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THE COUNCIL OF TRENT: WAS IT OPEN TO THE SPIRIT OF GOD?

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Abstract

The situation of the Catholic Church prior to the Reformation was really deplorable. The rot was widely spread from the top to the bottom; Popes and Bishops were not really serving the Church and the people but were interested in bettering their own economic conditions. Besides the concubinage of the clergy, there were so many areas that had deviated from the Gospel and the teachings of Jesus. The indulgences which grew in the sacrament of confession as a lenience shown to the sinner, became a money making instrument which led the Church to become totally corrupt. Hence one may rightly say the call for Reform was really the work of the Spirit of God. The article suggests that the leaders of the Catholic Church do not seem to have listened to the Spirit; they do not seem to have taken the Reformers' call for reform seriously. If they had listened to the Reformers in a Christian spirit of openness, and called them for dialogue, a split in the Body of Christ could have been averted and the Church would have been given a chance to grow in a united way to the benefit of all. Hence the article raises the question as suggested in the title. It is merely a suspicion that is voiced here, not an absolute statement of fact; the article invites further reflections from scholars.

Keywords: Catholic Church, Council of Trent, Indulgences, Martin Luther, Openness to the Spirit, Reformation

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Introduction

The reason for this title is the belief that where the Spirit of God is present there would be understanding. The effect of the Spirit of God is presented as understanding in the book of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2), as opposed to Babel (Gen 11) where no one understood anybody else. At the coming of the Spirit (Acts 2) everybody understood the Apostles. The Spirit of God is also the spirit of Truth. What seems evident at Trent is that the spirit of understanding was totally absent.

The Move to Reformation

When we look in to the background of the Reformation what becomes clear is that the situation in the Catholic Church had become so bad that the call for reform was really the work of the Spirit of God. The Reformation did not begin with Luther or with the 95 indulgences theses of 31 October, 1517. Luther was not interested in breaking up the Church, but wanted to reform the one Church. During 14th and 15th centuries there have been many attempts at reforms; but they failed. Most people would think of Alexander VI when talking about the Reformation. Jedin holds the view that decay was already at work during the time of Leo X.¹ The papacy was in bad shape. The situation of the clergy was not better than that of the papacy. Here Jedin warns us that we should not look merely at clerical concubinage.² Jedin claims that clerical concubinage was so widespread that the parishioners were hardly scandalised by the life of their pastors. The Church appeared like the private property of the clergy meant for the economic profit of the clergy.³ "As late as 1556 Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, grandson of Paul III, possessed ten Episcopal sees, twenty-six monasteries, and 113 other benefices—canonries, parishes and chaplaincies."⁴ Enhancing one's economic benefits was the main concern of the clergy.

Pope Adrian VI (1522-23) attacked the entrenched abuses of nepotism and preferment. The Pope's efforts were blocked, and disregarded.⁵ Clement VII (1523-34) was very cautious and managed to achieve nothing by way of reforms.⁶ Paul III (1534-65) was elected to the papacy in October 1534. His early life was not very moral, and

¹ Hubert Jedin, ed., *History of the Church, Vol. 5: Reformation and Counter Reformation*, Burns & Oates, London 1980, 6.

² Jedin, ed., *History of the Church, Vol. 5: Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 7.

³ Jedin, ed., *History of the Church, Vol. 5: Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 7.

⁴ Jedin, ed., *History of the Church, Vol. 5: Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 8.

⁵ Newman C. Eberhardt, *A Summary of Catholic History, Vol. 2, Modern History*, St Louis: B. Herder Book Co, 1962, 8.

