

WAS LUTHER NOT SUCH A BAD CHAP AFTER ALL?

You are not on the road to Hell,
You tell me with fanatic glee:
Vain boaster, what shall that avail
If Hell is on the road to thee?¹

Back in 2008, in response to a report in *The Times* of London that Pope Benedict was going to “rehabilitate” Martin Luther, we published this article to provide some balance. In the last week or so Pope Francis, his successor, uttered some confusing observations in the course of a visit to the Lutheran Evangelical Church of Rome about the possibility of Lutherans receiving the Blessed Eucharist in Catholic churches. It’s clearly time to bring the article up to date.

Martin Luther was a renegade priest formally condemned as a heretic by the Catholic Church in January 1521. Let us look at his history, character and teachings, and consider the harm he precipitated in the Church and throughout the world.

But first—do not, *Dear Reader*, confuse the Catholic Church with any other church, or confuse the Catholic religion with any other. They are *utterly* different. Belief in God is as varied as the religions to which believers adhere. What the Protestant means by “faith”, what the Mormon means, the Jehovah’s Witness, the Muslim, the Jew, the Hindu, the Buddhist, differs in each case. But whatever these meanings they differ fundamentally from what the Catholic Church means by the word. For the tenets of every religion save Catholicism are contrived by men and the faith of their believers is a human thing. But the tenets of Catholicism were laid down by Almighty God, and the faith of Catholic believers is something of God, a supernatural virtue which he infuses into their intellects in response to their acceptance of his revelation.²

If you study the Church’s position you will see the force of the logic behind it, even if you refuse to accept it. The Catholic Church claims to have been founded by God—Jesus Christ, the God-man. It claims that its enlivening spirit is God—the Holy Spirit. It claims that its end is God—union with him in heaven. It says it is infallible (that it cannot err in faith or morals), consistent with the claim to a Divine, rather than human, provenance. The Church manifests, moreover, the signs of something above the human, notably, its temporal endurance far beyond that of any other institution on earth—and this despite suffering from time to time the burden of evil men in its positions of power. Kingdoms come and go ; the Catholic Church endures. Tyrants lay it waste; but, like its Founder, the Church rises again.

There is another point, one that tends to be lost in the detail. The head of the Catholic Church is not, as all the world seems to think, the Pope. This error suits the

¹ ‘Saki’ (H H Munro), *For the duration of the war* in *The Short Stories of Saki*, London (The Bodley Head), 1930, p. 605.

² The author has elaborated on this topic in the article *Catholic Faith* which may be found on the web at http://www.superflumina.org/catholic_faith.html

mentality Luther precipitated—that the Church is just another human institution and its claims must be weighed as such. When the Catholic Church says that Jesus Christ rose from the dead—quoting St Paul in his Epistle to the Romans, “Christ risen from the dead, is dead no longer: death has now no dominion over him”³—it means what it says. The Christ in whom Catholics believe is a living Christ. He, the living Jesus Christ, God become man, is the Head of the Catholic Church. The Pope is his vicar on earth.

The faith of a Catholic like Martin Luther who lapses into heresy is, then, no longer theological faith, the gift of God, but a merely human thing, something of his own contriving. St Thomas Aquinas explains:

“It is manifest that he who adheres to the teaching of the Church as to an infallible rule assents to whatever the Church teaches. If, however, of the things taught by the Church, he holds what he chooses to hold and rejects what he chooses to reject, he no longer adheres to the teaching of the Church as to an infallible rule, but to his own will.”⁴

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Martin Luther was born on 10th November 1483 to Hans and Margarethe Luther in Eisleben in what is now Saxony-Anhalt in Germany and baptised the following day, the feast of St Martin of Tours. He was the eldest boy in a family in which there were to be a number of children. He attended school in Eisenach. In 1501 he was sent to the University of Erfurt where, in 1505, he obtained a master’s degree. He was poorly taught, his tutors forming him in the philosophy of the renegade Franciscan, William of Ockham (c1288-1347). Ockham denied the objective existence of the natures of things. Words were but the instruments of human convention : there was no reality to which they corresponded.

During a thunderstorm in July the same year Luther narrowly missed being struck by lightning. This precipitated a great terror of death and judgement which moved him to enter the enclosed Augustinian Friars at Erfurt⁵ just two weeks later. As well as this tendency to impulsivity, Luther had certain personality problems, notably a morbid sensitivity and restlessness. He had also a theological problem, a perception that it was possible to experience emotionally the effects of his faith. It is impossible, the Church teaches, to experience the fact that one is in the state of grace. This reality is not material, and *ergo* not sensible. But Brother Martin must needs *feel* himself in the state.⁶ He was, then, ever on the lookout for sensible consolations in religious life.

He threw himself into the ascetic life of the monk, indulging in excessive fasts and vigils. This, a practical Pelagianism, can be a problem for the neophyte religious in

³ *Romans* 6: 9

⁴ *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 5, a. 3

⁵ He may have been moved, too, by the recent deaths of two friends.

