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What is 'Catholic Enlightenment'?

Ulrich L. Lehner

Theology, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

Abstract

Recent research has demonstrated not only the existence of a variety of Enlightenments, but also the importance of the religious aspect to this worldwide process. In particular, special interest has been paid to the long-neglected Catholic Enlightenment, which entailed many strands of thought by Catholic intellectuals and political leaders who attempted to renew and reform Catholicism from the middle of the 18th to the early 19th century. This renewal was an apologetic endeavor designed to defend the essential dogmas of Catholic Christianity by explaining their rationality in modern terminology and by reconciling Catholicism with modern culture. The Catholic Enlightenment was in dialog with contemporary culture, not only by developing new hermeneutical approaches to the Council of Trent or to Jansenist ideas, but also by implementing some of the core values of the overall European Enlightenment process that tried to 'renew' and 'reform' the whole of society, and thus truly deserves the label Enlightenment.

Over the last decades our picture of the Enlightenment as a monolithic movement has been challenged by the acknowledgment not only of a variety of Enlightenments,¹ but also of a religious side to this worldwide process.² This religious Enlightenment expressed an 'alternative to two centuries of dogmatism and fanaticism, intolerance and religious warfare'.³ Recently, a great interest in the Catholic Enlightenment has emerged. Nevertheless, for most historians it is still unclear what the term Catholic Enlightenment means and what

characteristics marked this movement – problems this essay will address. Here, the term Catholic Enlightenment is used as a *heuristic* concept that describes the diverse phenomenon that took hold of Catholic intellectuals in the mid-18th century and early 19th century, which combines many different strands of thought and a variety of projects that were implemented to reform Catholicism. Through the use of this concept, we will be able to find and examine the common dynamics of the Catholic Enlightenment throughout Europe, as well as connect this phenomenon to philosophical, political, and social changes, all of which would not be possible with a disintegrated view of the Catholic Enlightenment. This view, however, does not argue for a uniformity of this intellectual movement or process and fully acknowledges that the Catholic Enlightenment was expressed in different ways during distinctive time periods and contexts, and that there were also some radical individuals who did not fit into the category of ecclesiastical reformers. It is important to note that this concept excludes all those who did not engage in at least a somewhat positive way with the overall European Enlightenment Process, for example, *radical* Jansenists.

1. What is Catholic Enlightenment?⁴

As an ecclesiastical reform movement, the Catholic Enlightenment was an apologetic endeavor that was designed to defend the essential dogmas of Catholic Christianity by explaining their rationality in modern terminology and by reconciling Catholicism with modern culture, for example, by the acceptance of new theories of economy, science, but also of judicial thought.⁵ The Catholic Enlightenment was in dialog with contemporary culture, not only by developing new hermeneutical approaches to the Council of Trent or to Jansenist ideas, but also by implementing some of the core values of the overall European Enlightenment process that tried to ‘renew’ and ‘reform’ the whole of society, and thus truly deserves the label Enlightenment.

Jonathan Israel’s recent magisterial history of the Enlightenment portrays radical Enlighteners like Spinoza, d’Alembert, or d’Holbach as the leading members of the Enlightenment, as they propagated relatively unrestricted tolerance, free speech, and equality. The Catholic Enlightenment, in this light, appears to be a defensive attempt at modernization or perhaps even a bulwark of the anti-Enlightenment. The latter, however, seems unsatisfactory, as much of the content of the Catholic Enlightenment, namely its Tridentine spirit, actually predates the Enlightenment and thus cannot be considered a reaction to it. Moreover, a close look at the primary sources tells us that Catholic publications from the 18th century were only to a negligible degree directed *against* the Enlightenment as a whole. What we nevertheless *can* detect is a resistance against certain *radical* Enlightenment ideals, indicating that many Catholics actually fought for what Israel calls a moderate or mainstream Enlightenment.⁶ Similarly, a great number of historians saw in the Protestant Enlightenment the measuring stick for the Catholic reform movement and gave too much credit to the 18th-century Protestant criticism of the Catholic Enlightenment. This has changed because Catholic erudition, with its different methodology, and Catholic culture, with its idiosyncratic dynamics, are now taken more seriously, and because the personal and often economic motives behind anti-Catholic propaganda, for example, of Friedrich Nicolai,⁷ are meanwhile known facts. Today, scholarship ‘historicizes’ the Catholic Enlightenment and no longer judges it according to what extent it followed its Protestant counterpart or contributed to a secular, national culture. All this makes it apparent that the Catholic Enlightenment does not easily fit into a neatly defined conceptual category. Moreover, these findings made clear that the ‘light’ of Catholic Enlightenment shone less brightly and less distinctly in different contexts, but was nevertheless projected, recalibrated, and refocused in others.