⁶ Eberhardt, *A Summary of Catholic History, Vol. 2, Modern History*, 209.

though he was a cardinal since 1493 he was not ordained until 1519. He resolutely challenged the inertia in the papal curia so that a certain amount of reform started. From 1535 Paul III nominated worthy men who would favour reforms.⁷ He wanted to summon an ecumenical council, but did not succeed; but his efforts had an effect eventually on the Council of Trent. In 1537 Paul III named a reform commission and its report was severe; it criticized abuses in indulgences; the Pope followed up its recommendations, clerical discipline was improved and absentee clerics were reprimanded in very strong terms; he curbed abuses in indulgences and censures. The Inquisition was reorganized with special vigilance for the censorship of books. Through *Sublime Deus* the Pope forbade enslavement of the American Indians. Philip Neri, though a lay man at that time, came to Rome as an Apostle of Rome; he too helped the reform efforts. The Pope's reform attempts had some effects, though the apostasy of Ochio, the Capuchin superior-general in 1542 had some negative effect on the reform attempts.⁸ He died in 1549.

The Popes were not really at the service of the Universal Church "but all the more to be exploiting the nations of Europe in a thoroughly organized fiscal system."⁹ The Church came to be entirely under the secular powers which could interfere with the Church matters as they willed. The Popes became more and more princes among princes with whom alliances were made and thus got fully entangled in politics. This type of entanglement in politics enabled Leo X to allow the Reformation to grow.¹⁰

Beginning with the Popes all the clergy was interested in improving their economic status; the care for the people was not their main concern. Hence a reform was very much the need of the hour. "Depravity has become so taken for granted that those soiled by it no longer notices the stench of sin," said Pope Adrian VI at his first consistorial allocution.¹¹

In Germany the Episcopal sees were open only to the nobility. What was obvious was that to the extent the care for persons sank the pursuit of money became the more obvious. The Roman curia in order to meet its elaborate life style found ways of enhancing their income by means

of an elaborate system of fees, taxes, more or less voluntary contributions, and finally even indulgences offerings. The prodigal and worldly papal

⁷Eberhardt, *A Summary of Catholic History*, Vol. 2, *Modern History*, 209.

⁸Eberhardt, *A Summary of Catholic History*, Vol. 2, *Modern History*, 209-210.

⁹Jedin, ed. *History of the Church*, Vol. 5: *Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 5.

¹⁰Jedin, ed. *History of the Church*, Vol. 5: *Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 5-6.

¹¹Jedin, ed. *History of the Church*, Vol. 5: *Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 7.

court, the extensive building activity and the great expenses of war brought about a continual need for money. It was certainly not accidental that the scandal of Tetzel's dealings in indulgences, which provided the immediate occasion for the outbreak of the Reformation, was connected with this concern for money.¹²

Such abuses led to a great dissatisfaction with the Church; that led even to hatred of Rome. The calls for reform were not heeded. The 5th Lateran Council (1512-17) was not at all effective.¹³ It was in Germany, more than anywhere else, this growing hatred towards the Church of Rome that appeared.¹⁴ Luther made these complaints his own. Zwingli also made use of this disaffection towards the Roman Church. "He directed his disciples not to preach chiefly about doctrine but about the wretched conditions and the necessity of restoring righteousness."¹⁵

The call for reform was welcomed by the people as they had grown so dissatisfied with what was going on. "More decisive than the personal failings of Popes, priests and laity is the question whether the truth given by Christ and the order established by him were attacked, whether the moral decay was an expression of a falling off in matters touching the essence of religion."¹⁶ The external religious practices did not have sufficient theological foundation.

Johann Geiler of Strasburg, one of the last great preachers of the Middle Ages, had predicted the dissolution of the Church in his final sermon before the emperor Maximilian. "Since neither pope, nor emperor, kings nor bishops will reform our life, God will send a man for the purpose. I hope to see that day."¹⁷

Indulgences

Indulgences arose in the context of the sacrament of reconciliation. First it was indulgence shown to the penitent when he or she could not perform the prescribed severe penance, by reducing the quantity of penance or by commuting it to something less severe. Then it came to be remission before God of the temporal punishment for sins of which the guilt has been forgiven; it is given by the ecclesiastical authority out of the treasury of the Church.¹⁸ Eventually it came to be something that the Church could sell for cash, as the Church often

¹²Jedin, ed. *History of the Church, Vol. 5: Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 8.

¹³Jedin, ed. *History of the Church, Vol. 5: Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 10.

¹⁴Jedin, ed. *History of the Church, Vol. 5: Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 8.

¹⁵Jedin, ed. *History of the Church, Vol. 5: Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 9.

