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The 450th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation: A Catholic Celebration?

JOHN N. SCHUMACHER, S.J.

ON October 31, 1517, a young Augustinian Friar, professor of theology and Sacred Scripture in the German University of Wittenberg, nailed to the door of the castle church a scroll of ninety-five theses on indulgences, inviting scholars to debate these propositions with him. This proposed academic disputation set in train a series of events which split the Church from top to bottom and changed the face of the modern world. Though nothing perhaps was farther from Father Martin Luther's mind that day than to divide the one, holy, Christian Church into Protestants and Catholics, the nailing of those ninety-five theses has come to symbolize the raising of the curtain on the first act of the Protestant Reformation.

Protestant churches throughout the world will no doubt celebrate with due observance this four hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the events which they believe to have worked under God's guiding Providence for the purification of His Church. They will take occasion from this celebration to rededicate themselves and their congregations to carry on Luther's efforts to eliminate the human accretions which ever continue tending to obscure the pure Word of God. What should be the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church in this year of anniversary? Can a Roman Catholic "celebrate" the Protestant

Reformation? Can a Roman Catholic rejoice at the recollection of what Father Martin Luther attempted and achieved in Christ's Church?

Obviously, no Catholic can rejoice, or even be complacent, about the fact that Christ's Church was split by the events of the sixteenth century and thereafter splintered into a collection of individual denominations, all calling themselves Christians, yet each seeking for the redemption God bestowed on us in Jesus Christ, not only apart from one another, but often even in competition with, or in open enmity to one another. But neither does any responsible Protestant today rejoice at the destruction of unity in Christ's Church which took place at the time of the Reformation, nor is this split of Protestant from Catholic what makes the anniversary of the Reformation a memorable occasion for Protestants. It is not the negative effects of the Reformation that Protestants look to, but the positive achievements, or perhaps even more, the positive ideals brought forward by Luther and the other sixteenth century Protestant reformers, for Protestants freely acknowledge that the Church is today and always, ever in need of reform, *ecclesia semper reformanda*.

THE ECUMENICAL BACKGROUND

We live in the age of ecumenism. The ecumenical movement, founded early in this century by Protestants, has finally come of age and has been officially accepted and encouraged by the Roman Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council. The maturing of the ecumenical movement among Protestants has been a long and difficult process, and has by no means won full acceptance in all Protestant denominations even yet. It has been an even more slow and more painful process among Roman Catholics, and the courageous pioneers who worked in faith and obedience within the Church to create the ecumenical atmosphere which came to fruition in the Decree on Ecumenism of Vatican II, had much to endure and much to suffer from the highest places in the Church. That the ecumenical movement today holds the official place that it does in the Roman Catholic Church even though there still is a long distance

to go before it penetrates to every level of our people, can only be due to the irresistible Spirit of God, which can overcome any human reluctance and opposition.

The ecumenical climate which exists today, and which will continue to grow, is undoubtedly a great blessing, and a cause for rejoicing. But it is not an end in itself. It is surely heartening to see the barriers of suspicion, enmity, and even hatred, which have existed for so long, dropping away, as Catholics and Protestants learn to talk to each other, to work together in cooperative social action, to cast aside the indeliberate misrepresentations or even deliberate falsehoods that each has spoken of the other through four hundred and fifty years. It is heartening too, to see some of the scandal of Christian disunity removed. Those who have worked among non-Christians in mission lands can say what an enormous barrier the sight of divided churches, all calling themselves Christian, has been to the preaching of the Gospel of Christ. One can appreciate too the plea heard from many advocates of ecumenism of the need that Catholics and Protestants unite in the face of the danger to the common values we share, coming from such forces as Communism and the growing secularism of the modern world. Indeed there is a need of united action on many fronts, though perhaps much more towards achieving a Christian social revolution leading to a just social order than simply a relatively sterile common opposition to the anti-Christian aspects of Communism and like ideologies. It is true, moreover, that ecumenical relations between Roman Catholics and Protestants received their first great impetus from the common dangers all churches faced in Hitler's Nazi Germany. But if ecumenism were to be motivated by nothing more than this, it would be only a useful tactic, a strategical method by which the churches would approach the non-Christian world, or would band together so that each might better defend its own interests against the common enemy. To put it in its lowest terms, and perhaps somewhat unfairly, it would be nothing more than what two political parties or factions do when each of them is too weak to win an election by itself. By joining forces in a coalition against the stronger party, they

are each able at least to win part of the election. The ecumenical movement must surely mean more than that.

