

# Martin Luther and the Reformation

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## Abstract

The Protestant Reformation is a complex historical event that has deep religious and ecclesial roots, but at the same time presents significant political and cultural implications. The paper illustrates some aspects of the exegetical work of Martin Luther: the interpretation of the Scripture is the path leading the Reformer to recognize the justification of the sinner by grace through faith as the centre of the Christian message. It further considers the meaning of the 95 theses on indulgences (1517) as well as the theological controversy that followed until the doctrine of Luther was condemned by Pope Leo X. Last, it describes the rise of a confessional Lutheran Church and the contribution of secular authority to the success of the Reformation in Germany.

**Keywords:** Martin Luther, Protestant Reform, Lutheran theology, *Confessio Augustana*

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## ***Introduction***

It is not an easy task to present in the limited space of a paper the main features of a complex event as the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century has been. Even if it is necessary to take a particular point of view and a selection among historical sources and facts is unavoidable, we should never forget the complexity of the historical process we are dealing with. It is an event that has deep religious and ecclesial roots, but at the same time presents significant political and cultural implications. Every historical interpretation of the Reformation can therefore demonstrate its adequacy only if it is able to explain the complexity of the historical phenomenon and the intertwining between the various components that played a role in the history of the Church and of the people of Europe at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

In this paper we will only consider the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation and we will limit ourselves to the Lutheran tradition. In fact there are also other important streams of the protestant Reformation: the Reformed and Calvinist tradition, the radical Reformation and, in some way, the Anglican tradition. The fifth centenary of Luther's publication of 95 theses on indulgences, however, allows us to exclusively consider the initiative of Martin Luther and the consequences produced by his theological positions and by the action he undertook in order to reform the Church.

### 1. A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben (Saxony-Anhalt, Germany) on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1483. He attended the school in Magdeburg and then in Eisenach and in 1501 he enrolled at the University of Erfurt where he attended the faculty of arts and obtained the title of *magister artium* in 1504. In 1505 he joined the Augustinian Order in Erfurt. After a year of novitiate he made his religious profession and in 1507 he was ordained priest. That same year he began the study of theology in Erfurt, continuing in 1508 at Wittenberg, a young university founded in 1502. In 1512 Luther received his doctorate in theology at the University of Wittenberg and the following year he started teaching Sacred Scripture at the same University.

"Luther was professor of biblical exegesis, *Professor in bibliis*, professor of Sacred Scripture. [...] We thus have a decisive hint about the very nature of his theology, which was rooted in the daily prayer of the Psalms, which were an essential part of the life of an Augustinian monk. To the book of Psalms he also devoted his scholarly interest in a particular way. Church and classroom were so in a close and tight connection. As a religious priest, even before becoming a professor, he had also to preach on a regular basis. He continued to do so as a professor until the end of his life on several occasions, especially in the Wittenberg *Stadtkirche* and for those who lived in his house". (Bayer,2003: VII)

Martin Luther started his academic teaching with a course on the Book of Psalms (*Dictata super Psalterium* 1513-1515) where the young professor applies the classical method followed by the biblical exegesis during the middle age, based on the four senses of the Scripture (historical, allegorical, moral and anagogical). But at the same time it can be observed that the distinction made by Augustin between *littera* and *spiritus* is taking more and more importance in the interpretation of the biblical text.

If in the first lectures on Psalms it is possible to identify some signs of an evolution which is taking place in Luther's theology, the crucial development that leads to gain a new perspective happens in connection with the exegesis of the letters of the apostle Paul. After the course on the Psalms, Luther turns to the New Testament and during three academic years he explains the letter to the Romans (1515-1516), the letter to the Galatians (1516-1517) and the letter to the Hebrews (1517-1518).

Compared to the lectures on Psalms, the interpretation of the letter to the Romans shows a significant development, first of all with regard to the conception of sin. Commenting on Rm 5, 14, Luther declares his disagreement with the scholastic theology which has seen the essence of original sin in the absence of original justice. Justice, as well as the lack of justice, were understood by these theologians in a subjective sense, as a tendency or orientation of the human will, which can either be in agreement with the will of God or disagree with it. But according the teaching of Paul original sin is not merely the lack of a quality of will,

but it is the complete lack of the justice of the whole human being, both interior and exterior, of all faculties of the soul and body:

