

Catholic Reform and Humanism Before the Reformation

by

John J. W. ALDEN

Department of History, Acadia University

As Gerhart Ladner has recently shown, the idea of the reform of the individual Christian to the image of Christ is already found in the New Testament Epistles of St. Paul.¹ The Pauline concept that the Church is in continual need of reform into Christ's image was later strongly emphasized by both the Greek and the Latin Fathers and became part of the medieval tradition.² The movement of the eleventh century usually known as the Gregorian or Hildebrandine Reform was especially important in developing the idea that the entire Church militant might be in especial need of reform during a given period of history. This new reformatory drive thus concerned the whole Church and not only or even primarily the monasteries. By the thirteenth century the Church in its practical operation had been converted into a vast legal pyramid. So effective was this process that by the fourteenth century the essentially legal view of the Church which had originally been developed by the canon lawyers had become widely accepted by the theologians themselves. The Church both in theory and practice had become a single juristic body which was subordinated to the pope.³ But the "Babylonian Captivity" of the Church caused a considerable diminution in the prestige of the papal office, and the Schism of 1378, which lasted for almost forty years, did further damage to both papal prestige and the institutional structure of the Church.⁴ Furthermore, the Great Schism had hardly ended with the resignation of the antipope Felix V and the dispersal

¹ Cf G. B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), pp. 35-62.

² *Ibid.*, esp. p. 63f, p. 319f, and G. B. Ladner's article "Reformatio," in *Ecumenical Dialogue at Harvard*, ed. S. H. Miller and G. E. Wright (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), pp. 172-190.

³ Cf Brian Tierney, *Foundations of Conciliar Theory: The Contribution of the Medieval Canonists from Gratian to the Great Schism* (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 132-139.

⁴ Cf Guy Mollat, *The Popes of Avignon, 1305-1378*, 9th ed., transl. J. Love (New York, 1965).

of the Council of Basel than there followed a succession of Renaissance culture-popes, most of whom treated the papacy primarily as an Italian political principedom. It is not surprising, then, that throughout the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there was a constant call by good Catholics throughout Europe for the reformation of the Church “in the head [the pope] and the members.”⁵

To understand the relation between Catholic reform and humanism on the eve of the Reformation it is necessary to have a clear grasp of what Renaissance humanism actually was. Although the German word *humanismus* from which the English “humanism” is translated does not appear to have been coined before 1808, the term nevertheless directly derives from the Latin *humanista* or “humanist” which was used in a specific sense during the Renaissance itself.⁶ The Latin *humanista*, together with its vernacular equivalents in Italian, French, English, and other languages, had by the sixteenth century come to be used to signify a professor, teacher or student of the humanities as these disciplines were understood during this period of revival of ancient Latin and Greek cultural ideals. The *studia humanitatis* or humanities were the studies which were held to lead to *humanitas*, that is to say, the civilized culture of the educated man according to the ancient Roman ideal found especially in the works of Cicero and Aulus Gellius, a Latin writer of the second century A.D.⁷ Cicero’s description of the humanities and his description of the kind of character which they inculcated remained the ideal of the variegated cultural movement known to historians as Renaissance humanism.

Renaissance humanism has, therefore, no connotation whatever of atheism as in the common modern meaning of the word, but indicates rather an educational ideal based upon the revival of classical culture. For although they wished to revive the whole of “antiquity,” most of the humanists of the Italian Renaissance were convinced Christians. This was true to an even greater degree of the humanism of Northern Europe, inspired as it often was by the devotional piety of the late medieval North. The humanists saw no antagonism between their humanistic ideals and those of Catholic reform. On the contrary, humanistic reformers of this period continued one aspect of the medieval ecclesiastical tradition in their attempts to renew the Church by restoring it to its primitive apostolic form. They believed that what this primitive and ideal form of the Church had really been could best be understood through the application of the critical tools of the humanities to

⁵ Cf. H. Jedin, *A History of the Council of Trent*, tr. E. Graf, 2 vols. (St. Louis, 1963), Vol. I, pp. 5-165.

⁶ P. O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought* (New York, 1961), p. 9f.

⁷ See W. K. Ferguson, *Europe in Transition, 1300-1520* (Boston, 1962), p. 291.

the literary sources of Christian antiquity: the Bible (in its earliest texts), the Church Fathers, and the ancient canon law.

They further believed that the whole *respublica Christiana* or Catholic Church could be renewed and reformed into Christ's image through such a revival of the primitive Church of the early Christian centuries. This is the approach to ecclesiastical reform which we find maintained in the writings of John Colet and his friend Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam.

