

Reaction and Renewal: Roman Catholic Church in the Modern World

We are going to take one last look at the Roman Catholic Church in our survey of church history. The next lesson will focus on Eastern Orthodoxy. I would like to begin with an old prayer, a prayer that comes from the Roman Catholic tradition. It comes from what is called The Sarum Primer, which is an old Roman name for Salisbury in England. The particular liturgy that was used at Sarum or Salisbury in England was one that was very important in the late medieval period and one that the Reformers (Thomas Cranmer and others) used in drawing up the English *Book of Common Prayer* for the Church of England. So, it is a prayer that has roots in the Roman Catholic tradition but was also used in the Protestant tradition. These are familiar words. Please pray them with me as I pray.

“God, be in my head and in my understanding. God, be in my eyes and in my looking. God, be in my mouth and in my speaking. God, be in my heart and in my thinking. God, be at my end and at my departing. Amen.”

I want us to have a very brief overview of Roman Catholic history going back to the sixteenth century and working up to the twentieth century. So, we will have to be extremely brief. Let me try to characterize those various centuries of Catholic history as we have this rapid survey.

The sixteenth century, of course, was the century of the Reformation. At first, the Catholic Church suffered great setbacks as the Protestant movement became very strong and won much of Northern Europe—and some of Eastern Europe as well—to the Protestant cause. However, by the time that century wore on, there was a counter-Reformation, which we studied earlier, and the Catholic Church was able to recover from the shock of the Reformation. In time, the Catholic Church was aggressively on the move in Europe, including in Hungary, where large tracts of territory were won back from the Protestants and the Reformed faith, as we saw in an earlier lesson. The Catholic Church was also aggressively on the move worldwide by the seventeenth century through the ministry of the Catholic orders, particularly the Jesuits.

The eighteenth century was a century of great decline; it was not one of the great centuries in the history of the Catholic Church. There were many setbacks and reversals in Catholic history during the 1700s. There were a number of reasons for that. The first was the collapse of Portugal and Spain as world powers. These were Catholic powers, and as world powers, the empires of Portugal and Spain hoped to widely extend the Catholic Church. However, during the eighteenth century, it was not Portugal and Spain but the Netherlands and England that became the great world powers, and those countries were Protestant. The second reason was the growing hostility of China and Japan to Catholic missions. The Catholic Church had made some headway in these great countries in the seventeenth century, but in the eighteenth century, missionaries were expelled, Christians were killed, and the Catholic movement was stopped in the Orient.

The third reason for the decline was the dissolution of the Jesuit order in 1773. You might wonder why the Jesuits were dissolved. The Pope dissolved the order. It was dissolved because there were many Catholic rulers and Catholics throughout the church who, by this time, opposed that most Catholic order—the Society of Jesus. The Jesuit fathers proposed to achieve their ends by whatever means were necessary—by the weapons of heaven when they could and by the weapons of earth when they could not. This made a lot of enemies both outside and inside the Catholic Church. So the Pope finally suppressed the Jesuit order in 1773. At least 3000 missionaries were removed from the field by that order. The Jesuits continued to exist, but they existed underground and without the influence they had

prior to 1773, even though the order was reconstituted in 1814. It once again became an order of the Catholic Church, and today it is a very important part of the Catholic Church. The fourth reason that the Catholic Church declined in the eighteenth century was the anti-clericalism of the French Revolution. The French Revolution was anti-church, anti-clergy, and anti-God. Because the Catholic Church was the powerful church in France, the Catholic Church took the brunt of the French Revolution and Napoleon's cynical use of the Catholic Church in the post-revolutionary period.

Well, that was a brief look at the eighteenth century. There was a decline in portions of Catholicism during the same century that revival was stirring the Protestant world among the Pietists and Moravians, through the evangelical revival in England, Wales, and Scotland and the Great Awakening in America.

As we come to the nineteenth century, we come to the most conservative century in Roman Catholic history. During almost all of the nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church tried to stand against the tide of modernism—political modernism, liberal modernism, and everything modern. The church took its stand against all of this. It was a century of renewed missionary activity. The great missionary pope in modern times was Gregory XVI. The pope took the name Gregory and therefore gave people the indication that he had missions at the top of his agenda. Gregory I was the great missionary who helped to expand the Christian faith to England back in the early Middle Ages. The nineteenth century was also the century of the triumph of ultramontanism, which means “the control of the papacy.” It was the Roman Catholic Church with an emphasis on “Roman” as over against the Gallatin Church, the French Church, or any other national church that was Catholic with an emphasis on internal control of the church. Ultramontanism said that the pope controls the church worldwide.

