

# The Catholic Reformation

## Our Catholic Heritage

### A New Confidence Grows in the Church

By MSGR. JAMES F. CONNELLY

The Catholic Church's reform of itself in the 16th century has been called the Counter Reformation. Such a term is a misnomer, at least in the religious sense, because it gives the negative impression that the Church of Rome was merely reacting to the Protestant rebellion, and was intent only on the recovery of lost prestige and property.

Only in a political sense can historians speak of a Counter Reformation. Led by Philip II of Spain and the Catholic princes of Germany, secular rulers tried to win back, even by force of arms, the lands they lost to the Protestants. Although a case can be made that the Protestant revolt was a catalyst for the Church to correct abuses and define its doctrines, the reform movement within the

Church is properly called the Catholic Reformation.

The Roman Catholic argument was for reform within the Church. Indeed, loyal Christians and faithful churchmen had for years demanded, and yearned for, a reform of the Church. Such a reform movement, coming from the ranks of the faithful, encouraged bishops, cardinals and popes to pursue a corporate and permanent reform of the Mystical Body of Christ. John Caraffa, Bishop of Chieti, Italy, later Pope Paul IV (1555-1559), led the way when he founded the Oratory of Divine Love in the same year (1517) in which Luther nailed his "Theses" on the chapel door in Germany. In 1524, Caraffa organized the Order of Theatines, secular priests who took vows of poverty, asceticism and corporal works of mercy.

Several other heroes of the Catholic

Reformation were later canonized by the Church whom they helped to save: St. Philip Neri; St. Charles Borromeo; St. Anthony Zaccaria; St. Angela Merici; St. John of God; St. Teresa of Avila; St. Peter Canisius and St. Ignatius Loyola.

Corporately, the Church reformed herself through the Ecumenical Council of Trent (1545-1563). This council defined nothing new, but merely clarified the traditional faith of the Catholic Church in opposition to the dissenting teachings of the Protestants. The spiritual initiative of individual faithful and of religious orders, the leadership of firm popes, the assistance of brilliant theologians, and finally the Council of Trent all combined to reform the Church — from within — in its head and members. Subsequent popes such as St. Pius V (1566-1572); Gregory XIII (1572-1585) after whom the Gregorian calendar is

named; and Sixtus V (1585-1590) implemented the teachings and the decrees of the Council with confidence and exactness.

Even though the Protestant Reformers were invited to its first (1545-1547) and second periods (1551-1552) — an invitation which Luther threw away — the Council of Trent was unsuccessful because it could not compromise the apostolic faith of the Church, as the Protestants wanted. But the Council of Trent succeeded in clarifying the belief of the Church so that no one could mistake it. It gave a new confidence to the Church which allowed her to recover from one of her severest trials. It was a reminder that the Church must always be reformed.

All in all the Catholic Reformation was a striking recovery.

### Teresa of Avila — A Mystical Union With Christ

By MSGR. JAMES F. CONNELLY

Teresa de Cepeda, one of nine children, whose father was a knight of Castile, was born in Avila, Spain in 1515. She was a religious child and was so enthralled by the stories of the saints that in her childish enthusiasm she left home at the age of seven to convert the Moors.

Her young imagination wavered between saintly martyrdom and romantic love. The latter triumphed when she fell in love with a local suitor, but was almost immediately repelled by his advances. Her father then sent her to a convent school in Avila, but she was 15 and headstrong and not about to be confined in a convent. She fell ill and returned home after a short stay.

While she was recuperating from her illness, she read the "Life of St. Jerome" and then decided to imitate his zeal and love for Christ by entering the Carmelite Convent at Avila (1534). In her "Life," she writes of her poor physical condition, her long struggle for spiritual perfection, her need for prayer, her visions and communications with God, her raptures and the mystical piercing of her heart by an angel which left her on fire with the love of God. During her raptures her body sometimes levitated by itself. She was consumed by her extraordinary mystical union with Christ.

At that time, many of the Carmelite convents in Spain, including her own, were lax. The nuns were worldly in their dress and their language. Their

convent parlors became places of entertainment for visitors, and the nuns took long vacations from the cloister. The salt had lost its savor!

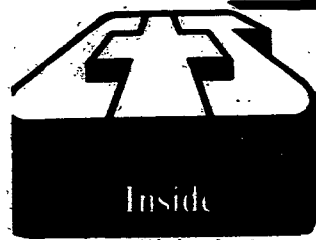


Encouraged by St. Peter of Alcantara, and with formal approval of the Church, she founded a reformed convent of Carmelites at Avila in 1562. She and her religious daughters lived in strict cloister with almost perpetual silence. They practiced austere poverty, wore habits of course serge, slept on straw, and instead of shoes wore rope sandals (hence the name discalced).

From this motherhouse she founded 17 other reformed Discalced Carmelite convents and two houses for Discalced Carmelite friars, whose direction she left to St. John of the Cross. Her purpose in founding these monasteries and convents was to provide for their ascetical inhabitants and to provide reparation for the destruction of hundreds of monasteries by the Protestants in Germany and the British Isles during the reformation period.

Although given to religious ecstasy, and largely uneducated, St. Teresa found time to write the "Way of Perfection," "Foundations of the Spiritual Life," "The Interior Castle," and her own autobiography, "Vida." She was a doctor of spirituality long before Pope Paul VI named her a Doctor of the Church in 1970.

Humble, obedient, patient under sickness and temptation of depression, immune to provocations and disappointments, and enthusiastically in love with Christ and His Church, St. Teresa died Oct. 4, 1582; was canonized in 1622; and ranks along with St. James the Apostle as patron saint of Spain. Her feast is observed on Oct. 15.



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