



Portrait of Nicholaus von Amsdorf,  
whom Luther consecrated as  
bishop of Naumburg in the 1540s,  
by the German painter and  
printmaker Peter Gottlandt.

<sup>3</sup>. The present translation is a twice-revised version of that by Charles M. Jacobs in *Works of Martin Luther with Introductions and Notes*, ed. Luther Reed et al., 6 vols. (Philadelphia: Holman, 1915), 2:61–164. The first revision was by James Atkinson for LW 44:123–217. The German text used is that of MLStA 2:96–167, edited by Karlheinz Blaschke. Much information from Blaschke’s notes has found its way into this translation. See also WA 6:381–469, and Karl Benrath, ed., *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung* (Halle: Verein für Reformationsgeschichte, 1884), referred to below as Benrath.

# TO THE CHRISTIAN NOBILITY OF THE GERMAN NATION CONCERNING THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN ESTATE,

1520<sup>3,4</sup>

JESUS.<sup>q</sup>

**T**O THE ESTEEMED and Reverend Master, Nicholas von Amsdorf, Licentiate of Holy Scripture, and Canon of Wittenberg, my special and kind friend, from Doctor Martin Luther.

The grace and peace of God be with you, esteemed, reverend, and dear sir and friend.<sup>r</sup>

The time for silence is past, and the time to speak has come, as Eccles. [3:7] says. I am carrying out our intention to put together a few points on the matter of the improvement of the state of Christendom, to be laid before the Christian nobility of the German nation, in the hope that God may help his church through the laity, since the clergy, to whom this task more properly belongs, have grown quite irresponsible. I am sending the whole thing to you, reverend sir, [that you may give] an opinion on it and, where necessary, improve it.

I know full well that I shall not escape the charge of presumption, because I, a despised, cloistered person, venture to address such high and great estates on such weighty mat-

<sup>q</sup> See above, p. 264, n. 11.

<sup>r</sup> An early example of Luther’s use of a “Pauline greeting” (cf. 1 Cor. 1:3) here combined with an older form where he simply employed the word “Jesus.” By 1522 this new form, an indication of identification of his office with that of the Apostle Paul, would completely replace the other.

ters, as if there were nobody else in the world except Doctor Luther to take up the cause of Christendom and give advice to such highly competent people. I make no apologies no matter who demands them. Perhaps I owe my God and the world another work of folly. I intend to pay my debt honestly. And if I succeed, I shall for the time being become a



A fool is pictured with a feather hat,  
about to trip himself with a cane; one shoe on  
and one off; and three children running about him.

court jester. And if I fail, I still have the one advantage that no one need buy me a cowl or provide me with a cockscomb.<sup>5</sup> It is a question of who will put the bells on whom.<sup>6</sup> I must fulfill the proverb, "Whatever the world does, a monk must be in the picture, even if he has to be painted in."<sup>7</sup> More than once a fool has spoken wisely, and wise men have often been arrant fools. Paul says, "He who wishes to be wise must

<sup>s</sup> I.e., who will declare whom to be a clown.

<sup>t</sup> The proverb *monachus semper praesens* is attested in Wander, 3:703, n. 130.

**4.** In the German phrase *der christliche Stand* ("the Christian Estate"), the word *stand* can mean "estate" as used in such phrases as "estates of the realm" or "imperial estates," but it can also mean "status" in the sense of standing or rank, as well as "state" in the sense of condition or walk of life. Nowhere in the treatise does Luther address himself to a Christian or "spiritual" estate that stands apart from another, presumably secular or worldly estate in society. Indeed, one of his principal arguments is that all baptized Christians are of the same "spiritual status" and that there is no distinction in this regard between clergy and laity (see below, pp. 381–83). Moreover, the list of reforms that he proposes requires action by both spiritual authority and secular authority, which he views as Christian. "The Christian estate," in other words, is the entire body of Christians viewed as one entity, often referred to as Christendom, in which all are of the same spiritual rank or standing. Luther finds that entity to be in terrible condition and thus sorely in need of reform. Bertram Lee Woolf captured this meaning when he took the liberty of turning *von des christlichen Standes Besserung* into "as to the Amelioration of the State of Christendom"; see Woolf, *Reformation Writings of Martin Luther* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), 101.

**5.** A cowl and a red rooster's comb were traditional signs of a clown or jester. Luther did not need them because he was already equipped with a monk's cowl and tonsure.

**6.** Luther's authority to speak on controversial matters of doctrine and practice derived from his status as a doctor of theology. In the process of being awarded his doctorate (19 October 1512), he took a solemn oath to teach the Holy Scriptures faithfully and to combat heresy and error. With the doctorate, moreover, he acquired full academic freedom to discuss without hindrance all questions of scriptural interpretation. See Brecht 1:126–27.

