

Martin Luther 500th Anniversary Medicine for the Church?

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'I think that the intentions of Martin Luther were not mistaken. He was a reformer. Perhaps some methods were not correct. But in that time he made a medicine for the Church.'

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This month marks the beginning of a year of preparation in advance of the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation on All Hallows Eve, 31 October 1517. When one thinks about what sparked the split in western Christianity, one usually has in mind an iconic event that historians are at pains to point out may never, indeed, have happened: the nailing of the *Ninety-Five Theses* by a young Augustinian friar, Martin Luther, to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. Such a seemingly public show of defiance to the authority of the pope in Rome is too striking an image to easily let go of. We have learned that Luther's target was the corrupt business (literally 'business') of indulgences and that this was what pushed him to act in such a demonstrative manner and to break with the Roman Church. For many, the Reformation begins with (and often ends in) such a narrative. And yet such an account does a great disservice to Luther, his priorities and the progression of his thought over time, and also greatly misrepresents his intentions in late October 1517 and, indeed, the significance of the indulgence controversy. There has also been a tendency in some narratives to portray a Catholic Church, as a result of the tidal wave that Luther initiated, being forced to confront the need for reform of its own house, something that only really got going with the Council of Trent which didn't meet until 1545. Thankfully, in more recent times, scholars and non-scholars alike, of all confessional hues, have made great strides in moving away from the polemics of the past and



Posthumous portrait of Martin Luther as an Augustinian Monk. Workshop of Lucas Cranach the Elder.

embracing a more balanced view of the events of the time. So what have we come to learn?

One of the areas that scholars are more likely to emphasise today is that the Reformation in Germany should be viewed in the light of other reform movements already happening within the Catholic Church. Indeed, it might even be said that there was much common ground between the so-called Wittenberg reform movement and that found elsewhere, for instance in the efforts of the late-fifteenth-century Archbishop of Toledo, Francisco Ximenez de Cisneros, who, like the German reform movement, also used the print industry to great effect in his work of reforming Church life and practice. Equally, while we sometimes think of Ignatius of Loyola as a Counter-Reformation figure, and the Society of Jesus as the Counter-Reformation's storm-troopers, in reality, Ignatius and the early Jesuit movement should more

properly be viewed as a movement of Catholic reform in itself, largely independent of what was going on in Germany, and much more influenced by the *Devotio Moderna* movement. Its classic work, *The Imitation of Christ*, strenuously emphasised that clergy had no special privileges in the eyes of God and became a handbook for lay spirituality. Indeed, the Jesuits proved to be rather un-clerical clerics, and the spirituality of Loyola vis à vis the lay state had much in it that might be admired by a figure such as Luther who would argue at one point that because of the command 'Honor thy father and mother', a housemaid obeying her master has more certainty of pleasing God than a monk pursuing self-chosen spiritual practices which aren't prescribed in the Bible.

While Luther was horrified by the indulgence industry as it was practised across the border in Ducal Saxony, the *Ninety-Five Theses* which he drew up (in Latin

as propositions for an academic debate, not in German for public controversy) were not intended as an attack on the pope; rather, they sought to clarify what the pope's intentions regarding the granting of indulgences actually were – and how far the present reality had strayed from these intentions. In fact, in setting these out, Luther expected papal support. Thesis number 50, for instance, reads: 'Christians must be taught that if the pope knew the exaction of the preachers of indulgences he would rather have St Peter's Basilica reduced to ashes than built with the skin, flesh and bones of his sheep'. Moreover, the thesis following proposes that the pope would sooner give to the poor, from which such money was being extracted, even if this meant selling St Peter's Basilica. These are not the words of someone who wished to split the Church. It was not the indulgence controversy itself which caused the Reformation, although it set in train a series of events which came to

