

An Open Letter to The Christian Nobility of the German Nation

Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, 1520
by

Martin Luther (1520)



CONTENT PAGE

Proposals for Reform Part I

Introduction and Translation by C. M. Jacobs

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With Introductions and Notes

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Proposals for Reform Part I

Now, although I am too small a man to make propositions which might effect a reform in this dreadful state of things, nevertheless I may as well sing my fool's song to the end, and say, so far as I am able, what could and should be done by the temporal authorities or by a general council.

1. Every prince, nobleman and city should boldly forbid their subjects to pay the annates to Rome and should abolish them entirely;[1] for the pope has broken the compact and made the annates a robbery, to the injury and shame of the whole German nation. He gives them to his friends, sells them for large amounts of money, and uses them to endow offices. He has thus lost his right to them, and deserves punishment. It is therefore the duty of the temporal authorities to protect the innocent and prevent injustice, as Paul teaches in Romans 13:4, and St. Peter in I Peter 2:14, and even the canon law in Case 16, Question 7 de filiis.[2] Thus it has come about that men are saying to the pope and his followers, Tu ora, "Thou shalt pray"; to the emperor and his followers, Tu protege, "Thou shalt guard"; to the common man, Tu labora, "Thou shalt work." Not, however, as though everyone were not to pray, guard and work; for the man who is diligent in his calling is praying, guarding and working in all that he does, but everyone should have his own especial task.

2. Since the pope with his Roman practices -- his commendations,[3] adjutories,[4] reservations,[5] gratiae expectativae,[6] papal months,[7] incorporations,[8] unions,[9] pallia,[10] rules in chancery,[11] and such like knavery -- usurps all the German foundations without authority and right, and gives and sells them to foreigners at Rome, who do nothing in German lands to earn them; and since he thereby robs the ordinaries[12] of their rights, makes the bishops mere ciphers and figure-heads, and acts against his own canon law, against nature and against reason, until it has finally gone so far that out of sheer avarice the livings and benefices are sold to gross, ignorant asses and knaves at Rome, while pious and learned folk have no profit of their wisdom and merit, so that the poor people of the German nation have to go without good and learned prelates and thus go to ruin.

Therefore, the Christian nobility should set itself against the pope as against a common enemy and destroyer of Christendom, and should do this for the salvation of the poor souls who must go to ruin through his tyranny. They should ordain, order, and decree, that henceforth no benefice shall be drawn into the hands of Rome, and that hereafter no appointment shall be obtained there in any manner whatsoever, but that the benefices shall be brought out and kept out from under this tyrannical authority; and they should restore to the ordinaries the right and office of ordering these benefices in the German nation as best they may. And if a "courtesan" were to come from Rome, he should receive a strict command either to keep his distance, or else to jump into the Rhine or the nearest river, and take the Roman ban, with its seals and letters, to a cold bath. They would then take note at Rome that the Germans are not always mad and drunken, but that they have really become Christians, and intend to permit no longer the mockery and scorn of the holy name of Christ, under which all this knavery and destruction of souls goes on, but have more regard to God and His glory than to the authority of men.

3. An imperial law should be issued, that no bishop's cloak[13] and no confirmation of any dignity[14] whatsoever shall henceforth be secured from Rome, but that the ordinance of the most holy and most famous Council of Nicaea[15] shall be restored, in which it is decreed that a bishop shall be confirmed by the two nearest bishops or by the archbishop. If the pope will break the statutes of this and of all other councils, what is the use of hiding councils; or who has given him the authority thus to despise and break the rules of councils?

If he has this power then we should depose all bishops, archbishops and primates[16] and make them

mere parish-priests, so that the pope alone may be over them, as he now is. He leaves to bishops, archbishops and primates no regular authority or office, usurps everything for himself, and lets them keep only the name and

empty title. It has gone so far that by his "exemptions"[17] the monasteries, the abbots and the prelates are withdrawn from the regular authority of the bishops, so that there is no longer any order in Christendom. From this must follow what has followed -- relaxation of discipline and license to do evil everywhere -- so that I verily fear the pope can be called the "man of sin." There is in Christendom no discipline, no rule, no order; and who is to blame except the pope? This usurped authority of his he applies strictly to all the prelates, and takes away their rods; and he is generous to all subjects, giving them or selling them their liberty.