**7.** During the Great Schism in the Western church (1378–1417), when there were two (and, for a time, three) rival popes, and ecclesiastical abuses (most of them rooted in the ruthless exploitation of papal authority to raise money) got worse, a sustained attempt was made to deal with the situation by means of a general council. Canonists argued that supreme authority in the church rested not with the pope, but with the universal community of believers, and that in an emergency that authority could be exercised by a council, which could be convoked by some authority (e.g., the emperor) other than the pope. The resulting “conciliar movement” assigned to a general council the task of restoring the unity of Christendom under one pope and of reforming the church, beginning with a thorough reform of the papacy itself. The Council of Constance (1414–1417) managed to restore unity under one undisputed pope, but it did not successfully address the problem of church reform. There followed a struggle

become a fool” [1 Cor. 3:18]. Moreover, since I am not only a fool, but also a sworn doctor of Holy Scripture, I am glad for the opportunity to fulfill my doctor’s oath,<sup>6</sup> even in the guise of a fool.

I beg you, give my apologies to those who are moderately intelligent, for I do not know how to earn the grace and favor of the super-intelligent. I have often sought to do so with the greatest pains, but from now on I neither desire nor value their favor. God help us to seek not our own glory but his alone. Amen.

At Wittenberg, in the monastery of the Augustinians, on the eve of St. John Baptist [June 23] in the year fifteen hundred and twenty.

To His Most Illustrious, Most Mighty, and Imperial Majesty, and to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, from Doctor Martin Luther.

Grace and power from God, Most Illustrious Majesty, and most gracious and dear lords.

It is not from sheer impertinence or rashness that I, one poor man, have taken it upon myself to address your worships. All the estates of Christendom, particularly in Germany, are now oppressed by distress and affliction, and this has stirred not only me but everybody else to cry out time and time again and to pray for help. It has even compelled me now at this time to cry aloud that God may inspire someone with his Spirit to lend a helping hand to this distressed and wretched nation. Often the councils have made some pretense at reformation, but their attempts have been cleverly frustrated by the guile of certain men, and things have gone from bad to worse.<sup>7</sup> With God’s help I intend to expose the wiles and wickedness of these men, so that they are shown up for what they are and may never again be so obstructive and destructive. God has given us a young man of noble birth as our ruler,<sup>8</sup> thus awakening great hope of good in many hearts. Presented with such an opportunity we ought to apply ourselves and use this time of grace profitably.

The first and most important thing to do in this matter is to prepare ourselves in all seriousness. We must not start

something by trusting in great power or human reason, even if all the power in the world were ours. For God cannot and will not suffer that a good work begin by relying upon one's own power and reason. He dashes such works to the ground; they do no good at all. As it says in Ps. 33[:16], "No king is saved by his great might and no lord is saved by the greatness of his strength." I fear that this is why the good emperors Frederick (I) Barbarossa and Frederick II and many other German emperors, even though all the world feared them, were in former times shamefully oppressed and trodden underfoot by the popes.<sup>9</sup> It may be that they relied on their own might more than on God, and therefore had to fall.



Frederick I Barbarossa.

between the restored papacy, which rejected the very idea of conciliar supremacy and feared reforms that would reduce papal income, and the conciliarists, who were numerous among theologians, bishops, and secular rulers, and who continued to call for limitations on papal authority and a thorough reform of the church "in head and members." With the help of Europe's secular rulers, to whom they made far-reaching concessions of authority to appoint bishops and other clergymen as well as of a share of ecclesiastical revenues, the popes defeated the conciliar movement, which had its last stand at the Council of Basel (1431–1449). But because of abuse and lack of reform in the "Renaissance papacy," conciliarism retained widespread appeal, particularly north of the Alps.

**8.** Charles V (1500–1558) was now twenty years old.

**9.** The Hohenstaufen emperors Frederick (I) Barbarossa (1152–1190) and his grandson, Frederick II (1212–1250), the last of the Hohenstaufens, both pursued dynastic and imperial interests in Italy that brought them into conflict with the cities of Lombardy and the popes (in their capacity as Italian territorial rulers). Both were excommunicated, and Frederick II was even deposed; both experienced catastrophic losses on the battlefield at the hands of their Italian enemies. Meanwhile, particularly in the reign of Frederick II, the German princes secured concessions that put an end to all hope of the establishment of a powerful national monarchy hereditary in the Hohenstaufen family.

Imperial authority survived in northern Italy and Germany but real power was in the hands of the great commercial cities of Italy and the German territorial princes.

