
Catholic Encounters with Martin Luther

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Luther's theological insights have been fascinating me for nearly fifty years, with influence on my teaching at the Jesuit School of Theology in Chicago in the 1970s and then at the Gregorian University in Rome. Since I left the Gregorian in 2004, Luther has continued to be a source of theological ideas to communicate to Lutherans and Catholics, and to combine in key ways with my own spiritual formation in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola.

This essay does not offer a survey of Catholic Luther scholarship, but is instead a personal memoir, looking back upon my own varied encounters with Luther. I have met him along the way of a life of theological scholarship, teaching, and work on ecumenical commissions. My perceptions of the Reformer have led to my published efforts at proper historical reconstruction of Luther's

development, at analytical organizing of his teaching, and at framing Luther's theological contributions to sound theology and greater personal depth in Christian believing and acting.

1. Early Encounter with Luther in Münster

My doctoral studies in the mid-1960s were at Münster, where the University had both Catholic and Evangelical theology faculties. It was for me a sustained encounter with Luther's early works and with the Luther scholarship on hand at the time. The work was theological in character, even though I was often surrounded by Reformation historians. For the doctorate in the Catholic faculty, Erwin Iserloh was my mentor, and a demanding one, at a time when he was developing lines of Luther-interpretation going beyond the work of his own mentor, Joseph Lortz.¹

In my first Münster semester, Iserloh's seminar treated Luther's 1517 intervention on the doctrine and practice of indulgences. My mentor was already famous for contesting, in 1961, the historicity of Luther posting the Ninety-Five Theses on the door of Wittenberg's Castle Church on October 31, 1517.² The seminar was Iserloh's

1. Three substantial contributions by Iserloh to Luther studies are "Sacramentum et exemplum. Ein augustinisches Thema lutherischer Theologie," in *Reformata Reformanda. Festgabe für Hubert Jedin*, 2 vols., ed. Erwin Iserloh und Konrad Reppen (Münster: Aschendorff, 1965), 1:247-64; "Luther und die Mystik," in *Kirche, Mistik, Heiligung und das Natürliche bei Luther*, ed., Ivar Asheim, Vorträge des 3. Internationalen Kongress für Lutherforschung (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1967), 60-83, in English as "Luther's Christ-Mysticism," in *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, ed. Jared Wicks (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970), 37-58; and "Gratia und Donum. Rechtfertigung und Heiligung nach Luthers Schrift 'Wider den Löwener Theologen Latomus' (1520)," in *Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie der Reformation. Festschrift Ernst Bizer*, ed. Luise Abramowski and J. F. Gerhard Goeters (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969), 141-56, and in *Catholica* 24 (1970), 67-83. These and other articles relevant to Luther-Interpretation are in Erwin Iserloh, *Kirche – Ereignis und Institution. Aufsätze und Vorträge* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1985), vol. 2. A full bibliography of Iserloh's publications is now in Uwe Wolff, *Iserloh. Der Thesenanschlag fand nicht statt* (Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag, 2013), 247-67.
2. Erwin Iserloh, *Luthers Thesenanschlag. Tatsache oder Legende?* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1962), first given as a lecture in Mainz, November 8, 1961, sponsored by the Institut für europäische Geschichte.

workplace for preparing the book whose English version is *The Theses Were Not Posted*.³

During that first seminar, I studied a little-known theological treatise by Luther on indulgences and on their rightful (that is, marginal) place in a Christian life of penance. Luther's *Tractatus de indulgentiis* is misplaced in vol. 1 of the Weimar Edition as a sermon of summer 1516, but a Mainz archive preserves it together with Luther's Ninety-Five Theses and his letter to the Mainz Archbishop, Albrecht of Brandenburg, sent from Wittenberg on October 31, 1517.⁴ I take Luther's short treatise as essential for grasping his theological grounds for drawing up the theses with which Reformation doctrinal controversy began.⁵

Luther's *Tractatus* filled the instructional vacuum left by Tetzel and other preachers on indulgences. Luther highlights a present penitential combat against the residue of sin, while insisting on post-justification penance *and* God's interior healing and renewing influence. Luther speaks of a *gratia infusa* that purges concupiscence and unruly affections. Everyone needs this urgently, but indulgences

3. The original German was *Luther zwischen Reform und Reformation. Der Thesenanschlag fand nicht statt* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1966), of which the translation came out from Beacon Press in 1968. Wolff, *Iserloh* (2013), gives Volker Leppin's judgment that Iserloh's amassed Luther texts not mentioning a historical theses-posting clearly outweigh other later texts advanced to prove the historicity of the event (pp. 239–45).

