Chapter Six

Catholic Reform or Counter-Reform?

The Catholic Church didn't simply roll over and play dead during the years Protestantism was growing, though it did take time before the church mounted an effective response to the need for reform from within and the challenge of Protestantism from without. Part of the reason for this delay was rivalries within Catholicism. Erasmus had promoted the most viable program of reform within the church, but the combination of jealousy from professional theologians plus the suspicion that Erasmus had aided and abetted Luther effectively discredited the humanist and set the reform program back decades. Charles V and others tried to pressure the popes to call a council of the entire church to deal with Luther, but the popes dragged their feet; they did not want to risk a council that could threaten their power, and they certainly refused to hold one in Germany as the emperor demanded because that would give Charles too much pull in the council. At the same time, Charles had his problems politically and militarily. He was fighting against the Ottoman Turks, who were expanding into southeastern Europe, and against France and the pope. Meanwhile, Luther was miles ahead of his opponents in effective use of the printing press, the first means of mass communication in history, with the result that Protestant ideas spread very quickly across much of Europe and more and more cities and territories split with Rome. The net result was that well into the 1530s, Protestantism was advancing and Catholicism was largely in disarray.

But it didn't stay that way. Beginning with the pontificate of Paul III (1534–1549), the Catholic Church increasingly got its act together, so that by the end of the century, Protestantism had pretty much stopped expanding, and many territories that had converted to Protestantism

were re-Catholicized. Because of the timing, nineteenth-century historians referred to this process as the "Counter Reformation," seeing it as a response to Protestantism. Many Catholic and some Protestant historians cried foul at this terminology, arguing instead that the reforms instituted during the period were a result of internal developments within Catholicism and had nothing to do with Protestantism. They preferred to label the movement the "Catholic Reformation." Other historians prefer not to use either term, since many elements of the Catholic Church were untouched by reform in either sense during the period. They prefer the term "early modern Catholicism," though I personally think that term is too general to be of much use. Given the choice, most historians today will go with "Catholic Reformation," while recognizing that some elements of the Catholic Reformation were prompted by Protestantism—in other words, if you want to use the term, the "Counter Reformation" is a subset of the broader Catholic Reformation. That is the terminology we will use here.

New Religious Orders

Historically, any time the Catholic Church needed reforming, religious orders led the way. In some cases, reforming movements arose within existing orders with an eye to returning to the ideals of the founder; in other cases, entirely new orders were founded. Both processes occurred during the Catholic Reformation. Revitalized orders were particularly common in Spain, where mystics such as Theresa of Ávila led reform programs in their orders. The most important changes, however, came from new orders and confraternities (groups of laity who followed a structured program of religious exercises and service, sort of like a lay religious order). One of the most important of these was the Italian Oratory of Divine Love, founded in Genoa in 1497 and built around the ideas of St. Catherine of Genoa (1457–1510). It was lay dominated and featured spiritual exercises, group prayer, frequent reception of the sacraments, and service to the poor. The Oratory spread to Rome in 1510, where some of its clerical members founded another quasi-religious order known as the Theatines in 1524. The Theatines were a group of priests dedicated to reforming the secular clergy (i.e., priests who were not members of a religious order). They lived a very austere life, being prohibited from either owning property or begging, and were dedicated to strict observance of canon law and to charity. Although they did not

have many houses, the Theatines included a number of very influential members, such as Thomas de Vio (later Cardinal Cajetan) and Gian Pietro Caraffa (later Pope Paul IV) and had an impact on the church out of all proportion to their numbers.

Although these confraternities were founded during this period, the church was generally reluctant to create new religious orders. The feeling was that there were quite enough already, thank you, and if they weren't doing their job, they needed to be shut down or cleaned up. Despite the opposition, however, a few new orders were founded during the 1520s and '30s. The Capuchins began in 1528 as a reformed Franciscan order dedicated to following the example of Christ and St. Francis and committed to preaching the gospel wherever it was needed; they were officially recognized by Paul III in 1536. The Ursulines, an order for women devoted to virginity and charity, were founded in Brescia in 1535. And then there was the Society of Jesus, a new religious order that deserves a section of its own.