¹⁶Jedin, ed. *History of the Church, Vol. 5: Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 9.

¹⁷John Paul: *A History of Christianity*, New York: Atheneum, 1977, 267.

¹⁸Karl Rahner, *Encyclopedia of Theology, a Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, London: Burns & Oates, 703ff.

was in need of money for the building of Churches, etc. Where there is money corruption is bound to arise. "Thus it was that the late Middle Ages saw a multiplication of indulgences and ever lighter works of indulgences and an unscrupulous financial exploitation of them."¹⁹ Already by the 13th century theologians proposed that indulgences could be applied to the dead. Then political leaders wanted a share in the profits of indulgences. Pope Julius II (1503-13) had begun the rebuilding of Saint Peter's basilica in 1505; to meet the enormous financial burden he announced a plenary indulgence.²⁰ Without going into details let us say that the whole system of indulgences for financial gain was an abuse worthy of sanction by any good Christian, and that is precisely what Luther attempted by his attack on the system. "He (Luther) repeatedly affirms that he does not desire to make claims but wishes to dispute and would willingly be corrected."²¹ It is remarkable that Luther was doing what he did in good Christian spirit of wanting to serve the truth and improve the condition of the Church.

The Attack by the Reformers

The Reformers had rejected the Eucharist as sacrifice, because, though officially the Catholic Church never taught that there is a fresh killing of Christ at the altar, there have been stray opinions pointing in that direction. For example, Lombard (1160) had summarized the teachings that preceded him by saying that there is a true sacramental immolation at the altar. So slowly the idea developed that sacrifice means immolation, death, and we have some startling statements available. The Bishop of Leon said: "Christ is slain by the priest."²² St Augustine had already said: "Was not Christ immolated but once, in his own person? And yet not only every year in the Paschal Liturgy, but every day he is immolated sacramentally for the people and if one were asked whether he is now immolated one would reply without falsehood that he is."²³ In spite of these and similar expressions found in theology, "never did they teach or imagine that the Eucharistic immolation implied the infliction of death or any harm on Christ present in the sacrament in his impassable life of glory."²⁴ The Reformers came to the wrong conclusion that "all Catholics held the

¹⁹Jedin, ed. *History of the Church, Vol. 5: Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 43.

²⁰Jedin, ed. *History of the Church, Vol. 5: Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 44.

²¹Jedin, ed. *History of the Church, Vol. 5: Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 49.

²² Francis Clark, *Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformation*, London: Darton, Longmann & Todd, 1960, 462.

²³Clark, *Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformation*, 405.

²⁴Clark, *Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformation*, 468.

theory of a fresh killing of Christ in the mass and held the equation sacrifice = death was universally accepted.”²⁵

The main objections to the Reformers as presented in the Council were: the notion of *ex opera operato* efficacy; the apparently automatic application of Christ’s satisfaction, without faith or devotion in the one to whom the application is made; the understanding of the mass as propitiatory; seeing it as an instance of “work theology,” namely merit through work instead of grace; private masses where no one except the priest communicated; infrequency of communion by the people; communion only in one species; a theology of merit; satisfaction and application of the fruits of the mass, even to those who are dead and absent; hence the idea that the mass can benefit the non-communicants, even the absent and dead; various other abuses like the endowed masses; some saying 5-7 masses a day, requiem masses, burial masses, anniversary masses, votive masses, especially the offering of the mass for the dead; the clergy being at the beck and call of the rich laity to offer masses as, when and where they liked; masses in honour of the saints; seeing the works of the saints as substitute for the satisfaction gained by Christ,²⁶ the emphasis on the priestly act which makes it a sacrifice, and which leaves out the people’s participation.

The Council of Trent

Though Paul III had announced the imminent summoning of the Council in 1535 due to all the political pulls and pushes the Bishops finally gathered at Trent in December of 1545. Then with the shift to Bologna and back, finally it enacted some decrees which were basically disappointing.