4. Fritz Herrmann, "Luthers Tractatus de indulgentiis," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 28 (1907), 370–73; G. Krüger, "Luthers Tractatus de indulgentiis," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 90 (1917), 507–20; Walther Köhler, *Dokumente zum Ablassstreit von 1517* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2 1934), 94–99. *WA* 1 (1883) placed the text among Luther's sermons of summer 1516: *WA* 1:63–65. Today, the treatise is accessible as part of Luther's correspondence of late October 1517 in *WABr* 12:5–9.

5. My publications on Luther's Treatise began with an introduction, translation, and commentary in "Martin Luther's *Treatise on Indulgences, 1517*," *Theological Studies* 28 (1967): 481–518, which also was part of my dissertation, *Man Yearning for Grace. Luther's Early Spiritual Teaching* (Washington: Corpus, 1968), also published by Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für europäische Geschichte Mainz, 56 (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1969), 238–61, with a German translation of the treatise in the Steiner edition on pp. 431–438. I revised and updated my English translation and presentation of the treatise in Jared Wicks, *Luther's Reform. Studies on Conversion and the Church* (Mainz: Ph. Von Zabern, 1992), 87–116.

per se do not help because, as presented, they remit imposed satisfactory penances—without an interior effect during this life. Regarding the departed souls undergoing purgation, Luther’s proposal was that the standard phrase *per modum suffragii*, concerning indulgences applied to the souls by way of petitionary intercession, was an indication of the church’s prayer of impetration that God grant these souls the infused grace that will overcome their remaining concupiscent spiritual disorders, turn them to God in pure longing, and so make them ready for seeing God in heavenly beatitude.

Luther’s conclusion of his *Tractatus de indulgentiis* became one orientation of my further research on what he had written, taught, and only in part published from 1509 through 1517. This was the era of his early biblical lectures and first anti-scholastic disputations. The last lines of the 1517 treatise on indulgences articulate one recurrent concern of this early work, when it concludes that Christian instruction has to promote a spiritual dedication to penitential purification from the concupiscent affections left after sins are absolved and forgiven. Preaching has to alert people to the danger that indulgences may foster spiritual security, lethargy, and neglect of interior grace. Emphasis has to fall, in ways well known from Augustine’s *Confessions* (especially Book X), on reducing sinful drives and replacing them with longing for God, which occurs by the influence of infused, healing grace. The treatise concludes, “Let us incessantly seek his healing grace” (*assidue sanantem gratiam eius quaeramus*). Thus a *gratia sanans* was an important factor in Luther’s critical position on indulgences in 1517. This mode of God’s influence, with prayer of yearning for this grace, loomed large in my dissertation research as I found it in numerous texts before October 1517. When I handed in my dissertation on Luther’s early spiritual teaching, the title included the phrase, *gemitus pro gratia*, in reference

to the heaving sigh of desire for God's cleansing, renewing, and orienting influence in the heart of a penitent Christian. In 1967 preparation for publication, the title had the time-conditioned form, *Man Yearning for Grace*,⁶ which flattened considerably Luther's Latin phrasing in many accounts of Christian life and penance in his works down to and including the 1517 theses and treatise on indulgences.

I did not realize it during my Münster years, but I was getting more than familiar with an important spiritual trait and dynamic. That earlier study would help me grasp Luther's lifelong thesis that the believer is *simul iustus et peccator*—one of the “hard nuts” we had to crack in preparing and defending the 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, particularly in Part 4.4, “The Justified as Sinner,” which became a model text of “reconciled diversity.”⁷ The *simul* is not a static condition simply to be endured. For the *iustus simul peccator* struggles over his or her interior disorders, emitting prayerful longing for God's healing influence, later called the *dona* given with God's relational and reconciling *gratia*. The *dona*, earlier called *gratia sanans*, enables a practice of self-denial to counteract life-long sinfulness.⁸

6. See the previous note, on this publication.

7. A crucial point is that Catholics do not call remaining concupiscence “sin” in the proper sense, which amounts to a language-rule, about how one predicates “sin,” especially in preaching and catechetics. The two sides agree on the ontology of disorder needing to be rectified.

