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## Catholic Tributes to Luther

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JOHN THEODORE MUELLER

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## Catholic Tributes to Luther

### I. As Preacher

In the centuries immediately preceding the Reformation the preaching monks regaled their hearers with tales of Troy and silly stories of the saints in order to catch the penny collection, and "penny preachers" they were called by Brother Berthold of Regensburg in the thirteenth century.

Even Cardinal and Archbishop Stephen Langton of Canterbury preached on an old French dancing song, applying "the Fair Alice" to the Virgin. "Stale and absurd" such things were called by the Dominican Jacob Eckard.

Geiler von Kaisersberg at Strassburg preached a whole course of sermons on Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*. Benito Mussolini (in his *John Hus*) quotes Hus: "Alas! In my youth I once participated in a masquerade. An infamous student was designated as bishop; then he was placed astride an ass with his face turned towards its tail; and thus he was conducted to Mass. In front of him were carried a bowl of soup and a tankard of beer, and even in the church were these things kept before him. I saw him offer incense at the altar, raise one foot in the air and call in a loud voice: 'It is drunk!' And the students carried before him some huge torches in the manner of tapers; he went on offering incense from altar to altar; then the students turned their caps inside out and began to dance in the church, and the people looked on and laughed and imagined that holy and legitimate rites were being performed."

Erasmus was in the papal chapel to hear a sermon delivered before Pope Julius II and a congregation of great churchmen on Good Friday.

The preacher began with praising the Pope as Jupiter Tonans, hurling from his potent hand the thunderbolt of war and shaking the earth by his nod. Then Decius, Curtius, Regulus, even Iphigenia, were brought in to illustrate the sacrifice of the Cross, and parallels were drawn between Socrates, Epaminondas, Phocion, Scipio, and the Author of Christianity, who, however, was not expressly named, the word "Jesus" not being in the Ciceronian vocabulary, to which the reverend orator strictly confined himself.

On the Feast of St. John Baptist in 1517 in the presence of Leo X the preacher appealed to the gods and goddesses "in a manner more pagan than Christian," writes Paris de Grassis, Master of Ceremonies.

Mario Equicola at the beatification of Leo X quoted Castor, Romulus, and others, who had been raised to be gods.

At the Lateran Council the bishops were told the name of Christ would have been forgotten but for the monks; outside the convents few Italians knew any theology.

Marsilio Ficino was charged with practicing magical arts; he mixed up Platonism with Christianity to a dangerous extent. He addressed his hearers as "beloved in Plato." Lamps were burned before his picture, he was ranked with the Apostles and the Prophets; feasts were celebrated in his honor, his writings were to be read in the churches on Sundays.

At the funeral of Cardinal Bibbiena and in the presence of the Pope, Pierio Valeriano appealed to the cardinal's shade, "We ask not to what part of Olympus thine immortal virtue has led thee in thy golden chariot; but when thou passest through the

heavenly spheres, and when thou beholdest the heroes there, then forget not to pray to the King of heaven and the other gods that, if they wish to enjoy the worship of others on earth, they may add to Leo's life the years of which the impious Fates have deprived thee and Giuliano de' Medici."

In a letter to the Elector-Cardinal-Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz Erasmus put in a good word for Luther and said, "It has distressed pious minds to hear in the universities scarcely a single discourse about the doctrine of the Gospel, to see those sacred authors so long approved by the Church now considered antiquated, to hear in sermons very little about Christ, but a great deal about the power of the Pope, and the opinion of recent writers thereon. Every discourse openly manifests self-interest, flattery, ambition, and pretense."

A reformation was needed; it came.

Staupitz deserted Dr. Luther, but shortly before his death on December 28, 1524, wrote to Luther: "My love for you is most constant, passing the love of women, always unbroken. . . . We owe much to you, Martin, for having led us back from the husks that swine did eat to the pastures of life and the words of salvation."

