

**Sight, Sound, and Speech**  
The Unified Approach of the Counter-Reformation

by  
John Williams

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The Catholic Church was challenged by the rise of Protestantism and the Protestant Reformation following the publication of the *Ninety-Five Theses* of Martin Luther and faith in the Church was brought into question insofar as some of the Church's doctrines and practices were concerned. The effort of the Church to reform itself and restore faith among its adherents came to be known as the Counter-Reformation. This paper will examine some of the reforms in art and music that were implemented in an effort to win back or keep its followers.

Catholicism was the dominant form of religion during the Renaissance but began to lose members after many people began to question the authority of the Church on matters of faith. The Council of Trent that began in 1545 was the Church's answer in the form of changes it sought to implement so that faith and piety would be inspired in its members. Many of the changes concerned the hierarchy within the Church and the behavior of the clergy. Other modifications came in the way art and music were presented "[so that] the people [would] be instructed and confirmed in the habit of remembering and continually revolving in mind the articles of faith" (Sayre 583) with the primary focus in art and music to be clear and easily understood by the common people and to inspire the faithful to "piety and religious fervor" (Sayre 583).

The changes in the art of the Protestant Reformation often removed specific imagery that had a religious focus, whereas in the Counter-Reformation the same type of imagery was seen as an essential element. The goal was to reach into and grab the "souls of the people" (Sayre 655) in such a way that the meaning of the stories that illustrated the beliefs of the Church was unambiguous. The representations in art also offered an example for the faithful to emulate.

Similarly, music was used during masses and the effect that was sought was the same as it was in art. The message of the stories was the most important facet that the Church wanted to

impart to its members. Many thought that a simple plainchant should be the only type of music that was to be heard in the liturgy, but the Council of Trent responded that the opposite was true. Polyphonic music with more than one voice and complex melodies was a vehicle that also carried the message and was there to support and reinforce the text “so [the text] should be clear and intelligible to the congregation” (Sayre 655).

The central message of the Church remained one of salvation and redemption and was the most important element that would draw in followers and reinforce their faith. A clear and understandable meaning was presented to the people in a unified combination of homily, art, and music where each element reinforced the others.

## **Works Cited (Bibliography)**

Sayre, Henry M. *The Humanities. Culture, Continuity and Change*. Book 3. Saddle Rock, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2012. Print.