Colet has recently been termed the "presiding genius" of the group of humanists which Frederic Seebohm a hundred years ago inaccurately chose to call the "Oxford Reformers of 1498."⁸ Colet's views on Church reform are stated most clearly in the sermon which he preached on this topic before the Convocation of the province of Canterbury on February 6, 1511/1512. When this sermon is interpreted in the light of statements in his other writings, it becomes clear that Colet stood in the same general tradition of Catholic reform which Professor Ladner has examined in St. Paul, the Church Fathers, and the reformers of the eleventh century, and which Monsignor Hubert Jedin has traced through the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and at the Council of Trent.

Colet's Convocation sermon *de reformatione* was so outspoken in its attack upon the clerical abuses of his day that Samuel Knight, writing in the eighteenth century, wrongly judged it to be an opening act of the English Reformation.⁹ But the sermon in fact shows that Colet stands in the late medieval tradition of an appeal for a reform of the Church "in head and members," except that since he was addressing the principal council of the *ecclesia Anglicana* he does not mention the reformatory role of the pope. At the beginning of the sermon he asks the Convocation to begin their prayers for the ecclesiastical hierarchy with a prayer for the pope; however, as it is specifically the state of the English Church which is at issue, leadership must come from the bishops and abbots of the *ecclesia Anglicana* as heads of the national Church.¹⁰ Moreover, since in his commentary on the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* of the Pseudo-Dionysius Colet refers to "that highest bishop

⁸ Cf. Frederic Seebohm, *The Oxford Reformers of 1498, John Colet, Erasmus, and Thomas More. Being a History of Their Fellow-Work*, 1st ed. (London, 1867) and subsequent revised editions of this influential book.

⁹ See Samuel Knight, *The Life of Dr. John Colet, D.D., Dean of St. Paul's in the Reigns of K. Henry VII. and K. Henry VIII. and Founder of St. Paul's School*, revised ed. (Oxford, 1823), p. xv and *passim*. This work remained the most important biography of Colet in English until the appearance of J. H. Lupton's *A Life of John Colet, D.D.* (London, 1887). Future citations from this latter work are from the second edition (London, 1909).

¹⁰ See the sixteenth-century English translation of the Convocation sermon in Lupton, *op. cit.*, p. 294. Colet's original Latin is given in Knight, *op. cit.* (1823), p. 240.

[*summus pontifex*] whom we are accustomed to call the pope,” there is certainly no question of any derogation of the papal authority in the Convocation sermon.¹¹ I make this point because Professor Leland Miles in a recent article in the *Anglican Theological Review* attempted to argue that Colet was a Protestant before Luther.¹² We should, however, note that in this same commentary on the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and following a similar statement in a letter of St. Jerome to Evagrius, Colet maintained that the papal supremacy over the other bishops in the Church is an entirely legal supremacy which developed historically during the early Christian centuries for the purpose of adjudicating disputes.¹³ We have here an example of the way in which the Dean’s humanistic approach to the study of the Bible and the Church Fathers influenced his ecclesiology.

Archbishop Warham of Canterbury had called together the Convocation of his province in February, 1511/12, primarily in order to deal with a resurgence of Wyclifitism and Colet was evidently expected to preach the opening sermon on the general topic of the evil of heresy. The Dean shows at once that he has little sympathy with heretics, but he takes the view that lay heresy is merely a symptom of the more general sickness of a Church which is in desperate need of reform. It is the “evil and wicked life of priests” which is the underlying cause of the recent upsurge of heresy. I quote from the sixteenth century translation of Colet’s Latin sermon, but have modernized the English in order to bring out the meaning more clearly. Speaking on behalf of the English clergy gathered together in Convocation, Colet states:

We are... nowadays grieved by heretics, man mad with a marvellous foolishness. But their heresies are not so... pernicious to us as [are] the evil and wicked lives of priests, which, if we believe St. Bernard, are a certain kind of heresy, indeed the chief and most perilous kind of all. For that holy father... preaching to the priests

¹¹ John Colet, *In ecclesiasticam divi Dionisii hierarchiam*, cap. 7.3.. in John Colet, *Two Treatises on the Hierarchies of Dionysius*, ed and trans L. J. H. Lupton (London, 1869), p. 264. This work will hereafter be cited as *In eccl. hier.*

¹² L. W. Miles, “Protestant Colet and Catholic More: A Study of Contrast in the Use of Platonism,” *Anglican Theological Review*, 33 (1951), pp. 29-43. Miles modifies this view in his more recent book *John Colet and the Platonic Tradition* (LaSalle, Illinois, 1961), pp. 171-216, but still maintains that Colet’s vocabulary has “a Protestant flavour” (p. 177), that he has a “Protestant attitude to Scripture versus Church” (pp. 181-182), and that he holds a “Protestant position on the sacraments in his Pauline commentaries” (pp. 199-201). These are all inaccurate statements.