It is interesting that the nineteenth century is when Italy finally moved toward some kind of national unification. Most of the countries in Europe had achieved this many years earlier, even centuries earlier. However, Italy was still divided into various parts until the nineteenth century. In 1848, Mancini, one of the Italian patriots who helped forge the unity of Italy as a nation, said triumphantly, “The papacy is dead!” This was because the papacy had opposed the unification of Italy. However, the papacy was far from dead in 1848. In fact, just two years before this, in 1846, Pius IX had been named pope, and his pontificate would extend for 32 years—the longest pontificate in Roman Catholic history.

Under Pius IX, opposition to any kind of liberalism characterized the nineteenth century in Roman Catholic history. Political liberalism was an anathema to the Catholic Church. Robert de Lamennais was a French Catholic who wanted to identify the church with the progressive movement of democracy in Europe, in Latin America, and elsewhere. He finally despaired of bringing the Catholic Church into this modern movement. It was forced out of the church. The Catholic Church set itself as a defender of the status quo and opposed modern democratic movements in Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere. The most symbolic statement of the pope's opposition to modern thought—both good and bad—is found in the Syllabus of Errors set forth in 1864 in which 80 errors were condemned—things like public schools and all sorts of modern ideas. The culminating error that was condemned in the Syllabus of Errors was “The Roman Pontiff can and ought to reconcile and harmonize himself with progress, with liberalism, and with modern civilization.” So, the Roman Catholic Church had effectively shut itself off from the modern world—both the good things and the bad things.

It was also in the nineteenth century that the doctrine of Mary came into prominence. The doctrine of Mary was part of the teaching of the church for many centuries but not like it became in the nineteenth century. In 1854, the pope set forth the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, which meant that Mary was not subject to original sin. She was born without sin just as Christ was born without sin. It is

sad that this is a dogma that must be firmly believed by every Catholic. It is not an incidental point but central to the Catholic faith.

About 100 years later, in 1950, a second dogma was added to the Immaculate Conception of Mary and that is the Assumption of Mary, which really flowed out of the earlier dogma. According to the Assumption of Mary, Mary completely overcame sin by her Immaculate Conception. As a result, she was not subject to the law of remaining in the corruption of the grave, and she did not have to wait until the end of time for the redemption of her body. So, at her death, Mary, who was born without sin, was taken directly into heaven.

Now, Protestants say that all of that has no Scriptural support nor does it really have any serious support in the tradition of the ancient church. It was only in the medieval period and the post-medieval period that you can find tradition—church doctors who began to move in this direction. This did not bother Pius IX when he set forth the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary in 1854. Someone asked him, “What is your support for this? What is your tradition for this?” Pius’ response was, “I am tradition,” and the Catholic Church accepted that answer. The fact that the Pope was the ongoing teacher of the church and successor to Peter, he was able to add doctrine on his own accord. There was no Scriptural support and no ancient church tradition. It was just the word of the pope based on the consensus of the church. Most people favored this and what was considered the suitability of the doctrine. If you read through that dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary and particularly of the dogma of the Assumption of Mary, you can see how strongly it is stated. Mary is called “the noble associate of the divine Redeemer,” and Mary is brought closer and closer to Christ in just about everything—another step in the Catholic tendency to blur the line between God and man. Karl Barth made the comment, “That damned Catholic ‘and!’” Karl Barth’s strong word has to do with the “and,” not with Mary. He was objecting to the fact that the Catholics add “and,”—Scripture *and* reason, faith *and* works, Christ *and* Mary—which always seems to add something to what the Bible says and what Christ has said. Now, that was Barth’s criticism, and I do not think it is inappropriate for us to think about. It would certainly not apply to every Catholic in every situation. The infallibility of the pope—that is, when he speaks *ex cathedra*—was used only once, and that was in the dogma of the Assumption of Mary in 1950.