2. History of the Term

In 1908, the German church historian Sebastian Merkle introduced the term Catholic Enlightenment. He intended to point his fellow Catholics to the fact that the Enlightenment was not *per se* anti-religious and anti-ecclesiastical, but had an important and positive impact on the life of the Church.⁸ Merkle’s critics, however,

rejected his concept because it associated Catholicism with the alleged agnostic and atheist Enlightenment, but also with the Protestant Churches and their enlightened theologies. Scholars of the next generation started to use the term *Reform Catholicism*, which, however, is more problematic, as it meant, for Liberals, progressive, and for Ultramontanists, restorative (and essentially unchanged) Catholicism.⁹ Furthermore, the term did not take into account that this movement was influenced by the European Enlightenment process.¹⁰ In France, Louis J. Rogier and Bernard Plongeron have asserted in the 1960s and 1970s¹¹ that only the 20th-century reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) made an unprejudiced investigation of 18th-century Catholicism possible. From then on, historians tended to view the Catholic Enlightenment event as an anticipation of Vatican II, as it tried – like the council – to bring the Church up-to-date while respecting its tradition.¹² The 1980s saw a further differentiation and acceptance of the term Catholic Enlightenment, for which Harm Klueting was especially responsible.¹³ A few years later, Bernhard Schneider argued convincingly that if we understand the term Catholic Enlightenment as the description of a process similar to other Enlightenments, but shaped by specific Catholic characteristics regarding content and structure, then a differentiation between Enlightenment reforms and the spirit of Trent was impossible.¹⁴ Likewise, Dieter Breuer stated that Catholicism in the 18th century was essentially shaped by confessional impulses that had their roots in Trent or its aftermath. These peculiarities made it a uniquely *Catholic* Enlightenment. As a consequence, one is not merely dealing with a Catholic philosophy or theology of the Enlightenment, but with a Catholic Enlightenment *culture*, of which Peter Hersche has recently given a masterful overview.¹⁵

3. Some Enlightenment Influences on the Catholic Enlightenment

The natural sciences, the foundation of academic societies and new universities forced Catholics in the 17th and 18th centuries to reshape their view of education to keep up with scientific achievements. As a result, theology gradually underwent an inversion of teleology that favored a more mechanistic explanation of nature. Around the same time, the idea of a natural religion began to gain acceptance among theologians and even found its way into Catholic textbooks. Political philosophy ceased to see the sovereign as the guarantor of supernatural salvation for his people, and instead saw him as a caretaker of public welfare and earthly happiness, which led to rationalist territorialism that authorized the State to interfere in ecclesiastical decisions or even to take possession of its property for the common good. Enlightened skepticism also had its impact on Catholic thinkers and motivated the Benedictines of St Maur to defend the possibility of historical certainty.¹⁶ Most Enlightenment concepts of reason and the limitations of the human mind, especially Kant's, were also compatible with the Catholic optimism about the epistemological access to reality, which affirmed that creation is intelligible because it was brought into existence by truth and wisdom personified, that is, God.¹⁷

Around 1740–1750 theological Wolffianism, which applied the so-called mathematical method to the Bible and tried to verify the harmony between reason and revelation, was introduced to Catholic institutions of higher education, primarily by Benedictines and Piarists. In the last two decades of the 18th century, the primary interest of Catholic theologians shifted from Christian Wolff to the critical works of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) whose work was considered valuable in the fight against atheism.¹⁸ However, only a minority embraced Kant's or Fichte's idealism and attempted to reform theology with it.

