

The Catholic Luther, Then & Now

by Mickey L. Mattox

In the anniversary year of Martin Luther's 95 Theses, the "Luther Year," it is important both to look back, and to look ahead. In what follows, I offer first an admittedly nostalgic retrospective on the reception of Luther among Roman Catholics. I will focus on the years just before and the couple of decades just after the Second Vatican Council, which met 1962-1965. I will speak very briefly about the prospects for a renewal of the Catholic reception of Luther today. I have been teaching Martin Luther at a Catholic university for almost 15 years now. My attempt to look ahead will draw on my experience teaching Luther to my Marquette students, as well as my work with both Catholics and Lutherans interested in his life and legacy.

First the nostalgia. It is tempting to speak of the decades just before and just after Vatican II as the golden age of Catholic Luther research. We historians are wary of such generalizations, but a good case can be made for it. Catholic scholars interested in Luther were emboldened by the hopeful ecumenical stance adopted at Vatican II. The years spanning roughly 1965 to 2000 were the real heyday of Catholic Luther research. But momentum for this research had been building for nearly a century beforehand. Theologies of resourcement, as they were known, called for a return to the biblical and patristic sources of Christian thought in order to break free from the allegedly confining categories of modern Catholic thought. Developed first by such nineteenth century figures as Johan Adam Möhler and extended in the work of such twentieth century greats as Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar, this *nouvelle theologie* brought new and more ecumenically open possibilities to Catholic theology.

Catholic historians were also involved in this work. At the University of Mainz, for example, Joseph Lortz willingly recognized Luther's theological genius; likewise, he agreed with Luther's protest against the 'semi-Pelagianism' found in some later medieval theologies. This new spirit of constructive engagement soon set Catholic and Protestant scholars side-by-side in a shared search for the truth. In the 1960s, Lortz's former students Peter Manns and Erwin Iserloh became important conversation partners in scholarly research on Luther. Manns for many years held forth on Luther at the Institute for

European History in Mainz, while for his part Iserloh challenged the Luther guild with a book arguing that Luther's 95 Theses had not been nailed to the church door, as was commonly believed. One of Iserloh's own students, the American Jared Wicks SJ, carried that legacy further. In a lifetime's worth of books and articles, Wicks advanced the scholarly conversation about Luther. Just as importantly, he mediated the results of German Catholic Luther scholarship to English language readers.

Elsewhere, the amazing Otto Herman Pesch brought Luther into dialogue with Thomas Aquinas, the man who had become the most authoritative theological figure in the western Catholic Church. Pesch argued for a broad agreement between Luther and Thomas on the doctrine of justification. To account for some of the obvious differences between the two men, Pesch argued that Luther tended to express his thought in "existential" terms—focused on the divine-human relationship—while Thomas spoke from the standpoint of "sapiential" theology, focusing on the majesty and providence of God. Pesch's work was crucial in preparing the way for a breakthrough agreement between the Catholic Church and the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation. The "Joint Declaration" on the doctrine of justification was signed in 1999, and here again one of the great figures in the theologies of ressourcement played a crucial role. When at the final hour it seemed that the Declaration would be derailed by a surprising series of criticisms expressed by certain unnamed theologians at the Vatican, then-Prefect Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) stepped in personally to guide the document through to approval. Catholic appreciation of Luther's theology, and readiness to make peace with the Lutheran churches, extended to the Vatican itself.

On the other side of the classical Reformation divide, Protestant scholars were narrowing the Catholic-Lutheran gap as well. Heiko Augustinus Oberman, a Reformed church historian from the Netherlands, trained a generation of brilliant young scholars, first at Harvard, later at Tübingen, and finally at the University of Arizona. The work of the so-called 'Oberman school' was aimed at setting Luther firmly into his late medieval context. As one German scholar later put it, their common goal was to find Luther in the sixteenth century, and much closer to the fifteenth than to the seventeenth. These efforts frequently dovetailed with the research of Catholic scholars working in the tradition of Joseph Lortz, with the result that Protestants and Catholics frequently found themselves making common cause. In the period leading up to the Joint Declaration, post-Vatican II Catholic scholars befriended and accompanied their Protestant counterparts in a common quest to take stock anew of Luther and his theology, with ecumenical rapprochement between their churches very much the goal. They were all looking, in other words, for the "Catholic Luther."

