

LUTHER THE MAN

WHAT a complex composite is man! His words and works of to-day contradicting those of yesterday stand out in bold defiance of what his to-morrow will be. They render any accurate attempt at soul analysis beyond the power and scope of man. Well has it been written, "Judge not, that you may not be judged." Martin Luther, the man, is no exception to the general rule. Indeed, his complex character has been the despair of all who would peer into the inner tabernacle of his heart. His great contemporary, the learned and cultured Erasmus of Rotterdam, has said of him, "At times he writes like an Apostle and again talks like a fool." What greater instance have we of this than a comparison between his beautiful, consoling and devotional classic, the Tesseradekas, with his obscene, vilifying and impious Table-Talk. Who would think that these two works, the very antithesis of each other, were the external expression of the same human heart? Yet they afford us a clue to his character—a very embodiment of contradictions.

Generally speaking, we may say that Martin Luther's Catholic life was ordinarily good. The first public manifestation of a change occurred at the time when he nailed his famous ninety-five theses to the church door at Wittenburg. His subsequent life was a logical development of the influences at work effecting this change. Character formation, whether for good or for bad, is necessarily a slow process. There are elements at work in the lives of us all, even though unknown to ourselves, which will sooner or later tell the character of the man. What were these influences in the life of Catholic

Luther to make his latter life contrast so badly with his former?

The obscurity consequent upon peasant life, into which he was born, makes the reconstruction of his youth a difficult task. Nevertheless even in this meager data there may be found traces of the future man. His parents were good pious souls of the stern type who believed in the maxim, "Spare the rod and spoil the child." Luther's father was of the irascible kind and his quick-tempered nature was manifestly the congenital inheritance of his oldest son. Early in his career, we find this inherent violence of his nature in open rebellion against the authority of his father, refusing to speak to him for a year on account of a beating. This, together with the fact that Luther's early school masters found it necessary to chastise their young disciple fourteen times in one morning, is sufficient evidence to indicate the future strong-willed man "recognizing no superior, tolerating no rival, brooking no contradiction."

Despite their lowly circumstances Luther's parents endeavored to give him all the advantages of an education. Young Martin applied himself with diligence and success and, when eighteen years of age, he had passed through the elementary schools of Magdeburg and Eisenach and was ready to enter the University of Erfurt as a student of jurisprudence. His law studies required a knowledge of philosophy. Although the general tendency of this university, as of all the principal schools of learning at that time, especially in Germany, was modernistic, nevertheless, scholastic methods were still in vogue. A strong Humanistic trend was especially evident among the

students. Although Luther himself manifested a special love for the ancient classics and many of his bosom companions were to be found among the supporters of this movement, he himself was not at the time apparently affected by it. Facts, however, in his subsequent life show that he did not escape the corroding influences of this pagan atmosphere. His moral life at the university was probably mediocre. Denifle gives us the impression that he had a difficult time spiritually. His in-born highly wrought tendencies would naturally leave him especially prone to temptations. The environments of this period of his life were not conducive to high morality. To use his own words, the town of Erfurt was a "Beer house and a nest of immorality." We would not be justified, however, in saying that he succumbed to these temptations. Other facts indicate that he was not deaf to the callings of a higher life. Mathesius, Luther's first biographer, tells us that "although by nature a lively fellow he began his study with prayers." "To pray, well," Luther was wont to say, "was the better half of study."

In all, every indication pointed to a bright future for the young barrister, when suddenly, for a number of alleged reasons, all of which are debatable, Luther turned his back on the world and begged admission into the Augustinian monastery. Whatever his motives for entering, his early life as a religious was exemplary. He labored by his mortifications and self-denials to overcome himself and advance in the perfection of the Christian virtues. From the first day, however, of his entrance, he was constantly worried and depressed by religious doubts. An inordinate fear of God's wrath and a scrupulous recollection of his past sins were constantly tormenting his otherwise happy life. He was ordained in

fear and trembling at his own unworthiness and so great was his awe of Christ's presence in the Blessed Sacrament, that it was only under coercion that he was able to pronounce the words of consecration at his first Mass. As is the case with scrupulous natures, the sacraments gave him little consolation. His suffering mind, however, was somewhat relieved by the salutary instructions of his novice-master and also by his sincere friend Staupitz. This timorous conscience, in Luther's case, was destined later to degenerate into a morbid scrupulosity, the inevitable reaction of which, together with his inbred violent nature, was a potent influence in his break with the Church.