Ignatius Loyola and the Society of Jesus

The Society of Jesus, a.k.a. the Jesuits, was founded by Ignatius Loyola (c. 1491–1556). Loyola, the son of a nobleman, was a soldier whose military career came to an abrupt end when his leg was badly broken at the siege of Pamplona in 1521. He had an extended convalescence at a monastery called Montserrat due to the fact that his leg had been set badly and needed to be rebroken. He was getting pretty bored lying around, but he couldn't find anything worth reading. He was interested in chivalric romances, but he was in a monastery, and all he could find in it was "women's books"—meaning devotional readings. Out of desperation, however, he started reading and got hooked. After recovering, he spent a year at a monastery at Manresa (outside of Barcelona), where he experienced visions and developed his *Spiritual Exercises*, a program of prayer and meditation based on the books he had read at Montserrat. The exercises were designed to promote a wholehearted commitment to Christ and to the church. Loyola then completed a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and went back to school to study theology. He needed to learn Latin first, of course, so this veteran soldier start taking classes with children to master the language. He eventually made it to the Collège Montaigu at the University of Paris, where the charismatic Loyola attracted a group of six men around him. Loyola led them through his *Spiritual Exercises*, and they took vows of poverty and chastity. Some time later, they set off on

a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They made it only as far as Venice, however, since the Turks made further travel too dangerous. They were ordained as priests, and in 1540 traveled to Rome to petition the pope to admit them as a new religious order. Over some opposition, Paul III agreed, and the Society of Jesus was born.

The Jesuits were an unusual order in several respects. First, they were all ordained priests and were very highly educated. Second, in addition to the standard monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience (or "no money, no honey, and no funny"), they took a special fourth vow of obedience to the pope, going without question or delay anywhere he would send them. This may have tipped the scales in their favor with Paul III. This enabled popes to circumvent the usual rules of the order at need and made the Jesuits something like a SWAT team that the pope could use to address particularly thorny problems. Third, since they had to be free to travel, they were exempted from the liturgical responsibilities of normal religious orders and even from the jurisdiction of local bishops who otherwise oversaw the monasteries and religious houses in their diocese. This enabled the Jesuits to base their spirituality on the *Spiritual Exercises* done as a month-long retreat under a spiritual director rather than on the liturgy and canonical hours of the traditional regular clergy.

In the late sixteenth century, the Jesuits worked in three main areas. The first was education. Jesuits were involved in preparing catechisms and basic devotional material for children and laypeople, and they eventually began establishing their own colleges and universities to provide high quality education to the young men who attended them. Although the schools taught mostly Catholic students, they had a missionary intent as well: Protestant parents, knowing that their children could get a high-powered, up-to-date education on the cheap in Jesuit schools and universities, often sent their sons to study in them. Protestant pastors did their best to stop this practice, fearing (rightly) that the schools would also try to win their Protestant students to Catholicism. But the pastors had only limited success. Protestant students attended Jesuit schools in substantial numbers, and many were converted to Catholicism. Meanwhile, the Jesuits were famous for boasting that if they had a boy by the time he was twelve, they would have him for life.

A second area of activity for the Jesuits was missions. Although by the seventeenth century Jesuits were involved in missions to the Americas, their initial work was in advanced cultures such as China and Japan. When they entered these territories, they did their best to use the culture to present themselves in a favorable light, adopting the clothing of

Confucian sages in China for example. They would then use Western technologies that were different from those in their host country to open doors for them to the people in power in the country. Mechanical clocks were a favorite for this, though occasionally the practice could result in unexpected consequences. For example, one Jesuit was summoned to the imperial palace in China after presenting a clock to the emperor. The clock had broken, and the Jesuit was told he had one day to fix it or he would lose his head. Even with such problems, the Jesuits found this a useful approach; it enabled them to create alliances with the ruling classes, with the expectation that conversion of this group would lead to conversion of the masses. Ironically, the biggest opposition the Jesuits faced was from the Franciscans, whose missionaries thought that the Jesuits went way too far in accommodating local practices, such as allowing Chinese Christians to continue to burn incense to their ancestors, rationalizing this as an application of the commandment to "honor your father and your mother." The Franciscans protested to Rome about it. Eventually, this and other similar issues would lead to a full-blown conflict known as the Chinese Rites Controversy. To make a long story short, the Franciscans won, and the Jesuits were prohibited from compromising too much with local culture and language.

