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From Condemnation and Rejection to Appreciation and Acceptance

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Abstract: His deep religious experience led Martin Luther to speak against the abuses in the medieval church, especially the selling of indulgences. But the officials of the Catholic Church who had earlier rejected other reformers condemned him also. His excommunication and the support of princes and people led to the growth of Reformation and division in the Western Church. The Catholic Church condemned Lutherans and rejected the changes they brought about. The enmity continued also in the mission lands where Lutherans and Catholics worked. But in the twentieth century began the process of understanding and appreciation. Vatican II document *Unitatis Redintegratio* initiated the first official Catholic-Lutheran talks, which eventually in 1998 produced the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. And in India ecumenical ventures to respond to the problems which beset Christians in particular and Indians in general brought the Lutherans and Catholics to work together. Now on the eve of the commemoration of the 500-year Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, the celebrations and conferences together are paving way towards reconciliation and communion. This article highlights the change in the relationship between Catholics and Lutherans. We are now at a point of time when the wounds of history have been healed to a large extent and we are able to look at persons, events and belief system in a more balanced way.

Keywords: Martin Luther, Tarangambadi, Doctrine of Justification, Pope Francis, Lutherans, Catholics, common priesthood, people of God.

From harbouring an attitude of condemnation and rejection Catholics and Lutherans have now moved into an era of mutual appreciation and acceptance. This change is succinctly expressed by Pope Francis' address to International Conference of Study organized by the Pontifical Council for Historical Sciences,[1] to mark the 500-Year Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation (1517-2017) on the theme: *'Luther, 500 years later.' A Reflection on the Protestant Reform in the Historic, Ecclesial Context*. He said:

> I confess that my first response to this praiseworthy initiative of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences was one of gratitude to God, together with a certain surprise, since not long ago a meeting like this would have been unthinkable. Catholics and Lutherans together, discussing Luther, at a meeting organized by an Office of the Holy See: truly we are experiencing the results of the working of the Holy Spirit, who overcomes every obstacle and turns conflicts into occasions for growth in communion. From Conflict to Communion is precisely the title of the document of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission prepared for our joint commemoration of the fifth centenary of the beginning of Luther's reform.[2]

Worldwide Repercussions

In the past, for many years Catholics regarded Reformation initiated by Luther and continued by others in different parts of Europe as something evil, because it brought about division in the Western Church. Loss of members in the Catholic Church in Europe with growing sharp criticism of the leaders of the Catholic Church, its belief system and ritual celebrations by Luther and his followers added fuel to the fire. This animosity towards Luther did not remain restricted to Europe where it originated, but spread in countries where Catholics and Lutherans pitched their tents.

Long Line of Reformers

To understand well Luther in his historical context we must situate him in the long line of reformers of the Catholic Church. The call for reform was not sudden. It was up in the air demanding attention and action to be taken. But the Church turned a blind eye to that or put down the new proposals and challenges in a high handed way.

The monument that commemorates Luther in Worms, Germany, portrays four reformers, who belonged to the period before Luther. They too tried to bring about change in the Church. The earliest among them was Peter Waldo (c. 1140 - c. 1205), one of the richest merchants of Lyons. He became uneasy about the source of his wealth, sold all his possessions, gave to poor and began preaching the Gospel. His apostolic life of poverty and preaching inspired others to join him. Those who followed him were known as Waldensians. They prayed, read scriptures in their local language and preached in market places: "you cannot serve two masters, God and mammon." Some officials of the Church saw them as a threat. In 1184 a Synod in Verona condemned and excommunicated them. But that could not stop them. They began to organize themselves apart from the institutional church. According to them life-style determined the true minister. And they were convinced that everyone had the right to read and interpret scripture. For this they produced translations of the Bible in local languages. They continued to grow in spite of repeated repressive measures against them. Later most Waldensians joined the Calvinist wing of the Protestant Reformation.[3]

The second person in the monument was John Wycliff (1320-1384), regarded as the first translator of the Bible into English. He challenged the right of the Church to own properties and criticised immoral priests. For these and other issues raised by him he was accused of heresy by the Pope and the University of Oxford. The opposition to him was so strong

that even after his death and burial he was "punished". In 1436 by the order of Pope Martin V, his bones were exhumed, burned and thrown in the River Swift.