Nevertheless, for fear he may complain that he is robbed of his authority, it should be decreed that when the primates or archbishops are unable to settle a case, or when a controversy arises among themselves, such a case must be laid before the pope, but not every little matter.[19] Thus it was done in olden times, and thus the famous Council of Nicaea decreed.[20] If a case can be settled without the pope, then his Holiness should not be troubled with such minor matters, but give himself to that prayer, meditation and care for all Christendom, of which he boasts. This is what the Apostles did. They said, Acts 6:2, "It is not meet that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables, but we will keep to preaching and prayer and set others over the work." But now Rome stands for nothing else than the despising of the Gospel and of prayer, and for the serving of "tables," i.e., of temporal affairs, and the rule of the Apostles and of the pope agree as Christ agrees with Lucifer, heaven with hell, night with day; yet he is called "Vicar of Christ and Successor of the Apostles."

4. It should be decreed that no temporal matter shall be taken to Rome,[21] but that all such cases shall be left to the temporal authorities, as the Romans themselves decree in that canon law of theirs, which they do not keep. For it should be the duty of the pope, as the man most learned in the Scriptures and most Holy, not in name only, but in truth, to administer affairs which concern the faith and holy life of Christians, to hold the primates and arch-bishops to these things, and to help them in dealing with and caring for these matters. So St. Paul teaches in Corinthians 6:7, and takes the Corinthians severely to task for their concern with worldly things. For it works intolerable injury to all lands that such cases are tried at Rome. It increases the costs, and moreover the judges do not know the manners, laws and customs of the various countries, so that they often do violence to the facts and base their decisions on their own laws and opinions, and thus injustice is inevitably done the contestants.

Moreover, the outrageous extortion practiced by the officiales[22] must be forbidden in all the dioceses, so that they may attend to nothing else than matters of faith and good morals, and leave to the temporal judges the things that concern money, property, life and honor. The temporal authorities, therefore, should not permit sentences of ban or exile when faith or right life is not concerned. Spiritual authorities should have rule over spiritual goods, as reason teaches; but spiritual goods are not money, nor anything pertaining to the body, but they are faith and good works.

Nevertheless it might be granted that cases which concern benefices or livings should be tried before bishops, archbishops and primates. Therefore, in order to decide contests and contentions, it might be possible for the Primate of Germany to maintain a general consistory, with auditors and chancellors, which should have control over the *signaturae gratiae* and *signaturae justitiae*,[23] that are now controlled at Rome, and which should be the final court of appeal for German cases. The officers of this consistory must not, however, be paid, as at Rome, by chance presents and gifts, and thereby acquire the habit of selling justice and injustice, which they now have to do at Rome because the pope gives them no remuneration, but allows them to fatten themselves on presents. For at Rome no one cares what is right or not right, but only what is money or not money. This court might, however, be

paid out of the annates, or some other way might easily be devised, by those who are more intelligent and who have more experience in these matters than I. All I wish to do is to arouse and set to thinking those who have the ability and the inclination to help the German nation become once more free and Christian, after the wretched, heathenish and unchristian rule of the pope.

5. No more reservations should be valid, and no more benefices should be seized by Rome, even if the incumbent dies, or there is a contest, or the incumbent is a "servant" of a cardinal or of the pope;[24] and it should be strictly forbidden and prevented that any "courtesan"[25] should institute a contest over any benefice, so as to cite pious priests to Rome, harass them and drive them into lawsuits. If, in consequence of this prohibition, there should come from Rome a ban or an ecclesiastical censure, it should be disregarded, just as though a thief were to lay a man under the ban because he would not let him steal. Indeed they should be severely punished because they so blasphemously misuse the ban and the name of God to support their robbery, and with falsely devised threats would drive us to endure and to praise such blasphemy of God's name and such abuse of Christian authority, and thus to become, in the sight of God, partakers in their rascality; it is our duty before God to resist it, for St. Paul, in Romans 1:32, reproveth as guilty of death not only "those who do such things," but also those who consent to such things and allow them to be done. Most unbearable of all is the lying reservation of pectoralis,[26] whereby Christendom is so scandalously and openly put to shame and scorn, because its head deals in open lies, and out of love for the accursed money, shamelessly deceives and fools everybody.