Disappointment obstructed the view of what has really been achieved, but it was incontestable that the Council presented itself as a torso: Its doctrinal decrees embraced only a part of the disputed teachings, the reform decrees eliminated some but in no sense the most crying abuses, and they had no binding force, because they had not yet been confirmed by the Pope.²⁷

Julius III (1550-55) succeeded Paul III. He was a senior Tridentine legate during the first sessions of the Council. The Pope was sincere but unstable “whose unpleasing mannerisms somewhat prejudiced his efforts.”²⁸ The reform efforts went forward and the Council was

²⁵Clark, *Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformation*, 383.

²⁶Given the idea of patronage in civil society, the saints were moulded after such a patronage system.

²⁷Jedin, ed. *History of the Church, Vol. 5: Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 479.

²⁸Eberhardt, *A Summary of Catholic History, Vol. 2, Modern History*, 210.

reassembled, but through the rebellion of Maurice of Saxony brought it to a premature suspension.²⁹ After Julius III, much hope was placed in Marcellus II (1555) but his premature death brought his efforts to nothing.³⁰ St Robert Bellarmine, his nephew would continue his reform efforts. Paul IV (1555-59) continued the reform efforts without the assistance of the Council. One of the great things he did was the approval of the Jesuits. Pius IV (1559-65), a mild and cultured person along with the help of Charles Borromeo brought the Council to a successful conclusion and approved the decrees of the Council.

Are the Teachings of Trent Relevant Today?

The council of Trent based the founding of the sacrament of reconciliation on Jn 20:21ff,³¹ suggesting thereby that only priests receive the Holy Spirit, or that they have a different Holy Spirit than the one which ordinary Christians receive. This text was not used by any of the early writers; they had used only Mt 16:16ff (binding and losing based on the power of the Keys). In describing the Eucharist as a sacrifice “the Council got over the difficulty about proofs from scripture, since in what is taken from it, it is not a line of exact exegesis that is proposed but the understanding of it that has always been found in the Church.”³² When the Council says that Lk 22:19 and 1 Cor 11:24 [“Do this as a memorial of me”] are foundation for the priesthood,³³ they are showing their ignorance of the practice that existed in the early Church, namely, the head of the family presided over the celebration of the Eucharist, precisely as head of the gathered community and not due to any ordination.³⁴ The Fathers of the Council of Trent were totally unaware that the understanding of the Eucharist as a sacrifice and the idea of a priesthood are later developments in the Church and do not stem from Jesus himself.³⁵

The Council of Trent instead of disproving the wrong conclusions that sacrifice means death and also looking into the accusations which were by and large justified, as the practices were real deviations from the early Church practices and were in fact based on

²⁹Eberhardt, *A Summary of Catholic History*, Vol. 2, *Modern History*, 210.

³⁰Eberhardt, *A Summary of Catholic History*, *Modern History*, Vol. 2, 210-211.

³¹Jacques Dupuis, ed., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Faith*, TPI, Bangalore 2001, no. 1617.

³²David N. Power, *The Sacrifice we Offer: The Tridentine Dogma and its Reinterpretation*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1987, 116.

³³Dupuis, ed., *The Christian Faith*, no. 1556.

³⁴Herve Marie Legrand, “The President of the Eucharist according to the Ancient Traditions,” *Worship* 53 (1979) 413-438.

³⁵Joseph Mattam, “Servant Leaders,” *Asian Journal of Vocation and Formation*, (January-June 2010) 15-32.

misunderstandings, the Council went all out to defend the propitiatory sacrificial character of the mass on such flimsy texts like Ps 109:4, Mal 1:11ff; Dan 8:3 and 12:11 and the priesthood of Melchizedek. They argued that the new law would be imperfect if it did not have a sacrifice and an external priesthood. They taught that James, Mark, Clement of Rome and Denis the Aeropagite (of the Acts) wrote the mass.³⁶ There was a shortage of time and there “was some anxiety to finish business as quickly as possible”³⁷ and the legates were given very limited time to answer to the questions raised by the Reformers. It is reported that Alphonsus Salmeron spoke for two hours and other speakers too spoke for too long and hence the whole question was treated very shabbily.³⁸