⁶ This preoccupation with feeling manifests itself in ‘religious experience’, one of the characteristics of the later heresy derived from Luther’s rebellion, Modernism. Cf Pius X’s encyclical *Pascendi* (8.9.1907) n. 15

any age. According to Pelagius, the believer can get to heaven by his own efforts.⁷ Luther was later cynically to remark, "If anyone could have gained heaven as a monk, then I would indeed have been among them."⁸ He was ordained a priest two years after his entry into religion and directed by his superiors to further studies. He was transferred to Wittenberg in 1508 where he obtained a baccalaureate in biblical studies and another, on *The Sentences* of Peter the Lombard, the following year. Late in 1510 his provincial chose him to go to Rome to argue a dispute, between the Augustinians of the strict and conventual observances, to the superiors of the Order. On his return he was assigned to the Augustinian house in Wittenberg. In 1512 he obtained a Doctorate in Theology and was awarded the Chair of Holy Scripture at the University. He lectured on the Psalms and St Paul's Epistles to the Romans, the Galatians and the Hebrews to great acclaim. He had an able mind: he was a noted preacher and enjoyed a high reputation in his Order. But already he was forsaking the Church's interpretations of the sacred texts in favour of his own.⁹

A man's salvation, the Catholic Church teaches, is the result of cooperation between him and God's grace. Sanctifying Grace builds on nature to lift man (through what is known as obediencial potency¹⁰) to live a life to which, though utterly beyond man's native capacity, God raises him. It is a created participation in the life of God himself—the *life of Grace*. In this doctrine man's freedom is acknowledged and preserved. For nothing is achieved in him without his free acceptance : yet the thing at which he arrives *is not of him, but of God*.

Historian Henri Daniel-Rops relates the dilemma wrought in Luther by his absorption in Ockham's Nominalism:

"Luther had discovered from the writings of this school not only that man could overcome sin by will alone, but also that no human action became meritorious unless God acknowledged it and willed it to be so. But if man's will failed it had no means of recovery, for reason was unavailing and grace was not conceived as a supernatural principle raising man's spiritual forces to the level of Divine Justice. Thus nothing was left save a capricious God, granting or withholding His grace and forgiveness for motives that defied all the rules of logic... Destiny appeared to be regulated by the cold mechanics of a despot in whose eyes nothing had any merit..."¹¹

Luther found the solution though "a sudden illumination of the Holy Spirit" in the interpretation of the phrase "the justice of God" in *Romans* 1: 17. In the Latin Vulgate

⁷ Pelagius (c354-c420) denied the doctrine of Original Sin.

⁸ Quoted in James Kittelson, *Luther, The Reformer*, Minneapolis, (Augsburg Fortress Publishing House), 1986, p. 53

⁹ Cf. H. Daniel-Rops, *The Protestant Reformation*, J M Dent & Sons, London, 1961 (a translation by Audrey Butler from the French of the author's *Une Révolution Religieuse: La Réforme Protestante*, 1958), p. 287.

¹⁰ One of the analogies given by theologians for this action is that of marble. This crystalline form of calcium carbonate is able to be split and ground by the action of external natural agents under the influence of the gravitational movement of the earth, for example, by glacial ice. An artist like Michelangelo or Bernini is able to use this natural potency to raise the rock to another, and immensely superior, level to produce (in likeness) a *David* or a *Saint Teresa*.

¹¹ H. Daniel-Rops, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

this verse runs, “iustitia enim Dei in eo revelatur ex fide in fidem sicut scriptum est iustus autem ex fide vivit.”¹² The modern Jerusalem translation puts the passage well:

“For this [ie, the Gospel] is what reveals the justice of God to us: it shows how faith leads to faith, or as scripture says: *The upright man finds life through faith.*”

Luther’s idiosyncratic interpretation provided him with a key which would save, yet solve, Ockham’s proto-Jansenism.

“I began to understand that the justice of God signifies that justice whereby the just live through the gift of God, namely, through faith. Therefore the meaning of the sentence is as follows—the Gospel shows us the justice of God but it is a passive justice, through which, by means of faith the God of mercy justifies us.”¹³

Later he formulated this new theology in this way:

“All have sinned and are justified freely, without their own works and merits, by [God’s] grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood (*Romans* 3:23-25). This is necessary to believe. This cannot be otherwise acquired or grasped by any work, law, or merit. Therefore, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us...”¹⁴

From the Pelagian error that one could redeem oneself, Luther had swung to the opposite extreme. Now, he insisted, man could do nothing to get himself to heaven. It was God alone who could achieve this.¹⁵

This is how he worked out the consequences:

“You must... say [to yourself] : although I seem to be plunged in sin to the ears and to stifle in it, although my heart tells me that God has turned away from me and is angered against me, yet there is at bottom nothing true in all that ; it is only a pure lie... So then, you are not bound to feel that you have justice but to believe that you have it ; if you do not believe that you are just, you commit a horrible blasphemy against Christ.”

And again:

“Christianity is nothing but a continual exercise in feeling that you have no sin, but that your sins are cast on Christ.”¹⁶

¹² The ‘in eo’ here, is a reference to ‘evangelium’, ‘the Gospel’, in the previous verse.

¹³ Quoted in H. Daniel-Rops, op. cit. at p. 288, but not sourced.