The ecumenical spirit, as has been noted above, is not an end in itself. It is a necessary condition, a means, towards the achievement under God of Christian unity. It must therefore advance beyond the point of good feeling, of cooperation, of mutual charity, good and necessary though these may be, to further concrete steps. If anything is ever to be done to heal the fractured unity of Christians, it must go back to the causes which brought about that fracture before it can make it whole again. To put aside metaphorical language, Catholics and Protestants alike must look back at the historical and theological reasons for the split of the Church, not in the spirit of mutual recrimination which for so long polluted such investigations, but in an effort really to understand the issues. Or to put it more concretely, the Roman Catholic Church must ask itself: Did Luther ask legitimate questions of the Church of the sixteenth century? If so, did the Roman Catholic Church of the sixteenth century give real answers to the questions Luther asked? And even more important, whether or not the right answers were given then, or the full answers, is the Roman Catholic Church of today giving an adequate answer to Luther's difficulties? Protestants too must put questions to themselves, most especially this: Did Luther wish to split the Church, or did he do so rather in spite of himself, because he did not find an answer to the questions he felt had been raised to him by the Word of God? If, as I would suggest, and most Protestant Luther scholars today would agree, the latter alternative is the true one, the further question must be investigated by Protestants who feel that Luther's real questions were legitimate; namely, has the Roman Catholic Church given or begun to give adequate answers to these questions?¹ But the present paper wishes to treat only the first point, Luther's questions to the Church of his day, and the answers they have received, then and now. This inquiry may give an answer to the question, should the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines today "celebrate" the four hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Reformation?

¹ See John Todd, *Martin Luther* (London, 1964), p. xvii.

LIMITS OF THIS ARTICLE

The present article makes no pretensions to giving thorough and exhaustive treatment to the subject. It is one for many books and much meditative thought and study. But it will attempt to point out some of the principal concerns of Luther, and to offer some suggestions as to their validity and the answers which have been given to them by Roman Catholics.

This attempt should be prefaced by a few cautions as to what it does not attempt to do. We are not trying to solve the question of whether Luther was right or wrong in leaving the Catholic Church. No one can remain a Catholic and assert that one is ever *objectively* justified in leaving the Church. But to say this tells us nothing of the case of Luther, of his motives for the steps he took, of his sincerity. That Luther had no intention of splitting the Church or separating himself from the Catholic Church in the beginning, is agreed by Reformation historians today, Catholic and Protestant. That it was only gradually, and with considerable reluctance, that he found himself in a position where he felt he must reject the authority of the Catholic Church, has been made clear by the historical studies of the present century.² Catholic historical scholarship over the last thirty years, led by the trail-breaking work of Father Josef Lortz,³ has largely put aside its prejudices and biases, to recognize the deep religious concern of Luther, his sincerity, his courageous and unshaken loyalty to what he understood to be the demands on him of the Word of God.⁴ Whe-

² See the citations from Luther's writings in E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and his Times* (St. Louis, 1950), p. 455, expressing the mental anguish he felt at the thought he was setting himself up against the popes, bishops, and universities of Christendom. See, also, among others, the thought-provoking book of Lutheran scholar, Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels: Catholic Substance and Protestant Principle in Luther's Reformation* (New York, 1964).

³ Principally his magisterial work, now being translated into English, *Die Reformation in Deutschland* (3rd ed., 2 vols.; Freiburg, 1949); also, *The Reformation: a Problem for Today* (Westminster Md., 1964). The present article is much indebted to the ideas expressed in this latter volume.