"According to the apostle and in accordance with an understanding that is marked by simplicity in Christ Jesus, it is not merely the privation of quality in the will, indeed, not merely the loss of light in the intellect or of strength in the memory, but, in a word, the loss of all uprightness and of the power of all our faculties of body and soul and of the whole inner and outer man. Over and beyond this, it is the proneness toward evil; the loathing of the good; the disdain for light and wisdom but fondness for error and darkness; the avoidance and contempt of good works but an eagerness for doing evil".  
( Pauck,2006: 167-168)

As it was for Augustine, also for Luther a true and a proper description of the sinful condition in which the human being is found is the basis for a correct understanding of the way in which God saves his sinful creature, giving him or her his justice. The doctrine of justification aims at answering the question about how the human being can be just in front of God, that is, in agreement with his will and commandments. Retrieving the essential elements of Paul's theology, Luther gives this question a negative answer first: the human being can not become just by his own works and counting on his own power. Slave of sin, the human being is incapable of fulfilling what the divine commandments prescribe, and thus it is impossible for him to attain true righteousness. Positively, the human being can become just only if he is justified by God and justification consists in the non-imputation of sin and in the imputation to the sinner of Christ's righteousness.

In order to describe this event, Luther uses the term *imputare* (impute, consider, attribute) already used by Augustine, even not in a systematic way. This terminology is taken by Luther in order to highlight the double aspect of God's saving action: the acquittal of the guilty human being and the gift of a justice which does not come from him or her but is freely received from God. Luther insists that the justice given by God never becomes a quality that belongs to human beings, but always remains "alien" and "external" as we read at the beginning of his commentary to the letter to the Romans:

" For God does not want to save us by our own but by an extraneous righteousness which does not originate in ourselves but comes to us from beyond ourselves (*non per domesticam, sed per extraneam iustitiam*), which does not arise on our earth but comes from heaven. Therefore, we must come to know this righteousness which is utterly external and foreign to us (*externa et aliena iustitia*). That is why our own personal righteousness (*proprium et domesticam*) must be uprooted"<sup>1</sup>.( WA 56, 158)

With the concept of external righteousness Luther marks vigorously the distance from the scholastic conception of habitual grace, understood as a quality that makes a human being good and just. The scholastic idea of grace as a *habitus* in Luther's eyes, runs the danger of making salvation dependent on a reality that the human being feels to be his or her own possession and by which he or she is able to stand before God. Instead, the idea of receiving an external justice emphasizes the gift God gives freely and the total dependence on this divine gift by a human being who has nothing to claim before God. The imputation of an external righteousness then does not just describe what happens at the beginning of the Christian life, when people are called to faith by the proclamation of the Gospel and are forgiven and justified, but emphasizes also a permanent situation of the justified believer.

The turning point that leads Luther to discover the central point of his theology, which will then inspire and lead the effort to reform the Church, can be probably seen not as a single event, as a sort of sudden conversion, but rather represents a process extending over time, where the effort to understand the biblical message is closely linked with the reflection on his personal spiritual experience. Luther's most important account about the turn that has taken place in his life was written many years later and we find it in the introduction to the first volume of his Latin works, published in 1545.

"In that year [1519], I had meanwhile turned once more to the interpretation of The Psalms, relying on the fact that I was better schooled after I had dealt in the classroom with the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans and the Galatians and that to the Hebrews. I had been seized with a really extraordinary ardor to understand Paul in the letter to the Romans, but until then there stood in

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<sup>1</sup> Luther Lectures on Romans, 4.

my way, not coldness of blood, but this one word, i.e., Rom. 1:17: 'The justice of God is revealed in it.' For I hated this word 'the justice of God which by the use and usage of all the doctors I was taught to understand philosophically in terms of that so-called formal or active justice with which God is just and punishes the sinners and the unrighteous.

For, however irreproachably I lived as a monk, I felt myself before God to be a sinner with a most unquiet conscience, nor could I be confident that I had pleased him with my satisfaction. I did not love, nay, rather I hated, this righteous God who punished sinners, and if not with tacit blasphemy, certainly with huge murmurings I was angry with God, saying: 'As though it really were not enough that miserable sinners should be eternally damned with original sin and have all kinds of calamities laid upon them by the law of the Ten Commandments, God must go and add sorrow upon sorrow and even through the gospel itself bring his justice and wrath to bear!' I raged in this way with a wildly aroused and disturbed conscience, and yet I knocked importunately at Paul in this passage, thirsting more ardently to know what Paul meant.