The third major area of Jesuit activity was in politics. Although the Jesuit constitution prohibited them from being involved in political affairs, this could be circumvented in a number of ways, particularly if the pope gave his approval. The main way Jesuits influenced politics was essentially the same approach they used on the mission field: They set up alliances with noblemen and kings by acting as their confessors, and from that position they sought to influence the religious policies of the kingdom. This approach was particularly effective in France, enabling the Jesuits to push the king to support the ultra-Catholic side during some of the Wars of Religion. With papal approval, the Jesuits could go even further; some were actually involved in assassination plots against Elizabeth I in England, with the goal of putting her (Catholic) cousin Mary Queen of Scots on the throne (see chapter 11).

Humanist Reform

Despite Erasmus's fall into disfavor, humanists influenced by the Dutch reformer continued to play an important role in the Catholic hierarchy. Paul III appointed a number of reform-minded cardinals, including Contarini, Sadoletto (who would later be involved in correspondence with

Geneva that led to Calvin's return to the city), and the Theatine Gian Pietro Caraffa, who would later be elected Pope Paul IV. These three, together with a number of others who represented different approaches to reform, were named to a commission looking into the state of the church. Their 1537 report, titled *Consilium de emendanda ecclesia* ("Council for the reform of the church"), was a succinct summary of the widespread abuses in the church and laid the responsibility for them squarely on the papacy. Unfortunately, Paul III took no action in response to the council's findings. Even more unfortunately, the supposedly confidential report was leaked. It was printed in Rome, and the following year appeared in German translation with a preface by Luther. This didn't do anything to improve its popularity with the curia.

But Paul III and his humanist cardinals did not throw in the towel at this point. The humanists, particularly Contarini, believed that they could reach an agreement with more moderate Protestants such as Luther's protégé Melanchthon on the basis of their shared humanist training and (presumed) values. This is another indication that the humanist reformers didn't get it; for most Protestants, the problem was doctrine, not shared values or reform of practice. Nonetheless, Catholic and Protestant leaders held a series of disputations and colloquies in Speyer, Hagenau, Worms, Regensburg, and Leipzig (1540–1541). The most important of these was the Regensburg Colloquy (1541), attended in its early sessions by the emperor as well as by Melanchthon, Calvin (as an observer), the stridently anti-Luther Eck, and the humanist Contarini. Both sides made a number of concessions—more than either Luther and other hardline Protestants or the pope and conservative Catholics were likely to accept—but in the end it became obvious that the differences between the two sides were too great to be resolved through negotiation. The German prelates called again for a church council to resolve the issues, but until such a council was to meet, the humanist and curial approach to reform had hit a dead end.

Repression

Perhaps in part because of the failure of the discussions in the empire, Paul III introduced two other measures the following year (1542). The first was the Roman inquisition, designed to root out heresy and heterodoxy from the Eternal City and nearby territories. A lot of nonsense has been written about "the" inquisition (as if there were only one), so we need to set the record straight. The term *inquisition* refers broadly to a

type of judicial procedure based on ancient Roman law. In an inquisitorial system, a panel of judges ran the trial. One, the investigating magistrate, looked into the facts in the case and presented it before the other judges. The judges then collectively interrogated the witnesses, examining them over and over from every conceivable angle. The assumption underlying the system was that even the most carefully crafted lie will break down if subjected to enough scrutiny. Once the evidence had all been collected, the judges made their decision. To use a modern analogy, this is similar to the way the U.S. Supreme Court operates. In Roman law, capital cases had a very high standard of proof: either a confession or two eyewitnesses. Since eyewitnesses to capital crimes are generally hard to come by, prosecutors had to rely on confession. Particularly in cases of treason, if there was strong evidence of guilt but no confession or enough eyewitnesses, torture could be used to try to coerce a confession. With the revival of Roman law in the Middle Ages, these procedures were reintroduced in Europe. Rules were established governing the use of judicial torture, though civil governments frequently ignored them.

