

Salvatore Calvo

Historic Perspectives I

November 17, 2010

Dr. Desnoyers

Apologies to Martin Luther: Rome on the Reformation's Catalyst

“His fellow monks knew him as a demon-possessed quarreler who lusted after drink and sex, without conscience, ready to use any means to further his own plans. Demonic monstrosities boiled out of his powerful but perverted mind.”ⁱ This reflects a fragment of vitriol that is typical of Martin Luther’s critics—accusations of blasphemy, narcissism and moral decadence while subtly acknowledging the man’s overwhelming genius and actions.ⁱⁱ Conversely, Luther’s monumental achievements during the Protestant Reformation are touted by his supporters and followers. Here, those people say, was the father of the Reformation and a role model for piety and determination in one’s beliefs. So which caricature of Martin Luther was closest to the actual man? The two perspectives have been historically divided across Catholic and Protestant lines—heated testimonial competition has taken place between Luther’s Protestant theologians and the Catholic Church’s own intellectuals in the five hundred years since the Reformation. Given the magnitude and consequences of Luther’s life and work, it is no simple task to fully unravel that massive yarn: a case can be made that this historiography has *its own* historiography. Therefore, this paper analyzes the Roman Catholic Church’s stance on Martin Luther over time. How fair is Rome to Luther’s legacy, and how does the Church’s stance on his teachings change over time? Can we deduce something close to an objective idea

of Martin Luther's character from all the differing testimony? I attempt to answer these questions in addition to this most important one: how can a man be measured solely from the testimony of his critics?

I will first outline Martin Luther's life, as analyzed by the most recent and objective historians. Being the most up-to-date interpretations of Luther's life, they are inherently aware of the biased interpretations written in the past and they can be considered the fairest and most accurate versions to draw my analysis from.

Hans and Margaretta Luther bore their second son on November 10, 1483 in Eiselben, Germany. What little is known about the Luther ancestry before Martin's birth often shows that they were a characteristically peasant family: Hans, whose hometown of Möhra's inheritance laws dictated he would earn nothing from his father's recent death, fled to Eiselben with his young family to start anew. Biographers Kittelson and Bainton both testify that the Luthers were strict, hard-working and loyal people, with husband finding work in a copper mineⁱⁱⁱ (and eventually expanding his business, later on) and wife managing backbreaking chores in addition to parenthood.^{iv} Also generally agreed upon is the Luthers' unwavering allegiance to the Church. On that November 10, Hans carried his newborn son through a rainstorm to the town chapel to have him baptized. As a God-fearing man, he did not want to take the chance that his baby might die in infancy unbaptized and not reach heaven. Also acting in Christian tradition, Hans named the child after the saint whose feast day the birth fell on.^v Baby Martin grew up in a strict, determined and pious atmosphere which no doubt influenced his actions later on.

Luther's father was very ambitious for him, and Luther turned out to be a very promising intellectual. After excelling at grammar schools in Magdeburg and Eisenach, Luther proceeded onto the university at Erfurt to receive a professional education. Here, "his companions nicknamed him 'the Philosopher' in recognition of his brilliance at disputations," a testament to his intelligence and skill.^{vi} Luther seemed headed to a secure, elite career in law or politics when a bizarre event sent him to join the clergy. As the story goes, Luther was actually struck by lightning in 1505 when walking from Mansfeld to Erfurt and the blast knocked his aspirations from his current studies to pursuing salvation and the Church. "St. Anne, help me!" he is said to have stated. "I will become a monk!"^{vii}

After his epiphany, Luther entered the well-known Augustinian monastic order in Erfurt, where he stayed for three years. The Augustinians were a prominent group in Germany, and they were well respected by the upper class because of their intense focus on theological study. The order combined an unforgiving, ascetic Church lifestyle with university-esque education—a blend that fit the curious Luther well. What made a huge impact on Luther seems to be the rigorous mental breakdown that was typical of an Augustinian upbringing, as Julius Kostlin explains:

