

LUTHER AS TEACHER

When Johann von Staupitz urgingly suggested in 1508 that Martin Luther accept a position on the faculty of the University of Wittenberg, little could he have realized what an important turning-point he was suggesting to his young friend -- an important turning-point for Luther, of course, but an important turning-point also in the history of the Christian Church, yes, even of the western world.

We must grant, of course, that hypothetical thinking is almost always of little importance, since it almost always deals with facts which never occurred. But isn't it interesting, nevertheless, to ask the question: what if Luther would not have become a professor at Wittenberg, had not become a teacher? What if, after his monastic training had made a priest of him, he had gone on into the parish priesthood, never to have been drawn into the great Reformation by the set of circumstances which resulted almost directly from his role as a teacher?

Since Luther's teaching career, which spread over nearly 38 years, was spent at Wittenberg, except for nearly two years at Erfurt and one at the Wartburg, let us take a brief look at that university and at the man whose university it was. Doing so will possibly help us understand a bit better Luther's importance as a teacher.

The man we refer to was Elector Frederick the Wise, Duke of Saxony. As one of the electors, one of the seven princes in a Germany of well over 300 states, one of seven who were powerful enough to claim the right of sitting in on the election of the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, you may be sure of his being a powerful man where military strength, access to wealth, influential leadership, and even inspiration for his state's culture were concerned. Frederick was a prince who took good care of his state and of his subjects, especially those who could be of benefit to him in turn. He loved knowledge and demonstrated a deep religious feeling. It goes without saying that, enjoying the friendship and admiration of such a man, as Luther did, was a great advantage. It explains, too, how it happened that in

a day when the university movement was extending itself among the states of Germany, that a man like Frederick would want a university in his state.

And so it happened that the University of Wittenberg was founded in 1502. It was, of course, a little university for some time. In fact, the city of Wittenberg was a small city with only about 3,000 inhabitants. But Elector Frederick seemed determined to change all this. He surrounded himself with able men, into whose hands he entrusted great responsibilities. These, in turn, were very careful to select talented and trustworthy teachers for the new university.

The supervision of theology was entrusted by Frederick to Johann von Staupitz, whom he personally held in high esteem. Since this is the man who had so much to do with the development and course of Luther's teaching career, let us take a better look at him. Staupitz was by no means an ordinary man. To begin with, he had received his Master's Degree in theology and became reader and prior of the monastery at Tuebingen. The very mention of Tuebingen reminds one to this day of a community of excellence in scholarly pursuit. The following year he became a Bachelor of the Bible. A year later he had mastered the Sentences of Peter Lombard sufficiently well to be declared a Sententiarius, one qualified to teach that immense volume of Christian doctrine. Before long we find him earning his Doctor's Degree in theology and with it his licentiate, the privilege to teach theology. While serving in his next appointment as prior of the monastery in Munich, Staupitz was made vicar-general of all the Augustinian Observantist monasteries in Germany. That gave him the responsibility of visitation also in the monastery at Erfurt in which Luther had chosen to get his training as a monk and a priest.

Let us explain that the Augustinian Order of monks was a conservative order, founded on the theology of the great Saint Augustine about a century later than the famous Franciscans and Dominicans. It was founded in order to stem some of the deteriorating trends in the older orders. And among the Augustinians the Observantines were a set of monks, especially conser-

vative, who organized in a group less than a century before Luther's day. They were committed to 'observing' all the rules of the Order.

Impressed as he was with the record of Staupitz, Frederick the Wise wanted him to direct his newly founded University of Wittenberg. To use our present-day language, one might say that he became the Dean or President of the University of Wittenberg. Such was the man who learned to know Luther during his visitation at Erfurt Monastery. Having recognized his abilities and talents, it does not surprise us that he wanted Luther at Wittenberg, and subsequently, in 1508, he recommended Luther to Frederick the Wise for becoming a teacher at Wittenberg. Again, we might say that being recommended by such a man as Staupitz says much for the obvious talents and training of Luther for his role as teacher.

