

An Open Letter to The Christian Nobility of the German Nation

Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, 1520
by

Martin Luther (1520)



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Proposals for Reform Part II

Introduction and Translation by C. M. Jacobs

Works of Martin Luther:
With Introductions and Notes

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Proposals for Reform Part II

15. Nor must I forget the poor convents! The evil spirit, who by human laws now confuses all estates in life, and has made them unbearable, has taken possession of certain abbots, abbesses and prelates also, and causes them so to govern their brethren and sisters as to send them the more speedily to hell, and make them lead a wretched life even here; for such is the log of all the devil's martyrs. That is to say, they have reserved to themselves in confession, all, or at least some, of the mortal sins which are secret, so that no brother, on his obedience and on pain of the ban, can absolve another from these sins.[1] Now we do not always find angels everywhere, but we find also flesh and blood, which suffers all bannings and threatenings rather than confess secret sins to the prelates and the appointed confessors. Thus they go to the sacrament with such consciences that they become "irregular"[2] and all sorts of other terrible things. O blind shepherds! O mad prelates! O ravening wolves!

To this I say: If a sin is public or notorious, then it is proper that the prelate alone should punish it, and of these sins only and no others he may make exceptions, and reserve them to himself over secret sins he has no authority, even though they were the worst sins that are or ever can be found, and if the prelate makes exceptions of these sins, he is a tyrant, for he has no such right and is interfering in the judgment of God.

And so I advise these children, brethren and sisters: If your superiors are unwilling to grant you permission to confess your secret sins to whomever you wish, then take them to whatever brother or sister you will and confess them, receive absolution, and then go and do whatever you wish and ought to do; only believe firmly that you are absolved, and nothing more is needed. And do not allow yourself to be troubled by ban, "irregularity," or any of the other things they threaten; these things are valid only in the case of public or notorious sins which one is unwilling to confess; they do not affect you at all. Why do you try by your threatenings, O blind prelate, to prevent secret sins? Let go what you cannot publicly prove, so that God's judgment and grace may also have its work in your subjects! He did not give them so entirely into your hands as to let them go entirely out of His own! Nay, what you have under your rule is but the smaller part. Let your statutes be statutes, but do not exalt them to heaven, to the judgment-seat of God.

16. It were also necessary to abolish all anniversary mortuary and "soul" masses,[3] or at least to diminish their number, since we plainly see that they have become nothing but a mockery, by which God is deeply angered, and that their only purpose is money-getting, gorging and drunkenness. What kind of pleasure should God have in such a miserable gabbing or wretched vigils and masses, which is neither reading nor praying, and even when prayed,[4] they are performed not for God's sake and out of willing love, but for money's sake and because they are a bounden duty. Now it is not possible that any work not done out of willing love can please God or obtain anything from Him. And so it is altogether Christian to abolish, or at least diminish, everything which we see growing into an abuse, and which angers rather than reconciles God. It would please me more -- nay, it would be more acceptable to God and far better -- that a foundation, church or monastery should put all its anniversary masses and vigils together, and on one day, with hearty sincerity, devotion and faith, hold a true vigil and mass for all its benefactors, rather than hold them by the thousand every year, for each benefactor a special mass, without this devotion and faith. O dear Christians! God cares not for much praying, but for true praying! Nay, He condemns the many and long prayers, and says in Matthew 6:7; 23:14, they will only earn more punishment thereby. But avarice, which cannot trust God, brings such things to pass, fearing that otherwise it must die of hunger!

17. Certain of the penalties or punishments of the canon law should also be abolished, especially the interdict, which is, beyond all doubt, an invention of the evil Spirit. It is not a devil's work to try to atone for one sin with many greater sins? And yet, to put God's Word and worship to silence, or to do away with them, is a greater sin than strangling twenty popes at once, and far greater than killing a priest or keeping back some Church property. This is another of the tender virtues taught in the "spiritual law." For one of the reasons why this law is called "spiritual" is because it comes from the Spirit; not, however, from the Holy Spirit, but from the evil spirit.

The ban[6] is to be used in no case except where the Scriptures prescribe its use, i.e., against those who do not hold the true faith, or who live in open sin; it is not to be used for the sake of temporal possessions. But now it is the other way around. Everyone believes and lives as he pleases, most of all those who use the ban to plunder and defame other people, and all the bans are now laid only on account of temporal possessions, for which we have no one to thank but the holy "spiritual lawlessness." [7] Of this I have previously said more in the Discourse.[8]

The other punishments and penalties, -- suspension, irregularity, aggravation, reaggravation, deposition, lightnings, thunderings, cursings, damnings and the rest of these devices, -- should be buried ten fathoms deep in the earth, so that there should be neither name nor memory of them left on earth. The evil spirit, who has been let loose by the "spiritual law" has brought this terrible plague and misery into the heavenly kingdom of the holy Church, and has accomplished by it nothing else than the destruction and hindrance of souls, so that the word of Christ may well be applied to them[9]; Matthew 23:13: "Woe unto you scribes! Ye have taken upon your the authority to teach, and ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men. Ye go not in yourselves, and ye suffer not them that are entering."

