

LETTER TO THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF THE ORDER
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 500th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE START OF THE LUTHERAN REFORM

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In perhaps a small way, we want to recognize the anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation which started with Martin Luther's public exposition of his 95 theses on indulgences, in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. There is no doubt that Luther promoted a true religious crisis that brought about the rupture of Western Christianity and laid the foundations not only of secularism but also of the process of secularization and the birth of a new Europe. These theses also implied a change in the way Luther understood himself. It was then that he changed his surname, "Luder", signing it for a time as "*Eleutherios*" (the free one), and then as "Luther".

His strong personality, rich and suggestive in its contrasts, the new theology he developed, the consequences of the revolution that he unleashed, all make him a decisive figure in world history and in the history of Christianity. We can affirm that there is clearly a time period before and after Luther.

We cannot forget that Martin Luther (1483-1546) was an Augustinian. He entered our Order in 1505 and was a member of the Congregation of the Observance of Saxony. He belonged to the community of the convent of Erfurt at first and then the community of Wittenberg. He held various positions of government: sub-prior and regent of studies (1512-1515) and vicar provincial of Thuringia and Meissen (1515-1518). He exercised these services with responsibility and wisdom, making decisions when necessary, without ignoring difficulties and seeking the common good. He was a renowned teacher (for him, his most treasured title was that of Doctor of Theology) and he was accredited as a preacher and was available to render his services when required, as happened with respect to the internal issues (conflict between observants and conventuals) that brought about his trip to Rome in 1511-1512. All sources point out that he was a pious, trustworthy and fervent monk. Until 1521 he always used to sign his name "Martin Luther, Augustinian" and used the habit until 1524, conserving until his death much of the "friar" in his piety and style of life.

It is also true that Luther not only abandoned the Order but abhorred religious life with all his might, rejected ascetic practices and piety, rejected praying the breviary and other obligations, radically altered sacramental theology, condemned the vows and promoted the abandonment and the mass exodus of vowed religious. The damage done to the Order and to religious life in Germany was enormous. Luther was our brother for a time and shared our charism, but he himself stood outside the Order with his choices, his initiatives, and his decisions.

The Order of St. Augustine, to which Luther belonged, has no reason to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation but, yes, to commemorate it. And we do it with serenity, highlighting the positive aspects that it brought about: the revalorization of the individual, the reaffirmed confidence in God, the centrality of Sacred Scripture, the bringing of the liturgy closer to the people, the development of a sense of community, a healthy secularity, and the need for reform, understood as a return to the essentials.

What could the Catholic Church learn from the Lutheran tradition? Pope Francis responds thus: "Two words come to my mind: Reformation and Scripture."¹ That is, the gesture of renewal for a Church that is *semper reformanda* and always in need of reforming itself, and the step taken to put the Word of God in the hands of the people. We must also learn to avoid that which would be a process of reform and revitalization of the whole Church that leads to a "state" of separation and rupture, and also that approach to Sacred Scripture that leads to subjectivism. For that reason, in the words of the Lutheran theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, "the division of the Church in the XVI century cannot be understood as the success of the Reformation, but rather only as the expression of temporal failure; in fact, the Reformation was aiming at the renewal of the entire Church, with reference to its biblical origin"². Moreover, we can say that the breakup of the Church is an expression of failure for all Christians.

Today, in recalling the figure of Martin Luther, we dwell on the man of deep religious intuition, on the herald and preacher of the divine word, on his ingenuity and creativity, on his amazing capacity for work, on the way he used the printing press and the advances of the time at the service of communication, and on his deep piety. "We are all beggars, *hoc est verum*, this is true,"³ he wrote on February 16, 1546, two days before he died. He was a sincere Christian and a man of prayer, a good husband and father of a family, a simple and hospitable friend, a diligent guide to the people who requested his advice. With a warm and effusive temperament, and despite the worries and ailments that affected him, he was a model of domestic virtues. We also highlight his inner struggles against anguish and temptation, his direct form of expression, the openness of his soul and the confident way of sharing his intimacy with those who were close to him, and his spiritual sensitivity.

However, we cannot avoid another less gracious side: that which refers to his intolerance. Obstinate and inflexible, passionate and vehement, Luther used biting expressions against those who opposed him, becoming abusive and rude. Often, he was vexatious and offensive, leading to slander. The one chosen by God, the "prophet of the end times"⁴, he considered himself to have the truth and, therefore, responded in aggressive terms to any discrepancy. For him, retraction was not possible because he did not assume the possibility of mistake or error. His fixation on the figure of the pope is significant, evolving from reverential obedience to animosity and abhorrence, to eventual hatred in his later years. His exaggerated insults and aggressions toward the Church of Rome (papist, according to the particular terminology) are truly sad. Reading those texts fills us with pain. Today, thank God, times have changed: not only are there cordial relations between Lutherans and Catholics but also, on the path of ecumenism, there are meeting points such as the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* signed in 1999, to which the World Communion of Reformed Churches has recently joined.

As for his thought, it is impossible to state it here, or even to summarize it. I shall say only that Luther makes concrete his distrust of reason and his rejection of philosophy in his visceral revulsion of scholasticism, of overly structured theological systems, of

¹ Cf. "Intervista a papa Francesco in occasione del viaggio apostolico in Svezia": *La Civiltà Cattolica* 2016-IV, 313-324.

² W. PANNENBERG, "Die Augsburgische Konfession und die Einheit der Kirche": *Ökumenische Rundschau* 28 (1979) 113.