That does not mean to imply that Luther already had all the formal training needed for that lofty position of being a university professor. That was especially true since we know that Luther was not completely happy with his first assignment at Wittenberg, that of teaching philosophy, Aristotle's ethics, to be exact. No doubt, he had done sufficiently well, having earned his Bachelor's Degree and then his Master's Degree while still at Erfurt before entering the monastery. But that was not now his favorite discipline. His great interest in Bible-reading even as a child at the Cathedral School in Magdeburg and then, certainly, during those good gymnasium days at Eisenach, to say nothing of his avid searching of the Scriptures during his monastery years, caused him to nurture a strong desire for teaching theology. Obviously, Staupitz noticed this as they worked together at Wittenberg during that school year of 1508-9. You will recall, we heard that Staupitz had become the first dean or president of Wittenberg. He saw that Luther while teaching Aristotle, used all the time he could manage at an intense study of the Scriptures, and the university granted him his Bachelor of the Bible degree in the spring of 1509. And now he saw to it that Luther should get his chance to teach theology. That explains the fact that in the fall of 1509 we find Luther back at Erfurt. Here, for a period of two years, interrupted only by a four-month leave for a trip to Rome, he threw himself

wholly into theology. He studied the Sentences of Peter Lombard thoroughly, earning as a result his title of Sententiarius, giving him the right to teach the Sentences.

Shall we degress for a few minutes to take a brief look at two matters which we have just mentioned in passing?

One of these was the Sentences of Peter Lombard. What made them the object of careful study on the part of every medieval theologian? Peter Lombard was the man who during the 12th century compiled in dialectic format a full list of the accepted doctrines of the church. In four long books he listed and treated them, taking his readers through a positive as well as a critical treatment of every doctrine of the Catholic Church -- from God, the Trinity, and the angels all the way through to the Sacraments and the four last things: death, the judgment, hell, and heaven. These Sentences continued to be respected and studied as the basic textbook of doctrine in the church throughout the centuries from Lombard's day till the Council of Trent ca. 1565.

The other matter which we mentioned was Luther's trip to Rome.

One might justly ask, how would it have happened that by the fall of only his second year of teaching at Erfurt he would be asked by Staupitz to make a journey to Rome for the Order. The fact points clearly to the great respect and confidence which Staupitz had for and in Luther. It happened that there were Augustinian Observantine monasteries in Germany which favored a union on their part with the headquarters at Rome. Staupitz favored such a union. Luther opposed it. And yet, Staupitz did send Luther as one of two representatives to the Holy City to handle the matter. We know little about Luther's assigned partner for the journey beyond his name and the impression that he was a man who favored the union. At first glance it appears fair on the part of Staupitz that he sent one man of each opinion in the matter. Otto Scheel, in his detailed and very dependable biography of Luther, suggests that, since Luther was young and did not know his way around in Rome, he was not expected to speak at Rome. It was a custom that monks

and priests always travelled in pairs on longer journeys. Scheel was also of the opinion that the real leader of the pair was a man from Nuernberg by the name of Anton Kress. In the light of all this, one wonders whether Staupitz was hoping that Luther might come back convinced that he ought support the union.

For Luther and the Reformation, this trip had a very important significance. It went a long way toward making Luther the reformer. When he undertook the assignment, he was enthusiastic about what a visit to 'holy Rome' would mean to him by way of peace of mind and satisfaction with his lot as clergyman. His first shock befell him already when the two travellers reached Milan. Luther thought he would like to read a mass at Milan to express his thankfulness to the Lord for bringing them safely through the long dangerous journey over the Alps. He found, however, that the Milanese were extremely proud of the fact that the great St. Ambrose had been their bishop at one time and that he had left them the Ambrosian chant. They told Luther to be on his way. "You cannot celebrate mass here. You are unable to perform the Ambrosian liturgy."