**10.** Known as “the warrior pope,” Julius II (1443–1513) spent much of his reign (1503–13) personally leading military campaigns aimed at recovering papal territory that had been alienated by his predecessors or annexed by Venice. In these struggles, France and Venice numbered among his enemies, but the German emperor Maximilian I (1459–1519) was his occasional ally.

**11.** I.e., the advocates of papal supremacy in the church.

What was it in our own time that raised the bloodthirsty Julius II to such heights? Nothing else, I fear, except that France, the Germans, and Venice relied upon themselves.<sup>10</sup> The children of Benjamin slew forty-two thousand Israelites because the latter relied on their own strength, Judg. 20[:21].<sup>11</sup>

That it may not so fare with us and our noble Charles, we must realize that in this matter we are not dealing with human beings, but with the princes of hell. These princes might well fill the world with war and bloodshed, but war and bloodshed do not overcome them. We must tackle this job by renouncing trust in physical force and trusting humbly in God. We must seek God’s help through earnest prayer and fix our minds on nothing else than the misery and distress of suffering Christendom without regard to what evil men deserve. Otherwise, we may start the game with great prospects of success, but when we get into it the evil spirits will stir up such confusion that the whole world will swim in blood, and then nothing will come of it all. Let us act wisely, therefore, and in the fear of God. The more force we use, the greater our disaster if we do not act humbly and in the fear of God. If the popes and Romanists<sup>12</sup> have hitherto been able to set kings against each other by the devil’s help, they might well be able to do it again if we were to go ahead without the help of God on our own strength and by our own cunning.

The Romanists have very cleverly built three walls around themselves. Hitherto they have protected themselves by these walls in such a way that no one has been able to reform them. As a result, the whole of Christendom has fallen horribly.

In the first place, when secular authority has been used against them, they have made decrees and declared that secular authority has no jurisdiction over them, but that, on the contrary, spiritual authority is above secular authority.<sup>v</sup> In the second place, when the attempt is made to reprove

*u* The biblical text mentions only twenty-two thousand slain.

*v* See p. 384, n. 18.

them with the Scriptures, they raise the objection that only the pope may interpret the Scriptures.<sup>w</sup> In the third place, if threatened with a council, their story is that no one may summon a council but the pope.<sup>x</sup>

In this way they have cunningly stolen our three rods from us, so that they may go unpunished. They have ensconced themselves within the safe stronghold of these three walls so that they can practice all the knavery and wickedness that we see today. Even when they have been compelled to hold a council,<sup>12</sup> they have weakened its power in advance by putting the princes under oath to let them remain as they were.<sup>y</sup> In addition, they have given the pope full authority over all decisions of a council, so that it is all the same whether there are many councils or no councils. They only deceive us with puppet shows and sham fights. They fear terribly for their skin in a really free council! They have so intimidated kings and princes with this technique that they believe it would be an offense against God not to be obedient to the Romanists in all their knavish and ghoulish deceits.

May God help us and give us just one of those trumpets with which the walls of Jericho were knocked down [Josh. 6:20] to blow down these walls of straw and paper as well and set free the Christian rods for the punishment of sin,<sup>13</sup> [as well as] bring to light the craft and deceit of the devil, to the end that through punishment we may reform ourselves and once more attain God's favor.

Let us begin by attacking the first wall. It is pure invention that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the secular estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and for this reason: all Christians are truly of spiritual status, and there is no difference among them except that of office. Paul says in 1 Cor. 12[:12-13] that we are all one body, yet every

**12.** The most recent was the Fifth Lateran Council, 1512-1517. See n. 40, p. 398.

**13.** "Rod" is used in the Bible to mean an instrument of God's wrath; see, e.g., Ps. 2:9 and Rev. 2:27.

<sup>w</sup> For the claim of sole authority to interpret Scripture, see Friedberg 1:58-60 (*Decret. prima pars*, dist. 19, can. 1f).

<sup>x</sup> See n. 37.

<sup>y</sup> See above, *Treatise on Good Works*, p. 341f.

member has its own work by which it serves the others. This is because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people.

But if a pope or bishop anoints, tonsures, ordains, consecrates, and prescribes garb different from that of the laity, he can perhaps thereby create a hypocrite or an anointed priestling, but he can never make anyone into a Christian or into a spiritual person by so doing. Accordingly, we are all consecrated priests through baptism, as St. Peter says in 1 Pet. 2[:9], “You are a royal priesthood and a priestly realm.” And the Apocalypse says, “Thou hast made us to be priests and kings by thy blood” [Rev. 5:9-10]. For if we had no higher consecration than that which pope or bishop gives, such consecration by pope or bishop would never make a priest, and no one could say Mass or preach a sermon or give absolution.

