

CHAPTER IX

THE CATHOLIC COUNTER-REFORMATION

1. Catholics Conscious of Abuses

Whenever the abuses and immoralities of the sixteenth century are expounded, and questions are solicited after the exposition, someone will invariably ask, "Does the Catholic Church today know that conditions were so corrupt, and if so, what do they say about it?" The fact is that the Catholic Church today knows that these abuses and immoralities are matters of history and not inventions of Protestants, and there were many devout Catholics who realized it to such an extent that shortly after the Protestant movement began, the Catholics started a reformation of their own, a movement known historically as the Catholic Counter Reformation. The result of this reformation was that the abuses were for the most part abolished. Whatever you may think of the teachings of the popes after the Reformation, at least we can say they were not guilty of such immoralities as those of Innocent VIII or Alexander VI or Leo X.

2. Difference between Catholic and Protestant Reformations

There was however a vast difference between the Catholic Counter-Reformation and the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic Reformation sought to reform only the abuses, but it kept all the traditional doctrines of the Roman Church, while the Protestant Reformation sought not only to reform abuses, but also to reform those erroneous doctrines out of which these abuses developed. For instance, Protestants held that most of the frauds practiced in connection with the forgiveness of sin and eternal salvation were based on false doctrines concerning forgiveness, purgatory, and the like, and that many of the immoralities of the priests grow out of the unscriptural practice of forbidding the priests to marry. Thus while Protestants sought to reform both abuses and doctrines, Catholics sought to reform only abuses while they kept the false doctrines.

3. Revolution or Reformation

There is a tendency in our day among historians to speak of the "Protestant Revolution" and the "Reformation." They base the distinction of terms on the assertion that while Luther actually revolted and formed a new church, the Catholic party reformed and stayed within the established church. This is an error. Luther did not form a new church, but merely purged the church of its accumulation of errors contrary to the Scriptures and restored it to the original purity of apostolic times. The Lutheran Church did not "spring from the Catholic Church." The Catholic Church departed from the doctrines of the apostles and Luther merely brought the Church back on the apostolic course laid out for it. If the Lutheran Church can lay claim to teaching and practicing those doctrines of the apostles, the Lutheran Church can lay claim to being the continuation of that Church founded on Pentecost.

4. Founding of the Jesuit Order

We now go back to the Catholic Reformation proper. There were two great factors in this Catholic Reformation, the Jesuit Order and the Council of Trent. We take up first the Jesuit Order. There was a certain Spanish nobleman by the name of Ignatius Loyola, who was born in 1491, and who for a number of years had the career of a soldier in the Spanish army. After he was severely wounded in a battle in northern Spain, he decided to abandon his army career and to become a soldier of the cross like the saints of the middle ages. For a while he lived the life of a hermit, but finally decided that he needed an education and so at the age of 37, he enrolled at the University of Paris and began the study of Latin. Here he became the leader of a little group of six men (of which Francis Xavier was one) who determined to devote themselves to the task of going to Jerusalem as soon as their studies were completed and convert the Muslims to Christianity, and if this were impossible, to put themselves at the disposal of the pope and to go wherever he might send them. The road to Jerusalem was blocked, and so they went to Rome and received the papal blessing. They organized the Society of Jesus (note the S.J. after the names of many priests today) along military lines with Ignatius Loyola as the first “general” of the order. In addition to the threefold vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience, they added a “fourth vow” of strict obedience to the pope. The Jesuits in military fashion pledge unqualified obedience to their superiors, and what their superiors tell them to do, they do without asking any questions.

5. Purposes of the Jesuit Order

The Jesuits had a fourfold program: first, to educate the young in the Catholic religion so thoroughly that they will never depart from it; secondly: to win the doubtful for the Catholic church by serving as their “confessors”; thirdly; to do missionary work among the heathen and heretics (Lutherans and other Protestants) and win them for the Catholic faith; and fourthly, to acquire political influence in the affairs of kingdoms by serving in the courts of nobles and princes. The Jesuits were a powerful factor in keeping the Protestant Reformation from spreading, but they accomplished very little so far as stamping it out of those places where it was already established.

6. Jesuit Principles

From the Jesuits, the Catholic Church derived the principle that “an action is justifiable when there is a probability of its goodness” which stated in popular terms is “The end justifies the means.” There is also a Jesuit principle of “mental reservation,” which allows persons taking an oath to make a silent mental reservation, and be bound only by the intention. For instance, if a Jesuit life is in danger, he may take an oath to support the Protestant cause, and then in his mind make the reservation “provided the Protestants return, to the pope” and he would be bound only by his intention and not by what he actually spoke.

7. Mission Work of the Jesuits

The missionary efforts of the Jesuits were most successful. Francis Xavier went to India, and extended his work also to Japan and China. Hundreds of Jesuit colleges and seminaries were established and in them all Catholic doctrine was boldly defended.

8. Protestants and a General Council

When the Protestant movement first began there was much talk of a general council of the Church, and the Lutherans had continually expressed their willingness to submit their cause to such a general council. At the Colloquy at Regensburg (Ratisbon) in 1541 it was evident, however, that no agreement between the Lutherans and the Catholics was possible, but the desire for a reforming council among Catholics still prevailed. The popes had hesitated to call a council for several reasons, one being that a reforming council might seek also to reform them, and another being that to call a council might be construed as evidence that the popes regarded a decision of a council above their own decrees.

9. The Council of Trent

However, the reforming pope, Paul III was finally prevailed upon to call a council at Trent in 1545. There were three separate sessions of this council, the first 1545-1547 under Paul III, the second 1551-1552 under Julius III, and the third 1562-1563 under Pius IV. At this council, abuses were condemned and steps taken to correct them, Catholic doctrine was defined, and “heretical doctrines” rejected. The official declarations of this council are known as “The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent.”

In Galatians 1:8, the apostle Paul says, “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other Gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.” That word “accursed” is in Greek “anathema” and in the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent all sorts of “anathemas” are hurled at distinctive Protestant teachings. For instance Canon IX on justification states: “If anyone saith, that by faith alone the impious are justified; in such wise as to mean that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema.” Again Canon XII reads: “If anyone saith that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ’s sake, or that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified, let him be anathema.” This is just another way of stating that whoever believes in the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone is held to be accursed, and yet justification by faith alone is the central doctrine of Holy Scriptures.

10. Significance of the Council of Trent

These Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent were really the first official pronouncements of the distinctive doctrines of the Roman Church. Up until this time, while the Roman Church taught and practiced all these doctrines, her only official statements of faith were the three universal creeds, the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed, and these three, we Lutherans also accept. The official declaration of distinctive Catholic doctrines was therefore made between 1545 and 1563, while the official statement of the distinctive

Lutheran doctrines was made at Augsburg in 1530. Even judged by official confessions, the Lutheran Church is older than the present day Catholic Church.

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What was the chief difference between the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Reformation?
2. Why is Luther's movement sometimes called a "revolution"? Is this justified?
3. What was the fourfold purpose of the Jesuit Order? In what way is the Jesuit Order active yet today?
4. Name two famous principles of the Jesuit Order and show their significance in the Catholic Church today.
5. What was accomplished at the Council of Trent, and what was its significance in church history?
6. What wholesome effect did Protestantism have on the Catholic Church?

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Read *Luther, Biography of a Reformer*, Chapter 9, "In Death He Lives," pp. 209-213.

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