

The Counter-Reformation

When you hear the term “Reformation” you probably think first about the Protestant Reformation and people like Luther and Calvin. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, witnessed not only the flourishing of Lutheranism, Calvinism, and other more radical Protestant groups (such as the Anabaptists and Mennonites), but also a period of Catholic reform and renewal. Historical scholarship on the Catholic side of the Reformation has frequently debated how to designate this period. “Counter-Reformation” signifies that Catholics were responding directly to the threat of Protestantism. Other historians use the term “Catholic Reformation” to signify that Catholics were not just reacting against Protestants, but that there was a longer push for reform within the Catholic Church that began before the Reformation and continued into the seventeenth century. More recently, historian John O’Malley suggested that the term “Early Modern Catholicism” encompasses not only the two previous terms, but also the wider experience of Catholics during this period.

Reforms before the Reformation

Well before the Reformation, late-medieval Christians saw the need for changes in the teachings and practices of the church. One often-successful method of reform was the use of church councils to resolve disputes over doctrine and authority. In the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the papacy was weakened by controversy and schism, as multiple popes claimed the authority of the Holy See with the support of different European kings. The Council of Constance resolved the crisis in 1417 and chose one pope. Supporters of conciliar reform, however, believed that greater reform was needed, and that it could be best accomplished by limiting the authority of the pope and increasing that of church councils.

While conciliar reform did not proceed quickly in the fifteenth century, other major reforms were carried out that affected the church hierarchy, the monasteries, and the clergy. Many religious orders of monks, nuns, and priests, for instance, initiated reform; they desired to return to the original observances of the order and clean up abuses. Many of the leaders of the Reformation later came out of religious orders that had followed this “Observant Reform.” These methods of reform attempted to clean up abuses in the church while remaining clearly orthodox.

The church did not judge other attempts at reform as equally orthodox. In the fourteenth century, John Wycliffe (d. 1384), an Oxford philosopher and theologian, taught that the pope had no claim to temporal power and that the Bible should be the standard for Christian belief. He also denied the power of saints, relics, and transubstantiation. Later, Jan Hus (d. 1415) of Bohemia asserted many of the same teachings and also criticized the wealth of the church, as well as indulgences and superstition. The Council of Constance condemned Hus as a heretic and he was burned at the stake. (They also condemned Wycliffe posthumously.) In many ways, these calls for reform prefigured many of the critiques that Luther and other reformers would bring forward in the sixteenth century.

The Case against the Church

The view of the Catholic Church as in the midst of reform prior to the Reformation is valid, but it must be weighed against the abuses and corruption against which Luther and later Protestants raged. The popes who presided over the church in the decades immediately preceding the Reformation were favorite targets for Protestant criticism. All of them were corrupt to varying degrees, were more focused on secular issues than religion, and were great patrons of the arts. In these ways, they acted as Renaissance princes more than spiritual leaders.

Alexander VI (r. 1492–1503) is perhaps the most emblematic example. He was born in Spain into the increasingly powerful Borgia family. He gained his position as archbishop of Valencia through nepotism when his uncle was elected as Pope Callixtus III. After Alexander's election to the papacy, rumors circulated that he had bribed his way into the holy office; historians, however, debate whether this claim can be substantiated. Alexander was reputed to be irresistible to women; he acknowledged four illegitimate children as cardinal (and there may have been more) and strategically married them into powerful Spanish and Italian families to increase the prestige and power of his family. He was also a patron of the arts. He commissioned artists such as Raphael and Michelangelo, and he commissioned Pinturicchio to paint an apartment in the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican that is today known as the Borgia Apartment.

A major critic of Alexander VI was Girolamo Savonarola (d. 1498), a Dominican friar stationed in Florence. He had previously held a Bonfire of the Vanities to criticize the debauched life of both the clergy and the laity; he urged the necessity of getting back to a simpler, less luxurious lifestyle. He attacked the corruption of the church and the sexual immorality of its leaders. Savonarola's criticism of the papacy was too much for the papal authorities to stomach, however, and he was burned at the stake in 1498.

