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Declan Marmion

From Foe to Friend

– Martin Luther's Legacy in Catholic Perspective

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It all started with a door! When Martin Luther allegedly pinned his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517 he had little idea of the theological and political tumult he was about to unleash in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. These theses were concerned with a proper understanding of repentance, the forgiveness of sin, the power of the pope, and the practice of indulgences. Luther intended them as an invitation to a theological discussion, not to divide the Church.

It all started with a door! Doors play a not insignificant role in the life of the Church. Since the fourteenth-century the Church has periodically instituted a Holy Year (every 25 years or so) part of which was a pilgrimage to Rome to make reparation for sin and seek conversion of life. In 2015 to mark the jubilee of mercy, Pope Francis opened the Holy Door in St Peter's Basilica and hoped it would become a 'Door of Mercy through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons and instils hope' and he continued: 'To pass through the Holy Door means *to rediscover the infinite mercy of the Father* who welcomes everyone and goes out personally to encounter each of them.'

What would Luther make of such sentiments? As a young Augustinian monk, he was sent to Rome in 1511 on business of the order. Like any pious pilgrim in the eternal city at the time he busied himself with Masses, fasts, and visiting churches. In fact, he was particularly concerned to acquire an indulgence for his deceased grandfather. He even partially regretted that his parents were still living as he would have been able to rescue them from purgatory too! Luther didn't become a Reformer in Rome. On the contrary, he believed in the holiness of the papacy and in the Church's ability to mediate salvation.

1 Edited version of a lecture (Patrick Finn Lecture Series) at St. Mary's Church, Haddington Road, Dublin 4 on 23 March 2017.

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What changed? Luther changed. He changed from a very scrupulous monk unable to placate a demanding God to someone utterly confident in God's power to save. This is sometimes called his 'Reformation breakthrough' and it came through study, particularly the study of St. Paul. Luther did not resign himself to his religious anxieties but was spurred on to study the Bible more closely. The fact that Luther felt more at home with this book than with any other would become the characteristic trademark of his theology.

Luther's decision to become a monk was taken against a background of fear. His time as a monk was dominated by the figure of the *pantocrator* – the all ruling and judging Christ. As Luther put it: 'I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners. In silence if I did not blaspheme against God, then certainly I grumbled with vehement anger against him.' This was a vindictive and tyrannical image of God, whose judgement, it seemed, could only be placated with the help of pious works including indulgences and pilgrimages. But Luther confessed his difficulty with such an approach: 'If I lived and worked to all eternity, my conscience would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God.' It was his fatherly friend and confrère, Johann von Staupitz who helped him overcome his scrupulosity and exaggerated fears about sin and to realise that the proper disposition toward God was not fear but a happy, hopeful and trusting heart.

The way out of this *cul de sac* for Luther, therefore, was to perceive the loving God behind the holy and commanding God. It entails grasping – intellectually and experientially – God's promise of mercy manifested in the saving work of Christ. The structure of his religious experience, therefore, was a *paradox* of two moments: human beings remain creatures, empty and unworthy, yet, in their sin, they abandon themselves to God's mercy. And God's mercy becomes real when we realise that we are accepted in, and despite, our unworthiness.

A Catholic way of putting this is that God can allow for sin – sin is transformed into the *felix culpa*. But Lutherans will always want to emphasise that the Christian is 'at the same time righteous and sinner' and must 'depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive.' [Martin Luther, *Large Commentary on Galatians* (*LW* 27, 387]. And because people remain sinners and unworthy, their righteousness is imputed – God 'covers over' our sins. In one image Luther compares a mother hen covering her chicks with her wings with the God who clothes us with a righteousness that is extrinsic to us in the sense that it is due to God's overwhelming grace and not our

efforts. It is God who turns to us, not we to God. God's grace is forgiving love.

In short, we become acceptable in God's eyes by grace *alone* through faith *alone* because of Jesus Christ *alone*. The enslaving power of sin is broken because of the merits of Christ. And this truth comes not so much through human traditions but rather through the gospel, that is, by scripture *alone*. 'For Luther, the life of faith is surrender not accomplishment' (Jane E. Strohl).

THE CHURCH IS IN NEED OF A REFORMATION

Luther was not a systematic theologian. He did not develop his 'teachings' in concise treatises; rather, they grew out of concrete situations. He was a theologian of conflict and controversy, a man of extremes, impulsive, possessed of a fiery temper, always working on the verge of exhaustion, who felt his theology rather than deducing it from abstract principles. As one psychologist put it: 'He could articulate his own position best by saying what he was against: he needed opposition in order to feel alive' (James W. Jones). In one of his Table Talks on wrath he says: 'I can never preach, pray, or write better than when I am irate. Wrath refreshes all my blood, sharpens the mind, drives temptations away.' He saw himself as God's prophet on earth in the last days spreading God's good news, as an interpreter of Scripture and a preacher. Lectern and pulpit would be the hallmarks of his public life. Though starting out as an exegete, he soon moved from a small academic audience to the broader public of the church.

