

# CHAPTER I

## CONDITIONS IN EUROPE PRIOR TO THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

In order to properly understand and appreciate the work of the great reformers of the sixteenth century, one must know something about the Europe which they attempted to reform. That pre-reformation Europe needed reforming needs no proof, for all devout persons living in that day agreed that some sort of a reformation was necessary, even though many of them were not willing to accept the leadership of Luther and his colleagues. For about a century previous, the slogan at the various church councils had been “A reformation of the Church in its head and in its members,” and before the end of the sixteenth century there was a reformation within the Roman Catholic Church as well as a Protestant Reformation. It shall be the aim of this first chapter to summarize conditions in Europe just prior to the Lutheran and other Protestant movements.

### 1. Ignorance and Superstition

The people in pre-reformation Europe were held in ignorance and were steeped in superstition. They attended mass, had their children baptized and confirmed, tried to make confession of their sins to a priest, had their marriages solemnized by the church, went to holy communion as they were required, and tried to see to it that their friends and relatives received the last anointing before they died. But many of them understood very little of what it was all about. They prayed, but many of their prayers were not directed to God but to the saints, and there seemed to be a saint for all sorts and conditions of people. In cases of lost articles, they called upon St. Anthony; for sore throats, one could invoke St. Blaze; St. Apollonia guarded against toothache while St. Gumprech guarded against dog bites. Physicians looked to St. Cosmas; cobblers to St. Crispin; mariners to St. Nicholas; and rat catchers to St. Gertrude. St. Catherine was assigned all the troubles of the lovelorn.

### 2. Relics

Relics (venerated objects) and shrines were numerous and many resorted to them to be healed, to offer prayers and to make an offering of money. Wood from the cross of Christ, skin from the face of St. Bartholemew, milk from the breast of the Virgin Mary, bits of hay and straw from the manger, wine from the wedding at Cana, earth from the soil at Damascus of which Adam was made, a tooth from John the Baptist are but a few samples. At one place it was asserted that they had preserved “a sigh of Jesus” and at another “a fragment of Egyptian darkness.” Relics often appeared in duplicates or triplicates or even worse. On exhibition were five shin bones of the donkey on which Christ rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and some twenty seamless coats were preserved all of which were supposed to be *the* coat for which the soldiers cast lots. Four different skeletons of St. Sebastian and five of St. Ursula were known to exist. The glorious gospel of Christ was dimmed and often entirely blacked out by man-made rules and regulations and by these numerous superstitions.

### **3. The Rebirth of Paganism**

The century before the Reformation was called “The Age of the Renaissance.” The word renaissance means “re-birth.” It must be remembered, however, that while the renaissance was responsible for the revival of the beauties of ancient art, sculpture and architecture, it was nevertheless an intellectual movement which had little or no effect upon the common people, and which in Italy especially resulted in a revival not only of the art and literature of ancient Greece and Rome, but also in a revival of the spirit of that age—and that spirit was pagan, secular and immoral.

The popes of the Renaissance period were products of this revival of ancient standards, and some of these popes were virtual pagans and morally corrupt. Sixtus IV, pope at the time of Luther’s birth, was a sexual pervert and the slave of unnatural vices and was the instigator of a plot to assassinate Lorenzo the Magnificent. Innocent VIII, the pope of Luther’s childhood, was the first pope to acknowledge his own children and to celebrate their marriages publicly. Two hundred persons were assassinated during the last two months of this pope’s reign. Alexander VI, the pope of Luther’s youth, was of the famous house of Borgia, and his interests were almost entirely secular and selfish—centered around making his children great. When absent from Rome, Alexander left his business affairs in the hands of his beautiful blonde daughter Lucrezia, authorizing her to open his mail and answer his letters. Leo X, the pope who excommunicated Luther, was a notorious gambler and delighted in giving elaborate banquets, and these banquets alone cost him 96,000 florins a year, which was seven times the combined salary of all the professors at the University of Rome. But no banquet was as elaborate as the one given at the time of the baptism of his illegitimate daughter, at which his banker was the guest of honor and at which food was served on golden plates which were thrown out of the window after the food had been eaten.

### **4. The Wealth of the Church**

In pre-reformation times, the Church owned from one-fifth to one-third of the land in most countries of Europe, on which it paid no taxes. Many wealthy persons, whose consciences seemed to trouble them, were induced to will their vast estates to the church in return for masses to be said for their souls while in purgatory, or in return for being buried on monastic ground. All the faithful were made to pay their “tithes” or tenth part to the Church, as well as special fees as baptisms, weddings, etc. High offices in the church were often sold to the highest bidder (simony), and shrines were the sources of much wealth.

### **5. Reformers before the Reformation**

There were some noble efforts at reform before the days of Luther, but it seemed that the time was not yet ripe. John Wyclif (d. 1384) of Oxford, England, denounced the authority of popes, repudiated the worship of saints and relics, spoke of the futility of pilgrimages, and cast doubt on the existence of purgatory (a place for cleansing). Though Wyclif was persecuted, he died a natural death, and his followers, known as the Lollards, continued his teachings up to the time of the English Reformation. Half a century after his death, the Council of Constance ordered Wyclif’s body to be dug up and burned, and the ashes thrown into the River Swift. This same Council of Constance also sentenced John Hus of Bohemia to be burned at the stake for teaching doctrines similar to those of Wyclif.

## **6. The New Learning North of the Alps**

While the Italian renaissance resulted for the most part in a rebirth of the paganism of ancient Greece and Rome, the renaissance north of the Alps had a somewhat different aspect. Here, instead of going back to ancient pagan culture, most of the scholars began to revive the culture of ancient Christianity; they commenced to study not only the original languages of the Old and New Testaments but also to revive the spirit of early Christianity. Out of this movement came such scholars as Reuchlin, the father of the study of Hebrew in modern times, and Erasmus (see Appendix F) who published a Greek text of the New Testament.

These renaissance scholars north of the Alps criticized the Church of their day and showed how vastly different it was from the Church of the apostolic times, and they did much to pave the way for the Reformation. But they were for the most part intellectuals, and when they realized that Luther's movement would result in a separation from the Church of Rome, most of them, though they admired much in Luther, lost their courage and continued as members of the Roman Church until their death.

### **FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. What conception did the common people of pre-reformation Europe have of the Christian religion?
2. What was really "reborn" during the Renaissance in Italy, and what effect did it have on the religious life of that day?
3. In what ways had the medieval church become wealthy, and what effect did this wealth have on the life of the Church?
4. Who were some "reformers before the Reformation" and why are they sometimes called "morningstars of the Reformation"?

5. How did the renaissance north of the Alps differ from the Italian Renaissance, and how did this difference affect the Church?

6. How did such renaissance scholars differ from the Protestant reformers?

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

*Luther, Biography of a Reformer*, Forward, pp. 9-12, "A Word about Great Men"; Chapter 1, Martin Comes and Grows, pp. 13-22.

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