Causes and Effects of the Protestant Reformation

What happens when people start to break away from the entity that bound an entire civilization together for over a thousand years? How does one go from unparalleled devotion to God to the exploration of what man could do? From absolute acceptance to intense scrutiny? Sheeple to independent thinkers? Like all revolutions preceding it, the Protestant Reformation did not happen overnight. Catholics had begun to lose faith in the once infallible Church ever since the Great Schism, when there were two popes, each declaring that the other was the antichrist. Two things in particular can be identified as the final catalyst: a new philosophy and simple disgust. The expanding influence of humanism and the corruption of the Catholic Church led to the Protestant Reformation, which in turn launched the Catholic Reformation and religious warfare.

Humanists had been calling for reform in the Catholic Church long before Martin Luther penned his Ninety-Five Theses. Humanism was an intellectual and cultural movement of the Renaissance that emphasized the expansion of mans’ capacities. “[Humanism] was an attempt to discover humankind’s own earthly fulfillment...[it] developed an increasing distaste for dogma, and embraced a figurative interpretation of the scriptures and an attitude of tolerance toward all viewpoints” (Sporre 310). This perspective could not differ more from the Church’s strict reliance on tradition. People’s outlook on the world changed, but the Church continued on with what had previously worked. It soon became clear that reform in the Church was not in the foreseeable future, so people decided to take matters into their own hands. As humanism spread throughout Italy and northern Europe, more and more people agreed with the core tenets of humanism and became critical of the Church. The strongest argument against the Church was its shady background laced with customs such as nepotism and selling salvation.
A long history of corruption caused people to view the Catholic Church as a for-profit organization rather than God’s voice on Earth. By the Renaissance, the Catholic Church had already lost much of its power over secular rulers but still held leverage over the masses. This authority naturally paved the way for corruption. The most outrageous form of corruption practiced by the Church was the sale of indulgences. An indulgence is the remission of temporal punishment still due for a sin that has been sacramentally absolved. One of the ways the Church would generate income was by selling them. The notion started off innocently enough; it stemmed from the idea that punishment for crimes could be converted to payments of money, in essence, a fine (Simon 35). However, it soon spiraled out of control as the Church used indulgences simply to gain money, as when Pope Leo X needed money for the construction of St. Peter’s basilica (Duiker and Spielvogel 429). People began to view salvation as something that could be bought; they could go out and sin on Saturday night, then simply pay for it monetarily Sunday morning. To encourage people to buy more indulgences, the Church even claimed that indulgences could be bought on behalf of those already dead and in purgatory (Sporre 378). This blatant victimization was what spurred Martin Luther to write his Ninety-Five Theses, which sparked the Protestant Reformation.

Corrupt practices were carried out by a corrupt papacy. Popes began to rely on nepotism to promote their families’ interests since the papacy was not a hereditary position (Duiker and Spielvogel 374). It is no coincidence that many Renaissance popes had ties to powerful clans. Pope Alexander VI was a Borgia; Leo X and Clement VII were members of the Medici family. A perfect example of manipulative behavior by the leader supposedly chosen by God lies in the tale of Lucrezia Borgia. The daughter of Pope Alexander VI, she was married at thirteen to a member of the Sforza family, a powerful family in Milan. A mere four years later, when
Alexander no longer needed Milan’s support, he had the marriage annulled. Lucrezia was married off again, this time to the son of the king of Naples, but that marriage was short-lived due to her husband’s murder. Alexander then arranged for is pawn to marry a duke (Howe and Howe 533). This kind of exploitive conduct was all too common from the Renaissance papacy.

The Catholic Reformation is also referred to as the Counter-Reformation because it was the Catholic Church’s response to the formation of Protestantism. The Catholic Church recognized that radical reform was necessary if they hoped to counteract Protestantism. Tension had been building for years, but now it was change or lose more believers. The first step in the Catholic Reformation was the foundation of the Society of Jesus in 1534. This organization believed in absolute obedience to the papacy, strict hierarchical order for the society, the use of education to achieve its goals, and a dedication to engage in “conflict for God” (Duiker and Spielvogel 437). Members were called Jesuits. Throughout the Catholic Reformation, the Jesuits acted as missionaries and managed to restore Catholicism to parts of Germany and eastern Europe (Duiker and Spielvogel 437). Next, a commission was formed by Pope Paul III to determine the church’s ills. This commission cited the perverse practices of church officials as the primary reason for the high number of dissidents (Duiker and Spielvogel 437). Pope Paul III reacted by demanding educational reform and firm discipline in the clergy. He also started the most important development of the Catholic Reformation, the Council of Trent. The Council of Trent, a meeting of cardinals, archbishops, bishops, abbots, and theologians, was where the official response was finally hammered out. The Council of Trent firmly re-established traditional Catholic beliefs: the efficacy of indulgences, the exclusive right of the Church to interpret scriptures, the seven sacraments, and the route to salvation (Flory and Jenike 42). However, the clergy could no longer profit from the sale of indulgences. By this time,
Protestantism had pervaded through much of northern Europe. Even though the Catholic Church was not able to wipe out Protestantism, the Catholic Reformation created a stronger Catholic Church that was more prepared for the inevitable warfare.

In spite of the Renaissance’s more secular views on life, religion was still very much a national concern. Both branches of Christianity fought for their religious beliefs. The French civil wars dragged on for over thirty years and ended only when the political leader of the Huguenots (French Protestants) converted to Catholicism. The result was the acknowledgement of Catholicism as the official religion of France but Huguenots were granted the right to worship (Duiker and Spielvogel 438). King Philip II of Spain, the “Most Catholic King”, could not crush the revolts of Protestants in the Netherlands and ended up losing that territory. Philip also hoped to invade England and bring it back to Catholicism. This event, known as the Spanish Armada, was an utter disaster. The most bitter of the religious wars was fought in the Holy Roman Empire. Known as the Thirty Years’ War, it eventually entangled Denmark, Sweden, France, and Spain. It was resolved by the Peace of Westphalia, which ensured that all German states were free to determine their own religion. Religion was now “in the process of becoming primarily a matter of personal conviction and individual choice” (Duiker and Spielvogel 443). In all of these wars no side truly won and forced the other to change religion. In the end, they compromised and allowed both practice as they pleased.

The Protestant Reformation, guided by the expanding influence of humanism and the corruption of the Catholic Church, propelled the Catholic Reformation and religious warfare. A separation of this magnitude brought conflict yet progressive improvements to both sides. Religious tolerance was at last emerging and never again would a single organization wield so much power.