At last, God being merciful, as I thought about it day and night, I noticed the context of the words, namely, 'The justice of God is revealed in it; as it is written, the just shall live by faith. Then and there, I began to understand the justice of God as that by which the righteous man lives by the gift of God, namely, by faith, and this sentence 'The justice of God is revealed in the gospel' to be that passive justice with which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: 'The just lives by faith.

This straightway made me feel as though reborn and as though I had entered through open gates into Paradise itself. From then on, the whole face of Scripture appeared different. I ran through the Scriptures then as memory served, and found that other words had the same meaning, for example: the work of God with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God with which he makes us wise, the fortitude of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. And now, much as I had hated the word 'justice of God' before, so much

the more sweetly I extolled this word to myself now, so that this passage in Paul was to me a real gate to Paradise"<sup>2</sup>.( WA 54, 185-187)

The importance of the exegetical work for the development of Luther's thought and action is summarized by Otto Hermann Pesch in a very pointed way: «The Reformation begins in the classroom».( Pesch,1983: 48) In this way he highlights that the movement started by Luther cannot be explained simply on the basis of his personal character, as the catholic interpretation often inclined to do. «If we recognize the Reformation as a theological and even academic event from its root, it is no longer possible to avoid the questions posed by it to theology and Church. It is not possible to avoid these question in a half-admiring, half-condemning view of Luther's character, in connection with the situation of the times, not least the desolate state of the Church, which would be the cause of all harm. Both the way that brought Luther to become a Reformer and the Reformation itself are first and foremost a theological matter, and it remains true even when Luther since long time has become a religious national leader and the Reformation a religious widespread movement». (Pesch, 1983: 49)For the same reason the ecumenical dialogue is trying today to take these questions seriously and to give them a proper answer.

## 2. THE REFORM OF THE CHURCH AND THE CONFLICT WITH ROME

The controversy on indulgences (1517) marks an important breakthrough for the Reformation movement: at this stage Luther's ideas and his critique to the Church practice of the time come out of the academic field and gain resonance in the public debate. Thus a theological perspective whose focal point is the doctrine of justification is taken in the service of a Church reform project.

Why is the Church reform felt so necessary and urgent at the beginning of the XVI century? Since the Council of Constance (1414-1418) the call for a reform of the head – the pope – and of the members of the Church (*reformatio in capite et in membris*) is constantly repeated all over Europe. Luther shares this wish, but he is convinced that the miserable state of the Church does not depend primarily on disciplinary abuses or corrupt moral behaviour of Church leaders, but arises from the preaching of a false and distorted gospel. The practice of penance and the granting of indulgences is a place where the relationship between false teaching and wrong

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<sup>2</sup> Luther Lectures on Romans, xxxvi-xxxvii.

practice is evident. In fact the sacrament of penance has a crucial importance for the beginning of the Reformation, as Emil Fischer stated in a study published at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where he wrote that «the Reformation was born out of confession».( Fischer, 1902: 1)

The usual Catholic understanding emphasizes the fact that Luther and the other Reformers failed to recognize the sacramental character of penance. This is in fact a significant aspect of the doctrine of penance taught by the Reformers. Even if they do not have a definite and unambiguous position regarding the possibility of naming "sacrament" the penance, certainly they all agree to reject the scholastic doctrine of the sacraments, which also offered the framework for the understanding of penance. Focusing on this "negative" aspect, however, one tends to forget the fundamental importance of the doctrine and practice of penance for the development of Luther's theology as well as for the Reformation movement and ignores that the Lutheran understanding of justification has its concrete place where the believer listens with faith to the word of forgiveness proclaimed by the Church in the sacrament of penance.

The importance of the penitential theme is confirmed by the first of the 95 theses on indulgences, published on October 31<sup>st</sup> 1517. Luther declares that Jesus' call to repent spelled out at the beginning of his public ministry, doesn't refer to the sacrament of penance, but to the fact that penance must extend to the whole Christian life: «Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying, "Repent, etc.," intended that the whole life of the believers should be a constant penance. (*Dominus and Magister noster Jesus Christus dicendo: Penitentiam agite etc. Omnem vitam fidelium penitentiam esse voluit*». (WA I, 233) Indulgences, on the contrary, give people the illusion that their sins can be forgiven and easily overcome without conversion and a lifelong penance: this is the central issue at stake in the 95 theses on indulgences published by Luther in 1517.

