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## To Early Modern Catholic Lay People

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## To Early Modern Catholic Lay People

### **Writing Process**

My process for writing this essay was rather simple, albeit grueling. I read and reread Martin Luther's *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* many times in order to fully understand his message. Then, I wrote an outline of his work so that I could summarize it accurately. After completing my summary, I began to analyze Luther's main points to develop my own position on the subject, which I then wrote about. This, however, was just the beginning of my process. Under the guidance of my instructor, Dr. Mackay, I revised and tweaked my paper over and over again until I reached the final, polished product I have today.

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To Early Modern Catholic Lay People

In Martin Luther's famous 1520 writing, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, he sets forth a theory of three walls that the Catholic Church has put up around itself, setting the stage for the Protestant Reformation that would have drastic impacts on Christianity for hundreds of years. This theory, and Luther's evidence that he provides for it, sparked massive debate throughout 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe and still continues today. This paper will summarize Luther's position in *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* and subsequently respond with my position on the matter. I agree that Luther makes a convincing argument for ecclesiastical revolution because of his dismissal of the Catholic rituals in the first wall, stripping away of the Church's "right" to interpret Scripture in the second wall, and derogation of the Church's special connection to God by creating a priesthood of all believers in his third wall.

In Luther's introduction, he states his three walls theory and provides a brief, cursory overview of what each wall is (9). To end his introduction, Luther asserts that the Church is an inherently corrupt organization that acts without its members' consent (9). After his introduction, Luther moves into writing about his first wall. He essentially says that the Church has put up a wall around itself in that it calls clergy members spiritual, or theologically higher, and common folk temporal, or theologically lower (9). According to Luther, this is absolute nonsense. He says that all Christians are spiritual, regardless of whether or not they are clergy members (9). The

formal duties of the ordained do not make them any more spiritual, or theologically higher, than common Christians (10). In this same sense, Luther argues, all Christians are priests (10). To illustrate his point, he provides a hypothetical example. Luther poses the scenario in which a group of Christians are stranded in the wilderness, arguing that if none of the people are already ordained clergy members, then one among the group could assume the priestly duties without an official ordination (10). Luther says that priests in Christendom are simply office holders (11), in that priests are the same as lay Christians, just with a different set of daily duties, and that Christians are all equal through baptism and faith (12). The only thing that changed this idea, according to Luther, is human, and more specifically Church, invention (13).

Next, Luther moves into his argument that the Church has put up a second wall around itself. This second wall is the Church assuming sole authority to interpret Scripture (13). According to Luther, this is absolute nonsense. Using Scripture, he argues that the Church might not understand Scripture, while a common man might. In this scenario, according to Luther, why would any sensible Christian listen to the Church (14)? Luther's next point is that the Church has usurped the power to interpret Scripture through a misinterpretation of Peter receiving the keys to the Church in the Gospel of Matthew (14). The Church thought this gave them alone the power to interpret Scripture, while the power is actually being given to the whole Christian community in that example (14). Luther again poses a hypothetical to prove his point. If there are good, holy people that are lay Christians, Luther asks, why should Christians reject their Scriptural interpretation and follow the pope's, whose holiness Christians do not truly know (14)? Referring to his ideas from the first wall, Luther argues that if all Christians are priests, all

Christians should then have the power to interpret Scripture (15). Finally, he urges all Christians to go forth and understand Scripture themselves, instead of blindly following Church teaching (15).

In Luther's third and final wall, he argues that there is absolutely no Scriptural or logical basis to the pope having the sole power to call a council (15). This power, according to Luther, only comes from the laws of the Church itself (15). He then goes through a few examples of councils not called by popes. First, he references the Apostolic Council, which was called by the Apostles and elders, not Peter (16). Next, Luther mentions the Council of Nicea, which was actually called by Emperor Constantine, not the Bishop of Rome (16). Since these councils were not called by popes, then, according to Church law, they are heretical and the many church officials that attended the councils should be burned at the stake. Luther, again referring to the point he made in his first wall, asserts that if all Christians are equal, then all Christians have the authority to call a council (16). In another hypothetical scenario, Luther asks his audience, if a fire broke out, would everyone just simply stand around and watch it burn if none of them had the authority to put it out (16)? This same idea would apply to councils, according to Luther. If a Christian sees a problem, he should be able to call a council to fix it (16). After wrapping up his ideas about the third wall, he moves into his conclusion. Luther finally reiterates his three walls theory (17), and says that if the Church continues to operate in this manner, then they are absolutely nothing like Christ (17).

