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How Dr. Martin Luther Died

By THEO. HOYER

Since 1883 Lutherans, and generally all Protestants, have observed the 400th anniversary of the chief events in the life of the great Reformer: Luther's birth; the posting of the Ninety-five Theses; the Diet of Worms; the publication of Luther's two Catechisms; the Diet of Augsburg; the preparation of the Smalcald Articles. This year we reach the end; the 18th of February marks the 400th return of the day of Luther's death. Judging by past experience, notice of this anniversary will be taken in most church periodicals. Not all of it will be friendly; old legends will be warmed up, old suspicions and insinuations repeated. It is well that we recall to memory what is known of Luther's last days.

In preparation for the 400th anniversary of the Reformation (1917) Dr. W. H. T. Dau published a little brochure under the title *Luther Examined and Re-examined*. It is not as widely known as it deserves to be. We reprint one of the last chapters in the book.

LUTHER ANNOUNCES HIS DEATH

Mark Twain awoke one morning to find himself reported dead. He did not accept the invitation suggested in the report, but wired to his friends: "Reports of my death grossly exaggerated." Luther was placed in a similar predicament by Catholics, who were deeply interested in the question how long he was to continue to live. One day in the early part of March, 1545, he was handed a printed letter in Italian which contained the news of his demise under curious circumstances.

He thought that he ought not to withhold this interesting information from the world: he had a German translation made of the document, which he published with his remarks as follows:

"Copy of a Letter of the Ambassador of the Most Christian King Regarding a Horrible Sign Which Occurred in the Shameful Death of Martin Luther.

"A horrible and unheard-of miracle which the blessed God has wrought in the shameful death of Martin Luther, who went to hell, soul and body, as may be clearly seen from a chapter of the letter of the ambassador of the Most Christian King, to the praise and glory of Jesus Christ and the confirmation and comfort of the faithful.

"COPY OF THE LETTER

"1. Martin Luther, having been taken ill, desired the holy Sacrament of the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. He died immediately upon receiving it. When he saw that his sickness was very violent and he was near death, he prayed that his body might be placed on an altar and worshiped as God. But the goodness and providence of God had resolved to put an end to his great error and to silence him forever. Accordingly, God did not omit to work this great miracle, which was very much needed, to cause the people to desist from the great, destructive, and ruinous error which the said Luther has caused in the world. As soon as his body had been placed in the grave, an awful rumbling and noise was heard, as if hell and the devils were collapsing. All present were seized with a great fright, terror, and fear, and when they raised their eyes to heaven, they plainly saw the most holy host of our Lord Jesus Christ which this unworthy man was permitted to receive unworthily. I affirm that all who were present saw the most holy host visibly floating in the air. They took the most holy host very devoutly and with great reverence and gave it a decent place in the sanctuary.

"2. When this had been done, no such tumult and hellish rumbling was heard any more that day. However, during the following night, at the place where Martin Luther's corpse had been buried, there was heard by everybody in the community a much greater confusion than the first time. The people arose and flocked together in great fear and terror.

At daybreak they went to open the grave where the wicked body of Luther had been placed. When the grave was opened, you could clearly see that there was no body, neither flesh nor bone, nor any clothes. But such a sulphuric stench rose from the grave that all who were standing around the grave turned sick. On account of this miracle many have reformed their lives by returning to the holy Christian faith, to the honor, praise, and glory of Jesus Christ, and to the strengthening and confirmation of His holy Christian Church, which is a pillar of truth."

Luther appended the following comment to this pious document:

"And I, Martinus Luther, D., do by these indentures acknowledge and testify that I have received this angry fiction concerning my death on the twenty-first day of March, and that I have read it with considerable pleasure and joy, except the blasphemous portion of the document in which this lie is attributed to the exalted majesty of God. Otherwise I felt quite tickled on my knee-cap and under my left heel at this evidence how cordially the devil and his minions, the Pope and the papists, hate me. May God turn them from the devil!

