Catholic Counter-Reformation: Crash Course European History #9

Crash Course: European History
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[introduction]

Hi, I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History. So, last week we took a break from religion to show that amidst warfare and bitter controversy over doctrine, people were also inventing and innovating and enslaving. Europeans were eating new foods, hanging out more in cities and making advances in commerce and legal protections for some people... while also inventing systems of oppression to enslave others.

Years ago historians firmly believed that the Protestant religion promoted capitalism. That is, all the business and commerce that were springing up at the time were caused by the Reformation. Some historians still find that Martin Luther's *other worldly* interests expanded to *this worldly* activities like reading, in ways that boosted prosperity. But the rise of capitalism was complex. And also, it happened in non-Protestant communities. So today, let's shift perspectives back to how the Catholics were handling all this.

Were they ready to simply surrender their influence in European society? Did the Church just turn its back on this momentous challenge of Protestantism and continue down its much criticized path? No. They responded. Leaders in the faithful created a sturdy, even strident, Catholic-Reformation or Counter-Reformation that also provided a little grease to the wheels of commerce. And today, we're going to look at the Catholic Reformation and how it influenced not just Europe, but the world.

[title sequence]

The task of reform fell to Pope Paul the Third, who, like many Renaissance popes, lived in the lap of luxury and engaged in corrupt practices such as appointing two of his grandsons cardinals in their early teens. He only hired the best people. Also, why does this pope have grandsons? That reminds me of the great last words of the Irish poet, Brendan Behan. A nun was giving him an injection and he said:

"Bless you sister. May all your sons be bishops."

Then he died.

But Pope Paul the Third did understand, partly because of external pressure, that the Catholic Church needed to shape up. Several attempts at undertaking reforms in formal meetings were blocked by powerful individuals though, who liked the status quo. Powerful individuals and the status quo, the greatest love story of this or any time.

But the Church was tired of seeing its overall power decrease, so in 1545, the Council of Trent, composed of high church officials, assembled to stop the Protestant momentum. And this council continued until 1563, a series of meetings that lasted so long that by the time it was over both Pope Paul the Third and his successor Julius the Third had died. I've definitely had meetings that felt 18 years long. I'm not sure if they were though.

So among the adherents to Protestantism were some of the most powerful princes and members of the nobility in Europe, and some Catholic leaders wanted those Protestants on their side. But eventually, the Council decided not to compromise. Instead the pronouncements of the Council of Trent were stark and emphatic. Already in 1542 while waiting for a council actually to get organized, the papacy had expanded the work of the Inquisition, which had been established in the 13th century to stamp out heresies in southern France and Italy. But now the Inquisition targeted Protestants, and searched for heresy also among conquered people in the New World. The Council also affirmed principles of *transubstantiation*, that is, the belief that the blood and wine of the communion sacrament become the actual body and blood of Jesus. It upheld the centrality of the Seven Sacraments and the selling of indulgences stuck around too. Clergy were to remain celibate and chaste, unlike most Protestant clerics. And all Catholics were to continue to live by faith and practice good works as their path to salvation, not by faith alone, like the Protestants.

The Church also began establishing seminaries where priests could become more informed in Catholic theology, and reformers felt this training was sorely needed for priests because they were being confronted by complicated Protestant challenges to Catholic doctrine.

And the Church began the Papal Index, a list of books that Catholics were forbidden to read. In addition, the Church reached deeper into society when it began to further regulate marriages. With the creation of a list of forbidden books and a declaration of power over marriage, the Counter-Reformation took Catholicism from a point of weakness and actually expanded its power, at least over those who believed. Even before these events, what would become a major bulwark of Catholicism and its Counter-Reformation was taking shape, because in the 1520s after being shot as a soldier in one of Spain's wars, a Spanish nobleman took up the challenge to fortify Catholicism.

Just as Luther had wrestled with his faith, Ignatius of Loyola suffered spiritual agonies and emerged as a charismatic leader. But unlike Luther, Ignatius and his followers remained loyal to the Catholic Church. In 1540, the Pope declared Ignatius's followers a religious order called the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits. Many pre-existing Catholic religious orders were rededicating themselves to protect and nourish their faith. But Loyola's approach was especially effective given the challenges from Protestantism in the 1520s and thereafter.

First, because he organized and ran his group like an army around a hierarchy of command; joining required several years of training and a strict code of discipline. And all of that was timely because of the Church's reputation for corruption and lax morals and in many cases, priestly incompetence, including ignorance of Latin. That wasn't a problem with the Jesuits.

Second, the Jesuits founded schools where humanistic education thrived alongside religious instruction.

These became a mechanism for combining the latest in intellectual practice with the revitalization and reaffirmation of Catholic theology. And it was important because one of the attractions of Protestantism was its emphasis on broader literacy so that everyone could connect directly with scripture. The Jesuits argued that Catholics could also spread education, which is why incidentally there are so many Loyola Universities around the world.

And that brings us to our final point about the Jesuits. In addition to reforming Catholicism in Europe, the Jesuits undertook globalizing the faith as a regular part of their mission. Through them, Catholicism truly did become a world religion, reaching India and Japan and Africa and the New World. And this Jesuit activism in establishing global relationships would eventually transform Europe in ways that have only recently gained the attention of historians. Let's go to the ThoughtBubble.