John Hus (c. 1370 – 1415) from Prague was the third pre-Reformation figure. Like Luther he too criticised indulgences. He also spoke against simony and papal immorality. He was excommunicated and on July 6, 1415, he was burnt at the stake, and his ashes thrown over the river Rhine.

The fourth one in the monument was Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498), a Dominican friar. He was a fiery preacher who attacked the abuses of the papacy under Pope Alexander VI and wanted to reform the lives of people who lived in Florence. But he was burnt at the stake on May 23, 1498.

Thus there were many Christians before Martin Luther who called for reform and met with opposition. Referring to the monument in Worms Scott highlights why nineteenth century Protestants consider Luther as the most important person. He observes:

> In Worms, the monument that commemorates him [Luther] also memorializes four excommunicated reformers who preceded him, and one each from Bohemia, Italy, France and England. Luther stands tall at the centre since he survived both excommunication and the threat of execution to become a hero in the eyes of 19th century Protestants who erected the memorial.[4]

To these reformers one should add Erasmus (1469-1536), a contemporary of Luther, who too spoke against the abuses in the church, advocated a better knowledge of scripture and translation of the Bible and prayers in local languages. He asked: "what indecency is there in reciting the gospel in one's native language, the tongue which everyone understands: the French in French, the German in German, the Indian in Indian? It seems to me far more indecent and even ridiculous that uninstructed people and women should sing the psalms and

Sunday prayer, like parrots, in Latin, without understanding what they are saying!"[5]

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries social, religious and political criticisms in Europe demanded reform. Luther, Erasmus and other humanists were critical of political and ecclesiastical corruption. Moreover, many Christians and princes called for a reform council. In 1512 Pope Julius II opened the Fifth Lateran Council, criticised the abuses in the Church and gave reform programme. But that failed to bring about any change. On March 16, 1517, the Lateran Council ended. On October 31 of the same year (1517) in Wittenberg Luther protested with his 95 theses against the false security given by indulgences.

Martin Luther's escape from execution was only one reason that he was the most influential of the other reformers before him. "No other medieval reformer initiated a religious movement that attained the geographical scope and political support enjoyed by the 16th-century Protestant Reformation," says Scott.[6] "On studying Luther's life and work, one thing is clear: the much needed Reformation took place, not because Luther decided that it would be so, but rather because the time was ripe for it, and because the Reformer and many others with him were ready to fulfil their historical responsibility," observes Justo Gonzalez.[7]

Priesthood of All Believers

Luther denounced the hierarchical church of the Middle Ages with the growing gap and estrangement between the clergy and laity. As a contrast to them he advocated priesthood of all believers. He wrote:

Let everyone, therefore, who knows himself to be a Christian, be assured of this, that we are all equally priests, that is to say, we have the same power in respect to the Word

and the sacraments. However, no one may make use of this power except by the consent of the community or by the call of a superior. (For what is the common property of all, no individual may arrogate to himself, unless he is called). And therefore this sacrament of ordination, if it is anything at all, is nothing else than a certain rite whereby one is called to the ministry of the church.[8]

The insistence on priesthood of all believers led to lay theologians expressing their views with courage. Elsie Mckee observes:

> If there is one thing which can be said about all lay theologians in the sixteenth century, it is that they expressed themselves with amazing confidence in their right to be heard and taken seriously as Christian voices. For most, the basis of this confidence was the priesthood of believers, the conviction that all Christians have equal access. Whatever their specific doctrinal stance, lay theologians claimed and exercised a voice and a choice with an assurance that was historically unprecedented, at least in scale if not in kind.[9]

Primacy of Scripture and Translations

In his work *The Freedom of a Christian*, one of the issues Luther stressed was the Primacy of Scripture. He was aware that the Bible remained distant from the people because of its language. Though Peter Waldo and the Waldensians had already begun the process of translating scripture texts in their mother tongue and used them in their street preaching, the Bible that was available in the Middle Ages was not in one's mother tongue. Luther sought to rectify that by translating New Testament into German. It is interesting to note that he completed this momentous task within eleven weeks and that too during one of the most crucial moments of his life spent in the Wartburg castle. Wartburg castle above the town of Eisenach in Saxony was the place of refuge for Martin Luther provided by Prince Frederick the Wise after the meeting at

Worms in 1521. Luther had already been excommunicated by the Pope. Now after the meeting in Worms he was also under the ban of the empire.

