

## LESSON 61: CHRISTIANS OUTSIDE THE CATHOLIC CHURCH (PART 2)

### **Revision from previous lesson:**

In the previous lesson, we learned about the first two major schisms that divided the Christian world. We also identified the Christians who had broken away from the Catholic Church as the Oriental and the Eastern Orthodox Christians. In this lesson, we will learn about the third major schism, which led to the existence of the Protestant Christians.

### **Current lesson:**

#### **SCHISM THREE: THE PROTESTANT DISPUTE**

1. A major religious revolt took place in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, beginning in Germany. It was started by a Catholic priest, Martin Luther (1483-1546).
2. Martin was the eldest son of several brothers and sisters. His father, Hans Luther, was known to be of extremely abrasive character and prone to inflicting severe punishment on his children. Although there was insufficient data to reconstruct his childhood, such treatment was said by biographers to be the common experience of his daily life as a child. His mother, “on account of an insignificant nut, beat me till the blood flowed, and it was this harshness and severity of the life I led with them that forced me subsequently to run away to a monastery and become a monk”.
3. In 1501, at age 17, Martin enrolled into the University of Erfurt to study Law, as it was his father’s ambition for his eldest son to become a lawyer. But Martin had no interest in law and quickly switched to Theology and Philosophy. He received his masters degree in 1505.
4. On 2 July 1505, at age 21, while returning to university on horseback after a trip home, a lightning bolt struck near Luther during a thunderstorm. He cried out, “Help! Saint Anna, I will become a monk!”, and he construed this to be an “involuntary and forced” vow (although the real motives for his subsequent entry into the monastery continues to be a subject of controversy). To the surprise of many people, he left the university and entered St Augustine’s Monastery in Erfurt 15 days later. His father was furious over his sudden decision.
5. As an Augustinian monk, Luther devoted himself to fasting, long hours in prayer, pilgrimage, and frequent confession. He described himself as having experienced continuous deep spiritual despair. Johann von Staupitz, his superior, pointed Luther’s mind away from continual reflection upon his sins toward the merits of Christ. He taught that true repentance does not involve self-inflicted penances and punishments but rather a change of heart.
6. In 1507, Luther was ordained in the Erfurt Cathedral. In 1510, was sent by his Augustinian order for a meeting in Rome. While in Rome, he was disturbed by the corruption and lack of spirituality that he allegedly witnessed there, e.g. priests sneering at religious rituals,

people mocking at pious monks, etc. Although the spiritual hollowness that he witnessed did not cause him to leave the Church, it is believed that this experience continued to disquiet him and perhaps contributed to his morbid scrupulosity.

7. In October 1512, he was conferred a licentiate degree, and then the Doctor of Theology degree, both shortly before being accepted onto the faculty of theology at the University of Wittenberg, occupying the chair of theology (all within the same month). He was appointed lecturer in Scripture in 1513, and spent the rest of his career in this position.
8. As his workload began to increase with further new appointments, the effects of his depressing childhood began to catch up, and he suffered from a chronic emotional condition that clung to him until the end of his life. It is said that Luther struggled with a morbid interior conflict which aroused in him a conscience that would not be stilled. This condition of morbidity finally developed into formal scrupulosity. He spiraled into distorted ascetic practices with increasing gravity but neglected obligatory spiritual practices. For example, he would neglect to pray the breviary for weeks, but yet abstain from all food and drink, torture himself by harrowing mortifications, to an extent that not only made him the victim of insomnia for five weeks at one time but threatened to drive him into insanity.
9. He disregarded the regulations of his monastery and the counsels of his confessor. Eventually, because of his morbid scrupulosity, he came to see God as the minister of wrath and vengeance. He was sorrowful for sin but unable to approach God with childlike confidence in His pardoning mercy. This resulted in hopeless discouragement, consequently creating a hatred and anger towards God.

This abnormal condition brought Luther to a chronic spiritual depression which later on, by a strange process of reasoning, caused him to blame the teachings of the Church concerning good works. It was an irony, since he had for a long time been living in direct and absolute opposition to the Church's doctrinal teaching and disciplinary code.