¹³ *In eccl. hier.*, c. 3. 2., in *Two Treatises on Dionysius*, ed. Lupton, pp. 83-84.

of his own time... said: "There are many men who are Catholic ... in their speaking and their preaching who are heretics in their works. For what heretics effect through their evil teaching, these effect by their example: they lead the laity out of the right way and bring them into error... These [men] are as much worse than heretics as their deeds are more powerful than [a heretic's] words."¹⁴

Nevertheless, throughout this sermon it is clear that Colet holds to the medieval view that the hierarchy of the priesthood is separate from and higher in ontological status in the Church than the lay hierarchy. It is for precisely this reason that the clergy must first reform themselves if they wish to bring lay heresy and anticlericalism to an end, for Colet believes that laymen will always strive to imitate the examples set by their rulers the clergy, whether these are good or bad. For the clergy are, or ought to be, the soul of Christ's Mystical Body which is the Church, whereas the laity form only its lower and "more carnal" part. Consequently, the ills of the Church cannot be reformed in accordance with the proper hierarchical order which God has established for her unless the *sacerdotium* first reforms itself under the leadership of its heads, the bishops and abbots.

Colet characteristically chose for this sermon a text from the twelfth chapter of his favourite Epistle of St. Paul, that to the Romans. Romans 12:2 is, in fact, the most explicit text on the subject of Christian reform in the Pauline *corpus* and was, therefore, a favourite text on this topic with both the Greek and the Latin Church Fathers.¹⁵ When Paul wrote these words, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be reformed in the newness of your understanding..." he had, Colet believed, a twofold intention. The Dean, therefore, divides his sermon into two distinct parts in conscious imitation of his favourite Apostle:

In [this text] the Apostle does two things. First, he forbids that we [priests] conform to the world and become carnal. Next, he commands that we be reformed in the Spirit of God [through whom] we are spiritual men.¹⁶

In keeping with this division of his text in the first part of his sermon Colet castigates contemporary abuses caused by the conformity of the clergy to this world, while in the second part he describes in detail the way in which he believes the English Church must be reformed. Colet begins the second

¹⁴ Lupton, *Life of John Colet* (1909), pp. 298-299.

¹⁵ Cf Ladner, *Idea of Reform*, p. 49f.

¹⁶ Lupton, *Life of John Colet*, pp. 294-295.

part of his Convocation sermon by reasserting his belief that reformation must spread down hierarchically through the Church from the heads, the lord bishops and abbots, to the members, the lower clergy and the laity:

This reformation and restoring of the Church's *status* must necessarily begin with you [fathers], and then follow in us [priests] and all the clergy. You are our heads, you are our example for living... In you and in your lives we desire to read as in living books ... according to what fashion we ought to live... "Physician, heal yourself!" is an ancient proverb. You spiritual physicians, first taste yourselves this medicine of purged morals, and then offer us the same medicine to taste.¹⁷

The correct way for the bishops to initiate the reform is to enforce strictly the existing canon law upon themselves and the rest of the clergy. There is no need for the Convocation to pass new provincial canons, for there are already "laws many enough and out of number."¹⁸ The problem is rather to enforce the canons which already exist. According to Colet, the conservative humanist theologian, all that is necessary to begin the reform is that the laws of the Church which are incorporated in the *Corpus juris Canonici* should be read out publicly before the Convocation and then be acted upon by the leaders of the Church. The Dean gives the following reasons for his belief in the effectiveness of this approach to reformation:

The evils which now exist in the Church were there before in time past, and there is no fault for which the fathers have not provided very good remedies. There are no trespasses which do not have laws against them in the body of the canon law. Therefore there is no need to make new laws and constitutions, but rather that those be kept that have been made already. Consequently, let those laws which have... been made be called before you and read out, those which restrain vice and those which further virtue.¹⁹

Colet goes on to summarize the canon laws which need to be enforced at once with especial vigour. The bishops should begin the reform by acting upon those canons which prohibit their own overhasty ordination of clerics:

...let those laws be rehearsed that warn you fathers that you put not oversoon your hands on every man [and] admit them to holy orders. For this is the well of evils that, the broad gate of holy orders once opened,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

¹⁸ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 299-300.

every man who offers himself is everywhere admitted ... This is the cause of both unlearned and evil priests in the Church. It is not enough, in my judgment, for a priest to construe a collect, ask a [scholastic] question, or answer a sophism, but much more [important] is a good, pure and holy life, approved morals, appropriate learning in Holy Scripture, some knowledge of the sacraments ... and, above all, the fear of God and a love of the heavenly life.²⁰

