

# THE REFORMATION AS A TURNING POINT FOR THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH (16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES)

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## ABSTRACT

In this article the effects of the Protestant Reformation on the Roman Catholic Church are investigated. The event of 1517, when Luther posted 95 theses on the castle church door in Wittenberg, had a profound effect on society in Europe and the Roman Catholic Church in particular. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) was the official response of the Roman Catholic Church to the Protestant Reformation and issued in the Catholic Reformation (Counter-Reformation). Christian thought went from a uniform approach to one of diversity. The Catholics of the day responded by focusing on strategies such as printing, the liturgy, the inquisition and finally excommunication. The wound to the unity of the Christian community was finally healed at the Second Vatican Council when the Roman Catholic Church joined the ecumenical movement of all Christian Churches. The Roman Catholic Church learnt tremendous lessons from the Protestant Reformation. In certain parts of Europe there was friction and in other parts cooperation between Protestants and Catholics. Through the course of time cooperation and dialogue won the battle eventually, as Protestants and Catholics grappled with both their common beliefs and their many differences.

**Keywords:** Protestant Reformation; Catholic (Counter) Reformation; Martin Luther; Council of Trent; Papacy; orthodoxy; diversity; printing; liturgy; excommunication; inquisition

## INTRODUCTION

The 500th anniversary of the birth of the Reformation in Europe is an opportunity to re-assess and critique the response of the Roman Catholic Church to Luther's call for reform. Luther was by no means the only adversary for change within the church in the first half of the 16th century. He did create a trigger for the change to be effected and the ripples of change turned into a tidal wave that changed the Christian community in

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Europe forever. At first the Roman Catholic Church was defensive as it perceived itself as a community under attack by the Protestant reformers. In time that approach changed to one of conciliation and dialogue.

The context of this paper is Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. It will investigate the response of the papacy to the reformation—as well examine the Council of Trent. The change in Christian thinking is studied and the strategies adopted by the Roman Catholic Church to this newly perceived threat from the Protestant groups that emerged in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. A large part of the paper will deal with the Catholic Reformation—sometimes referred to as the Counter-Reformation or early modern Catholicism. In conclusion an assessment will be made of the short- and long-term strategies of the Roman Catholic Church that would lead to further cooperation and dialogue between Catholics and Protestants.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LUTHER'S CHALLENGE TO THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

The expense of funding the Renaissance Papacy was enormous and bankruptcy and corruption were rife. It had reached a point of being a public scandal since all the finances collected did not even reach Rome. The reason for this being that bribes had to be paid along the way before the funds reached the Vatican. Martin Luther's objection to the buying of indulgences was just the tip of the iceberg. The idea of the indulgences was that the faithful would pay a sum of money to reduce their suffering in purgatory. This was a key point to Luther's grievance in that he had reached a point of conviction that salvation cannot be purchased. This indicated to him that the sale of indulgences was a sham. Owen Chadwick remarks: "On all Saints' Eve, 31 October 1517, he [Luther] fastened to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg a placard inscribed with 'Ninety-five Theses upon Indulgences'."<sup>1</sup> Was this so terribly unusual? Luther had been at the time a lecturer at the University of Wittenberg. Is a university not a place for theological reflection and debate? This did not suit the powerful within European society, and especially within the church, among whom were those who had been abusing the generosity of the poor Christians and were now being challenged. Chadwick quotes a letter written to a friend in May 1517 in which Luther points out: "My theology—which is St Augustine's—is getting on, and is dominant in the university. God has done it ..."<sup>2</sup> So this would indicate that Luther's emphasis on God's grace being responsible for salvation occurred even before he posted the 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg. In fact the 95 theses did not comment on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Their concern was the abuse of the indulgences and the position that money donated released souls from purgatory. However, the Pauline conviction that God's grace alone was responsible for salvation was at the back of Luther's thinking at

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1 Owen Chadwick, *Reformation* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1972), 43.

2 Chadwick, *Reformation*, 46.

the time. It formed the all-important backdrop against which Luther critiqued the abuse of indulgences within the Roman Catholic Church in the early 16th century. Soon the argument became one of papal authority and its limits. This was a deviation from the original purpose of the theses on indulgences. Luther was also swayed by the fact that he had the support of the sovereign, the Elector Frederick of Saxony, who was proud to have a German challenge the meddling of Italians in matters that affected Germany. At a Diet held at Augsburg in 1518, the argument became a matter of respecting papal authority and not the indulgence issue. On 12–14 October 1518 Luther appeared before the Dominican Cajetan and he refused to retract. From then on the wedge of separation grew stronger and this would eventually lead to the excommunication of Luther from the Roman Catholic Church. Luther started publishing pamphlets in Latin and German, calling for the moral and spiritual reformation of the Roman Catholic Church.