¹⁴ *The Schmalkald Articles*, quoted in *The Lutheran Confessions*, St Louis (Concordia Publishing House), 2005, p. 289, Part II, article 1. *The Schmalkald Articles* are a summary of Lutheran doctrine written by Luther for a council of the Lutheran church in the German town of Schmalkalden in 1537. Cf http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smalcald_Articles

¹⁵ Maritain takes the opposite view, that all Luther did was to modify his Pelagianism. He writes of Luther’s doctrine: “[I]t is ourselves, and we alone, who catch at Christ’s cloak to ‘cover all our shame with it’, and use that ‘skill to leap from our sin on to Christ’s justice and hence to be certain of possessing Christ’s piety as we are of having our own bodies’. The Pelagianism of despair ! In fine, it is for man himself to work his own redemption by driving himself to a desperate trust in Christ.” Jacques Maritain, ‘Luther’, *Three Reformers*, Charles Scribner, 1950; my copy a reprint by Greenwood Press, Connecticut, 1970 (n.b. no translator from the original French is specified), p. 18.

¹⁶ This and the preceding quote in Jacques Maritain, ‘Luther’, *Three Reformers*, op. cit., p. 179.

A small mistake in the beginning, as Aristotle says, becomes a big mistake in the end. Ockham's ideas had provided a vehicle for Luther to veer away from the truths of the Catholic faith. The consequences were to be profound.

The Affair of the Indulgences

In 1514 Albrecht Hohenzollern obtained election as Archbishop of Mainz. There was a cost involved, a payment to the Papacy. To cover this and the repayment of other debts, Albrecht borrowed some 21,000 ducats from the Fuggers, a firm of rich bankers at Augsburg. The new Archbishop guaranteed the bankers in return one third of the revenues raised on the preaching of the papal indulgence to assist the building of the new Basilica of St Peter's in Rome¹⁷. In 1517 he commissioned the Dominicans to preach the indulgence.

Faith without good works, as St James says in his Epistle, is useless¹⁸. Faith must be formed in works of charity such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimages, visits to churches and almsgiving which can include contributions to the physical welfare of the Church. Among the powers given to the Church by Christ is the power not only to forgive sin but to remit the temporal punishments due after the sin has been forgiven¹⁹. Since time immemorial the Church had provided these remissions by way of indulgences. Contrary to modern belief, the Church's doctrine on the subject was understood as well in Luther's time as in our own, as Daniel-Rops relates.

"A re-reading of the treatise which the learned Johann Pfeffer had devoted to the subject a quarter of a century [before Luther], in that same town of Wittenberg, or a glance at the sermons of the celebrated Johann Geiler of Kayserberg, makes the real meaning of indulgences clear beyond any shadow of doubt. What the Church understood by indulgence was the total or partial remission of the penalties of sin—to which everyone was liable, either on earth or in Purgatory—after the Sacrament of Penance had afforded him absolution from his fault and remission of eternal punishment. But the state of grace was indispensable for the obtaining of such temporal remission ; good works, in the shape of prayers, fasting, pilgrimages, visits to churches and almsgiving, were only an incidental, or to put it another way, a contributory factor. Where there was no firm resolve... there was no remission. In strict doctrine, an indulgence was certainly not an automatic means of gaining a cheap discharge from penalties that were justly deserved..."²⁰

The Church, aware that the privilege was open to abuse, had warned of this in 1320. But the abuses kept resurfacing and in Germany early in the sixteenth century it was open to doubt—

"whether preachers of indulgences, with their attendant collectors stationed at the foot of the pulpit, were primarily interested in saving souls or collecting ducats. All

¹⁷ Initiated by Pope Julius II in 1506.

¹⁸ *James* 2: 14

¹⁹ Council of Trent, *Decree on Indulgences*, DS 1835. Christ's promise to St Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth etc... and whatever you loose on earth etc..." (*Matthew* 18: 18) includes the power to loose all spiritual bonds. Cf. Sheehan's, *Apologetics and Catholic Doctrine*, Revised Edition by Fr P. M. Joseph, Saint Austin Press, London, 2001, pp. 558 et seq.

²⁰ H. Daniel-Rops, op. cit., p. 277

too often the grant of an indulgence was part and parcel of some shady deal, and sometimes the right to collect for it was actually sold at auction... Far too many preachers taught that an indulgence possessed a kind of magical quality, and that by spending money to obtain it men were taking out a mortgage on Heaven..."²¹

The Dominican, Johann Tetzel, was in charge of preaching the papal indulgence in 1517. His theology on the issue was somewhat lax. He would persist in offering "passports to cross the sea of wrath and go direct to Paradise"²². On October 31, 1517, Luther wrote to the Archbishop protesting against this apparent offering of the Church's spiritual goods for sale.²³ He enclosed with his letter a copy of his *Disputation of Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, which has come to be known as *The Ninety Five Theses*. Some have argued that Luther had no intention of confronting the Church and his disputation was simply scholarly objection to Church practices. Yet there was wilfulness and rebellion in the text, and more than a suggestion of heresy. Luther appeared to deny the efficacy of the sacrament of penance and the Pope's power to remit the temporal punishment due to sin. He seemed also to promote a theory of grace that made man's merits worthless. Implicit in it all was a denial of the power Christ had bequeathed to his Church ; in other words, a denial that the Church was of God.

