

A RETROSPECT

1517-1917

Nearly four hundred years have now elapsed since Western Christendom was shaken to its very foundations by the religious revolution which received the final and immediate impetus when Martin Luther issued his Ninety-five Theses on Indulgences, as a challenge to the world, at Wittenberg on the night of October 31, 1517. Now that the fourth centenary celebration of the Reformation—by which name this religious movement has been called—is at hand, we may look back over the period of its existence and form our opinion concerning its claims to success in accomplishing that for which it was instituted. The points about which our investigation turns and upon which our judgment shall be based are these: Is it in the least deserving of its name—Reformation? Has it, in the past, spiritually bettered the condition of those who were brought under its control? Is it capable of benefiting those who are at the present living under its influence? Or, has it failed entirely to achieve the purpose for which it was inaugurated, namely, the removal of certain abuses which had crept into the discipline of the Church through the weakness of her leaders and the influence which worldly princes and institutions brought to bear upon these leaders at various periods throughout her long history? There is a twofold element in the constitution of the Church, the human and the divine, a distinction which has too often been lost sight of by those who in their misguided zeal brand the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Church as false because of the loose and sinful lives of some of her members. As our guide in passing judgment on this so-called Reformation, we shall make use of the dictum proposed by our Divine Saviour when warning His disciples against the insidious attacks of false prophets: "By their fruits you shall know them."¹

As to the effects of this religious rebellion upon the people, after it had been given a fair trial and its results were patent, we shall allow its leader, Martin Luther himself, to give testimony. "Now," he tells us, "the people are possessed by seven devils where before but one possessed them. The devil so infests the people that now, under the clear light of the Gospel, they are more avaricious, more deceitful, more self-seeking, more unmerciful, more obscene, more insolent and vexatious than they were

¹ St. Matthew, 7, 16.

before under the Papacy."² Again, he tells his infatuated listeners, that "we learn, unfortunately, day by day, that the people now, under the Gospel, bear greater and more obstinate hate and envy, are more deceitful, sarcastic, more miserly and irritable than they were before under the Papacy."³ And again, against these same devotees he directs this tirade: "And where before you were possessed and dominated by but one devil, now seven worse devils have control over you. Such, one now sees among the peasants, townfolk, nobles and in all classes, from the highest to the lowest what a shameful, disordered life they lead in avariciousness, drunkenness, gluttony, lewdness, and in all sorts and kinds of shame and degradation."⁴

After a perusal of such passages as these, it would seem, after all, that from the very outset the work so earnestly pushed forward by Martin Luther was not a reformation of the moral and religious life of his devoted followers, but rather a retrogression. Furthermore, as he himself so strikingly sets forth, it rendered their condition far worse than it had ever been before under the guidance and restraining influence of the Popes, promulgating the teachings of Christ. From Luther's own words it would yet further appear that his new system of religion resulted in the people being possessed and dominated by the devil—a condition which was leading them to "all sorts and kinds of shame and degradation."⁵

Are these the results we should be led to expect from the life-labors of a reformer, of one sent by God to release man from the shameful bondage of sin and crime and to raise him to a higher moral level? Does the condition so graphically outlined above bear any resemblance to the picture which history has left us of the lives of the early Christians, following closely the example and teachings of their divine Master and Founder? Even the persecutors of the early Christians, as well as non-Catholic and non-Christian historians, are forced to speak most highly of their virtues, holding up for particular eulogy their charity and probity of life. This praise, approved and augmented by succeeding generations, proves conclusively that the world has recognized in Christ a true Reformer—One sent from God—

² Walch, "The Works of Martin Luther," Concordia Edition, St. Louis, 1892; vol. 13b, column 1358.

³ Walch, op. cit. sup. col. 2503.

⁴ Walch, op. cit. sup. col. 1359.

⁵ See note 4.

and in the system which He founded a true rule of morality and a sure guide to happiness. But when, on the other hand, we find Luther himself bewailing the sins and vices of his early followers who, hailing him as one sent from God and claiming him as their guide and teacher, followed closely the lessons he taught, then we are led to wonder what judgment he expected posterity to pass upon his work when he himself had condemned it by his denunciations. And in view of these facts we are mildly astonished, to say the least, that his system of religion has found so many adherents down through the ages. "Out of thy own mouth I judge thee,"⁶ said the master to the servant who had hidden his one talent; and basing our verdict of the worth of the Reformation on the testimony of its founder, and on a comparison with the results obtained from the life-labors of the Divine Reformer, we must conclude that the so-called religious reform of the sixteenth century, inaugurated by Martin Luther, is not worthy of the name of a true reformation. Nor did it, by the mere fact of its institution, succeed in its primary object—the removal of disciplinary abuses in the Church. Indirectly, however, it proved to be the much-needed stimulus which led to the convocation of the Council of Trent under Pope Paul III in 1545. This Council succeeded by means of wise and necessary legislation in putting a stop to many of the irregularities which for so long a time had existed amongst the clergy and laity.

