

## Chapter 8: The Catholic Reformation

Historians have traditionally referred to the major changes that took place in the Catholic Church in response to the Protestant Reformation as the “Counter-Reformation,” a movement that was essentially reactionary. More recently, however, historians have come to recognize that it is probably more accurate and useful to see this period of church history as a Catholic Reformation unto itself – the culmination of the reformist trends that had been present in the Church for centuries before Martin Luther set off the Protestant break with the Roman Church.

Luther, after all, had not set out to split the Church, but to reform it - hence the very term "Reformation." His positioned radicalized quite quickly, however, and he did openly defy both the pope and the Church hierarchy within just a few years of the posting of the 95 Theses. That being noted, one of the reasons that Lutheranism caught on so quickly was that there were large numbers of people within the Church who had long fought for, or at least hoped for, significant changes. Thus, while the Catholic Reformation began as a reaction against Protestantism, it culminated in reforming the Church itself.

### The Initial Reaction

Initially, most members of the Church hierarchy were overwhelmed and bewildered by the emergence of Protestantism. All of the past heresies had remained limited in scope as compared with the incredible rapidity with which Lutheranism spread. For practical political reasons, the pope and various rulers were either unwilling or unable to use force to crack down on Protestantism at first, as witnessed with Charles V's failed attempts to curtail Lutheranism's spread. Lutheranism also spread much more quickly than had earlier heresies, which tended to be limited to certain regions; here, the fact that Luther and his followers readily embraced the printing press to spread their message made a major impact, with word of the new movement spreading across Europe over the course of the 1520s.

In historical hindsight, the shocking aspect of the Catholic Church's initial reaction to the emergence of Protestantism is that there *was* no reaction. For decades, popes remained focused on the politics of Central Italy or simply continued beautifying Rome and enjoying a life of luxury; this was the era of the “Renaissance popes,” men from elite families who regarded the papal office as little more than a political position that happened to be at the head of the Church.

Likewise, there was no widespread awareness among most Church officials that anything out of the ordinary was taking place with Luther; despite the radicalism of his position, most of the clergy assumed that Lutheranism was a “flash in the pan,” doomed to fade back into obscurity in the end. By the 1540s, however, church officials began to take the threat posed by Protestantism more seriously.

The initial period of Catholic Reformation, from about 1540 – 1550, was a fairly moderate one that aimed to bring Protestants back into the fold. In a sense, the very notion of a permanent break from Rome was difficult for many people, certainly many priests, to conceive of. After about 1550, however, when it became clear that the split was permanent, the Church itself became much more hardline and intolerant. The subsequent reforms were as much about imposing a new internal discipline as they were in making membership appealing to lay Catholics.

The same factors that had made the Church difficult to reform before the Protestant break made it strong as an institution that opposed the new Protestant denominations: habit, ritual, organization, discipline, hierarchy, and wealth all worked to preserve the Church’s power and influence. Likewise, many princes realized that Protestantism often led to political problems in their territories; even though many of the German princes had originally supported Luther in order to protect their own political independence, many others came to realize that the last thing they wanted were independent-minded denominations in their territories, some of which might reject their worldly authority completely (as had the German peasants who rose up in 1524).

Among Catholics at all levels of social hierarchy, Catholic rituals were comforting, and even though rejecting the excesses in Catholic ritual had been part of the appeal of Protestantism to some, to many others it was precisely those familiar rituals that made Catholicism appealing. The Catholic Reformation is often associated with the “baroque” style of art and music which encouraged an emotional connection with Catholic ritual and, potentially, with the experience of faith itself. The Church continued to fund huge building projects and lavish artwork, much of which was aimed to appeal to laypeople, not just serve as pretty decorations for high-ranking churchmen.

Likewise, there was a wave of Protestant conversions that spread very rapidly by the 1530s, but then as the Protestant denominations splintered off and turned on one another, the “purity” of the appeal of Protestantism faded. In other words, when Protestants began fighting each other with the same vigor as their attacks on Rome, they no longer seemed like a clear and simple alternative to Roman corruption.



## The Inquisition and the Council of Trent

The individual who launched the “hardline” movement of Catholic Reformation was Pope Paul III (r. 1534 – 1549). Almost from the beginning of his rule, Paul was on the offensive: he commissioned a report in 1536 to evaluate the possibility and necessity of reform, which concluded that there were numerous abuses within the Church that had to be corrected (e.g. the lack of education of the clergy, the practice of earning incomes from parishes that bishops never visited, etc.), but there was no budging on doctrine. In other words, the essential beliefs and practices of the Church were judged to be entirely correct and Luther (and soon, Calvin) was judged to be entirely wrong.

In 1542 Paul III approved the creation of a permanent branch of the Church devoted to holding Protestantism in check: the Holy Office, better known as the Inquisition. The Inquisition existed to search out signs of heresy, including Protestantism, in areas under Catholic control. It had the right to subject people to interrogation and torture and in extreme cases, to execute them. The (in)famous Spanish branch of the Inquisition was under the control of the Spanish crown, but its methods and goals were essentially the same. Inquisitions had been around since the Middle Ages - the first one was in 1184 and targeted a heretical movement in southern France - but they had always been short-term responses to heresy. Under Paul III, the Inquisition became a permanent part of the Church.

