

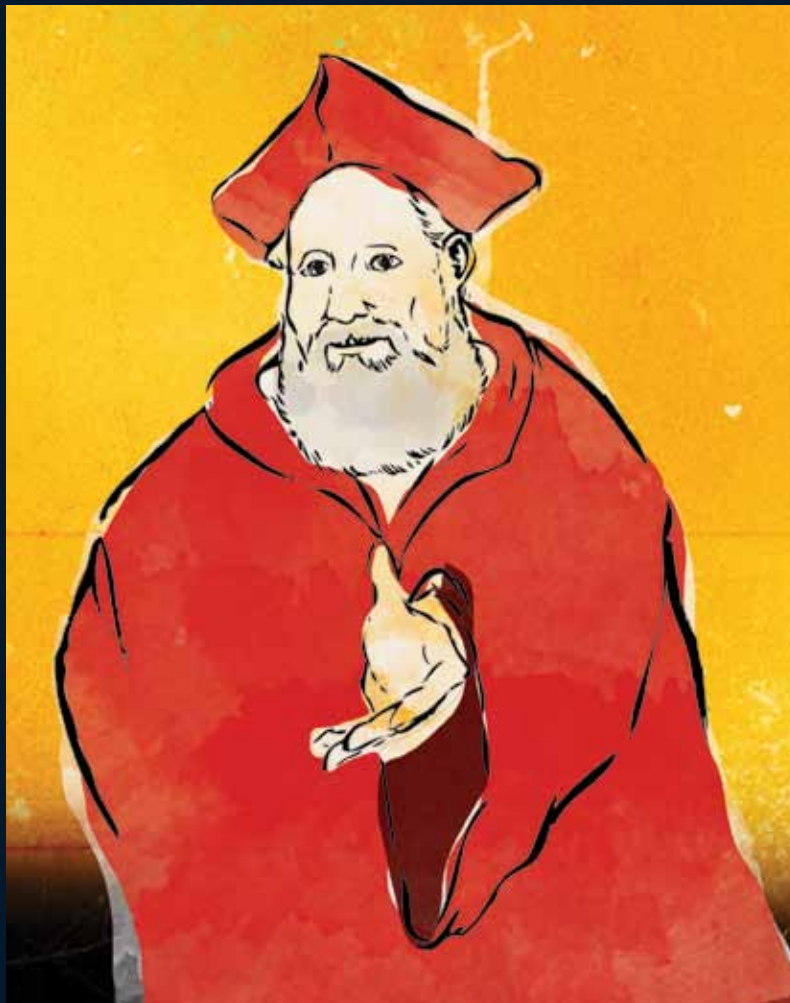
Inspiring Cardinal Gasparo Contarini

PETER MATHESON tells how Cardinal Contarini tried unsuccessfully to reform the papal bureaucracy and reconcile the Church and Protestants.

When we think of the Reformation our mind naturally turns to Germany and Martin Luther. However, reform movements were active not only in Germany but in the Netherlands, in Spain, in France and not least in Italy, and were active well before Luther appeared.

The theological issues, moreover, which were so fundamental for Luther, the role of the Bible, the central message of Paul and the primacy of grace and faith in penance and justification, were widely discussed within Catholic study groups in monasteries, court circles, civic sodalities and universities throughout Europe. Humanist scholars, as we have seen in the case of Erasmus, were determined to reform spirituality by a return to the ethos of the Early Church, to the world of Scripture and of the Greek and Latin Fathers. A particular interest was the letters of St Paul. This biblical focus was often associated with a drive to improve the education of the clergy and to reform absenteeism, simony, pluralism and other abuses in church structures.

I remember when I was a young lecturer how astonished Church of Scotland candidates in Edinburgh were when they discovered that in the early decades of the 16th-century there were groups of Catholic evangelicals in Italy and elsewhere, both clergy and laity, men and women, all eagerly reading Paul's epistles. They were still more surprised to find that one of Pope Paul III's leading advisers, Cardinal Gasparo



Contarini, was a keen advocate of justification by faith.

Leader of Spirituali

Gasparo Contarini (1483–1542), of a Venetian aristocratic family, was influenced in his youth by the civic humanism widespread in Italy. Even as a layperson he had combined a passion to reform the pastoral and educational work of the Church with personal study of Scripture and particularly the Pauline letters.

His understanding of justification by faith, which he shared with a varied and influential circle of friends, led him to be critical of the view that our salvation was assured by the performing of meritorious good works. The Jesuit scholar, Hubert Jedin, was one

of the first to identify the group of Catholic evangelicals around Contarini, sometimes called the "*spirituali*". They were to be found in many Italian cities, such as Rome itself, Naples, Milan, Modena and Lucca. They included Cardinals Reginald Pole and Giovanni Morone, both of whom were to have considerable influence at the Council of Trent, and prominent noblewomen such as Giulia Gonzaga and Vittoria Colonna. Other countries harboured similar groupings, for example, those around Jacques Lefèvre in France.