Next, ecclesiastical benefices should be bestowed on men who are worthy of them and not through nepotism and favouritism, whereby “it happens nowadays that boys instead of old men, fools instead of wise men, [and] evil instead of good men reign and rule.” The canons must also be enforced which command that all pastors with cure of souls take up personal residence at their churches instead of delegating their spiritual duties to unsuitable vicars and substitutes.²¹

We gain considerable insight into the disordered state of the English clergy of the time when Colet next demands the enforcement of those laws which forbid a cleric to be a merchant, usurer, hunter or gambler, to carry knives, “haunt taverns,” or have “suspect familiarity” with women. Furthermore, monks, canons, and members of religious orders should be excluded completely from all secular affairs in accordance with the canon of the Council of Chalcedon which requires that “monks ought only to occupy themselves in prayer and fasting, the chastening of their flesh, and the observing of their Rules.”²²

But the real key to an effective reformation is that the bishops themselves obey the canon law. Firstly, they should be elected in due canonical order by their cathedral chapters and not appointed through favour of secular princes. Indeed, the common contemporary practice of political appointment of bishops is the most basic cause of the prevalent worldliness and lack of spirituality in the Church. Bishops are also canonically required to reside in their own dioceses, to show themselves in their cathedrals at least on the major feast days, and carry out their duty of celebrating the sacrifice of the Mass for the laity. Colet here directly criticizes the practice which had become normal in England by the early sixteenth century whereby the diocesan bishops, since they were usually appointed by the King to be royal councillors, spent most of their time in London and seldom if ever visited

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 300-301.

their dioceses.²³ In his evidently private commentary on the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* of the Pseudo-Dionysius, Colet attacked in even more violent fashion the contemporary practice of royal appointment of worldly bishops as the root cause of the near ruin of the Church. Among his comments on Dionysius' view of the priesthood in this work he wrote:

...one may here express an abhorrence of the detestable custom which has now been increasing for a long time in the Church and is so deep-rooted at the present time as almost to destroy the *respublica Christiana*. For temporal princes, insane and calling themselves Christians, but in fact open enemies and blasphemers of Christ and overthrowers of his Church ... with haughty minds ... in chambers and at banquets appoint bishops to rule the Church... The men thus appointed are (heinous crime !) men who are ignorant of all sacred things and skilled in all that is secular, – men to whom the princes have already sold these very bishoprics ... Insanity of princes! Blindness and stupidity of ecclesiastics! ... All order is being overthrown ... Unless Christ has pity on his Church death which is almost here will take over all things. For how can the Church endure [when it] is governed by diseased counsel and murderous hands?²⁴

The last sentence of this quotation appears to be a direct criticism of the contemporary popes Alexander VI and Julius II. For Erasmus, in his biography of Colet completed shortly after the Dean's death, summarized a later sermon preached before Henry VIII and the court in which Colet attacked in barely veiled language the policies of these two popes as well as that of Henry himself²⁵

In the Convocation sermon of 1511/12 Colet completed his appeal to the bishops to lead Church reform by noting that the canon law also required frequent convocations of both general and provincial councils for this very purpose:

Finally, let those laws and constitutions of the fathers for the celebration of councils be renewed, which command

²³ Cf. A. Hamilton Thompson, *The English Clergy and Their Organization in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1947); A. R. Myers, *England in the Late Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth, 1963), pp. 156-160.

²⁴ *In eccl. hier.*, c.5.3. My translation, based on Lupton, *Life*, pp. 123-124.

²⁵ See the account of this sermon given by Erasmus in his biography of Colet in *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P. S. Allen, H. E. Allen, and H. W. Garrod (cited hereafter as Allen), 12 vols. (Oxford, 1906-1958), vol. IV, ep. 1211, pp. 525-526.

that provincial councils be more often held for the reformation of the Church. For there is nothing more harmful to the Church of Christ than the omission of both general and provincial councils.²⁶

Colet believed that the lower clergy would soon imitate the example set by their bishops and that the laity would similarly follow at once the examples set by their priests:

When these laws and others have been read out which pertain to us [clergy] and which concern the correction of morals, nothing else is necessary but that they be put into execution with the utmost authority and power; for since we have the law we should walk in accordance with the law. For which, with all due reverence, I chiefly call upon you [fathers]. For the execution of the [canon] laws ... must necessarily begin with you, in order for you to teach us priests to follow you by your living examples ...

For ... if you keep the laws, and if you first reform your own lives to the rules of the canon laws, then you will give us (priests) light by which we may see what we need to do, – that is to say, the light of your good example ...