Therefore, when a bishop consecrates it is nothing else than that in the place and in the name of the whole community, all members of which have the same power, he selects one person and charges him with exercising this power on behalf of the others. It is just as if ten brothers, all the sons and equal heirs of a king, were to choose one of their number to rule the inheritance for them: even though they are all kings and of equal power, one of them is charged with the responsibility of ruling. To put it still more clearly: suppose a group of earnest Christian laypeople were taken prisoner and set down in a desert without an episcopally ordained priest among them. And suppose they were to come to a common mind there and then in the desert and elect one of their number, whether he were married or not,<sup>z</sup> and charge him to baptize, say Mass, pronounce absolution, and preach the gospel. Such a man would be as truly a priest as if he had been ordained by all the bishops and popes in the world. This is why in cases of necessity anyone can baptize and give absolution.<sup>14</sup> This would be impossible if we were not all

<sup>14.</sup> On emergency baptism see, e.g., the bull *Exultate Deo* (1439), which decreed that in case of necessity anyone, “not only a priest or deacon but also a woman or, indeed, even a pagan or a heretic, has the power to baptize” (Carl Mirbt and Kurt Aland, eds. *Quellen zur Geschichte des Papsttums und des römischen Katholizismus*, 6th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1967), 485, no. 774, §10). The idea that in an emergency when no priest is available an ordinary layperson can hear confession and pronounce absolution can be traced to a statement of St. Augustine (354–430) that was incorporated into the *Decretum Gratiani* (cf. following note); Friedberg 1:1374.

<sup>z</sup> The word here translated as “married,” *ehelich*, can also mean “of legitimate birth.” Canon law made both marriage and illegitimate birth a disqualification for ordination.

priests. Through canon law<sup>15</sup> the Romanists have almost destroyed and made unknown the wondrous grace and authority of baptism and Christian status. In times gone by, Christians used to choose their bishops and priests in this way from among their own number, and they were confirmed in their office by the other bishops without all the fuss that goes on nowadays. St. Augustine, Ambrose, and Cyprian each became [a bishop in this way].<sup>16</sup>

Since those who exercise secular authority have been baptized with the same baptism, and have the same faith and the same gospel as the rest of us, we must admit that they are priests and bishops, and we must regard their office as one that has a proper place in the Christian community and is useful to it. For whoever has crawled out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest, bishop, and pope, even though it is not seemly that just anybody should exercise such an office. Because we are all priests of equal standing, no one must push himself forward and take it upon himself, without our consent and election, to do that for which we all have equal authority. For no one dare take upon himself what is common to all without the authority and consent of the community. And should it happen that someone chosen for such office were deposed for abuse of it, he would then be exactly what he was before. Therefore, a priest in Christendom is nothing else but an officeholder. As long as he holds office, he takes precedence; where he is deposed, he is a peasant or a townsman like anybody else. Indeed, a priest is never a priest when he is deposed. But now the Romanists have invented *characteres indelebiles* and blather that a deposed priest is nevertheless something different from a mere layman. They fancy that a priest can never be anything other than a priest, or ever become a layman.<sup>17</sup> All this is just contrived talk and human law.

It follows from this that there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, or (as they say) between spiritual and secular, except that of office and work, and not that of status. For they are all of spiritual status, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not

**15.** The term Luther uses here (and elsewhere) is *das geystlich recht* (“spiritual law”), a term that refers to church law as codified in the later medieval period into what is now known as the *Corpus Iuris Canonici*. Of the five collections that make up the *Corpus*, Luther referred most often to the two oldest: the *Decretum Gratiani* (c. 1140), and the *Decretals*, i.e., the *Liber Decretalium Gregorii IX* (1234). His attitude toward canon law was ambiguous. On the one hand, he hated it as the embodiment in law of papal tyranny. On the other hand, he found in it much useful evidence about the wholesome practices and teachings of the ancient church, and he became adroit at citing it to prove his contention that the “Romanists” ignored their own law when it suited their interests to do so. (On 10 December 1520 Luther burned a copy of canon law along with the papal bull of excommunication.)

**16.** St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo (354–430); St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan (c. 340–397); St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (d. 258).

**17.** The doctrine that ordination impresses on the soul an indelible mark that distinguishes the recipient from all those who have not received it was given authoritative formulation in the 1439 bull *Exultate Deo* of Pope Eugene IV (1383–1447); see Mirbt-Aland 484–85, no. 774, §9. Thus, a man in orders could cease functioning as a priest, but he could never again be a mere layman.

all have the same work to do, just as priests and monks do not all have exactly the same work. This is the teaching of St. Paul in Rom. 12[:4-5] and 1 Cor. 12[:12] and in 1 Pet. 2[:9], as I have said above, namely, that we are all one body of Christ the Head, and all members one of another. Christ has neither two bodies nor two kinds of body, one secular and the other spiritual. There is but one head and one body.

