

## THE INDULGENCE-PREACHER

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This year marks the four-hundredth anniversary of the death of John Tetzel, O. P., known to the world as "The Indulgence-Preacher." However little noted the event, yet it is a striking coincidence that the very year which witnesses what many think is a final blow to the Lutheran religion as a world-power also commemorates the passing away of one who has been commonly considered the principal cause of the birth of Lutheranism. For over three hundred years Tetzel and Luther had been pitted against each other by the two opposing parties, Catholic and Protestant. Against both burning accusations had been hurled by their enemies; both had been crowned by almost every virtue by their friends. Then we found out the truth. By the pens of men such as Jannsen, Denifle, O. P., and Grisar, S. J., both have been set before the world in a clearer light. We have found out that while Luther was almost without defense from the attacks of the Catholic party, much, far more than might be expected, could be said for Tetzel against the fierce assaults of the Protestants. It was Dr. Nicolas Paulus, however, who gave us the truest picture of Tetzel. And if he does not make Tetzel a saint, yet neither does he put him down as a wicked, shameless purveyor of indulgences. With Doctor Paulus, we think he was an earnest, though at times mistaken, laborer for souls in the vineyard of the Lord.

### I

John Tetzel was born at Pirna, in Meissen, Germany, about the year 1465. Entering in his seventeenth year the University of Leipzig, he received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1487. Not long after he joined the Dominicans either at Pirna or at Leipzig in the Province of Saxony. Affiliated some ten years later with the Province of Poland, he became in time Prior of the Monastery of Glogau. At the request of the Polish Provincial he was made Inquisitor for Poland (1509) by the Master General, Cajetan. At the same time permission was given him to take the necessary steps leading to the Doctorate of Theology. A little later he rejoined his former community at Leipzig, where he received the office of Inquisitor for the Province of Saxony.

From a worldly point of view the most glorious epoch of Tetzel's life (1503-1510) had now been completed. The years that followed were either hidden in dull obscurity or embittered by unjust persecution; but these were years when success clung to his path as he traversed the Provinces of Germany preaching indulgences. He rose from a simple preacher to a much trusted sub-commissioner of indulgences. Some Protestant authors have tried to discredit his work at this period, but the best they could do was to unearth calumnies published chiefly by Reformation preachers many years later. What the real character and effect of Tetzel's preaching was can be surmised from the sincere tributes of one Mykonius, his contemporary and opponent, who says: "I listened to him so attentively that afterwards I could repeat to others entire sermons, imitating even his gestures and pronunciations, not indeed in mockery, but in earnest. For I believed that these were surely the word of God."

Of Tetzel's work from 1510-1516 nothing is known. Certain documents, the very wording of which proves them to be forgeries, are brought forward to point the finger of shame at Tetzel and at the Church. Of the former it is said that, after being found guilty of adultery at Innsbruck and condemned to death by drowning, he was saved by the Elector Frederick of Saxony, who changed the penalty to life imprisonment (1512). This story, resting on a statement of Luther (1541), had great popularity until the recent thorough refutation of Dr. Paulus.

In the year 1516 Arcimbold appointed Tetzel as sub-commissioner for the preaching of an indulgence which had been granted first (1506) to Italy and Austria, but later (1514-1516) extended to several German Provinces. The alms collected were to be used in the building of St. Peter's at Rome. In the year 1517 Tetzel began to preach the same indulgence in the dioceses of Albert of Bradenburg, Archbishop of Mayence and Magdeburg.

During the early part of this year Tetzel came to Jüterbog, a small town just outside the boundaries of Saxony and not far from Wittenberg (Saxony). As the indulgence could not be preached in Saxony, many people from Wittenburg, as Luther tells us in "Wider Hans Worst," flocked to Jüterbog after indulgences. The Annals of Jüterbog prove that Tetzel's preaching was not, however, the immediate cause of the publication of Luther's "Ninety-five Theses." The Annals show us that Tetzel

preached at Jüterbog as early as April 10, 1517, while Luther did not nail the Theses on the church door at Wittenburg until October 31, of the same year. We know, too, that Tetzel had already been in the district of Bradenburg for several weeks. Moreover, Luther in a letter to Archbishop Albert admitted he had long been thinking of preaching against "indulgences abuses."

Both in his theses and in his letter to the Archbishop Luther mingles truth with error. Abuses were committed here and there; he did right in pointing these out and censuring them. But he did more than attack abuses; he assailed the very doctrine of indulgences and of good works. He went so far as to deny that the Pope had any power before God to remit that temporal punishment which is necessary for the complete purgation of the soul. In his letter he reproved the Archbishop for declaring that an indulgence could help the souls in purgatory.