Luther demonstrated this spirit of rebellion by declining to wait upon the Church's ruling. Instead, he took his case to the populace through pamphlets published via the newly invented printing press. He gained popularity and a following which cemented him in self-satisfaction. In the following chapter of the Augustinian Order in Heidelberg he supported a resolution to this effect :

"Free will in man, after Adam's fall, is merely a name and therefore no free will at all, at least as regards the choice of good ; for it is captive, and the servant of sin ; not as though it did not exist, but because it is not free except for what is evil."²⁴

The critical word in this contention is 'name'. If, *Dear Reader*, you have followed the argument you will see how the poison of Ockham's ideas had become a weapon to attack human reason.

In the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* (15th June 1520), Pope Leo X condemned forty one of the propositions in Luther's *Ninety Five Theses* and warned him that he risked excommunication unless within sixty days he recanted the views he had there expressed. Luther responded by publicly burning the bull and a volume of the Church's body of Canon Law at the gates of Wittenberg on 20th December 1520. In a lecture the following day he declared that this act was purely symbolic : in reality it was the Pope himself who should have been burned !²⁵ Leo excommunicated him

²¹ Ibid, p. 277-8

²² Quoted in H Daniel-Rops, op. cit., p. 279

²³ The reader may regard it as significant that this challenge to Christ and His Church should have occurred on *Hallow'een*, a sort of anti-feast day the devil encourages his acolytes to observe.

²⁴ Grisar, *Luther*, I, 318, quoted in Warren H. Carroll, *The Cleaving Of Christendom*, Front Royal, 2000, p. 6 (Vol. 4 of the author's *A History Of Christendom*).

²⁵ Cf. H. Daniel-Rops, op. cit., p. 303.

formally on January 3rd 1521 in a further bull, *Decet Romanum pontificem*, and threatened with interdict any city that afforded him asylum.

Luther's History Thereafter

The publication of the *Ninety Five Theses* and Luther's pamphlets promoting his views had produced civil upheaval. Large numbers embraced his rebellious attitude threatening peace and order in Germany. The general assembly of the estates of the Holy Roman Empire met in the city of Worms on the Rhine between the end of January and the end of May 1521 under the presidency of the Emperor, Charles V—the Diet of Worms—and ordered Luther to appear. Luther agreed to attend on a pledge of safe conduct. Worryingly for the authorities, popular demonstrations marked his passage to the Diet. Luther confirmed he was author of the various writings laid before the assembly. Notwithstanding that the Church had already condemned him, the Diet invited him to retract the views he had expressed. After time and consultation he responded:

“Unless I shall be convinced by the testimonies of the scriptures or by clear reason... I neither can nor will make any retraction, since it is neither safe nor honourable to act against conscience.”²⁶

The Emperor ordered Luther to leave Worms, his safe conduct being secured for twenty four hours. On 25th May 1521 the Diet issued an edict declaring him an outlaw, banning his literature and making it a crime to offer him food or shelter. It was too late, however, to stop the momentum he had set in train or to prevent the anarchy to come. Already Luther had numbers of supporters among the gentry notably Frederick III, the Elector of Saxony, and Philip, the Landgrave of Hesse. Frederick secreted him to prevent his arrest. The edict's terms were ignored.

Luther remained in hiding for many months, occupying his time by translating the New Testament into the vernacular and writing more pamphlets. Pope Leo X died in December 1521 to be succeeded by Adrian VI who lived only twenty months. His successor was the irresolute Clement VII, Giulio de Medici, who looked to Italian and dynastic affairs rather than the perils to the faith of developing heresy and unrest in Germany. The Emperor, Charles V, was preoccupied with war with the King of France. The Turks under Suleiman ('the Magnificent') had captured Belgrade.

Luther's ideas gained support not only from intellectuals and the petty nobility but from many of the clergy, among them Augustinians, Benedictines, Dominicans and Franciscans, who spread his faulty doctrine abroad. The situation in Wittenberg deteriorated under the influence of Andreas Karlstadt and Gabriel Zwilling. The

²⁶ Quoted in the article “Martin Luther” on the Wikipedia website at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther#cite_ref-SchaffHerzog72_65-0 Daniel Rops reports his response in this fashion: “In so much as you have failed to convince me by scriptural proofs of one shred of evidence—for I believe in neither pope nor councils which have so often been mistaken—I am bound by my own texts. My conscience is a prisoner of the Divine Word. Whatever ‘retract’ may mean, I cannot and will not do so. May God help me!” H. Daniel-Rops, op. cit., p. 305

Augustinian monks in Wittenberg attacked their Prior. Marks typical of the devil's influence began to appear. Many of the clergy desecrated the Mass. A number abandoned their vows and took wives. Mobs pillaged church buildings, pulled down crucifixes and mutilated the statues of the saints. They intimidated or openly attacked the clergy who sought to maintain Catholic teaching.