⁴ Several recent articles have traced this evolution. Mention might be made of Erwin Iserloh, "Luther in Contemporary Catholic Thought,"

ther or not one accepts the correctness of Luther's contentions, it is not hard to admire the courage and steadfastness with which he stood before the assembly of Emperor and German princes at the Diet of Worms in 1521, asserting:

Unless I am proved wrong by Scriptures or by evident reason... then I am a prisoner in conscience to the Word of God. I cannot retract and I will not retract. To go against conscience is neither safe nor right. God help me. Amen.⁵

There can be no question in the mind of any serious Christian that the disunity introduced into the Church by the Reformation was a tragedy. Where the fault of that tragedy lay is another question. In the very first years of the breaking up of Catholic unity, in 1523, Pope Adrian VI, unfortunately too quickly taken from the Church by death, made frank confession of where the fault, in large part, lay:

...We frankly acknowledge that God permits this persecution of His Church on account of the sins of men, and especially of prelates and clergy... We know well that for many years things deserving of abhorrence have gathered round the Holy See; sacred things have been misused, ordinances transgressed, so that in everything there has been a change for the worse. Thus it is not surprising that the malady has crept down from the head to the members, from the Popes to the hierarchy.

We all, prelates and clergy, have gone astray from the right way, and for long there is none that has done good; no not one. To God, therefore, we must give all the glory and humble ourselves before Him....⁶

Unfortunately for the Church of Christ, those courageous words of Adrian were not echoed again until John XXIII, and Paul VI,⁷ and the Second Vatican Council. In its Decree on

Concilium vol. 14, (New York, 1967), pp. 5-15; and Edward D. McShane, S.J., "Martin Luther," *Thought*, 41 (1966), 104-116. My own article, "Changing Catholic Concepts of the Reformation," will be appearing shortly in the *South East Asia Journal of Theology*.

⁵ Cited from Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (Grand Rapids, 1965), p. 56.

⁶ Cited from Ludwig von Pastor, *History of the Popes* (St. Louis, 1950), vol. IX, pp. 134-135.

⁷ See the citation from John XXIII in Hans Küng, *The Council and Reunion* (London, 1961), p. 103. For Paul VI, see *Council Document: Vatican II*, ed. Floyd Anderson (Washington, 1965), I, 148.

Ecumenism, the Council made explicit and official confession of Roman Catholic fault in the rending of Christian unity:

The words of St. John hold good about sins against unity: "If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." So we humbly beg pardon of God and of our separated brethren, just as we forgive them that trespass against us.⁸

The fault, then, for the break in Christian unity is shared by those who remained loyal to the Church of Rome as well as those who broke away, and where the greater guilt lies is not something capable of being decided by any human eyes. Surely this writer would not wish to weigh the religious depths of the pleasure-loving aesthete and Renaissance patron of the arts that was Pope Leo X, or of the intriguing diplomat and statesman that was Clement VII, against the passionate, if not always well-directed, devotion to Christ of Martin Luther.

To acknowledge the religious motives at work in the Lutheran Reformation, and the sharing of fault for the break in Christian unity by men on both sides, does not mean the adoption of what was objectively heretical in Luther's teaching, particularly in its later developments. Nor need it imply that the results of the Protestant Reformation for the world today have been always healthy. But it would seem that the question for the Roman Catholic Church of today about the Protestant Reformation should be elsewhere than on its rightness or wrongness, on its good or evil consequences for the modern world. Much more important is to reflect on the problems raised by Luther. Were the questions, the problems, the challenges, Luther raised to the Church of the sixteenth century real ones? important ones? Were they given an answer by the Roman Catholic Church of the sixteenth century, and was it a valid and adequate answer? Or do some of these questions and problems posed by Luther remain such to the Church today? Again, if we must say that the answer Luther gave to some of his questions was, theologically speaking, the wrong one, was not the *concern* behind that question a real and valid Christian concern? I should like to suggest that a proper Roman Catholic approach to the Protestant Reformation today

⁸ *Decree on Ecumenism*, no. 7 *ibid.*, II, 347.

is to address ourselves not so much to the theological *formulations* developed by Luther though these do have their importance, as to his *concerns*.⁹ Were they important, did Catholics respond to them in the sixteenth century? If they did, was that response adequate, or is it today? If not, ought we not address ourselves today to these concerns?