'The church is in need of a reformation' was Luther's rallying call. His critique of various Church teachings and practices was based on his interpretation of Scripture. Authority in matters of faith lay in the Bible alone. His critique of indulgences was that they had become a crass exchange of money and lulled people into a false sense of security, what he termed a 'works holiness.' Repentance, he maintained, cannot be bought or sold but is a lifelong activity expected of every Christian. Nobody could be sure of his or her salvation by a gift from a bishop. From criticism of a specific and badly developed practice of piety, Luther was soon on his way to critique the whole Church and its theology based on his interpretation of the gospel.

He went on to criticise the 'unbiblical' division of priests and lay people (what we call today the common priesthood of all believers) and the supreme teaching power of the pope. Ecclesiology and papal authority become the hot issues. Luther advocated the thorough decentralisation of the Church, the abolition of the Roman Curia and a greater independence for the German church.

The call for restructuring the Church system became more

and more urgent for him though he always saw it as an interim measure. In this sense, the continued existence of an independent Lutheran Church is not a sign of success but of the failure of the Reformation (W. Pannenberg). Luther did not want a new Church nor did he want his followers to use his name for their community; they were to call themselves 'Christians.'

With the development of publishing, Luther could bring his arguments to the people where they struck a chord because he was addressing their existential questions. In effect, he was calling on the laity to reform the Church. Nor did Luther believe he was saying anything fundamentally new, but simply re-articulating original New Testament insights on the relationship between the human being and God. Sadly, Luther's reform impulses did not trigger a constructive response from the Church in Rome. The door was closed. Cardinal Cajetan, who was given the mandate to interrogate Luther, expected him to recant and, in the event of his refusal, intended to arrest him and bring him to Rome. As the recent Lutheran-Catholic report on the Commemoration of the Reformation, *From Conflict to Communion,* put it, 'It is a tragedy that two of the most outstanding theologians of the sixteenth century encountered one another in a trial of heresy.' The atmosphere of the time was oppositional and polemical and ultimately led to Luther's excommunication in 1521.

Catholic excoriation of Luther persisted into the twentieth-century largely due to various polemical biographies by Johannes Cochlaeus (1479-1552), Heinrich Denifle (1884-1905), Hartmann Grisar (1845-1932) and others. These works were full of animosity presented under the cover of scientific objectivity. Luther was depicted as a monster, a child of the Devil, a drunkard, a violator of nuns, a sinner and victim of his own egoism, pride and sensuality. A Strasbourg Franciscan, Thomas Murner wrote an infamous anti-reformational satirical poem called *On the Great Lutheran Fool,* (1522), in which he imagined exorcising all the 'little fools' in the 'Great Fool's (Luther's) head. By the end of the poem, all the little fools have been exorcised from the great fool, and Luther has died and fallen into a toilet.

While the polemical picture of Luther continued to operate in Catholic circles, there were also moves towards a new, more irenical, appraisal particularly in the work of Church historian, Joseph Lortz (1887-1975). Here we have an acknowledgement that the Catholic Church must bear some responsibility for the split. There was, moreover, a greater awareness of Luther as an earnest, theologically-motivated, religious man rather than a wild revolutionary. The thesis was that Luther was overcoming within himself 'a Catholicism that was not fully Catholic' (*From Conflict*

to Communion, 21). A more positive and ecumenical assessment of the Reformation continued in the work of Catholic theologians including Yves Congar, Otto Hermann Pesch, Louis Bouyer, George Tavard and Jared Wicks.

THE 'REFORMATION PRINCIPLES' AND VATICAN II

It was at the Second Vatican Council that many of the 'Reformation principles' were officially appropriated into Catholicism. These included: an esteem for the place of Scripture in the life of the Church, the fundamental equality of all believers, the universal call to holiness, the full participation of the whole assembly in the liturgy – now in the vernacular, and a vision of the Church as *ecclesia semper reformanda*. In its *Decree on Ecumenism*, the Council stated that the restoration of unity was one of its 'principal concerns' and that Church division is 'clearly contrary to Christ's will.' It spoke 'with respect and love' for our 'separated fellow Christians' who, despite the obstacles between the churches, 'are in some kind of communion with the catholic Church' (*Decree on Ecumenism*, 3).