Other heretics emerged. A new sect led by Franciscan, Thomas Münzer, the Anabaptists, arose in Switzerland. Not the least of their heretical ideas was the denial of the effectiveness of infant baptism. They preached iconoclasm and a social doctrine which anticipated by 350 years the excesses of Marxist ideology. Realising that the revolt he had inspired was leading to anarchy, Luther left his refuge and returned to Wittenberg in March 1522. He had to labour hard there to suppress the Anabaptists' influence.²⁷ Ulrich Zwingli, Pastor of the Grossmünster in Zürich, publicly broke the Church's rule of abstinence from meat during Lent 1522. He fulminated against the taking of religious vows and advocated a married clergy. He denied that scripture revealed any but two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and even these he treated as symbolic rather than effectual. He denied the Real Presence in the Blessed Eucharist. Like Luther he denied free will : unlike him, he treated God as the author not only of good but of evil²⁸ ; and, since evil was part of the divine plan, indulging in evil was not a sin ; nor should one strive against it. (In this he reached the same end as Luther, but by a different route.) He stripped the churches of their altars, their crucifixes, statues and stained glass. He set up a State Church whose leaders were the Canton's prosperous citizens controlled by the Council, a democratically elected body.

There were others, too, like Martin Bucer a former Dominican in Strasbourg, Oecolampadius in Basle, and Karlstadt who had left Wittenberg for Orlamünde. Daniel-Rops reports:

"Luther looked with the deepest suspicion on all these reformers who, notwithstanding the fact that they were to some extent his descendants, were so obviously deviating from his views... Luther spewed them all out as half-hearted and lukewarm..."²⁹

Remarkably, given his views about transubstantiation, the *point de departure* between Luther and the rest of this crew was his insistence on the Real Presence of Christ in the Blessed Eucharist.

"[H]e... confessed, in reply to those who reproached him for supporting a thesis so out of keeping with his doctrine of justification by faith, that he had tried to find a way out of the dilemma... but that he had been 'imprisoned by the text' of the Gospel and obliged to accept the Real Presence..."³⁰

²⁷ The Anabaptists were to flourish again between 1531 and 1535 in the German town of Münster where their conduct was to anticipate that of Brigham Young and the Mormons in the United States of America three centuries later.

²⁸ Thus descending into Manichaeism.

²⁹ H. Daniel-Rops, op. cit., p. 337

³⁰ Ibid, p. 338

Luther abandoned his Augustinian habit in October 1524 and “to set the devil at defiance” he married an ex-Cistercian nun in April the following year. According to his bizarre theology, carnal love was a sin which God forgives out of mercy. He advised his followers—

“Be a sinner and sin hard,³¹ but believe even harder, and rejoice in God.”³²

And, with more detail—

“Seek out the society of your boon companions, drink, play, talk bawdily and amuse yourself. One must, sometimes, even commit a sin out of hate and contempt for the devil so as not to give him the chance to make one scrupulous over mere nothings ; if one is too frightened of sinning one is lost.”³³

Luther’s denial of free will in man was cemented into place in his debate with the humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam. In 1524 Erasmus published his *Dialogue on Free Will*, defending its existence from the scriptures in temperate tones. Luther would have none of it. He responded:

“Your quibbling details about the Papacy, indulgences, Purgatory and all this other nonsense don’t worry me! ... You alone have pulled the knot tight ; you alone have bitten me in the throat !”³⁴

In 1529 came his treatise in response, *Servile Will*, much of which was aimed, not at the arguments of the humanist, but at his person. Erasmus responded in kind and Luther added him to his list of enemies.

“I hate Erasmus ! ... I hate him from the bottom of my heart. Listen to me and be my witnesses... I consider Erasmus to be the greatest enemy Christ has had these thousand years past.”³⁵

Zwingli died in a battle between the Catholic and non-Catholic Swiss Cantons over a food blockade in October 1531 and Oecolampadius died shortly after. Luther had cursed both of them in life and repeated the dose after their respective deaths. Philip Melancthon was Luther’s amanuensis and the only voice of reason on Luther’s side in his many contests. But even Melancthon came to distance himself from the extremity of Luther’s positions.

As he approached the end of his life Luther’s concern that Melancthon might attempt a rapprochement with Rome moved him to set about a last work of polemic, *Against the Papacy founded in Rome by the Devil*. He was not to complete it. He had suffered general ill health for years and latterly from heart problems. Death came early in the morning of 18th February 1546. He was 62.

His Character

Luther’s popularity fed his self love. He gave up prayer for activity³⁶ and the loss of an interior life promoted his tendency to dissolution. Maritain writes:

³¹ Quoted in Jacques Maritain, op. cit., p. 10

³² This, the full quote, is in H. Daniel-Rops, op. cit., p. 319

³³ Quoted in Jacques Maritain, op. cit., p. 12

³⁴ Quoted in H. Daniel-Rops, op. cit., p. 331

³⁵ Ibid.