18. All festivals[10] should be abolished, and Sunday alone retained. If it were desired, however, to retain the festivals of Our Lady and of the greater saints, they should be transferred to Sunday, or observed only by a morning mass, after which all the rest of the day should be a working-day. The reason is this: The feast-days are now abused by drinking, gaming, idleness and all manner of sins, so that on the holy days we anger God more than on other days, and have altogether turned things around; the hold days are not holy and the working days are holy, and not only is no service done to God and His saints by the many holy days, but rather great dishonor. There are, indeed, some mad prelates who think they are doing a good work if they make a festival in honor of St. Ottilia or St. Barbara or some other saint, according to the promptings of their blind devotion; but they would be doing a far better work if they honored the saint by turning a saint's-day into a working day.

Over and above the spiritual injury, the common man receives two material injuries from this practice, i.e., he neglects his work and he spends more than at other times; nay, he also weakens his body and unfits it for work. We see this every day, yet no one thinks to make it better. We ought not to consider whether or not the pope has instituted the feasts, and whether we must have dispensation and permission to omit them. If a thing is opposed to God, and harmful to man in body and soul, any community,[11] council[12] or government has not only the right to abolish it and put a stop to it, without the will or knowledge of pope or bishop, but they are bound on their souls' salvation to prevent it, even against the will of pope and bishop, thought these ought to be themselves the first to forbid it.

Above all, we ought utterly to abolish the consecration days,[13] since they have become nothing else than taverns, fairs and gaming places,[14] and serve only to the increase of God's dishonor and to the damnation of souls. All the pretence about the custom having had the custom having had a good

beginning and being a good work is of no avail. Did not God Himself set aside His own law, which He had given from heaven, when it was perverted and abused? And does He not still daily overturn what He has appointed and destroy what He has made, because of such perversion and abuse? As it is written of Him in Psalm 18:27, "With the perverted Thou wilt show Thyself perverse."

19. The grades or degrees within which marriage is forbidden should be changed, as, for instance, the sponsorships and the third and fourth degrees and if the pope can grant dispensation in these matters for money and for the sake of the shameful traffic,[15] then every parish priest may give the same dispensations gratis and for the salvation of souls. Yea, would to God that all the things which we must buy at Rome to free ourselves from that money-snare, the canon law, -- such things as indulgences, letters or indulgence, "butter-letters,"[16] "mass-letters,"[17] and all the rest of the confessionalia[18] and knaveries for the sale at Rome, with which the poor folk are deceived and robbed of their money; would to God, I say, that any priest could, without payment, do and omit all these things! For if the pope has the authority to sell his snares for money and his spiritual nets (I should say laws),[19] surely any priest has much more authority to rend his nets and for God's sake to tread them under foot. But if he has not this right, neither has the pope the right to sell them at his shameful fair.[20]

This is the place to say too that the fasts should be matters of liberty, and all sorts of food made free, as the Gospel makes them. (Matthew 15:11) For at Rome they themselves laugh at the fasts, making us foreigners eat the oil with which they would not grease their shoes, and afterwards selling us liberty to eat butter and all sorts of other things; yet the holy Apostle says that in all these things we already have liberty through the Gospel. (1 Cor. 10:25 ff.) But they have caught us with their canon law and stolen our rights from us, so that we may have to buy them back with money. Thus they have made our consciences so timid and shy that it is no longer easy to preach about this liberty because the common people take such great offense, thinking it is a greater sin to eat butter than to lie, to swear, or even to live unchastely. Nevertheless, what men have decreed, that is the work of man; put it where you will,[21] nothing good ever comes out of it.

20. The forest chapels and rustic churches[22] must be utterly destroyed, -- those, namely, to which the recent pilgrimages have been directed, -- Wilsnack,[23] Sternberg,[24] Trier,[25] the Grimmenthal,[26] and now Regensburg[27] and a goodly number of others. Oh, what a terrible and heavy account will the bishops have to render, who permit this devilish deceit and receive its profits.[28] They should be the first to forbid it, and yet they think it a divine and holy thing, and do not see that it is the devil's doing, to strengthen avarice, to create a false, feigned faith, to weaken the parish churches, to multiply taverns and harlotry, to waste money and labor, and to lead the poor folk by the nose. If they had only read the Scriptures to as good purpose as they have read their damnable canon law, they would know well how to deal with this matter.

That miracles are done at these places does not help things, for the evil spirit can do miracles, as Christ has told us in Matthew 24:24. If they took the matter seriously and forbade this sort of thing, the miracles would quickly come to an end; (Acts 5:39) on the other hand, if the thing were of God their prohibition would not hinder it. And if there were no other evidence that it is not of God, this would be enough, -- that people run to these places in excited crowds, as though they had lost their reason, like herds of cattle; for this cannot possibly be the God. Moreover, God has commanded nothing of all this; there is neither obedience nor merit in it; the bishops, therefore, should boldly step in and keep the folk away. For what is not commanded -- and is concerned for self rather than for the commands of God -- that is surely the devil himself. Then, too, the parish churches receive injury, because they are held in

smaller honor. In short, these things are signs of great unbelief among the people; if they truly believed, they would have all that they need in their own churches, for to them they are commanded to go.