"However, if it is decreed that theirs is a sin unto death and that my prayer is in vain, then may God grant that they fill up their measure and write nothing else but such books for their comfort and joy. Let them run their course; they are on the right track; they want to have it so. Meanwhile I want to know how they are going to be saved and how they will atone for, and revoke, all their lies and blasphemies with which they have filled the world." (XXI b, 3376 f.)

Similar even more grotesque tales have been served the faithful by Catholic writers. The star production of this kind was published years ago in the *Ohio-Waisenfreund*. It related that horrible and uncanny signs had accompanied Luther's death. Weird shrieks and noises were heard; devils were flying about in the air; the heavens were shrouded in a pall of gloom. When the funeral cortege started from Eisleben, a vast flock of ravens had gathered and accompanied the corpse, croaking incessantly and uttering dismal cries all the way to Wittenberg, etc., etc.

These crude stories have now been censored out of existence. Catholics nowadays prefer to lie in a more refined

and cultured manner about Luther's death: Luther committed suicide; he was found hanging from his bedpost one morning.

Comment is unnecessary.

Luther died peacefully in the presence of friends, confessing Christ and asserting with his last breath his firm allegiance to the faith he had proclaimed. The probable cause of his death was a stroke of paralysis. Luther began to feel pains in the chest late in the afternoon of February 17, 1546. He bore up manfully and continued working at his business for the Count of Mansfeld who had called him to Eisleben. After a light evening meal he sat chatting in a cheerful mood with his companions, and retired early, as was his custom in his declining years. The pains in the chest became worse, and he began to feel chilly. Medicaments were administered, and after a while he fell into a slumber, which lasted an hour. He awoke with increased pain and a feeling of great congestion, which caused the death perspiration to break out. He was rapidly turning cold. All this time he was praying and reciting portions from the Psalms and other texts. Three times in succession he repeated his favorite text, John 3:16. Gradually he became peaceful, and his end was so gentle that the bystanders were in doubt whether he had expired or was only in a swoon. They worked with him, trying to rouse him, until they were convinced that he had breathed his last. The Catholic apothecary John Landau, who had been called in while Luther was thought to be in a swoon, helped to establish the fact of his death.

So far Dr. Dau's chapter. We add some explanations and later findings.

Forty-three years after Luther's death the Italian Oratorian Thomas Bozius published the first account of Luther's "suicide." Fifteen years later the Franciscan Sedulius, the same man whose brain hatched the fantastic brood of ravens resurrected in the *Ohio-Waisenfreund*, repeated the story, which an anonymous servant of Luther had allegedly told to an anonymous "pious man," who told it to an unknown "trustworthy man," from whom (through how many additional mouths deponent sayeth not) it came to Sedulius. The tale was taken up by the Jesuit Gottlieb¹ in 1883, who, however,

¹ Gottlieb, *Hamburger Briefe*, Berlin, 1883.

stated that he personally did not credit the story. Not so P. Majunke,² former editor of the Roman Catholic *Germania*, then priest in Hochkirch at Gross-Glogau. He claimed to have found a new document attesting the fact of Luther's suicide; it was, however, nothing but that tale told by Bozius together with hair-raising accounts of the death of Oecolampadius, Bucer, Calvin, and Zwingli.³

The circumstances surrounding Luther's death were again investigated by D. Th. Kolde, Professor of Historic Theology in Erlangen, Prof. D. Wilhelm Walther of Rostock, and others.

