

The Counter Reformation

The upheavals of the sixteenth century which brought Protestant Christianity to the world stage inevitably caused a crisis for Catholic Christendom. However, as Hans Hillerbrand puts it, 'It was at once the hour of its greatest crisis and of its greatest triumph; perhaps the latter would not have been possible without the former'.¹

Initially, the Catholic Church appeared unwilling, or perhaps unable, to fight back against the onslaught of the European Reformers. Pope Leo X (1513-21) possibly underestimated the Lutheran influence (he dismissed the controversy surrounding Luther as 'a squabble among monks'); his successor Clement VII (1523-34) was simply too tired to enter into any kind of response. This was crucial simply because of the nature of order in the Roman Church. But the Church was in a difficult position facing an impossible dilemma: 'If the need for reform was conceded, it was a concession to the Lutherans, who could boast ... that this proved what they had been saying all along. If, on the other hand, Catholics denied the need for reform, they were likely to be chided for being dishonest in the face of indisputable evidence'.²

Alongside this, the key issues were difficult to define. Hillerbrand describes the situation as 'a grandiose free for all':

Some thought that at issue were certain ecclesiastical abuses that needed only to be corrected to restore blessed tranquility. Others pointed to theological disagreements, but precisely what these were remained astoundingly enigmatic and uncertain. The bull *Exsurge Domine* seemed to suggest that Luther's errors pertained mainly to the doctrines of indulgences and penance; Erasmus singled out questions of anthropology as the crucial point; Melanchthon was persuaded at Augsburg in 1530 that conciliation would be possible if the Communion cup were offered to the laity and priests be allowed to marry; Luther declared that the controversy was about the proper understanding of Christ; and somewhere along the line the concept of justification crept into the picture.³

The difficulty on the Catholic side was compounded by the need to defend the *status quo*. There was little room for creative restatement and the teachings that theologians and commentators such as Johann Eck (1486-1543), Thomas Murner (1475-c.1537), Johannes Cochlaeus (1479-1552), Thomas More (1478-1535) and others had to defend had been known for years and 'discussed *ad infinitum*'.⁴

¹ Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The World of the Reformation* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons,

² Hillerbrand, *The World of the Reformation*, pp. 178-9.

³ Hillerbrand, *The World of the Reformation*, p. 181.

⁴ Hillerbrand, *The World of the Reformation*, pp. 180-1.

The Catholic church faced the call both for reform and to hold a council. Gradually the mood changed and as Catholic thinkers such as Peter Canisius (1521-97), reflected more calmly on the events unfolding in Europe, so the Church began to reform itself. Because of the nature of the church, events were in the hands of the pope. The papal office had been concerned to make Rome not only the centre for religion but the centre for art and culture. Yet consecutive popes were faced also with having to secure the independence of the papal states as other Italian states gained power as well as because of apparently constant tension between France and Spain. The slightest event could have massive political repercussions. Henry VIII's petition for annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, for example, was a critical point in European politics over which it was virtually impossible for Pope Clement VII to rule. Indeed, it was under Clement (1524-35) that the Reformation movement was perhaps at the height of its powers and the Catholic Church in its deepest crisis. Clement has been dismissed as 'the most catastrophic pope ever to occupy the throne of St Peter' due to his apparent inability to make decisions. Hillerbrand suggests that it is probably fairer to say that he refused to make decisions he knew would be catastrophic. In 1527, the power struggle between France and Spain reached Italy with the sack of Rome and Clement found himself a virtual prisoner of the Holy Roman Emperor. Little happened under Clement's pontificate – 'no general council, no officially sponsored reform. England deserted the Catholic ranks, as did Sweden and a great part of Germany'.⁵ Yet perhaps Clement was simply 'holding the fort', maintaining what he could until such a time that the Church was in a position to fight back. This undoubtedly occurred after his death.

Clement had made cardinals of men of definite spiritual and intellectual quality such as Gasparo Contarini, Jacopo Sadoletto, Reginald Pole and Giovanni Pietro Caraffa (later Paul VI). From around 1517, groups of priests including these men, had formed the Oratory of Divine Love which met in order to deepen their spiritual life and to seek reform in the church. There were other such groups, but it was this particular group which was chosen to report on the need for reform. A working party under Contarini was assigned the task and they reported in 1538 in the document 'Advice on Reforming the Church'. They were unequivocal in their demands and the report

... called for the abolition of practices that merely served the greed and ambition of the churchmen rather than the welfare of believers. Bishops should stay at home and do their pastoral work. Cardinals should be at Rome to advise the pope. Religious houses should be properly inspected and heresy should be excluded from schools and colleges. The exploitation of people through indulgences should end and those who wished to be priests should be effectively screened and tested before ordination. The report made it clear that drastic changes were necessary.⁶

⁵ Hillerbrand, *The World of the Reformation*, p. 183.