Despite the numerous differences between the European states and the development of the Enlightenment process in these countries, one can determine a number of common characteristics or *leitmotifs*, which serve as heuristic and pragmatic tools for further research. With the secular Enlighteners, the Catholic Enlightenment shared a number of common ideals, for example, striving to shed light on dark conceptual language and substituting confusing terms with distinct and clear ones.¹⁹ Besides this they also appealed to eclecticism, critical judgment, and intellectual maturity as positive goals of erudition.²⁰ Although few Catholic Enlighteners demanded absolute freedom of thought and speech in the Church, the doctrine of free will had officially been

Catholic dogma since the sixth session of Trent (1547), and has always been a core feature of Catholic philosophy, which made it principally open to all philosophies that thought likewise. Moreover, the belief in the perfectibility of social structures and organizations, but also of the human mind and race, can be named as a common characteristic. Nevertheless, there were two streams of Catholic thought which argued for two different anthropologies and consequently for two different understandings of progress. Although Catholic Enlighteners who were influenced by Jansenism had a rather pessimistic view of the post-lapsarian human being, Enlighteners who were influenced by Molinism (sometimes they were neo-Pelagian) had a more optimistic view. Yet, the tension between these two groups makes it impossible to speak of one neatly defined idea of progress, as for the former, this meant the restoration of the Church of antiquity, but for the latter, it meant something new, for example, the abolition of the belief that un-baptized children could never enter heaven. In many cases, the beliefs of both groups were mixed. Nevertheless, Catholic thinkers who had a more optimistic anthropology, even if other parts of their works were influenced by Jansenism, tended towards a more positive exchange with the secular Enlightenment, which is why this group more adequately defines the ideals of Catholic Enlightenment. Secular and Catholic Enlighteners also joined in battle *against* some ideas, especially against dogmatism,²¹ 'dark concepts,' prejudice, superstition, and enthusiasm.²² For the Catholic Enlighteners, however, this did not entail an attack on sacred doctrine or the hierarchy *per se*, but a constructive critique of outdated ecclesiastical structures and theologies as well as the ecclesiastical abuse of power. Instead of blind faith and obedience – concepts that allegedly could be found in the constitutions of the Jesuits – Catholic reformers propagated an enlightened and rational obedience and faith (*obsequium rationabile*; Rm. 12:1).

4. The Pre-Enlightenment Roots of the Catholic Enlightenment

At the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century, a few decades before explicit Enlightenment influences were fermenting in the Church, the spirit of Trent was finally, after a long delay, in full force. Among the fruits of this *ripresa tridentina* were the establishment of seminaries for the better education of the clergy, the fostering of child education, and the strengthening of local parish life, but also attempts to improve theological and philosophical enterprises. The Catholic Enlightenment reformers rationalized and deepened these reform attempts.²³ Clearly in dialog with the ideas of his time was especially Pope Benedict XIV (1740–1758), who issued numerous reform decrees to increase the depth of pastoral care but also of rational theology.

The emphasis on a practical Christianity of good and charitable deeds was also no invention of the 18th century but derived from the religious fervor of the new orders of the 16th-/17th-century Catholic Reform, which took care of the sick and dying, were involved with organized education, and provided shelter for the abandoned and marginalized. The Benedictine reform congregations that, through the spirit of St Maur, contributed so much to the Enlightenment of Catholicism also originated in a monastic renewal according to the spirit of Trent.²⁴ It must be pointed out, though, that despite the fact that Trent served as an inspiration for the Catholic Enlightenment, it did so *only* because of the Enlighteners' idiosyncratic and diverse readings of its decrees.