Alexander VI's successor was Julius II (r. 1503–13), who was known as an ambitious man, a great military commander, and an effective diplomat. He, too, was a great patron of the arts, and is particularly remembered for commissioning Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and for starting the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica. Julius also encountered strident criticism, this time from the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, who disapproved of how Julius lavished money on the arts and not on pious endeavors. Erasmus wrote a tract – which he published anonymously – that depicts Julius dying and arriving at the pearly gates to heaven. The satire, entitled *Julius Exclusus*, describes Julius as he tries to use the keys to his treasure chest to get into heaven. All the soldiers who died on his military campaigns then follow him; he had promised to get them into heaven. The book ends with Julius mustering his army to try to get into heaven.

Abuses by the popes themselves were a microcosm of abuses that were present throughout the top levels of the church hierarchy. It was difficult, for instance, to regulate clerical celibacy. Many clerics were secretly married, and bishops relied on the revenue they received from levying an extra tax on priests who had children. The ostentatious lifestyle in which the pope and the clergy lived contradicted the asceticism that the apostolic lifestyle suggested, and negatively affected the perception of the church.

These abuses were bad, but if there had not been problems at the local level, the abuses at the top of the church hierarchy (among bishops, cardinals, and the papal court) would not have mattered as much. There were, however, two main problems with the church for many Catholics. First, there were not enough clergy in rural areas, and therefore often no priests to perform the sacraments. This led to *pluralism* – priests holding multiple positions – or villages with non-resident priests. This was compounded by the fact that many priests were not trained or qualified to be clergy. Many were relatively illiterate; this became an increasingly important problem as literacy rates rose and congregations learned more about the Bible.

The Initial Catholic Response

Amidst this laundry list of difficulties, Catholics could not respond to Protestant charges. As a result, many cities converted to Lutheranism. Protestants used these abuses at the local level as part of their campaign against the Catholics, but their greatest objection was to the theology of the Catholic Church.

The papacy was slow to respond. Leo X (r. 1513–21), who was pope when Luther first published his *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1516, at first dismissed the German monk's importance. Leo was also preoccupied with the election of the Holy Roman Emperor and concerned with the balance of power among European kings. As Luther rapidly gained followers, however, Leo sent a cardinal to investigate and summoned Luther to meet with him. When Luther failed to appear, Leo condemned him in 1520, and subsequently condemned him again at the Diet of Worms in 1521. Leo's death that year, however, threw the process into chaos, and the papacy did little over the ensuing decade. Adrian VI (r. 1522–1523), for instance, spent his short tenure as pope attempting to unite Christendom against the threat of Turkish invasion. His successor, Clement VII (r. 1523–34), presided over some of the lowest points in the papacy's history – the 1527 sack of Rome by the French, and England's secession from the church in 1533. With these other problems, the papacy devoted little time to dealing effectively with Luther.

The Catholic response truly began under Paul III (r. 1534–49). Though he came from the corrupt Farnese family and was himself a corrupt pope, he was the first pope to tackle corruption in the church and to reform it more broadly. Crucially, he concentrated on appointing better cardinals who then dealt with the problems under their jurisdictions. Under Paul's leadership, the major efforts to reform the Catholic Church began – the Council of Trent was convened, the Society of Jesus established, and the Roman Inquisition called into being.

The Index and the Inquisition

Protestants were skillful at using printed media to convey their message, and the Catholic authorities realized the danger of print. As a result, the church's heresy courts compiled lists of heretical books. When Pope Paul IV was still a cardinal, he published the first Index of Prohibited Books, which included anticlerical tracts and books on magic.

