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Is the Catholic Church Ready for Another Reformation?

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Item Type	Article
Authors	Ferguson, Marianne
Publisher	Rabbi Myer and Dorothy Kripke Center for the Study of Religion and Society
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-06-23 02:07:59
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/180412



Journal of Religion & Society

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ISSN: 1522-5658

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The Kripke Center

Volume 5 (2003)

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## Is the Catholic Church Ready for Another Reformation?

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### Introduction

[1] Many situations in the world today resemble the circumstances that were prevalent close to the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Will these conditions and their ramifications bring about another reform and separation from the Catholic Church? Some of these conditions seem even more intense today than at the time of the Protestant Reform because of our present forms of democratic government, instant communication, adult literacy, advances in science and technology, and the Women's Rights Movement. It appears to many that the hierarchical Catholic Church is still trying to operate as though these issues have not occurred, just as they ignored the prevalent sixteenth century issues of nationalism, communication made possible by the printing press, the growth of the middle class, secular education, and the rise of individualism that resulted in enhanced regard for personal judgment.

[2] After the Age of Discovery, there was a paradigm shift from one centered upon European and Asian society to interest in the New World of the West. The church failed to make this paradigm shift except to evangelize and colonize North and South America while keeping all the elements of European patriarchal society. The Vatican kept the older values of absolute monarchy, which excluded the people and clergy from electing Popes and Bishops. They continued the classicism of the Middle Ages with clericalism, ignoring the voice of lay men and women. All authority rested with the Pope, Curia, and Bishops, who sought to control the lives of the lower clergy and the faithful. Today much of the world looks to the West for leadership, where Protestant values of egalitarianism, education for the masses, and representative democracy, lead to questioning of authority, and division of power into legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government.

[3] Before the Protestant Reform, travelers from the Middle East and Asia returned to Europe with new goods and ideas that fostered independent thinking. Eastern philosophies, math, art, and architecture were admired and incorporated into European society. The printing press contributed to the dissemination of these ideas, which stimulated research in science and literature. Today the computer can instantly disseminate information, new discoveries in science and technology, and global movements that increase the intellectual expertise of its recipients. Educated Catholics make many decisions based on this instant communication rather than wait for pronouncements from the Vatican. Many universities maintain internet sites that post the latest developments in thinking by noted theologians and scripture scholars, making this knowledge readily accessible to their readers. Books, religious journals, newspapers, and periodicals are read by the laity who look to the authority of expertise rather than to the authority of control to guide their faith.

[4] With the growth of adult literacy in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, some of the laity began to criticize the church with a view of reforming it. The efforts of Erasmus to produce a Greek translation of the Latin Vulgate edition of the Bible showed more than a few inaccuracies in the translation

to Latin from the original Greek. John Wycliffe had translated the Latin Vulgate into English and included the errors. The need to base Christian theology on correct Biblical translations brought an interest in the New Testament foundations and the early fathers of the church. Wycliffe enabled his English readers to see for themselves the vast difference between the poverty and simplicity of the early church and the opulence and complexity of the church of the fifteenth century. Valdes of Lyons was also an admirer of the early church and its attitude towards simplicity and poverty. He and his followers, known as the Waldenses, renounced their fortunes and vowed themselves to the poverty exercised by Jesus and his followers. The Waldensians were denounced by the church because they acted as itinerant preachers, violating the church's policy restricting preaching to ordained clerics. Educated laity were not included in the privilege of spreading the Word of God.

[5] Erasmus' *Handbook of the Christian Knight*, published in 1503, was quickly spread by the printing press. He stressed the need for fervent Christians to base their lives on the example of Jesus, which appealed to the educated laity, whom he considered the church's most valuable resource. The widely read book also emphasized a view of Christian ethics that was based on the "inwardness of religion" which he designated as piety and love. Erasmus influenced the Humanists, whose knowledge of the patristic literature and Biblical texts caused them to criticize the secular activities of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. They urged the church to return to the simple gospel of Jesus, and to promote morality among its members. In studying the gospels and the example of Jesus, many Humanists decried the emphasis on doctrine as promulgated by the institutional church. After reading the *Confessions*, Petrarch could identify with the humanity that Augustine portrayed on his journey to God. "Whereas medieval theologians had chiefly relied on Augustine as an authority on doctrine, Petrarch suggested that the Humanists were rediscovering Augustine as a human being, whose life had been a model spiritual journey; they sought not so much to absorb his doctrine as his spirituality" (Bouwsma: 244).

