



58. THE CATHOLIC REACTION. THE COUNTER-REFORMATION

In contemporary history books the events we have described in the previous chapters are narrated with shameless factiousness. In fact, the Protestant Reformation is shown as an initiative for the palingenesis of a freer and fairer Europe, that soon after had been attacked by the ruthless obscurantist reaction of the inquisitorial Catholic church backed, of course, by the expansionist ambitions of the house of Habsburg. But all this is exactly the opposite of the truth. It was actually the heresy that shook Christendom and the Holy Roman Empire by hunting down Catholics and by the use of violence of the soldiers under the orders of the rebellious German princes. The subversives pretended to be the victims and those who maintained the order were portrayed as repressors¹.



1. Luther. The never happened posting

The Church of Rome tried to talk in any possible way to the fanatics, and in the same manner the Empire showed patience and forbearance towards the rebels. This tolerant behaviour was a mistake and allowed heresy and nationalism to stabilize. The excommunication of Luther came only in 1521, four years after the publication of his theses². As already described, Emperor Charles V, in order not to dishonour the safe-conduct he had granted him, allowed Martin Luther to slip away and seek the protection of the rebellious princes. Immediately afterwards began the aggression of the princes' armies towards convents, monasteries, cathedrals, and the city of Trier, feud of the Electoral Bishop. The revolt of the knights and peasants was directed against the Empire and the Church, until the insurgents became useless and were abandoned and betrayed by Luther and the feudal lords who supported him.

The Counter-Reformation began after twenty years of bargaining, diplomatic efforts, proffers of conciliation, and timid stances that caused a serious delay in reacting to the theological provocation and the devastation of central Europe. The Counter-Reformation movement officially began in 1542, with a first hesitant convocation of the Council of Trent, and ended in 1563. However, these twenty-one years were characterized by strong accelerations and sudden stops: it all depended on the political positions of the five popes who alternated during those years³. The Emperor had to slow down the internal repression against

¹ They also want to blame the Empire for the sack of Rome, when in reality Charles V and Pope Clement VII were still allies. The responsibility of the event must be put on the Constable of Bourbon who was in command of the mercenary lansquenets. He was killed during the assault on the Roman walls, so his troops, mostly Protestants, lacking all control went on a terrifying barbaric plundering spree (André Chastel, *Il sacco di Roma 1527*, Torino, Einaudi, 2010).

² Incidentally, the scenic posting of theses on the door of the cathedral of Wittenberg in 1517 historically never happened, even though it is an unailing episode in school history texts. The episode, indeed, was narrated only thirty years later by Melancthon, the unique source who, moreover, at that date was not even present in Wittenberg. "Præfatio Melanthonis in 'Tomum secundum omnium operum R. D. Martini Lutheri'", in *Corpus Reformatorum* 6, Halis Saxonum, C. A. Schwetschke, 1839, p. 161 and following pages.

³ The popes of the 'Medici party', profoundly influenced by the secular culture of the Renaissance and sympathetic towards France, hindered the natural alliance with the Holy Empire showing a mild reaction towards the Protestant heresy, and thus



his vassals' felony because of the constant external attacks from the "most Christian" France, always ready in supporting the protestants, and of the threat of the expanding Ottoman Empire in the Balkans.



2. Il Concilio di Trento

Finally, in the Council of Trent was decided what follows:

1. The source of religion could not be reduced to the sole reading of the Bible, and it was indispensable the uninterrupted transmission of rites and doctrine that forms the only base of tradition. In order for the tradition to be kept intact, the transmission had to happen through ritually consecrated persons, in other words through bishops and their delegates, priests and deacons. In this way, the Counter-Reformation denounced the anti-traditional character of the various Protestant sects, which lacked of regularly consecrated clergy and therefore lacked of ritual and doctrinal transmission.
2. The reading of the sacred text had to follow the unbroken interpretation of the Church's teachings guaranteed by the transmission of the pontiffs and taught by the clergy. Therefore, personal interpretations of the Bible, based on each individual's own inclinations, were arbitrary and of no value.
3. The sacraments were seven, they were based on the New Testament and the conditions conveyed by the apostles. The sacraments were effective rituals that produced real effects in this life and in the life after death; they were not, therefore, merely empty commemorative ceremonies, like the only two sacraments recognized by the heretics.
4. The Eucharist was confirmed as central sacrament. Christ was born to sacrifice himself for the fallen humanity. The rite of consecration of the bread and wine was the actual renewal of the Good Friday sacrifice and the sacrifice of the cross and not simply a ceremony in memory of the Last Supper, as used by Protestantism.
5. Since the rites were operative, they allowed the accumulation of merits in order to reach heaven after death. Faith, therefore, was not sufficient to obtain salvation, as the Protestants claimed. As already noted, the Protestant denial of the efficacy of the rites is closely linked to their belief in predestination. In fact, in Protestantism the individual, without the grace of faith given by God, cannot act to improve his posthumous destiny.

favouring its consolidation. On the contrary, the popes of the 'Spanish party', more rigorous on religious matters, pushed decisively with the Imperial help for the eradication of the heresy.





