

# THE CHURCH FAILS TO REFORM ITSELF IN TIME

In the summer of 1454 one of the best-informed men in Europe, Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (later Pope Pius II), was traveling in Germany as papal legate a year after Constantinople had fallen to the Ottoman Turks. In a long letter he described his fears for the future of the Latin Christian world:

I prefer to be silent and I could wish that my opinion may prove entirely wrong and that I may be called a liar rather than a true prophet. • • • For I have no hope that what I should like to see will be realized; I cannot persuade myself that there is anything good in prospect. • • • Christianity has no head whom all will obey. Neither the pope nor the emperor is accorded his rights. There is no reverence and no obedience; we look on pope and emperor as .figureheads and empty titles. Every city state has its king and there are as many princes as there are households.

One could indeed draw a pessimistic picture of the European Christian community at the time. The Great Schism was a thing of the past, but its spiritual effects were still prevalent. The conciliar movement was put down, but papal authority could not easily recover from those disastrous forty years when Christians witnessed three men wearing the papal tiara anathematizing each other.

But it was not only the papacy that was in trouble; the condition of the Christian Church as a whole gave cause for alarm. At every level of Church life there were signs of grave disorganization and decay.

Let us begin at the top of the pyramid, with the Roman Curia. The reformers at Basel castigated it as the major scandal in the Church; but they were not alone: The Curia's wickedness was a constant theme of reform literature of the fifteenth century. All the evils of the Church were attributed to it: "The members were sick because the head was sick," it was said. And the cause of the sickness, they alleged, was simony.

Simony was at the heart of the curial system as it functioned before Luther. The Popes had gained control of a large number of ecclesiastical appointments, and their sale was a lucrative and even necessary source of papal income. By the time of Leo X (d. 1521), it is estimated that there were some two thousand marketable Church jobs, which were literally sold over the counter at the Vatican; even a cardinal's hat might go to the highest bidder.

Besides, there were an immense variety of taxes levied by the Curia on the newly conferred benefices. In order to ascend his throne as archbishop of Mainz, for instance, Albrecht of Brandenburg had to pay a tax of ten thousand ducats, and the indulgence that he promoted in order to secure the necessary funds involved him in an unsavory deal with the Curia. Luther's protest stamped this deal with everlasting notoriety-but actually it was quite typical of a deeply rooted curial practice.

Another curial practice odious to many of reforming temper was pluralism-the practice of conferring more than one ecclesiastical benefice or office on one man. This was simply a financial expedient-a means of supplementing the income of churchmen who were hard-pressed by the steeply rising inflation of the fifteenth century. It became increasingly difficult for princes of the Church to maintain the regal standard of living that was expected of them. And so a bishop might take charge of several dioceses in order to have sufficient income. Albrecht of Brandenburg again offers an example: Besides being archbishop of Mainz he held two other bishoprics and a large number of rich abbeys.

The practice by its very nature entailed absenteeism; indeed, some of these bishops never laid eyes on their dioceses. Obviously the morale of the Church suffered greatly; abuses of all sorts multiplied, since there was no authority on hand to check them. The literature of the period offers numerous examples of the cleric who after obtaining some benefice by using his influence in the Curia neglected its administration. "In Germany the percentage of resident pastors was fearfully small-as little as 7 per cent ...," it has been pointed out.

Another ominous development was the monopoly acquired by the nobility over the high offices of the Church-which they often exploited for personal and worldly reasons. It was quite common for a prince to have his younger sons appointed to bishoprics as the only way of securing a style of living appropriate to their station. Lortz

gives the example of Geneva, where between 1450 and 1520 no fewer than five ducal princes were bishops, and two of them were only eight years old at the time of their nomination. These men were often preoccupied with pleasure and material interests, and when the Reformation broke they were unable or unwilling to provide spiritual leadership. In fact, when Luther appeared many of them were among the first Catholics to turn their backs on the old Church in order to gain political or economic advantage from the new movement.

The lower clergy were in no better shape. As with the Curia and the higher clergy, we find every grade of decay: neglect of pastoral residence, accumulation of benefices, and utter worldliness. Besides, a whole clerical proletariat existed, the so-called Mass priests, who constituted in many cities as much as 10 per cent of the population; their only function was to say daily Mass. Preaching seems to have been on a very low level. Little attempt was made to instruct the young, and often the clergy themselves were as ignorant and superstitious as the rest. Concubinage was commonplace. The clergy's training was poor; only a small percentage had any university experience.

