Chapter 1

Reform in the Late Middle Ages

The Woman with the Beautiful Face

One fine May morning, weary of walking, the poet William Langland (ca. 1330–ca. 1400) fell asleep on an English hillside beside a babbling brook. He dreamed of a great mountain, a murky valley, and a field full of people. He saw all manner of men and women, including nobles and villagers. Down from the castle on the mountain came a lovely lady in linen garments. "Son, do you sleep?" she asked him. "Do you see this people, how busy they are about the meadow?" Langland observed them again and waited for the lady to continue. "Most of the men who move in this meadow have their worship in this world and wish no better," she said. "No heaven but here holds their fancy." Langland did know what to say. "I was afraid of her face," he wrote, "for all her beauty."

Langland then managed to mumble, "Mercy, Madam, what is your meaning?" She told him the castle on the mountain was Truth's dwelling. "Would that you worked as his word teaches!" she exclaimed. He who lives in the castle is the father of faith, she told him, and fashioned you wholly. The beautiful lady spoke to him at length in words weighted with the wisdom of scripture. He wondered who she was who taught him so mildly.

"I am Holy Church," she said, "and you should know me. I first found you. My faith I taught you."

Langland kissed the ground and asked her to pray for him a sinner. “Teach me to believe in Christ,” he begged. “Tell me of no treasure, but teach me only how I may save my soul, O sainted Lady!”[1]

So begins *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, one of the greatest poems of medieval England. It emerged from the heart of a Catholic people and was well known in its day. The author, William Langland, was a married layman in minor orders—or a “liturgical minister” in today’s terminology. He earned his living in London by praying and singing psalms for the wealthy.

Since the best part of the Church is in heaven and is thereby holy, Langland portrayed it as a beautiful woman in the poem. But “Holy Church” was not always so holy on earth. The figure of the “plowman” in Langland’s work represented the man of hardworking, Christlike simplicity seeking the path of salvation in a corrupt age, full of greed and lust and sloth—even among high churchmen. There was a wide gap between Christian ideals and actual ways of life, Langland observed, marring the Church’s beauty on earth. It was obvious to him that the Antichrist and his army had infiltrated the highest reaches. His poem was a cry for reform.

Infiltrated

The medieval period constituted the turning point in the two-thousand-year story of reform of the Church. The idea of *personal reform* through the Holy Spirit, common among the Church Fathers, expanded to include the whole Church. Not only should individuals allow their hearts to be converted and monasteries reform by returning to the purity of their original rules, but also the papacy itself should lead the way for the Church as a whole *in capite et in membris* (in head and members). This idea of reform from top to bottom (either from the papacy or from councils) fired the imagination of the late Middle Ages among all those who wanted to

take the gospel of Christ seriously. However, reform could also operate from the bottom up.

The zeal to reform was often accompanied by the zeal to criticize an existing state of affairs and demand change. There was much to criticize in the late medieval Church. The papacy was mired in financial and political problems. The pope even fled Rome due to political instability. This inaugurated the Avignon Papacy from 1309 to 1376 in France. After the pope returned to Rome, several men claimed to be pope. This created the Great Western Schism from 1378 to 1417. In addition, the Hundred Years' War raged between England and France. Confusion reigned, and the papacy was in no position to lead a widespread reforming movement. More and more people came to believe the ship of Peter was sinking. This was the context of Langland's great poem.

The situation was serious but not singular. For centuries—up to our own time—critics have blown loud trumpets warning of corruption in the Church. They have spun conspiracies and made charges that the Catholic Church has been infiltrated by everything from Aryans to Marxists, pagans to Freemasons, and family-interest groups to special-interest groups. This is nothing new: at times, wicked people have indeed undermined the Church, starting with Judas. The amazing thing is the Church has survived it all! Pointing zealously to such problems can help identify the enemy. Negatively, it can also feed the self-righteousness of the zealot and shift blame to vague figures far away. In this sense, the chant for reform can be unhealthy for our souls. The real question is perpetually, what are *we* going to do about reform in our own place and in our own time?

How did late medieval people think about and practice reform? What roadblocks held up the much-desired reformation of Christianity before the Protestants took matters into their own hands? Some kept up the call for reform while holding on to the principle of unity at the same time. Others started local grassroots movement of reform. Then there were the

independent types who broke with the Church in the name of reform—even before Luther.

St. Catherine of Siena to the Pope: Be a Man!

