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# The Church Reacts to Reform

By C. MERVYN MAXWELL

**I**N RECOUNTING the story of Catholicism it must be recalled that the Protestant Reformation was begun by a Roman Catholic.

Martin Luther was a Roman Catholic in good and regular standing when the Reformation began in 1517. In fact, he was a monk in a Catholic monastery, a priest over a Catholic parish, and a professor in a Catholic university. All the books he read during his early formative years were works approved by the Catholic Church. The Bible he studied was a Catholic Vulgate version, in due course augmented by a Greek New Testament produced by the Catholic scholar Erasmus. His advisers were all Catholics, and Frederick the Wise, his protector, was one of the most pious collectors of relics in all of Germany.

When Luther appeared at the famous Diet of Worms in 1521, the young Emperor Charles V said, "This monk will never make a heretic of me." He did not say, "This Protestant."

The Reformation began as a movement of Catholics within Catholicism. Let this never be forgotten. There are many searching hearts even now in Babylon who will yet hear Christ's call, "Come out of her, my people" (Rev. 18:4).

Even after the great separation took place and "Protestant" came to be distinct from "Catholic," Luther's Reformation effected a considerable reformation in what was left of the Catholic Church. It was a reformation that was slow to appear and far from complete, but it was a reformation nonetheless.

The Catholic Reformation, or Counter Reformation as it is often called, was "slow to appear" in that voices within Catholicism clamored for it for hundreds of years before it finally took place.

In the fourteenth century Marsilio of Padua and William of Ockham urged a greater role for the laity and less exercise of the practice of excommunication, the Franciscans pleaded with all their heart against churchly wealth, and *Piers Plowman* complained that—

"The country is the curseder that cardinals come in; And where they

live and linger most lechery there reigneth."

In the fifteenth century the great Councils of Constance (1414-1418) and Basel (1431-1445) strove vigorously to change the church, but in vain. And in the early sixteenth century, just before the publication of Luther's theses in 1517, Erasmus wrote his *Praise of Folly*, poking fun at the grotesque theology and inconsistent morality of the church of his day in such a brilliant satire that even the pope laughed and admitted it was all too true. In the 1530's a papal commission composed of respected churchmen such as Cardinals Contarini and Pole prepared a long list of the abuses that needed correction: Clergymen following harlots into brothels, bishops never once appearing in their home dioceses to fulfill their local responsibilities, and so on.

## Need for Reform Recognized

Everyone knew that the church needed to be reformed. Priests and their morals were the butt of a thousand jokes in those days as they are in Catholic countries today, and many a businessman cursed his bishop under his breath.

But the popes resisted reforms, reformers, and reforming councils like the plague. Outstanding Catholic reformers such as Savonarola were burned at the stake. Pius II (1458-1464), though an ardent reformer before he became a pope, is notorious for his bull *Execrabilis*, a document that cursed any Catholic who might commit the "execrable" offense of appealing to a (reforming) council rather than to the judgment of a pope.

Thus, when the Protestant Reformation struck between 1517 and 1521, Luther was not doing anything new in calling the people's attention to faults within the church (though, of course, the clarity of his doctrine of justification by faith *was* new). The Catholic Church was cut in half by Protestantism not because the clergy were taken by surprise but because the popes and their advisers refused so stubbornly to make changes when the people demanded them. In those days, as in the Vatican right

now, the conservative curia tended to resist reform.

But as the hierarchy saw Luther and Calvin drawing all Northern Europe into their camp, cutting papal income to the bone and reducing papal political influence to near impotence, it finally realized that something had to be done. It is because the Catholic Reformation was begun a generation later than Luther's Reformation, and was carried on in conscious opposition to it, that it is called the Counter Reformation. It involved principally three items: the Inquisition, the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), and the Council of Trent.

Because the Inquisition is so well known, little need be said about it here. Suffice it to say that in one form or another the Inquisition had been around since about 1200, when the era of brutal Catholic persecution was begun. Its most virulent and terrifying form was the so-called Spanish Inquisition, and when Contarini revitalized the Inquisition in 1542 as part of the Counter Reformation, he reformed it along the lines of the fearful Spanish Inquisition. Though its fierce bloodletting could not quench Protestantism in the Low Countries (especially Holland), it proved to be extremely effective in destroying Protestantism in Italy and Spain.

The second tool of the Counter Reformation, the Society of Jesus, was officially approved by the pope in 1540. Its founder, the Spaniard Ignatius Loyola, cherished in early life a dream of fighting as a knight in a successful crusade against the Turks. However, in 1521 Loyola was wounded in a local battle in which his personal bravery was so conspicuous that his enemies made a point of rescuing him from a pile of corpses after the battle was over and helping him toward recovery; but his leg injury precluded his ever being a soldier again.

Loyola agonized for months. In black despair he implored an apparently unfeeling, condemning God to show him mercy. Unable to find release in any penance he performed, he at last flung himself on the mercies of an "angry" God, as Luther had done some years before, and found

peace. His cry became, "Show me Thy way, O God, and I will follow Thee like a dog."

But here, paradoxically, in his crisis of supreme consecration, was Loyola's crucial mistake. God has never asked us to follow Him "like a dog." He asks us, expects us, to use our intelligence; to follow Him like men.