Vatican II, we might say, was the Catholic Church's mature response to the Reformation. True, in the immediate aftermath of Luther's death, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) sought to give a coherent exposition of the Catholic doctrine on grace and to frame a Catholic consensus on justification over and against what they took to be the Lutheran positions. The purpose of the Decree on Justification at Trent, however, was to define boundaries, to accentuate what is different, to draw a line of demarcation between Catholic dogma and belief and Protestant teaching. A defensive attitude toward Luther and his thinking resulted and would define Catholic relationships with Lutherans for years to come. 'Fear of the distribution of editions of the Bible unauthorized by the church, a centralizing over-emphasis on the papacy and a one-sidedness in sacramental theology and practice were deliberately developed features of Counter-Reformation Catholicism.'[2] Vatican II, on the other hand, has been described as 'the end of the Counter-Reformation.' It marked the transition to a new epoch. From the beginning, the Council was to be ecumenical rather than polemical and representatives of other Churches were invited to attend. Unlike Trent and most other Councils, it was not called to deal with a crisis but came to Pope John XXIII as a spontaneous inspiration. He intended the Council as an invitation to spiritual renewal for the Church and the world.

2 'Martin Luther, Witness to Jesus Christ' – Joint Statement of the Roman Catholic/Lutheran Commission on the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther,' 6 May 1983, 21.

Vatican II suggested a new style of relationships that was to prevail in the Church – less autocratic and more collaborative, a style willing to seek out and listen to different viewpoints rather than one that is unilateral in its decision-making. In this it tried to reflect the opening words of Pope John XXIII to the Council that the Church should act by 'making use of the medicine of mercy rather than severity … and by showing herself to be the loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of mercy and goodness.' A new vocabulary emerged at the Council. Words like 'charism,' 'dialogue,' 'partnership,' 'co-operation,' 'friendship,' 'dignity,' 'freedom,' 'pilgrim,' 'servant,' 'people of God,' and 'priesthood of all believers' all appear regularly in the Conciliar documents. These changes expressed a new vision and style of Catholicism: from commands to invitations, from laws to ideals, from threats to persuasion, from coercion to conscience, from monologue to dialogue, from ruling to serving, from withdrawn to integrated, from exclusion to inclusion, from suspicion to trust. (John W. O'Malley). This is a style based on persuasion and invitation and is pastoral rather than juridical in orientation.

CATHOLICS AND LUTHERANS AFTER VATICAN II

Without mentioning Luther by name, the ecumenical imperative of Vatican II paved the way for subsequent projects that resulted in consensus on many of the core issues that hitherto had been divisive. The image of Luther would become less polemically coloured and he would come to be honoured 'as a witness to the gospel, a teacher in the faith and a herald of spiritual renewal' ('Martin Luther, Witness to Jesus Christ,' 4). This statement in 1983 marked a watershed in Lutheran-Catholic relations in that here was official Catholic recognition of the Augsburg Confession of 1530 (or *Confessio Augustana*), the primary confession of faith of the Lutheran Church and one of the most important documents of the Lutheran Reformation. The text, 'Martin Luther, Witness to Jesus Christ,' was the work of the Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission on the person and work of Luther. It represented a genuine attempt to 'surmount existing differences at their roots' and to 'overcome a picture of Luther which in former times was often distorted.' It showed that 'Luther's call for church reform, a call to repentance, is still relevant for us.'

The most significant recent consensus between Catholics and Lutherans has been the 'Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification' of 1999. While the theme of justification may not appear to be as topical as intercommunion, the ordination of women or the role of the papacy, it expresses the core of Luther's theology. Justification is about how we sinners are brought into

a right relationship with God. 'When I preach on the article of justification, the congregation sleeps or coughs. When I begin to tell stories and give examples, the people perk up their ears, are quiet, and listen intently.' These are not the words of a contemporary Lutheran pastor but of Luther himself in 1532 on the reactions of parishioners to his sermons on justification. Nevertheless, the term and the thinking behind it are a response to Luther's existential question: 'How do I find a gracious God?' It implies a reassurance that I can still be saved even though my life is characterised by failure and sin. Luther believed that a person's salvation is effected in utter and absolute gratuity and through the work of another, Christ. Nobody can save themselves through their own efforts: 'No-one obtains anything from God by his own virtue or the worthiness of his prayer, but solely by reason of the boundless mercy of God.' (*LW*, 42, 87-88). Faith, then, is not a work or a self-initiated act; it is a trusting self-surrender and pure reception that renounces all efforts at self-justification. This conviction, however, is not an opiate to numb our existential fears but about the strength to face life, to resist the powers of evil, and to challenge rulers and authorities. It is not that Luther rejects the necessity of good works: 'Works are necessary for salvation, though they do not cause salvation, for faith alone gives life.'