The scene of Luther nailing the 95 theses on indulgences at the door of the Church of the Castle of Wittenberg is universally known and belongs to the most famous events of Europe's history. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it is often repeated that Luther's hammer blows were heard all over Europe, announcing a new era. The posting of the theses on indulgences received a strong symbolical meaning as a sign of the beginning of the Reformation, that is a protest against an unbearable Church authority and the opening of a time of freedom for the believers as well as for the



conscience of every human being endowed with reason. A kind of “founding myth” of the Reformation was shaped to which the centenary celebrations of the Reformation Jubilee gave a decisive contribution. (Opitz, 2013)

In the 60's of last century, two German Catholic historians, Erwin Iserloh and Klemens Honselmann, argued that the posting of the theses on the door of the Church of the Castle of Wittenberg on the eve of the feast of All Saints did not actually take place. (Iserloh, 1961: 303-312; Honselmann, 1965: 1-23) The witnesses about the event are in fact uncertain and quite late: only 30 years later, in 1546, after the death of Luther, Melanchthon<sup>3</sup> reports the fact, but he is not himself an eyewitness of what happened in Wittenberg because in 1517 he was still in Tübingen. Other Reformation scholars still think that Luther did post the theses and that there is no reason to doubt about the witnesses we have of the event. (Leppin & Wengert, 2015: 373-398). In fact, there is no decisive argument to support one or the other position, as is recognized by the Lutheran-Catholic document on the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. «When Luther sent his theses to a few colleagues and most likely posted them on the door of the castle Church in Wittenberg, he wished to inaugurate an academic disputation on open and unresolved questions regarding the theory and practice of indulgences». (The Lutheran World Federation, 2013: 20-21)

More important than the fact of the posting in itself is the content and the meaning of Luther's theses on indulgences. The primary purpose of the theologian on the way to become a reformer was to call for a *Disputation on the power and efficacy of indulgences out of love and zeal for truth and the desire to bring it to light*, as the title of the theses suggests. And the Latin language in which Luther drafted the text confirms that the academic audience was intended.

Another important element shows that Luther didn't give to the publication of the theses on indulgences the meaning of an act of rebellion against Church authorities of the time. Not only he invited the colleagues to an academic dispute, but on October 31<sup>st</sup> he also sent a letter to the local bishop Hieronymus in Magdeburg

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<sup>3</sup> **Philip Melanchthon** (1497 – 1560) was a German humanist, a collaborator and theologian who besides systematizing the theology of reformation, defended also the theological views of Martin Luther. His greatest contribution to Protestant reformation was the authorship of the Augsburg's Confession..

and to the Archbishop of Mainz Albrecht von Brandenburg, who was appointed by the Pope for the granting of the indulgences, asking them to put an end to the abuses caused by those who were preaching the indulgences. Together with the two letters he added the thesis he had prepared on the subject where his theological understanding of indulgences was explained and his critique to the actual practice was spelled out.

The Archbishop of Mainz Albrecht von Brandenburg sent Luther's theses and other writings of the Wittenberg professor to Rome, where a trial began against him: Luther was accused of heresy and cited to Rome in order to respond about his doctrine. But Luther didn't want to go to Rome, because he feared that the judgment of the roman courts would not be fair to him. Therefore he asked the Electoral Prince of Saxony Frederick the Wise to obtain from the Pope that the trial could take place in Germany. For political reasons the pope did not want to disappoint the Electoral Prince of Saxony and accepted that Luther would be heard in Germany by Cardinal Cajetan (the Dominican theologian and former General of the Order Thomas de Vio), sent in 1518 as his Legate to the imperial diet of Augsburg. The task assigned to the Cardinal was clear: Luther should recant his errors and the representative of the Pope was endowed with all the power necessary to reconcile him and to put an end to the trial.