In looking at Luther's first wall, I completely agree with his position, specifically, when Luther sets forward the hypothetical of Christians stranded in the wilderness. Looking at the

situation that Luther sets forward, there is an unmistakable common sense in his logic. There is absolutely no reason that all Christians should not be considered equals, and if they are, then Luther's hypothetical scenario must stand. Therefore, if Luther's hypothetical holds up, then it truly is Church invention that has permeated the idea of clergy members being of a different, more spiritual nature than the rest of the Christians. As Luther argues, the formal duties of the clergy do not make them special or differentiated from other Christians. "From all this it follows that there is really no difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, 'spirituals' and 'temporals,' as they call them, except that of office and work", Luther says (11). This point really prompted readers to agree with Luther. Since the formal duties of clergy members are the only thing that separates them from lay Christians, then it is absolute nonsense to try to elevate the clergy to a higher order than lay Christians, thus forcing me to agree with Luther in his position on the first wall of the Church.

In the second wall, Luther argues against the Church having sole authority to interpret Scripture. I agree with Luther in this scenario, because by taking Scripture out of the hands of individual Catholics, the Church has diminished the individual experience of their followers, thus taking them further from God. One of the major pieces of evidence that Luther used to convince his readers like me was Scripture itself. He spoke about the passage in which Peter receives the keys to the Church, which the Church itself misinterpreted, thinking it gave them sole authority to interpret Scripture. Luther writes, "although they allege that this power was given to Peter when the keys were given to him, it is plain enough that the keys were not given to Peter

alone, but to the whole community,” showing how the Church’s misinterpretation has deprived its followers from Scriptural interpretation (14). Peter receiving the keys symbolized the whole Christian family receiving the keys to the Church. This means that any notion of the ecclesiastical branch of the Church having the sole authority to interpret Scripture has absolutely no basis in practice. In this sense, all lay Christians, not just clergy members, have, by baptismal right, the authority to read and interpret Scripture.

Finally, in Luther’s third wall, readers can be convinced that popes are not the only Christians with the authority to call councils. What really developed my position on this matter was the examples of councils that had been called by other Christians. Looking at examples such as the Council of Nicea and the Apostolic Councils, readers are left to wonder how it is even possible for the Church to fabricate the idea that the pope is the only Christian that can call a council. If councils in the past had been called by other Christians, why could other Christians not call councils in the future, and why were the councils not called by popes considered heretical? Luther states as an example, “thus we read in Acts 15:6 that it was not St. Peter who called the Apostolic Council, but the Apostles and elders. If, then, that right had belonged to St. Peter alone, the council would not have been a Christian council, but an heretical *conciliabulum*” (16). A key point that Luther makes that convinced readers to adopt his position is his relation to his point he mentioned in the first wall. By setting all Christians equal to one another, Luther essentially created a priesthood of all believers. Therefore, if all Christians are equal, which Luther proved, then where is the justification for only one Christian being able to call a council? A pope, no matter his important Church duties, has no more true authority than any other lay Christian, which means that he has no more right than any other lay Christian has to call a council of the Church.

In conclusion, Luther's position in *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* essentially calls for an ecclesiastical revolution. In this work, he sets the stage for a major religious reformation that changes the course of world history forever. By setting forth his theory of the three walls of the Church, he strikes down cornerstones of Church dogma. Due to Luther's hypothetical reasoning in the first wall, the Church's misinterpretation of Scripture in the second wall, and the idea of a priesthood of all believers in the third wall, readers should be wholeheartedly convinced of Luther's position.