When their journey brought them to their first sign of the 'Holy City' Luther experienced the devotion of a pilgrim. He had for so long regarded Rome with holy veneration. He fell upon the earth, raised his hands, and exclaimed, "Hail to thee, holy Rome!" But he added later with indignation for himself how he had run like a crazy saint on a pilgrimage through all the churches and the catacombs. How he wished that his parents might already have died so that he might have performed some special act to release them from the pains of purgatory. But in all of this, he felt no peace of mind. On the contrary, his soul was stirred to the consciousness of another way of salvation which had already begun to dawn upon him, namely, justification by faith. While climbing on his knees, in prayer, and with a papal promise of absolution from the pope, the sacred stairs which were said to have led to the judgment-hall of Pilate, he was reminded of St. Paul's words, "The just shall live by faith." He tells us, too, that he was shocked at the immorality of the clergy which he encountered. He complains of the priests scrambling through the mass as if they were juggling; while

he read one mass, he found they had finished seven. He was horrified at the way the priests joked during the mass, garbling the words of the mass in such a way that for one standing close enough one understood them to say, "Bread thou art and bread thou shalt remain." He did express happiness concerning the trip in later years because if he had not seen what he did in Rome, he might have in later years feared lest he might be doing the pope an injustice. Now he could ~~he could~~ speak as he had seen.

The plan because of which Luther had been sent to Rome, namely, the union of the German Augustinians with the headquarters in Rome, failed. When Luther returned to Erfurt to resume teaching, it seems that, although he and Staupitz were still friends, the strained feelings between the monks of the two sides in the union matter caused Luther to feel considerable discomfort. Although for nostalgic reasons, he was unhappy with the thought of leaving his beloved college town, he was, nevertheless, relieved when, at the end of his second school year of teaching there, Staupitz transferred him back to Wittenberg.

Here he lived and worked for the remaining 36 years of his life. Those years were extremely busy with many things, preaching, counselling, travelling and attending conferences in the interest of the church, an unbelievable amount of writing, and even serving as vicar of the Augustinian Order throughout his district of Germany from 1515 to the Diet of Worms in 1521. There was only one interruption to those 36 years. We refer to his memorable and familiar stay at the Wartburg. The fact remains, however, that all 36 years belonged to his tenure as teacher.

Immediately upon his return to Wittenberg during the summer of 1511, Luther entered fully upon all rights and duties of a teacher of theology. He began by lecturing on the Psalms. While lecturing on a given book of the Bible, such as the Psalms that first year, he studied and presented the book with such diligence and such depth that in later years he often spoke of or identified a given year by the name of the book he was teaching during that respective year.

When Luther arrived back at Wittenberg, it was again Staupitz who influenced Luther's decisions. It was at First Luther's thought

to leave Wittenberg and devote himself to his office in the Augustinian Order. But Staupitz urged, as his superior, that he use his talents and abilities at the university. And Elector Frederick, having been deeply impressed by one of Luther's sermons, agreed wholeheartedly. There were times in later years, when surrounded by trials and dangers, that he regretted having given in to that request. He was quoted as exclaiming, "If I had known then what I know now, not ten horses would have dragged me into it."

When assuming his full professorship at Wittenberg, it was required that Luther hold one more title and one more degree. The required title was that of licentiate. It amounted to a license showing him ready and privileged to teach the Bible at the university level. The ceremony included a solemn oath on Luther's part, promising to defend with all his power the truth of the Gospel, and was sworn on his beloved Bible to preach it faithfully and in its purity. This vow proved to be a genuine source of strength and comfort in the coming years.

There was a delay of several weeks before Luther was granted his last degree, that of Doctor of Theology. The delay was caused by a lack of finances. But when Elector Frederick heard what the problem was, he was prompt to offer Luther the sum, a considerable one, so that his university could boast having another doctor, and at that, one already so famous. The oath as doctor bound Luther to abstain from doctrines condemned by the church and offensive to pious ears. Obedience to the pope was fortunately not required at Wittenberg, as was the case at other universities at the time.

The story is often told of Luther's first reaction to Staupitz' urging that he become a doctor and a preacher. The story may be a favorite because it demonstrates so clearly what a modest and humble man Luther really was. He and Staupitz were sitting under that familiar pear tree in the garden at the Black Cloister in Wittenberg. When Staupitz had stated the urgent request, Luther at once cited no less than 15 reasons why he did not find himself fit to be a doctor. Upon Staupitz' further encouragements, Luther exclaimed, "Herr Staupitz, you will bring me to my death. I will never endure it for three months." To that Staupitz replied in kindly humor,

"Don't you know that our Lord God has many great matters to attend to? For these He needs clever people to advise Him. If you should die, you will be received into His council in heaven, for He, too, has need of some doctors." After this, Luther had to acquiesce, willingly or not.