In October 1518 Luther met Cajetan in Augsburg, while the imperial diet was holding its sessions. The expectations of the two people were quite different: Luther wanted to discuss the matter of indulgences in a sort of theological dispute, while Cajetan understood his role as that of a judge who was sent to Germany to decide the case of a monk accused of heresy. Luther simply refused to recant his positions, as he was asked to do, and expressed the wish to be instructed where his positions were wrong. The subject of the discussion was first of all the question of the treasure of the Church, made up of the abounding merits of the Virgin Mary and the saints, which the Church dispensed through indulgences. But the focus of the debate very quickly moved to the question of the authority of the Pope. Luther rejected Cajetan's statement that the pope, as the supreme authority of the Church, cannot teach erroneously. It became thus evident how differently Luther and Cajetan understood the relationship between the authority of the Scripture and the authority of those – Popes and councils – who were called to teach the doctrine binding for the Church. At the end of the meeting it was clear that Luther was not ready to withdraw

his teaching and no agreement with Cajetan was possible. Luther returned to Wittenberg appealing to the council.

Different expectations made extremely difficult for the Roman cardinal and the German monk to meet on a common ground and it is not surprising that no agreement could be reached. But that doesn't mean that the theological questions raised by Luther were totally out of sight. On the contrary, Cardinal Cajetan took very seriously the position of Luther, even if the scholastic framework of his theological thinking made him unable to understand the new perspectives gained by Luther through his exegetical work and the reflection on the practice of penance.

«Before his encounter with Luther, Cardinal Cajetan had studied the Wittenberg professor's writings very carefully and had even written treatises on them. But Cajetan interpreted Luther within his own conceptual framework and thus misunderstood him on the assurance of faith, even while correctly representing the details of his position. For his part, Luther was not familiar with the cardinal's theology, and the interrogation, which allowed only for limited discussion, pressured Luther to recant. It did not provide an opportunity for Luther to understand the cardinal's position. It is a tragedy that two of the most outstanding theologians of the sixteenth century encountered one another in a trial of heresy». (The Lutheran World Federation, 2013: 27)

In fact, the difficult meeting between Cajetan and Luther in Augsburg can be seen a symbol of the difficulty to understand each other, which tends to become a total incommunicability, between two different theological languages, that of the medieval scholastics and that based on the Scripture to which Luther was giving shape.

The discussion on the same issues continues the following year in the Leipzig Dispute (June 27<sup>th</sup> – July 16<sup>th</sup> 1519). Luther's opponent, Johannes Eck, argues that in the Church the pope's primacy has a divine foundation because the earthly Church is formed on the model of the heavenly Church. Luther agrees that the Church is a monarchy, but he is convinced that only Christ can be recognized as his head. There is therefore no representation of Christ in the Church on the earth. Drawing the conclusion from this principle, Luther challenges the infallibility of conciliar decisions. In particular he considers that some articles of Jan Hus

condemned at the Council of Constance were true and evangelical. In this way, Luther opposes the authority of the Church and the authority of the Scripture. According to Luther, this is not an abstract "scriptural principle," but it is the authority of Christ himself manifested through the Scripture. Certainly, however, Luther was convinced that no Church doctrine could claim to be normative unless it was founded in the Scripture.

The Leipzig dispute increases Luther's reputation, but also causes the condemnation of his doctrinal positions by two Universities. The theological faculty of the University of Cologne on August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1519 condemns 11 propositions taken from the writings of Luther. Among other errors is rejected the claim that no good work done by the faithful is free from sin and the critique of the treasure of the Church on which indulgences are based. In a similar way the theological faculty of Leuven on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1519 condemns 26 false statements by Luther. The issues are the same already mentioned by the theological faculty of Cologne, but the Leuven theologians see in a deeper and more precise way that the roots of the doctrinal disagreement lie in a different understanding of original sin and justification.

On June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1520, the condemnation came from Rome with the bull *Exsurge Domine* of Pope Leo X. Until the Council of Trent this remains the only official position on Luther and his doctrine. Luther was given sixty days to recant, starting from the moment of the publication of the bull in Saxony, and the writings containing the condemned teachings were to be burned. On December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1520, in front of the Elster Gate of Wittenberg, Luther burned the bull itself, and then the papal Decretals and several writings of Johannes Eck. On January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1521 Rome promulgated the bull *Decet romanum pontificem* that excommunicated Luther and the adherents to his doctrine.

Imperial institutions, according to the medieval law, did not only have to acknowledge the condemnation but also execute it: the excommunication was then to be followed by the banning from the Empire. However, Saxony's Electoral Prince managed to get Luther listened to the diet at Worms. In fact, «in these months Luther had become so truly the voice of German nation, he had so made himself the advocate of its difficulties and wishes, that no one could have simply ignored him. But for this very reason a further enhancing of his already powerful prestige was to be feared from public negotiation with the Reformer. The papal nuncios sought to

avoid this. Moreover they did not want to let go unchallenged the lay powers' claim to act as judges in a matter of faith already decided by the Pope». (Iserloh, Glazik & Jedin, 1980: 76) But the Roman representatives did not succeed in their effort to prevent a new judgment on Luther's case. On April 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, Luther appears before the imperial diet. At the request to recant his affirmations, he declares that he can only accept the testimony of Scripture and does not recognize either the infallibility of the pope or that of the council.