[6] Interest in Biblical criticism has escalated in the twentieth century as adults attend Bible classes, read and discuss books authored by noted Scripture scholars, and attend Biblical conferences and symposia. Far more lay people than clergy graduate with advanced degrees in Scripture and early Church History from accredited seminaries and Universities. Some of the Roman Catholic women scholars are researching the position of women in the early church. This knowledge has led many Catholics to agree with Scripture scholars who declare that there is nothing in scripture barring women from the priesthood. Present day reformers calling for women's full participation in the Catholic Church insist that evidence from both scripture and tradition exhibit a precedent for women deacons and priests. Yet the Vatican will not allow the subject of women's ordination to be discussed. Scholars from all fields find this censoring of discussion incredible, especially in American colleges and universities where academic freedom is so highly prized. Comparisons are made to Galileo, whose scholarship was silenced by the official church and later recognized as pertinent to developing theology.

## **Personal Experience**

[7] Just as the humanists of the fourteenth century emphasized personal experience, many contemporary Catholics stress their own personal experience over the external forms of the institutional church. In the fourteenth century Julian of Norwich, a noted mystic, wrote about the joy, delight in prayer, and sense of security that she received from her relationship with God. Other mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross extolled the joys of the interior life. In this present age of personalism and relationships, many devoted Catholics have again turned to the mystics. Women have searched some of the medieval mystics, such as Hildegard of Bingen, along with the common sense and expertise in the spiritual life of Teresa of Avila. Thomas Merton's books on contemplation and Thomas Keating's books on intimacy with God draw readers from all sections of Christianity in hopes of learning to realize their own experience of God. Some contemporary thinkers attribute the decline in the attendance of the sacrament of reconciliation to Catholics going directly to God with whom they are in relationship, without the intermediary action of priests.

## **Human Sexuality**

[8] Perhaps it is the area of human sexuality that causes most Catholics to disagree with papal

pronouncements. With the advance of science, technology, and psychology, many literate Catholics recognize other purposes of human sexuality besides procreation. Such purposes include the human need for intimacy, pleasure, and self-expression, which contribute to healthy individuals. The burgeoning population of the earth adds to the concern for the use of birth control. The need for contraceptives has increased in the face of the AIDS crises. The Vatican teaching against the use of contraceptives is based on the belief that life begins at conception or at least the possibility of life occurs at this time. Yet, when speaking of abortion, they admit that they do not know exactly when life begins, although in practice, the official church acts as though life begins at the moment of fertilization. Theologians are divided on the issue of when life begins. Some say that the just fertilized ovum is genetically a human organism, but that does not mean that a human person exists from conception. Others will stress the potential power for a human being to be formed. Some will argue that although the zygote has the potential to develop into a human being, it is not a human person, because as each cell divides, it too would be a human person.

[9] The theory of segmentation says that human life can only be present when the point of cellular division and multiplication has been reached so that twinning, tripletting, etc. are no longer possible. If every person is an individual, one cannot be divided from oneself. The newly fertilized ovum can divide for a period of 14 to 21 days to become two or more beings, therefore the newly fecundated ovum can neither be a person nor fully human. This theory is supported by scientists who say that one-third to one-half of the fertilized ova are never implanted in the uterus, but are expelled during the woman's next menstrual cycle. Scientists support the theory that personal life begins at the establishment of individuality with the information that up to the time of the implantation of the fertilized ovum, only the RNA (ribonucleic acid) of the mother is present. The sperm does not begin to play any part until implantation occurs in the uterus, when the genetic formation of the new organism is activated and the conceptus begins to be directed by its own RNA. The transfer to the RNA of the conceptus occurs within 14 to 21 days after fertilization, at the same time that individuality is thought to be established.

[10] The ramifications of these two theories are especially crucial for victims of incest or rape. Traditionally, the Catholic Church allowed the time limit of 10 to 12 hours for a D & C (dilation and curettage) or vaginal douche for victims of rape to prevent fertilization. Given the rapid entry of the sperm into the fallopian tubes, this method would be most ineffective. The use of hormonal agents such as DES (diethylstilbestrol) to act as a contraceptive, within the longer period, would be more effective. These hormonal agents and morning after pills can appear to act as abortifacients, which causes Catholic theologians to give cautious support to their use, because they prevent implantation. The extended period of 14 to 21 days before the individuality and personhood of the fetus are established can allow more leniency toward their use for victims of rape and incest.