But what shall I say? Every one[29] plans only how he may establish and maintain such a place of pilgrimage in his diocese and is not at all concerned to have the people believe and live aright; the rulers are like the people; one blind man leads another. (Matthew 13:14) Nay, where pilgrimages are not successful, they begin to canonize saints,[30] not in honor of the saints -- for they are sufficiently honored without canonization -- but in order to draw crowds and bring in money. Pope and bishop help along; it rains indulgences; there is always money enough for that. But for what God has commanded no one provides; no one runs after these things; there is no money for them. Alas, that we should be so blind! We not only give the devil his own way in his tricks, but we even strengthen him in his wantonness and increase his pranks. I would that the dear saints were left in peace, and the poor folk not lead astray! What spirit has given the pope the authority to canonize the saints? Who tells him whether they are saints or not? Are there not already sins enough on earth, that we too must tempt God, interfere in His judgment and set up the dear saints as lures for money?

Therefore I advise that the saints be left to canonize themselves. Yea, it is God alone who should canonize them. And let every man stay in his own parish, where he finds more than in all the shrines of pilgrimage, even though all the shrines were one. Here we find baptism, the sacrament, preaching and our neighbor, and these are greater things, than all the saints in heaven, for it is by God's Word and sacrament that they have all been made saints. So long as we despise such great things God is just in the wrathful judgment by which He appoints the devil to lead us hither and thither, to establish pilgrimages, to found churches and chapels, to secure the canonization of saints, and to do other such fool's-works, by which we depart from true faith into new, false misbelief. This is what he did in olden times to the people of Israel, when he led them away from the temple at Jerusalem to countless other places, though he did it in the name of God and under the plausible guise of holiness, though all the prophets preached against it and were persecuted for so doing. But now no one preaches against it, perhaps for fear that pope, priests and monks would persecute him also. In this way St. Antoninus of Florence[31] and certain others must now be made saints and canonized, that their holiness, which would otherwise have served only for the glory of God and as a good example, may serve to bring in fame and money.

Although the canonizing of saints may have been good in olden times, it is not good now; just as many other things were good in olden times and are now scandalous and injurious, such as feast-days, church-treasures and church-adornment. For it is evident that through the canonizing of saints neither God's glory nor the improvement of Christians is sought, but only money and glory, in that one church wants to be something more and have something more than others, and would be sorry if another had the same thing and its advantage were common property. So entirely, in these last, evil days, have spiritual goods been misused and applied to the gaining of temporal goods, that everything, even God Himself, has been forced into the service of avarice. And even these special advantages lead only to dissensions, divisions and pride, in that the churches, differing from one another, hold each other in contempt, and exalt themselves one above another, though all the gifts which God bestows are the common and equal property of all churches and should only serve the cause of unity. The pope, too, is glad for the present state of affairs; he would be sorry if all Christians were equal and were at one.

This is the place to speak of the church licenses, bulls and other things which the pope sells at his flying-place in Rome. We should either abolish them or disregard them, or at least make them the common property of all churches. For if he sells or gives away licenses and privileges, indulgences,

graces, advantages, faculties[32] to Wittenberg, to Halle, to Venice and, above, all to his own Rome, why does he not give these things to all churches alike? Is he not bound to do for all Christians, gratis and for God's sake, everything that he can, and even to shed his blood for them? Tell me, then, why he gives or sells to one church and not to another? Or must the accursed money make, in the eyes of His Holiness, so great a difference among Christians, who all have the same baptism, Word, faith, Christ, God and all things? (Eph. 4:4 f.) Are we to be blind while we have eyes to see, fools while we have our reason, that they expect us to worship such greed, knavery and humbug? He is a shepherd, -- yes, so long as you have money, and no longer! And yet they are not ashamed of their knavery, leading us hither and yon with their bulls! Their one concern is the accursed money, and nothing else!

My advice is this: If such fool's-work cannot be abolished, then every pious Christian man should open his eyes, and not be misled by the hypocritical Roman bulls and seals, stay at home in his own church and be content with his baptism, his Gospel, his faith, his Christ and with God, Who is everywhere the same; and let the pope remain a blind leader of the blind. (Matt. 15:4) Neither angel nor pope can give you as much as God gives you in your parish-church. Nay, the pope leads you away from the gifts of God, which you have without pay, to his gifts, which you must buy; and he have without pay, to his gifts, which you must buy; and he gives you lead[33] for gold, hide for meat, the string for the purse, wax for honey, words for goods, the letter for the spirit. You see this before your very eyes, but you are unwilling to notice it. If you are to ride to heaven on his wax and parchment, your chariot will soon go to pieces, and you will fall into hell, not in God's name!

Let this be your fixed rule: What you must buy from the pope is neither good nor of God; for what is from God, to wit, the Gospel and the works of God; for what is from God, to wit, the Gospel and the works of God, is not only given without money, but the whole world is punished and damned because it has not been willing to receive it as a free gift. We have deserved of God that we should be so deceived, because we have despised His holy Word and the grace of baptism, as St. Paul says: 2 Thess. 2:11 f.: "God shall send a strong delusion upon all those who have not received the truth to their salvation, to the end that they may believe and follow after lies and knavery," which serves them right.