8. Later I presented an account of Luther's *simul* in a seminar at the 1988 congress on Luther-Research at Oslo and amplified this in “Living and Praying as *simul iustus et peccator*. A Chapter in Luther's Spiritual Teaching,” *Gregorianum* 70 (1989): 521–546, reprinted in *Luther's Reform*, 59–83. Otto Hermann Pesch then took over parts of this essay in “*Simul iustus et peccator*. Sinn und Stellenwert einer Formel Martin Luthers,” in *Gerecht und Sünder zugleich? Ökumenische Klärungen*, ed. Theodor Schneider and Gunther Wenz (Freiburg: Herder, and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 146–67. The studies in this work defend the judgment that the *simul* is not a Lutheran-Catholic church-dividing difference, but is open to reconciliation, as the *Joint Declaration* states.

Luther on Christian Living: Research of 1964–1966

My study in Münster of Luther's early works repeatedly yielded impressive theological and spiritual explanations on Christian living, praying, and struggling with interior disorders of the person. At the time, Luther-research did not have the term *Frömmigkeitstheologie* ("theology for piety"), later introduced by Bernd Hamm, but this is an accurate category for characterizing what Luther regularly presented in his early works.⁹

Luther's lectures on the Psalter (1513–15) and Romans (1515–16) show that the 1517 conclusion of the *Treatise on Indulgences*, on the urgency of seeking God's healing grace, arose from themes of Luther's early biblical work. Christian instruction should personal concern about one's endemic sinfulness, leading to prayerful longing for God's therapeutic influence to free one's heart from the drive of concupiscence and instill righteous movements of willing.

Along with the *Treatise on Indulgences*, another concise expression of Luther's early theology came in theses of 1517, prepared for a September 4 "Disputation against Scholastic Theology."¹⁰ These too rest on God's infused and operative grace and on the spirituality of "incessantly seeking God's healing grace." But the target here is not, as was the case with indulgences, preaching that disorients. Targeted instead are the views of certain Scholastics, especially Gabriel Biel,

9. Bernd Hamm, *Frömmigkeitstheologie am Anfang des 16. Jahrhunderts. Studien zu Johannes von Paltz und seinem Umkreis* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1984), which I reviewed in *Gregorianum* 65 (1984), 200–204. In 1984 I made connections linking Hamm's study of Paltz and Staupitz with Luther's development, in "Fides sacramenti – Fides specialis: Luther's Development in 1518," *Gregorianum* 65 (1984), 53–87, at 58–59; reprinted with small modifications in *Luther's Reform*, 117–147, at 121–22.

10. *WA* 1:224–228, giving ninety-seven theses. But Helmar Junghans divides the text into one hundred theses in Martin Luther, *Studienausgabe*, ed. H.-U. Delius et al., 1 (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1979), 165–172, in which the notes lead to the relevant texts in the scholastic authors against whom Luther directed his theses. However, a different enumeration does not lead to different contents. I follow the text and enumeration of the theses in *WA* 1 because of their wider accessibility.

on a capability of fallen human beings to make moral efforts good, and so “by ones natural powers alone” (*ex puris naturalibus*) to become well-disposed to receive justifying grace.¹¹ Against this Luther posits that the fallen human person is a bad tree that can only will and do evil (Thesis 4). The Scholastics have imported Aristotelian ideas into theology, forgetting that human beings stand in need of redemption (Th. 40–44, 50–53).