The picture presented by the religious orders is at least as dismal. Conditions, of course, varied much from country to country and order to order. In France the disasters of the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) and the Black Death and the consequent prevalence of anarchy undermined monastic discipline and left many monasteries incapable of recovery. In Italy and Germany also the strife between party

factions, between Pope and Emperor, followed by the Great Schism in the Church brought monasticism to a low ebb. The Benedictine rule was a dead letter, while many monasteries were directed by nonresident, secular abbots. Nor were monasteries any longer the home of secular learning. The Benedictines were mere feudal relics, having lost all touch with the new social and cultural conditions. The Cistercians were not as clearly decadent-their twenty-four new foundations in the fifteenth century show that some vitality was left. However, in most monasteries community life had become only a memory; regular prayer in common was discontinued, and common property gave way to private property. Many monks obtained permission from Rome to live outside their monasteries, while those still residing within the cloister often held their own cells as personal property.

The mendicant orders too were in a sad state-a fact with alarming applications, since so much of the pastoral ministry depended on them. Monks and friars were favored targets of satirists; according to a popular proverb of the day, one would do better meeting a robber than a begging friar. A famous anonymous satire, *The Letters of Obscure Men*, and the writings of Erasmus show that many people regarded the sons of Francis and Dominic as a pack of indolent ignoramuses. Nor was such an opinion merely the stock in trade of the perennially cantankerous and disaffected intelligentsia; the same views are found among the most loyal Catholic people like Ignatius Loyola and Thomas More.

It is obvious that there was great need for reform of the Church and, as the councils at Constance and Basel show most Catholic leaders were acutely aware of it. But the problem was how to achieve it.

The most popular and persistently recommended method was reform by a council of the Church and, in spite of the failure of Constance and Basel to accomplish it, the hope persisted. Many voices were raised in the latter half of the fifteenth century calling for a council-the voices of men deeply concerned with the welfare of the Church. After Basel's failure, however, it was obvious that such a council could only be carried out successfully under the leadership of the Popes.

Why did such a papal reform council fail to materialize in spite of the tremendous pressures in its favor? One important reason was the character of the papacy itself. This was the period of the so-called Renaissance papacy-a time when the Popes were more concerned with Italian politics than with the interests of the universal Church.

Externally, it was a time of papal grandeur as the Popes made Rome a foremost center of the Renaissance and inspired imperishable works of art that to this day adorn the Vatican. But morally and spiritually it was a time of terrible decline. In fact, under such Popes as Sixtus IV (d. 1484), Innocent VIII (d. 1492), and Alexander VI (d. 1503), the papacy wallowed in corruption unparalleled since the tenth century. These men virtually bought the tiara and used it mainly for the furtherance of personal and dynastic interests-filling the College of Cardinals with

relatives and unworthy candidates. They completely subordinated the religious functions of their office to unworthy temporal aims. Politically they were great successes. Julius II (d. 1513), a man of titanic character, made the Papal States a leading power in European politics. But it was all achieved at a tremendous cost to the integrity of the Popes' spiritual mission. The evil fruits would be abundantly reaped with Leo X.

Absorption in politics and worldliness were not the only reasons for the Renaissance Popes' failure to call a reform council. There was also the confusion over the relative authority of Pope and council. One must recall how the previous councils of Constance and Basel had asserted their supremacy over the Pope; though Eugenius IV (d. 1447) defeated the rebellious council at Basel, it was mainly through political tactics that did not scotch the conciliar theory itself. Pope Pius II (d. 1464)-a conciliarist himself until 1445-tried to eradicate this idea of the council's supremacy over the Pope by his bull *Execrabilis* (1460), which condemned any appeal from the Pope to a council. But this by no means spelled the end of conciliarism. In France and Germany the bull met with vigorous opposition, and in fact outside Rome it was not generally accepted. Right down to Luther himself, secular princes and various ecclesiastical bodies, supported by a number of leading canonists and universities, favored the conciliar theory and continued to use the appeal to a council over the head of a Pope as a legitimate canonical device.