The popes that followed Paul III were similar in their focus on re-emphasizing orthodoxy and creating institutions to combat heresy. Paul IV (r. 1555 – 1559) created the “Index” of forbidden books (in 1549) that would go on to form the basis of royal censorship in all Catholic countries for the next two centuries. He also enforced the stance of the Church that the Bible was not to be translated into vernacular languages but had instead to remain in Latin, an explicit rejection of the Protestant practice of translating the Bible into everyday language for Christians to read and interpret themselves. According to Catholic belief, reiterated under Paul IV, the Bible had to remain in Latin because only trained priests had the knowledge and authority to interpret it for laypeople. Laypeople, left to their own devices, would simply get the Bible’s message wrong and endanger their souls in the process.

Paul III, Paul IV, and the subsequent pope, Pius IV, all oversaw an ongoing series of meetings, the Council of Trent, that took place periodically between 1545 – 1563. There, Church officials debated all of the articles and charges that had been leveled against the Church, from the sale of indulgences, to the importance of good works in salvation, to the

spiritual necessity of the sacraments. While it was initially organized to try to reconcile, at least in part, with Protestantism, hardliners within the Church won out in the subsequent debates and the Council reaffirmed almost all of the controversial parts of church doctrine and disputed articles of faith; the major exception was that the cardinals and bishops banned the sale of indulgences in the future (the Church still issued them, but they were no longer simply sold for cash). This was distressing to Emperor Charles V, who had earnestly hoped that the Church would give ground on some of the doctrinal issues and thereby win back Protestants in his lands; he even tried to prevent Pope Paul IV from taking office because the latter was so intransigent.



*A depiction of the Council of Trent (in the background) painted in 1588, when wars between Protestants and Catholics were raging.*

While the Council of Trent would not budge on doctrine, it did propose one monumental change to the Church: henceforth, priests would be formally trained for the job. After Trent, the Church organized and funded seminaries, colleges whose express purpose was the training of new priests. There, all priests would acquire a strong scholastic education (and, soon, most



seminaries also included a humanistic education as well), fluency in Latin, and a deep understanding of the Bible and the writings of major Christian thinkers. The ad hoc nature of higher education for priests gave way to a formal and universal requirement: *all* priests would be well educated, not just those who had sought out a university themselves. While abuses of power and moral laxness were not eliminated from the Church, the one definitive change for the better in terms of the experience of lay Catholics was that their priests were now supposed to be experts in Christian theology.

## The Jesuits

In addition to the edicts and councils convened by the popes, the Catholic Reformation benefited from a resurgence of Catholic religious orders. The most important new religious order, by far, was the Society of Jesus, better known as the Jesuits. The Jesuits were founded by Ignatius of Loyola (1491 – 1556), a kind of Catholic counterpart to Luther or Calvin, in 1540. A Spanish knight, Loyola was injured in battle. During his recovery, Loyola read books on the life of Christ and the saints, which inspired him to give up his possessions and take a pilgrimage across Spain and Italy. He soon attracted a following and was even briefly imprisoned on suspicion of heresy, since he claimed to offer “spiritual conversion” to those who would follow his teachings.

Loyola wrote a book, the *Spiritual Exercises*, that encouraged a mystic veneration of the Church and a single-minded devotion to its institutions. The Exercises were based on an imaginary recreation of the persecution and death of Christ that, when followed, led many new members of the Jesuits to experience an emotional and spiritual awakening. That awakening was explicitly focused on what he described as the “Church Hierarchical”: not just a worldly institution that offered guidance to Christians, but the sole path to salvation, imbued by God Himself with spiritual authority.

As a former soldier, he founded the Jesuits to be “faithful soldiers of the pope.” The purpose of the Jesuits was to fight Protestantism and heresy, forming a militant arm of scholar-soldiers available to the pope. What made the Jesuits distinct from the other religious orders was that they were responsible to the pope, not to kings. They came to live and work in kingdoms all over Europe, but they bypassed royal authority and took their orders directly from Rome – this did not endear them to many kings in the long run.

By Loyola’s death in 1556, there were about 1,000 Jesuits; that number rapidly increased by the end of the century. Many became influential advisors to kings across Europe, ensuring that Catholic monarchs would actively persecute and root out heresy (including, of

course, Protestantism). They also began a missionary campaign that sought to rekindle an emotional connection to the Church through its use of passionate sermons.