Before a decision is taken, Luther leaves Worms under the protection of the Electoral Prince of Saxony and finds shelter at the Wartburg. Later, while many members of the diet, including the Prince of Saxony, had already left the assembly Charles V promulgated the edict of Worms (May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1521) which declares that «Martin Luther is to be regarded by us and you, each and every one, as a member severed from the Church of God, an obstinate schismatic, and a manifest heretic» and therefore is banned from the Empire and all his writings should be destroyed. But at this time the movement started by Luther was too advanced to be arrested.

### 3. THE RISE OF A CONFESSIONAL CHURCH

In spite of the often violent tones of the criticism against the Church of Rome, Luther and the other Reformers didn't aim at creating a new Church, breaking with the Church that existed before and shaping new structures, completely different from those inherited from the Middle Age. Their purpose was rather to reform the existing Church, removing everything that appeared to be in contradiction with the gospel. This attitude is still present in 1530 when the Princes and the Cities of the Empire who had introduced the Lutheran Reformation in their territories, at the Imperial Diet of Augsburg were called to give an account of their faith. The Confession of Faith (*Confessio Augustana*) handed over by the Lutheran representatives to the Emperor Charles V claims that the faith of the Reformation Churches is in continuity with the one of the Catholic Church (Articles 1-21), while the changes that had been introduced concern only a few "abuses" that had been removed (Articles 22-28). At the end of the first part of *Confessio Augustana*, the transition to the second part is expressed with these words:

"This is about the Sum of our Doctrine, in which, as can be seen, there is nothing that varies from the Scriptures, or from the Church Catholic, or from

the Church of Rome as known from its writers. This being the case, they judge harshly who insist that our teachers be regarded as heretics. There is, however, disagreement on certain abuses, which have crept into the Church without rightful authority. And even in these, if there were some difference, there should be proper lenity on the part of bishops to bear with us by reason of the Confession which we have now reviewed; because even the Canons are not so severe as to demand the same rites everywhere, neither, at any time, have the rites of all Churches been the same; although, among us, in large part, the ancient rites are diligently observed. For it is a false and malicious charge that all the ceremonies, all the things instituted of old, are abolished in our Churches. But it has been a common complaint that some abuses were connected with the ordinary rites. These, inasmuch as they could not be approved with a good conscience, have been to some extent corrected". ( Dingel, 1982: 83c)

This contention of continuity with the faith of the ancient Church is not only an easy diplomatic move to conceal the real disagreement and the true issues at stake in the dispute, but expresses the conviction that the religious parties had not yet moved so far that their positions needed to be considered mutually exclusive and incompatible and therefore the break irreversible. Still ten years later, in 1540 and 1541, Religious Colloquies were held in Worms and Regensburg between representatives of the Roman Church and followers of the Reformation in which a common understanding on major doctrinal points – original sin and justification – could be reached, even though the agreements formulated in the *Regensburg Book* were not received in Wittenberg and in Rome.

As a matter of fact, however, the distance between the two positions did gradually grow, reaching the point where any mutual understanding became almost impossible. As time goes by, it is becoming more and more evident that the Lutheran position can not be accepted by Rome and Luther himself takes a more radical position, opposing the true Church reformed according the criterion of the word of God and the false Church of the Pope that has turned away from the truth of the gospel.

In the new situation, the conditions are given for the rise of separate confessional Churches, based on the Confessions of faith and the writings of the

Reformers. It is not by chance that the word "confession" begins to be used as a name for a particular religious community, with a sharp doctrinal profile, with its own liturgy and Church structures which are reshaped in a more or less radical way. Through this process the *Confessio Augustana*, drafted in 1530 as a "dialogue text" that aimed at regaining Church unity in the West, became the doctrinal basis of the Lutheran Churches.