Therefore, just as those who are now called “spiritual,” that is, priests, bishops, or popes, are neither different from other Christians nor superior to them, except that they are charged with the administration of the word of God and the sacraments, which is their work and office, so it is with secular government, which has the sword and rod in hand to punish the wicked and protect the good. A cobbler, a blacksmith, a peasant—each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops, and everyone should benefit and serve everyone else by means of their own work or office, so that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, just as all the members of the body serve one another [1 Cor. 12:14-26].

**18.** The claim that spiritual authority was superior to all secular authority and not subject to correction by it was classically formulated in the 1302 bull *Unam sanctam* of Boniface VIII (c. 1235-1303). An important corollary of this view was the claim that clergymen had the *privilegium fori*, i.e., that they were exempt from the jurisdiction of the secular courts, even when charged with secular crimes. See nn. 21, 22 below.

Now consider how Christian the decree is which says that the secular power is not above the “spiritual estate” and has no right to punish it.<sup>18</sup> That is as much as to say that the hand should not help the eye when it suffers pain. Is it not unnatural, not to mention un-Christian, that one member should not help another and prevent its destruction? In fact, the more honorable the member, the more the others ought to help. I say therefore that since secular authority is ordained of God to punish the wicked and protect the good, it should be left free to perform its office in the whole body of Christendom without restriction and without respect to persons, whether it affects pope, bishops, priests, monks, nuns, or anyone else. If it were sufficient for the purpose of preventing secular authority from doing its work to say that among Christian offices it is inferior to that of preacher, confessor, or anyone of spiritual status, one would also have to prevent tailors, cobblers, stonemasons, carpenters, cooks, innkeepers, farmers, and the practitioners of all other secu-

lar trades from providing pope, bishops, priests, and monks with shoes, clothes, house, meat, and drink, as well as from paying them any tribute. But if these laypeople are allowed to do their proper work without restriction, what then are the Romanist scribes<sup>19</sup> doing with their own laws, which exempt them from the jurisdiction of secular Christian authority? It is just so that they can be free to do evil and fulfill what St. Peter said: "False teachers will rise up among you who will deceive you, and with their false and fanciful talk, they will take advantage of you" [2 Pet. 2:1-3].

For these reasons, Christian secular authority ought to exercise its office without hindrance, regardless of whether it is pope, bishop, or priest whom it affects. Whoever is guilty, let him suffer [punishment]. All that canon law has said to the contrary is the invention of Romanist presumption. For thus St. Paul says to all Christians, "Let every soul (I take that to mean the pope's soul also) be subject to governing authority, for it does not bear the sword in vain, but serves God by punishing the wicked and benefiting the good" [Rom. 13:1, 4]. St. Peter, too, says, "Be subject to all human ordinances for the sake of the Lord, who so wills it" [1 Pet. 2:13, 15]. He has also prophesied in 2 Pet. 2[:1] that such men would arise and despise secular government. This is exactly what has happened through canon law.

So I think this first paper wall is overthrown. Inasmuch as secular rule has become a part of the Christian body, it is part of the spiritual estate, even though its work is physical. Therefore, its work should extend without hindrance to all the members of the whole body, to punish and use force whenever guilt deserves or necessity demands, without regard to whether the culprit is pope, bishop, or priest. Let the Romanists hurl threats and bans as they like. That is why guilty priests, when they are handed over to secular law, are first deprived of their priestly dignities.<sup>20</sup> This would not be right unless the secular sword previously had had authority over these priests by divine right. Moreover, it is intolerable that in canon law so much importance is attached to the freedom, life, and property of the clergy,<sup>21</sup> as though the laity were not also as spiritual and as good Christians

**19.** An allusion to references in the Gospels to "scribes and Pharisees."

**20.** A clergyman found guilty of a secular crime by an ecclesiastical court was first deprived of his priestly office and then surrendered to the secular authorities for punishment.

**21.** In addition to the *privilegium fori* (see previous note), members of the clergy and religious orders enjoyed the *privilegium canonis*, according to which anyone who laid a hand on a clergyman or monk automatically incurred excommunication, the lifting of which was reserved to the pope. Canon law also declared that ecclesiastical persons and property were exempt from most of the general obligations (e.g., military service) and taxes required of laypeople (*privilegium immunitatis*).