Turning from the effects this religious rebellion had on the early followers of Martin Luther, let us now briefly note what harm it did in a wider circle, after it had been taken up by more powerful agents, and its principles pushed to their logical conclusion to meet and gratify the passions of those whose pride and ambition led them to seek in these principles a justification of their many excesses. Western Europe retired to rest on the evening of October 31, 1517, in peace and union with the successor of St. Peter, as it had been ever since the coronation of Charlemagne and the founding of the Holy Roman Empire on Christmas Day, in the year 800. But in the course of that fatal night the seeds of discord were sown which soon ripened into a harvest of bloodshed and ruin. It brought in its train anarchy in religion, desolation and sorrow to the Christian Faith, and a fatal disorganization among the nations. Friends, families, communities, cities, states, kingdoms and empires felt the baneful influence of

⁶ St. Luke, 19, 22.

its touch and were divided and formed into opposing camps, rending with fierce determination the pre-existing harmony and good will. Religious sects innumerable, like mushroom growths on the face of society, sprang into existence with astonishing rapidity, flourished for a brief space of time, and with an almost equal rapidity gave place to others, finally sinking back into the confusion which had given them birth. Each of these sects teaches a doctrine contrary to that of every other, and claims its tenets alone to be true and divinely inspired—all together so confusing the idea of religion and religious unity that a pagan, or a visitor from another world, might well pause in surprise and astonishment at such a spectacle. These Protestant sects, breathing the rebellious spirit of Martin Luther, have been marked by confusion of doctrine and discipline ever since the institution of Protestantism, and have kept to this course even to our own times. They call themselves Christian, and yet they fail to bear that most distinguishing mark of Christ's Church—her unity. They would be his disciples, and yet by their dissensions they have placed themselves beyond the pale of His intimate friendship; they have no share in that truly divine prayer of Jesus for His disciples and for all the faithful: "that they all may be one, as thou, Father, in me, and I in thee; that they also may be one in us."⁷ Although these sects differ from one another as to matters of faith and discipline, yet they are at one in their hostility to the Catholic Church—the one true Church founded by Christ, to which He has pledged His divine assistance, which shall be her guide and mainstay through all the storms of hatred and prejudice even to the consummation of the world.

The present status of Protestantism, the outgrowth of the Reformation, is precisely the logical development of the principles upon which it commenced its career in the world's history. "Protestantism," writes Archbishop Ireland, "in all its branches, under all its types, is anarchy; and naught else can it be while it upholds its vital rule of faith, the private, personal interpretation of the Scriptures."⁸ And what is the result of this basic principle of the Reformation? We find Christian doctrine and revelation shorn of their real character and reduced to mere formulæ to which but little or no importance is to be attached; Christ's claims to divinity and the divine authorship of the Sacred Scrip-

⁷ St. John, 17, 21.

⁸ "Lenten Letter," Feb. 26, 1917.

tures are by many either openly denied or passed over in silence; morality has come to be considered as a code of purely natural ethics, deriving its sanction from the civil and not the divine law; the belief in the supernatural is so often ignored and unknown, or so frightfully distorted, that nature is deified and held up before men's eyes as the sole cause, guiding principle and end of this life, as well as the controller of the world and the one force which is to shape the destiny of man.

This, indeed, may seem a terrible indictment against a system of religion which claims to bear within itself the divine vivifying principle. But looking back over the years which have passed since its foundation we find these charges amply substantiated. "Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?" asks our Divine Saviour of His disciples.⁹ The cause was placed and the result naturally followed, just as the harvest of the fall is the result of the seed sown in the spring. "The dire agony of Protestantism," again writes Archbishop Ireland, "as it sorrowfully contemplates the dreadful ruins encumbering its pathways of travel, is that all that has happened, all that is happening, is the direct result of its own chosen principles."¹⁰

And what of the future? Of that we know nothing. Nor is it within our province to delve into its mysteries, pry into its hidden recesses, and tear away the veil which hangs over the dark and forbidden threshold beyond which lie the things which are yet to come. But lying open before us is the record of past ages, replete with examples of ruin and failure, permitted by a benign Providence for our instruction. How many blighted wrecks lie along the shores of the stream of Time which in their silent eloquence bid us beware a like fate! How many fair institutions, commencing their careers in a blaze of glory and with a flourish of trumpets, now lie stranded on these same shores awaiting either the final overwhelming wave which will obliterate them forever from the remembrance of man, or, if they are fated to live on in memory, the curses and malediction of succeeding generations. And if institutions such as these have failed, how much more must the ruin of those be expected whose foundations were built on the quicksands of human pride, passion and ambition! From these wrecks and ruins we learn that, just as no stream can rise above its source, or no effect can be

⁹ St. Matthew, 7, 16.

¹⁰ loc. cit. sup.

greater than its cause, so no undertaking begun in pride, obstinacy and violence can hope to succeed, to claim the whole-hearted esteem and the unanimous approval of mankind. History has taught us this lesson, and our Divine Saviour corroborated and strengthened it when He said: "Every plant which My heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up."¹¹ And again we hear the clear and solemn voice of Divine Wisdom, sounding its clarion notes down through the misty vista of the past, and we pause in our haste to listen: "Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it."¹²

—Benedict M. Allen, O. P.

¹¹ St. Matthew, 15, 13.

¹² Psalm 126, 1.

ROSA MYSTICA

After the Latin.

To-day, ere dawn has flecked the sky,
Till evening's rosy sunset glows,
All nations praise in psalmody
The glories of our beauteous Rose.

This bud of Christ, as yet a child,
By grace divine was soft bedewed;
His was her heart, all undefiled,
And with His trysted love imbued. . . .

With Christ, the dying Lord of all,
On Calvary's gloomy height she mourns:
She shares His stripes and bitter gall,
And on her brow the piercing thorns.

No longer grieving for her Love,
Joy now o'erflows her faithful heart!
Eternal anthems, hymned above,
And pure delight her blessed part!

O may the sacred Trinity
Be rendered grateful, joyous praise:
Meet honor to that Mystery
Throughout eternal length of days!
—Chrysostom Kearns, O. P.