10. The spark that ignited Luther's confrontation with Rome was the practice of indulgences. Indulgences are the remission of all or part of the temporal punishment due to sins which have already been forgiven, and can be applied either to the person performing the prescribed act or to a soul in Purgatory. Prior to obtaining an indulgence, one must have received the sacraments of Confession and Communion, in addition to some other act or good work, such as making a pilgrimage or doing a work of mercy.
11. During Luther's time, Pope Leo X was calling for donations to fund the building of St Peter's Basilica. At the same time, Cardinal Albert of Brandenburg was also requiring funds to help him pay off the debts incurred in a bribe that he needed to pay to buy off a rival in order to secure multiple positions in the Church.
12. A Dominican friar named Johann Tetzel was tasked to preach indulgences to the Catholic public, strongly encouraging donations to be made to the Church as the recommended work of mercy to gain indulgences. The revenue from these donations was supposed to be split into two equal halves, one half for the building of St Peter's Basilica and another half for Cardinal Albert's bribe. According to historians, it was Tetzel's preaching that ultimately

pushed Luther to protest. He was accused of selling full forgiveness for sins not yet committed, thereby causing a great scandal. It was also alleged that all the monies he had raised from preaching indulgences were used for the two purposes mentioned above.

13. The fact is, years before Martin Luther, abuses of all sorts (including those related to indulgences) were already rampant in the Church. Some clerics were using “donations” to the Church to fund their extravagant lives. Abuses have always been present in the Church, and it would be self-deceit to claim that they are no longer present today.
14. Where Luther went wrong in his dispute with the Catholic Church was in using the matter of corruption of men in the Church as a springboard to denying the authority of the Church, i.e. throwing the baby with the bathwater. In the process, some doctrines were attributed to the Catholic Church which she had never taught, whilst others had been interpreted in ways that she herself would condemn. Luther ended up laboriously refuting what the Catholic Church did not teach at all. His battle for reform was tainted by his own struggle with morbid scrupulosity, leading to an insistence on the right of private judgement in place of the Church’s authority.
15. On October 31, 1517, during the vigil of All Saints, Luther nailed his *Disputation on the Power of Indulgences* (popularly known as the 95 Theses) to the castle church door, which served as the noticeboard of the university on which all notices of disputations and high academic functions were displayed. It was not meant to be a declaration of war, but an academic dispute. He argued that the practice of relying on indulgences drew believers away from the one true source of salvation: faith in Christ. God alone had the power to pardon the repentant faithful. The pontifical council ordered him to retract his claims immediately, but Luther refused.
16. Luther began to engage in regular public debate on religious reforms. Helped also by the revolution of the printing press, he advanced the following arguments:
  - A) He argued that the Bible alone, and not the Church, should be considered the sole authority for Christian life.
  - B) He propagated a new doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.
  - C) He rejected the authority of the pope, declaring that any Church council or even a single believer had the right to challenge the pope, so long as they based their arguments on the Bible. He argued that the Church did not rest on papal foundations but rather on faith in Christ.
  - D) He rejected the practice of the sacerdotal priesthood, i.e. priests approaching God on behalf of the people. Rather, he propagated a priesthood of all believers, saying that people could communicate with God directly.
  - E) He insisted that the Church should use the common language of the people, and not Latin as was the practice in the Roman Catholic tradition. As a result, he led Mass in German and even translated the entire Bible into German. In the process of doing so, he discarded the deuterocanonicals from the Old Testament and four books from the New Testament (Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation).

By 1521, Luther had been declared a heretic and was excommunicated. He was urged to retract his accusations but he refused to do so. This refusal to recant decidedly marked his final breakaway from the Catholic Church.

17. The Protestant Reformation spread throughout Europe, and the three cities that became the centres of the Reformation were Germany (Martin Luther and the University of Wittenberg), Geneva (John Calvin), and Zurich (Huldrych Zwingli). Subsequently, there was also the English Reformation under King Henry VIII.
18. The Protestant Reformation continues even today, comprising over 40,000 denominations with a total of about 800 million adherents globally. Generally, they can be divided into three groups of denominations, depending on the time of their founding:
  - A) *Reformation communities* founded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Some examples: Lutheran, Reformed/Presbyterian, Anglican.
  - B) *Free communities* emerging between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a result of breakaways from Anglicanism and the Reformed Churches. Some examples: Quakers, Baptists, Methodists, Evangelicals, etc.
  - C) *Newer sects* arising from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Some examples: Brethren, Salvation Army, Pentecostal Movement, Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists, Unitarians, etc.