SOME MAJOR CONCERNS OF LUTHER

There is an enormous amount that could be said on this subject, and much that has already been said recently.¹⁰ Here it would seem possible and desirable merely to indicate a few of these concerns, so as to make manifest that the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century needs the attention of the Roman Catholic of today.

Without pretending to give an exhaustive list of Luther's concerns, the following can certainly be said to occupy an important place among them: God's free and gracious justification of man through faith, the primacy of the Word of God as contained in the Scriptures, the priesthood of all Christians, the preaching of the Word of God in the language of the people. It is a common, but historically unjustified, belief that the principal cause of Luther's break with the Catholic Church was the abuses and immorality of the papacy, the hierarchy, the clergy. The abuses were no doubt very real, and Luther himself took advantage of the lamentable state to which the Church had fallen to discredit the Roman Church in his polemic works. The anti-Catholic polemics of the past four centuries have continued this tradition, and fixed the image of moral corruption as the main reason for the Protestant Reformation. But as a matter of fact, much as Luther denounced the greed of the papacy, the immorality of the clergy, and other moral abuses, this was by no means his basic criticism of the Church. Rather, it was a reform in doctrine that he

⁹ Lortz, *The Reformation*, pp. 210-214.

¹⁰ In much of what follows, I must acknowledge my indebtedness not only to the book of Lortz mentioned in note 2, but also to Louis Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism* (Westminster, Md., 1965), and Robert E. McNally, S.J., *The Unreformed Church* (New York, 1965).

sought, and he merely found in the undeniable moral corruption of the Roman Church a weapon to belabor his opponents with after he had separated himself from them over matters of faith.¹¹ It is then to these doctrinal concerns of Luther that we should address our attention and not rest complacent in the fact that such corruption of papacy and hierarchy that Luther denounced in the sixteenth century is now a thing of the past.

Primary to Luther's religious view is the fundamental truth that man's justification, man's salvation, is a free gift of God's grace, received by man through faith; it is not the human works of man which make him just in the eyes of God, he insists, but the acceptance through faith of God's gracious act in Christ by which he has justified us. As has been pointed out, this teaching on man's salvation is "... in perfect harmony with Catholic tradition, the great conciliar definitions on grace and salvation, and even with Thomism. . . ."¹² It is true that Luther's full explanation of what he meant by justification, the notion of imputed justice, etc., was rejected by the Council of Trent but his basic contention that God, not man, is the author of our salvation, that we cannot redeem ourselves mechanically, so to speak, by any external practices of religion in themselves—this was fully accepted, as it had to be, by the official declaration of Catholic doctrine at Trent. Why then, one may ask, if this is traditional Catholic doctrine, could justification by faith become the cornerstone of the Reformation? Simply because this truth, so central to the teaching of Scripture and earlier enunciated in the official and traditional teaching of the Church, was in common Catholic practice of the sixteenth century, so often negated. The traffic in indulgences

¹¹ See the remarks of Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism* (New York and Nashville, 1959), p. 51. Pelikan notes that if a Protestant were to base his support of the Reformation primarily on moral grounds, he would have lost half his case with the sixteenth century moral reforms carried on after Trent, and "... would lose much of the other half if he studies the similarity between moral conditions in Roman Catholic lands and those in Protestant lands since the Reformation..." See also Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: a Life of Martin Luther* (New York, 1950), pp. 68-69.

¹² Bouyer, p. 13; also Küng, p. 112, and Küng's major study, *Justification* (London, 1964).

which sparked Luther's attack, could perhaps, apart from its grosser abuses, receive some kind of theologically correct explanation. The varied shrines and pilgrimages, the veneration of numberless relics, which so fascinated the mind of the late medieval Christian, the multitude of prayers to the saints which played so dominant a part in the religious life of the people—all these could be given an explanation which was compatible with the central truths of the Christian faith. But what was theologically possible, was in actuality more often forgotten, and whatever might be found in the official teaching of the Church, this basic truth of man being wholly dependent on God in the process of his salvation was obscured by the "works of man" often with the complacency, or even the encouragement of the clergy.¹³ It would be naive, of course, to think that the ever-recurring human tendency to look for what might be called gimmicks of salvation, or something *we* can do to assure ourselves that we are all right with God by our own efforts, has been totally eliminated from those who followed Luther, simply because of the assertion of the principle. But surely it cannot be denied that this assertion of salvation as God's gracious gift, to be received through faith,—a faith indeed which manifests itself in good works—is likewise something in constant need of re-assertion among Catholics today against the ever-present thought that we by our good works, by any pious practices or organizations, can put God in our debt, can earn our salvation on our own.