There were many Christians in the early 16th century who saw the need for reform within the Roman Catholic Church. However, Luther took the initiative to challenge the status quo. He found many in Germany and beyond, who were sympathetic to his writings as they felt the same about the need for reform. As Luther found support among the German leaders and the peasants he was spurred on to write more and call for reform not only concerning the indulgences, but also on the abuses of papal power. This is interesting to note as the initial challenge to the church was on the indulgence issue and not the authority of the pope. Rome issued the papal Bull *Exsurge Domine* on 15 June 1520 in which it condemned “forty-one positions of Luther as a heretic ...”<sup>3</sup> Luther’s works were to be burnt and he had a period of two months to recant or to be excommunicated. On 10 December 1520 Luther burnt the Books of Canon Law, a few papal decretals and a copy of the Bull *Exsurge Domine*. This was the manner in which Luther sealed his fate and he was then excommunicated. Luther’s excommunication came into effect on 3 January 1521.<sup>4</sup> This is a far cry from the protest against indulgences which could have been dealt with in a more diplomatic manner through discussion and debate. The wedge of separation and polarisation had begun the split in Christendom forever. The scandal of division within the Roman Catholic Church was the next chapter to be written within the history of the Roman Catholic Church.

John P Dolan points out: “In Luther were clearly reflected the two central themes of the Reformation, the renovation of the fundamental message of the Gospel and the establishment of a more practical and personal means of presenting it.”<sup>5</sup> Despite Luther’s shortcomings,<sup>6</sup> he managed to translate the Bible into German and also produced hymns that elaborated the themes of his theology. It was Luther’s conviction that a copy of the Bible should be made available to all and sundry, so that they could recite the Scripture while engaged in their everyday activities. What began as a squabble between theologians

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3 Chadwick, *Reformation*, 54.

4 Chadwick, *Reformation*, 55.

5 John Dolan, *History of the Reformation* (New York: H. Wolff, 1965), 252.

6 As a translator of the Bible it is to be noted that Luther was not proficient in the Greek language.

had become an exercise in evangelising and educating all the peoples of Europe and beyond. Luther could not be swayed to recant his teachings. In fact he needed evidence from Scripture to declare him as being wrong in the views that he espoused to in his theology and teachings. For Luther the truth is to be found in Scripture alone.

Luther produced *The Babylonian Captivity* in 1520 in which the number of sacraments was reduced from seven to three (baptism, Eucharist and private confession).<sup>7</sup> It is significant to note the importance of the role of Melanchthon in establishing the faith confessed by the Lutheran Church in the Confession of Augsburg, which was presented to the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. This Confession of Augsburg was the doctrinal standard adopted and represented the faith of the Lutheran Church. From the beginning Luther and Melanchthon did not see themselves separating from the Roman Catholic Church that had been developed over the centuries. They considered themselves as reformers of that faith community. They were certain that papal power had to be destroyed and priests and nuns released from their vows. In fact, as time went on, it became clear that they were actually starting a new reformed church that was not congruent in terms of what had been practised in the Roman Catholic Church in their day. Luther's contribution to change in Europe in the early 16th century is unparalleled in human history. It set off a series of events that split Christendom forever. Dolan goes on to point out that: "It is therefore incorrect to assume the notion that the church as understood by Luther and his immediate followers was a new church in opposition to the ancient Catholic Church."<sup>8</sup> However one might choose to explain the events that followed Luther's protest against the Roman Catholic Church, it was a consequence that schism between the Lutheran community and the Roman Catholic Church was the result. It was only with the changes at the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) that restoration of the importance of Scripture and a more active role of the laity were accepted within the Roman Catholic Church.

## THE PAPACY RESPONDS WITH THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

Cardinal Alessandro Farnese was made pope on 13 October 1534 after a conclave of two days. Farnese was to take the name of Paul III and it was his duty to help the Roman Catholic Church to respond to the Reformation. Many different groups of Christians in Europe were clamouring for a council. However, this was difficult to respond to as there was no clear idea as to what the council should consider, who should attend or what should be discussed at such a council? The Protestants, for example, wanted the council to be held in Germany and not in Rome. As a first step, Pope Paul III set up a committee to establish the state of the church at that time. The committee consisted of "the Venetian layman Gasparo Contarini, the fiercely Neopolitan co-founder of the Theatines, Gian

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7 Chadwick, *Reformation*, 65.