The Archbishop and his council decided to bring Luther to trial for his allegations, but Tetzel took no legal action against him. He could not, however, long ignore Luther's challenge, and on January 20, 1518, he answered Luther's objections in a public disputation at the University of Frankfort. His theses, according to the custom of the times, were drawn up by Conrad Winpina, a professor of theology; this action does not prove, as his enemies assert, that Tetzel was ignorant of Latin or of theology, for he undertook to defend the doctrine therein contained. Several of the theses erroneously set down as truths of faith two opinions disputed in the schools.

A "Sermon on Indulgences and Grace" was published by Luther a few days later, only to be immediately answered by Tetzel in his "Vorlegung." Here the latter showed he had grasped the vital point of the whole discussion. What had been a mere theological controversy was now developing on Luther's part into a covert attack on the basic principles of the Church. "Luther's articles," Tetzel said, "will cause great scandal, for because of them many will come to despise the supremacy and power of His Holiness, the Pope, and of the Holy Roman See. Works of sacramental satisfaction will be neglected. The preachers and doctors will never be believed. Every one will wish to interpret Scripture to his own taste. Thus, the Christian people must be exposed to the risk of their souls; for every one will

believe what he pleases." Luther made fun of these predictions, but subsequent events prove that they were only too true.

In May, 1518, Tetzel published another set of theses, his own work, which dealt not so much with indulgences as with the authority of the Church. Luther declared the Bible to be the sole rule of faith; Tetzel affirms that loyal followers of Christ must not only believe what is explicitly contained in the Bible, but also the "ex cathedra" decisions of the Pope and the approved traditions of the Church. The very root of the controversy was now laid bare. Indulgences were not so much in question as the authority of the Church. As Luther did not yet think of rejecting the true faith, he admitted that most of Tetzel's theses were true.

On account of Luther's attack, the preaching of indulgences could be continued no longer; therefore, Tetzel withdrew to Leipzig. Here, in January, 1519, he met Charles von Miltitz, a young Saxon cleric of noble blood and a chamberlain of the Pope. The latter had been sent to Germany (1518) to present the Elector of Saxony with the Golden Rose; he was also to attempt a settlement of the recent disputes. To the disappointment of the Roman authorities, he did more harm than good. It is true he secured some sort of promise of better behavior from Luther, but he did not insist on what was really needed—Luther's absolute retraction of his errors. To get what he did Miltitz made unlawful concessions to Luther's friends, and heaped all manner of unjust abuse upon their opponents. In spite of a letter from Herman Rab, the Dominican Provincial, Miltitz showed no consideration for Tetzel, "who had done and suffered so much for the glory of the Holy See," receiving only insults in return. According to his own account, Miltitz reproached the unfortunate Dominican most harshly, accusing him of all the evil things people said of him and threatening him with severe punishments.

This was the last blow. Tetzel's already failing health succumbed to evils far greater than usually fall to the lot of man. His life threatened, his good name tarnished by slander, and his heart crushed by the terrible consequences of a revolt for which he was blamed—all these things would seem to fill his cup of sorrow; but no, the abuse of Miltitz must be added! What must have been his grief and consternation at such treatment from a Papal envoy! It could not but have hastened his death, which occurred August 11, 1519. In spite of the clamor against him he



was buried with becoming honors and his body was placed under the high altar of the Dominican church at Leipzig. Luther consolingly wrote to the dying Tetzel that he (Tetzel) should not worry, for the child (the Reformation) had quite another father. This statement has been variously interpreted, but it seems that Luther wished to throw the blame neither on Tetzel nor on himself, but on the Pope and the Archbishop Albert.

## II

The accusations directed against Tetzel may be brought under two heads: those against his character and those against his teaching.

The former, once they received the approbation of Luther and Miltitz, were so popularized by Protestants that until lately any vile story that could be told of an indulgence-preacher was related of Tetzel. But the fact that Miltitz accepted these stories does not prove them to be true. Even though we disregard the circumstance that he took no pains to verify them, his conduct in this affair is enough to discredit all his official acts and reports. His cringing attitude towards Luther's friends, his mercenary agreement to promote their interests, and his base treachery in slandering the Roman authorities during his drunken revels—all these things marked him as untrustworthy and made him disgusting alike to Catholics and to Protestants. Even Luther censured him. A statement of Oscar Michael, a Protestant historian, that "all attempts to set up Miltitz as a reliable witness will be in vain" is now admitted by those who have taken pains to find out the truth.

