the decrees of Trent

The work of the bishops and theologians at Trent would have done little to bring reform to the Church if the popes *after* the Council had been weak and not committed to implementing the decrees of the Council. Fortunately for the Church, the three popes after Trent—Pius V, Gregory XIII and Sixtus V—are bent on reforming the Church according to decrees issued at Trent. These popes are ably assisted in implementing the teachings and discipline of the Council by the Jesuits and by great theologians like Charles Borromeo, Robert Bellarmine, and Peter Canisius.

Pope Pius V (1556-1572) is faced with the almost overwhelming responsibility of getting a shattered and scattered Church back on its feet. It has been badly shaken by corruption and abuses, by the Reformation, by the constant threat of Turkish invasion, and by the bloody bickering of young nation states.

Elected Pope in 1566, three years after the close of the Council, Pius V contributes much to implement the decrees of Trent. *“He ordered the founding of seminaries for the proper training of priests. He published a new missal, a new breviary, a new catechism and established the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) classes for the young. Pius zealously enforced legislation against abuses in the church. He patiently served the sick and the poor by building hospitals, providing food for the hungry and giving money customarily used for the papal banquets to poor Roman converts. His decision to keep wearing his Dominican habit led to the custom of the pope wearing a white cassock”* (Saint of the Day, p.104).

On the downside, Pius’ zeal is carried to an extreme when he shows zero tolerance for those who do not conform to his reforms. Writing to one king about heresy, he supposedly says: *“Never give in, show no mercy, get rid of heretics, get rid of those who resist, persecute to the very end...”* (The Pope’s Histories and Secrets, p.473). Perhaps, Pius is convinced that drastic measures are needed at a time of great crises.

Gregory XIII (1572-1585) establishes numerous seminaries and colleges, relying on the Jesuits to staff them. He strongly promotes spreading the faith beyond Europe. He organizes the papal diplomatic corps by sending ambassadors (called Nuncios) to the Catholic capitals of Europe. He is probably best remembered for revising the modern calendar used today in every country of the world.

Sixtus V (1585-1590) is best known for restructuring the Church government by creating fifteen Roman congregations, which continue to exist in Rome to this day. On the downside, Sixtus launches a brutal campaign against roving bands of brigands, particularly in the Papal States, resulting in thousands of deaths.

Reform though religious orders. New religious orders play a big part in reforming the Church in the sixteenth century and beyond. The best known of these new orders is the Society of Jesus.

The Jesuits

The Society of Jesus is founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola in 1534 and recognized by the pope in 1540. During a ten-year schooling, mainly at the University of Paris, Ignatius gathers around him six companions who henceforth take the traditional vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and a fourth vow of obedience to the pope as a sign of their commitment to fight Protestantism.

The Jesuits engage in preaching, teaching, writing, and founding of schools and colleges. They embark on their mission educating the poor and illiterate, but within a few years, they will be educating princes and kings. Before long, the Jesuits are on the faculties of most of the major universities of Europe. They also open a large number of universities and seminaries. In a short time, the Jesuits are called the school master of Europe. They are also vigorous missionaries bringing the faith to the New World and the East. The greatest of all missionaries is St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552) who preaches the Gospel in India, Indonesia, and Japan. Other Jesuits, like St. Peter Canisius and St. Robert Bellarmine, help win back many Germans, Hungarians, Bohemians and all of Poland, to Catholicism. Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* (1541) becomes a classic of Christian spirituality and the basis of the Jesuits’ great work in retreats and spiritual discernment.

Other religious orders like the *Theatines*, *Capuchins* (branch of Franciscans), *Ursuline Sisters* (1535), and the *Oratory* founded by St. Philip Neri play a significant role in bringing reformation to the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century.

Catholic mystics and activist saints

This period in the Church's history is also blessed with other great saints, mystics and activists. A brief look at a few of them:

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) was born before the Protestant Reformation and dies 20 years after the Council of Trent. At the age of 20, she enters a Carmelite convent against the wishes of her father. The Order at that time has a very relaxed approach to religious life. The nuns often receive visitors and entertain them in their nice parlors. They wear jewelry and eat fine foods. For about 20 years, Teresa lives this rather casual approach to religious life.

