

Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 1

February 2016

A Letter to a Struggling German Catholic During the Reformation

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Recommended Citation

Zinck, Rachel G. (2016) "A Letter to a Struggling German Catholic During the Reformation," *Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 1.
Available at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl/vol2/iss2/1>

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A Letter to a Struggling German Catholic During the Reformation

Writing Process

The assignment presented was to write a position paper in the format of a letter to a German Catholic friend undergoing an existential crisis during the Reformation period. First, we needed to analyze Martin Luther's 3 Walls of the Romanists, and then take a stance either choosing to follow or ignore Luther. In writing this essay, I spent a lot of time reading over Luther's arguments and reflecting on my own personal views and compared them with careful consideration. I was aware that the situation at the time was a matter of life and death for many, and attempted to reflect that urgency and consideration during my analysis and while presenting my stance.

Course

ASI110

Semester

Fall

Instructor

Dr. William Trollinger

Year

2015

Rachel Zinck

Professor Trollinger

ASI 110 C1

December 10, 2015

A Letter to a Struggling German Catholic During the Reformation*

My Dear Friend Catherine,

It was with great empathy that I received your urgent letter. Indeed, our world is in terrific turmoil with our very souls on the brink of either salvation or damnation. Take heart, my friend, for you are not alone in feeling this division of the soul. You have requested my assistance in understanding the declarations set forth by Martin Luther as well as my input as it pertains to the path of salvation. This is not a burden I take lightly or frivolously, for—as you made clear in your letter—not only is this about our spiritual loyalty, but that of our families. And with the knowledge of your newest born—little Michael, only four months old!—it is only after careful analysis do I write to you. I will inform you upfront that Martin Luther, though raising valid points, ultimately is simply not correct, and we cannot follow him.

Despite the conclusion I have come to, it is of utmost importance that I articulate to you exactly what his argument pertains. The first wall Martin Luther rallies to bring down is that the Church does not answer to any secular power, but instead exclusively to a divine power. He argues, quoting St. Paul in 1 Corinthians, that because all Christians are supposed to be united as one in the body of Christ, it is the Scripture and faith alone that make us holy people. He says that the Pope, bishops, priests, and other clergy are not more holy or spiritual than any of the laymen, declaring that any claim otherwise is hypocritical and false. Luther considers it hypocrisy due to the belief, based on some passages from 1 Peter and the Book of Revelation,

that all Christians should be considered part of the priesthood because we have all participated in baptism (9-10).

Luther uses an illustration of a group of laymen who have been left in the wilderness. He explains that if one of them were to be elected by the others to hold Masses and perform sacraments, then the elected one would be as holy as any ordained priest. Martin Luther maintains that, in necessary situations, anyone can carry out the duties of a priest. He expands on this idea asserting that it would not be possible unless everyone had an inherent equality of holiness. He states, citing St. Paul in Romans and 1 Corinthians as well as St. Peter, that the only difference between ordained and lay people is the work they choose to do, not a level of holiness (10-11).

Martin Luther also says that ordained clergy should not be protected from secular laws by the Church. He explains that secular powers have a God-ordained right to perform their occupation regardless of whom may be receiving punishment. Luther asserts that everyone should help everyone else; he reasons that if the clergy should be exempted from the outcomes of one of the groups of occupations, then they should be exempted from receiving the benefits of all jobs. Succinctly stated, Luther believes that if a priest were to break a law, then he should be held accountable for such crimes. Martin Luther feels that to do otherwise is to permit sin, and therefore he advocates for legal equality between laypeople and clergy (11-13).

The second wall that he attacks is Christianity's exclusive adherence to a Papal interpretation of the Scriptures. He believes it is foolish to think that the Pope can be perfect in faith and Scriptural interpretation when, as Luther maintains, he is only human and could be of questionable moral character. In addition, he believes that that the concept of Papal perfection is

simply a means of justifying practices in the Church that people—Luther in particular—may find dubitable (13-14).

Martin Luther reasons that if the Pope is perfect, it would undermine the importance of Scripture and make it unnecessary. He cites a quote from St. Paul in which Paul says that if one were to receive a revelation while another was talking then the first speaker should be silent; Luther then poses the rhetorical question as to why commandments such as these would be necessary if we only needed to listen to one person. He addresses the claim regarding the lineage of Peter by counter-arguing that the keys were not given to Peter alone but rather to the community as a whole, referencing a Biblical passage in the Gospel of Luke. Luther also believes that in doing this, we are reducing the entirety of the Church into one man. Luther contends that if Christians all share a faith and Scripture, then we should be able to interpret it for ourselves and achieve a mutual understanding, basing his argument on the words of St. Paul found in 1st and 2nd Corinthians. Luther reasons that by claiming the Pope is perfect, it negates the necessity of the Bible (14-15).

In addition, during his discussion of the second wall, Martin Luther discusses a few examples from the Bible—specifically, Sarah and Abraham as well as Balaam and his donkey—in which someone subordinate spoke God’s wisdom to the person seen as superior. He likens these examples to himself speaking out against the Pope, and also offers a call to action for Christians to point out the errors in the Church (15).