The inquisition in the narrower sense of a church court focused on finding and punishing heresy began in the wake of the Albigensian crusade. Without going into all the details here, Albigensianism was a religious movement centered primarily in southern France. The Catholic Church considered it heretical, though really it was more of a separate religion than a heresy. In any event, after political pressure by the church and assassinations of church officials by the Cathars, as the Albigensians were called, a crusade was called to eliminate the Albigensians altogether. Suffice it to say it worked, and hundreds of Cathars were slaughtered. To root out the remnants of the movement, the church established a court charged with finding and punishing heretics, and the inquisition was born. Other inquisitions followed whenever there was a religious movement that threatened the doctrine or power of the Catholic Church. Since heresy was considered treason against God and therefore a capital offense, if there was sufficient evidence against the accused, torture could be used to obtain a confession and a list of collaborators, following Roman law. Being fair, though, the church courts were far more likely to obey the restrictions on the use of torture than civil courts were. In Florence, for example, there are people who never even made it to the preliminary examinations in criminal cases because they died under torture before the process even began. Things like that didn't happen in church courts, though inquisitors could be pretty brutal.

The most famous inquisition, of course, was the Spanish Inquisition, which began in 1478. Here again, however, there are a lot of misconceptions about the institution. The Spanish Inquisition was actually controlled by the crown rather than the church. The goal of the Spanish Inquisition was essentially ethnic cleansing; it was intended to make Spain a purely Christian (read "Catholic") state. The territory that became Spain had had a vibrant Jewish and Muslim culture during the Middle Ages. Many members of these communities converted to Christianity under pain of expulsion or worse during the late fifteenth century. The government suspected that these conversions were false and that these converts were still practicing their old religions secretly. The inquisition was thus hijacked by the government to enforce its religious policies by persecuting these groups. The horrors of the Spanish Inquisition, which were in all likelihood exaggerated by English propaganda, were thus ultimately the responsibility not of the church but of the crown.

Back to the Reformation: Paul III decided in 1542 that the dangers of heresy were growing sufficiently grave, even in Rome itself, so it was time to suppress Protestantism. He thus began an inquisition in Rome, with the support of Cardinal Caraffa as inquisitor-general. Caraffa used the model of the Spanish Inquisition in the new body; it had power to imprison suspects, confiscate property, and use the state to coerce confessions and inflict punishment. Paul III also supported efforts at repression in England, France, and within the empire. Caraffa later was elected pope, taking the name Paul IV (1555–1559). Paul IV continued and even intensified the work of the inquisition, even going so far as to examine Catholic reformers such as Reginald Pole for heresy. He enthusiastically supported the persecutions of Protestants by "Bloody Mary" in England and steadfastly opposed any dialogue with Protestant leaders. Curiously, he also established a ghetto in Rome on the Venetian model as an attempt to protect the Jewish community from attacks by Christians. Realizing the power of the printing press, Paul IV also established the first *Index of Prohibited Books* in an attempt to enforce censorship. It backfired; getting put on the *Index* became an easy route to best-seller status, and many printers waited to see what would make the list so that they would know what to print. Paul IV's wholehearted endorsement of repression marks a clear shift away from the Catholic reformers' earlier emphasis on humanism, piety, and cleaning up abuses and toward dogmatism, authoritarianism, and a clear Counter-Reformation emphasis within the papacy.