8 Dolan, *History of the Reformation*, 294.

Pietro Carafa and the Englishman Reginald Pole.”<sup>9</sup> This committee formulated the report titled *Advice concerning the Reform of the Church*. Although this report was supposed to be confidential and secret, a copy of the report appeared in Germany, much to the delight of the Protestants. This was due to the critical nature of the report which challenged practices in the Roman Catholic Church during the 16th century. Criticism was raised against the “secularization of the papal office and the decadence evident in Rome.”<sup>10</sup> Other issues brought to task were the abuse of indulgences, the power of canonists and the concern of cardinals to increase their wealth. This resulted in the Protestants in Germany saying “I told you so!”<sup>11</sup> Other Catholics were interested in reform and this was responded to by the establishing of new religious orders and congregations. Pope Paul III approved papal bulls which approved the founding of the Capuchins (1536), the Jesuits (1540) and the Ursulines (1544). Like the reform earlier with the establishing of the mendicant orders (Franciscans and Dominicans), there was renewed interest in responding to the Gospel and relieving the plight of those who suffered or were neglected within society. The Roman Inquisition (1540) was “reorganized and its jurisdiction extended”<sup>12</sup> so as to respond to the evangelical groups that had arisen especially in Naples and Venice. The Roman Catholic Church was beginning to choose its path ahead as it faced the Protestant onslaught. In 1541 talks were held in Regensburg between Melancthon and Cardinal Contarini. Talks broke down when the topic of the Eucharist was raised. All was not lost as there was agreement on the teaching of justification. However, there was a setback when both Luther and Rome rejected the agreement on justification. The need for a council became more apparent but there was disagreement on exactly where such a council should be held.

It took three decades for the Council of Trent to gather. The meeting of the Council of Trent took place in three stages (1545–1548, 1551–1552 and 1562–1563). Part of the reason for the delay was that the Protestants had called earlier for a council in Germany where clergy and laity would gather. The Roman Catholic Church did not respond too soon, lest it appear that they were acquiescing to the demands laid down by the Protestant groups that had emerged after the protest of Luther against indulgences. The agenda for the council was long and the times were complex. According to Christopher Bellitto: “Not only did the Catholics have to discuss and implement useful reforms; they had to explain the Roman Church’s teaching on core issues the Protestants had questioned (especially authority, tradition and sacraments) fully, carefully and effectively.”<sup>13</sup> There was social unrest in Europe in the form of religious and political wars that were being fought in the mid-16th century. All these factors had an effect on the Council of Trent.

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9 Robert Bireley, *The Refashioning of Catholicism, 1450–1700* (Catholic University of Washington DC: America Press, 1999), 46.

10 Bireley, *The Refashioning of Catholicism*, 46.

11 Bireley, *The Refashioning of Catholicism*, 46.

12 Bireley, *The Refashioning of Catholicism*, 47.

13 Christopher Bellitto, *The General Councils: A History of the Twenty-One Church Councils from Nicaea to Vatican II* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2002), 102.

A thorny issue at the Council of Trent was the interpretation of Scripture. The Protestants maintained that any Christian could interpret Scripture, whereas the Roman Catholic Church supported the idea that Scripture could be interpreted by the hierarchy alone. The Council of Trent formulated a creed in 1546 which was based on the creeds of the earlier councils of Nicaea I (325) and Constantinople I (381). The Roman Catholics supported the idea that church regulations should emanate from Scripture and tradition—as laid down by the early church fathers and the ecumenical councils held by the Roman Catholic Church over the centuries. The Roman Catholic Church placed an emphasis on the use of the Vulgate (Latin version of the Bible), which it was felt needed updating. For some Protestant groups there were only two sacraments, i.e. baptism and the Eucharist. Trent affirmed once again that there were seven sacraments (baptism, Eucharist, confirmation, confession, marriage, extreme unction and holy orders). Concerning the correct understanding of the Eucharist, the Council of Trent returned to the word “transubstantiation which Lateran IV had used in 1215.”<sup>14</sup> Other issues discussed at the council were the topics of relics, indulgences, images, saints and purgatory. All these issues had been questioned as a result of the Protestant Reformation started by Martin Luther in 1517 and later. Concerning the central issue of indulgence peddling, the Roman Catholic Church heeded the warning concerning the sale of indulgences. Indulgences were to be retained within the Roman Catholic Church. Indulgences were to be used only in the context of devotions. The job of “alms collector”<sup>15</sup> was abolished and indulgences were no longer to be used for personal financial gain of church personnel and especially the hierarchy.

The Council of Trent lasted 18 years. It was first convened by Pope Paul III, then by Paul IV and finally by Pius IV. There was a lull in proceedings during the long interval of 1552–1562 because of the fact that Pope Paul IV was reluctant to reconvene the Council of Trent.<sup>16</sup> Many of the issues that were dealt with at the Council of Trent were based on the following two main points, viz. “the relationship between Scripture and tradition and that between faith and good works.”<sup>17</sup> In Vatican II, both Scripture and tradition are viewed as two sources with the same origin, i.e. the proclamation of the Good News proclaimed by Jesus Christ (Dei Verbum, the Decree on Revelation nos. 4, 7 and 9). Another important element reconsidered by the Roman Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council was the role and apostolate of the laity in the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) promulgated on 18 November 1965. This was 448 years after Luther had challenged the role of the laity within the Roman Catholic Church. Catholic sympathisers might retort by saying: “Better late than never.” Sceptical Lutherans might be inclined to say: “Too little too late.” It can be said

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14 Bellitto, *The General Councils*, 106.