Complementary to Luther's insistence on our justification by God through faith, is his emphasis on the primacy of the Word of God contained in the Scriptures. The conviction he expressed at Worms in 1521, putting Bible over Popes and councils, he spent the rest of his life asserting in more positive form through his labors as translator of the Bible, and through the centrality of the Bible in his preaching.¹⁴ Though the

¹³ See, e.g., the picture painted from a Catholic point of view by John P. Dolan, *History of the Reformation* (New York, 1965), pp. 199-218.

¹⁴ See Schwiebert, pp. 631-636, 643-663. Also McNally, pp. 84-85 on Luther's insistence on the centrality of the Bible in theology. However, the reserves of Lortz, pp. 134-135, deserve to be noted.

Council of Trent rejected the notion that the Scripture alone, freely interpreted by each individual Christian, can be the norm of faith,¹⁵ Luther's insistence on the primacy of God's Word was not denied. But it must be confessed by Catholics that it was Luther who brought the Scriptures to the Christian people once more. No doubt, the legends of the Bible being chained to keep it from the people, are purely legend. It is true also that there were vernacular translations of the Bible in German and other languages before Luther, though much inferior to his. But the placing of the Bible in the hands of the people as well as at the center of theology, was the work of Luther and of the Protestant churches who followed his lead.¹⁶ Though many of the Fathers at the Council of Trent earnestly urged the need of the revitalization of the teaching of theology and of preaching by deeper study of the Word of God, the conservative champions of scholastic method in theology limited the reform to a few innocuous decrees which failed to achieve what was really needed—a theology and a preaching built on the Word of God, and thoroughly penetrated with its spirit.¹⁷ It was only with the Catholic biblical movement of the twentieth century, from the time of the encyclical *Divino afflante spiritu* of Pius XII, that real progress has been made in making the Bible the basis of Roman Catholic theology and preaching, and no one who is informed on the subject could say that nothing remains to be done still. It is particularly in the decree of Vatican II that the Church has finally taken a clear stand that the Bible is to be the "soul of theology" the constant study of the priest, the daily nourishment not only of the theological studies, but also of the spiritual life of the student for the priesthood. Preaching and catechetical instruction too must derive their efficacy from a diligent and continual reading of Scriptures. Finally, the Council urges that every Christian should be nourished on God's Word in the

¹⁵ It does not seem that Luther himself went to this extreme. See Schwiebert, pp. 470-471.

¹⁶ Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland*, pp. 190-191.

¹⁷ McNally, pp. 92-97.

liturgy, by instructions, and by their own frequent reading of the Bible.¹⁸

It is particularly on this last point of the encouragement of Bible reading by all the faithful, that Luther's concern has waited long to make a positive impact on the Roman Catholic Church. At the Council of Trent there was a strong movement even to forbid vernacular translations of the Bible, which some declared to be "the parent and origin of heresies."¹⁹ Though the energetic efforts of more open-minded Fathers prevented any prohibition of vernacular Bibles, translations were long in coming in many languages, and the knowledge of the Word of God, even to the present, has been sadly lacking among Catholics in comparison with Protestants. To look simply at our Philippine situation, though the stories concerned with the "discovery" of the Bible by Filipinos with the coming of American Protestants at the beginning of this century, are often more or less legendary, it is worth reflecting how very recent are the translations of the whole Bible into the Philippine vernacular languages which have been made under Catholic auspices. How many of the Philippine languages even today have either no translation of the Bible, or only one which is due to the efforts of the Protestant Bible societies? It is instructive to recall how many hundreds and perhaps thousands of books of devotions, novenas, etc. were written in or translated into the principal vernaculars of the Philippines from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century by zealous Spanish missionaries and Filipino priests,²⁰ but no translation of the complete Bible was ever made.