Luther’s theses of September 1517 contain eleven counter-pointed assertions which ascribe to God’s grace—not to moral effort—a re-creative, revivifying effect in the human spirit. This is the positive, constructive element underlying in Luther’s anti-scholastic polemic.¹² The theses of early September 1517 tell of the work of infused or healing grace, which was a key notion as well in Luther’s treatise on indulgences.¹³

11. In the margins, “Contra Gabrielem” identifies the adversary of eleven theses. Luther’s marginal notes to Gabriel Biel’s *Collectorium*, on *Sentences*, Bk. III, dist. 27, treat the human ability to love God. *WA* 59:40,27–47,40. The nub of the problem is Biel’s erroneous assumption that the human will is healthy and needs no healing: “insulse arguit, sanam voluntatem praesupponens” (45,40).
12. I was critical of Leif Grane’s monograph on this disputation, *Contra Gabrielem* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1962), for its neglect of the renewing efficacy Luther ascribed to grace, for example, on grace making righteousness abound, because it instills good-pleasure toward observing the law: “*Gratia autem dei facit abundare iustitiam per Ihesum Christum, quia facit placere legem*” (Thesis 75, *WA* 1:227,33–34).
13. In the September theses, prevenient divine grace, not the fallen human nature and will, is the source of authentic love of God, termed “the love of friendship” (Th. 20), in which the person is converted to God (Th. 27). Grace must coexist with human actions for the latter to have value as meritorious (Th. 54). The reason for these and the following conclusions about grace is that it is never a static or idle presence, but is active as “a living, moving, and operative spirit” (*vivus, mobilis et operosus spiritus*) (Th. 55a). To be sure, such grace does not fully suppress the anger and lust of fallen humans (Th. 65b), but it works at such suppression (Th. 67). In fact, by such grace, righteousness abounds through Jesus Christ (Rom 5:15), because it instills good pleasure in observing the law (Th. 75). Therefore, “blessed are all those who carry out the works of God’s grace” (Th. 80). Because the imperatives of the law grate on fallen human nature, grace must enter as a *mediatrix* to reconcile the will to the law (Th. 89). Such grace guides and directs the will, lest it make erroneous choices in loving God (Th. 90). Thesis 91 specifies that grace not only facilitates a life of love of God but is in fact the essential and irreplaceable cause of any elicited act of love of God (Th. 92). Breaking out of the Scholastic vocabulary of *amicitia*, *voluntas*, and *gratia*, Luther’s Thesis 84 specifies in a Pauline way how the law becomes a good

To the present day, Luther's penitential conception of Christian living, enabled by God's sanative interior influence, is a valued part of my own life. It enters my preaching during Lent and my guiding of persons through the Ignatian *Exercises*. I hope it will become more widely known as people approach the commemorations coming in 2017, because it represents the doctrinal and spiritual basis of Luther's 1517 criticism of preaching on indulgences.

2. Discovery of Luther's *fides sacramenti*: 1969 and After

I was able in 1969 to undertake extensive study of Luther's works beyond 1517, during six months at the Institut für europäische Geschichte in Mainz, then directed by Joseph Lortz. Reading Luther in Mainz, I concentrated on the Reformer's sacramental theology in 1518–1519, attending especially on how the sacraments make their impacts on Christian living.

Luther's main innovation of 1518–1519 was his insistence that the believer is to take hold, in personal faith, of central words of sacramental conferral, especially absolution spoken to the person upon confessing his or her sins. Absolution is God's means of conferring his grace, that is, of accosting the repentant sinner with an open and unambiguous word of forgiveness, consolation, and assurance—it is “gospel” in dense concentration. God reveals himself openly and calls for faith in what he conveys—which becomes valid *pro me* in receptive faith. A dialectic of hiddenness *sub contrario* is marginal here, since here God is *not* justifying under the outward form of judgment, as in several of Luther's earlier comments on the Psalter and Romans.¹⁴ A visit to Tübingen during my Mainz

way of life in love, for “the love of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 5:5).