15 Bellitto, *The General Councils*, 108.

16 Norman Tanner, *The Councils of the Church: A Short History* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 78.

17 Tanner, *The Councils of the Church*, 81.

that the Roman Catholic Church revisited a number of issues which were raised in the Reformation and were able to be more realistic about the changes that were eventually made in the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). This was also the council that would bridge the gap as the Protestants were invited to participate in the proceedings of the council as observers. This was the first time in history, since the onset of the Protestant Reformation in 1517 in Germany, that the schism between Catholic and Protestants was re-visited in an amicable manner. At Trent the Roman Catholics emphasised the Eucharist as sacrifice and also strengthened the seminary system so as to create a more orthodox setting for the training of Catholic clergy. Tradition was also reaffirmed to oppose the Protestant emphasis on Divine Revelation emanating from Sacred Scripture. This further polarised relations between Roman Catholics and Protestants.

## ORTHODOXY VERSUS DIVERSITY: ADAPTING TO A NEW CONTEXT

The Reformation can be viewed from two perspectives. Firstly, Reformation for some is viewed as a time of Catholic errors being challenged by the Protestants recovering the truth from the Bible. Secondly, that very Reformation is viewed by others as a time of Protestant renegades separating themselves from those who chose to be faithful to the Apostolic See in Rome. Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between these two points of view. Without doubt the Reformation was a time of reviewing certain basic theological themes such as grace, sacraments, the identity of the church and its ministry, the correct use of the Bible and the writings of the early church fathers and also the medieval theologians. The period from c. 1470 and c. 1600 was noted for tremendous intellectual fertility that took place within the church and society in Europe. It is also interesting to note that within medieval Europe there was no consensus as to one locus for the authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Reformation is also associated with the growth of humanism. This is important to note as there were humanists on both sides of the divide. By way of definition, Seán Hughes points out:

Humanism in the late 15th and 16th centuries was not a unified ideology with a particular perspective on religion, but a collection of new educational techniques: innovative modes of argumentation emphasizing the importance of style and rhetoric, bypassing commentators, ancient and medieval to “return to the sources” of ancient pagan and Christian learning, and hence a renewed interest in early Christian writings, especially the text of Scripture.<sup>18</sup>

This definition of humanism is good to bear in mind as both Catholics and Protestants adopted the techniques of humanism. There was a flowering of scholasticism in the Spanish universities in the 16th century. However, these Spanish scholastics were

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18 Seán Hughes, “Diversity and Orthodoxy,” in *Christian Thought: A Brief History*, edited by Adrian Hastings et al. (Suffolk: Oxford University Press, 2002), 92.



using the critical and historical techniques borrowed from humanism.<sup>19</sup> Erasmus and the Reformers (first and second generation) were very critical of the shortcomings of scholasticism. However, in the last quarter of the 16th century later Reformers took a different view and wrote in the style of scholasticism “invigorated by the synthesis with humanism, came to dominate Lutheran and Reformed academic theology.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, on both sides of the divide humanism formed a point of unity in academic writing in the 16th century. Erasmus, although critical of scholasticism, never left the Roman Catholic Church.

The Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century also faced the need for diversity from within its own ranks, albeit that there was greater unity in the post-Tridentine Roman Catholic Church at a level not possible in the medieval Catholic Church. There were calls for different rites to be accepted by the Catholics from various parts of the world. In 1570 Pius V produced a missal so as to unify the church practice within the context of the liturgy. Charles Borromeo (1538–84) defended the continuation of the Ambrosian rite for Milan in Italy. Challenges also came from the “eastern Catholic Church whose theological and liturgical heritages had seen some protection from the decrees of the Council of Florence.”<sup>21</sup> The Union of Brest-Litovsk (1595–6) maintained union with the Byzantine rite Ukrainians. Union with the “East Syrian rite Malabar Indian Christians of St Thomas”<sup>22</sup> was assured by the terms of the Synod of Diamper in 1599. This meant that a level of pluralism was allowed in the 16th century Roman Catholic Church in terms of liturgy and canon law. The same did not apply to the area of theology where the Roman Catholic Church was like a mother trying to keep her children from different contexts talking to each other. The 16th century had changed the context in which the Catholic Church had operated for centuries. Change was on the cards in the years ahead. Diversity was the catch phrase in the road ahead and the Roman Catholic Church had no other option than to choose the path of unity in diversity in the years ahead.

## STRATEGIES FOR RESPONDING TO THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

The Roman Catholic Church had to learn from the Protestant reformers in order to cope with the changes brought about by the Protestant Reformation. It had to consolidate its efforts and strengthen its membership base. The liturgy had to be a unifying force for the faithful and had to assert its identity where the influence of the Protestants was very strong.