How different our situation is today. Many Catholics in recent decades, particularly during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, have been concerned to address the theological confusion and liturgical degradation that followed Vatican II. They want to recover the riches of Catholic faith, liturgy, and spirituality that were obscured during the chaotic decades immediately after the Council. So it is that young Catholic graduate students in theology—at least the ones I have known at Marquette—have generally proven more ‘tradition positive’ than the students of the 60s, 70s, and 80s. Neo-Scholasticism, too, is experiencing a revival, while the weaknesses in theologies of ressourcement have become all too clear. The trend toward Catholic traditionalism befuddles some of these student’s elder teachers, who tend to think, wrongly, that the default position for the young is one of progressive opposition to ‘entrenched traditions,’ rather than, say, eco-feminist or social justice concerns. Instead, these young people really want to study theology: God, the Church, Jesus Christ, the sacraments, and so on, and they want to do so in service to the Church’s life and faith.

My undergraduate students present a different profile. As I lecture on Luther’s 95 Theses, his fateful confrontation with the papacy, and the greed and confusion seemingly rampant in the later medieval church, they much too quickly jump to the conclusion that the corruptions in the church of Luther’s day parallel the corruptions in the Church today: the sexual abuse scandals, financial shenanigans at the Vatican, and so on. Never mind the fresh renewal sparked by Vatican II, the inspiring sanctity and leadership of John Paul II, or the theological courage and acumen of Benedict XVI.

So, I find my students today headed in two very different directions. Graduate students looking for a career in theology or church service want to reclaim the Church’s great traditions, which leaves them typically indifferent or even somewhat hostile to Martin Luther. Undergraduate students, for their part, want to interpret the ‘headline news’ about their own church through the lens of Luther’s experience in the late middle ages. In the years ahead, the graduate students will become leaders and teachers in the Church, while the undergraduates will form an influential segment of the lay membership of the Church. Whose perspective will predominate? Is Luther a friend, or a foe?

Similar questions can be put to today’s Catholic bishops as well. Will the tradition-minded bishops who wrote the Church’s general catechism and have stood fast against the imperatives of the sexual revolution continue to dominate? Or will the gently progressive program of Pope Francis gain the ascendancy? It is probably fair to say that tradition-minded Catholic bishops do not typically think first of Martin Luther when in search of helpful theological conversation partners. But as the example of Pope Benedict XVI suggests, the situation on

the ground is more complex than the black and white media polarization of conservative versus liberal would suggest. The Catholic Luther, it seems, fits well within the framework of Catholic ressourcement traditionalism. More progressive Catholics, on the other hand, take encouragement from Pope Francis, who has been quite publicly affirming of Luther and his legacies. For progressives, the liberalizing trajectories in the Church—from the common priesthood of the baptized to support for married priests, and more—may look to Luther as a helpful resource.

My own suggestion would be that one should resist a false polarization of the traditionalist versus the progressive Catholic position. A *via media* between these two options need not be found, because it already well exists. Benedict and Francis are more alike than different in their outlook on Martin Luther. What is needed, then, is not political agitation to gain the victory for one side over the other. Instead, in 2017 we Catholics need to continue the tradition of patient and sober work in the sources to discover if and how Luther can play a role in informing the Church's life and faith, and in leading the separated churches closer together. To do so would truly honor the legacy of the great Catholic Luther scholarship of the twentieth century. *LEJ*

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Mickey L. Mattox is Professor of Historical Theology at Marquette University. He formerly served as Research Professor in the Institute for Ecumenical Research (Strasbourg), and Assistant Professor of Theology at Concordia University Chicago.