Above all things, their own will was to be entirely broken...inclination to pride was to be overcome by imposing upon them the meanest services. Friends of Luther inform us that he, in the beginning of his novitiate, was daily compelled to perform the most degrading work in sweeping and scouring, and that it afforded envious brothers peculiar pleasure when he

was ordered, with a sack upon his shoulders, to bed through the town in company of a more experienced brother.^{viii}

This sort of monastic hazing (to make a modern analogy) built the foundation for Luther's unwavering discipline in faith and practice. He is said to have fasted for days at a time on some occasions, and spent eight hours of each day in prayer, excluding his theological studies. It is agreed among Luther's biographers that he was nothing if not devout: because of this, his conscience was unforgivable. By attaining the priesthood, Luther became solely focused on minimizing his sins in order to achieve heaven. The more he studied Scripture and God's will, the more he subjected himself to painful self-examination. This practice seems to be an interesting mix of paranoia and severe Catholic guilt^{ix}, and Luther constantly entered the confessional to be cleansed of what he considered his "sins": lack of obedience in the monastery, or deviating from his work. His superior, Johann von Staupitz, once exclaimed to him: "You want to be without sin, but you don't have any real sins anyway! Christ is the forgiveness of awful sins, like the murder of one's parents, public vices, blasphemy, adultery, and the like...you must not inflate your halting, artificial sins out of proportion!"^x An objective reader should get the impression that Luther was not the horrible sinner he viewed himself to be: true to his discipline, he was simply very hard on himself. Erfurt had taught him that.

Luther's ultra-sensitive conscience soon began to affect his opinions on the Catholic Church as he entered a very active and vocal part of his life. Luther became a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg in 1512, and began

to lecture on Scripture—Psalms, Galatians, Hebrews and more. His many writings from this period are considered the beginnings of “Reformation theology” as they begin to deviate from traditional Church teaching. As historian Albrecht Beutel puts it: “He interpreted the passages not with a scholastic’s eye any more[sic], but from the Bible’s perspective, not on the background of traditional interpretations by church authorities, but within the framework of the whole biblical tradition.”^{xi} Luther’s back-to-basics approach to faith stood against the theology of the time (and eventually the Church’s teachings altogether), as he showed in his seminal *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*. Radical for its time, Luther makes statements like this one:

Not only are the religious ceremonials not the good law and the precepts in which one does not live (in opposition to many teachers); but even the Decalogue itself and all that can be taught and prescribed inwardly and outwardly is not good law either. The good law and that in which one lives is the love of God, spread abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.^{xii}

Luther was essentially saying that the grandeur and ceremony of the Church is not the way to true salvation (or “good law”), but that people find salvation within personal contact with God. From this view developed Luther’s “justification by faith” attitude: when one sinned, reconciliation was only possible with true and personal guilt. For Luther, confession and other sacraments were becoming less and less necessary. This idea was contrary to the Catholic Church’s procedures, of course, and tensions began to form between Luther and Rome.

The Catholic Church at this time was more corrupt and bureaucratic than Luther could tolerate. Instead of stressing a life of faith, Rome was a powerful

machine that neglected its pious masses. Leo X, the present pope, was a member of the Medici family and preoccupied the Church's agenda with politics and scandal.^{xiii} Practices like simony and pluralism were conducted by clergymen across Europe, often with the Church's permission. Luther disagreed in particular with the fact that Catholic masses were held in Latin, a language understood only by the priests, who could then manipulate Scripture in their translation to the common people. Luther believed that since people should study the Bible for themselves, Catholicism was doing believers a disservice as the intermediary between them and God.^{xiv} During a trip to Rome in 1511, Luther himself noted the immorality of the clergy there: "the frivolous indifference with which the most sacred services were performed, the vulgar infidelity which the shepherds and rulers of the church expressed among each other without shame...roused [Luther's] righteous indignation."^{xv} Luther's basic philosophy now was that people could find God using Scripture only: they did not need Catholic dogma, or even an "infallible" pope, to dilute their religion.