Jansenism, whose driving idea was a rigorist reform of the Church in the spirit of the Early Church Fathers,²⁵ is sometimes thought to be the most important influence on Enlightenment Catholicism.²⁶ Rome's failure to engage wholeheartedly in reform contributed to its rise in the 17th and 18th centuries, first in France, then throughout Europe.²⁷ It aimed at a reorganization of Church practices and fought for a decentralized Church, an increase in monastic discipline, better education and pay for the clergy, practical education of the laity, and a certain liberality concerning individual religious practices (including the use of the vernacular in the liturgy).²⁸ Jansenist ideals were soon adopted by Enlightenment Catholics like Muratori,²⁹ who had already called for a reduction of the cult of the saints and of pilgrimages and for the discouragement of superstitious religious

practices. Even Pope Benedict XIV seemed to have been to some degree sympathetic to the Jansenist cause.³⁰ The Jansenist cry for a more individualistic approach to spirituality was a religious phenomenon that was also sociologically influenced by the rise of 'bourgeois self esteem'.³¹ As the Jansenist movement emphasized the importance of national churches independent from Rome, it gradually became politicized, especially after the dissolution of its main religious enemy, the Jesuits. From that point on, it no longer restricted itself to moral rigorism and the critique of Baroque spirituality, but also engaged in purely political debates.³² After all, Jansenism was influenced by Conciliarism and Gallicanism.

Usually forgotten, however, is the influence of classical ascetic theology on the Catholic Enlightenment and on Jansenism. After the theological battles of the 17th century, the 18th century saw the rise of a new mystical theology. The debates over Quietism in the last two decades of the 17th century led a majority of theologians to believe that contemplation is a gift for only a few chosen souls, but not for the community as a whole.³³ With Giovanni Scaramelli S. J. (1687–1752) and his handbook, the differentiation between asceticism and mysticism was universally accepted, the former embodying the attempts of the ordinary faithful to achieve salvation, the latter the contemplative way of a few. The trend in canonization processes towards an emphasis on heroic virtues accessible to all, instead of mystical union, visions, and extraordinary gifts, had begun with the case of St Charles Borromeo in 1610.³⁴ This theological shift accelerated over the next 150 years until it became institutionalized in academic theology when Prospero Lambertini's standard work on the canonization of saints, *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione* (1734), was published. When Lambertini became Pope Benedict XIV in 1740, this view began to shape the whole Catholic Church.³⁵

5. Some Leitmotifs of the Catholic Enlightenment

When the Catholic Enlightenment suggested making the faith more useful and practical, it was able to improve already existing traditions and institutions, for example, parishes. Bishops now increasingly took the lifestyle of their priests more seriously and even erected correctional facilities for problematic clergymen. The number of parish missions and reforms dramatically increased, as well as the number of local education facilities. This increased concern for the welfare of parishes was also a result of the secularization of the state. The latter was responsible for the pursuit of happiness and for proper worship, and the Church for the spiritual welfare of the faithful. If the Church wanted to retain any influence on society at all, it had to prove the usefulness of religion by making a contribution to the moral welfare of the state. Pursuing such a contribution required educated and committed clergymen whose first concern was not for their own income, but for the needs of their parishioners. However, to strengthen the bishop's authority, parishioners were only allowed to practice their faith in the approved ways, so that the parish and not the home became the center of worship and of moral surveillance. Moreover, in the last quarter of the 18th century the clergy were increasingly acting as educators and moral teachers on topics like the importance of vaccinations, midwifery, and hygiene, but also on the disastrous consequences to the economy of taking too many religious holidays.³⁶ With the discovery of the transforming power of religion in the lifestyle of the faithful, the Catholic Enlightenment gave rise to a new awareness of social problems within Catholicism, which led in the 19th century to the creation of a new theological discipline, Catholic social ethics.³⁷

The more the Enlighteners pushed for a practical Christianity, however, the closer their movement came to rationalism, because for doctrinal and moral teachings to be practical, they need to be *understandable*. Jesuit scholasticism, with its disregard for Lockean empiricism, was looked upon by more and more thinkers as a fruitless enterprise. The first attacks against it were already launched in the 17th and early 18th centuries, for example, by the Oratorian Nicholas Malebranche (1638–1715) and the Benedictine Robert Desgabets (1610–1678).³⁸ Soon also the Jesuits themselves started to integrate Locke and Malebranche into their curriculum, especially in France, but in many European countries the resentment against their school remained.³⁹ In Italy, for