6. The rite, therefore, in order to be effective, must be preserved from any voluntary or involuntary modification. The celebrating priest, had to scrupulously follow the Roman canon, with the exception of the few ritual variations consecrated by tradition¹.
7. The ritual language had to be Latin², and St. Jerome's *Latin Vulgate* was declared the canonical text for the Bible. The use of the vernacular was interdicted³.

These points concern the Catholic doctrine and liturgy. Actually, the Council of Trent did not change anything in this area; it merely reaffirmed the tradition in strong opposition to the Reformation. The following points, on the other hand, are innovations that consisted in organizational and behavioural changes in order to repair the defects of the church and the corruption that had been the cause of the moralistic accusations of the heretics⁴.



3. Trent Seminar

8. The Clergy had to be instructed in doctrine, ritual practice, and morality. The doctrine had to be explained with clarity, simplicity and beyond all uncertainty. In this regard, the ponderous medieval theology was synthesized and unified in articles of faith taught by the catechism. The centralization of the Roman rite put an end to the diversity of practice among the various dioceses and nations. More importance was given to the moral theology in order to define without any doubt the behaviour of all consecrated people. Bishops were responsible for overseeing the education of the clergy, by keeping under their supervision and control the new centres of study for the aspiring priests, the seminaries.
9. Bishops were to keep a constant attention onto seminaries, monasteries, and convents, by removing and punishing unworthy individuals.

¹ For example, the ancient Ambrosian ritual used in the Milan area, the Greek ritual of the Ravenna area, the Braga ritual in Portugal, and the medieval ritual of the Carthusian Order, were all maintained.

² The whole of Christian rituals that the consecrated priest celebrates on behalf of the faithful is called 'liturgy'. Literally it means "action on behalf of the people" (Gr. *λαΐτος-ούργια*). Since Latin was also used for individual rites both spoken and mental, it is reductive to consider it only as a liturgical language. During the Middle Ages, when the initiatic practice still existed, Latin formulas, or alternately the Greek ones, were used. Latin, therefore, must be considered to all effects the sacred language of Roman Christianity. The appearance of Hebrew in pseudo-initiatic inscriptions or in Renaissance magical evocations-came later and can be attributed to the syncretism of Christian *Qabbalah*.

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⁴ It will be recalled that the Lutheran subversive movement began with the specious criticism of the sale of indulgences. The specific case was the collection of funds for the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Without those indulgences, the basilica would have never been built to marvel the following centuries. Protestant moralists, on the other hand, took over Catholic churches and transformed them into reformed 'temples', destroying ancient paintings and sculptures, as result of their iconoclasm and hatred for the cult of saints. This explains the distressful hangar or garage-like squalor of their 'temples'. On the other hand, the moralist-in-chief, Martin Luther, preferred to convert the monastery in which he lived as an Augustinian monk into a luxurious residence for his family.



10. Parishes and dioceses had to commit themselves to nurture and instruct the faithful, working for the recovery of the weaker or morally stray fringes of society. To this end, numerous 'religious orders'¹ were created and dedicated to an action of social relief.
11. The Roman Pontiff was proclaimed the sole guarantor and absolute sovereign of all Catholics, in complete continuity with the secularization begun five centuries earlier by Gregory VII; with the aggravating circumstance that at that time the prestige of the Holy Roman Empire was threatened by the national kingdoms born during those centuries. The imperial prestige was now of a symbolic and moral order, but in practice it was not followed. The pope, realizing this, decided to align the Emperor alongside the various reigning kings and princes, all strictly subordinate to him. Unfortunately, he did not realize that even the papal authority was now perceived in the same way and that, politically, the State of the Church had no longer real power, but only a moral one. By denying the imperial primacy, the pope also demolished his own authority.

The decisions made by the Council of Trent resulted in an entrenchment of Catholicism in a new crystallized form. The clarity of doctrine simplified in the catechism brought to the proliferation of dogmas, i.e., indemonstrable postulates of faith. Catholic society, by assuming more austere rules, seemed to purify itself. However, without realizing it, the conduct of the Counter-Reformation towards a more moralistic behaviour became similar to the Protestant one. The education of the ignorant masses through catechism indeed benefited the common people and the lower clergy; however, it led to a considerable intellectual impoverishment in comparison with the scholasticism of the Middle Ages as pursued by the Dominicans and Franciscans.