Once the clerical and spiritual part of the Church has been reformed, then we may in just order proceed to the lay part, which ... will be very easy to do if we [clergy] have been reformed first. For the body follows the soul, and as the rulers are in a city, so are the dwellers in it. Therefore, if the priests who have the charge of souls are good, soon the laity will [also] be good. Our own goodness will more effectively teach laymen to be good than any other teaching and preaching. Our goodness will compel them into the right way more effectually than all your suspensions and curses ...

You want to be obeyed by [the laity], and this is right. For in the Epistle to the Hebrews these are the words of St. Paul to the lay people: “Obey,” he says, “your rulers, and place yourselves under them.” But if you [clergy] want this obedience, first effect in yourselves the reason and cause of this obedience: ... serve God and reign in him. And then, believe me, the lay people will not touch [you], the anointed of their Lord God.²⁷

Despite certain reservations about the exercise of papal power which he

²⁶ Lupton, *Life of Colet*, p. 302.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 302.

seems to have held in common with Erasmus, Colet certainly cannot be considered a Protestant before Luther, as Leland Miles maintained.²⁸ For although the Dean through his historical studies was well aware that the authority of the papacy developed during the early centuries of the Church and maintained that it was a legal authority based upon canon law, Colet certainly did not, like Luther, attack the authority of the ecclesiastical law as unchristian on the ground that it had no basis in Scripture.²⁹ On the contrary, for Colet the canon law is the true explication of the *lex nova* of the New Covenant, and as divine law it is superior to every secular and human law, whether it be the Roman Civil Law or the English Common Law.³⁰ For, as Erasmus wrote regarding Colet's theological humanism, he "had a leaning to certain opinions derived from Dionysius and other early theologians. But he never so favoured these as to disagree with the ecclesiastical *Decrees [Decreta ecclesiastica]*."³¹

Dean Colet's idealistic appeal for a reform of the English Church under the leadership of a spiritually renewed episcopacy in the tradition of an earlier period was doomed to failure by 1511/12 without vigorous support from the young King Henry VIII. The monarchy had established a strong control over appointments to the higher offices of the English Church by the beginning of the sixteenth century. During the earlier part of his reign Henry placed his trust for ecclesiastical reform as well as for affairs of state in the hands of Wolsey. Although Wolsey told Leo X that he would use the extraordinary powers which he was eventually granted by the papacy to bring about the reform of ecclesiastical abuses, it soon became evident that he was more interested in his power to reform than in reformation itself. Nevertheless, less than a year before Colet's death the Dean made an appeal to Wolsey to use his special jurisdiction as papal legate *a latere* to reform the college of canons of St. Paul's Cathedral by authorizing and putting into practice revised

²⁸ Cf note 19 above.

²⁹ For Luther's statement in his *On the Papacy at Rome* that "there is not a single word in the Holy Scriptures concerning what the Romanists call the church...in the sense of Catholic ecclesiastical law" and his symbolic burning as worthless a copy of the *Corpus Juris Canonici* together with the papal bull *Exsurge, Domine* in December, 1520, see Heinrich Boehmer, *Road to Reformation* (New York, 1960), pp. 331-334, 369-374.

³⁰ Cf *Scripta Ioannis Colet Professoris Theologise in Epistolam Divi Pauli ad Romanos*, c. 4, in John Colet, *Letters to Radulphus on the Mosaic Account of the Creation Together with Other Treatises*, ed. J. H. Lupton (London, 1876), pp. 132-142, for Colet's views on the various kinds of law.

³¹ Allen, vol. IV, ep. 1211, p. 521, lines 476-477. My translation is based on that of J. H. Lupton reprinted in *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, ed. J. C. Olin (New York, 1965), p. 185.

statutes which Colet himself admitted. Wolsey did in fact draw up and attempt to enforce reformed statutes based upon those of Colet, but they seem never to have been put into effect since they did not receive the seal of the combined Dean and chapter of the cathedral.³² It appears certain that the drastic medicine of the Protestant revolt was necessary before the Catholic reform movement of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries would gain the leadership it required from the papacy, the episcopacy, the religious orders, and the Catholic princes.³³

³² Cf. *Registrum Statutorum et Consuetudinum Ecclesiae Cathedralis Sancti Pauli Londiniensis*, ed. W. Sparrow Simpson (London, 1873), pp. 237-248; 418-419.

³³ This view is maintained, for instance, in the recent books by Joseph Lortz, *How the Reformation Came*, tr. O. Knab (Montreal, 1964) and John P. Dolan, *History of the Reformation* (New York, 1965).