

The Reformation and Martin Luther.

THIS is the usual term applied to that religious movement which made its appearance in Western Europe in the early part of the Sixteenth Century and while ostensibly aiming at internal renewal and reform really led to revolt and the abandonment of many Christian beliefs. The causes of the Reformation have been much discussed yet they cannot be too often brought to our minds especially in connection with the outstanding figure among the reformers.

For the causes of this great revolt we must seek as far back as the fourteenth century. The doctrine of the Church was still as pure as it was in the days of Nero's persecution. Beneficent institutions were as numerous as they ever were. Many were the saintly lives then led by the clergy and the people ; many were the good works performed ; Ecclesiastical life was still vigorous ; Christian art and literature were still cultivated and appreciated and neither did this spirit of decadence hold simultaneously or with equal intensity in all places—in fact some escaped it altogether.

The bad conditions existing—and there were bad conditions existing—were largely due to profane or civil influence in Ecclesiastical affairs or the exercise by clerics of civil authority. In many places through jealousy or envy—the heritage of the age-long struggle of the Empire and the Papacy—fierce collisions took place betwixt Church and State. Thus social and political conditions hampered the reformatory movement of the Church and it seemed an appertune moment for heresy and schism to step forth and bury in the ruins of her own greatness the power that had so long restrained the tyranny of princes and the passions of the rabble.

Since the days of the Barbarian invasions the Church had effected a wondrous transformation of the peoples of Europe. The Papacy had become the centre of Christendom and a glorious life of intellectual and religious advancement had sprung up. But soon the power of the Episcopate in this happy union of Christian nations began to transfer itself to worldly government and among the higher Ecclesiastics soon the guiding of men's

souls to their goal became of secondary interest in comparison with temporal affairs. Material power and privileges coupled with other earthly interests were far too often the aim of the higher clergy.

Even the Roman Curia itself displayed this gross spirit to a remarkable degree and various abuses arose in the lives of the clergy and the people. Many bishops and abbots became as secular princes rather than servants of the Church. Luxury prevailed and the chief worry of the Cathedral Chapters was how to increase their income—very often at the expense of the oppressed lower clergy. The people themselves in many places were sunk in ignorance, superstition, indifference or immorality. Many efforts were made by holy men to revive Christian people and side by side with this moral decay stood numerous examples of pure and beautiful lives.

The clergy nevertheless were losing the respect of the masses. From the 14th century this necessity for reform in all ranks had been voiced by clear sighted and serious men and their writings and sermons tended still more to bring down the clerics in the estimation of the people. The much talked of councils of the 15th century accomplished little or nothing in the line of reform.

Along with this came the impairment in the authority of the Holy See caused chiefly by the Exile at Avignon which was nothing other than an attempt to nationalize the Papacy—and the Great Western Schism which placed before men's minds the idea that war spiritual and temporal could be waged against one whom many other Christians regarded as the only lawful Pope. Humanism affected some of the Cardinals and even a few of the Popes who alternately occupied themselves with politics or Pagan art. Consequently this decline of the Papacy might be traced to Rome itself. Thus as Ecclesiastical authority grew weak at the fountain head it necessarily decayed elsewhere and the strongest check ever exercised on dissolute and rapacious princes was withdrawn.

During the stirring times of the 14th and 15th centuries there grew up the modern concept of the state and the direct influence of laymen in Ecclesiastical affairs rapidly increased. Many matters of secular and

mixed character had been formerly managed by the church which the state in its new self-consciousness sought to direct. Thus arose many of the quarrels of Church and State which spread all over Europe, and awakened the dormant spirit of hostility that is still rampant on the part of the State—in most countries. The old view of the interdependence of Christian Nations died out. Distrust and selfishness took its place. The lack of moral scruples and the inordinate love of wealth came to the fore. Dangerous revolutionary opinions began to be circulated and the rift between Christian morality and politics swiftly broadened. All these things tended to incline men's minds to revolution in the hitherto undivided allegiance to one religion.

The Renaissance or Humanism partly introduced and helped along this movement. The pagan views inculcated by the old masters were revived. Christian art and morality were lost sight of and a crude materialism prevailed among the higher classes. The Humanists assailed the Scholastics on their ways of teaching; and the fear that this reform would not stop at the method but run unto the content of the dogma and thus find widespread support in Renaissance circles, was too well founded.

The soil was prepared for revolt in the religious sphere. Many were the signs and warnings—the reforms in diverse places and orders—that presaged this great movement. But the general reform beginning with Rome itself was not promptly undertaken and all now needed was an occasion to precipitate the revolution that would cut off all Northern Europe from the stem of the Universal Church.