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19 Hughes, “Diversity and Orthodoxy,” 92.

20 Hughes, “Diversity and Orthodoxy,” 93.

21 Hughes, “Diversity and Orthodoxy,” 106.

22 Hughes, “Diversity and Orthodoxy,” 106.



## Printing in Poland (1520–1536)

The invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg from a noble family in Mainz, Germany, in c. 1440, meant that information could be passed around within society at a greater speed. By the early 16th century, both the reformers and the Roman Catholic Church could get their message across so as to influence public opinion on matters of the faith. It created yet another site of battle during the Reformation. There were problems nevertheless. In the early days of the Reformation not many writers were eager to engage in arguments via public text against what some perceived to be heretics. The other problem was the perennial problem of finance. Who would pay for the mass production of pamphlets and books and for what particular gain?

According to Natalia Nowakowska: “Pierre Deyon (1981) and David Birch (1983), for example, surveyed the rich variety of anti-Reformation polemical materials published during the French Wars of religion and in Henry VIII’s England respectively.”<sup>23</sup> In 1980 John Dolan published a study on international anti-Lutheran writings and in 1978 Wilbirgis Klaiber produced a database of 3 450 “Catholic controversialists” who printed material in Europe before 1600.<sup>24</sup> Nowakowska’s contention is that there has been little mention of the anti-Reformation polemics published in the kingdom of Poland during the reign of King Zygmunt I Jagiellon (1506–1548). There are 13 Latin books and pamphlets published by nine senior clergymen of the day that hailed from Cracow and Poznań during the period from 1520 until 1536. Within the context of Poland in the early 1600s, it was considered by some members of the royal court that the king to succeed King Zygmunt I, could be from the Reformer community. It was as a result of this thinking that some nobility sent their sons to go and study at the University of Wittenberg.<sup>25</sup> It had been the practice of the King to print papal, royal and even Episcopal edicts. In 1520 this was done and the Bull *Exsurge Domine* was printed by the Haller workshop in Cracow. Together with the Bull that was published was included a pastoral letter written by Jan Konarski (the bishop of Cracow) to warn against the errors of Luther. “Only gradually did printed anti-Luther polemic emerge as a stand-alone subject for a printed book in Jagiellonian Poland.”<sup>26</sup> Apart from the official publications of edicts the printing of anti-Reformation documents was also spurred on by the literary feuds that were going on between academic opponents. For example, Piotr Rydziński in 1524 produced a short work titled *In Axiomata Ioannis Hessi Wratslaviae Edita* in response to the work of Johannes Hess (1490–1547), who was very influential within the context of Silesian Lutheranism. An associate of Hess responded to this work in a book that is no longer in existence. Rydziński replied soon after that with the work: *Petri Risinii in Ioannis Hessi ... Responsio*. Such was the nature of the debate for those

23 Natalia Nowakowska, “High Clergy and Printers: Anti-Reformation Polemic in the kingdom of Poland.” *Historical Research*, 87, no. 235 (February 2014): 43, Oxford: John Wiley and Sons.

24 Nowakowska, “High Clergy and Printers,” 43.

25 Nowakowska, “High Clergy and Printers,” 47.

26 Nowakowska, “High Clergy and Printers,” 49.

who chose to participate in the dilemmas that beset the Roman Catholic Church as a result of the Reformation started by Martin Luther in Wittenberg. Of special interest within the context of Poznań (1535–6) there erupted a debate in print between Grzegorz Szamotulski (Archdeacon of Poznań) and the Lutheran Christoph Hegendorff—both of whom taught at the Poznań Academy. Hegendorff was also a Lutheran humanist, so that highlighted the tensions between the followers of Scholasticism and Humanism as well. Nowakowska points out that of these anti-Reformist works printed in Latin, 33 per cent were scholastic in nature and 20 per cent were by authors with a humanist slant.<sup>27</sup> The use of Latin made the text available to an elite group within Polish society. This elite group consisted of clergy and laity who had a working knowledge of Latin. It also made the documents more international in character, which would not have been the case had they been published in Polish. In Poland in the early 16th century there were three vernacular languages spoken: Polish, German and Ruthene. Latin, therefore, had the status of being the common language of the educated elite.