4. The Catechism of the Council of Trent

¹ With the Middle Ages decline, the 'contemplative monastic orders' lost their sacerdotal science, the patristic doctrine and the corresponding initiation. In order to overcome this loss, the 'pauperistic mendicant orders' such as the Franciscan and the Dominican, appeared; certainly, some of these friars had obtained an initiation, but a knightly or a trade one that were completely foreigner to the orders they belonged to. The Franciscans devoted themselves to the guidance of souls in the cities by indicating a righteous and simple life; the Dominicans, on the other hand, specialized in the teaching of theology and philosophical speculation. Both concurred in founding universities and in professing scholasticism. The new 'religious orders' of sixteenth-century on the other hand, devoted themselves to social activities such as, for example, the basic teaching of catechism to children, canteens to feed the indigent, asylums for the recovery of prostitutes, assistance to prisoners, institutes for the reception of foundlings, etc. Over the centuries, this tendency towards social work has become the sole purpose of Catholicism, to the detriment of all other truly religious activities.



The absence of a Catholic sapiential esotericism for several centuries resulted in two opposing phenomena. To the first one we have dedicated our previous writings of this Series starting from chapter 48: the lack of cognitive or, at least, devotional initiation, pushed the humanists to create from book-based sources an anti-Catholic magical occultism founded on the hermetic-qabbalistic syncretism. The second was the birth of mysticism, sometimes spontaneous, sometimes induced by certain practices. The religious orders reacted correctly against Protestant or agnostic pseudo-initiations. However, in doing so they built a wall around the Catholic Church that would also prevent any interchange with a regular initiation. In fact, from that moment on, the post-Tridentine Church confused any form of authentic initiation, that was still surviving in the West, with occultism and Satanism, all branded indiscriminately as ‘Gnosticism’. From then on, this constituted a true incompatibility between Catholicism and initiation.



5. Ludovica Albertoni. Spontaneous ecstasy

Mysticism¹: we assume that the reader is aware that *mystica* and *mystes*² correspond to an initiatic condition, while mysticism and mystic describe a spontaneous phenomenon of a psychological order. The mystic manifests from birth certain characteristics and mental inclinations that provoke in him involuntary subtle experiences and that, as such, are considered bestowed on him by the divine grace. Generally, these experiences intensify during the adolescence, determining in the youth choices regarding their future adult life. These experiences, although multiple and specific to each individual, can be divided into two categories: sensory experiences while remaining in a waking state, such as the perception of visions, voices and sounds, smells, touches³, etc. Or experiences that are defined contemplative and that are experienced during the ecstasy⁴.

In specific initiatic terms, the use of the definition ‘contemplative experiences’ is erroneous, since in the initiatic path contemplation is a desire for knowledge⁵ and not a passive reception of the divine grace. Scholasticism defines the ecstasy as the separation of the soul from the body, which is equally an inaccurate concept, since such separation would lead to immediate death. Nevertheless, the theological

¹ Subject partly already covered in the third article of this series “Initiation and Mysticism”.

² It is therefore correct to regard Eckhart’s doctrine as *mystica* and him as *mystes*, although his followers, Tauler, Suso, the ‘Friends of God’, as well as Beguinage, are more correctly to be counted among the currents of mysticism.

³ Some of them manifested the Christic stigmata or other wounds as suffered by holy martyrs of the past. Like all those who passively receive these experiences, also the mystic, in the event that the phenomenon does not occur, is driven to fraud and simulation of the ‘divine signs’.

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas (*Le questioni disputate. IV: De anima*, Bologna, Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 2001, II.II, q. 175 a. 3) distinguishes three degrees of ecstasy: suspension of the external senses, suspension of both external and internal senses, direct contemplation of the divine essence.

⁵ Note that *jijñāsā* is still a mental activity (*mānasa kriyā*) despite the fact that it is considered non-action (*akarma*) because it does not produce other action (*karma phala*).



description, however limited and fallacious, is useful for understanding the meaning of mysticism in Catholicism. To use a cultural anthropological language now widespread in contemporary pseudo-theology, ecstasy is, an altered state of consciousness¹. This correctly places mysticism together with similar spontaneous phenomena, such as the shamanic transe, the mediumistic transe and other types of passive possession. Consequently, the religious upbringing of the mystic would determine whether his or her sensory or ecstatic experiences should be considered orthodox² or heterodox³. However, even among orthodox mystics, it remains uncertain how to differentiate which of their subtle experiences should be considered of divine origin and which of a demonic one⁴.

Spontaneous mystic phenomena were already present in Catholicism towards the end of the Middle Ages when sapiential initiation had receded, and they became quite common in the Renaissance period, as if to counterbalance the spread of witchcraft among common people and the Renaissance occultism among scholars.