To this development at the level of the confession of faith and of the binding Church doctrine, illustrated in a paradigmatic way by the change of meaning of the *Confessio Augustana* just mentioned, also corresponds the development of new and original structures within the Churches which adopted the Reformation. At this time the Reformation movement is undergoing an important shift: while the first phase is characterized by a critical attitude toward the traditional forms of doctrine, worship and Church structures, a second phase has to face the positive task of building up new forms of Church life, in accordance with the protestant faith. This new situation has also a deep influence on Luther's theological thinking during the last two decades of his life. For instance, in 1520 he stresses the decisive importance of faith for the efficacy of sacraments – *non sacramentum, sed fides sacramenti iustificat* – while ten years later the emphasis is laid on the divine gift communicated through the sacramental sign, which faith only receives and cannot constitute. (Maffeis, 2004: 87-139) In this effort to give shape to the protestant communities, the support provided by the Princes and by the ruling bodies of the cities was of fundamental importance.

How did secular authorities contribute to the success of the Reformation? Luther's position on the relationship between Church reform and political power shows some fluctuations. In the *Adress to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), Luther had affirmed the right and duty of the secular power entrusted to the Christian Princes to carry out the reforms that the ecclesiastical hierarchy was not able or did not want to accomplish. The intervention of civil power is clearly grounded in the fact that its holders are Christians and therefore, at times of Church crisis, they are called to give their contribution for the health and renewal of the Church.

Luther's writings between 1520 and 1525 do not follow the same line, but on the contrary they tend to narrow the scope of civil authority. In a writing of 1523

on the *Secular authority: to what extent it should be obeyed* (WA 11, 229-281)<sup>4</sup> Luther points out what does not belong to the capacity of secular authority, in order to avoid any possible interfering in matters which directly affect religious life.

«So, if a prince or a secular lord commands you to adhere to the papacy, to believe this or that, or to surrender books, then your answer should be: it is not fitting for Lucifer to sit next to God. My good Lord, I owe you obedience with my life and goods. Command me what lies within the limits of your authority, and I will obey. But if you command me to believe, or to surrender my books, I will not obey. For then you will have become a tyrant and overreached yourself, commanding where you have neither right or power. If he then takes away your goods and punishes you for your disobedience, then blessed are you, and you should thank God for counting you worthy to suffer for the sake of his Word. Let the fool rage; he shall surely find his judge. But I say to you: if you do not resist him and let him take away your faith or your books, then you will truly have denied God».

On the other hand, the need of the exercise of the secular authority by those who are entrusted with this task is strongly emphasized by Luther, because the society can not exist without a power able to prevent evil and to punish the evildoers. Two kinds of government have therefore to be distinguished within the human society: the secular government and the spiritual one. Both have in God their origin, but they serve different purposes and function in a different way.

«Therefore care must be taken to keep these two governments distinct, and both must be allowed to continue their work, the one to make people just, the other to create outward peace and prevent evildoing. Neither is enough for the world without the other. Without the spiritual government of Christ, no one can be made just in the sight of God by the secular government alone. However, Christ's spiritual government does not extend to everyone; on the contrary, Christians are at all times the fewest in number and live in the midst of the Unchristian. Conversely, where the secular government or law rules on its own, pure hypocrisy must prevail, even if it were God's own commandments that were being enforced. For no one becomes truly just

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<sup>4</sup> Von weltlicher Obrigkeit, Wie weit man ihr Gehorsam schuldig sei (WA 11, 229-281).



without the Holy Spirit in his heart, however good his works. And equally where the spiritual government rules over a country and its people unaided, every sort of wickedness is let loose and every sort of knavery has free play. For the world in general is incapable of accepting it or understanding it [i.e. the spiritual government]».

The sharp distinction between spiritual government and secular government explains the critical attitude taken by Luther toward the Peasants' Revolt and the support he gave to its repression by the Princes. In his sight, a revolutionary interpretation of the Reformation message is totally wrong because it mixes two fields, the spiritual and the secular one, which should be kept carefully distinct.

In fact, the role of the secular authority will prove to be very important for the shaping of the Reformation Churches under the institutional aspect. The Princes are certainly not allowed to decide what the people have to believe, but they play a decisive role for the organization of Church life in their territories. Measures were necessary to define a large number of issues concerning the concrete life of the communities that had accepted the Reformation.