One great example of late medieval reform was Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), a saint and Doctor of the Church. She knew the Church was the mystical body of Christ and the hope of the world. The popes represented Christ on earth. Therefore, Catherine was distressed by the fact that the popes resided in Avignon, France, and no longer in Rome, traditionally associated with Peter the apostle and his successors. As a lay member of the Dominican Order, she personally influenced Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome from Avignon in 1377. This was no easy task—for Catherine or Gregory. Insurrections and wars ravaged the Italian peninsula where the French pope was much hated. "Up, father, like a man!" Catherine composed in a letter to him, challenging him to put aside fear. Do not be timorous and do what you ought: return to Rome and use your authority to execute justice against the many iniquities in the Church, she challenged him. She believed reform from the top down would inspire the laity to reform their lives too.[2]

Gregory did return to Rome, but he unfortunately died in 1378. When the cardinals of the Church met to elect a new pope, Italian mobs broke into the voting chamber demanding an Italian be elected. The cardinals chose one, and he became Urban VI. In his fervor to begin reforms right away, Urban made enemies among the cardinals. Reformation was derailed, and the situation became much worse. The cardinals withdrew to try to annul his election and decide on an alternative French candidate who became Clement VII. Now there were two popes. The kingdoms of Europe lined up to support their favorite pope. This was reform gone bad.

Catherine was horrified. She composed a letter in 1378 to three Italian cardinals who defected from Urban. She demanded they support the true

pope whom they had validly elected the first time—the one they accepted with everyone else and who received the office. By creating an antipope, "you have divided us from the truth which strengthens us," she warned. Pride robs you of the light of reason, and you have turned to the dark side, she charged. The pope represents Christ on earth, and you have broken obedience. Yield to the "prick of conscience that I know is perpetually stabbing you" for fostering disunity, she stated, and "feed in truth at the breast of the Bride of Christ."[3]

The schism lasted thirty-nine years. It had a devastating impact on widespread perceptions of the Church, its unity, and its authority. This happened at the very moment when rising national aspirations of the European peoples were straining against their common interests. At one point there were *three* claimants to the papacy! How could the situation possibly be resolved? At last, hundreds of churchmen and scholars met at the Council of Constance (1414–1418) to resolve the confusion. They deposed or accepted the resignation of all papal claimants and elected Pope Martin V (r. 1417–1431).

This was an important accomplishment. However, the Council of Constance also raised another problem: *conciliarism*. This is the theory that councils hold superior authority to popes. Conciliarism seemed to make sense due to the crisis of multiple claims to the papacy. Once the papacy stabilized again, conciliarism seemed a threat that made the popes of the late 1400s distrust councils altogether. Could new councils erode the authority of the papacy? Maybe it was better not to hold them. Tragically, this put off the question of systematic Church reform even further.

Grassroots Reform Movements

Without much papal leadership, by the late 1300s various laypeople, churchmen, and political rulers took reforming initiative into their own hands. The Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, for example, were

lay associations started in the Netherlands by the deacon Gerard Groote (1340–1384). They sought to develop a more vibrant inner life. Groote had been a well-off academic who passed through a conversion and spent time in a monastery. He emerged from this retreat with apostolic zeal, preaching widely. He was fearless in his attack on the vices of priests and monks. At one point he was forbidden by the bishop of his diocese to preach. Groote obeyed ecclesiastical authority and turned his attention to organizing communities of followers. This laid the basis for a fruitful reform movement.

Together, Groote and his followers focused on an inward piety known as *devotio moderna* ("modern devotion"). Intentional communities lived semi-monastic lives. They resolved to start a reform inside the Church, and their efforts were eventually approved by the pope. Through their schools and their writings—above all the *Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis—the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life influenced many beyond their immediate circle. That influence helped raise literacy rates (among women too) and book production in the Netherlands during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This may have even unintentionally raised the level of economic prosperity there.

Up Close and Personal:

ST. CATHERINE OF GENOA

St. Catherine of Genoa is a stellar example of how God's grace can work through an individual who works steadily and faithfully, doing daily what seems small and relatively insignificant. Her deep and dedicated life of prayer prepared her heart to receive God's grace and sustained her in her difficult marriage and her work with the poor and neglected.

Born in 1447, Catherine married young to an irascible nobleman chosen by her family. He was unfaithful, was irresponsible with money, and had a violent temper. Catherine was miserable. She tried to find ways to cope by turning to worldly comforts until one day she experienced a profound conversion in prayer prior to the sacrament of Confession. God pierced her with his love, allowing her to experience its immense depth. She spent hours in prayer after this and became a daily communicant, yet always actuated her spiritual life in her daily duties. She cared for the sick in the hospital in Genoa for many years, eventually becoming an administrator there. She steadily endured the horrific plague the city faced in 1493, caring for those infected as nearly 80 percent of the city perished.

Eventually Catherine's prayer and steadfastness bore fruit in her personal life, and through God's grace her husband converted. He became a third order Franciscan, working alongside her in the hospital until his death. Afterward, she resigned from her duties because of her deteriorating health. She suffered greatly but took the time to speak to her spiritual director and a group of disciples about her life's experience. They set it down in writing.

God granted remarkable and mystical experiences to Catherine, particularly revelations about purgatory and the life of the soul. Her most widely known works, "Treatise on Purgatory" and "Dialogue with a Soul," detail these. Later ratified by theologians, these works would go on to inspire many others, including other great saints of the Age of Reformations like St. Francis de Sales.