[entering the ThoughtBubble]

The Jesuits interacted worldwide with an eye on both short and long term results. They wanted to convert souls, but they also wanted, through schools, to shape the way that young people learned, and thus their perspective. It's important to remember that no education is morally neutral. What you learn about shapes the way you look at

the world. And as they travelled, the Jesuits were in constant touch with one another, comparing best practices. And they also adapted different strategies to different parts of the world as their order spread across the globe.

They studied local languages before approaching people and in many cases took elements from local beliefs and tried to persuade those they wished to convert that Catholic beliefs were basically identical to local ones. And this was effective. In China, there were 38,000 converts to Catholicism by 1633. By 1650, there were over 100,000. Once the Jesuits established these global contacts, they produced reports, first in Latin, but then translated into local European languages, and their work created a Eurocentric globalization that ended up going way beyond religion.

For example, they became an early version of industrial spies when it came to producing porcelain, reporting back from China to Europe about the processes that went into making high quality porcelain. Spreading Catholicism was their mission, but the Jesuits were among those advancing commercial and agricultural development, as well.

Thanks, ThoughtBubble.

[exit the ThoughtBubble]

Many Catholics really took the Church's reforms to heart, intensifying their devotion, sometimes in ways that also helped further the relgion's influence around the world. Among the most renowned was the Spanish mystic and nun, Saint Teresa of Ávila, who had a very long birth name that I will not attempt to pronounce. I mean mispronouncing things is my thing, but there's no reason to go down that road. At 20, she escaped the confines of her home where she was recuperating from one of her many and lifelong bouts of illness to join the Carmelite Order of Nuns, but once there, she balked at the superficiality and the high society life of constant visits and fancy food. She began to live out the reform Church's re-dedication to faith and good works, being extremely strict in her practice. She was a proponent of self-flagellation ceremonies, self-flagellation being the act of hitting oneself with a whip in imitation of Christ's suffering at the cross. And she became an inspiration, particularly after Church leaders had her write down her spiritual experiences in several books that have now become Counter-Reformation classics, such as *Way of Perfection* and *The Book of Foundations*. At the same time she went about founding new *discalceate,* that is, shoe-less or barefoot Carmelite religious orders, restoring austerity and strictness to religious life.

The Council of Trent had also issued a statement about art, advising that it needed to connect with ordinary people, including the poor. The aim was not to produce subtle or erudite symbolism, but to strike emotions, inducing awe and evoking the power and majesty of the divine.

Gian Lorenzo Bernini produced such effects, for example, in the piazza in front of Saint Peter's Basilica. It features massed columns which produce a dramatic setting for papal ritual. Protestants had smashed ornate statuary of saints and the holy family, and instead created simple, unadorned places of worship. But Catholics embraced majestic religious interiors, enhancing figures through the use of light and shade in paintings of Jesus of angels and saints and the royalty surrounding the divine. All of which were part of a new style called Baroque. Did the world just open? Is there a tiny little baby Jesus dressed up fancy back there?

Indeed, it is the Infant of Prague, or at least a... three dollar recreation of it. So you can see here this baby Jesus is in a very fancy dress. And I, uh, listen. If I were a tiny baby Jesus, I would wear this fancy dress. But if you've read the Gospels you'll know that like... this is not how tiny baby Jesus dressed. It is however super Baroque, emphasizing the majesty of the divine. And religious statuary like this also expressed the intensity of the Counter-Reformation and its leading figures. Like, Bernini's statue of Saint Teresa of Ávila for instance would seem to contradict the asceticism of rejecting one's shoes, yet it expressed the ecstatic relationship with the divine and an overflow of the feeling and belief. Likewise Baroque music expressed complexity through the use of counterpoint and emotional and thunderous chords that filled parishioners, both illiterate and learned, with religious awe.

One artist who took up the Baroque style, some would say with a vengeance, was Artemesia Gentileschi. Trained by her father, Orazio, Gentileschi was raped by a man who had been hired to give her additional instruction. She herself was tortured with thumbscrews by the court in order to insure that she was telling the truth when her father brought suit against the rapist. One of the few ways to get revenge? Painting.

The frightening *Judith Slays Holofernes* for instance shows the biblical heroine and her maid getting revenge on the general Holofernes, who threatened her people's survival. From the dramatic imagery to the high contrast of dark and light, this painting is exemplary of Counter-Reformation art. It evokes the senses and an emotional connection to God's word... and it ain't subtle.

So, between the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, people obsessively confronted some of the major issues of human existence, right? Faith, the Divine, the human conduct that should accompany religious belief, and we're still not finished with the repercussions of that questioning and the responses to it. These religious upheavals weren't just about how to get into heaven, they were also about who should learn, and how, and what constituted and effective human life. We are still in the shadow of those who modeled new ideas of what matters in human life. And we'll have much more to say about Catholicism and the role of organized religious in people's lives, but first, next week we dig into the world of witchcraft and shamans and magic and alchemy. Which were also important belief systems in early modern Europe, and ones that co-existed with Christianity. That's right friends, it will soon be time to turn lead into gold and frog eyes into hex potions. I'll see you then.

[end credits]

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