21. One of our greatest necessities is the abolition of all begging throughout Christendom. Among Christians no one ought to go begging! It would also be easy to make a law, if only we had the courage and the serious intention, to the effect that every city should provide for its own poor, and admit no foreign beggars by whatever name they might be called, whether pilgrims or mendicant monks. Every city could support its own poor, and if it were too small, the people in the surrounding villages also should be exhorted to contribute, since in any case they have to feed so many vagabonds and knaves in the guise of mendicants. In this way, too, it could be known who were really poor and who not.

There would have to be an overseer or warden who knew all the poor and informed the city council or the priests what they needed; or some other better arrangement might be made. In my judgment there is no other business in which so much knavery and deceit are practiced as in begging, and yet it could all be easily abolished. Moreover, this free and universal begging hurts the common people. I have considered that each of the five or six mendicant orders[34] visits the same place more than six or seven times every year; besides these there are the common beggars, the "stationaries"[35] and the palmers,[36] so that it has been reckoned that every town is laid under tribute about sixty times a year, not counting what is given to the government in taxes, imposts and assessments, what is stolen by the Roman See with its wares, and what is uselessly consumed. Thus it seems to me one of God's greatest miracles that we can continue to support ourselves.

To be sure, some think that in this way[37] the poor would not be so well provided for and that not so many great stone houses and monasteries would be built. This I can well believe. Nor is it necessary. He who wishes to be poor should not be rich; and if he wishes to be rich, let him put his hand to the plow and seek his riches in the earth! It is enough if the poor are decently cared for, so that they do not die of hunger or of cold. It is not fitting that one man should live in idleness on another's labor, or be rich and live comfortably at the cost of another's discomfort, according to the present perverted custom; for St. Paul says, 2 Thess. 3:10: "If a man will not work, neither shall he eat." God has not decreed that any man shall live from another's goods save only the priests, who rule and preach, and these because of their spiritual labor, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:14, and Christ also says to the Apostles, Luke 10:7: "Every laborer is worthy of his hire."

22. It is also to be feared that the many masses which are endowed in the foundation sand monasteries are not only of little use, but greatly arouse the wrath of God. It would therefore be profitable not to endow any more, but rather to abolish many that are already endowed, since we see that they are regarded only as sacrifices and good works,[39] though they are really sacraments, just like baptism and penance,[40] which profit only those who receive them, and no others. But now the custom has crept in, that masses are said for the living and the dead, and all hopes are built upon them; for this reason so many of them have been founded and the present state of affairs has come about.

My proposal is perhaps too novel an daring, especially for those who fear that through the discontinuance of these masses their trade and livelihood may be destroyed, and so I must refrain from saying more about it until we have come back to a correct understanding of what the mass is and what it is good for. These many years, alas, it has been made a trade practiced for a temporal livelihood, so that I would henceforth advise a man to become a shepherd or to seek some other trade rather than become a shepherd or to seek some other trade rather than become a priest or a monk, unless he first knows well what it is to celebrate mass.

I am not speaking, however, of the old foundations and cathedrals, which were doubtless established in order that the children of the nobility (since, according to the customs of the German nation not all of them can become heirs or rulers), might be provided for in these foundations, and there be free to serve God, to study, to become scholars and to make scholars. But I am speaking of the new foundations, which have been established only for the saying of prayers and masses; for after their example, even the old foundations have been burdened with like prayers and masses, so that they are of little or no profit; though it is also of God's grace that they too come at last, as they deserve, to the dregs, i.e., to the wailing of organs and of choral singers, and to dead, cold masses, by which the incomes of the worldly endowments are gotten and spent. Such things pope, bishops and doctors should examine and proscribe: but now it is they who are most given to them. They let everything pass, if only it brings in money; one blind man is always leading another. This is the work of avarice and of the spiritual law.

Again, no one person should be allowed any longer to hold more than one canonry or prebend. He must be content with a modest position, that some one else may also have something. This would do away with the excuses of those who say that they must hold more than one such office to "maintain a proper station." A "proper station" might be so broadly interpreted that a whole land would not be enough to maintain it! Moreover avarice and veiled distrust of God assuredly go with it, so that what is alleged to be the need of "a proper station" is often nothing else than avarice and distrust.

23. Sodalities,[41] indulgences, letters of indulgence, "butter-letter,"[42] mass-letters,[43]

dispensations, and everything else of the sort, are to be drowned and destroyed. There is nothing good in them. If the pope has the power to grant you dispensation to eat butter and to absent yourself from mass, then he ought also be able to leave this power to the priests, from whom, indeed, he has no right to take it. I speak especially of those fraternities in which indulgences, masses and good works are portioned out. Dear friend, in your baptism you entered into a fraternity with Christ, all the angels, saints and Christians on earth. Hold to this fraternity and live up to its demands, and you have fraternities enough. The others -- let them glitter as they will -- are but as counters compared with guldens. But if there were a fraternity which contributed money to feed the poor or to help somebody in some other way, such a one would be good, and would have its indulgence and its merit in heaven. Now, however, they have become excuses for gluttony and drunkenness.