Her life and writings inspired her followers to form the Oratory of Divine Love, out of which came two significant churchmen: Gian Pietro Carafa (1476–1559) and Gaetano da Thiene (1480–1547). They helped establish an order known as the Theatines that pursued innovative urban missionary work. This order later produced several reforming bishops.

Besides Groote, the Italian laywoman Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510) also left a great reforming legacy. Her life inspired a much later classic work in the philosophy of religion called *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* (1908) by Friedrich von Hügel. Von Hügel thought of religion as made up of three elements: (1) religion as experiential, (2) religion as intellectual, and (3) religion as institutional (and thereby external, communal, and authoritative). Through his study of Catherine of Genoa and her friends, von Hügel concluded that one never finds any one of these three elements without a trace of the others. They properly go together for the fullest expression of religious life.

The difficulty in any religiously serious life was to *keep* these elements together. Enthused about one of them, believers all too easily suppress the others due to their longing to intensify (and thus simplify) their religion. For example, one who discovered the emotional/experiential side of religion would be tempted to "sweep aside both the external, as so much oppressive ballast; and the intellectual, as so much hair-splitting or rationalism." If those elements were swept aside, "a shifting subjectivity, and all but incurable tyranny of mood and fancy," would result, von Hügel predicted; "fanaticism is in full sight." On its own, mysticism tended toward subjectivism, intellectualism toward rationalism, and institutionalism toward superstition and routinization. In other words, in a healthy religious personality, each element needed to supplement, purify, and stimulate the other, protecting it from one-sided religion. The "cross" of religious existence meant the creative acceptance of the balance, tension, and friction of these elements *together*.[4] True reform maintained harmony among religious experience, reason, and institution, as von Hügel found in Catherine of Genoa and her friends. This required spiritual docility and patience.

Sacrificing Unity for the Sake of Reform: John Wycliffe and Jan Hus

Other late medieval reformers did not manage to balance these three elements. They ended up creating heretical movements. For example, there was the religious reform movement started by the Oxford professor and priest John Wycliffe (1330–1384) whose members were popularly denounced as "Lollards," though it is not clear what that term meant. Wycliffe condemned the widespread Church corruption of his day. He also appealed to the Bible as the highest authority and pushed reading it in the vernacular or common language. On that basis, he criticized the rule of clerical celibacy, monasticism, intercession of the saints, veneration of images and relics, pilgrimages, transubstantiation, and papal authority. He also thought the property of unworthy officials and clerics should be taken away.

Wycliffe attracted a wide following across England. From the perspective of von Hügel's elements of religion, Wycliffe emphasized the intellectual element in religion (he was a professor) at the expense of the institutional side. This sacrificed the unity of the Church and ended in heresy.

In addition, Wycliffe's teaching inspired another academic and priest, Jan Hus (ca. 1372–1415), a Czech thinker in Eastern Europe. Hus vigorously attacked Church corruption. That was nothing new, as many had done the same. However, Hus went a step further to insist that sinful clergy could have no real authority—a heresy like that of the Donatists dealt with by St. Augustine in the 400s. Such clergy should be removed from office and their property confiscated. That appealed to a wide spectrum of people in a region where the churchmen owned nearly half of the land. Hus gained followers. He appealed to scripture, history, and conscience against the authority of the papacy. Because the papacy was still divided by two—and then three—claimants, this lent weight to Hus's

arguments. "To rebel against an erring pope is to obey Christ the Lord," he wrote in his *Treatise on the Church*.[5] As with Wycliffe, zeal against corruption supported the belief that the Church was irredeemable. As a result, Wycliffe's and Hus's efforts threatened the unity of the Church.

Hus was eventually burned as a heretic, sparking anger and revolt. One branch of his followers, called the Taborites, became militant radicals with an apocalyptic desire to bring about the kingdom of God on earth by force. There would be no private property—everything would be held in common. This revolutionary movement inaugurated two decades of violence in the Hussite Wars before Taborite forces fell in defeat. Reforming radicalism, which called for overturning the social order, would reemerge in the sixteenth century with bloody results in Germany.

Reform by Catholic Monarchs

Elsewhere, political leaders took the initiative in Church reform. This occurred in Spain under the governance of King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella. These two Catholic monarchs famously supported Christopher Columbus on his voyage across the Atlantic Ocean in 1492. They also launched Spain's Golden Age during the 1500s. After centuries of anarchic fighting between regional lords around Spain, the monarchs devoted themselves to shaping a new national identity through unity in the Catholic faith. Their devotion to the faith and their awareness of corruption in the Church prompted their great concern for reform. Along with their advisors they strove to raise the standards for the episcopacy, the priests, and the religious orders through discipline and education. These efforts met determined resistance in places—as when hundreds of friars fled to North Africa and converted to Islam rather than give up their female companions.

One important Spanish reformer in league with Ferdinand and Isabella was the cardinal and statesman Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros (1436–1517). He served as Isabella's spiritual director for a time. When she