When speaking of Luther in his role as teacher at Wittenberg, we should be unfair to one person if we were not to add a few lines concerning his contacts with Luther during that time. We refer to Philip Melanchton. True, we should have to add volumes, were we to follow the contacts of Luther and Melanchton throughout the whole Reformation. Here, however, we are interested only in contacts as co-workers on the faculty at Wittenberg.

Looking at Melanchthon in that role, we find him a very unusual young man. In childhood, he had been precocious where learning was concerned. Soon thereafter he displayed similarly unique intelligence when studying Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. It ought to be mentioned that he was greatly influenced by his great-uncle, Johann Reuchlin, the great humanistic scholar in Hebrew and Greek literature. At 13, Melanchthon entered Heidelberg University. His age gave him no problem when he applied for his Bachelor's Degree. But when he applied for his Master's Degree at the age of 16, he was refused. This may have resulted, we are told, from his very youthful appearance. He did receive that degree, however, at the renowned University of Tuebingen three years later.

It was Melanchthon's great-uncle, Reuchlin, who recommended him to the Elector of Saxony for a position on the faculty at Wittenberg University. He entered that faculty early in his 21st year. For many of his early years at Wittenberg, he and Luther worked together in a firm bond of friendship and admiration for one another. Each complemented the other in a way that made of them an incomparable pair of teachers. James Richard, a biographer of Melanchthon, has this to say: "Luther loved Melanchthon as a son, and yet often he sat at his feet as a pupil. Melanchthon learned his spiritual apprehension of divine truth from Luther." It is our impression that what Luther sought of Melanchthon was further training in Greek and Hebrew, and the theology which Melanchthon sought of Luther was in most cases practical theology."

Would you consider us justified if we suggested this thought at this point: fortunate are the co-workers in the Lord's work who, when recognizing the stronger talents and skills in their fellows, will, rather than envying them, seek to enjoy the benefit of the same. And if there is a possibility of enjoying some mutual exchange, all the better.

In his very recent article in the August, 1983, ^{issue} of the ELS Lutheran Sentinel, Dr. Neelak Tjernagel, our school mate during our days at the Seminary at Mequon, caught very well the importance of Melanchthon at Luther's side at Wittenberg during his teaching days: "In his public support of education, Luther had a skilled and effective associate in Philipp Melanchthon whose leadership in education had earned him the title, "Preceptor of Germany." The author of many textbooks and the organizer of practical educational programs, Melanchthon had added much to the initial impetus of Martin Luther's sponsorship of education."

We now have spent considerable time getting acquainted with the schools at which Martin Luther served as a teacher. We said something about how he happened to teach at each of them and about his tenure at the same. We looked briefly at his preparation for these assignments, his schooling and additional degrees on his way to becoming a university professor. Now let our attention turn to that which we may be sure the theme of this essay asks of us. That is: what kind of a teacher was Martin Luther?

Perhaps one should start the answer to that question by saying that he was a most enthusiastic and consecrated teacher. He was convinced that being a teacher was a precious calling, of all callings second only to that of the ministry, and even then second by very little. These are some of Luther's own words.

"I would briefly say that a diligent and pious school teacher or master or whoever the person is who faithfully trains and teaches boys can never be sufficiently rewarded and repaid with any money, as even the heathen Aristotle says. Yet this work is shamefully despised among us as if it were nothing whatever. Still we want to be Christians. If I myself could or should be obliged to leave the office of

the ministry and other duties, I would rather have the office of school master or teacher of boys than any other office. For I know that next to the ministry this work is most useful, the greatest, the best. In fact, I do not know which of the two is the better; for it is hard to tame old dogs and to make old rascals pious. Yet this is the task at which the preacher must labor and often labor in vain. But one can bend and train young trees more easily even though some of them break in the process. My friend, let it be considered one of the greatest virtues on earth faithfully to train the children of other people. Very few people, in fact, practically none, do this for their own children."

And to that let us add this thought. A teacher who finds his motivation stemming from such a conviction concerning the value of teaching will most certainly be an enthusiastic and consecrated teacher -- a good teacher.