[11] Thinking Catholics are likely to be more open to "morning after" pills because of the lack of unpleasant side effects. They may also be more amenable towards any new scientific discoveries regarding contraception. These Catholics prefer to use their own judgment regarding birth control which they feel is informed by science and medicine. They are less likely to look to the authority of older, celibate clergy, whom they consider are basing their information on outdated and obsolete evidence that is directed more to control rather than the welfare of the laity.

## **Homosexuality**

[12] Along with the questioning of the church's teaching on contraception and abortion, there have been criticisms of the Vatican's pronouncements on homosexuality. The official Catholic teaching that homosexual acts must be judged as objectively immoral regardless of circumstances, has provoked various responses on the pastoral level. Many Catholics find themselves parents or siblings of homosexual persons, whose happiness they desire. Their love for their children or siblings supercedes their respect for the church's teaching on homosexuality. Because many Catholics do not regard the only purpose of marriage as the procreation of children, they do not apply this principle to their homosexual relatives and friends. Many Catholics who see homosexuals committed to each other in a stable monogamous relationship understand the mutual love, support, and enhancement of human growth that can be possible for the partners. They do not put committed relationships on the same level as coercive, anonymous, impersonal, promiscuous sex or seduction of the young and innocent that is sometimes attributed to homosexual

behavior.

## **Crisis of Authority**

[13] In the fourteenth century, many of the faithful experienced confusion regarding the lawful authority to promote sound doctrine. There appeared to be tension between the authority of the Pope or a Council to give acceptable pronouncements concerning the teachings of the church. The Council of Constance had met in 1414-17 to decide which of the rival candidates for the papacy should reign. Three candidates were claiming that they were the rightful possessors of the papal throne. The Council passed over all three and chose their own candidate, Martin V, giving the impression that the Council had authority over the Pope. The need for reform became more obvious in the fifteenth century and so the Conciliarist party demanded a calling of a council to reform the church from within. Alister McGrath, a noted theologian, claims, "The failure of the conciliarist movement is generally regarded as a central cause of the Reformation" (34). Some Catholic bishops today are calling for a council that will recognize the work of Vatican II, which designated their authority as teachers and promoters of sound doctrine, rather than the Curia who seems to usurp their powers.

[14] In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, some theologians began developing theories on their own, because they did not have a central authority to declare sound doctrine. Today, theologians have a different problem in that they are told by the Curia that they must seek their local bishop's permission to teach theology at Catholic colleges and universities. This decree presents special problems in America where the few Pontifical universities and the many Catholic universities and colleges must adhere to standards established by the State. Most university professors belong to a union that touts academic freedom allowing the professor to share his or her expertise without interference from outside offices. Seeking permission to teach theology from an office that does not have accreditation in the field seems repulsive to most university departments. Taking any kind of oaths to remain faithful to the dictates of any external group appears most distasteful to academics who have spent much time and money becoming experts in their field. They respect the authority of expertise, not control, and prefer obedience to truth, not to the dictates of an outside authority.

[15] This confusion reigns over the issue of inclusive language in the English translation of the lectionary. Since 1980, book and journal publishers refuse to print any material that does not contain inclusive language. Protestant women have successfully petitioned hymnal publishers to change the sexist language in their songs. Reformed and Conservative Jews have changed the psalms to contain inclusive language. It is difficult for Catholics to understand why the translation of the English version of the lectionary has met with such difficulty. They wonder why the authority for the English translation does not lie with the English-speaking theologians and bishops rather than with a small group of curial officials who have limited knowledge of American culture and the English language. Many Catholics question if the bishops are designated as the official teaching authority of the Church, then why are they overlooked in such a crucial decision?

## **Scandal in the Hierarchy**

[16] At the time of the Reformation some bishops and clerics lived lives contrary to the gospel. Some were breaking their vows of celibacy with liaisons with women who bore their children. Some bishops did not reside in their dioceses and ignored the superstitious practices associated with the veneration of relics. Some cardinals and bishops lived in luxury, becoming patrons of the arts. Criticisms arose around the scandal of professional Christians who departed from the words and example of their leader Jesus Christ.