We come now to Vatican I and its teaching, which took place in 1870. This was the same year that the pope lost control of all but the Vatican because his temporal rule was restricted to the Vatican in 1870. So, the pope’s temporal claim to part of central Italy was restricted to the Vatican only—those few acres surrounding Saint Peter’s. The pope, of course, protested that for a long time. It was not until the twentieth century during the time of Mussolini that the pope was willing to accept that temporal restriction. The year 1870 marked the withdrawal of the pope to the Vatican and also the expansion of the power of the pope in spiritual areas. The famous “thunderstorm,” the most spectacular declaration of doctrine in Roman Catholic history, took place. With a final vote of 522 in favor, 2 opposed, and 100 abstaining, the cardinals, bishops, and archbishops passed the dogma of papal infallibility—that when the Roman pontiff speaks *ex cathedra* (when in discharge of his office of pastor and doctor of all Christians), he is endowed with the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter with that infallibility with which our blessed Redeemer willed that the church should be furnished in defining doctrine of faith or morals. This means that when the pope speaks *ex cathedra* (and he speaks *ex cathedra* when he says that he speaks *ex cathedra*), when he speaks out of the chair, officially and publicly as the teacher of the church, he is infallible. This, of course, represented the ultimate triumph of the papacy over the Conciliar movement in the Catholic Church, which was a council to end all councils because if the pope speaks *ex cathedra* infallibly then there is no need for church council.

Most of the Catholics went along with this, but this particular statement from Vatican I brought some protests from not only Protestants but also Catholics. Charles Hodge wrote a letter to the pope, turning down the pope's suggestion that Presbyterians attend Vatican I and giving the reasons why he did not think that was appropriate. Not only did Protestants object to this but some Catholics did as well, though not many. There is a group of people in the world today called "old Catholics." They are mainly in the Netherlands, but they are in other places, too, in Central Europe. They were opposed to the doctrine of papal infallibility, so they withdrew from the Catholic Church. Those old Catholics merged with the Jansenists. Today, there are 350,000 old Catholics in full communion with the Church of England. The dogma of papal infallibility has only been used once, which is curious. You would think that the pope, facing unrest within the Catholic Church, would today draw upon that dogma again to settle some of the problems that the Catholic Church is facing. However, the popes have been very reluctant to use the dogma; they have used it only once.

After hearing a lecture by Richard John Neuhaus, I was interested that he struggled with this dogma quite a bit. He was a Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor who became a Roman Catholic some years ago, and it seems to me that Mariology and papal infallibility are two problems that he continues to try to wrestle with and explain in some ways. He did make the statement that it would be possible for the pope to speak ex cathedra and to set forth some teaching in opposition to the Gospel. For instance, Neuhaus did not want to suggest that this could really happen; however, something like this could conceivably happen. He said that theoretically the pope could say ex cathedra that Mary was the fourth member of the Trinity. Then what would happen? Neuhaus said, "There would be a crisis in the Catholic Church. The church would not allow that to stand. Somehow that would be overturned. It would be a great crisis and great struggle, but it would not stand." It seems to me that Dr. Neuhaus is defining infallibility in an odd way—that is, the pope is infallible only when he is right, and if he is wrong, the church would not follow him. This probably does mean that this dogma, for all of its impressiveness in the way it is set forth, is more or less a dead letter in the Catholic Church. I do not know that we will ever see it used in our lifetime. It may never be used again, but it does stand on the books (as we might say) as Roman Catholic teaching and one of the great hindrances as Protestants and Catholics talk about what they have in common and about where they differ.

Let us come to the twentieth century now, a century of dramatic changes. John XXIII, who was a pope for only five years, was one of the most beloved popes in history. He called a council in January 1959. In October 1962, 2300 cardinals, bishops, and archbishops arrived in Rome to begin what we call Vatican II. Vatican I is famous for the infallibility of the pope. Vatican II is famous for the modernizing of the Catholic Church. I think we can summarize Vatican II with a few points: the renewal of the church, new openness toward separated brethren, and the continuing commitment of the Roman Catholic Church to the papacy and to Catholic dogma.