Lilly says, "Luther departed wholly from the established type of sermon, founding himself not upon the Scholastics, but upon the Bible, and especially upon the Epistles attributed to St. Paul." "Luther wielded with supreme dominion the High Dutch (*sic!*) dialect spoken by his countrymen, and made of it the German language. 'A most powerful master of the German language' he has been called; and with good reason. . . . His words are instinct with life. They burn with purpose and power. 'He flashes out illumination from him.' Carlyle well says, 'His smiting idiomatic phrases seem to cleave into the very secret of the matter.' And this marvelous power of expression doubtless came from the intensity and directness of his insight. 'Those demoniac eyes of his,' which so impressed Cardinal Aleander [Cajetan?], were true symbols of his mental vision. . . . He saw it as no one else. And he made his hearers, his readers, see it as he saw it, and believe in his belief. There are few things more notable about him than his extraordinary personal ascendancy over his followers. . . . It was an ascendancy, as Nisard notes, which kept well-nigh all of them under his yoke until his death."

Audin testifies, "For the first time, a Christian preacher was seen to abandon the Schoolmen and draw his texts and illustrations from the writings of inspiration." "Luther knew the secret of the gifts which God had bestowed upon him. His language consorted with his external appearance. Sometimes it floated in a lyrical excess, or savored of intoxication, to use an expression of Erasmus;

sometimes it was coquettish like a female, employing allegory as a veil, to excite curiosity; by turns simple as a parable, impassioned as an ode; daring as an eagle in its flight, or like a white-plumed dove, as Menzel says; and sometimes so indifferent to human art, so disdainful of every check, so extravagant in its conduct, that his language seemed not that of a priest, but rather of another Hans Sachs. Even the Catholics were seduced, and attributed to the influence of evil spirits, as did Prateolus, that deceptive charm which, according to his disciples, breathed of the Holy Ghost: a wonderful organization, destined to command wherever there was trouble. Place him in the time of the Gracchi, and he would have carried with him the senate and the people; in that of the Crusades, and he would have repeated, had he believed, the miracles of St. Bernard; in a public assembly like the National, and he would have been something greater than Mirabeau if he had faith; in the seventeenth century, in our Catholic pulpits, and he would have been a second Bossuet and Bridaine." "If he ascended the pulpit, the people expected with anxiety the words which were to drop from his mouth. His eye, which seemed to roll in an orbit of fire, his large brow, his flushed face, as after high excitement, his threatening gesture, his voice which roared like thunder, the burning breath with which his bosom was charged, cast his hearers into terror or ecstasies. It was known when Luther was in the pulpit by the suspended breathing of the audience, 'who hesitated as if the Lord,' says Calvin, 'were thundering by the lips of the preacher.' Beza said, 'Luther is an excellent organ of God, divinely inspired; he that does not sense the Spirit of God in him does not sense anything.' He returns to the strife impassioned with that language in which he is so powerful and unrivaled; to that fiery eloquence which inflames, excites, and electrifies like a war song, and which alarms even his disciples."

Florimond de Rémond says, "Nature had been very favorable to him, both in body and mind. For . . . he had an active and lively genius, a happy memory, much ease of expression, eloquent and fluent beyond any of his time. When he was in the pulpit, full of fire and energy, he threw a life into everything he said and, like a torrent, carried with him the minds of his hearers; a grace which is unnatural to the people of the North."

Erasmus wrote Luther in 1526, "I know the violence of your speech and the forest-torrent that plunges from the mountain with terrible roar and tears with it blocks of rocks and trunks of trees."

Janssen observes, "Luther's expression is rich and pithy; his exposition full of movement and life; his similes, with all their simplicity, seize and fire the imagination; he drew from the richest sources of the tongue of the people; in popular eloquence few have come near him."

## II. As Teacher

The crowned poet Petrarch, priest, canon, archdeacon, friend of Popes and princes, called by some "the first modern man," poured the vials of scorn on the Scholastic system and branded the universities as nests of ignorance, adorning fools with pompous degrees of Master and Doctor.