Early in his monastic career, he was selected by his superiors to specialize in the study of the Sacred Scriptures. For this particular branch, Luther manifested a special inclination and it probably formed his most exhaustive study. His theology was for the most part eclectic with a decided preference for Occamism. Luther's contempt for Aristotle naturally turned him against Thomism. In fact this was the spirit of the times. The modernistic trend of the schools looked upon the Scholasticism of the thirteenth century as belonging to the realms of the past. Moreover, the ever increasing subtleties occasioned by the unworthy successors of the true Scholastics had done much to bring Scholasticism into disrepute. The simplifying process of Occam's system was the order of the day. Without going into an explanation of this complicated system, it is sufficient to say that its logical consequences have given us our modern anti-Catholic philosophy. Authors do not agree as to how much time Luther gave to theology. At best, it could not have been much. This lack of a solid theological foundation caused him to make the fatal mistake of reading bad

theology into Scripture, an error which has been the downfall of many another. Added to this was the false trend which his natural inclination to mysticism had taken. His misunderstanding of the works of John Tauler, whose sermons gave him much pleasure, led to his frequent misrepresentation of this orthodox Dominican mystic.

Luther's visit to Rome was probably an important factor in the history of his change. In 1511, he had been selected by a faction of his confrères to represent them in the Eternal City on business relative to the Augustinian reform movement in Germany. He had expected to find Rome a city of saints and found it "a sink of iniquity, its priests infidels, the papal courtiers men of shameless lives." It cannot be denied, the human element in the Church stood in need of reform. Whether the conditions of affairs in Rome weakened Luther's faith or not, it is difficult to say. At all events, he returned to Germany apparently as strong in faith as when he left it, but the carefully concealed unorthodox tendencies which began to exhibit themselves in his lectures and sermons of the following year would seem to indicate the effects of spiritual ruin.

In 1512, Luther received the Doctorate in Sacred Theology. Instead of teaching in this branch, however, he continued his study in Sacred Scripture, and undertook a course of lectures on the Psalms, which lasted three years. Although, it was only in the light of subsequent history that any signs of heresy could be discovered in these commentaries, nevertheless, they were full of a tone of disrespect. The various elements at work in his character formation were beginning to tell. In his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans in 1516, the first unmistakable signs of his departure from Catholic doctrine are to be found.

There, in an elementary state, are his later developed doctrines on concupiscence, original sin and grace. Luther's activity during this period was a colossal work of studying, lecturing and preaching. He had the good will of his brothers in religion who elected him to the difficult post of Rural Visitor. His sermons were exceedingly popular and he had succeeded in convincing his hearers that he was the reformer of Germany. Although his capacity for work was enormous, the effect of his many duties was showing themselves in a neglect of his spiritual life. The sacred obligations of daily Mass and Office were sometimes left aside for weeks. Then, overcome by his scruples, he would carry his austerities to the opposite extreme. A spiritual crisis was bound to be the inevitable consequence. Added to this, the dissatisfied condition of the German people, owing to the many demands made on them by Roman authority, had made things ripe for reform. Tetzel's appointment as the indulgence preacher for Germany was the occasion and Luther was the psychological man for the work of reform.

Here is the turning point in Luther's life. From now on till his excommunication in 1520, he was steadily drifting from the safe moorings of Catholicism. The many contradictions and inconsistencies, especially evident in this portion of his life, would seem to indicate his frantic efforts to cling to his old position. At times he himself tells us, he trembled to find himself alone against the whole Church." But the break had been made. The force of circumstances were driving him farther and farther from the Church. To recant would be to acknowledge his errors and humiliate his pride. This he could not bring himself to do.

Tetzel's deep theological penetration was quick to discover in Luther's at-

tack on the abuses of indulgences his covert revolutionary tendencies, aiming at the overthrow of the Church's whole penitential system and at the very root of ecclesiastical authority. In the rapid succession of theses and anti-theses, Luther's tirades of invective, his quick abandonment of the original thesis to attack papal authority, his descent from the recognized mode of academic discussion to the public forum by publishing in the vernacular his sermons on "Indulgences and Grace" bear testimony to the true purpose of things in the mind of the Reformer. The discontent of the German people had made Luther exceedingly popular. Failing to recognize the true situation, they had been deluded into thinking that Luther was the true reformer of the abuses within the Church. Many of Luther's early followers, really in earnest for a true reform, abandoned him later when they saw the real drift of things.

Luther was becoming bolder and the condition of affairs were becoming critical. Pope Leo X attempted to silence Luther by instructing his superiors in Germany to reprimand him and urge him to cease the propagation of his new doctrines. His superiors seemed to underestimate the whole situation and thought that things would rectify themselves in the coming chapter at Heidelberg. There, strange to say, not a word of reprimand was given Luther but on the contrary the honors shown him on this occasion would seem to be a silent approval of his position. After this chapter, Luther sent his "Resolutions on the Virtue of Indulgences" to Pope Leo X. Accompanying these was a letter of most abject subserviency in which the famous words occur, "Kill me, let me live, approve or disapprove—I will hear your voice as that of Christ Himself." Hardly could this have reached the Pope, when from the pulpit of Wittenburg he was preaching

against the Pope's right to excommunicate.