The tensions between Luther and Rome reached the tipping point in 1517, when the papal sale of indulgences caused an angry Luther to write the famous *95 Theses*. Leo X, attempting to raise funds for the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, commissioned his clergy to sell indulgences to the people of Europe. Indulgences were essentially reconciliation for a price; common Christians could pay away the sins of their dead loved ones. Johann Tetzel, Germany's seller, condensed the deal best: "Once the coin into the coffer clings, a soul from purgatory heavenward springs!"^{xvi} Luther, whose conscience for good was still unforgivable, viewed this practice as unholy. For the believers, it was an

illegitimate way of penance for sins, and it was conducted with an authority the clergy did not have. Disgusted, he shot into action and (as legend goes) pinned his 95 *Theses* to Wittenberg church's door.^{xvii} They were not only a biting attack on the unfairness and blasphemy of papal indulgences, but also a critique of Roman Catholic hypocrisy in general. Here are some of the most important of the *Theses*:

5. The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons.

28. It is certain that when money clinks in the money chest, greed and avarice can be increased; but when the church intercedes, the result is in the hands of God alone.

32. Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers.

37. Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is granted him by God, even without indulgence letters.

45. Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but God's wrath.

86. Again, "Why does not the pope, whose wealth is today greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build this one basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?"^{xviii}

Luther unabashedly challenged the power of the pope and the Church, and claimed that teaching Christians to pay indulgences is by nature unchristian. He had insulted the Catholic Church, and the Protestant Reformation had now begun.

Luther's condemnation of the Church became instant history in Europe. His posting set off a chain reaction of indulgence protests all around Germany: though originally written in Latin, the *Theses* were soon translated into common

German and widely read by laypeople.^{xix} Luther had an audience for his Reformation theology, but now had to answer to his new Catholic enemies too. First Pope Leo X called him to trial in Augsburg in 1518, and then was confronted in a debate the next year by Catholic theologian Johann van Eck at Leipzig. Luther asserted on both occasions that the Bible does not give the pope the right to interpret Scripture and that popes and church councils are not infallible (not free of error).^{xx} These tensions reached their pinnacle at the famous Diet of Worms, held in 1521. Having been excommunicated by the Church, Luther reaffirmed his dispute with the Church in front of all the royalty of the Holy Roman Empire—and was then named a heretic, and exiled from the Empire.^{xxi}

All of Martin Luther's attitudes and motivations are evidenced clearly (enough for analysis, anyway) in the events before and including the Diet of Worms. Luther was obviously a very intelligent theologian, an extremely pious Christian with a very guilty conscience, and possessing an unwavering allegiance to the Scripture (but not the Church, which he deemed unnecessary and corrupt). Luther spent the next fifteen years in and out of exile, feuding with Rome, writing more texts (including the entire Bible in German vernacular)^{xxii}, and building on the foundation he had created to start the Lutheran Church. His Bible translation and his clerical marriage to Katherina von Bora^{xxiii} set precedents for his new church. His health slowly began to decline, though, and he succumbed to ongoing heart and kidney problems in 1546.^{xxiv} When the life of Martin Luther ended, the era of studying, judging, and condemning him began directly after. Being one of the most powerful, influential men in Western civilization, Luther's legacy was put under a microscope, especially by Catholics, the day he died.

The history of Catholic judgment of Luther began while the Reformation was still in full swing. This movement came to be a very political war of words between the Catholic and Protestant Churches, and Catholic scholars showed no reluctance to paint Luther as a heretic. The father of this school of thought was a German theologian named Johannes Cochlaeus in the first three decades of the Reformation (1521-1552), and his hypothesis can be clearly exemplified by this sentence: "...there would be no end to [Luther's] wickedness."^{xxv} Cochlaeus was a devoted Catholic theologian associated with Duke George of Saxony, a staunchly anti-Lutheran leader whom he served under as court counsel.^{xxvi} Some historians assert that the duke influenced Cochlaeus's opinions with political favor, which would explain his undeniable bias. He was intelligent, though, in that he viewed Reformation Europe as a territorial battle between the churches. In his opinions he "combined religious argument with political exhortation, impressing upon Catholic secular authorities the importance of recognizing the danger of tolerating the Protestants."^{xxvii} And so he set about vilifying the life and views of Martin Luther in an epic smear campaign.