The Index established three basic categories of books that should be prohibited. First, books by certain authors should be prohibited, even if those books were not about religion. These authors unsurprisingly included Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and other major Protestant authors. Paul's list also included Erasmus; even though Erasmus argues the Catholic point of view in some of his writings, his Protestant-leaning writings tainted his other good writings in Paul's opinion. The second category was individual books by authors who were otherwise acceptable. The third category was reserved for printers who printed too many heretical works, especially anonymous works.

The Council of Trent discussed the Pauline Index and found it too harsh. The 1564 Tridentine Index was less harsh, and some of Erasmus's books, for example, were removed from the list. The last edition of the Index was published in 1948, and the Second Vatican Council abolished it in 1966 as part of its attempt to modernize and liberalize the church.

The Inquisition, as a heresy court, provided the muscle to make the Index effective. The court used the inquisitorial method, whereby the inquisitors laid a charge, usually based upon a denunciation from a witness, and then the inquisitors questioned the witnesses and the accused to determine guilt or innocence. There was no jury. This method had been used in fourteenth-century France to focus on heretics and in sixteenth century Spain to focus on Moors and Jews who had converted to Christianity. The Inquisitorial Court came to the Papal States in 1542.

In many ways the Inquisitorial Court was not nearly as harsh as some secular courts elsewhere. Compared to some witch trials in the north, for example, the Inquisitorial Court did not kill that many people. In particular, the court burned fewer witches than other courts; in the place of execution, inquisitorial judges often offered witches exorcism or confession.

The Roman Inquisition, however, attempted to rid Italy of reformers. It did so even when there were only a few in an area. It was staffed mainly by Dominicans and later, Jesuits, and was based on denunciation, though it was difficult to keep out false denunciation. Both Teresa of Avila and Francis of Assisi were brought before the court, as were many others who had had mystical experiences.

The Council of Trent

The Council of Trent took place in three sessions – from 1545 to 1547, 1551 to 1552, and 1562 to 1563 – that stretched over eighteen years. In the end it had enormous significance for the Catholic Church.

The Council was only called after tremendous pressure from Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who believed that much-needed reforms of the church would help bring peace to his territories. The pope was not so enthusiastic. Paul III, who called the council, believed that the Protestants were merely repeating older heresies. Unlike Charles, Paul believed that reconciliation with the Lutherans (the conference took little note of the Anabaptists and only perceived the Calvinist threat in the third session) was unlikely. All that needed to be done was the clarification of a few doctrines. Besides, the Council cost him a lot of money. Despite the fact that Luther had begun to promulgate his teachings in 1517, and that Protestantism had spread through much of Europe, the

Catholic Church did not instigate a council to deal with Protestantism until decades later.

There were several reasons for the delay. First, it was difficult to find a proper venue. There were fears that if the council were held in German lands, the safety of the Italian clergy might be at risk. The French, however, would only permit the conference to be held in Italy. The choice of Trent was a compromise and only came after long deliberation. Trent was a small town in the 1500s, with a population of about seven or eight thousand people. It lies in present-day Italy, but at the time it was under the control of the Holy Roman Empire. The political authority in Trent was a prince-bishop, and he was thus under the authority of both the papacy and the empire.

Even when the site was chosen, it was difficult getting bishops to go. Though the Catholic Church had more than seven hundred bishops and cardinals, only twenty-nine attended the opening of the first session, and at no point did more than one hundred attend either of the two sessions. The 280 prelates who attended in the summer of 1563 represented a high point for council attendance. Most of those who did attend came from areas in modern-day Italy. At the time, Italy was divided among several jurisdictions, so the delegates did not act as one body, but the Protestants were hardly strong there. Very few delegates attended from the German lands, where the Reformation had begun.

The prelates stayed away for many different reasons. For one, Europe was beset by war, especially during the first two sessions. Christians fought amongst themselves, and the Ottoman Empire made territorial gains in the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Moreover, bishops were unsure that the papacy wanted the council to succeed at all.