⁶ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation: From Wyclif to Knox – Two Centuries that Changed the Course of History* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1985), p. 239.

Consecutive popes, Paul III (1534- 50), Julius III (1550-5), Paul IV (1555-9), Pius IV (1559-65) and Pius V (1566-72) presided over a renewal of the church. R. Tudur Jones suggests that 'there were three aspects to the revival: the correction of abuses, the refurbishing of doctrine and the revivifying of spirituality'.⁷ Paul III's pontificate 'marked the turning point of Catholic history in the sixteenth century. Under him, the Catholic church made a comprehensive effort to regain both its vitality and its self-confidence'.⁸

The Council of Trent

Given that there had been some debate around the authority of councils during the previous century, when it looked for a time as if they would be hailed as more authoritative than the papacy itself, it is hardly surprising that successive popes were cautious about calling a general council. Nonetheless, Paul III summoned a council to meet at Trent in northern Italy on 15 March 1545 'for the exaltation of the Christian faith and religion; for the extirpation of heresies and for the reformation of the Christian clergy and people'. The first session opened on 13 December, though only thirty-one representatives were in attendance and it was never a council which was thoroughly representative of the Church. Discipline and the definition of doctrine were considered to be the main tasks of the Council, and it did its work over three sessions: December 1545 to February 1548, April 1551 to April 1552, April 1561 to 4 December 1563.

As far as Doctrine was concerned, the Council upheld the traditional Catholic dogma and rejected Protestant teaching. The 'Decree on the Canonical Scriptures' (8 April 1546) maintained that the 'truth and discipline' of the church 'are contained in the written books, and the unwritten traditions which, received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself, or from the apostles, themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating ...' Thus the Council rejected the claim that the scriptures were the sole source for authority in Christian faith and life and enabled the retention of teachings and practices which could not be justified from scripture alone. Indeed, the whole tenor of the Council was shaped by this first decree. Although there was debate about what constituted 'tradition', it enabled the justification of virtually any existing teaching, practice or institution. Trent also upheld a view of salvation through inherent and imputed righteousness. Christ imputed his righteousness to the sinner by grace. The inherent righteousness came as the fruit of faith which was demonstrated by love and good works. Thus there was a human component within the doctrine of salvation. The validity of all seven sacraments was upheld as was the sacrifice of the Mass which was declared to be 'truly propitiatory' and a repetition of the sacrifice of Calvary though the 'manner of offering' was different. The 'manner of offering' was the transubstantiation of the elements at the altar into the real body and blood of Christ. The whole Christ was confirmed as present in either element, making communion in both elements unnecessary for the laity. Purgatory was declared really to exist and, as a result, prayers for the dead were necessary to relieve their situation. In short, 'Trent ensured that Protestantism

⁷ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, p. 238.

⁸ Hillerbrand, *The World of the Reformation*, p. 184.

was no longer merely a schism but a heresy'.⁹ Furthermore, having established tradition as a foundation for authority in the Church, Protestants were left unable to criticize Catholic teaching and practice by appealing to scripture.

As far as discipline was concerned, Trent tended to centralize authority in the pope, though bishops were empowered to undertake reform in their dioceses in accordance to the spirit of the Council's decrees. The Council reaffirmed the use of images, invocation of the saints, pilgrimage, prayers for the dead and the use of indulgences, but they were to be strictly regulated in order to avoid superstition and their abuse for financial gain. Preaching was said to be 'the chief duty of the bishops' which demonstrated the Council's concern that the lay people were not being adequately taught about the faith, while bishops were also to make provision for preachers in their dioceses. Ordinands were to be more carefully selected and trained, while religious houses and the clergy were to be the subject of more careful oversight. The bishops were to ensure that there was adequate provision of training for ordinands by establishing theological seminaries in their diocese. 'The time and care taken at Trent to remove all kinds of abuses show that the bitter complaints of thousands of critics had not gone unheeded'.¹⁰

