

COMMENT

Luther was born on 10 November 1483. He was baptised next day, the feast of St Martin of Tours. Dominicans cannot join in the anniversary celebrations without a certain embarrassment. There was, of course, a Dominican priory in Erfurt when the young Luther upset his ambitious father in 1505 by suddenly giving up the law to become a religious – but it was the comparatively strict and learned Order of the Hermits of St Augustine which he joined. By his middle thirties he was professor of biblical theology in the new university at Wittenberg, where he had previously lectured on Aristotle's *Ethics*. He was Regional Vicar, with responsibility for eleven houses of his order. Indeed, he had already been sent to Rome in 1510, on official business connected with the reform of certain 'lax' houses. His youthful pilgrim's enthusiasm, in the month that he spent in the Eternal City, deepened into irreversible disillusionment. He saw priests say Mass, as he said afterwards, like jugglers. Only seven years had passed since Rodrigo Borgia was Vicar of Christ. The zealous young northerner was horrified to learn, no doubt from the perennial cynics in the Roman Curia, about the goings-on of the late unlamented pope and of his notorious son and daughter. The reigning Pontiff, for that matter, was a bloodthirsty old politician whose main concern was to consolidate papal authority by military expeditions. Indeed, of the *nine* popes whom Luther's life spanned, only *one* had any serious idea of the spiritual responsibilities of the office, and that was the only Dutch pope we have so far had, Hadrian VI, who died a little more than a year after he set about the reform of the Curia. If only Martin Luther had not expected so much of the Vicar of Christ . . .

Dominicans intervened fatefully at least three times in Luther's life. His letter of 1517 to Archbishop Albrecht, introducing the famous Ninety-Five Theses, leaves intact the very idea of the Papal Indulgence for the rebuilding of St Peter's in Rome, and is content to "regret the false meaning which the simple folk attach to it". (Ben-ARCIC, meeting amid the steamy churches of Venice, advertising Holy Year indulgences, has, not surprisingly, placed the subject on its agenda – but it will prove one of those things that Catholics defend to the last, while conceding at the outset that it *almost* always leads to "abuses".) Luther even said, in Thesis 91, that "if pardons were preached in accordance with the spirit and mind of the Pope" it would be all right. Johann Tetzel, however,

the Dominican whose preaching of the indulgence sparked off Luther's protest, taught that one might obtain a plenary indulgence for a dead soul, by 'making a contribution', independently of one's own state of soul. This was actually the official teaching of the Archbishop of Mainz, as his "Instruction" shows; but that only shows how the Magisterium may go astray.

Secondly, in 1520, when Luther was drawn into an irrevocable stand against the doctrine of papal sovereignty, it was in response to the theories of one Silvestro Mazzolini, O. P., Master of the Sacred Palace, whose idea of the papal office included the following thought: "Whoever does not rest upon the teaching of the Roman Church and the supreme pontiff as an infallible rule of faith, from which even Holy Scripture draws its vigour and authority, is a heretic". (Perhaps it took until *Lumen Gentium*, in 1964, for the Church to disown *that* thought.)

But Luther could not have expected better of a Dominican by that time. In 1518 he obeyed the summons to meet Thomas de Vio, O.P. Cardinal Cajetan, who had just concluded his stint as Master of the Order. They met in Augsburg, initially with respect on Luther's side and apparently paternal concern on Cajetan's part. Fourteen years older than Luther, he was in the middle of writing what became the classical commentary on the work of St Thomas Aquinas. He had urged the cause of ecclesiastical reform at the Lateran Council, some six years previously. But, on this occasion at least, Cajetan failed. The two were soon shouting one another down, in a dialogue of the deaf. Basic theological questions seem never to have been raised. If only they had turned together to Aquinas on grace and justification . . . but the Cardinal seems to have stuck obsessively to reiterating the papal claims, and in any case his commentary on that particular section of the *Summa* is, to say the least, exiguous.

Even that is not all the story. Luther was delated to Rome in the first place, in 1518, by the provincial chapter of the Dominicans of Saxony. There was nothing prescient, or even moderately intelligent, about the Dominican attitude to the reformer then. It was merely a lack of theological imagination. To be precise, it was an obsession with indulgences and papal sovereignty. Five hundred years later, Dominicans have a much deeper insight into the essential questions that Martin Luther raised in the Catholic Church. At least, it would be nice to think so.