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Counter-Reformation

Introduction

Throughout the middle ages the Catholic Church sunk deeper into a pit of scandal and corruption. By the 1520s, Martin Luther's ideas crystallized opposition to the Church, and Christian Europe was torn apart. In response, the Catholic Church set in motion the counter-reformation. An era of strict conformity and accompanying terror had begun.



The Problem



During the reign of Pope Leo X, discontent amongst Catholics in Europe was at an all-time high. The sale by the Pope of indulgences, a guarantee of salvation, was the last straw. Martin Luther became a figurehead for the discontented masses, and his "95 Theses" proposed dramatic reforms of the Catholic Church. With the advent of the printing press Luther's manifesto spread far and wide and garnered widespread support.

The challenge from Luther caught the Pope by surprise. The leaders of the Catholic Church were also frightened by how confidently the Princes of Germany resisted Vatican pressure. These leaders, supposedly subject to the authority of the Church, now declared themselves independent of Vatican rule. Ultimately the Princes' defiance ensured Luther's survival, and prompted the birth of a Catholic movement known as the Counter-Reformation.

The Council of Trent

In 1545, the leaders of the Catholic Church gathered in the Northern Italian city of Trent for an emergency conference. Their aim was to reclaim the moral high ground, and the superiority of the Holy Mother Church, in the wake of the Protestant challenge. The stakes were high. They were playing for the survival of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Council's Decisions

After 20-years of debate, the Council of Trent established the basis for a Catholic counter-attack. Decrees were issued covering every aspect of Church authority, from the holding of multiple offices, to the chastity of priests, and monastic reform. Ignatius Loyola was charged with forming the Jesuits, a band of militant missionaries whose task was to reconvert the converted.



The "Index of Forbidden Books" was published, naming and shaming 583 heretical texts, including most translations of the Bible and the works of Erasmus, Calvin and Luther. New churches were ordered, with

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space for thousands of worshippers, and acoustics designed, for the first time, for vernacular sermons. The Catholic Church used the weapon of reform to entice back its disillusioned congregations.

Effects

A new agency of obedience was created. Taking its cue from a successful Spanish model, the Council of Trent formally established the Roman Inquisition, to examine and try all evidence of heresy or dissent. No Catholic country was exempt. All crimes in the eyes of the Church would be handed to a local Inquisitor, equipped with all necessary means of persuasion. Guilt was always assumed, interrogation relentless, and torture deployed to squeeze the truth out of a witness.



Roman Inquisition

Reading Questions:

1. What was the Counter-Reformation?
2. Why did it happen?
3. What reforms did the Church make?
4. How else did the Church try to keep people under the control of the Catholic Church?