When it became evident to the authorities at Rome that the German Augustinians were but abetting the cause of Luther, they decided to summon him for trial to Rome. Silvester Prierias, O. P., the Master of the Sacred Palace, had drawn up an indictment of heresy against Luther which evoked from the Reformer a response in the form of vilest insult to Prierias and a reassertion of his false doctrines. Luther fearing death at Rome feigned ill-health and through the influence of Frederick the Elector of Saxony succeeded in getting his trial in Germany. At Ausburg, Luther was summoned before the Dominican Cardinal Cajetan, the papal envoy. The duties of the cardinal were plain. He was either to pardon Luther entirely if he would recant,—this failing, he was to bring him a prisoner to Rome. After three interviews, Luther refused to retract and fled secretly back to Wittenburg. Knowing the consequences of such a step, Luther was shrewd enough to enlist the sympathies of Frederick with such success that when Cajetan appealed to the Elector to silence Luther, he was met by a firm refusal unless Luther was proven heretical.

Still another attempt to bring Luther to reconciliation with the Church was destined to be a dismal failure. Although Karl von Miltitz, the Saxon Papal Chamberlain, had succeeded in getting a promise from Luther to write a letter of submission to the Pope and to observe silence, if his opponents did likewise, nevertheless, the sincerity of these promises do not stand the test of subsequent procedure. While preparing himself for the famous Leipzig Debate, Luther wrote to Spalatin, Frederick's secretary and chaplain, the following: "I am studying the decrees of the Popes for my debate and I speak

it in your ear, I know not whether the Pope is antichrist or his apostle."

In the Debate itself Luther openly attacked the Primacy of the Pope. His able opponent, Dr. Eck, so triumphed over Luther that even he himself was forced to call his defeat a tragedy. The outcome of this debate was disastrous for Luther. It drove him to wanton recklessness. "Luther, the Reformer, had become Luther, the Revolutionary." To gain his point, he no longer hesitated to affiliate himself with the most radical elements and leaders of religious and political reform. How strongly does the zeal with which he now saturates himself with anti-papal, humanistic literature contrast with his student days at Erfurt! His literary activities during this period bear unmistakable testimony of a changed man. In his "Three Primary Books," the "Address to the German Nobility," "Babylonish Captivity" and "On the Liberty of a Christian Man," he had laid the corner stone of his new religion. Reconciliation with the Church was no longer possible. Excommunication was inevitable. But what cared he now for the Pope's excommunication. To use his own words, "As for me, the die is cast; I despise alike the favor and fury of Rome."

Luther was excommunicated in 1520. This action of the Pope was quickly followed by that of the Catholic Emperor Charles V, who at the Diet of Worms put him under the ban of the Empire. Now Luther was not only an exiled child of the Church but also an outlaw in the Empire. Under the protection of Frederick, the Elector of Saxony, he was hurried to the Castle of the Wartburg. There, his sojourn of a year amid the throes of great interior struggle, he had ample time to give form to his new religion. For this his vernacular translation of the Bible was an indispensable adjunct. These

are the days which gave inspiration to his "Essay on the Monastic Vows"—so disastrous in its immediate effect, so influential in producing the moral degeneracy following in the wake of the new religion. Satan, always an important factor in his life, had become especially so now. His disputation with the devil concerning the private recitation of the Mass has become historical.

Enough has been said to give us the clue to his character. Sufficient to say his whole subsequent life, even to his marriage with the ex-nun Catherine from Bora, was a practical bearing out of his changed theological position. How different things might have been if he had remained an obedient child of the Church. His undeniable intellectual abilities and qualifications as a leader of men, his irresistible oratorical eloquence could easily have won for him a high pedestal in the Church's hall of fame. But how different was the case. The former humble, patient, pious, chaste and scrupulous monk had become the proud, immoral, impatient and wholly shameless man. The same pride that made him break with the Church had driven him to a life the reverse in every particular to what it formerly had been. At one moment giving vent to the most vilifying invective, the coarsest vulgarity and grossest obscenity, the next giving expression to the highest and best in mysticism; surely Martin Luther was an embodiment of contradictions. His death came in 1546. His last act was, as he had predicted and prayed, an attack on the papacy. As he lived so he died. Such was Luther, the man. The inner motives of such a life we will leave to the mercy of our great Judge; but surely we are justified in saying that the downward trend of such a life and the fruits of its labor are tokens of other than divine inspiration.

—Pius Johannsen, O. P.