example, Gianvicenzo Gravina (1664–1718) affirmed the liberation from *Aristotelian Slavery* (1700)⁴⁰ and the Italian Benedictine Celestino Galiani (1681–1753) introduced his fellow monks to a more up-to-date approach to science, namely, the thought of Newton and Locke, as early as 1713.⁴¹ Also, high-ranking Cardinals like Domenico Passionei (1682–1761)⁴² and Angelo Maria Quirini O. S. B. (1680–1755)⁴³ were, to a certain degree, enchanted by the new philosophy, even with the French *philosophes*. However, even the greater appreciation of experiential knowledge among Catholics, especially of Locke and Newton, led only a few to pure empiricism. Most Catholic Enlighteners nevertheless tried to combine some of the new ideas with traditional ways of achieving rational knowledge, especially concerning the existence and the nature of God.⁴⁴

Owing to the quasi-monopoly of the Jesuits in education and the order's overall unwillingness to reform its schools, the Jesuits attracted a lot of anger and disappointment.⁴⁵ In Spain, Diego Zapata (1701) and Benito Jeronimo Feijoo O. S. B. (1676–1764) were the spokesmen of this antipathy.⁴⁶ Over the course of the 18th century, this critique of Jesuit scholasticism grew exponentially. Moreover, governments throughout the Catholic world became increasingly uncomfortable with the political and economic influence of the order, its strict defense of papal prerogatives, and its jurisdictional exemption. This was the best time for the other religious orders to challenge the Jesuit monopoly on education: the Oratorians in France and Portugal, the Piarists in the Habsburg territories and Poland, Augustinian Regular Canons and Benedictines in the Holy Roman Empire. However, only the suppression of the Jesuits (1759: Portugal; 1762 and 1764: France; 1767: Spain; 1773: Papal suppression) allowed for serious reforms.⁴⁷ Such reforms were brought about, for example, in the Habsburg countries (1782), by the Benedictine Franz Rautenstrauch (1734–1785).

Another important characteristic of the Catholic Enlightenment was that it was conscious of the history of the Church, mainly the dogmatic development, and thus of the relativity of traditions. Such historical awareness was mostly brought about by the Benedictine congregation of St Maur/France under the able guidance of Jean Mabillon (1632–1707). The Maurists had started an enormous research projects connecting dozens of monasteries and hundreds of scholars to bring about new editions of the Church Fathers but also of monastic traditions and history. Moreover, the Maurist movement wanted to show that scholarship is an important part of monastic life and also a service rendered to God, equivalent to prayer and worship. The research, however, also had an apologetic side. The Maurists attempted to answer Spinoza's remarks about the historicity of the Bible, but also the historical Pyrrhonism of François de La Mothe Le Vayer. The monks developed highly sophisticated rules for judging old documents, which would guarantee historical certainty.⁴⁸ The Maurist awareness of historical developments soon spread throughout Europe, especially because of the monastic communication networks, and consequently also accelerated Catholic Bible scholarship. Benedictines, such as Bernard Lamy (1640–1715), together with the Oratorians, especially Richard Simon (1638–1712),⁴⁹ requested to replace scholastic theology with a more scripture-oriented, so-called positive theology.

Catholic Enlighteners also had a common problem: the status of the local church and consequently the status of the pope's authority. Many of them revived medieval Conciliarism and fought even for the independence of their dioceses and national communities from papal prerogatives. In France, such ideas were already well established owing to Gallicanism and its codification in the *Declaration of the Clergy of France* in 1682. In the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, the Jansenists used this Gallican tradition to gain parliamentary support against the papal persecutions of their movement. Gallicanism, combined with Jansenist ideas, spread throughout Europe partly because of the monastic correspondences and exchanges of the Benedictines. Abbots and priors of different orders – often supported by the Curia – fought against the attempts of the bishops and the state to restrain their monastic sovereignty.⁵⁰ The Gallican and Jansenist pamphlets that called for a separation from Rome, or at least a considerable limitation of papal authority, articulated the widespread dissatisfaction with curial interferences in ecclesiastical affairs. In the second half of the 18th century, these anti-Roman sentiments were summarized in Johann Nikolaus von Hontheim's (1701–1790) *Febronius*.⁵¹ The book

inspired a reform movement within the Church that sought to strengthen the position of the bishops and the secular sovereigns and almost eradicate papal influences.⁵² This Episcopatism seemed necessary at the time owing to the fact that since 1751, the year of the condemnation of Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* and the second condemnation of freemasonry, the official dialog between the papacy and the Enlightenment almost entirely ceased, and finally faded away with the death of the relatively open-minded pope Benedict XIV. The Enlighteners' hope for change lay entirely on the bishops and the sovereigns.