The conference was also divided between the priorities of Charles V and Paul III. The pope's representatives (none of the popes ever attended the conference) set the agenda, and the only doctrines that the council addressed were those that the Lutherans had challenged. The reforms that Charles hoped for, meanwhile, focused on the clergy and the papacy. The council eventually discussed ways to get the clergy to do its job – in particular, it sought to make sure that priests and bishops lived in their territories and took care of the people within them.

The council reaffirmed many of the core Catholic beliefs that were threatened – the seven sacraments, Purgatory, and even indulgences (with clarification on their purpose and how they should be properly used). It also condemned a number of Protestant teachings, though unlike other councils, it did not condemn the leading exponents of those teachings by name. The council emerged with a strengthened resolve that reform would begin by improving clerical discipline. The bishops gave most of the power and responsibility for maintaining discipline to themselves. That said, the council's decrees were hardly perfect. For instance, the pope's influence – a major sticking point for Protestants – meant that the council never discussed what powers the papacy could wield. Overall, however, the council did help to unite Catholicism under a new spirit of reform and adherence to doctrine.

New Religious Orders

The establishment of new religious orders was part of the Catholic effort to spread its new and reaffirmed theology. Thirty new religious orders were established in this period; they were a strong component of the church's revived commitment to propagating the faith. The orders sometimes represented the long-term changes that had occurred in the church and were not merely part of an attack on Protestantism.

The orders emphasized an active spirituality in an attempt to show that the spirit of the Counter-Reformation was active, virile, and had an exacting religious outlook. This was a newly militant Catholic Church. The spirit of the times called for action, giving rise to new forms of piety such as missionary work, education, and social welfare. While religious orders had been involved in all three of these activities since before the sixteenth century, under the new orders this involvement became more organized and more successful.

The most successful male active order was the Society of Jesus, better known as the Jesuits. It was founded by Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556) in the 1530s and confirmed in 1540. It was a strictly active, worldly order and did not have communal contemplative life. Along with the traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, there was an extra vow of absolute obedience to the pope. Although the early Jesuit founders spoke little of the Protestant threat, the order evolved to become a key aspect of the Counter-Reformation. They focused on education and preaching; they formed missions in Protestant areas in order to win back converts to Catholicism.

Some female religious orders also flourished in early modern Catholicism. Teresa of Avila, for instance, founded fifteen new convents in the reformed order of Carmelite nuns, and followed the decree of enclosure that the Council of Trent had stipulated for nuns. Other new orders and congregations for women followed a new model of active apostolic life that diverged greatly from the medieval model of passive contemplation for female religious. The Ursulines, founded by Angela Merici in 1535, were quick to focus on education as their primary mission. Though in the seventeenth century they increasingly followed the dictates of enclosure, they nevertheless embodied this new active role for religious women in the Catholic and Counter-Reformation. Similarly, Mary Ward attempted to found an order for women based on the Jesuit model of spirituality and religious life. For a time, her English Ladies lived outside the bounds of enclosure, but eventually they were suppressed.

Along with active spirituality, however, the Catholic Church still endorsed the traditional expression of mysticism. Ignatius and Teresa were both mystics, and both wrote guidebooks to mysticism. The church, however, was also suspicious of mystics, and in general it wanted to control them. They operated outside of the hierarchy of the church, so direct control was difficult, but nonetheless both Teresa and Ignatius were called before the Inquisition to defend themselves. They, like other mystics, had to show that they were legitimate and orthodox; for women, this usually meant having a male confessor as an intermediary.

Confessionalization

The changes in the Catholic Church during the sixteenth century can be understood in the framework of the confessionalization thesis, which is an important way that historians interpret the Reformation. German historians Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling popularized the thesis in the 1980s. They argued that after the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist states attempted to spread the confession throughout the areas under their control.