In 1555, while praying before the crucified Christ, Teresa goes through a profound religious experience which leads her to give herself completely to God. In 1562, she establishes a small convent in Avila, Spain. In this new convent with 13 other sisters, the renewal of the Carmelite religious life begins. These sisters give up the material comforts of their former larger convent and start to live a very simple life of prayer and meditation. Teresa's Carmelite group is called "disclaled" which means "without shoes." These nuns wear sandals instead of shoes.

While continuing to live a life of intense prayer, Teresa founds many other disclaled Carmelite convents in Spain. In her efforts to renew her religious order, she is misjudged and opposed both by her own religious order and by the clergy. She even has to defend herself before the Spanish Inquisition. Her writings, especially *The Way of Perfection* (her spiritual autobiography) and *The Interior Castle* (the six stages of union with God) help to renew the Church after the Protestant Reformation, and ever since have helped generations of Christians. Teresa's most famous saying is her so-called bookmark poem:

*Let nothing trouble you, let nothing scare you,
All is fleeting, God alone is unchanging.*

*Patience, everything obtains.
Who possesses God, nothing wants,
God alone suffices.*

Teresa inspires another Spaniard, **John of the Cross**, to work for the renewal of male Carmelite religious houses. Like Teresa, John of the Cross suffers great opposition during his lifetime. He is even imprisoned by his own religious order. During his time of spiritual darkness, he writes his now famous *Dark Night of the Soul*.

St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) is bishop of Geneva, Switzerland, from 1602 to 1622. He is a highly regarded pastor and writer. Through his writing and preaching, he attracts thousands of Swiss Protestants back to the Catholic faith. He believes that he who preaches with love preaches effectively. He famously states: "*A teaspoon of honey attracts more flies than a barrel of vinegar.*" Because of the simple profundity of his voluminous writings, Francis is made a Doctor of the Church and patron saint of journalists. His book *Introduction to the Devout Life* is a spiritual classic, written to help lay people grow in holiness.

St. Jeanne de Chantal (1572-1641), friend of Francis de Sales and a widow, founds the order *Congregation of the Visitation* in 1610. The order devotes itself to prayer and works with the sick and the poor.

St. Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) has a tremendous zeal for reform and a great love for the poor. His congregation helps much to reform the spiritual lives of the clergy. He is also instrumental in founding the *Sisters of Charity* in 1633, the first Catholic order of sisters who live a fully active life in the world, ministering among the poor and sick. Vincent is so active in charitable works of all sorts, such as ransoming slaves from galley ships, that he earns the title Catholic patron of all works of charity.

The enduring legacy of Trent

The Council of Trent is greatly credited for helping the Church renew itself and recover from the Protestant Reformation. Luther's challenge has made the Church see that it needs to 'clean house' of the scandalous corruption in Church leadership and to clarify its teaching on doctrines and practices challenged by Luther, Calvin and other reformers. Trent gives the Church a firm footing as she goes forward.

On the downside, two things are often noted. First, the Catholic Church has taken on a kind of 'fortress mentality' against the world and other Christian

groups. This mentality continues pretty much until the Vatican Council II in 1962-1966. Second, for the next 500 years until Vatican II, the Church remains almost unchanged. For 500 years, the Tridentine Mass is the same all over the Catholic world, and people go to confession in a dark room. Pre-Vatican II Catholics do not know that the model of church they grew up with only goes back to the sixteenth century. They do not know until after Vatican Council II that the Church could change the *way* she defines herself, the *way* she sees herself in relationship to other Christian churches and other religions, the *way* she celebrates the sacraments, and the *way* Church authority is exercised.

Reflection questions

1. What spoke to you most in this article?
2. What surprised you most or confused you most?
3. If you grew in the pre-Vatican II Church, what, if anything, do you miss from that era?
4. Do you have any questions from this period in church history?