These are the results. Sixteen persons were eyewitnesses of Luther's death: Michael Coelius; Justus Jonas; two of Luther's sons, Paul and Martin; his Wittenberg servant Ambrosius; his host in Eisleben, the secretary of the city, Hans Albrecht; two doctors of Eisleben, Doctor Ludwig and Magister Simon Wilde; Count Albrecht of Mansfeld; Count Henry of Schwarzburg and his wife; Johann Aurifaber; three more Counts of Mansfeld: Philip, Hans Georg, and Vollrath; and Prince Wolf of Anhalt. Within a few hours five of them wrote letters with an account of Luther's departure which are extant: Justus Jonas (to the Elector of Saxony), Albrecht of Mansfeld, Wolf of Anhalt (also to John Frederick of Saxony), Johann Aurifaber (to Michael Gutt in Halle), and Hans Georg of Mansfeld (to Duke Maurice of Saxony). Then Jonas, Coelius, and Aurifaber wrote a detailed *Historia* of Luther's death, with this concluding sentence: "Wir . . . zeugen dies vor Gott und auf unsere eigene letzte Hinfahrt und Gewissen, dass wir dieses nicht anders gehoert und gesehen . . . und dass wir es nicht anders erzaehlen, denn wie es allenthalben ergangen und geschehen." All of these accounts agree; the brief statement of Dr. Dau above is fact.⁴

Over and above this we have the report of a Catholic eyewitness, a *Mansfelder Buerger*, published by Luther's bitter enemy Joh. Cochlaeus, separately at first, then as part of his biography of Luther. The Catholic N. Paulus has convincingly demonstrated that this *Mansfelder Buerger* was none

² *Luthers Lebensende*. Eine historische Untersuchung von Paul Majunke, Mainz, 1890.

³ The accounts of Bozius and of Sedulius quoted by Kolde, *Luthers Selbstmord*, p. 26 f. and p. 41 f.

⁴ Kolde, *Luthers Selbstmord*, p. 11 ff. — W. Walther, *Fuer Luther wider Rom*, p. 193.

other than the Catholic apothecary in Eisleben, Johann Landau, who was called in to revive Luther.⁵ This is his report: "Feria quarta in coena rursus valde laetus fuit et faceciis fabulisque recitandis dicax omnibus mouens risum. Ad circiter horam Octavam conquestus est, se aliquantulum male habere sicut Epistola (the letter of Jonas) de eo scripta refert. Post medium noctis repente vocati sunt ad eum duo Medici, quorum alter Doctor alter Magister erat: Qui ubi advenerunt non repererunt in eo ullum amplius pulsum. Scripserunt tamen mox receptum quoddam pro emittendo Clisterio seu Enemate" etc. (The procedure is then described, and he continues:) "Quandoquidem et antea aliquoties pro mortuo habitus fuerat, sine motu et sensu vitae aliquandiu iacens id quod Smalcaldiae quoque eidem acciderat, quando calculo excruciatu esset. . . . Idcirco iussus est Apothecarius odorifera aqua illa ungere ac fricare corpus mortui. Qui sane sedulo ac impigre iussa peragens applicuit aquam illam multis fricationibus aliquamdiu naribus, ori, fronti, pulsui ac mammae sinistrae."⁶

In Majunke's reference to that premature announcement of Luther's death we catch a glimpse of history writing as it should not be. He asserts that Luther himself manufactured and spread that story, so that later it could be said: "That's nothing new; a year before his death that tall tale was told" — as though Luther expected the devil to get him and prepared for that emergency. The Reformer, Majunke says, often acted on the principle: The end justifies the means; his conviction was "ad papatum decipiendum omnia licere." He gave no reference for this citation; but the phrase already had a history; Joh. Janssen had cited it (*Deutsche Geschichte*, II:107) and translated: "Wir halten dafuer, dass uns zur Hintergehung und zum Verderben desselben (des Papsttums) um des Heiles der Seelen willen alles erlaubt ist." No reference; but Walther (*Luther im neuesten roemischen Gericht*, Heft II, p. 2) charged him with giving a wrong translation of Luther's words. Answering his friend Joh. Lang, who had objected to Luther's strong language in his *Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Luther admitted having written sharply,

⁵ N. Paulus, *Luthers Lebensende*, p. 67 ff.