And thus, Catherine, we come to the third and final wall, which he defines as the fact that only the Pope has the ability to call a council. Martin Luther declares that if the first two walls fall, then this third one also cannot stand. He explains, with a reference to the Gospel of Matthew, that Christians are called by God to point out the faults and errors of one another,

taking it to the Church if the one at fault will not listen. However, Luther rationalizes that he cannot do this if the Pope is the one at fault because only the Pope may bring councils together. He makes the argument that if the Pope were to do something that would require punishment, then he would never receive it due to the fact that only the Pope would be able to call the council that would punish him. Luther contends that this tradition has no solid foundation, citing the Acts of the Apostles in which the Apostolic council was called by Apostles and elders, not only St. Peter (15-16).

Luther sees this as detrimental to the Church itself, drawing an analogy to a fire in a city. He explains that it would be odd if a fire broke out in a city and nobody did anything because they either did not have the same power as a city leader or the fire was at the leader's house. In addition, Luther also says that if someone were to attack the city, the person who first brought attention to the attack would be seen as a hero. He makes the declaration that those who take action should be praised rather than silenced, and he equates these examples with someone who were to point out faults in the Church and its leaders and call Christians together to fight the injustice (16).

Martin Luther maintains that the people who should have the means of bringing together a council should be the secular powers, since—by the reasoning against the first wall—they are just as holy as any clergy. He furthers this argument by saying that the Pope's power over calling the councils can be a great hindrance to the growth and development of the Church. Luther says that the power to be such a deterrent does not lie in the Pope, backing this argument with a reference to 2 Corinthians. Rather, the Pope should only have powers that will assist in growth and expansion (16).

Now, my friend, you are right to feel distressed over the turmoil that has arisen from these declarations. I am not so cavalier as to blatantly disagree with Luther's stance in its entirety, for many of his claims are ones to which I begrudgingly concede. In his discussion of the first wall, I must agree with Luther's claim that the clergy cannot be exempted from secular law. For if we are to believe that priests and other members of ordained ministry are particularly blessed by God to do their work, is it so far to believe that the lawmakers and peacekeepers of our world are equally called by God to do their work? It is not. In addition, if we are to believe that the Church and its leaders are meant to reach every soul and help it achieve salvation, should we not also believe that every soul should respect the work of others? We should; for as Christians, we are called to live in communion with one another.

In addition, Luther's argument regarding the third wall—which you will remember discusses how the Pope alone may call councils together—is a critique that regrettably carries weight of truth. As Luther declared, we and our fellow Christians are called to help keep one another on the path towards salvation. While the Pope is divinely inspired, he is still entirely human. As such, we cannot believe him faultless of sin for that would be to equate him with Christ himself. Rather, there is a chance that a council may be needed to correct potential faults of our Pope, but this may not happen if the Pope does not realize he is in the wrong. It is my belief that we as a Christian community would be significantly better should we turn to a system within our beloved Church in which councils could be called together by someone or multiple people, inclusive but not exclusive to the Pope.

However, as I mentioned in the beginnings of this letter, there are many aspects of Martin Luther's testament with which I adamantly disagree. To return to the discussion of the first wall, one of Luther's foundational arguments is the claim that we are all part of the priesthood solely

because we have all partaken in baptism. I do not hold this reasoning to be true. Am I a lawyer solely because I choose to live in a society governed by certain laws? No. Similarly, I cannot and do not claim to be a priest simply because I choose to live out the same faith of those who are likely more studied and practiced in certain aspects of it than I. I remain uncertain as to whether there is a difference in holiness, but I do believe it is too far to say that we are all part of the priesthood.

Another significant point of disagreement I draw with Martin Luther is the majority of his argument in reference to the second wall, or the Papal interpretation of the Scriptures. Luther declares that the concept of Papal perfection was merely fabricated to rationalize doctrine with which he disagrees. However, this seems to imply that simply any man can become our Pope, which is not true. Our Pope is chosen carefully and meticulously, for we recognize that we are handing over our very souls to his leadership and guidance. In addition, our Pope does not make decisions hastily, but rather with practiced meditation and deep, intense prayer. We recognize the Pope as a continuation of the lineage of Peter, and I refute Luther's accusation that Christ gave the keys to the community. For Christ said that it was upon Peter himself that the Lord would build his Church, claiming him the Rock.

Despite what Luther may argue, listening and adhering to how the Pope interprets Scripture does not undermine the importance of it. If anything, I believe it to emphasize such an importance. While Martin Luther claims that this consolidates the entirety of the Church into one man, I believe that it simply allows us to be more united in our faith and understanding of the Word of God. It centralizes and joins our faith, but it does not consolidate it into one person.

For these reasons, Catherine, I do not believe we can follow Martin Luther in his apparent call for revolution. To use his terminology, I believe that the only "wall" which we

should bring down is the third, and the first two should remain standing. We must call for reform, not abandonment of the Church set forth by the Apostles of Christ Jesus. I urge you, my friend, to not lose sight of the path of our Savior because of the words of a misguided man. Be of no illusion: many will leave and follow Luther, but I stand firmly beside the Church and urge you to do the same. If we do not, are we not like Peter who denied the Lord twice before the cock crowed? I cannot force this decision onto you, but I do so care for that joyous soul of yours that has made mine laugh time and again, and I urge you to take my words to heart.

Your Sister in Christ,

Rachel

** This essay received the Barbara Farrelly Award for Best Writing of the Issue