6. The casus reservati,[27] the "reserved cases," should also be abolished, for not only are they the means of extorting much money from the people, but by means of them the ravening tyrants ensnare and confuse many poor consciences to the intolerable injury of their faith in God. This is especially true of the ridiculous and childish cases about which they make so much ado in the Bull Coena Domini,[28] and which are not worth calling daily sins, still less cases so grave that the pope may not remit them by any indulgence; as for example, hindering a pilgrim on his way to Rome, furnishing weapons to the Turks, or tampering with papal letters. With such gross, crazy, clumsy things do they make fools of us! Sodom and Gomorrah, and all the sins which are committed and can be committed against the commandments of God are not reserved cases; but sins against what God has never commanded and what they have themselves devised, these must be reserved cases, solely that no one be hindered in bringing money to Rome, in order that, safe from the Turks, they may live in luxury and keep the world under their tyranny with their wanton, useless bulls and braves.[29]

All priests ought rightly to know, or else there should be a public ordinance to that effect, that no secret sin, of which a man has not been publicly accused, is a reserved case, and that every priest has the power to remit all sorts of sins, however they may be called, so long as they are secret; moreover that no abbot, bishop or pope has the power to reserve any such case to himself.[30] If they attempt it, their reservation does not hold and is not valid, and they should be reprov'd, as men who without authority interfere in God's judgment, and without cause ensnare and burden poor, ignorant consciences. But if great public sins are committed, especially sins against God's commandments, then there is indeed a reason for reserved cases, but even then there should not be too many of them, and they should not be reserved arbitrarily and without cause; 1 Peter 5:3, for Christ has set in His Church not tyrants, but shepherds, as saith St. Peter.

7. The Roman See should also do away with the officia, and diminish the swarm of vermin at Rome, so that the pope's household can be supported by the pope's own purse. The pope should not allow his court to surpass in pomp and extravagance the courts of all kings, seeing that such a condition not only has never been serviceable to the cause of Christian faith, but the courtiers have been kept thereby from study and prayer, until they are scarce able to speak about the faith at all. This they proved quite

plainly at the last Roman Council,[32] in which, amongst many other childish and frivolous things, they decreed that the soul of man is immortal and that every priest must say his prayers once a month on pain of losing his benefice. How shall matters which concern faith and the Church be decided by people so hardened and blinded by great avarice, wealth and worldly splendor, that they have only now decreed that the soul is immortal? It is no small shame to all Christians that at Rome they deal so disgracefully with the faith. If they had less wealth and pomp, they could pray and study better, and so become worthy and able to deal with matters of faith, as was the case in olden times when they were bishops, and did not presume to be kings over all kings.

8. The hard and terrible oaths should be abolished, which the bishops are wrongfully compelled to render to the pope,[33] and by which they are bound like servants, as that worthless and unlearned chapter, *Significasti*, [34] arbitrarily and most stupidly decrees. It is not enough that they burden us in body, soul and property with their many mad laws, by which faith is weakened and Christendom ruined; but they seize upon the person and office and work of the bishops, and now upon the investiture [35] also, which was in olden times the right of the German emperors, and in France and other kingdoms still belongs to the kings.

On this point they had great wars and disputes with the emperors, [36] until at last, with impudent authority, they took the right and have kept it until now; just as though the Germans, above all the Christians on earth, had to be the puppets of the pope and the Roman See and do and suffer what no one else will do and suffer. Since, then, this is sheer violence and robbery, hindering the regular authority of the bishops and injuring poor souls, therefore the emperor and