(Adapted from Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, *Dialogue: Resource Manual for Catholics in Asia*, 2001)

19. Many Protestant historians claim that Luther did not intend for his Reformation to represent a break from the Catholic Church and that his intentions were purely to reform the Church from within. Whilst saying that he intended to start the Protestant Reformation may be saying too much, in the same vein, saying that all he wanted to do was to reform the abuses in the Church from within is saying too little. After all, Luther had contemporaries (e.g. St Thomas More) who also openly objected to abuses within the Church without breaking away from it.
20. Did Luther regret the Protestant Reformation? He never said that the Protestant Reformation as a whole was a failure or that it should not have happened, but he did lament on how the new Protestants were miserably failing in manifesting the superiority of their system over Catholicism.
21. More than 500 years has now elapsed since the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Disunity among Christians remains a scandal and an affront to the prayer of Jesus that God's people "may be one" (cf. John 17:11-26). For this reason, the Catholic Church continues to dialogue with all Christians outside of itself, and this includes the Protestant communities. However, we are always cautioned that our dialogue and attempts to express unity must reflect the true state of our current relationship.
22. *Dominus Iesus*, 17: "...the **ecclesial communities** which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery, are **not**



**Churches in the proper sense;** however, those who are baptized in these communities are, by Baptism, **incorporated in Christ** and thus are in a certain communion, albeit imperfect, with the Church.”

23. Some important excerpts from the *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 1993) regarding our relationship with Protestant Christians:

*Point 104c (on sharing of resources):* The sharing of spiritual activities and resources, therefore, must reflect this double fact:

- 1) the real communion in the life of the Spirit which already exists among Christians and is expressed in their prayer and liturgical worship;
- 2) the incomplete character of this communion because of differences of faith and understanding which are incompatible with an unrestricted mutual sharing of spiritual endowments.

*Point 107 (on mutual respect):* Catholics ought to show a sincere respect for the liturgical and sacramental discipline of other Churches and ecclesial Communities and these in their turn are asked to show the same respect for Catholic discipline.

*Point 104e (on Eucharistic concelebration):* Since Eucharistic concelebration is a visible manifestation of full communion in faith, worship and community life of the Catholic Church, expressed by ministers of that Church, it is not permitted to concelebrate the Eucharist with ministers of other Churches or ecclesial Communities.

*Point 108 (on praying together):* Where appropriate, Catholics should be encouraged, in accordance with the Church’s norms, to join in prayer with Christians of other Churches and ecclesial Communities. Such prayers in common are certainly a very effective means of petitioning for the grace of unity, and they are a genuine expression of the ties which still bind Catholics to these other Christians. Shared prayer is in itself a way to spiritual reconciliation.

*Point 109 (on praying together):* Prayer in common is recommended for Catholics and other Christians so that together they may put before God the needs and problems they share – e.g., peace, social concerns, mutual charity among people, the dignity of the family, the effects of poverty, hunger and violence, etc. The same may be said of occasions when, according to circumstances, a nation, region or community wishes to make a common act of thanksgiving or petition to God, as on a national holiday, at a time of public disaster or mourning, on a day set aside for remembrance of those who have died for their country, etc. This kind of prayer is also recommended when Christians hold meetings for study or common action.

*Point 110 (on praying together):* Shared prayer should, however, be particularly concerned with the restoration of Christian unity... Prayer of this type is particularly recommended during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity or in the period between Ascension and Pentecost.

*Point 115 (on Sunday obligations):* Since the celebration of the Eucharist on the Lord's Day is the foundation and centre of the whole liturgical year, Catholics – but those of Eastern Churches according to their own Law – are obliged to attend Mass on that day and on days of precept. It is not advisable therefore to organize ecumenical services on Sundays, and it must be remembered that even when Catholics participate in ecumenical services or in services of other Churches and ecclesial Communities, the obligation of participating at Mass on these days remains.

*Point 118 (on liturgical participation):* In liturgical celebrations taking place in other Churches and ecclesial Communities, Catholics are encouraged to take part in the psalms, responses, hymns and common actions of the Church in which they are guests. If invited by their hosts, they may read a lesson or preach.



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