First, there was a renewal of the church. Vatican II was an attempt to bring the Roman Catholic Church into the modern world. The nineteenth century had resisted the Catholic Church's being part of the modern world. The twentieth century, at least after Vatican II, was a reversal of policy as the Catholic Church attempted to come to terms with much, or at least some, of the modern world. The Italian word, *aggiornamento*, which means "updating or redefining," is frequently used to describe what happened to the Catholic Church in the 1960s. Things began to take place in the Catholic Church that gave it a more modern tone. For instance, the liturgy was modernized and used in vernacular languages, not in Latin. Music also changed. Guitars and other musical instruments were used in worship. Folk masses became very popular. So, in many ways, the church attempted to redefine itself and to become more attractive to people in the modern world.

There was also a new openness toward non-Catholics. I think this is perhaps, for Protestants, the most significant thing that happened in Vatican II. After Vatican II, Protestants were not viewed as heretics but as separated brethren. The church stopped thinking of the Protestants and other non-Catholics as guilty of invincible ignorance, which is now called involuntary ignorance. However, Vatican II still could not bring itself to call Protestant churches “churches.” Churches of Protestants and others are still considered ecclesial fellowships because the only church is the Roman Catholic Church. But, this was a significant change in attitude. The door was opened by Vatican II to move toward Protestants in a friendlier and more positive manner. However, Vatican II continued the commitment of the Roman Catholic Church to the papacy. It did not change the attitude of the church or the power of the pope. It affirmed that the college or body of bishops has no authority unless it is understood together with the Roman pontiff. The pope’s power of primacy over all, both pastors and faithful, remains whole and intact. So, there was no reversal there—no democratic movement despite the restlessness of bishops in the Netherlands, America, and other places where there is a continual move to bring a change in the structures of the Roman Catholic Church. Nothing has happened yet in that regard and probably will not for a long, long time.

Vatican II also continued official Catholic dogma. It did not change the theology of the Catholic Church, although some of the emphases of the Council of Trent have at least been sequestered or sidelined if not controverted. Now you have to listen very carefully to see if a Catholic is talking about the doctrine of Trent or something else. The doctrine of Trent is still officially the dogma of the church. This was clearly set forth in the new catechism of the Catholic Church statement of the Second Vatican Council’s reforms. Much in that new catechism appealed to Protestants and was encouraging to us as an indication of new thought and activity within the Catholic Church. However, the normal, standard message that still comes through in the new catechism and Trent (although you can interpret Trent in various ways—with a Protestant interpretation or a semi-Pelagian interpretation) is something like this: God wants to help you and indeed does help you to be worthy of salvation, but you have to help Him to put forth your will and make an effort if you are to be saved. We are capable of spurning divine aid or accepting it by a free act of assent. Since God refuses His assistance to no one, our salvation depends ultimately on us. This, of course, is a very semi-Pelagian way of summarizing popular, modern Catholic teaching, but I think it is accurate. It does not mean that all Catholics believe that. In fact, some Catholics would very much object to that as a summary of their faith. However, that kind of way of salvation can be heard on a popular level in the Catholic Church in many, many places.

What was the response of Catholics to Vatican II? There were three responses. Some Catholics were very dismayed by all of this and wanted to return to a traditional Catholic past. This has not gained favor in the modern church, and those traditionalist priests and others have found themselves more and more marginalized in the modern Catholic Church. Other Catholics have become more evangelical. The Bible has assumed a larger place in the life of many Catholics. Even the doctrine of justification by faith can be heard espoused by some Catholics. So, there has been a movement within the Catholic Church after Vatican II toward evangelicalism. Third, among other Catholics, there was a rush into modernism. Vatican II was interpreted as allowing the church to move more toward liberal positions in theology. In Vatican II, the scope of the Bible’s inerrancy was limited to matters that deal with salvation only. So, the inerrancy of Scripture (what is absolutely true and cannot be compromised) applies only when the Bible talks about salvation. Where the Bible talks about history or something else, it is a different category besides inerrancy. It was this shift (the Catholic Church never likes to talk about shifts; it is always the same in the Catholic Church) that has allowed the pope now to speak about evolution as more than a theory, as something coming close to being a fact because the Bible does not have to be looked at when it talks about things concerning creation in the same way that it has to be looked at when it talks about salvation. We know, of course, that many well-taught and prominent evangelicals have converted to the

Roman Catholic Church in recent years. It is interesting that those incoming evangelicals have been passing outgoing Roman Catholics at the threshold coming into the Protestant church or into evangelicalism. It is a two-way street there.