Reform Plans for Curia

As a Venetian diplomat Contarini, who is widely regarded as the leading figure of the *spirituali*, became aware of the strength of the reforming movements in Germany and saw the reform of the Papacy, especially its civil service, the *Curia*, as urgently necessary. Such reform, he and his associates thought, would be a first step toward pursuing the possibility of an understanding with the Lutherans, thus restoring the unity of the Church. Pope Paul III appointed Contarini as a cardinal in 1535. From that time on he headed up a reforming group which sought

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to regain the unity of the Church by dialogue with the moderate elements within Lutheranism. In 1536 he was actively involved in the *consilium de emendanda ecclesia*, a commission which suggested far-reaching reforms in the Curia, the papal bureaucracy. Unfortunately, conservative opposition scuttled its proposals.

Hope for Peace with Protestants

Then in 1541 the emperor, Charles V, weary of the incessant wars with France which divided Christendom and aware of the serious threat of Turkish advances in the east, launched a serious attempt at a reconciliation with the Protestants.

His letters breathe a spirit of warm humanity and a humble desire to be of service to the Church he loved. He was also aware that many of the forces opposing an ecumenical solution were non-theological, driven by political and self-interested concerns.

His aim was a more united empire. His Chancellor, Granvelle, deployed the Erasmian idea of a learned colloquy of theologians, who were to report on the possibility of theological agreement or at least a degree of tolerance of different views to the Reichstag or Imperial Parliament. Charles V summoned the Reichstag to Regensburg on the Danube in 1541 and it opened with a magnificent *Corpus Christi* procession through the city.

Contarini was appointed by Paul III to the delicate task of being the papal representative to the Reichstag and he encouraged the Catholic theologians, Johann Eck, Julius Pflug and Johann Gropper to explore the possibility of an agreement with the Lutherans, including Luther's closest colleague, Philip Melanchthon.

Despite deep scepticism on the part of Luther in Wittenberg and of opponents in Rome, an agreement was actually reached by the Catholic and Lutheran collocutors on the central doctrine of justification. Faith formed by love was the formula that satisfied all sides. In his report to Rome Contarini included a heartfelt "*dio laudato*". John Calvin, who was an observer in Regensburg, was also impressed. In his view the agreement accorded "with the essentials of our true teaching".

And, in fact, this was a truly remarkable achievement after two decades of bitter polemic warfare between Protestant and Catholic. It was one not to be repeated until the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between Catholics and Lutherans in 1999 – some 450 years later!

When discussion proceeded to the sacraments and to the magisterial authority of the Church, however, no agreement proved possible. The Chancellor, Granvelle, was not even able to obtain any undertaking to tolerate differing views.

Reconciliation Failed

After returning to Italy Contarini died in 1542, some said of a broken heart, and the hopes of the *spirituali* for reconciliation with the Lutherans (and the increasingly important Calvinists) effectively died with him. The Council of Trent (1545–63)

ended such mediatory attempts. Under Pope Paul IV many of the *spirituali* began to be harried by the Inquisition. The era of the Counter-Reformation had begun.

However, Contarini's life and thought illustrate the variety, subtlety and attractiveness of pre-Tridentine Catholicism and this raises in tantalising form the question whether the Reformation schism was inevitable.

Contarini was not, perhaps, an original thinker, but he was a skilled diplomat, originally in the service of Venice. He knew his world. His letters breathe a spirit of warm humanity and a humble desire to be of service to the Church he loved. His personal piety was deep and he originally considered entering monastic life. Yet he was convinced, as he once put it, that the basic insight of Luther was a Catholic one, the *fundamento* of Lutheranism was *verissimo*, was "spot on". He had no sympathy at all with an understanding of salvation based on meritorious good works. He was also aware that many of the forces opposing an ecumenical solution were non-theological, driven by political and self-interested concerns. The Bavarian Dukes were a case in point.

On the other hand he was genuinely shocked at Regensburg to find that even moderate Protestants such as Bucer and Melanchthon had views on the Mass and on the nature of the Church which for him were totally unacceptable. Occasionally authors have portrayed him as a crypto-Lutheran but this is as nonsensical as dismissing him as an unrealistic dreamer. Peacemakers are often vilified by both sides. I suspect that many of us, whether Catholic or Protestant, would wish that his policies had prevailed. He was truly an admirable person who continues to inspire us today. ■

Illustration by Lilly Warrenson and Daniel Ido

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