

The Impact of a Religious Order

There have been some discussions in recent days about whether the formation of new structures like orders would be good for the Presbyterian Church (USA). When we look at some of the examples from church history, we see that the creation of orders became a stimulant for both reform within the church and great missionary activity outside the church. Orders had to deal with issues of mistrust and opposition in the church. They brought some agreement to the church, but never were able to remove disagreement completely. And yet, in the midst of the human imperfection, they were able to stimulate much needed evangelism and discipleship. Mark Noll's book *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* offers some interesting insights for today from the examples of the Jesuits and the Catholic orders of the 1500s.

“In the summer of 1539, a Spaniard who had begun his adult life fighting for the king of Spain enlisted for a different cause. Ignatius Loyola, for many years a priest, was now asking Pope Paul III to let him establish a new religious order. Five years before, Loyola had taken the first steps in formalizing the intense devotion that already characterized his life. With six companions, Loyola has sworn vows of poverty and chastity. Together they had pledged themselves to seek the conversion of Muslims in and around Jerusalem. At that gathering in Paris in August, 1534, Loyola and his friends also agreed that if their original intention could not be fulfilled, they would agree to whatever service the Pope would assign to them.

Loyola had studied theology for eleven years. At one point, he was **so zealous about his faith**, that he was **investigated** by the Inquisition as someone **likely to disturb the peace and unity of the church**. While some were uneasy with Loyola's intense spirituality, others were drawn to him as a beacon of truth. The band that pledged itself to missionary service was the result.

Loyola's petition for a new religious order did not receive an immediate response. **He had to be patient**. More than a year elapsed from the time of his request to the pope's approval to formally establish the Society of Jesus. Thus was founded what has been called “the most powerful instrument of Catholic revival and resurgence in this **era of religious crisis**.”

The founding of the Jesuits revitalized the church, cultivated a new missionary zeal, and shaped the doctrine of the church for the next five hundred years. Even before the pope acted officially to establish the order, one of Loyola's original companions, Francis Xavier (1506-52) had embarked on the missionary journeys that brought the message of Christianity to India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Japan. This was done 150 years before anything comparable can be found among Protestants and 250 years before anything comparable among English-speaking Protestants. As they did so, they had to learn how to communicate the gospel cross-culturally, from a European perspective into an Asian context.

The main cause of reform in the Catholic Church **was the great surge in creating new religious orders** that dated from the 1520s. Just as Benedictine monasticism had sparked broad church renewal in the sixth century, so in the early sixteenth century, **concern for the decline of the church** moved many of the devout to **form new bands for the purpose of prayer and**

service or to reform already existing religious structures. One group of reforms was inspired by the dynamic leadership of St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) whose fervent piety and sharp common sense guided a religious community given over mostly to prayer and contemplation. Teresa's success in establishing monastic foundations (one for men and one for women) was repeated with several of the new or revived orders in other places throughout Catholic Europe.

The **main point** that needs to be made about these new orders – which included the Jesuits as the largest and most active - was their attachment to older medieval ideals of **poverty, chastity, and obedience.** Their focus was on living up to ancient ideals and carrying out reform through practices of prayer, meditation, and service with an ancient lineage in the church.

In 1537, a group of reform-minded cardinals produced a report which criticized the papacy for exaggerating its claims to power in the church and in society. It also called upon the papacy to concentrate on its spiritual tasks. It pointed out the failure of bishops to fulfill their tasks as pastors in their dioceses. Although its recommendations proved both too general and too deep to be implemented, the commission pointed the way toward reform that later popes would follow.

A final emphasis of the Council of Trent in 1562-1563 was the **stress upon the missionary mandate.** By this time, many of the orders had already begun a much-expanded missionary activity, but Trent put a stamp of urgency upon efforts to carry the Catholic faith to Asia, North America, South America, and other areas far beyond the borders of Christendom. The success of the reform from Trent depended crucially on the assistance of Roman Catholic monarchs like Francis I and Charles V, who **though they deeply distrusted each other,** shared a desire to reassert church unity in their own lands and throughout Europe.

The active cooperation of zealous Catholic reformers and faithful Catholic monarchs proved to be an extraordinarily effective combination. To be sure, **many quarrels remained** within the church, especially as orders bickered with each other, with diocesan clergy, and with secular rulers, even as Catholic monarchs continued intermittently to **plot against each other.** Yet despite ongoing struggles within the Catholic Church, the reforms set in motion at Trent supported a **massive renewal** of Catholic energy, devotion, and success. So effective were these efforts at reform that the norms defined at Trent remained overwhelmingly dominant throughout the Catholic Church for nearly four hundred years. The uniformity achieved at Trent never resulted in an entirely uniform Catholic Church. National variances made for **significant ongoing differences** among Catholics. Yet the reforms were also significant. The record of the Jesuits displays remarkable faithfulness to Christianity, as well as remarkable flexibility to their missionary situation.”

The lessons of church history are applicable to our situation today. Today's church is in need of reform. Today's church is in need of increased missionary activity, including learning how to relate to the mission field that has moved into our own neighborhoods. The example of orders within the church shows how a disciplined spirituality can not only reform the nature and character of the church, but also significantly improve its participation in the mission of God in our world today.