Parishes were divided because some pastors held to the traditional faith while others had joined the Reformation. It was therefore necessary to define procedures to select and appoint pastors, to oversee their preaching, and to provide for their sustenance. The reforms adopted in the field of liturgy were not consistent but depended on the more or less radical views of those who had introduced them. Many parishes had been deeply affected by the disorder caused by the Peasants' Revolt; the financial system had collapsed with negative consequences above all on the schools run by the Church. Finally, Canon law was no longer in force in the territories that had introduced the Reformation so that a new regulation was needed for instance for matters of public interest such as marriage.

Who can decide on this complex matter, since the ministry formerly exercised by the bishops is no longer there? After some initial hesitations, Luther accepts that the Electoral Prince of Saxony appoints some "visitors", endowed with full powers to decide issues and define rules for Church life in his own territory. On June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1527, Prince John promulgated an Instruction that defines the visitors' mandate and task. They had to examine whether pastors had turned away from popery, if they did not teach errors to the people, if their life was irreprehensible, if

they were fit for Church ministry. It was then necessary to resolve the issue of pastors' salary and order the administration of the revenue of ecclesiastical benefices. It was also envisaged to establish superintendents, that is pastors with oversight functions, who were responsible for a group of communities. Those who did not accept the "Christian correction" given by the visitors were invited to leave the territory. In this way, the order of the territorial Church began to be established on the basis of the criterion of confessional uniformity.

Philipp Melanchthon, as a delegate of the Wittenberg theological faculty, was one of the visitors and drafted for them more detailed instructions. In the preface written by Luther for Melanchthon's Instructions, the reformer notes that the bishops who have become princes have neglected the visitation ministry, with great damage for the doctrine and the life of the Church. The renewal of the preaching of the gospel urges for a true episcopal ministry that is willing to fulfil the task to visit the faithful. Luther adds: «Since none of us had the vocation to do so [...] we appealed to the Electoral Prince of Saxony, the sovereign of this country, as the authority instituted by God. We have asked him to act for Christian love, for the good of the gospel and for the sake of salvation of the poor Christians of this country, and to establish people qualified for this ministry».

In fact, in Germany Lutheran Princes inherited important episcopal functions, and what is initially explained as a "provisional episcopate", necessary for an emergency situation, tends to become a more and more permanent institution. The Prince who takes over the *summus episcopatus* is just a *Notbischof*, an emergency bishop, and this activity will have to cease one day. In fact, this situation lasted in Germany until the end of World War I in 1918. Since then the Lutheran Churches have shaped an independent form of Church government, combining the collegial principle (Synod) with the personal exercise of authority (Bishop).

Princes perform their episcopal functions not directly, but through representatives (jurists and theologians) appointed by them and who act in their name and with their authority. The task of Church oversight entrusted to the visitors is gradually transferred to special bodies called *Consistories*. When the Wittenberg Consistory was established in 1539, Luther emphasized that it had to work only as marriage court, but in fact its competence will become broader, developing in a true Church governing body.

Luther's hesitation on the role of secular power in Church life could not prevent a continuing consolidation of the territorial Church and the strengthening of the Prince's authority over the Church. On this matter the opinion of Melanchthon prevailed. He thought that those endowed with secular power *ex officio* have the duty to watch on the two tables of the Ten Commandments, including so worship and doctrine as well as the appointment of pastors in the area of their jurisdiction.

The formation of territorial Churches, under the rule of the secular authority gave a decisive contribution to the success of the Reformation in Germany. The way of a Church reform coming from below had proved to be problematic as the outcome of the Peasants' revolt made clear. The path to a reform from above, willing to maintain the Church's episcopal structure according the Scandinavian model, was impossible for the hostility of the German bishops toward the Reformation movement. Instead, the German princes who desired to loosen their ties with the central powers – Empire and Papacy – gave their support to the Reformation of Martin Luther, even if the fragmentation and a considerable degree of submission to the civil power was the price the protestant Churches had to pay.

### ***Summary***

The Protestant Reformation is a complex historical event that has deep religious and ecclesial roots, but at the same time presents significant political and cultural implications. The paper illustrates some aspects of the exegetical work of Martin Luther: the interpretation of the Scripture is the path leading the Reformer to recognize the justification of the sinner by grace through faith as the centre of the Christian message. Then the meaning of the 95 theses on indulgences (1517) is considered, as well as the theological controversy that followed until the doctrine of Luther was condemned by pope Leo X. Finally the rise of a confessional Lutheran Church is described together with the contribution given by the secular authority to the success of the Reformation in Germany.

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