Cochlaeus set the precedent for Catholic hatred of Luther by denouncing every new Protestant canon. Papal infallibility, catechisms, justification by faith alone, and unnecessary church authority were all interpreted as barbaric and sinful. Here, for example, he compares Luther's destruction of religion to that of Turkish invaders (a classic European fear of the time):

Luther no longer wants to celebrate Mass, chant the canonical hours, or to have vigils, matins, saints' feast days...works of penance, or pilgrimages.

What, by immortal God, could the most barbarous Turk do that could be

worse to our religion? Who of the pagans has ever been so foreign to all divine praise and worship than Luther? Or what nation has ever been so barbarous as never to have any sacred things or priests?^{xxviii}

Cochlaeus's aim was not only to smear Luther, but also to instill fear in his readers. Luther was a demon and an alcoholic, bent on anarchy. At every juncture he interprets Luther's motivations as only to denounce the Catholic Church, not to create a simpler and purer faith. The *95 Theses* were actually posted as a pompous show of defiance, "cunningly seeking both the reader's sympathy toward himself and hatred toward his adversaries."^{xxix} The reasonable anger that Luther felt over the famous papal bull is rendered by Cochlaeus to thoughtless rage.^{xxx} Even Luther's translation of the Bible is suspicious because it might be subject to his 'evil twistings.' In actuality, Luther's reason for translating the German Bible was to prevent the Catholic priesthood manipulating the Word in the first place.^{xxxi} Under close analysis, many of Cochlaeus's assertions about Luther are just as manipulated. "Recent Catholic scholarship has shown Cochlaeus to be terribly prejudiced and unreliable," an historian notes, full of inconsistencies.^{xxxii} Scholars now agree that Johannes Cochlaeus carried a very heavy bias in favor of the Church and against Luther. Unfortunately, though, he was not considered as unreliable during the Reformation era. In fact, Cochlaeus actually set the precedent for Luther intolerance in the Catholic Church for the next three centuries. "His charges, 'sources,' and characterizations were reprinted, circulated, and accepted in much of Catholicism."^{xxxiii}

Preceding generations of Catholic scholars relied on the rumor mill that Cochlaeus started. Directly after his time saw the Peasants' War and the Counter-

Reformation in Europe, so the wounds of schism were still fresh in Catholic theology. John Pistorius the Younger, a direct contemporary of Cochlaeus, added personal attacks to the “heretic” thesis. In addition to declaring Martin Luther a blasphemer, he was also “possessed by a host of evil spirits...slovenly, erroneous, insolent, proud, fraudulent, and traitorous.”^{xxxiv} The man seems to gather ammunition for smearing, and makes no attempt to understand Luther’s motivations. But this is typical of the Catholic anti-Luther movement—there is a noted lack of “biographers” understanding the man until even the 20th century. Heinrich Denifle, a German Catholic biographer, issues a study of Luther in the very same vein as per tradition. Religiously, Denifle presents Luther as a false theologian for the most baseless of reasons: he blames the views of Lutheranism on its leader’s deep ignorance, and essentially makes Luther out to be an ill-informed egotist.^{xxxv} Denifle brands Luther’s justification-by-faith philosophy as an excuse for his uncontrollable vices. His drinking hobby is stretched to alcoholism, for example, and at some point he contracted syphilis.^{xxxvi} But the biggest and most personal attack is saved for Luther’s clerical marriage to Katherina von Bora, which was controversial for Catholics since priests were not allowed to marry. For Denifle, Luther’s marriage is unjustifiable and is in fact the root of his blasphemy. As historian Heiko A. Oberman explains:

No one in our century has dealt so thoroughly with Luther’s sexuality as the Dominican Heinrich Seuse Denifle...Denifle sees Luther’s “lust” as one of the main causes of the Reformation. Luther’s experiences with his sexuality led him to believe that man’s “primeval sin” was insuperable.