To ensure that the doctrine and discipline defined at Trent were upheld, the Church took the rather sinister step of renewing the role of the Inquisition. Established in Spain in 1473, Cardinal Caraffa was so impressed by it that he persuaded Pope Paul III to establish a similar and permanent tribunal in Rome. It was established on 21 July 1542 by the papal bull *Licet ab initio*. Caraffa was ruthless: punishment was to follow suspicion of heresy or indiscipline rather than proof of it; the Inquisition was to encompass all sections of society; no mildness was to be shown, with Calvinists singled out for particularly harsh treatment. Caraffa became Pope Paul IV in 1555 ensuring that the Inquisition was supported at the highest level of the Church. If anything it became more ruthless with appointment of Michael Ghislieri as its head. Ghislieri became Pope Pius V (1566-72). Alongside this, the 'Index' of forbidden books was issued in 1559 which included Bibles in the vernacular, Erasmus's books and all Protestant books.¹¹

Spirituality

Alongside these more formal and structural developments, there emerged a number of groups which were able to renew Catholic spirituality. In some ways, these groups were more significant for Catholic Reform (and the Counter-Reformation) than the Council of Trent. The Order of Clerks Regular, or the Theatines – were founded in 1524 by Gaetano da Thieni (1480-1547), while Matteo da Bassi (1495-1552) founded the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin in 1525 (their third Vicar-General was Bernadino Ochino who later became a Protestant and spent some time in London). The Regulars of St Paul, or Barnabites, were approved in 1535. In 1540 the Society of Jesus – the Jesuits –

⁹ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, pp. 240-1.

¹⁰ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, p. 241.

¹¹ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, p. 242.

was approved. Initially one small part of a much greater picture, the Jesuits would come to overshadow most other expressions of Catholic spirituality. Indeed, they would become 'the militant propagator of the Roman Catholic Revival'.¹²

The Society of Jesus was founded by Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556). While the Jesuits were deployed to counter Protestants, it is also true that their institution had been more the result of developments (if not reforms) within Catholicism which had little to do with the emerging religious protest. Ignatius had experienced a spiritual crisis but he found the answer within Catholicism and remained loyal to the Catholic Church. This suggests that, despite Luther's protest, the Church did have the spiritual resources, even when its corruptions were manifest, to provide succour for souls in torment. As a result 'the story of Martin Luther will always need to be juxtaposed with that of Ignatius of Loyola'.¹³ For Hillerbrand, Ignatius 'symbolizes indigenous Catholic reform in the sixteenth century and illustrates how reform could be turned to combat the Protestant Reformation. The Jesuits turned their attention to the suppression of heresy and became the most formidable expression of the Counter-Reformation'.¹⁴

The aims of the Order were sharply militant – to advance souls in the Christian life, to propagate the faith, to preach and to educate. Their parish was the world. Their most enterprising missionary was [Francis] Xavier [1506-62] who propagated Catholicism successfully in Goa, south-west India and Japan. But the Jesuits also were very effective educationists in many countries, as well as the most vigorous intellectual opponents of Protestants. They combined high ideas with an accommodating pragmatism which gained them immense influence but also made them objects suspicion in many countries. But Loyola and his Jesuits were the spearhead of the Roman Catholic counter-attack against Protestantism.¹⁵

By the end of the sixteenth century, the Roman Church had succeeded in re-asserting the need for repentance, renunciation of sin, good living and good works and had managed to a great extent to rid its clergy and practices of the corruptions that had given rise to Luther's protest in 1517. It had also secured an environment in which the appeal to the senses could once again be legitimate, in the face of a Protestantism which was becoming increasingly puritan in outlook. Most significantly, the church reformed its approach to education – in part with the aid of the Jesuits – which had been necessary given the Protestant emphasis on a learned ministry.

¹² R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, p. 253.

¹³ Hillerbrand, *The World of the Reformation*, p. 184.

¹⁴ Hillerbrand, *The World of the Reformation*, p. 184.

¹⁵ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, p. 243.

One assessment

In assessing the Counter-Reformation, R. Tudur Jones makes the following points:

The Roman Catholic Revival was a success in that it transformed the Roman Catholic Church. It was a success too in that it regained perhaps one third of the territory lost to Protestantism. And it succeeded also through its missionary outreach in opening up new and extensive territories.

On the other hand, the decrees of the Council of Trent met with a mixed reception even in Roman Catholic countries such as France and Spain. Kings and princes had political and social reasons for opposing reform.

If Trent be thought of as an attempt to re-unite Christian Europe, it was a failure. And for those who worked and prayed for the church to submit itself to the scrutiny of Scripture, Trent was a disaster. The church defined itself in such an exclusive way as to imperil its right to call itself Catholic. Its character as an ecclesiastical institution centred upon Rome and the papacy seemed to overshadow its catholicity, and that meant the extinguishing of any fruitful interchange of theological views between Roman Catholic and Protestant.¹⁶

¹⁶ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, p. 247.