“Now he preaches from the pulpit : ‘Just as I have no power not to be a man, so it does not lie in my power to live without a woman’. He gathers sensuality everywhere on the pretext of alleviating intolerable burdens and of facilitating virtue ; he broadcasts in convents of women, to urge the nuns to find husbands, exhortations the product of a foul imagination and impossible to transcribe. ‘We are all saints,’ he adds. If there is talk of prayer and fasting and mortification, ‘even dogs and pigs can almost practise that kind of sanctity every day.’”³⁷

The extent of Luther’s descent into the carnal is revolting even to modern minds. Denifle wrote in his study on Luther and Lutheranism:

“Little by little, Luther thought, spoke and wrote under the influence of a lustful delectation ; thence came those writings (against chastity) the like of which could only be found – and even then but rarely – in the most depraved authors.”³⁸

Maritain adds these comments in an extensive footnote demonstrating Luther’s facility in blending blasphemy and lasciviousness.

“After a rape of nuns which took place on the night of Holy Saturday, 1523, Luther calls the citizen Koppe who organised the exploit, a ‘blessed robber’, and writes to him, ‘Like Christ, you have drawn these poor souls from the prison of human tyranny. You have done it at a time providentially indicated at that moment of Easter when Christ destroyed the prison of His own.’ He himself was surrounded by nuns thus restored to nature. His [wife] Catherine Bora was one of them. It is curious to note that a base contempt for womanhood is the normal price of this war against Christian virginity. ‘The work and word of God tell us clearly that women must be used for marriage or prostitution.’ ‘If women get tired and die of bearing, there is no harm in that ; let them die, so long as they bear ; they are made for that.’ And I quote only what can transcribed.”³⁹

Luther developed a sort of heroic egocentrism where irrationality was matched with arrogance.

“I do not admit that my doctrine can be judged by anyone, even by the angels. He who does not receive my doctrine cannot be saved.”⁴⁰

Johann Adam Möhler wrote justly when he said of him:

“Luther’s self was in his opinion the centre round which all humanity should gravitate; he made himself the universal man in whom all should find their model. Let us make no bones about it, he put himself in the place of Jesus Christ.”⁴¹

³⁶ The permission to indulge in excessive activity which led to his *Ninety Five Theses* could not, of course, have occurred without the tacit cooperation of his superiors in the Augustinian Convent at Wittenberg. Something similar occurred with Thomas Merton and his superiors in the Cistercian order in the 1940s. Merton followed much the same course of dissolution Luther had walked 400 years prior.

³⁷ Jacques Maritain, op. cit., p. 12

³⁸ Henry Denifle (1844-1905) *Luther et le luthéranisme*, ed. Paquier, 2nd ed. 1913, I, 172; quoted, translated, by Maritain in footnote 19 in his ‘Luther’, op. cit., p. 185

³⁹ Quoting Denifle, *Luther et le luthéranisme*, op. cit., I, 40; and other sources. I have not included the list Maritain is diligent in citing for each of Luther’s utterances.

⁴⁰ June 1522, Erlangen Edition *Sämtliche Werke* (1826-1857), vol. 28, 144.

⁴¹ Johann Adam Möhler (1796-1838), German Catholic priest and theologian. The quote is reproduced, unsourced, by Maritain in his ‘Luther’, *Three Reformers*, op. cit., p. 15. On Möhler, see the Catholic Encyclopaedia at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10430a.htm>

The astute observer will note, even in the limited offering of quotes in this short paper, the utterance of expressions which seem to emanate not from the man, Martin Luther, but from the devil. A good argument can be mounted that from time to time he demonstrated evidence of demonic possession.

Finally, let us read Daniel-Rops' analysis of the man's character.

"Three factors... are common to every [attempt to paint his portrait]. First there is... authority... a magnetism which drew crowds whenever he spoke, his eyes flashing and his clenched fists beating his breast... In the second place he possessed that faculty described by the German word *Germütlichkeit* which has no real parallel in French or English—an inner radiance, humane generosity, sensibility and even sentimentality, which in Luther's case was translated into loyal friendships and family affections... and into delicate love of animals and flowers. But... all eye-witnesses agree on his terrible propensity to violence, which carried him to lengths of unbelievable coarseness. There was not a single one of his adversaries whom Luther did not publicly wish dead, and whom he did not load with insults—Karlstadt, Münzer or Zwingli, or Henry VIII, 'the vilest of swine and asses', or the Pope. For the last named such expressions as 'devil's henchman', 'antichrist', or 'mouth of lies' seemed to him far too moderate....

"Bossuet himself recognised Luther's 'force of genius' which found expression both in his speaking and in his writing. Luther was one of those born orators who are inspired the moment they make contact with their audience, spontaneously seizing on images which will impress the mind and expressions that reach deep into the heart... He was an indefatigable writer ; despite all the disturbances in his life he found time to write more than one hundred books... His gifts were considerable; there was something of the poet in him—not one of his thirty-seven hymns leaves the listener unmoved—and his flights of language were often magnificent. Yet at the same time he knew how to turn scholar, dialectician or philosopher as occasion demanded. Few men have had at their disposal such power to convince their fellows, and the pity is that it was placed at the service of heresy.⁴²"

The Consequences for Mankind

Martin Luther's influence on mankind is cardinal ; *critical*. He altered man's attitude to God. His doctrine of justification by faith alone denied that sanctifying grace removes original sin and makes man once again intrinsically good. No longer, after Luther, did a man regard himself as a sharer in the Divine nature. He could produce no vital, no essentially personal, act vivifying him supernaturally. Luther removed God from the centre of religious life and replaced him with... what? With man!⁴³ Two errors have afflicted the world ever since—

- + the loss of understanding of what God is;
- + the loss of understanding of man.

