

Notes on the Counter Reformation

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Suggested Reading

Introduction: a problem of definition

Attempts to reform the Roman Catholic Church from within during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are commonly called ‘The Counter Reformation’.

This is misleading, because it implies that the whole movement was a response to the various schisms and heresies which became known as Protestantism.

Recently it has become more fashionable to call it the ‘Catholic Reformation’ and to point out that its origins went back well before Luther.

This can be equally misleading, because it can be taken to mean that it would have happened anyway, and that the Protestant challenge was largely irrelevant.

In these notes I use the term ‘Counter Reformation’, because I believe that differences both qualitative and quantitative changed the reform movement within the church as a result of the doctrinal challenges which originated with Luther.

Before about 1520 the issues were those of discipline and practice; acutely felt, but not fundamentally different from the problems which had affected the church intermittently for centuries.

However **Justification by Faith Alone** represented a radical attack upon one of its core teachings.

1. If the sacraments were no longer to be seen as vehicles of grace and necessary for salvation – what was the point of them?
2. If ordination was no longer a sacrament, and the mass no longer a miracle – where was the authority of the church?

It was these crucial questions which traditional theologians set out to answer between 1520 and about 1570, which were the ‘high years’ of the Counter Reformation.

The movement did not stop there, of course.

In some parts of Europe (notably England) it had hardly started by 1570, but the key doctrinal definitions were made during these years.

The church had recovered the initiative, but recovering the territories lost to the reformers, both Swiss and German, was a matter not of theology but of politics.

Where the rulers were sympathetic, as in Poland, almost complete success was achieved; where they were unsympathetic, as in Denmark and Sweden, the efforts failed.

Where the forces were more equally matched, as in France and the Low Countries, the result was war.

The greatest war of all was that which convulsed Germany between 1618 and 1648, and resulted in the military conquest of Bohemia by Catholic forces.

This was the last phase of the Counter Reformation, because by the time that peace was negotiated at Westphalia in 1648 the heat had gone out of the religious conflict, and it had become apparent that political vested interests would control the confessional map of Europe in the future.

1. Background: the papal schism and the conciliar movement

The origins of the schism went back to 1309, when **Pope Clement V settled his Curia at Avignon in the south of France.**

The reasons for **this move were largely political** and went back for many years, arising from the desire of successive popes to **escape from the Imperial domination of Italy.**

The result, however, was that the papacy came to be (and to be seen as) increasingly French, and this caused problems with the enemies of France, notably the English and the Germans.

During the Avignon years the Curia reached its highest level of sophistication, and the attractiveness of its offices led to many abuses, which were tackled only spasmodically.

There were also political disadvantages in being so far from Rome.

The ecumenical pretensions of the papacy seemed less realistic when exercised from a French provincial town, and the **need to intervene constantly in Italian politics did not go away.**

That, too, was more difficult from outside Italy.

Consequently **Pope Gregory XI (1370-1378) moved himself and his officials back to Rome.** When he died on the 26th March 1378 he was contemplating a return to Avignon, but his Cardinals were in Rome, and subject to violent **demands for an Italian pope.**

In their alarm, they hastily elected Bartolomeo Prignano, who took the title of Urban VI.

Urban quickly turned out to be a violent autocrat, and the cardinals, repenting their decision, withdrew to Naples, where they denounced their earlier election as forced and invalid.

They then proceeded to elect Cardinal Robert of Geneva (a Frenchman) as Clement VII.

Although deserted by his College, Urban denounced this election in turn as invalid, and created a new team of cardinals.

Clement and his supporters withdrew to Avignon, while Urban remained in Rome.

The result was the Great Schism, because when Urban died in 1389 he was replaced by Boniface IX, and when Clement died in 1394 he was replaced by Benedict XIII.

The result was manifest disgrace, because the rivals hurled anathemas at each other, and effectively **divided the western church into two factions.**

Abuses were multiplied in both places and the grief of the pious became more outspoken and intense.

The only remedy was a General Council, but the problem was, who was to convene it?