Luther was a praying teacher. We read that he spent long hours in prayer. He was overheard and quoted on a number of occasions praying out loud, though alone in his room. He would discuss with his heavenly Father the problems which weighed heavily upon his heart, asking the Lord to guide him in giving the best advice at all times either to his students or to his parishioners. The thought is easy to accept that a teacher who makes his work the object of his prayers will be a sincere teacher.

We have already made the point and feel that it warrants being repeated, Luther was a teacher eminently trained for his work at every turn along the way. He experienced a genuine love and capacity for learning. He was quite at home with four languages, German, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Even while lecturing extemporaneously (though he always prepared an outline for his lectures to guide him in their course), he would switch from one language to another with interesting effect, either to speak in one or the other of the first two, or to illustrate his exegesis in either of the latter two.

His learning was widely admired and appreciated, not only by his friends and students, but even on the part of some of his

opponents. Erasmus, the 'Prince of Humanists' and sometimes called the most learned man of his century, when asked by Pope Adrian VI to address himself in opposition to Luther, replied, "As to writing against Luther, I have not learning enough." James Froude, considered one of the greatest British historians, once said of Luther's mind was literally world-wide: his eyes were forever observant of what was around him. At a time when science was scarcely out of its shell, Luther had observed nature with liveliest curiosity. He had anticipated the generative functions of flowers. Human nature he had studied like a dramatist. His memory was a museum of historical information, of anecdotes of great men, of old literature and song and proverb. Scarce a subject could be spoken of, on which he had not thought and on which he had not something remarkable to say."

One author (the source escapes your essayist) has called Luther the 'Thomas Edison' of his day. People of his day regarded him as a genius. Modern writers in this computerized age have declared him the same.

Melanchthon, the good friend and co-worker of Luther later, once said of Luther at a time when he, Melanchthon, was still quite an admirer of Erasmus, "Luther is too great, too wonderful, for me to depict in words. One is an interpreter; one, a logician; another an author, affluent and beautiful in speech; but Luther is all in all - whatever he writes, whatever he utters, pierces to the soul, fixed itself like arrows in the heart -- he is a miracle among men."

Luther was an inspiring teacher - his lectures were so inspiring that we are told that some of his students failed to take notes lest they miss a word. He was ready to admit that some of his earlier lectures were not as well done as he wished, but that realization brought him back all the more promptly to his study in order to delve more deeply into the beloved Scriptures and prepare better for the next lectures. Especially after he had found the true understanding of the Gospel and the righteousness of Christ imputed to us did his evangelical lectures attract more and more students from all over Germany, even from other European countries. Just as the famous Abelard once became the attraction at the University of

Paris four centuries earlier, so that people said that Abelard became the university, so it was with Luther at Wittenberg. At the end of its first year in 1503, the enrollment at Wittenberg was only 416 and even dropped during the year following. But during the ten years after Luther came to Wittenberg in 1508, the enrollment increased steadily until it numbered over 1,000. Some 400 of these men attended Luther's classroom only. That enrollment of more than 1,000 compared with an average attendance at Leipzig University of 100 and only 50 at Erfurt.

Unlike many other university professors of the day, Luther drew many of his students into a bond of friendship. The slow student was given helpful attention. Luther often went out of his way to find some merit in that which such a student had to offer, if he recognized honest effort on the part of that student. The intelligent or advanced student was given a challenging approach. He kept his presentation, however, for the most part at the level of the average student. He was ready at all times to counsel his students cautioning them against the pleasant temptations and vices of youth and maturity. The students were often known to seek his fatherly advice and counsel. He was their mentor both in and out of the classroom.

We do not want to encourage the impression that all students necessarily liked Luther. He said himself that that would be too much for any teacher to hope. We have statements from Luther himself indicating that he was aware of the fact that some of the students resented his earnest efforts to accomplish a lot with them. Nor do we want to give the impression that his friendliness and concern for the students made him a soft touch. He was too clever for that. He could become very sharp at times. Knowing Luther as we do as a man capable of frank, even strong language at times we can understand that on occasion he disciplined in a way that blistered some. Luther hoped that in later years, when they matured to the point of knowing that what he had done was for their own good, they would still think of it all in the right spirit.