Earlier, in 1524, Andrzej Krzycki composed a letter to King Zygmunt I, challenging Luther. This established a new genre in the anti-Reformist writing in Poland. The work was titled *Ecomia Luteri* and hailed back to the early church fathers and medieval clergymen such as Bernard of Clairvaux. This work was published throughout the Holy Roman Empire and received much notoriety. Such printed polemic established a means for the anti-Reformist authors to express themselves concerning the policies of the Polish Crown and bishops. This body of anti-Reformist polemic meant that the author could challenge the reformists at a distance and influence the faithful nearby within the local context of Poland. It amplified the anti-Luther rhetoric and provided arguments for preachers and laity alike in the combat against the reformers. This printed polemic was produced by the cathedral canons, who sought to have their anti-Reformist preaching put into print. It remains a salient question as to whether printed polemic created the Reformation or whether the Reformation created this printed polemic. The two went hand in hand and were reciprocal and the one created the necessity for the other. This new interest in doctrinal arguments replaced the traditional printing of liturgical books, royal and Episcopal edicts and hagiographies. The Reformation created the opportunity for Roman Catholics to clarify their understanding concerning doctrine, biblical inspiration, the sacraments, religious life and church and state relations. The initial response was one of being defensive but that would later lead to a position of being open to dialogue within an ecumenical context. Poland within the early 16th century grappled with the printed media, doctrine and church practice as elucidated by the hierarchy, senior clergy and the rest of the church at large.

This meant that just as the Protestants had used the printing press to further their cause, so too did the Roman Catholics. As illustrated above, printing in Poland was very effective in spreading Counter-Reformation rhetoric and propaganda.

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27 Nowakowska, “High Clergy and Printers,” 52.

## The Liturgy of the Solemnity of Corpus Christi as a Means to Proselytise (1579–86)

Liturgy, the public worship of the Roman Catholic Church, is an expression of the unity and power of that faith community. On the Estate of Mikulov, in Moravia, during the period of 1579 until 1586, the local overlord Adam von Dietrichstein brought a Jesuit as the local parish priest to the estate so as to return the members of that locality back to the Roman rite. The liturgy of Corpus Christi was used as a tool to establish contact with old Catholics from the area, convert further the new Catholics and isolate the members of the Protestants' following in the area. Why the Feast of Corpus Christi? The rule of thumb was that Protestants would not genuflect or kneel during the procession with the Blessed Sacrament and also that they would insist on receiving communion under both the species of the body and blood of Christ.<sup>28</sup> The reason for these initiatives was the presence of Hutterite Anabaptists in Mikulov. Efforts were also made to establish the confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament and the use of Scripture to justify the rituals surrounding the veneration of the Blessed Sacrament on the Feast of Corpus Christi.

These Anabaptists were pacifists and lived in communes where they practised their crafts as “vintners, millers, servants and wet-nurses”<sup>29</sup> in the Mikulov Estate. The industrious nature of the Anabaptists brought much wealth to the region and boosted the coffers of the area by contributing taxes. As pacifists they refused to pay any war taxes and as a result had their property pillaged of livestock, liquor and other commodities in place of the war taxes that they were expected to pay. Due to the wealth that they brought to the region, no effort was made to remove them from the area but rather to convert them to Roman Catholicism. It was rather sought to co-exist with the different denominations on the Mikulov Estate. Nevertheless, it was the expressed desire of Dietrichstein (the overlord) that the area was to be returned to the control of the Roman Catholic Church.

The strategies used by the Catholics in Mikulov included support networks and the use of Scripture, the arrival of a priest called Cardaneus (a Jesuit) and the establishment of the confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament in 1584 at Mikulov. Darlage points out that: “Whereas the formation of the lay confraternity devoted to the body of Christ points to strategies of community building around Eucharistic devotion, the priest of Mikulov also promoted the veneration of the Host through the Corpus Christi sermons.”<sup>30</sup> This was to respond to the presence of the Anabaptists (referred to as the heretics) in Mikulov. No-one was allowed to join the confraternity if they were in any way associated with “heresy or sectarian error.”<sup>31</sup> All new members to the confraternity were to make a goodwill offering for the preparations for the Feast of Corpus Christi, as

28 Adam Darlage, “The Feast of Corpus Christi in Mikulov, Moravia: Strategies of Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation (1579–86),” *The Catholic Historical Review*, XCVI, no. 4 (October 2010): 652.

29 Darlage, “The Feast of Corpus Christi in Mikulov,” 659.

30 Darlage, “The Feast of Corpus Christi in Mikulov,” 670.

31 Darlage, “The Feast of Corpus Christi in Mikulov,” 667.

well as for the funerals and masses said for the intention of the deceased members of the group. The confraternity also aimed at improving the moral condition of the priests and lay members. There was also the stipulation of attending the Eucharist on Thursdays and spending some time in Eucharistic devotion through the veneration of the Blessed Sacrament. The members of the confraternity also pledged their support to be present at the procession on the Feast of Corpus Christi and to take an active role during those celebrations annually. The confraternity was aimed at the common citizens of Mikulov and attracted both the wealthy and the poor of the area. The idea was to establish lines of separation between the Roman Catholics and the heretical sects. The confraternity was to provide confraternal support to the members of the Roman Catholic Church in Mikulov.

The confraternity of Corpus Christi was used as a means to have Protestants return to the Catholic faith. Elements within this form of worship highlighted who were Protestants, as there was the requirement to genuflect as the consecrated host passed by in procession. This made evident the difference between the two communities. The Protestants of Mikulov were not encouraged to leave the area due to the revenue that they brought to their place of residence in the form of taxes. For this reason a gentle approach was adopted in dealing with the Roman Catholics and Protestants in Mikulov.