But is the theme of justification just 'confused nonsense,' as Goethe once claimed? And does Luther's question really strike a chord with Christians today? When Pope emeritus Benedict XVI addressed the Council of the Evangelical Church in Erfurt in 2011 he addressed this issue. In recalling how the question of God was the driving force of Luther's life: 'How do I receive the grace of God?' or 'How do I find a merciful God?' Benedict felt this question no longer bothers Christians today who prefer to believe in a magnanimous God who overlooks our failings. But, following Luther and his sense of the pervasiveness of sin, Benedict asks: 'Is not the world laid waste through the corruption of the great, but also of the small, who think only of their own advantage? Is the world not threatened by the growing readiness to use violence, frequently masking itself with claims to religious motivation? Could hunger and poverty so devastate parts of the world if love for God and godly love of neighbour … were more alive in us?' And he concludes: 'No, evil is no small matter.' Each generation of Christians, therefore, needs to ask itself Luther's question: 'Where do I stand before God?'

THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL

Luther's call for ecclesial renewal and reform finds an echo in Pope Francis's recent Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*

(2013). There Francis speaks of how the Gospel, above all, 'invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others' (n. 39). Francis speaks much about the 'heart of the Gospel' which he says is 'the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ' (n. 36). It underpins a pastoral style not so much concerned with imposing a 'multitude of doctrines' as about concentrating 'on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary' (n. 35). Not unlike Luther, Francis is also calling for, what he terms, 'an ecclesial renewal which cannot be deferred' (n. 27).

There is much here that resonates with the insights and concerns of Luther. His was also a reforming agenda focused on the heart of the Gospel. Like Francis, his call for Church reform was, firstly, a call to repentance, a summons 'to listen anew to the gospel,' to recognise our own unfaithfulness to it, and to witness more credibly to it again today. As the first of his Ninety-Five Theses on Indulgences puts it: 'The entire life of believers [is] to be one of repentance.'

So today, there is a more positive Catholic assessment of Luther. He has become 'de-confessionalised' and is now regarded as part of a common theological and spiritual tradition. He did not want to close any doors but sadly division ensued. Thankfully today, some doors have re-opened. Might Pope Francis consider lifting the ban of excommunication on this 'Church father' of Lutheranism? In a pioneering speech nearly fifty years ago, at the Lutheran World Federation's Fifth Assembly, Cardinal Jan Willebrands reflected this new evaluation of Luther when he said:

> Who ... would still deny that Martin Luther was a deeply religious person who with honesty and dedication sought for the message of the gospel? Who would deny that in spite of the fact that he fought against the Roman Catholic Church and the Apostolic See and, for the sake of truth one must not remain silent about this, he retained a considerable part of the old Catholic faith? Indeed, is it not true that the Second Vatican Council has even implemented requests that were first expressed by Martin Luther, among others, and as a result of which many aspects of Christian faith and life now find better expression than they did before? To be able to say this in spite of all the differences is a reason for great joy and much hope.

At the same time, we shouldn't idolise Luther. The Church needed reform but not disunity. No Catholic or Lutheran can endorse his anti-Semitism or his hatred of the Turks. And like most prophets,

he wasn't the compromising type: 'I cannot tread so softly and quietly,' he explained. Moreover, Luther's anthropology can appear too pessimistic, even demeaning. His tendency is to limit human freedom and will and the possibility of self-determination. In emphasising grace as so completely the work of God in us he reduces almost to vanishing point our free response. The bishops at Trent feared that the Lutheran perspective could weaken ethical endeavour. Thus, Catholic theology continued to emphasise the meritorious character of 'good works' as fruits of grace and the responsibility of persons for their actions. Both approaches are legitimate and not mutually exclusive.

The positive aims of the Reformation have now become a shared concern of all Christians. And this is as it should be. I recall Dr. Margot Kaessmann, Special Envoy of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, speaking a few years ago, in the Quaker House in Dublin. She named secularisation as the biggest challenge facing the Christian Churches in the West and referred to a recent survey in Luther's home town of Eisleben where most people declared themselves to be of no religion. Thus, in their most recent joint statement, *From Conflict to Communion* (2013), Lutherans and Catholics adopted several ecumenical imperatives. These imperatives call for a joint rediscovery of 'the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for our time' and a 'witnessing together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world' (*From Conflict to Communion*, 242 and 243). A contemporary reformulation of the 'Reformation discovery' might therefore be: 'Turning from fear – Turning to God – Moving out into the world' (Theodor Dieter).

The imitation of Christ.
Christ had to Christ to imitate.

– Stanley Hauerwas, *Cross Shattered Christ* (Grand Rapids, Brazos) p. 99.