Above all, we should drive out of German lands the papal legates with their "faculties,"[45] which they sell us for large sums of money, though that is sheer knavery. For example, in return for money they legalize unjust gains, dissolve oaths, vows and agreements, break and teach men to break the faith and fealty which they have pledged to one another; and they say the pope has the authority to do this. It is the evil Spirit who bids them say this. Thus they sell us a doctrine of devils, and take money for teaching us sin and leading us to hell.

If there were no other evil wiles to prove the pope the true Antichrist, yet this one thing were enough to prove it. Hearest thou this, O pope, not most holy, but most sinful? O that God from heaven would soon destroy thy throne and sink it in the abyss of hell! Who hath given thee authority to exalt thyself above thy God, to break and to loose His commandments, and to teach Christians, especially the German nation, praised in all history for its nobility, its constancy and fidelity, to be inconstant, perjurers, traitors, profligates, faithless? God hath commanded to keep oath and faith even with an enemy, and thou undertakest to loose this His commandment, and ordainest in thine heretical, antichristian decretals that thou hast His power. Thus through thy throat and through thy pen the wicked Satan doth lie as he hath never lied before. O Christ, my Lord, look down, let the day of thy judgment break, and destroy the devil's nest at Rome! Here sitteth the man of whom St. Paul hath said (2 Thess. 2:3 f.) that he shall exalt himself above Thee, sit in Thy Church and set himself up as God, -- the man of sin and the son of perdition! What else is the papal power than only the teaching and increasing of sin and evil, the leading of souls to damnation under Thy name and guise?

In olden times the children of Israel had to keep the oath which they had unwittingly been deceived into giving to their enemies, the Gibeonites, and King Zedekiah was miserably lost, with all his people, because he broke this oath to the King of Babylon. (Josh. 9:19 ff.; 2 Kings 24:20; 25:4 ff.) Even among us, a hundred years ago, that fine king of Hungary and Poland, Wladislav,[46] was slain by the Turk, with so many noble people, because he allowed himself to be deceived by the papal legate and cardinal, and broke the good and advantageous treaty which he had sworn with the Turk. The pious Emperor Sigismund had no good fortune after the Council of Constance, when allowed the knaves to break the safe-conduct which had been given to John Hus and Jerome,[47] and all the trouble between us and the Bohemians was the consequence. Even in our own times, God help us! How much Christian blood has been shed over the oath and alliance which Pope Julius made between the Emperor Maximilian and King Louis of France,[48] and afterwards broke? How could I tell all the troubles which the popes have stirred up by the devilish presumption with which they annul oaths and vows which have been made between great princes, making a jest of these things, and taking money for it. I have hopes that the judgment day is at the door; nothing can possibly be worse than the Roman See. He suppresses God's commandment, he exalts his own commandment over it; if he is not Antichrist, then let some one else

tell who he can be! But more of this another time, and better.

24. It is high time that we seriously and honestly consider the case of the Bohemians,[49] and come into union with them so that the terrible slander, hatred and envy on both sides may cease. As befits my folly, I shall be the first to submit an opinion on this subject, with due deference to every one who may understand the case better than I.

First, We must honestly confess the truth, stop justifying ourselves, and grant the Bohemians that John Hus and Jerome of Prague were burned at Constance in violation of the papal, Christian, imperial safe-conduct and oath; whereby God's commandment was sinned against and the Bohemians were given ample cause for bitterness; and although they ought to have been perfect and to have patiently endured this great injustice and disobedience of God on our part, nevertheless they were not bound to approve of it and to acknowledge that it was well done. Nay, even to-day they should give up life and limb rather than confess that it is right to violate an imperial, papal Christian safe-conduct, and faithlessly to act contrary to it. So then, although it is the impatience of the Bohemians which is at fault, yet the pope and his followers are still more to blame for all the trouble, error and loss of souls that have followed upon that council.

I have no desire to pass judgment at this time upon John Hus's articles or to defend his errors, though I have not yet found any errors in his writings, and I am quite prepared to believe that it was neither fair judgment nor honest condemnation which was passed by those who, in their faithless dealing, violated a Christian safe-conduct and a commandment of God. Beyond doubt they were possessed rather by the evil spirit than by the Holy Spirit. No one will doubt that the Holy Spirit does not act contrary to the commandment of God; and no one is so ignorant as not to know that the violation of faith and of a safe-conduct is contrary to the commandment of God, even though they had been promised to the devil himself, still more when the promise was made to a mere heretic. It is also quite evident that such a promise was made to John Hus and the Bohemians and was not kept, but that he was burned in spite of it. I do not wish, however, to make John Hus a saint or a martyr, as do some of the Bohemians, though I confess that injustice was done him, and that his books and doctrines were unjustly condemned; for the judgments of God are secret and terrible, and no one save God alone should undertake to reveal or utter them.

All I wish to say is this: though he were never so wicked a heretic, nevertheless he was burned unjustly and against God's commandment, and the Bohemians should not be forced to approve of such conduct, or else we shall never come into unity. Not obstinacy but the open admission of truth must make us one. It is useless to pretend, as was done at the time, that a safe-conduct given to a heretic need not be kept.[50] That is as much as to say that God's commandments are not to be kept to the end that God's commandments may be kept. The devil made them mad and foolish, so that they did not know what they were saying or doing. God has commanded that a safe-conduct shall be kept. This commandment we should keep though the world fall. How much more, when it is only a question of freeing a heretic! We should vanquish heretics with books, not with burning; for so the ancient fathers did. If it were a science to vanquish the heretics with fire, then the hangmen would be the most learned doctors on earth; we should no longer need to study, but he who overcame another by force might burn him at the stake.