> He [Luther] was now the ultimate outsider, both heretic and outlaw. His marvelous hymn "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," which still inspires people today, recalls this time of crisis and yet confidence…. Despite the threats he was under and his inner turmoil, he succeeded in translating the New Testament into pulsing, vivid German within eleven weeks.[10]

The printing press put the Bible in German language in the hands of the lay people who were literate. The illiterate too gained the knowledge of the scripture and interiorized it by learning by heart scripture texts through memorizing texts and singing psalms. Thus the lay became empowered with the power of the knowledge of the Gospel and their right to interpret it.

Liturgical Celebrations in Local Languages

Luther not only translated Christian Scripture into German but he also saw to it that the linguistic distance of celebration of mass in Latin which the people did not understand gave way to rituals in local language. This led to greater participation by the congregation gathered for worship. This insistence on local language was followed by Lutheran missionaries in different lands. For example, when the first Indian Lutheran pastor Aaron in Tamil Nadu was ordained the rite of ordination was in Tamil. Moreover, during Services the pastors preached directly to the people. The physical separation because of rood screens that was part of the medieval churches was not there between the pastor and the people.

Catholic Response to Reformation in Europe

The Catholic Church rejected many of the features of the Reformation movement. Some of the texts of the Council of

Trent, held between 1545 and 1563, were marked by anti-Protestantism. Certain practices were condemned just because they were in use among Protestants, for example, use of the local language in the liturgy. The Catholic Church continued to insist on a hierarchical church with the Pope as the focal point. This situation continued into the twentieth century too. Pope Pius X (1835-1914) insisted on "hierarchology." He wrote:

> The Church is essentially an unequal society, that is, a society comprising two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock, those who occupy a rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful. So distinct are these categories that with the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the end of the society and directing all its members towards that end; the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors.[11]

Catholic and Lutheran Missionaries in India

When the first Lutheran missionaries Barthalomäus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau landed in Tarangambadi, Tamilnadu on July 9, 1706, a Catholic community was already in existence there for more than hundred years. In course of time the Lutheran missionaries also began to convert the local people to the Protestant Church. In this new situation the Catholics had to share a common "mission field"[12] with the Lutherans. What made matters worse was that members of one community crossed over to the other group. For example, in the space of one year, between October 1727 and October 1728, 104 persons became Lutherans, and 40 of them were from Catholic church. This did not go well with the Catholic missionaries. When not only some Catholics, but also a few catechists in Tarangambadi and in Thanjavur district became Lutherans, the feelings of enmity reached a high pitch.

True Christianity

The Catholic and Lutheran missionaries in India saw each other as a threat.[13] Each group considered itself as the true Christianity, and the other as false. The Annual Letters of Jesuits, when referring to Lutherans, call them heretics and Lutheranism a heresy. The first time this is mentioned with respect to Lutheran missionaries is in the Annual Letter of 1727 written by the Jesuits to the General of the Society of Jesus: "Would to God that we could equally avert the ruin which threatens us from the Danish heretics, settled at *Tarancambadi*."[14] In the same letter the negative word 'plague' is used to describe the Lutheranism: "Let Your Paternity be kind enough to ask our brethren to pray to God that this plague may disappear."[15]

Not Different from Hindus

By the time the Lutherans landed in India the Catholics had adapted many of the Indian cultural and religious expressions into Catholicism.[16] And Lutheran missionaries like Ziegenbalg were suspicious of these practices and said that the ceremonies in the Catholic Church were not very different from the ones performed in Hindu temples and that the Catholics were not very different from the pagans. He wanted to bring the Catholics to the "true" Christian faith, besides converting Hindus to Christianity. It is interesting to note that the Lutherans saw the presence of Catholic religion in Thanjavur as a preparation for the establishment of Lutheranism, *preparatio evangelica* - a fulfillment theology! This claim about being true Christianity was made by different churches down the ages.

