

The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from the Story of the Church

Rome Responds

“I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I marvelled with great amazement.”

Revelation 17:6

How was Rome to respond to the Reformers? It soon became obvious that simply persecuting Protestants would not make them go away. In any case, many of those who stayed loyal to Rome agreed that at least some of the condemnation levelled at the Church was not without foundation. The Roman Catholic Church did need to change.

Catholic Evangelicals

One response was to agree with much of what Luther and the others had said, yet regretting their break with the papacy. From 1521 to 1541 there was a strong movement to reform the Church of Rome from within, towards more Biblical teaching and practice, and so win back the Protestants. Prominent Catholic Evangelicals argued in favour of the teaching of salvation by grace alone. Many of them were as bold as Protestants in their condemnation of abuses in the Church. The chief difference between them and the Protestants was their continuing belief in the pope as the head of the Church and in transubstantiation.

The influence of the Catholic Evangelicals reached its height in 1541 when, under the authority of the Emperor and with the pope's backing, a series of meetings with Protestant theologians was held at Regensburg in Bavaria. Calvin, Melancthon and Bucer were among those who attended. A common statement was drawn up on the doctrines of original sin and justification by faith. Even Calvin expressed his delight with what had been achieved. However, the whole thing fell apart over the doctrine of the Eucharist.

This marked the end of the official influence of the Catholic Evangelicals, who up to that point had been granted high standing in the papal court. Even the Pope of the day was keen to see some kind of reform but the failure of the Regensburg talks seemed to prove that nothing was to be gained by seeking reconciliation with the Protestants.

The Black Pope

A very different approach to reform from within came from Spain. The man responsible for it was Ignatius Loyola.

In his youth, Loyola had been obsessed with tales of knighthood and chivalry but his ambition to become a famous knight was shattered when he was crippled in war between France and Spain. As he recovered from his injuries his thoughts turned to religion. He renounced his worldly ambitions and vowed that he would become a spiritual knight.

In 1522 Loyola became a monk and devoted himself to prayer and harsh ascetic discipline. In the Dominican monastery he joined, he experienced visions which inspired him to write “Spiritual Exercises,” the book which was to become the training manual of the religious order he founded — The Jesuits.

Spiritual Exercises presented a set of exercises in prayer and meditation. It placed powerful emphasis on the use of the imagination in training the soul. Loyola wanted his readers to experience personally the flames of hell, the cries of the damned, the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary and other key events by imagining that they were present, seeing every sight, hearing every sound, smelling every odour, touching, tasting and feeling every detail. People who went through the Exercises described its overpowering impact — they were never the same again.

Loyola believed passionately in the infallibility of the Church of Rome and in his mind, faith meant unquestioning acceptance of all its teachings. The purpose of the Exercises was to bring the soul into total obedience to Christ through total submission to the Roman Church, outside of which, he taught, there was no grace, no Christ and no salvation.

“Setting aside all personal judgment of our own, we must keep our minds prepared and ready to obey in all things the true Bride of Christ our Lord, which is our holy mother, the Catholic Church.... To make perfectly sure of our orthodoxy, if the Catholic Church proclaims something to be black which appears to be white, we must accept that it is black. For we believe that there is one and the same Spirit in Christ our Lord the Husband, and in the Church His Bride. This Spirit governs and guides our souls to salvation; the same Spirit and the same Lord who gave the Ten Commandments guides and rules our holy mother the Church.”

Ignatius Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*

In 1539 Loyola and a small band of followers began calling themselves The Society of Jesus. People were soon calling them the Jesuits and their general, the black pope. In 1540 the Pope gave the Jesuits official recognition as a new religious order. Loyola was their first “general” and it was he who drew up their rules, which he believed were given to him by divine revelation. The organisation of his order of spiritual knights reflected Loyola’s military background. Those who joined had to be healthy, physically beautiful, intelligent, good at public speaking and free from the least suspicion of heresy. He wanted none but the best.

Ordinary Jesuits took three vows: poverty, celibacy and obedience to superiors. Those at the highest level also vowed to go, without delay, wherever the Pope might send them. This vow created a special relationship between the Jesuits and the papacy over the next three hundred years. They were the most zealous advocates of the absolute supremacy of the Pope over both Church and state.

Loyola also laid stress on the importance of education. The Society’s schools concentrated on educating the sons of Roman Catholic Monarchs and nobles. They were particularly successful in raising up a new generation of devout and committed Roman Catholics.

In the 1550s, the destruction of Protestantism became another of the Society’s chief purposes. Jesuit theologians gave themselves to overthrowing the works of the Protestant Reformers. Popes sent Jesuits to every Roman Catholic nation that had been affected by Protestantism to win people back to full allegiance, often with great success. The work of one Jesuit — Peter Canisus — for example, almost wiped out Protestantism in Austria and Bavaria. Protestants came to fear the Jesuits more than any other religious body.