He wrote Giovanni Colonna, "The real wisdom of God is Christ. In order to attain true philosophy, we must love and reverence Him above all things. We must first be Christians—then we may be what we will. Through the Gospel of Christ alone can we become wise and happy. On the Gospel alone as upon the one immovable foundation can human diligence build all true learning."

Lilly says Aeneas Sylvius, Pope Pius II, told the University of Vienna, "Our whole study is in empty quibbles."

"Erasmus, more than anyone else, represented the revolt of the intellect against this philosophy."

Nisard has pungently characterized the philosophy dominant at the opening of the sixteenth century as "an amalgam of the corrupted tradition of Aristotle with the not less corrupted tradition of Christianity."

Savonarola thundered, "Why, instead of expounding so many books—Aristotle and Plato, Vergil and Petrarch—do they not expound the one Book in which is the law and spirit of life?"

Adriano Corneto in 1507 at Bologna published his *True Philosophy*, in which he says Holy Scripture is the only source of all faith and all knowledge, and condemns Aristotle, whom Christians must avoid. Cardinal Castellesi said the same.

Baudrillart says, "Erasmus committed Humanism to absolute contempt for the Scholastic philosophy." "The Italian Humanists mocked at Scholasticism." "The ribald and blasphemous witticisms of Rabelais amused a greater number of people than they scandalized"—in the fourth book of *Pantagruel*. In the *Gargantua* he "ridicules the doctors of the Sorbonne. He was an adversary of the clergy; he revived the mockery and gross invective of the poets of the 14. and 15. centuries against priests and monks; a rival of Luther in his pamphlets against the Pope." Michelet calls him a "great prophet, of profound faith." Bishop Jean du Bellay of Paris called Rabelais' book "a new gospel, and pre-eminently *the* book."

Dean John Colet of St. Paul's denounced Aquinas: "If he had not been possessed with arrogance, he would not have defined everything with so much temerity and pride; and if he had not had something of the worldly spirit, he would not have corrupted the whole doctrine of Christ with his profane philosophy."

Bishop Gore comments, "No one can interpret the Reformation rightly, on its religious side, who does not bear in mind the existence of a widespread and passionate desire to get back to the Christ of the Gospels and the primitive Church."

Erasmus ridicules the vain efforts of the Schoolmen, those pseudo-theologians. They define the indefinable, they distinguish the indistinguishable, and they divide the indivisible. They are like the heads of the Hydra: the more you cut them, the more they grow. He agreed with St. Ambrose that it did not please God to save men by dialectic, as he wrote to Martin Dorp.

In the *Praise of Folly* he says the Schoolmen "possess such learning and subtlety that I fancy that even the Apostles themselves would need another Spirit if they had to engage with this new race of divines."

Martin Pollich, "the Light of the World," "the First Rector and Parent" of the University of Wittenberg, opposed the studies of the day. Audin says, "At Leipzig, where for some time he was professor, the School divinity had been the subject of his ridicule; all its divines, in succession, had fallen under the weight of the Doctor's sarcasms; even Thomas, the angel of the Schoolmen, had not been spared."

Francis Bacon rejected the authority of the Schoolmen.

Egmund of the University of Louvain feared the New Testament "written" by Erasmus would bring the whole Scholastic and monastic system to an end. Fool that he was, he was not altogether a fool.

Pastor admits Scholasticism had become degenerated and furthermore says, Carmelites of Bologna held there was no harm in asking for things from demons. Astrology was at home in the universities of Padua, Milan, and Bologna.

In Bergamo a canon of the cathedral preached Christ suffered not from love of the human race, but was forced by astral influences; and theft and robbery are not mortal sins.

The Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, the Warden of New College, and the Dean of Cardinal College in February, 1528, consulted an astrologer in order to find Garret, who had spread Lutheran books.