Second, The emperor and the princes should send to the Bohemians some pious and sensible bishops and scholars; but by no means a cardinal or papal legate or inquisitor, for those people are utter

ignoramus as regards things Christian; they seek not the welfare of souls but, like all the pope's hypocrites, only their own power, profit and glory' indeed, they were the prime movers in this miserable business at Constance. The men thus sent into Bohemia should inform themselves about the faith of the Bohemians, and whether it be possible to unite all their sects. Then the pope should, for their souls' sake, lay aside his supremacy for the time being, and, according to the decree of the most Christian Council of Nicaea,[51] allow the Bohemians to choose one of their number to be Archbishop of Prague,[52] and he should be confirmed by the bishop of Olmutz in Moravia, or the bishop of Gran in Hungary, or the bishop of Gnesen in Poland, or the bishop of Magdeburg in Germany.[53] It will be enough if he is confirmed by one or two of these, as was the custom in the time of St. Cyprian.[54] The pope has no right to oppose such an arrangement, and if he does oppose it, he becomes a wolf and a tyrant; no one should follow him and his ban should be met with a counter-ban.

If, however, it were desired, in honor of the See of St. Peter, to do this with the pope's consent, I should be satisfied, provided it does not cost the Bohemians a heller and the pope does not bind them at all nor make them subject to his tyrannies by oaths and obligations, as he does all other bishops, in despite of God and of justice. If he will not be satisfied with the honor of having his consent asked, then let them not bother any more about him[55] and his rights, laws and tyrannies; let the election suffice, and let the blood of all the souls which are endangered cry out against him, for no one should consent to injustice; it is enough to have offered tyranny an honor. If it cannot be otherwise, then an election and approval by the common people can even now be quite as valid as a confirmation by a tyrant; but I hope this will not be necessary. Some of the Romans or the good bishops and scholars will sometime dare and oppose papal tyranny.

I would also advise against compelling them to abolish both kinds in the sacrament,[56] since that is neither unchristian nor heretical, but they should be allowed to retain their own practice, if they wish. Yet the new bishop should be careful that no discord arise because of such a practice is wrong;[57] just as it ought not to cause dissension that the clergy differ from the laity in manner of life and in dress. In like manner if they were unwilling to receive the Roman canon law, they should not be forced to do so, but we should first make sure that they live in accordance with faith and with the Scriptures. For Christian faith and life can well exist without the intolerable laws of the pope, nay, they cannot well exist unless there be fewer of these Roman laws, or none at all. In baptism we have become free and have been made subject to God's Word only; why should any man ensnare us in his words? As St. Paul says, 1 Cor. 7:23 and Gal. 5:1: "Ye have become free, be not servants of men," i.e. of those who rule with man-made laws.

If I knew that the Picards[58] held no other error touching the sacrament of the altar except that they believe that the bread and wine are present in their true nature, but that the body and blood of Christ are truly present under them, then I would not condemn them, but would let them enter the obedience of the bishop of Prague. For it is not an article of faith that bread and wine are not essentially and naturally in the sacrament, but this is an opinion of St. Thomas[59] and the pope. On the other hand, it is an article of faith that in the natural bread and wine the true natural body and blood of Christ are present.[60] And so we should tolerate the opinions of both sides until they come to an agreement, because there is no danger in believing that bread is there or is not there. For we have to endure many practices and ordinances so long as they are not harmful to faith. On the other hand, if they had a different faith,[61] I would rather have them outside the Church; yet I would teach them the truth.

Whatever other errors and schisms might be discovered in Bohemia should be tolerated until the

archbishop had been restored and had gradually brought all the people together again in one common doctrine. They will assuredly never be united by force, nor by defiance, nor by haste; it will take time and forbearance. Had not even Christ to tarry with His disciples a long while and bear with their unbelief, until they believed His resurrections? If they but had again a regular bishop and church order, without Roman tyranny, I could hope that things would soon be better.

The restoration of the temporal goods which formerly belonged to the Church should not be too strictly demanded, but since we are Christians and each is bound to help the rest, it is in our power, for the sake of unity, to give them these things and let them keep them in the sight of God and men. For Christ says, Matt. 18:19 f.: "Where two are at one with each other on earth, there am I in the midst of them." Would to God that on both sides we were working toward this unity, offering our hands to one another in brotherly humility, and not standing stubbornly on our powers or rights! Love is greater and more necessary than the papacy at Rome, for there can be papacy without love and love without papacy.

With this counsel I shall have done what I could. If the pope or his followers hinder it, (Phil. 2:4), they shall render an account for seeking their own things rather than the things of their neighbor, contrary to the love of God. The pope ought to give up his papacy and all his possessions and honors, if he could by that means save one soul; but now he would let the world go to destruction rather than yield a hair's-breadth of his presumptuous authority. And yet he would be the "most holy"! Here my responsibility ends.

NOTES:

[1] On this sort of reserved cases see Discussion of Confession, Vol. I, pp. 96 ff.