Ecumenical Movement

For a long time the Catholic Church thought of Christians in different Churches as separated brethren and considered itself

as the only true church to which all should return. Though other Christian communities were opening themselves to ecumenical collaborations since the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, Catholic Church took decisive steps towards ecumenism only during Vatican II. Vatican II document *Unitatis Redintegratio* initiated the first official Catholic-Lutheran talks, which eventually in 1998 produced the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.[17] The forthcoming 500th year Celebration and the preparations for it have strengthened the bond more.

Pastoral and Biblical

"The origins of the whole Reformation have often been traced back to Luther's perhaps apocryphal nailing of his Ninety-Five Theses against indulgences to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. More important than any such symbolic act is that he tossed out philosophical language in favor of biblical and pastoral," says Matheson.[18] This pastoral and biblical approach was adopted by Vatican II. Moreover, the Council brought forth changes in the church and in this way the Catholic Church has adopted some of the features of the Church advocated by Luther.

People of God

Stanford observes, "Luther has gone down in history as the man who shattered the unity of Western Christendom. But he was reluctant to leave the Catholic Church, and if he returned today he would find that many of the reforms he proposed have come to pass."[19] One of the reforms proposed by Luther was common priesthood. This concept, common priesthood, has been expressed in the concept people of God in Vatican II. Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens, one of the leading voices in the Second Vatican Council emphatically said:

If we were to be asked what we consider to be that seed of life deriving from the council which is most fruitful in pastoral consequences, we would answer without any hesitation: it is the rediscovery of the people of God as a whole, as a single reality, and then by way of consequence, the co-responsibility thus implied for every member of the church.[20]

Church is People of God. It is not primarily an institution but people, pilgrim people of God. This phrase "People of God" is the principal paradigm of the Church in Vatican II – the most important term to explain what the Church is. The term "People of God" includes all the faithful – pope, bishops, priests, religious and the laity. In this way Clergy-laity divide is overcome. The council Fathers insisted on what is common to all, baptism. They pointed out that all Christians are first and foremost "the faithful" – the deepest meaning of the word faithful being "the believers." They insisted that all Christians belong to the People of God and they enjoy equal dignity:

The chosen People of God is one: "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5). As members they share a common dignity from their rebirth in Christ. They have the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection. They possess in common one salvation, one hope, and one undivided charity (LG 32).

They underlined the mutual ordination of common and ministerial priesthood in this way: "The common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are ... interrelated. Each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ" (LG 10).

Participative Liturgical Celebrations in Local Languages

One of the aims of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC) was "full, conscious and,

active participation in liturgical celebrations ... demanded by the very nature of the liturgy" (SC 14). Of the reforms initiated by the Council regarding liturgy the pride of place must be given to the restoration of the proclamation of the Word to a position of prominence in the liturgical celebrations. This step has been criticised by some as "Protestant".

Vatican II encouraged the use of local languages in liturgical celebration. Though this step was also criticised as Protestant in the beginning days, now it has become an established feature of liturgical celebrations and has also led to the use of local cultural elements like music and dance in liturgical celebrations.

Change in Attitude

The Ninety-five Theses[21] of Luther on October 31, 1517, did not lead to open discussion on the issues raised as Luther had envisaged. On August 7, 1518, Luther was ordered to appear in Rome. Attempts to silence him failed. Luther continued to write more books expressing his opinions. In June 1520 Pope Leo X in his bull *Exsurge Domine* condemned as heretical 41 of Luther's theses. On December 10, 1520, Luther burnt the bull at the gates of Wittenberg. On January 3, 1521, Pope formally excommunicated Luther.

"Luther may have been violent in the language that he used in his tracts and sermons to decry "papists", and indeed popes, but increasingly, in the final third of his life, he was also in his calmer moments hinting at an empty space inside him since falling out with the Church of his birth and formation,"[22] says Stanford. Earlier the Popes too were harsh on Luther or like Pope Adrian VI (1459-1523) dismissed Luther as "this petty monk."

But after Vatican II things have changed for the better. In 2008, during a visit to the former Augustinian friary in Erfurt,

where Luther was a student, Pope Benedict XVI spoke so positively about Luther that some began to speculate that the excommunication order on Luther was going to be lifted. In 2016 Pope Francis travelled to Sweden, where he stood side by side with Lutheran leaders at events that commemorated the Reformation. "His bold and generous gesture represents a new moment in Catholic-Protestant relations, and validates the Catholic Church's sometimes hesitant journey towards Christian unity,"[23] comments Christopher Lamb.