God is, after Luther, no longer understood as what He is, the one necessary existent, the only BEING—the *being who cannot-not-be* ; without whom the world cannot exist ; on whom we are utterly dependent ; He who created man for Himself

⁴² H. Daniel-Rops, op. cit., pp. 320-1

⁴³ Cf. Jacques Maritain, op. cit., p. 168

to be happy with Him forever in heaven ; the *Alpha* and the *Omega* ; the beginning of my existence, and its end ; the One who is closer to me than I am to myself. God is reduced to a means to an end, the one who saves Luther from perdition.

Man is no longer a being who exists contingently—a creature whose essence (*what he is*) is really distinct from his existence (*that he is*)—albeit the most noble of creatures, created by God in His own image and likeness⁴⁴, for whom God created the universe in its immensity. Man is no longer that most subtle blend of spirit and matter ; an animal, but with an immortal soul ; a being who, though his body corrupts and dies, will live forever. Man is just another instance of the blind working-out of a purposeless material continuum ; just another animal whose being and reality ends with his far too early death.

Prior to Luther man acknowledged reality as the incontrovertible standard, the paradigm against which behaviour was to be measured. Man accepted reality as God's surrogate, the majesty of the created universe standing for that immense unseen, and unseeable, thing the Majesty of God. Whatever his sins, a man accepted they involved a rejection of that standard. He knew that if he continued as he was, he was committed irrevocably to perdition ; that there was only one way to avoid that, contrition, conversion. After Luther the standard was removed.⁴⁵

After Luther it was no longer reality that determined what a man should believe, but man's belief that would determine reality ! The gates were opened for the flood of subjectivism.⁴⁶ It was inevitable that philosophy should descend to the *ipse dixit* of the *philosophes*, where the cleverness of a Voltaire masqueraded as wisdom—"If God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him"—and the fatuousness of a Bakunin could pretend at profundity—"If God really existed it would be necessary to abolish him."

The errors propounded by Martin Luther affect the daily lives of you and of me in our dealings with our neighbour in a thousand ways—here ; now ; almost 500 years

⁴⁴ "Created little less than a God", cf. *Psalm* 8

⁴⁵ These two evils worked together: man's loss of understanding of God affected his grasp of reality; his loss of grasp of reality confirming the change in his understanding of what God is.

⁴⁶ "Luther... places both the Bible and its meaning in the hands of the individual believer, rejects any mediating role for the Church, entrusts everything to the individual's private lights and replaces the authority of an institution by an immediacy of feeling which prevails over all else... The liveliness of an individual's impressions is called 'faith' and declared to be an immediate gift of grace. The supremacy of this individual conscience removes the foundation of all the articles of faith, because they stand or fall according to whether the individual conscience assents to, or dissents from them... [I]t is no longer the divine authority of the Church which guarantees them, but subjective individual impressions... It is not the thing which demands assent, but assent which gives value to the thing. If then, by an internal logic, this criticism of divine authority as a theological principle becomes a criticism of the authority of reason as a philosophical principle, that is no more than might have been expected..." Romano Amerio, *Iota Unum*, [translated from 2nd Italian edition by Fr John P. Parsons], Sarto House, Kansas City, 1996, p.p 23-25.

later. The shift from realism to subjectivism is the reason the world of the XXIst century is dominated by ideology, political correctness, advertising, opinion polls, surrogate presences, surrogate heroes, delusional entertainments and vehicles for escape from reality. It is the reason the assertions of ideology are treated as gospel, and why anyone who submits them to rational examination is treated as a pariah, as an enemy of society. It is the reason individual conscience reigns supreme. For there is no standard to which it must conform save that dictated by the utilitarian principle of minimisation of harm to others : it is a law unto itself. Rightly did Sir Maurice Powicke remark of the effects of the Protestant revolt in England : “The claim of conscience in the end took the place of Rome.”⁴⁷

This systematic denial of reality in the moral and social orders is also the key to understanding the all-pervasive atheism of our western society. If there is no standard to which I must conform myself in making moral decisions other than my own opinion ; if reality is what I say it is, not some standard to which I must conform myself ; there is no need for me to acknowledge responsibility for either my actions or my existence. God becomes superfluous ! Hence, Lutheranism—Protestantism—is inchoate atheism.

The Consequences for the Catholic Church in the XXIst Century

Luther’s heresy was, like all heresies, founded in an asserted superior knowledge, a knowledge superior to the wisdom of Christ and his Church. Bossuet wrote:

“[T]he secret of his justifying faith... was... that it did not consist in a general belief in the Saviour, in His mysteries and promises... Luther incessantly repeated that we are justified as soon as we believe with certainty that we are justified ; and the certainty which he required was not merely that moral certainty which is based on reasonable motives and excludes agitation and trouble, but an absolute certainty, an infallible certainty, in which the sinner must believe that he is justified with the same faith with which he believes that Jesus Christ came into the world.”⁴⁸

Maritain’s comment on the above passage is to the point:

“What is the Lutheran dogma of the certainty of salvation but the transference to the human individual and his subjective state of the absolute assurance in the Divine promises... formerly the privilege of the Church and her mission?”⁴⁹

In 1958, that is, before the upheavals in the Catholic Church precipitated by the Second Vatican Council, Daniel-Rops provided this summary of the effects of Luther’s doctrine on the Catholic Church of Luther’s time.