The Council of Trent was a defensive council, a re-action. It is difficult to say that it was the result of listening to the Spirit of Jesus. We know that all defensive reactions are going to be wrong because they come not from reason and search for truth but from insecurity and fear. It is doubtful how much value many of the teaching of this Council has today. It is difficult to say that this Council was guided by the Spirit of Jesus. When the Spirit of Jesus is present there will be mutual understanding (Acts 2), but the main characteristic of Trent was the absence of any understanding of the other. The Council fathers were highly prejudiced against the Reformers and made no attempt to understand them as they understood themselves, which is the foundation of Christian charity and that would be the approach in situations of conflict. They were pressed for time and so asked “minor theologians” (theology students?) to collate all the errors of the Reformers; the summary presented by them was summarily condemned by the Council fathers; they do not seem to have made any efforts either to read the original texts of the Reformers or to understand them.

What is obvious is that the bishops of the Council did not understand the Reformers.

There is no guarantee of any sort that the bishops of the Council of Trent, as advised by the theologians, understood what the reformation sought or what this system was. It is all too clear that they did not sympathize with it, as it is clear that the reformers often attacked what was based in the medieval system, without taking account of its positive values.³⁹

³⁶ Power, *The Sacrifice we Offer*, 97.

³⁷Power, *The Sacrifice we Offer*, 96.

³⁸Power, *The Sacrifice we Offer*, 96.

³⁹Power, *The Sacrifice we Offer*, 141.

It is true that Cajetan was authorized to study the writings of Luther and to interrogate him. That also did not lead to any enlightenment.⁴⁰ As we saw above the Church was in dire need of reform, but the Council fathers were not interested in reforming the Church, but they wanted merely to condemn the Reformers, as they were considered to be wrong.

Had the fathers of the Council listened to Luther, especially his 95 Theses, and other Reformers in a Christian spirit of humility, they would have realized that there was a lot of truth in the accusations made by the Reformers and would have moved in the direction of true reforms, a split in the Body of Christ could have been avoided. By now most of the issues raised by the Reformers have been accepted by the Church and most of what they had questioned has been given up.

What was expected of a Church which is led by the Spirit of Jesus is that it would have listened to the attacks and would have examined what was going on with an unprejudiced mind. There was a lot of truth in the accusations, if one had listened without any prejudice. That could have avoided the split in the Church, the Body of Christ, and reforms would have happened. But it seems that the leaders were not open enough to the Spirit.

The reaction of the Catholic leaders especially in the Council came rather from deep insecurity, than from the discernment of the Spirit. Hence, instead of listening to and dialoguing with the opponents they went all out to attack and condemn; “shoot the messenger” was the principle at work. Where deep insecurity is present, one is not open to the truth. Now we can only speculate what could have been the situation if the Catholic hierarchy had humbly listened to the Reformers, sat with them and looked into what was going on in the Church, instead of the defensive reaction that actually happened, the Church would have been much stronger, united and healthier.

Conclusion

One story that is unfolding now should give us pause: there is an increasing consensus among theologians and historians that, on several counts, the Council of Trent misunderstood the teachings of the Reformers and consequently several of its anathemas were misplaced. Ecumenical scholars are putting immense effort into the disentangling of such mistakes; and as truth reveals itself the expressions of regret are becoming more numerous. If such misunderstanding could occur at an

⁴⁰Jedin, ed., *History of the Church, Vol. 5: Reformation and Counter Reformation*, 55ff.

ecumenical council, they could surely occur within the Church's ordinary administration.⁴¹

"It seems to many of us that Roman theology has simply not yet found a way of acknowledging that the institutional church itself could err and sin."⁴² "The errors of the Church's teaching office have been numerous and grave; nowadays, when open discussion can no longer be forbidden, they cannot be denied even by the more conservative theologians and Church leaders."⁴³

⁴¹Ladislav Orsy, "Justice Begins at Home," *The Tablet*, 16 January 1999, 78-81.

⁴²Eamon Duffy, "What about the Inquisition?," *Priests and People* 13 Jan, 1998, 3-8.

⁴³Hans Küng, *Infallible? An Enquiry*, London: Collins, 1971, 27.