*Statue of Ignatius of Loyola at the Church of the Gesù in Rome, one of the original Jesuit churches. The statues are in the baroque style noted above, practically dripping with ornamentation and gilding.*

Ultimately, the most important undertaking of the Jesuits was the creation of numerous schools. The Jesuits themselves were required to undergo an eleven-year period of training and education before they were full members, and they insisted on the highest quality of rigor and scholarship in their training and in the education they provided others. They raised young men, often nobles or rich members of the non-noble classes, with both an excellent humanist education and a fierce devotion to the Church. By 1600 there were 250,000 students in Jesuit



schools across continental Europe. The schools were noteworthy for being free, funded by the Church and private gifts. Students had to apply for admittance, and the Jesuits working at the schools were far closer to their students than were the very aloof professors at traditional universities at the time. The products of Jesuit schools were thus young men who had received both an excellent education and a deep indoctrination in Catholic belief and opposition to Protestantism. Those young men, drawn as they were from families of social elites, often went on to positions of considerable political and commercial power.

Jesuits were also active missionaries, soon traveling all over the known world. Unlike many other orders of missionaries, the Jesuits distinguished themselves by not only learning the native languages of the people they ministered to, but of adopting their customs as well. They were the first successful missionaries in East Asia, founding Christian communities in Japan (in 1549) and China (in 1552). In the Chinese case, the Jesuits failed to make many converts, but they did bring back an enormous amount of information about China itself. The most noteworthy Jesuit missionary, Matteo Ricci, lived in the court of the Chinese emperor, was fluent in Chinese, and served as a court astrologer. It was Jesuits who brought back the puzzling (to Europeans) reports of a highly sophisticated, rich, ancient culture that had achieved its power without Christianity.

## Effects of the Catholic Reformation

The Catholic Reformation was happening in earnest by the 1530s. The Church adopted the use of the printing press and began reaching out to both priests and educated laypeople, often in the vernacular languages rather than Latin (although, as noted above, the Bible itself was to remain untranslated). The new fervor led to a revival of religious orders focused on reaching out to the common people rather than remaining sequestered from the public in monasteries and convents. One significant new order along those lines was the Carmelites, an order of nuns reformed by St. Teresa of Avila starting in 1535. St. Teresa led a major reform that redoubled the nuns' vow of poverty and their focus on prayer and purity (the reforms also abolished separate residences and lifestyles for nuns from rich and poor families). Likewise, many orders started opening hospitals and orphanages in the cities that provided care for both the sick and the poor and indigent. The early decades of the Counter-Reformation thus saw an "opening up" of the Church to its followers and a greater emphasis on the duties of the Church to laypeople.



*A famous depiction of St. Teresa at the moment she later claimed to have been overwhelmed by the divine presence. Like the statue of Ignatius of Loyola, the statue above is in the highly dramatized and emotional baroque style.*

A major focus of the Church was reconnecting with common people, something that many reformers (including popes) believed was only possible if the Church “put its house in order.” While Catholic monarchs continued to almost completely control the Church in their kingdoms (this was especially true of France), popes had at least moderate success in forcing bishops to stop living like princes, to have priests remain at least nominally celibate, and for church officials to actually live in the places they were supposed to represent. The moral qualities of members of the Church, while not universally exemplary, did come to more closely resemble their purported standards over time as a result.

To better connect with laypeople, the Church began to sponsor a counter-propaganda campaign following, inspired by the success that Protestantism had enjoyed through the use of cheap print. Lives of saints, prayer books, and anti-Protestant propaganda were printed and distributed throughout Europe. The Church began to stage plays not just of Biblical scenes, but of great moments in the Church’s history. The new religious orders, including not just the



Jesuits but the Capuchins, the Ursulines, and the followers of Vincent de Paul (who lived in the late sixteenth century) sponsored major charitable works, reconnecting the poor to the Church. All of these activities amounted to a cultural reaction to the Reformation that took from Protestantism its focus on the individual's spiritual connection to God. In contrast to the austerity and even harshness of Lutheranism and (especially) Calvinism, the Catholic Church came to offer a mystical, emotional form of both worship and religious experience that was very appealing to many who may have originally been alienated from the institution.

One social phenomenon that definitely benefited from both the Protestant and Catholic Reformations was literacy. More schools and universities – both church-supported and private – continued to come into being throughout the sixteenth century. All Protestant denominations emphasized the importance of reading the Bible, and as the Catholic Church waged its counter-propaganda campaign, the Church hierarchy came to regard general literacy as desirable as well. Overall, literacy climbed to between 5 – 10% of the population by 1600 across Central and Western Europe.

## Conclusion

The battle lines between Protestantism and Catholicism were firmly set by the 1560s. The Catholic Reformation established Catholic orthodoxy and launched a massive, and largely successful, campaign to re-affirm the loyalty and enthusiasm of Catholic laypeople. Meanwhile, Protestant leaders were equally hardened in their beliefs and actively inculcated devotion and loyalty in their followers. Nowhere was there the slightest notion of "religious tolerance" in the modern sense - both sides were convinced that anyone and everyone who disagreed with their spiritual outlook was damned to an eternity of suffering. The wars of propaganda and evangelism gave way to wars of muskets and pikes soon enough.

*Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):*

[Council of Trent](#) - Public Domain

[Ignatius of Loyola](#) - Roy Sebastian

[The Ecstasy of St. Theresa](#) - Napoleon Vier