THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MODERN PERIOD
OF CHURCH HISTORY

Scripture: Psalm 71:17-19
Prayer
Hymn: 345 "Awake, My Soul, and with the Sun"

The year, 1650, is often considered the end of the Reformation and the beginning of the Modern World. Some insist that 1650 was not only the end of the Reformation but also the end of the Renaissance—that the Renaissance that had begun before the Reformation had continued all through the Reformation Period. These urge that throughout Reformation and Counter-Reformation there were humanists (writers, artists, philosophers, scientists) who looked to Erasmus for inspiration and who kept aloof from the religious struggles. Some contend that the Renaissance figures contributed more to the rise of the modern world than the leaders of the Reformation.

1650 is a kind of round figure. Actually for Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed (Calvinists), the Peace of Wesphalia of 1648 which ended the Thirty Years War was the end of the Reformation and the beginning of the Modern. One should remember that the French and the Spanish continued to fight until the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659. France replaced Spain as the dominant power of Europe.

In England 1689 makes a better dividing point. In that year William and Mary replaced James II as king and queen, Parliament set forth the Declaration of Rights ending the divine right of kings, and also Parliament passed the Toleration Act settling the religious question. The Anglican Church (Church of England) was the established church with the three old denominations (Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Baptists) recognized as English free churches that had to pay taxes to support the established church. Freedom of worship was granted to all Dissenters who swore or affirmed oaths of allegiance to William and Mary.

THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION AT THE BEGINNING OF THE MODERN PERIOD

The Peace of Westphalia broadened the old formula "Cujus regio, ejus religio," (as goes the prince, so goes the religion), of the Peace of Augsburg (1555) that had granted recognition only to Catholics and Lutherans. The Peace of Westphalia gave recognition to Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists (The Reformed Church). Pope Innocent X (1644-55) refused to recognize the peace, but both Catholics and Protestants ignored his protests.

The Catholic Church came out of the Reformation Period and entered the Modern somewhat chastened and reformed. The pope still claimed to be God's ruler over the whole world in both spiritual and temporal affairs but he could no longer enforce his demands. He could no longer count on the temporal rulers to support his claims. The Catholic Church still claimed to be the one holy, catholic, apostolic church—the only true church, but it had lost large sections of territory and many people. The Catholics still controlled Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, Austria. They had recovered much of Southern Germany, Poland, the southern part of the Netherlands that became Belgium. In France the Edict of Nantes (1598) gave a measure of
toleration to the Huguenot minority. The Edict of Nantes was revoked by Louis XIV in 1685 putting France completely in the Catholic fold officially. The Catholics had been able to hold a part of Switzerland. Led by the Jesuits they had recovered Poland and Moravia. In former Byzantine territory of the East the Jesuits had been able to win a number of churches to the recognition of the pope in return for the privilege of retaining their Eastern customs and practices. These were known as the Uniate Churches. In numbers of people and in territory the Catholic Church entered the modern period with probably more people and land than at the beginning of the Reformation. This was due to the successful mission work the Catholics had carried on while Protestants were struggling to survive and to write perfect creeds. Catholic missionaries had won converts in North, Central and South America, on the islands of both Atlantic and Pacific, in Africa, India, China and Japan. The decline of Spain and Portugal at the end of the Reformation threatened the stability of much of this mission work. English and Dutch trading posts were a growing threat.

The Council of Trent, the Counter-Reformation council, (1545-1563), solidified the Catholic Church in a medieval position in theology. Protestant positions were rejected and condemned. The Catholic Church emerged from Counter-Reformation more highly centralized, more popish, and more Roman than at the beginning. The Curia had been overhauled and streamlined to abolish abuses that had aroused such strong protests. The Catholic Church had learned not to expose dirty linen to the public.

The Catholics entered the Modern Period with the vastly improved educational system perfected by the Jesuits. New orders that had sprung up in the Reformation led in developing well organized charity and hospital works. The devotional literature of the Catholics had been greatly enriched by the works of Spanish and French mystics such as Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Vincent of Sales.

At the end of the Reformation the Lutherans held Northern Germany, the Scandanavian countries, and rivaled Catholics and Calvinists in Southern Germany. The Lutherans were scattered in territorial churches dominated by the petty Lutheran princes. The wars of religion left the Lutherans exhausted. The Lutherans were badly torn by the theological quarrels that characterized their scholastic period of rigid creed making. Church and university attendance had declined. Much of the fiery zeal of the early Reformation had burned out. Many of the clergy were despised for their ignorance, for low morals, and for subservience to the petty princes.

At the beginning of the Modern Period the Reformed Churches (the Calvinists) had also moved into a hide-bound creed making period. Socinians and Arminians still caused Calvinists much trouble. The Calvinists controlled the Northern Netherlands that became known as Holland and much of Switzerland. The model Calvinist church was the Presbyterian church of Scotland. Under William and Mary Presbyterianism became the recognized religion of Scotland in 1690. The Independents, the Congregationalists, and the Baptists of England were Calvinist. Calvinism still exercised great influence in Anglicanism in spite of the strong Arminian tendency and growing
Socinian influence in England, the result of immigration from the persecutions on the continent. Puritans and Separatists who fled from England to America were Calvinists.