6. Ecstasy of St Teresa of Avila

In this same period another kind of Catholic mysticism appeared, not spontaneous but induced by prayers and ascetic practices that can be traced back to the Jewish environment. Examples are the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola⁵ and the practices to promote the ecstasy⁶ of St. Teresa of Avila⁷.

¹ The extent of the corruption of thinking, due to scientism, of contemporary Catholic pseudo-theologians is proven by the following exposition: “This necessity is so decisive that for Aquinas: It is clear that the sensitive faculties are necessary for us in order to be able to think, not only in the phase of acquiring knowledge but also in using the knowledge already acquired. [...] Here Thomas has an insight that only the modern medical sciences, particularly neurophysiopathology, have acquired. [...] Today we know how and why a lesion of parts of the brain leads to serious difficulties in its overall functioning...” (Don Sergio Simonetti, “Mystical Knowledge in St. Thomas Aquinas,” Rome, *Teresianum* 57, 2006/2, pp. 599-612).

² These considerations are valid for monotheistic religions, with the exception of Eastern Orthodox Christianity and the Islamic *Sunnah*, where the phenomenon did not happen. Therefore, it is fair to assume that the post-Qabbalistic tendencies of Judaism were mystical experiences as well as were those of the Islamic *Shi'a* after the decline of Sufism in the Imamite environment.

³ Meaning reformed: among the latter are known the cases of Jakob Böhme, George Fox, Emanuel Swedenborg and others.

⁴ From a metaphysical point of view, we cannot accept at all as origin of certain psychic phenomena neither God nor the devil, as it is assumed in theological circles. We prefer to interpret them as projections of the *sāttvika*, *rājasa* or *tāmasa* tendencies of the individual's own nature (*svabhava*).

⁵ Ignatius was a *hidalgo* descended from a Jewish family converted to Christianity and his secretary, Diego Laínez, was Jewish by birth. (C. Carrete y C. Fraile, *Los judeoconvertos de Almazán. 1501-1505. Origen familiar de los Laínez*, Salamanca, Universidad Pontificia, 1987). The meditative isolation required for the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius is the Christian transposition of the Qabbalistic *hitbonenuth*.

⁶ The evident sensual characteristics of these ecstatic states has always casted doubt on whether these were influences of the lubricious heretical current of the *alumbrados* of Toledo; although St. Teresa was kept under control by the Holy Office for this reason, the ecclesiastical tribunal was never able to prove the truth of this suspicion.

⁷ “In the course of the investigation, it emerged that the Jew Juan Sánchez, a wealthy silk merchant living in Toledo and a convert to Christianity, i.e., *converso*, was accused of having secretly returned to the practice of Judaism and therefore



However, this mysticism must not be mistaken with the Christian *Qabbalah* founded by the Marquis of Mirandola. In fact, Spanish mystics borrowed the Jewish techniques to aid Catholic religious and completely exoteric practices, while the Christian *Qabbalah* represented a Judaization of the hermetic magic thus showing its esoteric pretensions.



7. Vision of Saint Ignatius of Loyola

Jesuits and Carmelites, rapidly spread these preparatory techniques to mysticism throughout the Latin world in order to contain the Protestant expansion.

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considered a *marrano* [crypto-Jews]. After a raid by the Suprema, the Inquisition Tribunal, Juan Sánchez had chosen to make a confession and therefore, having been judged guilty, had atoned for his guilt on July 20, 1485: he was flogged in public, forced to put on the black 'sambenito' (blessed sackcloth) and paid a considerable fine. After this bitter matter, Juan Sánchez and his family moved to Ávila, changed their surnames, and his sons lived as nobles and married women from the most important social circles in Ávila. The *marrano* was none other than the father of don Alonso de Cepeda, therefore grandfather of doña Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada. [...] Teresa was aware of this family background, but never mentioned it in her writings, although some signs revealed a connection with the religious tradition of her family. In fact, similarities are appreciable between Judaism and Teresa's mysticism, for example between the Jewish prayer and Teresa's oration; the "we will do and listen" of the Torah and Teresa's "works"; halacha, the path through existence of the Jew and Teresa's Path of Perfection; kavannah and deveqúth as participation to the divine Presence, the shekinah, and the concentration as taught and practiced by Teresa; berachà, the blessing that gives rhythm to the day of the pious Jew and that is similarly present in all the works of the Carmelite; tzimtzum, the contraction of God in the individual own profound essence leaving space and autonomy to creation corresponds to the contraction of Teresa's life in a delimited space, accepting the tzimtzum of one's own body and spirit in celibacy. All experienced within history in order to restore the world, in tikkun 'olam, in communion with the Most High. (Vito Luigi Valente, "Nonno marrano," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 2.10.2014)

