

"1517: the Beginning of the Liberation of Religions"

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Initially, Martin Luther made use of traditional methods for interpreting the Bible. However almost immediately he placed new accents upon them, for example by drawing away from speculation to come to questions regarding God and man. Luther believed that the Apostle Paul was particularly important so much so that, beginning in 1515, he analyzed numerous letters written by Paul during his lessons and debated Medieval theology, namely Scholasticism. In fact, he held that philosophy dominated theology and he also called for the liberation from Aristotelian thought, which had been a great discovery and a tool useful for interpreting Medieval theology. Theology should not be suffocated by philosophy however, but the supremacy of the Bible must be rediscovered, because God speaks from it so that one need refer essentially only to it.

Soon Luther came to criticize the Church of his time where much intolerance and many false securities prevailed.

The mixture between business and religion in the selling of indulgences

Already in 1516 during a sermon, Luther had declared that indulgences were a cause of temptation for man. In effect, indulgences substantially meant receiving a dispensation from infractions against Canon Law, when in reality this mechanism had an influence on numerous aspects of spirituality. Many people believed they were obtaining beatitude by purchasing an indulgence. In the role of confessor, the Augustinian monk came to learn all these things even if he was not a parish priest and did not guide a religious community. It was precisely during the confessions that he contested these false securities, and due to his temperament he was not able to refrain from criticizing them. His sermon in 1516 did not arouse any interest, nor did his other critical assertions which went unheeded.

The 95 theses on the indulgence that he sent to Alberto di Magonza, who was his bishop and archbishop, on 31st October 1517 gave him notoriety. These 95 theses received a very rapid propagation. Luther disapproved that by means of the indulgence money was extorted from the people when in truth, Jesus had preached that man's souls should be "fished for" in the name of the Gospel. When the author of the theses sent them to his superior he probably didn't expect the Prince of the Church to react in a negative way. But the latter was interested in increasing the profits derived from the selling of indulgences since he needed money to pay his own debts. Besides it was forbidden by the Church to be head of more than one dioceses but Alberto had obtained a special

permission from Rome in exchange for a large contribution which had to be covered by using a portion of the profits derived from the selling of indulgences. The people were made to believe that all this money was destined for the reconstruction of St. Peter's Basilica. Truly Luther, while attacking the mechanism of the indulgences, violently criticized a worse practice that was responsible for the degeneration of the Church in his time. Clearly Alberto di Magonza did not take the monk of Wittenberg under his protection, but rather convinced the authorities in Rome to submit the theses of this man to the Roman Curia's examination.

The disputation about the Church's authority

In Germany the controversy on this theme became lively in every context.

Soon the main point on which the disputation was hinged became evident.

Some of those participating in the disputation sustained that the selling of indulgences by the Pope should not be criticized because he is the highest authority of the Church.

Luther, instead, affirmed that even the Pope had to stick to the Bible, especially when the mechanism of the indulgences compromised authentic spirituality. The controversy about a precise ecclesiastical practice rapidly was transformed into a disputation upon the concept of the Church.

Is the Church exactly an organism entirely subject to the Bishop of Rome?

The birth of a new Church

Luther succeeded in explaining to himself the Church's opposition and especially that of the Roman Curia against the reformer movement, asserting that inside it was the Antichrist. As a result, the polemical force of his own affirmations increased remarkably. He did not intend to attribute either to the clergy or to the Pope a pre-eminent role, because the true dignity of the Christian is represented by Baptism, which in itself defines the authentic relationship between God and man, so that the Sacrament becomes essential in the life of every believer.

These attacks proved to be offensive and yet today give rise to criticism about Luther.

The Lutheran reform, which for this reason can be indicated by the historical turning-point of 1517, once again conferred upon the State its responsibility before God. Although it is true that the Christian princes had felt themselves responsible to God ("legitimated by Divine Grace") the Church had attempted during the Middle Ages, to place itself in a position of superiority, because it dealt with Eternity, while the State took care of the short earthly life.

The professor of Wittenberg emphasized that:

- God had established the State to fight evil,
- the Church therefore could not place itself between God and the State,
- the State's duty is particularly important, because the Devil is "the God of this world" and is continuously accomplishing evil.

Attention though,

Luther did not deify the State, he only clarified to what point one should be obedient to it.