Crucial to all Catholic Enlighteners was also the desire to distinguish themselves from the religious fanaticism that had separated the Christian churches for centuries. Thus, they conceived networks – for example, in Fulda – that provided peaceful interdenominational dialogs on the legitimacy of papal faculties and the position of bishops and Catholic princes, but also about sacramental union, the abolition of celibacy for priests,⁵³ and the subjugation of the Church under the state (Gallicanism, Febronianism, Theresianism, Josephinism). Three hundred years after the Reformation, it was these Catholic individuals, rather than the Roman Curia, who began to see Luther's revolution for the first time in a more positive light. They did not even shy away from calling their demands a 'reformation', not only a reform, of Catholicism.⁵⁴ It was in this context that Catholic ecumenical theology has its beginning. The groundbreaking reunification plan of Dom Beda Mayr (1742–1794) might suffice to show that.

6. Conclusion

The Catholic Enlightenment had an ambivalent dynamic. On the one hand, it was a cosmopolitan force while on the other, it was national. It was also both radical and conservative. It was cosmopolitan in the sense that enlightened Catholic theologians throughout Europe started from the same *imperatives*, namely the Judeo-Christian revelation in Scripture and tradition. From this they drew their conclusions, under the influence of some Enlightenment thinkers. Changes to this concept could be made, but the main premises were impossible to give up. It was national, as every Catholic country provided a different setting for the Church: in France, it was Gallicanism; in the Holy Roman Empire, it was the *Reichskirche*, etc. The Catholic Enlightenment was radical: once certain traditions were identified as contrary to 'true' belief or the pristine Church and as impediments for the flourishing of society, they were abandoned. Nevertheless, Catholic Enlighteners understood themselves not as inventors but as reformers, as their work had been an adaptation or a development of what the Church originally believed. There is in this regard, as Plonger observed, a gulf that separates the Radical Enlightenment from the Religious and, in our case, the Catholic Enlightenment. Whereas the former was concerned with turning politics into a completely secular endeavor without reference to God as Designer, Judge, and Sovereign over the universe, the latter adhered to the principle *that grace perfects nature*. In this context, it meant that religion was regarded as necessary to bring a civil society to perfection. Even if there were passionate discussions about the essence of ecclesiology, its basic principle, the hierarchy, was almost never denied. Therefore, the Catholic Enlighteners could not meet their secular colleagues on the same ground, and therein lays one of the reasons for the drama of this movement, which was crushed by the forces of Ultramontanism and the rise of theological conservatism in the 19th century.⁵⁵

Short Biography

Ulrich L. Lehner studied at the University of Munich and Notre Dame and received his PhD from the University of Regensburg in 2005. After teaching 2 years at the University of Munich, he has been assistant professor of early modern religious history and historical theology at Marquette University, Milwaukee, since 2006. He was a member of the Princeton Institute of Advanced Study (2009) and a fellow at the Institute for Comparative History of Religious Orders at the University of Eichstätt/Germany (2008). Lehner's research focuses on Central European History and its religious traditions from 1648 to 1848. Among his many publications are three books, *Historia Magistra* (2005), *Kant's Concept of Providence* (2007), and *Enlightened Monks* (forthcoming

2010), as well as numerous articles, reviews, and 10 edited volumes, including *Brill's Companion to the Catholic Enlightenment in Europe* (together with M. Printy, forthcoming 2010), *Beda Mayr's Vertheidigung der katholischen Religion* (2009), and *Justinus Febronius abbreviatus et emendatus* (2008).

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