His carnal instinct drove him to interpret the Scriptures so as to make legitimate marriage “completely overcome by lustfulness.”^{xxxvii}

It is interesting that the baseless attacks on Martin Luther’s character by Catholic theologians in the three hundred years after the Reformation have essentially the same voice across that span, making the same assertions in 1900 that they did in 1600. While Cochlaeus embarked on a largely political crusade against Martin Luther, most of his facts were skewed and his Catholic bias was noticeable. All of the preceding anti-Luther Catholic writers ignored the context of Cochlaeus’s work, and took his unreliable testimony as fact. The status quo of this school of thought did not change until the early 20th century, when Catholic writers began attempting to understand Luther.

The beginning of an appreciative perspective of Luther came about when Catholic critics realized their previous opinions of him were both unreasonable and unchristian. They lacked reason because the Catholic Church was not interested in understanding its biggest competitor in the middle of that very competition. The attacks were unchristian, says Fred Meuser, “because [they] lacked the basic Christian attitude of love, without which it is impossible to understand anyone. When Catholics began to try to understand Luther, revision of the traditional picture became a possibility.”^{xxxviii} Several European Catholic writers began to reanalyze and even accept Luther’s teachings in the 1920s. One theologian, Anton Fischer, viewed Luther as a man of devout prayer and stated Catholics could learn piety better from Luther’s message.^{xxxix} The first writer to truly reinterpret Luther in an objective way was German Catholic theologian named Johannes Lortz, in 1939. Lortz writes *The Reformation in Germany* well

aware of the Church's past attacks on Luther but does not get swallowed up by them. He views the Church as imperfect, and admires Luther's trust in God above all of his qualities. In addressing whether or not Luther is a heretic, Lortz creates an important moment in this historiography:

I refute the opinion that a heretic can only be made if he is man of little intellectual and religious depth. It is a poor interpretation of history which says that a superficial mind lacking religious depth was sufficient to deal with the colossal blows which rent the Church. It would be a serious indictment of the Holy Church if this were true. No, nothing short of the uncovering of the Church's own deepest treasures, but in a one-sided and hence objective false presentation, could have inflicted such wounds.^{xi}

Lortz actually acknowledges that Luther could not have lacked intelligence and still made the impact he did, something that every previous Catholic writer neglected to logically consider. This is a watershed moment for Luther in the eyes of Catholics: "Reformation" is no longer a dirty word, and Martin Luther is not a hideous demon. That said, Lortz is still critical about Luther on some counts. Similar to Denifle's hypothesis, he believes that Luther's personal weaknesses may have contributed to the way he viewed justification by faith and the way he set up his church. To Lortz, Luther was still a bit egotistical, and not the best listener to alternative views.^{xii} But according to Fred Meuser, "there is general agreement that his Reformation history opened up the possibility of real dialogue between Protestants and Catholics on Luther."^{xiii}

The understanding era of Johannes Lortz and the other mid-century Catholic writers eventually coalesced into the current Church stance on Luther.

While tension still exists between the Catholic Church and the branch that separated from it, some theologians welcome Martin Luther's message and most are at least analyzing him objectively. The modern era—closing in on the late 20th century—saw the end of polemic attitudes in favor of strictly historical ones.^{xliii} This idea is crucial to the historiography: for example, a powerful new Luther history was written by a Catholic religious philosopher named Johannes Hessen in 1947. Hessen makes “every effort to understand and appreciate Luther,”^{xliv} according to historiographers. He believes that Luther's attacks on church authority and sacraments were not only justified, but that they were “affirming the true Catholic position” in an attempt to do something perfectly reasonable: reform the broken Church.^{xlv} I view it as the end of inherent bias when Catholic theologians begin to agree with Martin Luther on their own church's faults. This is the present stance among theologians, and that is where the historiography seems to conclude.

