

LUTHER THE REFORMER

THE task of a reformer is never an easy one. Whether he direct his attacks against social abuses, or against moral decay or against a weakening of Church discipline, the battle is bound to be a fierce one. Victory comes only to him who possesses the rare qualities of a true reformer. These facts are testified to by history, throughout whose pages are recorded the glorious achievements of men and women who stemmed the tide of the ravaging waters of iniquity.

Among these illustrious champions of truth and godliness, may be mentioned a Saint Paul, who fought heroically against the ceaseless contentions of the Judaizing party, which sought to hinder the promulgation of the Gospel of Christ; a Saint Augustine, who uttered a successful protest against the worldliness of his age, and crushed the heresies of the Donatists and Manichaeans attempting to undermine the very dogmas of our holy Faith; a Saint Catherine of Siena, who pleaded so fearlessly before Popes and princes, that she finally succeeded in bringing back the Pope to Rome. A Savonarola, whose stupendous power of reform was directed against the prevailing laxity of morals and alluring sensuality of the Florentines.

On these and many others like them has been rightly bestowed the glorious title of Reformer. These great lights lived in times when abuses seemed so prevalent and deep-rooted in the hearts of men that there appeared to be no human hope of success in extinguishing them. True, if they had trusted to mere human aids, their efforts would have been an utter failure, but inspired by the dictates of a firm faith, with an ever-ready and docile obedi-

ence to legitimate authority, and with a firm trust in God's goodness and mercy, they overcame the intrigues of their enemies.

Now a Reformer must be a leader among men who is not easily seduced by their mocking praise or daunted by their self-centred clamorings; one who is not fickle, desirous of satisfying the selfish interests of his constituents, or ready to relinquish his purpose because of the double-dealings of men holding positions of dignity either in the civil or religious communities; one who is a saint at heart, striving not only to reform his own soul by holding in restraint any tendencies toward pride, but also seeking to check all undue supremacy of the lower passions. Indeed, a true reformer must be dominated by a steadfast love for the religion of Christ; he must be strengthened by a sincere respect for the Church which is the divinely appointed guardian of the Faith; and finally, he must be a child of humility, prompt to sacrifice his own opinions to the authority of Christ's Vicar on earth.

The abuses that were rife in the body of the Church during the latter part of the fifteenth century and the early sixteenth clamored for the restricting hand of a reformer. Humanism was in the heyday of its vaulting ambition; its golden age had been reached. As a philosophical system it received its great impetus in Italy. It was a well-planned departure from the traditional intellectual culture of the day. The numerous followers of this system based all learning upon the literature and culture of classical antiquity. Owing to the sad conditions obtaining in the centuries where it had taken root its spread was rapid. It made easy headway among the common people

who were eager for some broad ethical system by which the depravity of their lives could be justified. Humanism was a ready handmaid to their licentious desires. It enthroned reason and free-will upon a lofty dais. It denied the compatibility of science and faith; it denied the meritorious value of the mortification of the senses; it denied the Christian ideas of sin and took no account of its consequences. Its fundamental principle was "sequere naturam," words which meant to the Humanist the deification of human nature. He made reason the supreme court of human action, the sole rule of life and, contrary to the dictates of reason, gave free rein to the lower passions of man. Evils of every description were the logical result of such paganized doctrines. The universities of Germany were noticeably affected by this new system, and completely revolutionized their intellectual character.

Among the many abuses of those days, and sharing with Humanism a prominent role on the shaping of events, was the traffic in indulgences that had been promulgated for the erection of Saint Peter's Cathedral at Rome. Not that the proclamation of an indulgence was itself an evil, but its misuse in the hands of certain unscrupulous persons was a sore in Christendom's heart. The costly task of building the stately edifice of Saint Peter's could not be carried on without the aid of the Church's loyal children. Hence, Leo X granted an indulgence to all who contributed money or offered prayers and fastings for the success of the undertaking. The necessary conditions for gaining this indulgence—as with all other indulgences of a similar nature—were true repentance, confession, and the visiting of a church. These were explicitly contained in the grant. The proclamation, as it came from the Sovereign Pontiff, was in accord with Catholic doctrine. The mistakes were

made by some of those who preached the indulgences throughout Christendom. But far greater were the evils attending on the sacrilegious bargaining carried on by certain members of the clergy, who, forgetting their sacred character as Christ's anointed, sought to enrich themselves by an unholy practice of simony. Such, in a few words, was the deplorable condition of affairs on the eve of the Reformation in Germany; such were the abuses that cried out loudly for some souls who would devote themselves to the work of freeing the body of the Church from this close-woven network of evils.

God, in the past, had often chosen individuals to uphold the unity of the Church's doctrines, and to free the Spouse of Christ from the shackles of heresy. And so this age of moral and intellectual decay seemed to have a right to look for some individual, selected by God in His infinite wisdom, to perform a task like that of an Ambrose or an Augustine, who by their divinely inspired powers of mind and body crushed out seeds of heresy. Such a divine mission is not left to the whims and fancies of the individual himself but to God alone. Men jealous of the Faith which was their proud inheritance asked upon whom should this mighty task be laid, and by what saving power should it be undertaken. Naturally, it might be said that the task should devolve upon the Papacy; but no, this power was handicapped. Until the advent of Leo X to the Chair of Saint Peter, the power of Rome to institute a well-organized reform was much hampered. Her centralized power had been shaken as a result of the Babylonian Exile and the Great Western Schism. With the ascendancy of Leo to the throne prospects looked brighter, but he was occupied with matters just as urgent in Rome itself. Men were forced to look to some indi-

vidual. Then it was that their prayers seemed to receive an answer.