Conclusion

On the eve of the commemoration of the 500-year Anniversary of the Protestant Reform Pope Francis calls Catholics and Lutherans for purification of memory, to be free from past prejudices and to seek God's grace of reconciliation. On March 2017 Pope Francis said in his address to International Conference of Study organized by the Pontifical Council for Historical Sciences mentioned earlier in this article:

All of us are well aware that the past cannot be changed. Yet today, after fifty years of ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Protestants, it is possible to engage in a purification of memory. This is not to undertake an impracticable correction of all that happened five hundred years ago, but rather "to tell that history differently,"[24] free of any lingering trace of the resentment over past injuries that has distorted our view of one another. Today, as Christians, all of us are called to put behind us all prejudice towards the faith that others profess with a different emphasis or language, to offer one another forgiveness for the sin committed by those who have gone before us, and together to implore from God the gift of reconciliation and unity.[25]

As observed rightly by Stanford, "The healing process is now in full swing, although even after half a millennium,

schism cannot just be magicked away by time, good will, fine words – or even by papal leadership. But it is a cause for celebration, and the distance covered is impressive."[26]

Notes

1 It took place in Rome, March 29-31, 2017.

2 See https://zenit.org/articles/popes-address-to- luther-500-years-after-conference/ March 31, 2017, accessed on April 2, 2017.

3 Scott H. Hendrix, *Martin Luther*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 6.

4 Hendrix, *Martin Luther*, 5.

5 Erasmus, 'Note to the Reader' in his Paraphrases of St. Matthew (1522) as cited in Jean Comby with Diarmaid Mancull-och, *How to Read Church History*, vol. 2, London: SCM Press, 1989, 4.

6 Hendrix, *Martin Luther*, 5.

7 Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Reformation to the Present Day. The Story of Christianity, vol. 2*, New York: HarperCollins, 1985, 15.

8 Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 36 edited by A.R. Wentz, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, 116.

9 Elsie Mckee, "The Emergence of Lay Theologies," in *Reformation Christianity, A People's History of Christianity, Vol. 5*, edited by Peter Matheson, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006, 212.

10 Peter Matheson, "Reforming from Below," in *Reformation Christianity, A People's History of Christianity, Vol. 5*, edited by Peter Matheson, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006, 1.

11 *Vehementer Nos* (1906), 8.

12 See Anders Norgaard, *Mission und Obrigkeit: Die Dänish-hallische Mission in Tranquebar* 1706-1845, Gerd Mohn: Gutersloher Verlagshaus, 1988, 176.

13 Leonard Fernando, "The First Encounters between Catholics and Lutherans on Indian Soil," in *Halle and the Beginning of Protestant Christianity in India*, vol, 2, edited by Andreas Gross, Y. Vincent Kumaradoss and Heike Liebau, Halle: Franckesche Stiftungen, 2006, 783-796.

14 Annual Letter of 1727 by Prosper Giuliani dated 16 July 1728.

15 *Ibid*.

16 This happened due to the adaptation policy "Malabar rite" begun and promoted by Roberto de Nobili and the Jesuit Madura Mission.

17 On October 31, 1999 "The Doctrine of Justification" Joint Declaration was made by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church. It was signed by Bishop Christian Krause, President, on behalf of the LWF and Cardinal Edward I. Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, on behalf of the Catholic Church in Augsburg, Germany. This event marks an important milestone in ecumenical movement. This "decisive step forward" is the result of more than thirty years of prayer, meetings and dialogue between both the Churches as partners with equal rights. (See Joint Declaration n. 44). The document does not say that earlier conflicts were based only on mutual misunderstandings. Neither does it do away with all the differences in understanding this important doctrine. In spite of the differences it sees the possibility of both the groups being open to each other. As the Declarations states: "the Lutheran and the Catholic explications of justification are in their differences open to one another and do not destroy the consensus regarding the basic truths" (40). The differences, which are accepted, are looked at in a new light. And devoid of polemics one another's formulations have become true, complementary and acceptable.

18 Peter Matheson, "The Language of the Common Folk," in *Reformation Christianity, A People's History of Christianity,*