³ Cf. LUTHER, *Weimarer Ausgabe* (WA) 48,241.

⁴ Cf. *Tischreden* (WATr) 5,23,27-24,6.

aristotelianism, of the games of the intellect, of classifications, of sophistry, and of the subtleties of the various schools of thought of his day. All of that distances us from the encounter with Christ and obstructs the genuine faith that is based on Scripture, the Word. God is not a philosophical hypothesis, but is revealed to us and speaks to us in Christ. That is why it requires greater simplicity, abandoning the artifices to go to the source making the encounter possible. And it also requires bringing the Word of God closer to the people, facilitating personal contact and assimilation. From this approach, we can understand that Luther devotes much time and care to the translation and exegesis of Sacred Scripture and to preaching. He showed excellent handling of his vernacular language. His translation of the Bible is of decisive importance, both in the pastoral and in the philological sense. Luther plays a decisive role in his lexical choice and in his style, in which he reflects the vivacity and spontaneity of the spoken language. He is an innovator of the language, which he endows with great accuracy and realism, to the point of being considered determinant in the unification of the German language and in the fixation of the modern German language. Recognized as a preacher, his sermons always had an enormous resonance. Of simple style, concrete and didactic; very practical. He spoke with deep conviction, concentrating on what he said, without getting lost in gesture or theatrics, but using popular phrases and idioms. He was the "Ecclesiastes of Wittenberg"⁵, the preacher and transmitter par excellence of the Word of God.

Another essential point in his thinking, in an Augustinian way, is the reality of grace in reference, above all, to justification. In this world of the triumph of indifference, in which we often live as if God does not exist, in which God is reduced to a concept or a norm, Luther returns us to the God revealed in Christ, who is Love and who is concretized in Love. The center of his life and his reflection was undoubtedly the question of God. Tormented in his youth by the theme of salvation, he found his tranquility and joy in the principle of justification by faith (cf. Rom 1:17). Therefore, the Justice of God should not be understood in an active or vindictive sense (a just God who punishes sinners), but in a passive or justifying sense (God who makes us righteous and gives us sanctification). It is not works, however good they are, that obtain salvation, but trust in Christ, the only Redeemer, who is communicated to us by faith. *Solus Christus, soli Deo Gloria*. The terrible God thus becomes the Father of mercies, and the righteous Christ becomes the unique Savior by way of the cross. Luther feels the inability of human forces, without grace, but radicalizes this doctrine to the extreme. For him it is impossible that the human being can collaborate actively in salvation, because sin remains. Only, by the merits of Christ, are we not held guilty.

Sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide. The consequences of the Lutheran perception lead to the denial of free will, to the dogmatic innovation of the sacraments, to the rejection of the Mass as a sacrifice, to the denial of the ministerial priesthood, to the demolition of the magisterium and of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and to the demonization of the papacy. However, Luther is surprisingly servile to the protestant princes and a passionate defender of the legitimate social and political order, even at a high price. His position in the War of the Peasants (1524-1525) offers a good example of this and is one of the most discussed features of the reformer, as are also two other aspects, present in Luther, which have cast their black shadow on the history of the last centuries: nationalism and anti-Semitism.

The figure of Luther is not easy, but fascinating. It is full of contrasts that hinder objectivity and equanimity, but it offers enormously novel features and is undoubtedly very up-to-date.

⁵ Cf. WA 10,2

In spite of the five centuries that have passed, he continues to arouse extreme passions, adhesions and visceral rejections. And in our Augustinian milieu, unfortunately, he remains quite unknown. In the Order, we need specialists in Luther, both in the historical and theological fields. I hope that this commemoration of the Lutheran Reformation will be a wake-up call and boost the studies in this line.

I am grateful for the interest shown and the initiatives that have been taken in the various circumscriptions of the Order, especially in the academic field, with the organization of excellent congresses, study days and publications. The General Council has wished to be involved in this respect and has encouraged the holding of the Congress, entitled "*Luther and the Reformation: Augustine and the Augustinian Order*", to be held in Rome from 9 to 11 November. I hope this is a starting point.

I want to end with the words of Pope Benedict XVI, pronounced in the *Augustinerkloster* of Erfurt, during his trip to Germany⁶: "For Luther, theology was no mere academic pursuit, but the struggle for oneself, which in turn was a struggle for and with God. 'How do I receive the grace of God?' The fact that this question was the driving force of his whole life never ceases to make a deep impression on me. For who is actually concerned about this today – even among Christians? What does the question of God mean in our lives? In our preaching? Most people today, even Christians, set out from the presupposition that God is not fundamentally interested in our sins and virtues. He knows that we are all mere flesh. And insofar as people believe in an afterlife and a divine judgment at all, nearly everyone presumes for all practical purposes that God is bound to be magnanimous and that ultimately he mercifully overlooks our small failings. The question no longer troubles us. But are they really so small, our failings? 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 it not laid waste through the power of drugs, which thrives on the one hand on greed and avarice, and on the other hand on the craving for pleasure of those who become addicted? 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 neighbor – of his creatures, of men and women – were more alive in us? I could go on. No, evil is no small matter. Were we truly to place God at the centre of our lives, it could not be so powerful. The question: what is God's position towards me, where do I stand before God? – Luther's burning question must once more, doubtless in a new form, become our question too, not an academic question, but a real one. In my view, this is the first summons we should attend to in our encounter with Martin Luther".

May our Lady of Grace accompany us with her love.

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⁶ *Encounter with the representatives of the Evangelical Church of Germany*, Erfurt 23 September 2011