[2] "Irregularity" is the condition of any member of a monastic order who has violated the prescriptions of the order and been deprived, in consequence, of the benefits enjoyed by those who live under the regula, viz., the rule of the order.

[3] The three kinds of masses are really but one thing, viz., masses for the dead, celebrated on certain fixed days in each year, in consideration of the enjoyment of certain incomes, received either out of bequeathed endowments or from the heirs of the supposed beneficiaries.

[4] i.e., Even when the mass is decently said.

[5] See above, p. 72, note 1.

[6] See above, p. 104.

[7] Das geistliche Unrecht.

[8] The Treatise concerning the Ban, above, pp. 33 ff.

[9] i.e., To those who teach enforce the canon law.

[10] Luther means the saint's-days and minor religious holidays. See also the "Discourse on Good Works", Vol. I, pp. 240 f.

[11] Or "congregation."

[12] i.e., City-council.

[13] Kirchweihen, i.e., the anniversary celebration of the consecration of a church. These days had become feast days for the parish, and were observed in anything but a spiritual fashion.

[14] i.e., Occasions for drunkenness, gain and gambling.

[15] See above, pp. 96 f.

[16] See above, p. 98, note 2

[17] Letters entitling their holder to the benefits of the masses founded by the sodalities or confraternities. See Benrath, p. 103.

[18] See above, p. 98, and Vol. I, p. 22.

[19] The pun is untranslatable, -- Netz, Gesetz solt ich sagen.

[20] What the pope sold was release from the "snares" and "nets," viz., dispensation.

[21] i.e., Even into the law of the church.

[22] Die wilden Kapellen und Feldkirchen, i.e., churches which are built in the country, where there are no congregations.

[23] A little town in East Prussia, where was displayed a sacramental wafer, said to have been miraculously preserved from a fire which destroyed the church in 1383. It was alleged that at certain times this wafer exuded drops of blood, revered as the blood of Christ, and many miracles were said to have been performed by it. Wilsnack early became a favorite resort for pilgrims. In 1412 the archbishop of Prague, at the instigation of John Hus, forbade the Bohemians to go there. Despite the protests of the Universities of Leipzig and Erfurt, Pope Eugenius IV in 1446 granted special indulgences for this pilgrimage, and the popularity of the shrine was undiminished until the time the Reformation. Cf. Realencyk, xxi, pp. 347 ff.

[24] In Meckleburg, where another relic of "the Holy Blood" was displayed after 1491. Cf. Benrath, pp. 104 f.

[25] The "Holy Coat of Trier" was believed by the credulous to be the seamless coat of Christ, which the soldiers did not rend. It was first exhibited in 1512, but was said to have been presented to the cathedral church of Trier by the Empress Helena, mother of Constantine the Great.

[26] Pilgrimage to the Grimmenthal in Meiningen began in 1449. An image of the Virgin, declared to have been miraculously created, was displayed there, and was alleged to work wonderful cures, especially of syphilis.

[27] The "Fair Virgin (die schone Maria) of Regensburg" was an image of the Virgin similar to that exhibited in the Grimmenthal. The shrine was opened March 45, 1519, and within a month 50,000 pilgrims are said to have worshipped there. (Weimar Ed., VI, 447, note 1). For another explanation see Benrath, p. 105.

[28] The pilgrimages were a source of large revenue, derived from the sale of medals which were worn as amulets, the fees for masses at the shrines, and the free-will offerings of the pilgrims. A large part of this revenue accrued to the bishop of the diocese, though the popes never overlooked the profits which the sale of indulgences for worship at these shrines could produce. In the Gravamina of 1521 complaint is made that the bishops demand at least 25 to 33 per cent of the offerings made at shrines of pilgrimage (WREDE, op. cit., II, 687).

[29] i.e., Every bishop.

[30] The possession of a saint gave a church a certain reputation and distinction, which was sufficiently coveted to make local Church authorities willing to pay roundly for the canonization of a departed bishop or other local dignitary. Cf. Hutten's *Vadiscus* (Bocking, IV, 232).

[31] Archbishop of Florence (died 1459). He was canonized, May 31, 1523, by Pope Hadrian VI. When Luther wrote this the process of canonization had already begun.

[32] *Indulta*, i.e., grants of special privilege.

[33] "Lead," the leaden seal attached to the bull; "hide", the parchment on which it is written; "the string," the ribbon or silken cord from which the seals depend; "wax," the seal holding the cord to the parchment.

[34] Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, Carmelites and Servites.

[35] *Botschaften*, interpreted by Benrath (p. 105), Clemen (I, 406, note) and Weimar Ed. (VI, 406, note 1) as a reference to the *stationarii*. They were wandering beggars who, for an alms, would enroll the contributor in the list of beneficiaries of their patron saint, an alleged insurance against disease, accident, etc. They were classified according to the names of their patron saints, St. Anthony, St. Hurbert, St. Valentine, etc. Protest against their operations were raised at the Diets of Worms (1521) and Nurnberg (1523). Included in these protests are the *terminarii*, i.e., the collectors of alms sent out by the mendicant orders. See WREDE, op. cit., II, 678, 688, III, 651, and Benrath, loc. cit.

