

Church History: “The Reformation” 1500-1900

(Part 6)

What was the Counter-Reformation?

The Counter-Reformation was Roman Catholicism’s response to the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers objected to the veneration (worship) of Mary, the selling of indulgences, the insistence that rituals and sacraments were necessary for salvation, and so forth. Catholicism responded with its own efforts. Some of these were intended to change the Catholic Church itself, but most were designed to resist the claims of the Reformers.

What were the 3 main instruments of the Counter Reformation?

- The Council of Trent,
- The Roman Inquisition
- The Society of Jesus.

The Council of Trent

Pope Paul III initiated the Council of Trent (1545-1547, 1551-1552 And 1562-1563).

The Council of Trent did positively address some complaints of the Reformers. The Sale of indulgences was stopped, the roles of priests were more carefully defined, and the use of sacred artifacts –relics- was greatly reduced.

However, on the most critical issues, the Council of Trent, was mostly a doubling-down on entrenched Catholic theology. This council, and the other Counter-Reformers, doggedly defended transubstantiation, upheld the necessity of sacraments for salvation, rejected Scripture alone as authoritative, and claimed outright that Catholic tradition was as equally authoritative as the Bible. In addition, the council members determined the Latin Vulgate was the one and only acceptable bible for church use. They insisted that, since politics was instituted by God, all political leaders were subject to papal authority.

The Roman Inquisition

Paul III established the Roman Inquisition; the purpose was to suppress Lutheran heretics in Italy. The group of six Inquisitors in the Holy Office of the Roman Inquisition were independent from bishops in their jurisdiction and could punish anyone except the pope. The Inquisition reached its peak during the papacy of Pius V extirpating Italian Protestants. Protestants were questioned about their beliefs, often under torture and threat, and those who would not conform to the requirements of the Pope and Church were dealt with unmercifully. They perished at the stake, upon the scaffold, and were strangled or even buried alive. These persecutions began about 1523 and continued with more or less severity until 1555. It has

been estimated that more than 5,000 people suffered death on a charge of heresy.

The Inquisition also made an “Index of Prohibited Books” practicing censorship. It included not only books considered to be theologically erroneous and harmful but also all translations of the New Testament in the vernacular.

The Society of Jesus

The Jesuits, founded by the Spanish nobleman and ex-soldier Ignatius of Loyola were the most effective of the new Catholic orders. Loyola, after recovering from a severe battle wound, took a vow to “serve only God and the Roman pontiff, His vicar on earth.” Once again, his emphasis on the pope is a key reaffirmation of the medieval Church as the Council of Trent firmly defeated all attempts of Conciliarism, the belief that general councils of the church collectively were God’s representative on earth, rather than the pope. Firmly legitimizing the new role of the pope as an absolute ruler, the Jesuits strongly contributed to the reinvigoration of the Counter-Reformation Church.

Characterized by careful selection, rigorous training and iron discipline, the worldliness of the Renaissance church had no part in the new order. Taking strong monastic vows of chastity, obedience, and poverty and setting an example that improved the effectiveness of the entire Church, they became preachers, confessors to monarchs and princes, and their efforts are largely credited with stemming Protestantism in Poland, Bohemia, Hungary, southern Germany, France and the Spanish Netherlands. They also strongly participated in the expansion of the church in the Americas and Asia.

Their tactics during the Counter-Reformation involved intellectual and theological arguments, although they also used less spiritual methods of accomplishing their goals. The **Inquisition** was a product of Jesuit influence. The Jesuits also produced an index of prohibited books: texts Catholics were officially forbidden to read. The Jesuits’ influence on Catholic philosophy and theology was significant.

Strange as it may seem the mystical experience was a large part of of Catholic saints: the English lawyer and statesman, Thomas More; the cheerful and imaginative missionary to the Calvinists, Francis of Sales; the somber reforming archbishop of Milan, Charles Borromeo; the rapturous Spanish mystic, Teresa of Avila; and most influential of all, the Spanish soldier of Christ, Ignatius Loyola. The Spanish mystics stressed the personal nature of faith and saw love as the basis of Christian faith, not obligation or duty. Even though they met with strong opposition, their work bore fruit and was eventually recognized by the popes. The French school of spirituality stressed the church’s role in continuing Jesus’ mission, as well as the need for bible study and personal faith.