## Excommunication in Spain

With vigour and enthusiasm the ecclesiastical authorities in Spain implemented the process of excommunication from the late 16th century onwards. This was due in main part to the Council of Trent having decided in 1563 to re-introduce the practice of excommunication once more. The practice of excommunication had been frowned upon due to the abuses of the system in the middle ages. The main reasons for excommunication were disobedience and rebellion against the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church. This was strange to say the least, as most of the excommunications were not in fact for disobedience or rebellion. There were two types of excommunications: minor excommunication, which was for venial sins; and then major excommunication, which was for mortal sins. According to the Papal Bull of the Lord's Supper (also referred to as *Bula in Coena Domini*), the reasons that warranted excommunication were threefold, viz. "the falsification of pontifical documents, aggression against a member of the clergy, and occupation of apostolic lands."<sup>32</sup> Synods after the Council of Trent also included as a reason for excommunication not having paid one's tithes. Other reasons that gradually went onto the list of transgressions were not having gone to confession or mass at the required time of once a year, or not having attended a particular procession or sermon for example. Parishes kept lists of who had attended confession so as to check during the course of the year who had not attended this sacrament. Lists of offenders were

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32 María Tausiet, "Excluded Souls: The Wayward and Excommunicated in Counter-Reformation Spain," *History*, 291 (July 2003): 441. Oxford: The Historical Association and Blackwell Publishing.

publicised in the churches and the lists were also read out for the benefit of those who could not read.<sup>33</sup> Excommunication was the gravest form of punishment that the Roman Catholic Church could give offenders as a consequence of not following the practices of the local Catholic community. Excommunication involved no longer being admitted to the sacraments and also included social isolation from the faith community.

According to Pope Innocent IV (1245), at the Council of Lyons, excommunication did not jeopardise the salvation prospects of the person who had been excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>34</sup> In this regard, Tausiet points out the following concerning Luther's view regarding excommunication:

Luther, however, later maintained that this condition was deliberately concealed from the faithful in order to fool them because divine grace was not something that the Church could give or take away, but rather something that spontaneously re-established itself by means of contrition.<sup>35</sup>

This example above points out the weakness in the system of excommunication practised in Spain from the late 16th century onwards. How is sin and contrition to be dealt with in the long term for those striving for salvation? Public penances were given to offenders, which could be liturgical in nature, or they were even being banished from the town or city for a certain period of time. Yet another shortfall in the system was the fact that accusations were sometimes made against enemies so as to settle differences between members within the faith community. There were also *Latae sententiae* (immediate excommunications) which meant that one was excommunicated at the very moment of having committed certain sins. This meant that there was no need for a formal hearing to effect the excommunication. There were also excommunications of innocent people, who had to passively accept these decisions without having being given the opportunity to defend themselves. At times civil authorities were called in to act and victims of these excommunications could be thrown into prison.

Excommunication represents the darker side of the Catholic (Counter) Reformation. It points to a moment in the past when the Roman Catholic Church felt that it was under attack. In fact, some of the measures adopted caused greater scandal than the initial reasons for the Reformation in 1517. Excommunication was also open to abuse, since false accusations could be brought against someone as a form of revenge due to conflict between two individuals. The original reasons for excommunication became irrelevant once the practice had been re-introduced by the Council of Trent. Excommunication polarises people and breaks the possibility for dialogue and constructive communication in a time of conflict. It is open to abuse and encourages vendettas.

## Inquisition in Rome

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33 Tausiet, "Excluded Souls," 440.

34 Tausiet, "Excluded Souls," 438.

35 Tausiet, "Excluded Souls," 438.

In the early Modern period Rome became a centre for the Counter-Reformation and still retained its status as the eternal city, which was the seat of papal power. Legislation was put in place to “isolate, persecute, or convert foreign heretics.”<sup>36</sup> Conversions of educated people, noblemen and common folk have all played a part in the propaganda of the Roman Catholic Church as victories of the true church. From the 1650s and continuing into the 17th century, the Catholics produced autobiographies and pamphlets telling of the conversions to Catholicism. This was particularly true during the reign of Alexander VII (1655–1667). The legislation was aimed at protecting newcomers to Rome and allowing them to travel unhindered. The strategy for conversion was one of assimilation into the Roman Catholic community. Most of these converts were foreigners from the expatriate communities of German, English and Dutch extraction.<sup>37</sup> However, over the years it also included Jews, Muslims and exiles emanating from war-torn zones in Europe and the Middle East. The legislation enforced was that the innkeepers, parish priests, hospitals and confraternities had to report if non-Catholics were residing in their area. This was considered to be more of a problem if these foreigners were carrying with them subversive literature. Some of these business people were at times not prepared to collaborate with the ecclesiastical authorities as they feared losing business as a result. The policies of the Roman Catholic Church encouraged foreigners to hide their religious affiliation so as to avoid being targeted or causing scandal.