“Lutherans... recognise[d] one of [the] two sources of truth—Holy Scripture—but they den[ied] the Church any right to [interpret it]...”

“Christianity’s centre of balance [was] completely shifted; while... Catholicism centres its faith on the Revelation of the living God in His Incarnate Son to whom the Church renders perpetual and sure witness, Lutheranism is based on the subjective certainty, which must be deeply felt by each individual believer, of being personally redeemed by Christ...”

⁴⁷ Sir Maurice Powicke, *The Reformation in England*, OUP, London, 1941

⁴⁸ Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704), *Histoire des variations des églises protestantes*, I, 8

⁴⁹ Jacques Maritain, op. cit., p. 16

“In such a perspective there could no longer be room for all those intercessors between God and man... All those consoling and profoundly human features of the Catholic cult of the saints no longer have any meaning at all... one must not invoke them or implore their aid... Luther undoubtedly venerated [the Blessed Virgin Mary] but he refused to admit that in accepting the angel’s proposal that she should become the Mother of the Saviour, Mary had in some way worked in intimate cooperation with the grace of God, and that this made her... the recipient of particular privileges, and able to intercede before her Son on behalf of every sinner.

“Since faith alone justifies, the sacraments cannot be the means, the vehicles of grace... Luther retained only those three sacraments whose origins he considered directly ascribable to the scriptures [Baptism, Penance and the Eucharist]... Penance [was]... however reduced to an act of appeal to God... The enumeration of sins is unnecessary since all human actions are tainted with sin... Finally the Eucharist... too, was fundamentally distorted... [T]here is no real Sacrifice of the Mass any more than there is any transubstantiation... As for the other sacraments, they were either abandoned or robbed of their genuinely religious value : marriage, for instance, ceased to have any sacramental meaning, a theory which implied the authorisation of divorce.

“All this doctrine obeyed a strict inner logic once its basic principle was accepted... The hierarchical principle of the Catholic Church was rejected in favour of direct relationship with God...

“At the end of it all what remained of the traditional cult ? ... Vows were swept away because they impinged on the total liberty of the spiritual impulse towards God... As for the Mass, it was retained but reduced to two elements: the teaching of the Word and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper; its mysterious sacrificial character vanished...

“Such are the essential attributes of Lutheranism. They defined a completely new type of Christianity which claimed to be the true one, the Christianity of Primitive times and of Christ the Redeemer Himself... ”⁵⁰

The Catholic reader will recognise in this synopsis elements of the disruption which individual bishops, priests and laymen have promoted, and continue to promote, within the Catholic Church today, including—

- objections to dogma ;
- appeals to a subjective ‘direct relationship’ with God in lieu of the course ordained by God himself through his Church ;
- repression of the cult of the Blessed Virgin and of the saints, and the removal of their images ;
- persistence in illicit use of the exceptional rite of the sacrament of Penance involving general absolution without individual confession of one’s sins (Third Rite Reconciliation) ;
- loss of the sense of the Mass as the sacrifice offered for the living and the dead by reducing it to scriptural readings, sermonising and a “celebration of the Lord’s Supper” ;
- degradation of the Eucharist by word and conduct ;
- tacit acceptance of divorce in calls to allow the divorced and ‘remarried’ access to the Eucharist ;
- calls for ‘democratic’ involvement of the faithful in the Church’s activities ;
- abandonment of religious vows and calls for a married clergy ;

⁵⁰ H. Daniel-Rops, op. cit., pp. 325-7

- urging of a return to a 'primitive Christianity'.

He will see them for what they are, the renewal of the claims of Protestantism over God's Holy Church, the repetition of Luther's pernicious doctrines.

Conclusion

A Catholic can only be bemused by the avidity with which the adherents of Protestant sects embrace a body of beliefs served up for them by founders who lived revolting personal lives. Who, once he realised the excesses of Henry Tudor (King Henry VIII) could continue in conscience to belong to the Church of England? Who would want to remain a member of the Lutheran Church, once he understood what a foul-mouthed guttersnipe was its founder?

The reader may object that there have been Catholics, indeed Cardinals and even Popes, who have lived appalling lives. Indeed there have. But these did so in flat contradiction of the teachings of the Church in which they held office. They were an open scandal, and known to be so.

Here is the reality: the founder of the Church of England was a man, Henry VIII, and he is dead—and so is his Church. The founder of the Lutheran Church was also a man, Martin Luther: he also is dead, and his Church, too, is dead. The founder of the Catholic Church was Jesus Christ, the God-Man, who is alive—for *death has no more dominion over him*—and His Church is alive, and will endure until the end of time and *the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it*.

Michael Baker

21st November 2015—*Presentation of the Blessed Virgin*