⁶ Cited from Cochleus de actis et scriptis Lutheri, in Kolde, *Luthers Selbstmord*, p. 18.

but continued: "Nos hic persuasi sumus papatum esse veri et germani illius Antichristi sedem, in cuius deceptionem et nequitiam ob salutem animarum nobis omnia licere arbitramur."⁷ Janssen in later editions changed his translation; but Majunke promptly changed the original to justify his rendering; he cited Luther as saying: "ad cuius deceptionem," etc. In the second edition he silently omitted this; neither he nor Janssen ever confessed the error in the first edition; and this had gone out, to be quoted to this day. Against the charge that Luther himself had written and spread the false report of his death it was pointed out that it was originally written in Italian; moreover there is extant the letter of Philip of Hesse to Luther telling how the document came to him; Philip's letter to the Elector in which he asks that the Italian document be sent to Luther and encloses the letter of the man in Augsburg who had sent it to Philip, stating that the document had been printed in Naples. And Majunke must have known all this; for he quoted a note of Seckendorf's *Commentarius historicus* in which occurs a reference to that premature report and those who even then spread the rumor that Luther had written it; and on the same page Seckendorf names the letters which tell how Luther received it.

The facts of Luther's death are as well attested as any event in history, and Catholic historians who value their reputation acknowledge it. Grisar⁸ gives a correct and detailed account, which is based, he states, on letters of eyewitnesses, the report of Landau, and the *Historia* of Jonas, Coelius, and Aurifaber; and though he thinks that the *Historia* contains "palpable exaggerations concerning the pious aphorisms and prayers of Luther," he adds: "There is, however, no adequate warrant for impugning the substantial credibility of this and other accounts, as has been done in recent times. . . . The fable of Luther's alleged suicide, which some writers (notably P. Majunke) have exploited in recent years, is based on an apocryphal letter, attributed to an alleged servant of Luther, whose name is not mentioned. . . . The fable belongs to a

⁷ De Wette, *Luthers Briefe*, I, 478. Enders, *Luthers Briefwechsel*, II, 461.

⁸ *Martin Luther, His Life and Work*. By Hartmann Grisar, S. J. St. Louis, 1935, pp. 575, 576, 578.—The book carries the *Nihil Obstat* of Joannes Rothensteiner, Censor Librorum, and the Imprimatur of Archbishop Glennon.

category of inventions, quite common at the time, devised for the purpose of imputing a disgraceful death to an opponent, especially if he happened to be an ecclesiastic. Many prominent men were made to die in despair and impenitence, or to terminate their lives by suicide." And at the end of a long list of such fables he concludes: "These tales merely prove how greatly the Catholics had been horrified at Luther's conduct"; which is obviously an admission that Catholics invented them. Joseph Clayton⁹ closes the account: "Jonas of Wittenberg and another friend, Coelius, the court preacher to the Count of Mansfeld, were with him when the stroke came and, pressing the dying man for an answer to their question whether he died faithful to the doctrine of Christ which he preached, received a whispered 'Yes' for the reply they sought. So died Martin Luther, and many fantastic legends sprang up concerning his death as friend or foe sought to glorify or defame this extraordinary man. Not so died the movement which he, and he alone, had created."

The *Historia* records Luther's last prayer (Walch, *Luthers Werke*, Vol. XXI, Nachlese, p. 287): "O mein himmlischer Vater, ein Gott und Vater unsers Herrn Jesu Christi, du Gott alles Trostes! Ich danke dir, dass du mir deinen lieben Sohn Jesum Christum geoffenbart hast, an den ich glaube, den ich gepredigt und bekannt habe, den ich geliebet und gelobet habe, welchen der leidige Papst und alle Gottlosen schaenden, verfolgen und laestern. Ich bitte dich, mein Herr Jesu Christe, lass dir mein Seelichen befohlen sein. O himmlischer Vater, ob ich schon diesen Leib lassen und aus diesem Leben hinweggerissen werden muss, so weiss ich doch gewiss, dass ich bei dir ewig bleiben und aus deinen Haenden mich niemand reissen kann."

St. Louis, Mo.

⁹ *Luther and His Work*. Milwaukee, 1937, p. 189. Published as a number of the "Science and Culture Series," of which Joseph Husslein, S. J., of St. Louis University, is general editor. Nihil Obstat: H. B. Ries, Censor Librorum. Imprimatur: Samuel A. Stritch, Archbishop of Milwaukee.