9. The pope should have no authority over the emperor, except that he anoints and crowns him at the altar, just as a bishop anoints and crowns a king; [37] and we should not henceforth yield to that devilish pride which compels the emperor to kiss the pope's feet or sit at his feet, or, as they claim, hold his stirrup or the bridle of his mule when he mounts for a ride; still less should he do homage and swear faithful allegiance to the pope, as the popes have shamelessly ventured to demand as if they possessed that right. The chapter "*Solite*," [38] in which the papal authority is raised above the imperial authority, is not worth a heller, nor are any of those who rest upon it or fear it; for it does nothing else than force the holy words of God out of their true meaning, and wrest them to human dreams, as I have showed in a Latin treatise. [39]

Such extravagant, over-presumptuous, and more than wicked doings of the pope have been devised by the devil, in order that under their cover he may in time bring in Antichrist, and raise the pope above God, as many are ready doing and have done. It is not proper for the pope to exalt himself above the temporal authorities, save only in spiritual offices such as preaching and absolving. In other things he is to be subject, as Paul and Peter teach, in Romans 13:1, and 1 Peter 2:13, and as I have said above. His nobles are in duty bound to prevent and punish such tyranny. He is not vicar of Christ in heaven, but of Christ as He walked on earth. [41] For Christ in heaven, in the form of a ruler, needs no vicar, but He sits and sees, does, and knows all things, and has all power. But He needs a vicar in the form of a servant, in which He walked on earth, toiling, preaching, suffering and dying. Now they turn it around, take from Christ the heavenly form of ruler and give it to the pope, leaving the form of a servant to perish utterly. He might almost be the "Counter-Christ" whom the Scriptures call Antichrist, for all his nature, work and doings are against Christ, for the destruction of Christ's nature and work.

It is also ridiculous and childish that the pope, with such perverted and deluded reasoning, boasts in his decretal *Pastoralis*, [42] that he is rightful heir to the Empire, in case of a vacancy. Who has given him this right? Did Christ, when He said, Luke 22:25, "The princes of the Gentiles are lords, but ye shall not be so"? Did St. Peter will it to him? It vexes me that we must read and learn such shameless, gross,

crazy lies in the canon law, and must even hold them for Christian doctrine, when they are devilish lies.

Of the same sort is also that unheard-of lie about the "Donation of Constantine." [43] It must have been some special plague of God that so many people of understanding have let themselves be talked into accepting such lies as these, which are so manifest and clumsy that I should think any drunken peasant could lie more adroitly and skillfully. How can a man rule an empire and at the same time continue to preach, pray, study and care for the poor? Yet these are the duties which properly and peculiarly belong to the pope, and they were imposed by Christ (Matthew 10:10) in such earnest that He even forbade His disciples to take with them cloak or money, since these duties can scarcely be performed by one who has to rule even a single household. Yet the pope would rule an empire and continue to be pope! This is a device of the knaves who would like, under the pope's name, to be lords of the world, and by means of the pope and the name of Christ, to restore the Roman Empire to its former state.

10. The pope should restrain himself, take his fingers out of the pie, and claim no title to the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily. [44] He has exactly as much right to that kingdom as I have, and yet he wishes to be its overlord. It is plunder got by violence, like almost all his other possessions. The emperor, therefore, should not grant him this fief, and if it has been granted, he should no longer give his consent to it, and should point him instead to the Bible and the prayer-books, so that he may preach and pray, and leave to temporal lords the ruling of lands and peoples, especially when no one has given them to him.

The same opinion should hold as regards Bologna, Imola, Vicenza, Ravenna and all the territories in the Mark of Ancona, in Romagna, and in other Italian lands, which the pope has taken by force and possesses without right. [45] Moreover, he has meddled in these things against all the commands of Christ and of St. Paul. For thus saith St. Paul, 2 Timothy 2:3, "No one entangleth himself with worldly affairs, whose business it is to wait upon the divine knighthood". [46] Now the pope should be the head and front of this knighthood, yet he meddles in worldly affairs more than any emperor or king. Why then he must be helped out of them and allowed to attend to his knighthood. Christ also, Whose vicar he boasts himself to be, was never willing to have aught to do with temporal rule; indeed, to one who asked of him a decision respecting his brother, He said, Luke 12:14, "Who made Me a judge over you?" But the pope rushes in unbidden, and boldly takes hold of everything as though he were a god, until he no longer knows what Christ is, Whose vicar he pretends to be.