Closely connected with Luther's concern for putting the Bible into the hands of every Christian, was his concern for a reform which would make the public worship of the Church evangelical, intelligible, and participated in by all the people.

¹⁸ *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, nos. 24-25; *Decree on Priestly Formation*, no. 16; in *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J., and Joseph Gallagher (New York, 1966), pp. 127, 451.

¹⁹ McNally, p. 95.

²⁰ A partial idea of these may be gained by skimming through the three volumes of bibliography by Wenceslao E. Retana, *Aparato bibliográfico de la historia general de Filipinas* (Madrid, 1906).

to say that priests should often explain to the people the meaning of what was read by the priest in the Mass, even where this prescription was carried out, the Catholic people was for four centuries generally deprived of a living contact with the Word of God in the Liturgy.

In this matter, as in Luther's other efforts for a pastoral liturgy, it has only been in the present day, particularly with the Constitution on the Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, that an adequate Catholic response has begun to be given. Though a thorough reform is still in process, the meaning given to the liturgy in the lives of many Catholics in these past few years by some of the very reforms advocated by Luther is adequate testimony to the fundamental correctness of his pastoral concern in these matters, in spite of the doctrinal errors and misunderstandings involved with it.

One final concern of Luther and his reform which deserves the attention of a Roman Catholic today is his emphasis on the priesthood of all Christians. The Middle Ages had seen an ever greater clericalization of the Church, a growing separation of the clergy from the laity, and the prevailing notion that the Church was the affair of the clergy, not of the laity. In one of his early writings Luther had said: "There is neither priest nor layman, canon or vicar, rich or poor, Benedictine, Carthusian, Friar Minor, or Augustinian, for it is not a question of this or that status, degree, order."²⁴ A few years later, he would come out more clearly and more radically in his *Appeal to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, where he flatly asserts: "all Christians are truly of the 'spiritual estate', and there is no difference among them save of office"²⁵ That is to say, there is no such thing as a sacramental priesthood different from the priesthood bestowed on every Christian by his baptism. This denial of the sacramental priesthood instituted by Christ was necessarily rejected

²⁴ Cited by E. Gordon Rupp, "The Age of the Reformation," in *The Layman in Christian History*, ed. Stephen Charles Neill and Hans-Ruedi Weber (London, 1963), p. 138.

²⁵ *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson (2nd ed.; London, 1963), p. 271.

To make it evangelical, he rejected meaningless ceremonies, and attempted to restore worship to the lines of the Lord's Supper as found in the Gospel. To make it intelligible, he put it in the language of the people, and insisted on the centrality of the Word of God, as found in the Scripture readings and the preaching which was based on them. Reacting violently against the tendency so prevalent in the late medieval period, of looking on the Mass as something at which mere presence sufficed, as a quasi-magic act, conducted as it was entirely in an unintelligible language and generally without any preaching, he emphasized the proclamation of the Word intended to arouse the faith of the worshipper. To encourage participation, he devoted his attention to composition of German hymns. Unfortunately, in his insistence on the liturgy of the Word, Luther rejected entirely the sacrificial character of the Mass, which he misunderstood, and thus rejected the Mass as Catholics understand it.²¹ Equally unfortunate was the Council of Trent. It indeed re-asserted the true Catholic doctrine on the Mass, and eliminated many of the gross abuses and superstitions which had grown up around it in the Middle Ages. But in reaction against the reforms of Luther, it failed to undertake a thorough reform of the decadent medieval liturgy,²² and still worse, effectively perpetuated the exclusion of the liturgy of the Word in the Mass from playing a part in the religious formation of Catholics. One can only be saddened at reading its decree on the subject: "Although the Mass contains much of instruction for the faithful, nonetheless, the Fathers have not judged it expedient that it should be generally celebrated in the vernacular."²³ And though it went on

²¹ Schwiebert, pp. 665-676; McNally, pp. 114-115, 122-136; Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels*, pp. 94-95.

²² Küng remarks that the Tridentine reforms "...were in fact more in the nature of a restoration of the medieval *status quo* than a truly constructive and creative renewal of Christian worship in the light of the Gospel and arising from a need to adapt worship to the requirements of a new age..." *The Council in Action*, (New York, 1963), p. 111.