In his seventy-fifth theses and in the letter to Archbishop Albert, Luther accused Tetzel of speaking offensively of the Blessed Virgin. This Tetzel indignantly denied, and made good his denial by official testimony from the magistrates and the clergy of Halle, where the shameful utterance was said to have been made; they avered that he had never used such language and that they considered it wholly impossible for him to have done so anywhere.

Historians no longer put any credit in the slanderous story that Tetzel was guilty of adultery. It is a product of Luther's brain years after Tetzel had been in his grave, and is manifestly false, for one detail of the account conflicts with another. As

Theodore Brieger says: "It is high time that this story, which has been questioned even by Protestants, should disappear."

That Tetzl embezzled the indulgence-fund is also false. The indulgence-preacher was not permitted to have any care of the money. The faithful were commanded by ecclesiastical law personally to deposit their alms; to give it to the confessor or to the indulgence-preacher would entail the loss of the indulgence. The chest into which the alms were dropped always had two or three locks, the keys to which were held by different persons. When it was opened, the clerk of some banking house counted and received the money in the presence of a notary. The "Tetzl indulgence chests" shown in a few German towns are counterfeits.

### III

In order to get a clear idea of Tetzl's teaching it must be considered in its threefold aspect: confession-letters, indulgences for the living, and indulgences for the dead.

The confession, or indulgence-letter, issued generally during a jubilee, was a written permission to choose a special confessor. By means of this letter the confessor chosen could give his penitent absolution not only from those sins under the ordinary jurisdiction of a priest, but also from those reserved to the Holy See; moreover, he could grant his penitent two plenary indulgences, one for the jubilee and one at the hour of death. As the letter itself was not an indulgence, it could not naturally be procured without contrition; since a sufficient number of confessors were always provided for the penitents it was not needed; because it was something special and gave extraordinary powers, the recipient usually gave an alms. The letter itself could not remit sin. In order to receive absolution for past sins, and to gain the indulgence, confession and contrition were required; to commit any future sin on reliance of the letter would make it null and void. On these points Tetzl was not in error.

As regards indulgences for the living, Tetzl's teaching was also correct. A plenary indulgence, as now, was an entire remission of the temporal punishment due to sins, the guilt of which had been remitted by confession and contrition. Besides the plenary indulgence, the jubilee granted to the confessors permission to absolve from all sins, even those reserved to the Pope.

The statements that Tetzel sold "forgiveness of sins without requiring contrition," and was "ready to absolve from future sins in return for a money payment are," as Grisar says, "utterly unjust." In his "Vorlegung" Tetzel says: "The indulgence remits only the penalty of sins which have been repented of and confessed. . . . No one merits an indulgence unless he is in a truly contrite state." There is no evidence that Tetzel ever changed his teaching, and Carlstadt, even after he became a Lutheran, has nothing to say against him on these points.

In his doctrine of indulgences for the dead, Tetzel held two points which are now generally rejected by theologians and the Church. He taught, first, that in order to gain a plenary for the dead it was not necessary to be in the state of grace; it would suffice, he said, to give an alms during the jubilee. Secondly, he taught that the particular soul for which such an indulgence was gained infallibly profited by it. Both opinions were defended in his day and even later; both are probable, but not certain, and never were the official teaching of the Church. In affirming both as certain, and the first as a "Christian dogma" (Vorlegung Thesis 65), Tetzel departed from Catholic doctrine. Many of his contemporaries objected to these opinions. Cardinal Cajetan, an eminent Dominican theologian, condemns preachers who use such matter in their sermons. "Preachers speak in the name of the Church," he says, "only so long as they proclaim the teaching of Christ and of the Church; but if from self-interest they teach that about which they know nothing, the fruit of their own imagination, they cannot be regarded as mouth-pieces of the Church. No one must be surprised if such as these fall into error."

If Tetzel was in the wrong, was he so maliciously? Hardly. He deserves the consideration respectfully given to a priest who has spent an arduous life in behalf of souls. One should be slow to read evil motives into his actions. It would have been better if he had not used these opinions; if he had been more careful to distinguish between the certain and the probable in his preaching. But it must be remembered that, while the Holy See had not approved these opinions, neither had she condemned them. In the schools, theologians were divided; some openly rejected, others as warmly upheld them. The individual was at liberty to follow whichever party seemed to give the strongest arguments. There is, then, no reason for unmitigated censure of Tetzel; he

had some right to preach doctrines which to his mind were well enough established.