Sixtus IV and Paul III believed in astrology. Julius II put off his enthronement till the stars pointed out a lucky day. Had not Marsilio Ficino foretold Giovanni de' Medici would sit in the seat of St. Peter? And now the credulity of Leo X increased.

The great wit Saint Sir Thomas More was quite sure miracles happened at shrines. The prince of letters, Erasmus, hung votive offerings in churches. He used a charm, a cup marked with an "astrological lion" which gave virtue to his drink. He consulted

the notorious quack **Philippus Theophrastus Aureolus Bombastes Paracelsus**.

Well, if **Vergil**, **Cicero**, and **Seneca** believed in astrology, why not their disciples?

**Mark Twain** joked, "Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it." All the world of Humanists talked about Scholasticism; nobody did anything about it—with one exception. Luther was the only one to do anything about it.

In a disputation on September 4, 1517, he dethroned Aristotle and enthroned Christ. He gave grave offense at the universities of Erfurt, Leipzig—and Wittenberg. Early in 1518 he wrote his old master **Trutvetter** at Erfurt, "I absolutely believe that it is impossible to reform the Church unless the canons, the decretals, the Scholastic theology, philosophy, and logic, as they are now treated, are utterly rooted up and new studies put in their place. I may seem to you no logician, nor perhaps am I; but one thing I know, that in defense of this opinion I fear no man's logic." He wrote, "Aristotle gradually descends to eternal ruin. The lectures on the 'Sentences' are wonderfully disdained. Only teachers of the new Biblical theology can hope for hearers."

**Christopher Scheurl**, Professor of Law, wrote a great change in theological studies was in sight, and soon it would be possible to become a theologian without either Aristotle or Plato.

**Roger Bacon** in the thirteenth century said, "If I had all the books of Aristotle in my power, I should cause every one of them to be burned, because studying them is a loss of time and a cause of error and a multiplication of ignorance, beyond what can be explained."

**Pope Martin V** preached, "While we possess Augustine, what care we for the sagacity of Aristotle, the eloquence of Plato, the prudence of Varro, the dignified gravity of Socrates, the authority of Pythagoras, or the skill of Empedocles?"

**Clayton** admits, theological studies in monasteries and priories were at the ebb. Scholasticism had petered out in trivialities and futile questions. The laity thus shepherded were but scantily taught the rudiments of Christian faith and morals . . . multitudes grew up in ignorance.

Learning was regarded with aversion by the priesthood, unlearned and not trained to desire learning. . . . **Erasmus** and other German Humanists were ill prepared for the theological controversy raised by Luther.

**Joseph Clayton** writes, Luther's two catechisms are "admirably effective for the instruction of ministers and laity. . . . Luther's intimate knowledge of the people for whom he wrote, is manifest in these catechisms. No invective nor violent abuse of the Pope, the Mass, or the old religion of Germany distract the



reader or arouse ill will to the author. Luther, writing for people still nominally Catholic but largely ignorant of Catholic faith and doctrine, avoids creating prejudice against his evangel. He intrudes no comments liable to hostile interpretation. The old Catholic rule, long obscured through the neglect of bishops and parish priests, is followed in the Little Catechism. . . . His purpose was to establish a lively and reasonable Christian faith among people growing up in doubt and extreme perplexity — the old order being apparently overthrown, a new order not plainly set up — and to check the flood of paganism that threatened to submerge all Christian belief and the very existence of all moral law.

"When Luther wrote, he rarely wrote in vain. The catechisms did achieve very largely the purpose of their author. Thousands lost to the Catholic Church were saved from utter unbelief by these documents. . . .

"Luther's was not the first, but it was so vastly superior to anything of the sort in existence that it swiftly won its tremendous popularity. Several attempts had been made to answer the Lutheran catechism, but they were, unhappily, dull. Dullness is fatal to a catechism. Indeed it takes a man of genius for popular writing and combined with scholarship."