In the minds of the Popes, therefore, the call for a council was often tantamount to a cry of revolt. When faced with the demand for a council they stressed the practical difficulties involved in convening one and resorted to other evasions or made counterproposals. An added reason for papal caution was the way the conciliar idea was abused by secular princes. This occurred several times before the time of Luther, the most notable example being the council at Pisa, called by Louis XII of France in 1511 as a purely political maneuver. Hence even Popes concerned about reform preferred to think in terms of direct papal action, through legislative acts such as papal bulls and decrees, or through the work of papal legates.

This was the method adopted by Pius II, who was sincerely committed to reform; he drew up a bull, *Pastor Aeternus*, which drew its inspiration in part from Nicholas of Cusa's reform program. It bound the Pope himself to certain procedures in the government of the Church, but unfortunately Pius died before it could be issued. A long hiatus ensued in papal reform efforts, only interrupted when Alexander VI showed some interest in reform. A bull that he drew up but never published contained the most comprehensive reform program of the whole period between Basel and the Fifth Lateran Council (1512-17). It condemned such things as the political preoccupations of the cardinals and insisted on the duty of bishops to reside in their dioceses. But unfortunately, Alexander was soon distracted from the whole matter; he lost interest in the bull and never published it.



The last attempt at papal reform before the breakup of Christian unity was undertaken at the Lateran Council, originally summoned by Julius II, and concluded in 1517 under Leo X. Two Camaldolese monks, Giustiniani and Quirini, drew up and presented a reform program that ruthlessly criticized the ignorance of the clergy, papal absorption in politics, and bureaucratic centralization. It called for a whole range of constructive solutions: adequate training for the clergy, revision of Canon Law, and convoking of general councils every five years. It prefigured in a remarkable way the actual reforms of Trent; but its vision was too lofty and spiritual for the man on the throne of Peter at the time. Leo X (d. 1521) had no awareness of the volcano under his feet and little sense of responsibility for the salvation of souls. And so nothing was actually accomplished.

Reform of the Church by council and Pope was not the only possibility envisaged by reformers. Some favored another method: They saw reform beginning at the grass roots, on a small scale, with devout souls who by their personal sanctification, works of charity, and apostolic activity would move their own religious order or parish to undertake reform. It was a quiet, unspectacular way, slow and wearisome, demanding a great amount of patience and self-sacrifice in the face of inevitable misunderstanding and conflict. In religious communities it invariably meant returning to the original ideals of the order and a renewal of the common life, common prayer, and common table. When such a reform party imbued with such ideals

appeared and gathered strength it inevitably tried to secure religious superiors of like mind.

A number of such reform movements can be traced in the records of the fifteenth century: the Franciscan Observantines, led by the great saints and preachers Bernardine of Siena (d. 1444) and John Capistrano (d. 1456), the Benedictines of the Bursfeld and Melk congregations, the Dominican Lombard congregation, and Luther's own Augustinian monastery were examples of strict observance. But the melancholy fact is that not a single order was completely reformed. The work of reformers was constantly frustrated by the failure of Church leaders to support them.

An outstanding contribution to the work of such personal reformation was made by Geert Groote (d. 1384) of the Lowlands, who preached and lived a spirituality that called for a return to Christian inwardness. The Imitation of Christ captures its peculiar flavor. Two important fifteenth-century congregations-the Canons of St. Augustine of Windesheim and the Brethren of the Common Life-owed their beginnings to Groote's inspiration. One order in the Church that never required reform was the Carthusians, who were able to exert considerable influence in favor of renewal during the fifteenth century. Their charterhouse at Cologne, for instance, acted as a spiritual center for the entire lower Rhine region.' There were also reforms associated with the secular clergy-the bishops and the pastors of parishes. These efforts were by their nature less likely to catch the eye than the reform of existing orders or the

foundation of new ones. Undoubtedly we will know more about these movements as history continues its inquiry into diocesan archives and uncovers more information about bishops and pastors who ministered industriously to their flocks, held synods, and tried to engender a renewal of the Church. One of the outstanding experts in the period, Hubert Jedin, gives a whole list of such reforming ! German bishops of the fifteenth century and opines that more reforming activity was carried on in Germany than anywhere else, so that if the ecclesiastical revolution began in Germany it was not in his view because conditions there were worse than elsewhere but because the spiritual awakening there made abuses all the more intolerable.