There appeared on the scene a man from a corner of Saxony who purposed to reform the evils of his time. This man was Martin Luther. Père Lacordaire says of him: "Certainly, he had more right to do so than any man of his time; for he had received from God a power of eloquence, which flowed from his lips or from his pen with equal fecundity; an ardent soul, capable of retaining by love as well as of subjugating by doctrine; to whose character nothing was wanting to assure the power of his mind. What more? A man of genius, an orator, an author, a monk, all the powers and all the glories in that young hand! Let us leave him to do his work" (Lac. Conf. on Church, 338).

Yes, truly, Luther shared all these gifts, and others, too, which should have been of great service to him. Born of poor parents, he was early inured to privations and even distracted by the clamorings of want. From his own words it can be learned that his early manhood was not at all pleasant. Through the beneficent charity of Madame Cotta, he was able to acquire the priceless advantages of a higher ecclesiastical education, which culminated in the priesthood. Later he received the Doctorate in Sacred Theology and a professorship at the University of Wittenberg. The very environments of his position opened his eyes to the necessity of some drastic reform. Indeed, with such a training, with such well developed powers of mind, and a well established influence among his fellow-professors and his students, Luther was capable of the task of a religious reformer, provided he used all in a moderate manner and ordained all to a holy end. Did he make good use of the right that seemed to be his? The supreme test came in 1517 when he

publicly objected to sermons on the indulgences of Leo X by John Tetzel, a Dominican Friar. Then he showed his real character: Luther, the Reformer not in theory, but the lawless and headstrong Reformer of history.

Now the change could not have been a sudden one, and it may be well to seek for the causes. It cannot be denied that Luther had many weak points. The amazing change from Luther, the priest, monk and child of Holy Mother Church, to Luther, the drastic reformer, the originator of new systems of faith and morals, and the unhappy subject of the Church's anathemas, was not sudden, but was the partial result of his over scrupulous mind, his obstinate attachment to his own ideas, his forgetfulness of prayer and meditation, his weakness in fighting off doubts in matters of faith, and finally his pride, which Denifle puts down as the cause and reason of his eventual downfall. Moreover, his theological studies had suffered from the influence of Humanism, and, because of his superficial training in scholastic philosophy and theology, he was unable to grasp the falsity of its underlying principles. Thus the character of the man, combined with the circumstances within which he was placed, brought about the revolt of his soul later on.

The opportunity alone was wanting him to give vent to his novel doctrines. The much prized occasion came in his controversy with John Tetzel. Jealous of the signal success of the Dominican preacher, Luther at once, from the pulpit of the Castle Church, denounced Tetzel's sermons in his characteristically violent and sarcastic style. This denouncement was followed up by his famous "Ninety-five Theses," which he nailed to the church door on the eve of All Saints, 1517. They gave expression to the fact that Luther had made his important break from the doctrines of

the Church. Contradictions and obscurities prevailed throughout the theses.

As time went on the controversy between the preacher and the professor waxed strong; the one zealous in defense of truth, the other nourishing a malicious intent to foster his own divergent opinions even at the sacrifice of truth. From this period on till his life was spent, Luther's chief occupation consisted in adjusting his actions and arranging his new system to justify his rebellious course. Upon its successful issue his popularity depended, if success may be attributed to such an ignoble cause. Repeatedly was he summoned before ecclesiastical authorities, and repeatedly did he show himself to be incorrigible. The Holy See treated leniently with him, but Luther was deaf to a true Mother's divine solicitation and affection, until on January 3, 1521, Leo X issued a Bull excommunicating him. After this, Luther's purposes were no longer hidden beneath the cloak of assumed truth, but were carried out in open rebellion. The Church, Papal infallibility and authority were the subjects of his constant tirades, which rushed on like the waters of a long pent-up stream set free to work havoc and to destroy everything that hindered its mad rush.

Now the question may be asked: Has Luther any claims to the title of Reformer? Without any hesitancy the answer can be only in the negative. Although in his own highly sensitized imagination he claimed this divine mission, still the light of present day criticism and the verdict of Protestant historians strongly discountenance this presumption. How could the pitiful results of his actions, the corruption of mind and teaching, the paganizing of Christian virtues and the distressing conditions of society both civil and ecclesiastical be attributed to the operations of a divinely inspired cause? He

was without credentials and authority. Does he in any way measure up to the standards of a true Reformer? After a fair analysis of his character, the answer is again in the negative. Indeed, Luther was a leader of men, but was seduced by their shallow praise. In the beginning he may have had the intention of reforming the prevalent abuses in the Church, but his conceited intellect succumbed to the first resistance he met with. He courted the favor of the crafty Elector of Saxony, Frederick. Holiness of life and perseverance in religious discipline were wanting, for he failed to chastise his body before attempting to cure the grave maladies exterior to himself. Humility, that valuable asset in the hands of a true reformer, was notoriously lacking in him; pride was his final downfall. Love for Holy Mother Church, and respect for her divinely instituted prerogatives was not in him; against these he grievously sinned. Love for truth was far from his heart, for, as Denifle says, he constantly and systematically lied, misrepresented and falsified. It is impossible to behold the qualities of a reformer in one whose reason refused to acknowledge a higher and holier authority outside itself, whose turbulent spirit was not held in check by the holy bonds of obedience, whose clashing passions were not restrained by well regulated moral principles, and whose career was marked by a craving for power to which he gave all the energy he possessed. Doctor Alzog says: "Luther closed his career of a Reformer as he had opened it, breathing hostility against the Pope, and uttering driveling contradictions. . . . His teachings, like his life, are full of inconsistencies."

Luther was a rebel rather than a Reformer.

—Jordan Donovan, O. P.