Confessionalization was achieved in two ways. First, before and after the Peace of Augsburg, Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists attempted to standardize their respective doctrines. Catholics did this at the Council of Trent, Lutherans in the 1530 Augsburg Confession and the 1580 Book of Concord, and Calvinists with the 1536 and 1566 Helvetic Confessions. In each case, the doctrine was to be spread by a more educated, disciplined clergy. Second, religious and state authorities attempted to discipline the people so that they abided by the newly stated doctrines.

The confessionalization thesis has both benefits and drawbacks. It quickly became an alternative to the theory that German history was characterized by a *Sonderweg*, or “special path” that led to Nazi authoritarian rule. It also contradicted historians who argued that Catholicism was backward, while Lutheranism and especially Calvinism were modern and progressive. Max Weber’s theory that Protestant countries advanced more quickly than Catholic countries because of the Protestant work ethic is an example of such an argument. According to the confessionalization thesis, all three confessions followed a similar path from origins in medieval Catholicism towards modernity.

As an argument that has generated much debate, the confessionalization thesis is an appropriate place to begin to understand the Counter-Reformation. It also shows the evolution of the early modern state, which worked with religion in an attempt to control the populace. Recently, however, historians have argued that the confessionalization thesis relies on a top-down, institutional understanding of the Reformation. Since Reinhard and Schilling first published their arguments, other historians have argued that while states and religious institutions may have tried to confessionalize the people under their control, at the local level the effort was only partially successful. The theological disputes of the Reformation often had little relevance or interest for ordinary Europeans. Moreover, locals often resisted efforts to bring their religious observance in line with the newly standardized practices.

Some historians have also found that while the thesis applies to some states in the Holy Roman Empire, it is less applicable to other states and to the rest of Europe. In sixteenth-century France, for instance, the monarchy was too weak to sustain efforts at confessionalization. Finally, critics argue that the confessionalization thesis takes the religion out of the Reformation – it treats the confessions as historical processes and minimizes their differences.

Women in Counter-Reformation Europe

Historians are divided on how the Reformation and Counter-Reformation affected women. Some women, like Teresa of Avila and the Ursulines, were very important in the Counter-Reformation. For many others, though, there was an increased emphasis on the patriarchal household. Some historians argue that this limited a woman's ability to form her own religious viewpoints and identity separate from her husband. At other times, however, women were able to adapt family life to their desires or abandon it entirely. Moreover, since mothers were usually in charge of the religious education of their children, they had an important role to play in both the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Outside of the female religious orders, laywomen could often work within the confines of the domestic sphere to shape the religious practice and opinions of their family, and perhaps even their community.

It is also worth mentioning some points of comparison between women in Protestant and Catholic Europe. Women in Protestant Europe who married clergymen often had the opportunity to exert influence through their husbands in the newly created role of the pastor's wife; this option was still not available to Catholic women. Martin Luther, for instance, mentioned his wife many times in his writings and she influenced him greatly. In the early Reformation, women also had the opportunity to become outspoken advocates of the new teachings (though this participation was curtailed as the new churches became more established). In the Catholic Church, women had no such freedom. However, women could seek a vocation in the Catholic Church as nuns, particularly in the new religious orders mentioned above, while most Protestant denominations did not have an equivalent vocation.

Summary

- Many of the theological issues that divided the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century had already been subject to reform attempts in the fifteenth century.
- While Protestants often had the greatest quarrel with Catholic theology, they also raised many valid criticisms about the comportment of the papacy and the clergy.
- As an institution, the Catholic Church was slow to respond to Luther's demands. The papacy was busy with other concerns and only began its response with the Council of Trent in 1545.
- The council's main points of focus were doctrine and church reform. While the council eventually did help to unite Catholics and form an effective response to Protestantism, it did so without much input from German delegates.
- The emergence of new "active" religious orders, such as the Jesuits and Ursulines, helped to spread the Catholic response.
- One argument that historians use to examine the Catholic response to the Reformation is the confessionalization thesis, which holds that in the period after the 1555 Peace of Augsburg, the Christian confessions attempted to unite the people in the territories they controlled under one confession.