Alander on April 5, 1521, wrote Cardinal Medici the Pope should "by praise and reward encourage men of talent to make an intelligent study of Scripture and put their pens to work, after the example of the Germans, in defense of the faith."

Lilly writes, "In his lectures Professor Luther went back from Aquinas to Augustine, from the *Sentences* to the Scriptures, with no thought of disloyalty to the Church. An appeal from the degenerate disciples of Aquinas and Scotus to Christ and His Apostles."

Audin says, "The monks then ruled the schools, under the shadow of Aristotle: a revolution was required to overthrow their dynasty. . . .

"They found themselves opposed to an adversary who had himself been educated in the schools, a monk also, who required no inspiration of wit from the ancients, but whose ridicule was impassioned and fiery . . . and who was the first to introduce into theological controversy warmth, eloquence, intemperate and coarse language. . . . Luther's ax was too weighty for them to wield."

"A few words dropped from an obscure chair, by a professor who had not even wherewith to cover himself in winter, excited the Catholic world . . . in Latin, of which he was absolute master.

"Never before had been heard from any chair in Saxony an exposition so luminous as that of the professor, upon the Old and New Testaments. He spent days and nights on it, scarcely eating or sleeping."

### III. As Translator

Duke George of Saxony hated Luther with a perfect hatred, but liked his German New Testament immensely. He heartily wished the scoundrel would put the whole Bible into German and then go to the devil.

Luther cheerfully fulfilled the first part of the pious wish.

Jerome Emser, secretary to Duke George, severely denounced Luther's New Testament. Then he "took" it, put in some errors, his notes, and copies of Luther's pictures, bought from Cranach for forty dollars, and published it under his own name! Imitation is sincere flattery, but misappropriation is the sincerest flattery.

John Dietenberger took practically Luther's whole German Bible and published it under his own name! What a sincere tribute to Luther!

John Cochlaeus, "the Scourge of Luther," scourged Luther for his German New Testament. "Tailors and shoemakers, yes, even women and other simple idiots read it most eagerly as the fountain of all truth. Some carried it about and learned it by heart. Within a few months they trusted they had so much competence and experience that they were not afraid to dispute not only with Catholic laymen, but also with priests and monks, yes, even with Masters and Doctors of Theology about faith and the Gospel. The Lutheran crowd was much more diligent to learn the Bible than the Catholics themselves, since the laymen left that care to the priests and monks. Thus the Lutheran laymen could often readily quote Scripture more than the Catholic monks and priests. And they were taught by Luther to believe and accept nothing but what was taken from Scripture. Therefore the Catholics had to bear it to be accused of, and blamed for, their ignorance and stupidity, though otherwise the most learned theologians. . . . The Lord graciously kept some from bending the knee to the Saxon Baal. . . .

"The Lutheran books were usually printed most beautifully and carefully, but the Catholic books carelessly and corrupt. A countless crowd sold Lutheran books all over Germany. Bibles were burned."

Bishop John Faber of Vienna, court preacher of King Ferdinand, was against indulgences and Eck, and friendly towards Luther, but later he wailed bitterly Luther's Bible had done more damage than all the hail in Egypt.

Kaspar Ulenberg at Koeln in 1617 got out a revision of his own, but says of Luther's Bible, "What Luther held to be the meaning of the text he clothed in pure and beautiful German, on the extremely fine development of which he had all his life spent much labor. In the German language he surpassed all, and no one could be compared with him. In this translation of the Bible

he really took pains above all through a certain beauty and grace of speech to attract all to read and to win the minds of men."

