Two Responses to the Reformation – Jesuits and Calvinists

The Counter Reformation or the Catholic Reformation, which dates from 1534, was the Roman Catholic Church’s reaction to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century in Europe. The Protestant gains in Europe finally forced Pope Paul III in 1545 to clarify the doctrine of the Catholic Church. This council, called the Council of Trent, worked on this problem in three separate sessions from 1545 to 1563. This council eventually advised some far-reaching reforms in the abuses practiced by the church, such as the selling of indulgences. The Council forced bishops to live in the region they were responsible for and also banned the selling of important positions of responsibility in the Church. In addition to reform, the Council decided that seminaries should be built throughout Europe so that church doctrine could be spread easily and priests could be better educated. Another response of the Catholic Church was to encourage the foundation of new groups or ‘orders’ that supported a disciplined return to the essential ideas of Christianity. Led by intellectuals and concerned with education, the most important of the movements was the Society of Jesus or the Jesuits, founded by Ignatius of Loyola. At the start, the Jesuit movement was a small movement. The original Society of Jesus had only ten members. By 1630, it had over fifteen thousand members all over the world and is considered by many to have been important in stopping the spread of Protestantism.

Jean Calvin was a French Protestant who fled to safety in Geneva in 1534. Calvin encouraged Protestants everywhere to set up new churches that challenged the authority of the Catholic Church. They were not afraid of persecution, because they believed that it would be glorious to die for their faith. Calvin strongly believed in predestination. This is the idea that God has already decided whether people would go to heaven or hell before they were even born. Men and women were thus divided into two groups: the Elect and the Reprobate. The Elect were chosen by God for eternal life in heaven, while the Reprobate were damned and would go to hell. Calvin made up a strict moral code for all citizens of Geneva. Calvin believed that Christian life should be based upon the essential teachings of the Bible. Calvin's publications spread his ideas to many parts of Europe especially Scotland, the Netherlands, and parts of Germany but he was also influential in France, Hungary, Transylvania, and Poland. Most settlers in the American Mid-Atlantic and New England were Calvinists, including the Puritans and Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam (New York).

Activities

1. Write a sentence or two to explain each of the words in bold.
2. What evidence is there that the Catholic Church eventually accepted the criticisms of Martin Luther?
3. Why were Calvinists such dangerous opponents of the Catholic Church?
4. In what ways were the Jesuits and Calvinists similar responses to the Reformation?
5. Using the sheet showing two churches in 16th century England label one Catholic and the other Protestant and then explain the significance of as many differences as you can.