There were also reform movements that began with the laity. The Oratory of Divine Love, founded in Genoa shortly before the year 1500, was the most famous of these. The main idea of the members was to achieve personal sanctity by means of good works on behalf of others.

Another type of reform was attempted by secular princes: German territorial princes like the Saxon Dukes, who in 1485 were authorized by the Pope to reform the monasteries in their land, or the French Kings who used the great power they had over the Church to further reform. But actually only the Spanish Kings made any real progress in this task. Spain was peculiarly suited for this kind of reform, possessing a number of gifted monastic reformers and prudent and energetic bishops, most notably Ximenes de Cisneros, the experienced and ascetic archbishop of Toledo who for some forty years until his death in 1517 carried out

an impressive reform of the Spanish Church. His new University of Alcalá he made a seminary of bishops and a center of humanistic studies that fused the new learning and the old theology in an original synthesis. Under men like Ximenes the King and clergy learned how to collaborate without detriment to the authority of either in a program that combined reform with respect for tradition. It is no accident that Spain provided the leaders of the extraordinary Catholic Reformation that swept the whole Church after the Council of Trent.

One more type of reform effort deserves mention here in this sketch of pre-Lutheran reformations. This was the kind urged by the Christian humanists. Humanism was an intellectual and artistic movement beginning with Petrarch (d. 1374) that gave a whole new direction to European thought. Unlike the Aristotelian-Scholastic mentality, its point of view was historical and above all critical. It was critical of longstanding Scholastic assumptions in philosophy and theology and in regard to the institutional Church, critical not only of patent abuses but also of venerable traditions. Its favorite weapons were ridicule and irony, which humanists like Erasmus (d. 1536) used relentlessly against Church customs and practices until they incurred-and perhaps justifiably in some cases-the charge of skepticism.

The humanists were dedicated to the idea of reforming the Church by example and education-on the assumption that learning, sacred or profane, would increase piety and that knowledge would make a man better. Such a belief

about the nature of man was much too optimistic, as subsequent European history has only too forcefully demonstrated. Moreover, humanism itself contained too many ambivalences. Its rejection of Scholasticism was too sweeping and endangered the continuity of Catholic tradition. Its emphasis on nature rather than grace and its enthusiasm for secular values led in some cases to outright paganism. Though the leading humanists remained loyal to the old Church-Thomas More even to martyrdom-their reckless criticism of its most sacred institutions undoubtedly prepared the minds of many for Luther's all-out attack.

Nevertheless, humanism did make a positive contribution to the work of reform in influencing the renewal of theology that was to form an important feature of the Tridentine Catholic Reformation. The leading Catholic theologians of this period-Cano (d. 1560) and Vitoria (d. 1546)-would have been inconceivable without the achievements of humanism. Humanism's chief merit in this regard was its insistence on the historical character of Christianity and the need for theologians to nourish their thought constantly by the study of the sources-the Bible and the Fathers of the Church especially. This required an up-to-date study of the ancient languages and the use of methods of historical criticism that humanists like Valla (d. 1457) had developed. The prince of Christian humanists, Erasmus (d. 1536), devoted his life to laying the groundwork for this new biblical, critical, and historical theology. His Greek New Testament (1516) was the first

of its kind in Western Europe, and his monumental editions of the Fathers-the fruit of his incredible capacity for work-provided scholars with access to the wealth of patristic thought.

To sum up, then, the general picture of reform activity before Luther shows a number of bright spots. Individual Christians-laymen and priests-anxiously pursued reform in many and various ways. The general state of the Church was one of pervasive corruption, nevertheless. Unimpeachable Catholic authorities at the time were the first to admit this. This is the substance of what Pope Adrian VI said in his message to the Diet of Nuremberg (1522); it is likewise the gist of the report of the commission of cardinals (1538) who were appointed by Pope Paul III to draw up proposals for reform.

A general reform of the Church could only have succeeded if it had reached the top and seized hold of the papacy itself. Unfortunately, this did not happen until after the Council of Trent. So as the historian Jedin says, "The Protestant Reformation owed its success to the fact that the attempts at reform which sprouted from the soil of the Church did not come to maturity.