Jesuits also went to many Protestant nations to strengthen persecuted Roman Catholic minorities. Many were put to death, especially in England.

Sweeping aside Catholic Evangelicals, Loyola’s spiritual knights championed a new fiercely anti-Protestant Roman Catholicism. They stood on the front line as preachers, educators, chaplains and theologians. They dealt staggering blows against the Reformation and at the same time strengthened the Church of Rome by founding orphanages, schools, centres for the care of the poor, houses for reforming prostitutes and societies for ransoming captives from Muslims

The Council of Trent

Before his break with Rome, Luther had called for a Council of the whole Western Church. Others had been demanding it for years. Under pressure from the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, a Church Council was finally summoned in 1545: it met in Trent, northern Italy, in three sessions. Of course, when it assembled, the half of the Church which had abandoned Rome and the papacy was not represented.

In its first session (1545 – 1547) the first issue to be settled was that of “Scripture and tradition” and after debate and heated argument a decree was agreed which all parties were able to accept.

“The Council receives and venerates with the same sense of loyalty and reverence all the books of the Old and New Testaments (for God alone is the author of both), together with all traditions concerning faith and morality, as coming from the mouth of Christ, or being inspired by the Holy Spirit, and preserved in continuous succession in the Catholic Church.”

The Council went on to approve decrees which stated that the Roman Church was the only body capable of interpreting divine revelation, that the Latin Vulgate was the authoritative text and that the Apocrypha was divinely inspired and part of the Old Testament. Its decree on the doctrine of justification denied that it was by faith alone and confused it with sanctification.

“Justification itself is not only forgiveness of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man, through the voluntary reception of the grace and gifts by which an unrighteous person becomes righteous.”

Charles V had hoped the Council would restore unity to the Church but he was disappointed and when discussion moved to the sacraments he lost his temper completely. In the fall-out Pope Paul III adjourned the proceedings.

The second session (1551 – 1552) was convened by Pope Julius III. It focussed on the sacraments and decrees were passed which made any realistic hope of reconciliation with Protestants impossible. It was declared that there are seven sacraments. The doctrine of transubstantiation was set out in uncompromising language. The sacrificial nature of the mass was affirmed as was the withholding of the cup from the laity and the priesthood of the clergy.

This session ended when Charles V was defeated in battle by the Lutheran prince Maurice of Saxony. The delegates fled in fear of their lives.

The third and final stage was convened ten years later in 1562. The Pope of the day was a skilful diplomat and was able to guide the Council to the conclusions he wanted. It passed anti-Protestant decrees on the invocation of saints, the veneration of relics, purgatory, masses for the dead and indulgences. The authority of the pope over the bishops was confirmed, in spite of much controversy over that particular issue.

The Council also decreed that there should be a seminary for the training of priests in every diocese. No longer should Protestants be able to claim that the Roman Catholic clergy were ignorant.

The Council of Trent was finally dissolved in 1563 and its collected decrees from all three sessions were given official sanction by the Pope in 1564. A commission, set up by the Council to review the liturgy of the mass continued its work until 1570 when it published the Roman Missal whose use was made binding on the whole Church. It remained unchanged until the 1960s.

For the next four hundred years Trent’s formulation of Roman doctrine was the standard to which Roman Catholics rallied. Tridentine (Tridentum being the Latin name for Trent) Catholicism dominated Rome until the Second Vatican Council of 1962 – 1965.

The Papacy

In the years following the Reformation successive Popes worked to restore confidence in the papal office. Whilst Protestants denounced the doctrines of the popes they could no longer accuse them of scandalous immorality.

Zeal and Expansion

The post-Reformation years also saw a rise in the number of religious orders. The greatest of the new orders was the Jesuits but there were others and they too made a contribution to the renewal of Roman Catholicism.

A new spirituality, largely mystical but also practical, arose, especially in Spain and spread into France and other parts of Europe.

These were also the days of expansion of the colonial empires of Spain and Portugal in the Americas, Africa and India. Coming in the wake of the “conquistadores,” who were half pirates and half crusaders plundering the land and intent on destroying paganism, Jesuit, Dominican

and Franciscan missionaries imposed Roman Catholic Christianity on the natives . The Church grew with astonishing speed.

And so the Roman Catholic Church, having entered the sixteenth century a moribund institution that disgusted even its friends, emerged at the end of the century with renewed zeal. The reputation of the popes was restored and the doctrine that defined it was settled.

Some Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think there was such an apparent increase in the strength of the Roman Catholic Church in the years following the Reformation?
2. In what ways has the teaching and practice of the Roman Catholic Church changed since the decrees of the Council of Trent were formulated?
3. If a Roman Catholic were to ask you what are the fundamental differences between his church and yours what would you answer?

For Further Study

Make sure you understand the doctrine of justification by faith to the extent that you could defend it from Scripture.