²³ Sessio XXII, De sacrificio missae, cap. IX, in *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*² ed. Centro de Documentazione, Istituto per le Scienze Religiose, Bologna (Basle, 1962), p. 711.

by the Council of Trent, but unfortunately the Council did not go on to make mention of the priesthood of the laity at all, nor even to speak of the role of the laity in the Church.

Thus, though the Council of Trent effected much for the reform of the clergy, eliminating a great deal of what had rendered medieval clericalization of the Church so odious, still the clericalization of the Church from the time of the Counter-Reformation, though purified by reform, was in many ways far more complete than it had ever been in the Middle Ages. In this matter too, it is only recent years which have seen a growth in the understanding of the layman's role in the Church. Though affirming no less clearly than the Council of Trent the special character of the ordained priesthood, Vatican II has laid the foundation for a fuller understanding in the affirmation of its Constitution on the Church that Christ gives to every baptized Christian a share in His Priesthood, as well as in his life and mission.²⁶ This mission receives extended treatment in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, which will surely serve as a charter for far more extensive development of the essential role of the layman in the Church.

LUTHER'S CONCERNS CATHOLIC

The areas of Luther's concern treated rather briefly and somewhat superficially in this article are, of course, only a part of his thought. Little effort has been made to show what in Luther's thought a Roman Catholic must find unacceptable, or why this must be so. Undoubtedly there are other concerns of Luther too, which would be worth exploring. But what has been pointed out here should at least make clear that much of what Luther really desired to achieve in the Church was not only valid, but necessary. The failure of the Council of Trent, for all its great work in the clarification of Catholic doctrine and the reform of the Church, to meet adequately these demands of Luther on the Church, was tragic. It may well be urged that in the circumstances of the times, and given the polemic atmosphere on both sides, it was too much to ex-

²⁶ *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, no. 34; in *Documents of Vatican II*, p. 60.

pect that this would be done. However, there were more than a few Fathers among those at Trent, who did see the situation more clearly and dispassionately than the majority of their colleagues, but were over-ruled.²⁷ In any case, the fact remains that these concerns of Luther we have mentioned here were also major subjects of concern at Vatican II. It would at least be going beyond the evidence to say that the Second Vatican Council concerned itself with these great problems principally because they had been brought before the eyes of the Church through the protests of Luther.²⁸ It would likewise be historical naivete to say that the profoundly Christian and evangelical concerns of Luther have always been to the fore in the churches derived from the Protestant Reformation, as responsible Protestant historians and theologians will readily admit. Precisely the typically Protestant refrain, *ecclesia semper reformanda*, the Church ever in need of reform, proclaims the continued necessity for Christians to return to the principles of the Gospel, to judge the Church in the light of the Gospel, as Luther did.

Nonetheless, it seems justified to say that the evangelical concerns of Luther here mentioned, preserved in the living witness of the churches stemming from him, have at least contributed to keeping these concerns before the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church, that the Spirit of God has worked through Luther's Reformation in bringing to fulfillment many of these concerns in the Second Vatican Council. Surely in this sense Roman Catholics can and should celebrate with their Protestant brethren the four hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Reformation. In these positive principles and achievements of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church can only rejoice,

²⁷ See, e.g., McNally, pp. 92-96.

²⁸ Küng has noted that the self-renewal of the Catholic Church which has slowly and quietly been underway for the past sixty years has, while actually bringing us closer to the Protestants, proceeded generally with little explicit intention of doing so. "...It was rather a matter of a genuine Catholic renewal, not on the whole envisaging Protestants, but aiming, in the sight of the Lord, at a fuller realization of the riches of Catholicism. But though no approach was intended, it was none the less made..." (*The Council and Reunion*, p. 146).

acknowledging in them the Spirit of God and the power of the Gospel. When these evangelical concerns shall have found full embodiment in all churches, Protestant and Catholic, the obstacles which still separate us will at least seem less formidable. Towards that point, we can, as the Decree on Ecumenism says, go forward "without prejudging the future inspiration of the Holy Spirit."²⁹

²⁹ *Decree on Ecumenism*, no. 24; *Documents of Vatican II*, p. 365.