[17] Catholics' faith in their hierarchy, especially the bishops in the United States and some African and European countries has diminished recently after the cover up of pedophile and ephabophile priests. Some Bishops showed more concern for the welfare of their institutions than for the victims of the crimes. The sex abuse scandal has prompted responses from Catholics all over the globe. Groups of laity are calling for the church to study clergy abuse from Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia, as well as in the United States. This scandal has pushed many committed Catholics beyond their level of tolerance of the present system of governance by the Church. Polls conducted by reputable institutions, such as Zogby Associates and the

National Catholic Reporter show that 75% of Catholics favor a more open style of leadership where celibacy for priests is optional and women can take their place as sacramental leaders. Many laity who see themselves in the role of making Christ present in the world are grouping together to make their voices heard to the entire church.

## **New Lay Groups in the Church**

[18] Some of these groups resemble the Lollards and Hussites of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries who tried to make their voices heard regarding reforms. The Lollards in England in the fifteenth century anticipated many sixteenth century Protestant positions. They denounced clerical celibacy, confession to a priest, pilgrimages, and the ecclesiastical wealth of the church. The Lollards taught that preaching was superior to the sacraments, and by selling Tyndale's English *New Testament* (1526), they sought to place the vernacular in the hands of their countrymen.

[19] The Hussites were followers of Jan Hus, a Czech preacher and theology professor who taught that lay people suffered discrimination when they were deprived of receiving the consecrated wine in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Laypersons could receive only the consecrated bread because reception of the consecrated wine was reserved for the priest. Hus declared that the laity were not receiving the respect due to their spiritual dignity as Catholics. The Hussites laid the groundwork for lay resentment of clerical privilege that surfaced before the Protestant Reformation. Today, one lay group, Call to Action, is demanding a full disclosure from dioceses regarding the clergy abuse situation. "As lay people assert their right to full disclosure about abuses committed and money spent, they will be embarking on wider roles in other aspects of church governance" (*Church Watch*, October 2002: 2). Call to Action has chapters all over the country and sponsor well attended conferences that feature noted theologians and authors.

[20] Some college professors from Catholic universities, such as Notre Dame and Boston College sponsor conferences, programs, and lectures exploring controversial topics including ordination of women, optional clerical celibacy, and other issues of church governance. The second meeting of the lay group, the Synod of Southern Illinois, was banned from using church property by the Belleville Bishop Wilton Gregory, U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference president. However, he did relent when lay people picketed the Cathedral.

[21] In support of the active role of laity in the church, Tom Doyle, a canon lawyer, called for replacement of the church monarchy with a more democratic structure. He said that the laity are not mere onlookers whose duty is to pray, pray, and obey. "Its most vital members are not those wearing elaborate robes and sitting on thrones, but the marginalized, the hurting, the rejected, the forgotten, the voiceless, - and today we are taking back what has been hijacked from us" (*Church Watch*, October, 2002: 4). When asked by the *National Catholic Reporter* what kind of church they desired, one of those polled reflected the answer of many other respondents:

I would like to see a discipleship of equals. The issue goes to the heart of the patriarchal and hierarchical structure of the church and the false holding of one person above another. It means opening all church offices to women. It means shifting the weight of power away from Rome and church pulpits to the people of God. It means getting rid of all parent-child terminology like "Father", (Holy and otherwise) (May 3, 2002: 16).

Respondents called for a reform of the church's teaching on human sexuality, saying that natural law arguments against contraception are contradictory, cause economic pain to families, and undercut any credibility the church has in opposing abortion. Likewise, the theology of marriage needs some reconsideration so the pollsters found. "Marriage should be considered a special vocation that is not ruled by canon or civil law, or dispensations masquerading as annulments" (*National Catholic Reporter*, May 3, 2002: 16).

[22] One of the new groups, Voice of the Faithful, organized in Boston, was formed with "the purpose of providing a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the faithful can actively participate in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church." Another group, Coalition of Concerned Catholics, is

committed to helping victims of sexual abuse within the church. They wish to build a broad base of consensus so that all voices among the faithful may be heard. They are concerned about "donation without representation" (*National Catholic Reporter*, April 26, 2002). The group, Fellowship of Southern Illinois Laity, are calling for a synod of the laity because of their concern regarding decision making by the hierarchy alone.