Last year, when I was giving this lesson, one of the students told me that she was led to Christ by a Roman Catholic priest who told her how to be born again. She said, "I am no longer a Catholic and neither is the priest." So, there are people who are moving out of the Catholic Church and into the Protestant church. There are certainly Protestants who are moving into the Catholic Church. Some have left an evangelical heritage, such as Thomas Howard, who was trained at Wheaton College and was teaching at Gordon College. He was from a famous evangelical family. He is the brother of Elisabeth Elliot. A few years ago, Thomas Howard stunned the Protestant evangelical world by announcing that he had converted to the Catholic Church. Not long after that, Richard John Neuhaus, from a confessional Orthodox Protestant Church, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, became a Roman Catholic.

Why do evangelicals and confessional Orthodox become Roman Catholics? Let me suggest three reasons. The first is an historical consciousness, that is, the impressiveness of the Roman Catholic Church as having stood against time and enemies all the way down to the present. The Roman Catholic Church has a kind of historical continuity going back, its adherents claim, at least to Peter. When Thomas Howard converted to the Catholic Church, he gave some reasons in an interview in *Christianity Today*. He said, "In my mind, the titanic edifice, which is the Roman Catholic Church, in all of its radiance and super abundance, really was the thing that I found inexorable: the greatness, the majesty, the historical continuity of the Roman Catholic Church." The historical continuity is impressive to people. The second reason is dogmatic certainty. In a world in which churches are divided and everybody seems to have a different opinion about what is right and wrong, there is a longing for certainty and for someone or something to say, "This is what we ought to believe." Protestantism, of course, has infallible Scripture but not an infallible interpreter of that Scripture. So, Protestantism does not have an infallible teaching office to guarantee an infallible understanding of the Christian faith. There are many people who are dismayed at the fragmentation of Protestant churches and long to find some kind of certainty—something absolute—and they think they see it in the Roman Catholic Church. The third reason usually given (and these are almost always the three reasons given by the Protestant who converts to Catholicism) is transcendence in worship and sacramental worship, which is viewed as deeper, richer, and more meaningful than Protestant worship, which is described as weak, anemic, and ineffective. I am not going to take time to answer those points. I think you can do that for yourself. But, those are the three reasons that are commonly given for conversion to the Catholic Church.

In recent years, the movement called "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" has become important and very impressive to us. It was from the 1994 document called "Evangelicals and Catholics together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium." People like J. I. Packer, Charles Colson, Os Guinness, Nathan Hatch, and Mark Noll on the Protestant side as well as some influential Catholics met together to try to see what Catholics and Protestants had in common. The document produced a great deal of discussion, dissention, and debate. It was not noticed very much among Catholics, but it was noticed among the evangelicals. It did result in a large amount of debate and many responses, including the response of the 23rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). This response strongly asserts the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone. I noticed that it does it with a long quotation from Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*. The document acknowledges that there are true Christians in the Roman Catholic Church. It also states that there are many Protestants who fail to understand the doctrine of justification by faith alone. So, it is not only Catholics who are wrong when they do not teach this but also Protestant churches and individual Protestants who do not teach it either. The document rejoices in the new emphasis on holy Scripture in the Catholic Church and in the

principle opposition of the Roman Catholic Church to some of our national sins. It seems that it is an appropriate and balanced statement between both the problems facing evangelicals as they look at the church and great appreciation for the Catholic Church and many of the good things it does.

As a follow-up do that document, a second one called “The Gift of Salvation” was published late in 1997. It is also causing a certain amount of debate. Some Protestants think that that statement is really selling out the Reformation doctrine of *sola fide*. Other very strict Protestants have argued that it is a very appropriate statement and that it is an amazing consensus between some Catholics (because this is not an official document of the Catholic Church) and some Protestants who are able to come very close to agreeing (if not really agreeing) on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. I think it is an amazing statement, and as you read “The Gift of Salvation,” you will probably wonder, “Could a Catholic really say this?” I am not saying it is a perfect statement. There are places it could be even stronger, but it is much stronger than I would have expected a few years ago—that prominent Catholics would be able to come as close to saying what Luther and Calvin said, as they do in this document. It does not mean that we need to think that everything is solved, but it is a beginning step. We can pray that God will continue to use this movement to bring revival to His church—both to Catholics and to Protestants.

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isaiah 40:8).