14. I presented Luther's early theology of the sacramental word and faith amply and appreciatively in “*Fides sacramenti – fides specialis*: Luther's Development in 1518,” (n. 9, above), which began as a seminar paper during the 1983 Luther Research Congress in Erfurt. This involved several

fellowship led to an evening with Oswald Bayer, who soon published his *Promissio* on Luther's reformation *Wende*. He and I agreed on Luther's turn to the objective, forgiving word and on the dependent *pro me* of faith.¹⁵

Luther defended his insight into "faith in the sacrament" (*fides sacramenti*), with its insistent personalizing of the *pro me*, in texts of 1518 that climax in his *Acta Augustana*, countering a critique by Cardinal Cajetan, the Papal Legate to the German Imperial Diet in Augsburg. To ground his thesis, Luther cited numerous biblical texts on faith in a present effect, as when Jesus healed those in need. Luther also claimed he was not innovating, but was in fact applying a well-known, probative axiom, "*Non sacramentum, sed fides sacramenti iustificat*" (It is not the sacrament, but faith in the sacrament that justifies). On a visit to Heidelberg during my Mainz fellowship, I met Kurt-Victor Selge, who showed me evidence that at Augsburg in 1518 Cardinal Cajetan, after insisting that Luther must retract his innovation on *fides sacramenti*, in fact withdrew this demand, because Luther's position could be interpreted in an orthodox way.¹⁶

Most importantly, Luther's 1519 works moved toward integrating this new aspect of faith into the spirituality he had developed in works

revisions of critical judgments I had made earlier on Luther's notion of *fides*, when I was influenced to an extent by the Münster professor Paul Hacker.

15. See Oswald Bayer, "Die reformatorische Wende in Luthers Theologie," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 66 (1969): 115–150, and *Promissio. Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971). Knowing Bayer's Luther-interpretation confirmed for me that an innovation occurred in Luther's theology in 1518. Bayer and I agreed extensively on the contours of the teaching that preceded this, which I set forth in *Man Yearning for Grace*, and I came to hold a positive view of Luther's new departure in and after 1518.
16. K.-V. Selge reviewed Gerhard Hennig, *Cajetan und Luther. Ein historischer Beitrag zur Thomismus und Reformation* (Stuttgart: Calver, 1966), in *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 60 (1969): 217–274. Selge told on p. 273 about Cajetan's change, related in a letter from Augsburg of Georg Spalatin, published in the Wittenberg edition of Luther's German works, Part 9 (1560), p. 36a. Selge gave a fuller citation of Spalatin's information in "La chiesa in Lutero," in *Martin Lutero*, ed. Massimo Marcocchi (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1983), 31–32, note 30.

I had studied earlier. My Mainz study yielded a positive evaluation of this *fides sacramenti* during Luther's transitional years of 1518–1519, which I featured in the 1970s and 1980s in several broader accounts of Luther on justification.¹⁷

This Luther-theme also correlates with Ignatian spirituality. For in the *Spiritual Exercises* the Nativity meditation—a model for contemplating Gospel scenes—leads one to consider our Lord's whole life and suffering unto death on the cross, “and all this *for me*.”¹⁸

Advocacy for Luther, 1969–1979

Upon my return to America after the 1969 fellowship in Mainz, my book-reviewing on Luther studies began in earnest. In several reviews, I became an advocate for Luther's emphatic objectivity concerning the word of God in the encounter of justifying faith, especially in absolution and the Lord's Supper. Against a claimed “subjectivism” in Luther (the old shibboleth of Lortz), I urged attention to his sacramental theology, which is “centered in an objective and utterly reliable word of forgiveness.”¹⁹ The English translation in 1970 of Gerhard Ebeling's short introduction to Luther gave me the opportunity to call attention to Luther's notion of *fides sacramenti*, which is all but absent from Ebeling's account, but which Luther took as central in justification. God's word comes to the believer most concretely in the assuring communication, “Your sins are forgiven.” I claimed that the reader who goes from Ebeling's

17. I inserted the 1518 works on *fides sacramenti* into the entry, “Luther,” *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, 9 (1976), 1206–1243; into “Justification and Faith in Luther's Theology,” *Theological Studies* 44 (1983): 3–29 and *Luther's Reform* (n. 5, above), 15–42; and into *Luther and His Spiritual Legacy* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1983), 130–37.

18. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 116. But under Ignatius's instruction the sacraments play no great role, while Luther is emphatic on the Gospel being expressed personally to one being baptized or absolved and receiving Holy Communion.

19. *Catholic Historical Review* 57 (1971–72): 637, in a review of Riccardo Garcia Villoslada, *Raíces históricas del luteranismo* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1969).