[23] Call to Action at a conference in Utica, New York voted that their members petition the U.S. Conference of Bishops insisting that the "people of God" be included in all discussions regarding the treatment of victims of clerical abuse. " We maintain that this abuse, egregious as it is, is but the presenting issue of a much deeper concern, the institutional culture of deceit, denial, silencing, secrecy, and systemic clericalism, which attempts to separate the hierarchy from the rest of God's people." They decry the lack of opportunity for receiving the sacraments because the hierarchy refuses to discuss the need for ordination of married men and women.

[24] Just as some groups, such as the Hussites and Lollards, were persecuted by the official church preceding the reformation, some of these newly formed groups are persecuted by the hierarchy today. The Voice of the Faithful claims that it does not want to portray itself as a dissenting Catholic organization. Yet the bishops from Maine, Long Island, New York, Bridgeport, Connecticut, Camden, and Newark, New Jersey have banned them from their dioceses. In Boston, where the movement originated, Cardinal Bernard Law has banned new chapters from meeting on church property, but existing chapters may continue to meet. This group became so bold as to enlist the help of priests to call for Cardinal Law's resignation. Voice of the Faithful has over 25,000 members active in 100 chapters across the country who are calling for structural reform of the church.

As a grass roots movement, VOTF has proved that power in the church can come from the pews as well as the pope. The most dramatic development was the resignation ...of Boston's embattled cardinal, Bernard Law, after VOTF and 58 Boston-area priests publicly demanded he step down (Scelfo: 66)

## **Implications for the Future**

[25] There was an excitement and anticipation on the part of Roman Catholics on the eve of the reformation that was similar to contemporary Catholics after Vatican II. Just as the fifteenth century Catholics looked forward to a new day in the history of the church, many twentieth century Catholics following Vatican II excitedly anticipated a revitalized church based on the gospels. Disappointment and frustration reflect the attitude of today's Catholics as they watch their church retreat into dogmatic control over doctrine, practice, and clerical appointments. Even some church leaders see the need to call for a new council that would continue the theology and policies of Vatican II. Thirty-one bishops, a cardinal and a member of the Roman Curia have signed a petition asking John Paul II to convene a new ecumenical council, in which the church would respond to the growing challenges facing humanity, especially persons in extreme poverty in a rapidly changing and interconnected world.

[26] Conditions today seem even more critical than on the eve of the Reformation. Education of the laity and instant communication of complaints against the institutional church cause many Catholics to look elsewhere than their parishes for spiritual nourishment. Conditions are ripe for schism or a movement to another denomination. The obvious shortage of priests has led to creative liturgies on the part of the laity, many of which are led by women. How long will these women remain in secondary positions that deprive them of conducting the sacraments? They cannot be compared to the women at the time of the reformation who were not as vocal or educated as the women of today, but their influence prevails. Mothers of a few decades ago refused to allow their sons to become altar servers unless their daughters received the same opportunity. Today mothers are refusing their sons to be priests unless their daughters can be also considered for ordination.

[27] Some theologians think that the Protestant Reform was staved off in the thirteenth century by the reforms conducted in the church by the Franciscans and Dominicans. Perhaps lay groups today could accomplish similar results, if they were recognized by the official church. If some of the demands of the

newly formed lay groups could be met, such problems as hierarchical secrecy, curial control, priestly shortage, and suppression of scientific developments could be alleviated. Rather than another Protestant Reform, an energized and vital church might emerge similar to the situation following Vatican II. Instead of starting new churches, educated Catholics might turn their talents towards the service of the gospel as practiced within their own church.

[28] Reliance on their own experience led many Protestants to develop the principle of individual judgement regarding Scripture and church norms. Just as many Protestant groups divided into other segments over dissenting opinions, Catholics display a vast array of reactions to many contemporary issues. The spectrum of opinions range from liberal to moderate to conservative to ultraconservative on many questions. Many contemporary Catholics are placing more emphasis on the Bible and the example of Jesus than the authority of the clergy. Papal authority has responded to these issues of clerical scandal, women's rights, sexual practices, new developments in science and technology, and the variety of global cultures with very conservative policies aimed at avoiding splintering of the church by suppressing dissent. Will the liberal wing of the Catholic Church move in the same direction as Protestant churches in the sixteenth century? Already many Catholics have moved toward non -denominational and mainline Protestant churches. The question remains, how much will the Catholic Church learn from history and recognize the present trends in church and society that seem to reflect the conditions of the sixteenth century.

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