The occasion arose shortly. A Jubilee Indulgence had been proclaimed and alms were asked of all receivers to aid in the completion of St. Peter's Cathedral. The commission to preach this indulgence in Germany had been given to the monk Tetzel of the Dominican order. Great jealousy existed between the Dominicans and Augustinians because the latter claimed it was their right to preach. It has appeared that Tetzel's preaching was not altogether correct and Martin Luther, an Augustinian priest and Professor at the University of

Wittenberg, attacked him on the subject of Indulgences. But pride overcame Luther. He soon began to reject one truth after another. He spread aloft the standard of revolt. He broke his solemn vows to marry an ex-nun. The price of the Landgrave of Hesse's support was Luther's permitting him to give his arm to two lawful wives. He denied free will and set forth the impeccability of the believer as truths deduced from Scripture. He died repeating the horrible doctrine that we cannot miss heaven—that we can contract no stain—that good works repentance, charity and all such things are useless—that the Eternal God cannot escape us—that faith alone is necessary for salvation—a doctrine condemned by the most illustrious of his disciples such as Melancthon and Albert of Reuttingen.

The Reformation has already become political in character. The maxim of the Reformers was—the Emperor Charles must be knocked on the head for he is an excited madman allied with the Pope.—a bloodhound who must be killed with pikes and clubs. It was the break up of society an ever widening chasm come between Lord and servant.—It was war between cottage and castle—prince and town. This civil strife, the result of Luther's preaching, meant the lives of one hundred thousand men of the best blood of Germany. It was this that caused Erasmus to write to Luther: "You see we are now reaping the fruits you sowed. You will not acknowledge the rebels ; but they acknowledge you, and they know only too well that many of your disciples who clothed themselves in the Mantle of the Gospel have been the instigators of this bloody rebellion. In your pamphlet against the peasants you in vain endeavor to justify yourself. It is you who had raised the storm by your publications against the monks and prelates, and you say you fight for Gospel liberty, and against the tyranny of the great ! From the moment that you began your tragedy I foresaw the end of it." Had this disastrous war continued much longer not a single vestige of the ancient monuments filling Germany would have remained. As it was far and wide were spread desolation and ruin—abandoned cottages and Castles—desolated villages and hamlets and here and

there the smouldering remains of a once flourishing town.

The Peasants' War was soon succeeded by the spoliation of the Monasteries the invasion of the sacred and inviolable right—in many cases more sacred than life itself—one that our brave soldiers are now battling for on the plains, hills and marshes of Europe.—the one that denies that might is right—the right of property. From that day Luther preached this robbery of the religious houses. Where Monks once copied a classic, tilled the soil and fed the poor and hungry, some petty prince or count now supported a mistress and a pack of hounds. This plunder of Church property preached by Luther will be the eternal condemnation of his cause and as Jean Audin says “Though Naboth's vineyard may serve as a bait and a reward for apostacy, it cannot justify crime.”

And now to quiet all murmurs it was enacted that all who should question this doctrine or protest against this rapacity was both a heretic and a rebel and ought to be prosecuted with fire and sword. Luther's disciples no longer satisfied with the plunder of the monasteries, desired luxury and ease, and they wished for palatial residences and armies of servants. As the historian says “Every town had its Lutheran Pope. At Nuremberg Ossiander was a regular Pacha. When he arose to preach the diamonds on his finger dazzled the people. Those among them who endeavored to reprove this scandalous ostentation were abused and maligned.”

The incessant religious disputes of these Germans retarded rather than advanced men's minds,—like blind men they fought furiously yet all missed the road to truth. It was an age of Biblical criticism—the inheritance of Pagan Humanism—well illustrated by a passage of Villers. “It may be said that the criticism of Scripture was unknown previous to the time of Luther; and if by this is meant that captious, whimsical and shuffling criticism which Dewette has so justly condemned—certainly so. But that which relates to languages, antiquities, the knowledge of times, places, authors—in a word hermeneutics—was known and practised in our schools before the Reformation as is proved by the works

of Cajetan and Sodoletus, and a multitude of learned men whom Leo X had encouraged and rewarded. We have seen besides in the history of the Reformation, what that vain science has produced. It was by means of his critical researches that, from the time of Luther, Karlstadt found such a meaning of "Simen immolare Moloch as made his disciples shrug their shoulders ; that Muenzer preached the community of goods and wives ; that Melauction taught that the dogma of the Trinity deprives our mind of all liberty ; that at a later period Ammon asserted that the resurrection of the dead could not be deduced from the New Testament ; Veter that the Penlateuch was not written by Moses ; that the history of the Jews to the time of the Judges is only a popular tradition ; Bretschneider that the Psalms cannot be looked upon as inspired ; Augusti that the true doctrine of Jesus Christ has not been preserved intact in the New Testament ; and Gusse that not one of the four Gospels was written by the Evangelist whose name it bears."

Since the days of Semler, Germany presents a sorry spectacle of inconsistency. Every ten years or so her theological literature undergoes a complete revolution. What was once admired is now rejected—old divinities are burned to make way for the new and once time honored dogmas are now in discredit. In the words of the historian "Treatises of classical morality are banished as out of date, criticism overturns criticism and the commentary of yesterday ridicules that of the previous day."

It is written "The house divided against itself shall fall." This splitting and usplitting of sects has gone on to our time and the retribution now overtaking Germany may be but the consequence of the terrible religious revolution which took place there four centuries ago.

—J. J. R. H. F '17

The only way to have happiness as a permanent guest is to keep your door open to the helpless.