So in the battle of truth for Martin Luther's character, have we logically deduced any theory as correct? Could he be the visionary reformer driven by unwavering faith, a relentless conscience, and his own logic? Or could he be, in the words of Cochlaeus and Denifle, a heartless drunk and a syphilitic demon, whose disturbing blasphemy was outdone only by his utter ignorance of Scripture? After analyzing the evolution of Catholic thought about Luther over time, and analyzing *just as closely* the Catholic Church's motivations behind those thoughts, it is safe to say that the visionary reformer is easily the closer caricature. Luther's Catholic detractors have an obvious inherent bias against him, and their assertions are filled with inconsistency. The more separated

Catholic theologians are from the Reformation, the more and more objective they become in assessing Luther's views. Therefore, it is safe to say that the most modern estimate of Luther is the most accurate one Catholics have.

Endnotes

ⁱ Fred W. Meuser, "The Changing Catholic View of Luther," in *Interpreting Luther's Legacy*, eds. Fred W. Meuser et al. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1970), 41.

ⁱⁱ Meuser, 40.

ⁱⁱⁱ James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 32.

^{iv} Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abington-Cokesbury Press, 1950), 26.

^v Kittelson, 32.

^{vi} *Ibid*, 44-48.

^{vii} Bainton, 21.

^{viii} Julius Kostlin, *Life of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1883), 61-82.

^{ix} Kittelson, 84.

^x *Ibid*.

^{xi} Donald K. McKim and others, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7.

^{xii} Martin Luther, *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, theses 82-84, in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Timothy F. Lull, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 19.

^{xiii} Kittelson, 105-108.

^{xiv} Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (Binghamton, NY: Vail-Ballou Press, 1989), 214-215.

^{xv} Kostlin, 74-79.

^{xvi} Kittelson, 103.

^{xvii} McKim, 8-9.

^{xviii} Martin Luther, *The Ninety-Five Theses*, theses 5, 28, 32, 37, 45, 86, in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Timothy F. Hull, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 22-29.

^{xix} Kittelson, 106.

^{xx} McKim, 9.

^{xxi} Bainton, 167-190.

^{xxii} Oberman, 304-309.

^{xxiii} *Ibid*, 272-283.

^{xxiv} Kittelson, 292-300.

^{xxv} Johann Cochleaus, *The deeds and writings of Martin Luther from the year of the Lord 1517 to 1546 related chronologically to all posterity*, trans. Elizabeth Vandiver, in *Luther's Lives: Two Contemporary Accounts of Martin Luther*, Vandiver, Ralph Keen and Thomas D. Frazel (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 112.

^{xxvi} Ralph Keen, *Johannes Cochlaeus: An introduction to his life and work*, in *Luther's Lives: Two Contemporary Accounts of Martin Luther*, Keen, Elizabeth Vandiver and Thomas D. Frazel (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 39-40.

^{xxvii} Ibid, 40.

^{xxviii} Ibid, 47.

^{xxix} Cochlaeus, *The deeds and writings*, 61.

^{xxx} Ibid, 78-89.

^{xxxi} Ibid, 106.

^{xxxii} Meuser, 41.

^{xxxiii} Ibid.

^{xxxiv} Ibid.

^{xxxv} Heinrich Denifle, *Luther and Lutherdom*, trans. Raymond Volz (Somerset: Torch Press, 1904), 78-95.

^{xxxvi} Meuser, 42.

^{xxxvii} Oberman, 275.

^{xxxviii} Meuser, 45.

^{xxxix} Meuser, 46.

^{xl} Johannes Lortz, *The Reformation in Germany*, trans. Robert Walls (New York: Herder and Herder, 1939), 218.

^{xli} Meuser, 46.

^{xlii} Ibid.

^{xliii} Ibid, 49.

^{xliv} Ibid, 50.

^{xlv} Ibid.