Anabaptists had managed to survive—scattered in small communities in Germany, Holland, Switzerland, England and were beginning to migrate to the New World. Most were some kind of Mennonite or Hutterite.

Huguenots of France had fled to Prussia, England and the New World, but had also managed to survive as a persecuted minority in Catholic France.

As the Modern Period opened Protestantism was beginning to spread largely through English efforts at colonization.

THE POLITICAL SITUATION

By the end of the Reformation the emperor and the Holy Roman Empire had lost both authority and territory. The emperor was little more than king of Austria. The empire was becoming an association of over three hundred small states, jealous of their autonomy and freedom to carry on their own diplomatic negotiations as theoretically equal sovereign states. The power center was shifting to the emerging modern states or nations (Spain, France, England). Germany was made up of the small states ruled by petty princes and formed part of the empire. Italy was divided into city states. France was replacing Spain as the dominant power of Europe.

The political mind of Europe was dominated by the ideal of the absolute monarch. Louis XIV of France became the model for all the petty kings and princes of Europe. They tried to copy and model their courts after the court of France.

In England Parliament had been able to end the divine right of the king and to establish a constitutional monarchy under parliamentary control.

In the relations between states the idea of "balance of power" was replacing confessional alliances. The different states and their rulers considered themselves Christian but they were more and more ruled by national self-interest and the pursuit of power and glory rather than by religious considerations. More and more the states were unwilling to be "secular arms" of a church; they asserted more and more state sovereignty. They were beginning to look to natural law rather than to Christian revelation or church authority for justification of policies and actions. Human reason was replacing faith as a guide in the political realm. Dynastic and national interest overshadowed religious conformity.

Renaissance humanism and reaction to the ruinous wars was moving some men to take more seriously Hugo Grotius' idea of international law to limit state actions. International law was conceived as independent of Christianity and grounded in nature and reason.

GEOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION AND EXPANSION

Geographic exploration was a growing factor in the shaping of men's thinking. For both Spain and Portugal missions and trade had
gone hand in hand. At the opening of the Modern Period the Dutch and the English were making great in-roads into Spanish and Portuguese trade and expansion. The English were beginning to turn to colonization as a means of spreading the Protestant faith. Lust for gold and power tended to overshadow religious interests.

NEW ECONOMIC THEORY

The religious sanctions of the Middle Ages and the Reformation began giving way to mercantile absolutism. There was a growing practice of economic freedom from religious restraint. Nominal Christians would not let Christian tenets interfere with their business. This opened the way for Adam Smith and Francois Quesnay to formulate the economic theory that commerce and industry should be governed by the natural laws of supply and demand in a free market.

THE NEW COSMOLOGY, ASTRONOMY AND SCIENCE

In the ancient and medieval periods Christians had labored to harmonize Ptolemaic cosmology and Aristotelian physics with the cosmology of the Bible. Beginning in the Renaissance and continuing through the Reformation and into the early modern period there was arising a new cosmology, astronomy, and science based on the experimental method that pointed to a universe governed by natural laws with no place for divine purposive and moral intervention. Bacon, Nicholas of Cusa, Copernicus, Galileo and Newton opened men's minds to a marvelous new view of the universe. The mechanistic view of the universe spread. The new science resulted in great technological advances. There was a growing feeling that the older Christian views were archaic. The new science left little room or need for miracles and revelation.

THE NEW PHILOSOPHY

The new science went hand in hand with a new philosophy set forth in the works of Bruno, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Hobbes. The new thinking exalted human reason and natural law and questioned divine revelation. A culture was arising that was emancipated from Christian control and integration. A culture began to grow that was independent of Christianity—a neutral culture so far as religion was concerned. Hostility grew toward clerical control and religious orientation. Education was more and more dominated by the new science and philosophy that exalted a natural morality above Christian morality.

THE GROWING DEMAND FOR TOLERANCE

Renaissance humanism with Erasmus as one of its chief models had continued its plea for tolerance in religion. The new science and philosophy which often felt the wrath of both Catholics and Protestants took up the call for tolerance. Sensitive, earnest souls were appalled at the atrocities of the religious wars and the fanatical persecutions. The tolerance established in England helped open eyes. Although at first neither Catholic nor Protestant rulers were willing to tolerate those who differed, there was a growing awareness of the impossibility of enforcing uniformity and that persecution did not accomplish its purpose. Slowly rulers awakened that tolerance could increase the prosperity and peace of the state.
GROWING SECULARIZATION

By the end of the Reformation and at the beginning of the Modern Period a growing secularization was pushing religion from the center of life. There was a growing tendency to turn from Augustine and Aquinas to natural law and reason. Reason and the new science were becoming the court of appeal for some instead of revelation. Dynastic intrigues, national ambitions, greed for wealth tended to dominate politics and business. World culture was increasingly emancipated from Christian direction. Education was emancipated from clerical control and religious orientation. Religion was accorded an ever smaller place in the curriculum. Christian faith for many became a declining and somewhat irrelevant factor in their culture. Occupation with thoughts of the affairs of this world tended to push thoughts of the world to come into the background.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

When we speak of the modern world we are speaking of the last 333 years. As we look back on these years the developments we see growing from the trends of the end of the Reformation and beginning of the Modern are things that the people of 1650 hardly envisioned in their wildest dreams and imaginings.