Another fault into which Tetzel seems to have fallen is condemned also by a Dominican, John Linder, a fellow-townsmen. "His teaching found favor with many, but he devised unheard-of-ways of making money . . . from which scandal and contempt resulted among the populace and censure of such spiritual treasures on account of the abuse."

If we examine the purpose of a jubilee in those times we may come to a better understanding of what is meant by Linder. Its purpose was the salvation of souls and the collecting of alms for some good purpose. The manner in which the jubilee was made known to the people resembled closely the modern mission. Pious preachers of considerable talent and oratorical ability were sent out among the people to remind them of the supreme purpose of their life on earth and to renew in them a real, deep Christian spirit. A plenary indulgence was granted to those who underwent a true change of heart and received worthily the sacrament of Penance. In order to gain this indulgence some good work, in addition to confession and contrition, has always been required. Quite rightly, too, for since such an indulgence is a great and special favor from the Church, the most natural thing for her to do would be to demand an additional effort from the recipient, even if only to make him realize the worth of the favor. An indulgence is also an encouragement to the free performance of good works, as it rewards the one who does them. The usual requirement now is the earnest recitation of specified prayers for the intention of the Pope; then, it was the giving of alms to some good cause, as the Crusades or the building of a church. Even then an alms was not required from the poor or from those who could not save for the future; the recitation of given prayers would satisfy for people of this class. The people, as a whole, made no objection to the almsgiving, for it seemed little in comparison with the spiritual gain.

While it was not wrong for the Pope to grant a jubilee, yet there could be, and at times were, grave faults in the way it was promulgated to the people. The reason for this is apparent when one reflects on the nature of fallen man. Since even the perfect are apt to fall, why should one be excessively shocked if the less perfect are now and then guided by human motives and regard



temporal more than spiritual interests? Some preachers, even head-commissioners, desirous of success, did think too much of the indulgence-chest. It must also be admitted that even greater scandals arose because bad men found their way into the clerical state. These evils were and are always condemned by the Church. In order to put an end to them, she not only abolished almsgiving as a requirement for the indulgence, but also suppressed the office of indulgence-preacher.

Among those evil men who forced the Church to this drastic, though beneficial act Tetzel cannot be classed. He received none of the money collected when he preached indulgences. In referring to Linder's accusation, J. Corbett, S. J., says: "Linder's account was written in 1530 and may have been colored by the sad account of Luther's rebellion against the Church, in which the controversy had culminated; but it would indicate on Tetzel's part some excess in urging the faithful to contribute." As stated before, the purpose of a jubilee was the salvation of souls and the acquiring of means to build St. Peter's at Rome. It was then also a part of Tetzel's duty to rouse the generosity of the people in favor of that sublime monument to Christian faith. In the course of his mission Tetzel met the same difficulties which all have to face who seek pecuniary aid from the public. However worthy the undertaking, there are always some who do not care to help. Such as these are very apt to take offence at what they call the importunities of the beggar. It is likely enough that Tetzel aroused such opposition. But there was another reason why Tetzel's mission was unpopular. For various reasons Germany—and other nations, too—were bitterly hostile to the exportation of money for use in foreign parts. Hence it seems that the popular cry against Tetzel was due more to peculiar circumstances of the time than to grave abuses in his preaching.

In estimating the character of Tetzel two extremes must be avoided. He certainly does not deserve the excessive amount of blame cast upon him by his enemies, nor does he really merit the lavish praise given him by some of his friends. The doctrine he preached did contain some errors from which abuses arose. Nevertheless, his preaching was not the cause of Luther's revolt; it was more correctly an occasion seized upon by the latter for advancing his own ideas. If Luther had sought only the correction of evils, he would not have gone so far as he did. At this

time, while he still wished to be a loyal child of the Church, he was already under the influence of a new system of doctrine, the logical result of which he did not entirely foresee. When later we find him stubbornly clinging to his own ideas, we can conclude with safety that even had Tetzel never existed Luther would have still torn himself from the bosom of the true Church.

Tetzel's character, while altogether free from foul blots, was not without some of the faults common to men. He is described as rather pretentious, somewhat decided in his manner, and as apt to be much irritated if his dignity was not respected. Yet these traits do not seem to have made him unfit to do much good for souls, for he is also said to be "quite learned, eloquent in speech, a renowned preacher." If we recall to mind the several testimonies of Mykonius, of the civil and religious authorities of Halle and of his own Provincial we are led to think that he had with all his faults a goodly number of excellent qualities. When, finally, one considers his staunch defense of Papal authority, together with the unmerited persecution he received, one is inclined to justify rather than to condemn and to extol rather than to scorn.

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