[36] *Wallbruder*, the professional pilgrims who spent their lives in wandering from one place of pilgrimage to another and subsisted on the alms of the faithful.

[37] i.e., If the plan above proposed were adopted.

[38] See above, p. 129, note 1.

[39] See *Treatise on the New Testament*, Vol. I, pp. 308 ff.

[40] In the *Babylonian Captivity* (below, pp. 291 f.) Luther definitely excludes penance from the

number of sacraments, but see also p. 177.

[41] The sodalities ("fraternities," "confraternities"), still an important institution in the Roman Church, flourished especially in the XVI Century. They are associations for devotional purposes. The members of the sodalities are obligated to the recitation of certain prayers and the attendance upon certain masses at stipulated times. By virtue of membership in the association each member is believed to participate in the benefits accruing from these "good works" of all the members. In the case of most of the sodalities membership entitled the member to the enjoyment of certain indulgences. In 1520 Wittenberg boasted of 20 fraternities, Cologne of 80, Hamburg of more than 100 (Realencyk., III, 437). In 1519 Degenhard Peffinnger, of Wittenberg, was a member of 8 such fraternities in his home city, and of 27 in other places. For Luther's view of the sodalities see above, pp. 8, 26 ff. On the whole subject see Benrath, pp. 106 f.; KOLDE in Realencyk., III, pp. 434 ff.; LEA, Hist. Of Conf. And Indulg, III, pp. 470 ff.

[42] See above, p. 98, note 2.

[43] See above, p. 128, note 5.

[44] The excesses committed at the feasts of the religious societies were often a public scandal. See LEA, Hist. of Conf. and Indulg, III, pp. 437 ff.

[45] "Faculties" were extraordinary powers, usually for the granting of indulgences and of absolution in "reserved cases" (see above, p. 105, note 3). They were bestowed by the pope and could be revoked by him at any time. Sometimes they were given to local Church officials, but were usually held by the legates or commissaries sent from Rome. Complaints were made at the Diet of Worms (1520) and Nurnberg (1523) that the papal commissaries and legates interfered with the ordinary methods of ecclesiastical jurisdiction and appointment. See WREDE, op. cit., II, 673, III, 653.

[46] Wladislav I forced the Sultan to sue for peace in 1443. At the instigation of the papal legate, Cardinal Caesarini, who represented that the treaty had not been approved by the pope, and absolved the king from the fulfillment of its conditions he renewed the war in 1444. At the battle of Varna, Nov. 10th, 1444, the Hungarians were decisively defeated, and Wladislav and Caesarini both killed. See CREIGHTON, Hist. of the Papacy, III, 67.

[47] John Hus and Jerome of Prague were convicted of heresy by the Council of Constance and burned at the stake, the former July 6th, 1415, the latter May 30th, 1416. Hus had come to Constance under the safe-conduct of the Emperor Sigismund. Luther is in error when he assumes that Jerome had a similar safe-conduct. In September, 1415, the Council passed a decree which asserted that "either by natural, divine or human law was any promise to be observed to the prejudice of the catholic faith." On the whole matter of the safe-conduct and its violation see LEA, Hist. of the Inquisition in the MA, II, pp. 453 ff.

[48] The League of Cambray, negotiated in 1508 for war against Venice. In 1510 Venice made terms with the pope and detached him from the alliance, and the result was war between the pope and the King of France. See Cambridge Modern History, I, pp. 130 ff., and literature there cited.

[49] i.e., The Hussites. After the martyrdom of Hus his followers maintained for a time a strong organization in Bohemia, and resisted with arms all attempts to force them into conformity with the

Roman Church. The Council of Basel succeeded (1434) in reconciling the more moderate party among the Bohemians (the Calixtines) by allowing the administration of the cup to the laity. The more extreme party, however, refused to subscribe the Compactata of Basel. Though they soon ceased to be a factor in the political situation, they remained outside the Church and perpetuated the teachings of Hus in sectarian organizations. The most important of these, the so-called Bohemian Brethren, had extended into Poland and Prussia before Luther's time. See Realencyk., III, 465-467.

[50] See above, p. 140, note 1.

[51] See KOHLER, L. Und die Kirchengesch., 139, 151.

[52] The Archbishop of Prague was primate of the Church in Bohemia.

[53] The dioceses of these bishops were contiguous to that the Archbishop of Prague.

[54] Bishop of Carthage, 249-258 A.D.

[55] Lass man ihn ein gut jar haben, literally, ""Bid him good-day.""

[56] One of the chief points of controversy between the Roman Church and the Hussites. The Roman Church administered to the laity only the bread, the Hussites used both elements. See below, pp. 178 f.

[57] Luther had not yet reached the conviction that the administration of the cup to the laity was a necessity, but see the argument in the Babylonian Captivity, below, pp. 178 ff.

[58] The Bohemian Brethren, who are here distinguished from the Hussites, Cf. Realencyk., III, 452, 49.

[59] St. Thomas Aquinas, the great Dominican theologian of the XIII. Century (1225-74), whose influence is still dominant in Roman theology.

[60] The view of the sacramental presence adopted by William of Occam. For Luther's own view at this time, see below, pp. 187 ff.

[61] i.e., If they did not believe in the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper.

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