Audin "cannot forget that of which Germany is so justly proud—the German Bible, the noblest monument which he has raised to his native country. . . . We are pleased with the cultivator of art and poetry; in the prefaces—which are models of style—the genius of the translator is tinged with the colors of the original. There are pages which flow spontaneously from his pen, so full of inspiration that you might fancy you heard the Prophet himself. For example, in his estimate of the Psalms, a book of which he was passionately fond. . . . He is engaged upon a colossal work, which would daunt any other but himself—the translation of the Bible into the German language, a task of which the accomplishment has invested his reputation as a scholar with so bright a halo. . . . We cling to that wondrous being. There is in the letters which he writes from his 'Patmos' a mass of internal paintings which captivate by the finish of the details, almost like a picture by Karel du Jardin. . . . His incontestable glory. . . . Both Catholics and Protestants regarded it as an honor done to their ancient idiom."

Friedrich von Schlegel says, "It is well known to you that all true philologists regard this as the standard and model of classical expression in the German language; and that not only Klopstock but many other writers of the first rank have fashioned their style and selected their phrases according to the rules of this version. . . . We owe to him the highest gratitude for placing in our hands this most noble and manly model of German expression. Even in his own writings he displays a most original eloquence, surpassed by but few names that occur in the whole history of literature, He had, indeed, all those qualities which fit a man to be a revolutionary orator. . . .

"As to the intellectual power and greatness of Luther . . . I think there are few, even of his own disciples, who esteem him highly enough. . . . It was upon him and his soul that the fate of Europe depended."—*Lect. Hist. Lit.*

"None of the other heads and leaders of the new religious party had the power, or were in a situation, to uphold the Protestant religion: its present existence is solely and entirely the work and the deed of one man, unique in his way, and who holds unquestionably a conspicuous place in the history of the world."—*Philosophy of History*.

Prof. Seb. Merkle of Wuerzburg admits, "Luther proved himself a gigantic and original theologian in finding justification by faith alone, apart from the works of the Law. Denifle was the

first to deny this. Dr. F. X. Kiefl, Professor of Dogmatics at Wuerzburg, with all vigor defended Luther against the assault of Denifle."

Ernesto Buonaiuti is more bitter than Janssen, Denifle, and Grisar, but he defends Luther against Denifle's charge of "Ignoramus or Liar" in the matter of Rom. 1:16, 17. He pays his tribute to Luther's genial translation of the Bible.

Cardinal Newman says with reluctant admiration, "The translated Bible is the stronghold of heresy."

Froude adds, "It was the seat and center of real infallibility to those whose consciences rejected the false infallibility of the Pope."

#### IV. As Hymnist

Audin gives "unreserved praise to the hymns which he translated from Latin into German, and which he composed. He is grave, solemn, simple, grand. . . . He was at once the poet and musician of a great number of his hymns."

Joseph von Eichendorff, died 1857: "The first Protestant Church hymns are fine war hymns, made in the turmoil of mental battle or in times of distress in the nightly rounds of sentry service, full of manly trust in good luck and bad luck, and all hardly thinkable without song. Here, too, Luther's heroic, utterly popular personality and moving language mastery with his 'A Mighty Fortress' opened the way."

Baudrillart asks and answers his question, "To what must be attributed this growth of virtue which we respectfully and joyfully acknowledge in our separated brethren when we come across it?"

"It must be attributed to the Christian life left by the Reformation; to that religious sentiment which is certainly not more Protestant than Catholic, but which is absolutely Christian, although too many Catholics think they can do without it; to the reading of the Bible, when they have remained faithful to it, for the Bible has placed them in presence of revealed truth—of the Gospel; to those hymns so beautiful and penetrating which have kept up religious emotion and often a real piety in their souls in spite of the natural aridity of the cult."

Erich Sinz tells us, "A priest searched a Lutheran hymnal for dogmatic errors, but with the best of will found none. He was surprised at the beauty of many a hymn and the stream of grace breaking through all over."

Joseph Clayton says after the Council of Trent "the very music of the Church was changed when Palestrina became director of music at Rome; the old ribald and florid stuff was prohibited—to the distress of its admirers and the indignation of singers and choirs who revelled in its performance."

An influential reformer, that man Luther.

Oak Park, Ill.

WILLIAM DALLMANN