The procedure invited foreigners to present themselves to the Holy Office and deny their religious beliefs if they were not Catholic. The candidates had to give their family history including their instruction in heresy. An important part was to note their point of conversion. They were also expected to explain their pain at missing their loved ones and of not knowing the true church. They had to speak about how they had offended God by not adhering to the Holy Catholic Faith. Finally, the convert was given a penance. Fosi goes on to elaborate on the penances given. She mentions the following:

Converts were given clear penitential obligations, which included a pilgrimage to the Seven Churches of Rome and fasting every Friday for three years, meaning that they could only have water and bread on that day. They also had to say the Rosary twice a week and go to confession and communion at least on Christmas, Easter, and All Saints’ Day.<sup>38</sup>

For Jews and Muslims their baptism marked the rite of passage in changing their religious identity and in becoming Catholic. This was not so for Protestants, since as Protestants they had already been baptised. In such cases the analogy made was of the Prodigal Son returning to the House of the Father in Heaven. Converts were then placed on lists of charities so that they would not have the need to beg within the confines of the city. Whether the relative cooperation and financial assistance was the true motive for the

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36 Irene Fosi, “Conversion and Autobiography: Telling Tales before the Roman Inquisition,” *Journal of Early Modern History*, 17 (2003): 438.

37 Fosi, “Conversion and Autobiography,” 448.

38 Fosi, “Conversion and Autobiography,” 446.



conversion is something that is difficult to judge? These sources reveal graphic stories of adventure, tragedy and religious fervour. However, Fosi asks the enduring question: “But can we really know the deep and true motivations of a religious conversion?”<sup>39</sup>

In summary it can be noted that these policies of the Holy See made it possible for many immigrants to be assimilated in the eternal city of Rome. This being equally true, even during times when the “eye of the Inquisition was particularly vigilant.” Participation in the process afforded one the status of being assimilated into the Roman Catholic Church. Sadly, though it is still a question as to whether converts acted out of true religious belief or were spurred on by what they had to gain by becoming Roman Catholic in the city of Rome. The practice of the inquisition in Rome was open to manipulation, as vulnerable people could be tricked into being converted to be accepted within Roman society and not for religious motives.

## CONCLUSION

A divided community is a wounded community. This was true after the Protestant Reformation that started in 1517. Blame can be allotted to both the Protestant and the Catholic sides of the divide created by the schism. However, out of a crisis new possibilities emerge. There is regeneration and growth. It is a time of new beginnings and to get rid of the dry wood. Being critical of abuse might cause conflict, but it is necessary for healing and improvement to take place. This is true of the Protestant Reformation begun by Martin Luther.

It has been pointed out in this paper that Luther was not alone in calling for change within the Roman Catholic Church during the early Modern period. Founders of religious communities, such as Ignatius of Loyola (Founder of the Jesuits) and Angela Merici (Foundress of the Ursuline Sisters), also stepped up to the plate in the 16th century to respond to the glaring needs of their society in Europe and abroad at that time. Erasmus was also critical of the abuses within the Roman Catholic Church at that time. However, it was Luther who had the distinction of setting Christianity on a very different path. Once he had discovered that grace was freely given, it became clear that the sale of indulgences was a pretext for extorting money from the laity. This became the trigger that set off the avalanche. Christendom was doomed to be divided from that point onwards.

Four case studies were presented in this paper as strategies used by the Roman Catholic Church in Europe to respond to the Protestant Reformation. These were: 1) Printing in Poland; 2) Liturgy in Mikulov (Moravia); 3) Excommunication in Spain; and 4) Inquisition in Rome (Italy). All of these have their merits and shortcomings as short-term responses to the Protestant Reformation. Concerning excommunication and the inquisition, there are critical questions to be raised about the motivations and abuses inherent in such responses during a time of crisis. It is, therefore, accepted that in these

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39 Fosi, “Conversion and Autobiography,” 452.



areas there is much doubt as to whether they are profitable in the long run. Concerning printing and the liturgy, these are more enduring solutions that are applicable for a long passage of time. Patterns of worship and articulating one's faith in print are both more enduring. They lend themselves to dialogue and reconciliation of a still divided Christian community. Regarding the practices of excommunication and the inquisition, these two practices are both open to abuse and therefore mark a darker period in the history of the Roman Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation started by Martin Luther.

Christianity's need in the third millennium is for healing from discord and division. There is a dire need to appreciate once again how we can co-exist according to the principle of "Unity in Diversity." There is too much water under the bridge to turn back the hands of time. There needs to be acceptance among the various Christian denominations as to where we can build on our points of unity and accept the differences that separate us.

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