be far more about the question of authority than the preaching of pardons. This was also accompanied by the development of Luther's own thinking about salvation and how it was achieved (in short, it was not) and the dawning awareness that, as an excessively scrupulous friar, all the penances he imposed upon himself, the sacrifices he made, the vigils he kept, the fasting he performed, the vows he had pledged, counted as nothing in justifying him before God; in bringing him into right relationship with his Creator. Luther's reading of the passage in Romans 1:17 with new eyes – 'for in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written "the one who is righteous will live by faith"' – would set him on a course which would lead him to view 'works' in a whole new light and would lead him to conclude that the idea of 'merit' had no place whatsoever in making an individual right with God or in his or her salvation. It is Luther's developing views on justification which would have far more effect long-term than the indulgence controversy. Indeed, although we have tended to regard the *Ninety-Five Theses* and their take on indulgences as having a central place in the story of the Reformation, this would not have resonated with most people at the time. Indeed, public debates in 1517 tended not to be about the issue of indulgences at all, nor even the pressing need for Church reform; what was of much greater concern in the public sphere was perceived to be the imminent threat of attack from the Ottoman Empire.

Although Luther's views on justification and grace would lead him to reject many of the popular practices of medieval Christianity as contributing anything to one's salvation, he was moderate in his approach to those who continued to pursue them. Traditional practices such as fasting and pilgrimage might still profitably be undertaken as a means of disciplining the body as long as one didn't erroneously conclude that they contributed in any way to earning God's favour. In a similar manner, he didn't object to the presence of images in churches as long as their installation was not understood as a 'good work'. Moreover, those who are unfamiliar with Luther's views on the Eucharist are sometimes surprised to learn that Luther believed strongly in the 'real' presence of Christ 'in, with and under' the bread and wine, his contention with the Catholic



Pope Francis at Tacloban Airport, Philippines

tradition being the use of the scholastic term 'transubstantiation', which declares that the bread and wine are substantially changed, nothing remaining except their 'accidental' properties. Luther would, however, defend the literal meaning of Christ's words *Hoc est corpus meum* when debating the issue with other reformers such as Huldrych Zwingli. Although Luther would reject most of the Catholic sacraments (except Baptism and Eucharist) as not having sufficient basis in Scripture, his understanding of the Gospel (Christ's promise) was heavily indebted to medieval Catholic sacramental theology – the Gospel is a promise by which God gives what he promises; an external word which gives what it signifies. Some Luther scholars have judged that his sacramental notion of Gospel is far closer to that of Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas than it is, say, to Augustine, the difference being the influence of medieval sacramental theology. It is encouraging, too, that in more ecumenical times (and with a greater attentiveness on both sides), Lutheran–Roman Catholic dialogue has succeeded in fostering new respect for the languages in each tradition and an

acknowledgment that key terms such as 'faith' and 'sin' can, indeed, mean different things, which has had significant implications for obstacles on both sides which had previously been thought insurmountable, and which has led to such landmark documents such as the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* in 1999.

In an Irish context, the Lutheran Church was a relatively late arrival. In 1689, Esdras Marcus Lichtenstein, the twenty-three-year-old son of Jewish parents from Hamburg, arrived in Ireland as an army chaplain. Subsequently serving for some years in the regiment of the Elector of Brandenburg, Lichtenstein returned to Ireland in 1697, becoming pastor of a Lutheran congregation founded in 1690, consisting of twenty-four resident Germans who met in Marlborough Street. By 1725, the Lutheran congregation had built their first church in Poolbeg Street, which remained open for about a century. In 1962, the 'Lutheran Church in Ireland' was established (a merger of Dublin and Belfast congregations) and it is now based at St Finian's Church, Adelaide Road.

Pope to lead common prayer service at Reformation commemoration in Sweden

Pope Francis is due in Lund on 31 October and will attend an ecumenical commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Pope Francis, alongside Bishop Munib Younan, president of the Lutheran World Federation, and the Revd Martin Junge, the federation's general secretary, will lead a common prayer service based on the recently published Catholic-Lutheran 'Common Prayer' liturgical guide. The guide is based on *From Conflict to Communion*, a joint document that highlights the ecumenical developments between the two churches.

Lutheran Archbishop Antje Jackelen of Uppsala said the idea behind the arena event 'is to further describe the development from conflict to communion with a focus on hope for the future and common service in the world'.

Pope Francis' schedule includes a morning Mass with Sweden's Catholic community on 1 November.

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