Loyola gradually sublimated his ambition to fight as a soldier against the Turks into a plan to fight as a monk against the Protestants. When about thirty years of age, he embarked on eleven years of college in order to obtain a thorough education. He gathered around himself a nucleus of able and zealous men, including Francis Xavier, who later claimed to have baptized 700,000 converts in the Far East. He molded step by step the Society of Jesus as a military order whose members were obliged to give unqualified obedience to their superiors (in effect, that is, to obey them like dogs—even like walking sticks; even like dead bodies, their manual said). And he set up the most notorious rule in all Christendom:

"If we wish to proceed securely in all things, we must hold fast to the following principle: What seems to me white, I will believe black if the hierarchical Church so defines."

### Unquestioned Obedience to Church

Here is the very opposite of Luther's stand at Worms. Luther would not be moved from his position unless he could be convinced by conscience, Scripture, and plain reason. Loyola's Jesuits would obey the church against the light of all three.

In an age when millions wavered, wondering whether Luther's stand were true, the Society of Jesus seemed to the pope a sword fashioned to his hand. It was officially approved by Paul III in 1540, and immediately went into action.

One of the Jesuit's main methods was the use of education. Highly trained Jesuits became tutors to the sons of Protestant princelings. When these sons succeeded to power in their turn, they compelled their subjects to become Catholics or be exiled. Like the Inquisition, the Society of Jesus was highly successful.

Thus the church reacted to the Protestant Reformation by reforming the Inquisition—honing it into a rapier of persecution—and by establishing the Society of Jesus, the most single-minded and devoted organization that ever vowed to further Catholic claims. The Council of Trent completed the Counter Reformation.

It should be recognized that prior to the Council of Trent no system-

atic presentation of official Catholic doctrine had ever been proclaimed as incontrovertible dogma. There was more freedom of thought in the medieval Catholic Church than is often realized today. This is one reason Luther felt free, as a loyal Catholic, to dispute some of the church's teachings without a thought at first of precipitating the Reformation. As long as this undefined doctrinal status continued, many a Catholic in Southern Europe felt safe to study Protestant authors. The Council of Trent was called, in part, to codify Catholic dogma in order to put a stop to this dangerous freedom of discussion; and in this it was largely successful.

As the council began its meetings in the little north-Italian town of Trent in 1545, all sorts of hopes and fears occupied Europe, just as they did when Vatican Council II began in 1962. The emperor hoped the council would work out a formula whereby Catholics and Protestants could be united. Some council fathers came hoping to redefine justification by faith closer to the Lutheran position, and to exalt the Scriptures above tradition. And the pope hoped the theologians would wrangle so hard about doctrine they would forget all about reforms that might concern himself.

The council met for three periods of about a year each between 1545 and 1563. There were some stormy meetings. Some beards, it is said, were plucked on occasion. But the pope won, hands down.

In one of the earliest sessions it was voted that tradition should be accepted "with equal reverence" along with Scripture.

In the fifth session, after months of intense and earnest conversation, it was declared that justification did indeed come by faith and was entirely a free gift of the grace of God. It seemed that the Protestant position held by a number of council delegates had won. But the decree went on to state that this applied only to the

### Instant Wealth

By DONALD F. HAYNES

You can't get it by getting,  
Only by giving.  
This is friendship's wealth:  
Flash a look of understanding  
Into the face of a stranger  
And you will see it.  
Not every time, of course.  
But often enough  
To prove the ancient truism,  
"A man that hath friends  
Must shew himself friendly."  
Here is exhibitionism  
At its best.

justification that occurs at baptism! Sins committed after baptism require confession to a priest and the performance of works—and no one, the decree stated, could be *sure* that he had done enough works. Since virtually all Catholics are baptized as infants, the only kind of justification they can know intelligently is the priest - and - penance - and - you - can't - be - really - sure kind. What a tragedy!

### Subsequent Sessions

Subsequent sessions limited the official number of sacraments to seven and, after many an impassioned hour, set up the Mass dogmatically as an atoning sacrifice. And the council officially denied the laity the use of the wine in the Lord's Supper, not because there was anything wrong in their use of the wine, but because under no account was any concession to be made to the Protestants. That this was the motivation was brought out explicitly, over strong objections by some of the bishops. But in the realm of the reform of abuses, some progress was made of which Protestants can approve. Among many other things, regulations were passed requiring priests definitely to avoid fornication and ordering bishops to reside in their dioceses.

During the final period in which the council met, the whole basic structure of the church came up for discussion. The question debated was whether the bishops receive their power directly from God or indirectly from God through the pope. This question, obviously, is fraught with all kinds of implications and was discussed again at the recent Vatican Council, at which time, be it noted, the decision reached was the opposite of the one taken at Trent.

A large number of bishops at the Council of Trent hoped for a decision that would favor their local autonomy by declaring that each bishop receives his power directly from God, but the pope held the council in session until utter weariness and a sense of futility persuaded the disappointed bishops to lay the whole church in the pope's lap and leave it there.

Thus by 1563 the Catholic Church had in its tool kit a ruthless instrument of persecution in the revitalized Inquisition, a dedicated and highly educated organ of evangelism and intrigue in the Society of Jesus, and a clear-cut doctrinal system, an efficient organizational structure, and a greatly reduced list of abuses in the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent.

This was the Counter Reformation, the Catholic reaction to Protestant reform.

*(Continued next week)*