The Council of Trent

Paul III's final contribution toward reform was calling the long-awaited, much-anticipated council of the church in 1542, the same year he started the Roman inquisition. Several matters had to be decided before the council could begin meeting and doing its work. The first was where it would meet: Paul III wanted it in Italy, since he could better control it there; Charles V wanted it in the empire, since that was where the problem started and he could better control it there. Eventually, they compromised and held the council in Trent, a city in imperial territory but on the Italian border. The council began to meet in December 1545 and continued on and off until 1563, making it the longest running council in church history. The next step was to decide whether to deal with doctrine or practice first. The Italians wanted to condemn Protestantism and delay dealing with practice since correcting abuses would inevitably have cut down on their income and perks. Charles and the Germans wanted to delay dealing with doctrine, since that would alienate Luther and his followers. Instead, they wanted to deal with abuses first so that they could win the confidence of the Protestants and only later deal with theological questions. Charles was still heavily influenced by the humanist reformers, thinking the real problem was abuses. He never did understand that for the Protestants the root issue was doctrine, not practice. The council decided to take the two questions in tandem, handling alternately doctrinal and disciplinary matters.

The council's theological decisions served to reinforce and narrow traditional Catholic doctrine against Protestant challenges. Tradition was affirmed as an equal source of authority to Scripture; Protestant arguments that original sin continues to affect us after baptism were condemned; justification was declared to be not by faith alone but by works as well, following Aquinas's theology; all seven sacraments were reaffirmed, as was transubstantiation and the legitimacy of giving the laity only the bread during the Eucharist. Hubert Jedin, one of the leading historians of the council, has argued that none of these decrees marked a change in Catholic doctrine. In a sense this is correct, but as Heiko Oberman has pointed out, the decisions narrowed the scope of Catholic theology greatly by limiting the number of options considered acceptable within the church from several to just one. This narrowing of acceptable formulae in itself represents a change in doctrine. However you resolve that question, the decisions drew a line in the sand against the Protestants and defined Catholic theology more precisely than ever before. Significantly,

however, the council did not address some of the challenges the Protestants had raised against the Catholic Church, notably the power of the papacy and the doctrine of Mary. Simply put, the council was too divided to reach consensus on these questions and thus did not address them.

In terms of disciplinary decisions, the council did much to strengthen the structure of the church. It reformed the office of bishop, revising the system for selecting bishops and ending in principle episcopal plurality (i.e., a single bishop ruling over more than one diocese) and nonresidence (i.e., a bishop living outside of his diocese)—though in the latter case exceptions could be made by papal dispensation. Bishops were made responsible for the care of all souls in their diocese and were expected to preach. They were also responsible for all decisions relating to ordination of priests in their diocese and were to see to it that priests preached in their churches as well. In what is arguably the most important disciplinary canon, the council mandated that bishops establish seminaries in each diocese, ultimately raising the quality of the clergy immeasurably across the Catholic world. The bishops were also to hold synods every three years to deal with disciplinary issues in their dioceses. In the face of challenges by secular rulers to the encroachment of church courts on such areas as marital law and probate, the council reaffirmed the authority of ecclesiastical courts in these areas.

The effects of the Council of Trent were legion. It eliminated many of the abuses in the church, strengthened the bishops, and drew a clear line between Catholic and Protestant doctrine. Together with the new religious orders, Trent contributed to a revitalized Catholicism even before the council had ended. Already in the 1540s and '50s, a combination of church reforms and political developments in Europe meant that Catholicism was ready to attempt a comeback to regain its dominant position in European society. And it would begin where the problems had started—in the empire.

Questions for Discussion

1. In view of the information included in this chapter, how would you strike a balance between the terms "Catholic Reformation" and "Counter Reformation"?
2. The entrenched interests within the Catholic Church, such as the professional theologians and the Curia, all resisted reform, delaying the process for decades. Why do you think they did this? Was it simply a matter of corruption, or was principle involved as well?

3. Do you think a top-down or bottom-up strategy is more effective in introducing reform into large, complex institutions? What implications does your answer have for your church? For society? For government?
4. What do you think of the Jesuits' strategy of aligning themselves with the movers and shakers in society? Given that Christianity initially spread among the lower classes rather than the elites, were the Jesuits using an appropriate model for missions and political involvement? Which is more effective, grassroots activity or focusing on elites?