At the same time, we find Luther to have been a modest and humble teacher. He expressed his unhappiness with the students'

custom of all arising in respect when he entered the room. He said he wished that custom might be turned about so that the professor would bow to the class. He said that the professor could never know but what there might be a future mayor, a doctor, or a lawyer in his classroom. His heart went out to the students, who because of lowly background or poverty, had difficulty staying in school. He was known on occasion to have helped such out of his own funds, even when he found affording such generosity difficult.

As a teacher, Luther was untiring in his efforts to accomplish an unbelievable volume of work. He was known at times to have carried a load even under physical handicaps that would have incapacitated the ordinary man. His teaching load may have appeared to be light, four lectures a week, one on each of four days, Monday Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, with Wednesday as a free day. But we must remember preparation for those lectures during the early years of his career meant constantly preparing new material until he had worked through the entire Scriptures, to say nothing of the volumes of theology and church history. Then, too, he altered the courses he presented every schoolyear. Let us not forget either that his 38 years of teaching were paired at the same time with a pulpit responsibility, first at the Black Cloister, then at the City Church, and then for many years at the Castle Church of the Elector. This preaching schedule, especially during its latter years, called for as many as two and three sermons a day. Sometimes the festival seasons called for even more. And who of us has not marvelled in sheer humility when he stood before the shelves which house the collected writings of this man Luther?

We must add to all of this the fact that he considered it his duty as a teacher to furnish all who followed him or studied under him an in-depth analysis and, if necessary, a refutation of the whole gamut of theories or trends which popped onto the scene during his long career. Time does not permit us to enter into these here, but just let a sample list of such run past your memories for a moment: scholasticism, humanism, mysticism, the indulgence problem, the troublesome views of an Erasmus, the sharp attacks of a John Eck, the fickle view of Henry VIII, the sacramentarianism

of Zwingli, the legalism of Calvin, the misunderstanding of the peasants, the radicalism of the Zwickau Prophets, of Zwilling, Carlstadt, and the Anabaptists and others. Each of these necessitated study, writing, meetings, travel, and more preaching and teaching, to say nothing of long hours of counselling and guiding. Have we perhaps gone far enough to have won your agreement when we say that it simply boggles the mind of any one of us when trying to imagine a university teacher satisfying such demands?

In closing, there is one thing about this teacher, Martin Luther which surprises one somewhat. It is the fact that, although teaching was close to his heart, he never put down in writing a formal list of directives which might be called his philosophy of education or methodology. One would need to read very widely, taking copious notes, working his way through Luther's Table Talks and many other volumes written by him, and then come up with only a handful of his statements concerning the importance of education and the things that ought to be taught, but not with enough of what could be termed a philosophy or methodology for teaching. The best one can do on that score is to read about his teaching and imagine being in his classroom. Some of you appear to be old enough to have read the book of last century by Painter under the title, "Luther on Education." If you have read it, then you will agree that it uses many more pages describing the times of the Reformation, and the kind of schools which they had in those days, than pages on which it gives the reader preparation for entering the classroom as a teacher.

Some of the thoughts one does gather after reading considerably in Luther's works, looking for suggestions for the teacher, seem to crystallize into what one might consider his suggestions to others. But let no one think that we present this brief accumulation of his statements to be considered as any more than a mere sampling. Since each is very deserving of thought, however, here are a few.

Let the teacher know his students as well as possible. Let him teach them as individuals for their good rather than to build up his own reputation or for the good of the school in which he serves.

One of the worst sins parents can commit where their children are concerned is that they do not give them proper education.

Where God's Word does not rule, there do not send your child. All true education must be oriented with religion.

Education at the elementary level ought be universal. Young men beyond the elementary level who find higher education difficult or distasteful should be given vocational training, so that they might learn a trade and become valuable citizens.

Aside from a strong emphasis on religion and history, education owes another debt to parents and the state, namely, to train the young, wherever possible, in things cultural - music, the arts, etc., so that they might use their talents and skills to the glory of God and toward the welfare of their fellow man.

Luther, the teacher! May our dear Lord help us, who are all active in the same vocation as he, whether pastor or teacher, to find in him an example, inspiring to us in the way he studied the Word of the Lord, in diligence, consecration, humility and sincerity, and in the way he approached his Heavenly Father in prayer for help toward such faithfulness.

Respectfully submitted by

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