11. The kissing of the pope's feet [47] should take place no more. It is an unchristian, nay, an anti-Christian thing for a poor sinful man to let his feet be kissed by one who is a hundred times better than himself. If it is done in honor of his authority, why does not the pope do the same to others in honor of their holiness? Compare the two -- Christ and the pope! John 13:1 ff., Christ washed His disciples' feet and dried them, and the disciples never washed His feet; the pope, as though he were higher than Christ, turns things around and, as a great favor, allows people to kiss his feet, though he ought properly to use all his power to prevent it, if anyone wished to do it; like Paul and Barnabas, who would not let the people of Lystra pay them divine honor, but said, Acts 14:11-16, "We are men like you." But our sycophants have gone so far as to make for us an idol, and now no one fears God so much as he fears the pope, no one pays Him such ceremonious honor. That they can endure! What they cannot endure is that a hair's-breadth should be taken away from the proud estate of the pope. Now if they were Christians, and held God's honor above their own, the pope would never be happy while he knew that God's honor was despised and his own exalted, and he would let no man pay him honor until he saw that God's honor was again exalted and was greater than his own.

[48] It is another piece of the same scandalous pride, that the pope is not satisfied to ride or to be driven in a vehicle, but although he is strong and in good health, he has himself borne by men, with unheard-of splendor, like an idol. How, pray, does such satanic pride agree with the example of Christ, Who went on foot, as did all His disciples? Where has there ever been a worldly monarch who went about in such worldly glory as he who wishes to be the head of all those who are to despise and flee worldly glory, i.e., of Christians? Not that this in itself should give us very much concern, but we should rightly fear the wrath of God, if we flatter this kind of pride and do not show our indignation. It is enough that the pope should rant and play the fool in this wise; but that we should approve it and tolerate it, -- this too much.

For what Christian heart can or ought to take pleasure in seeing that when the pope wishes to receive the communion, he sits quiet, like a gracious lord, and has the sacrament passed to him on a golden rod by a bowing cardinal on bended knee? As though the holy sacrament were no worthy that a pope, a poor stinking sinner, should rise to show God honor, when all other Christians, who are much more holy than the Most Holy Father, the pope, receive it with all reverence! Would it be a wonder if God were to send a plague upon us all because we suffer such dishonor to be done Him by our prelates, and approve it, and by our silence or our flattery make ourselves partakers of such damnable pride?

It is the same way when he carries the sacrament in procession. He must be carried, but the sacrament is set before him, like a can of wine on the table. In short, at Rome Christ counts for nothing, the pope counts for everything; and yet they would compel us with threats to approve, and praise and honor such antichristian sins, though this is against God and against all Christian doctrine. Now God help a free Council to teach the pope that he too is a man, and is not more than God, as he presumes to be.

12. Pilgrimages to Rome[49] should either be abolished, or else no one should be allowed to make such a pilgrimage out of curiosity or because of a pious impulse, unless it is first recognized by his parish-priest, his town authorities or his overlord, that he has good and sufficient reason for it. I say this not because pilgrimages are bad, but because they are at this time ill-advised. For men see at Rome no good example, but only that which offends; and they have themselves made the proverb, "The nearer Rome, the worse Christians." [50] Men bring back with them contempt for God and His commandments. It is said: "The first time one goes to Rome he seeks a rascal, the second time he finds him, the third time he brings him home with him." [51] Now, however, they have become so clever that they make the three journeys at once, and they have verily brought back from Rome such pretty things that it were better never to have seen or known Rome.

Even if this reason did not exist, there is still another and a better: to wit, that by these pilgrimages men are led away into a false conceit and a misunderstanding of the divine commandments; for they think that this going on pilgrimage is a precious, good work, and this is not true. It is a very small good work, oftentimes an evil, delusive work, for God has not commanded it. But He has commanded that a man shall care for his wife and children, and look after such other duties as belong to the married state, and besides this, to serve and help his neighbor. Now it comes to pass that a man makes a pilgrimage to Rome when no one has commanded him to do so, spends fifty or a hundred gulden, more or less, and leaves his wife and child, or at least his neighbor, at home to suffer want. Yet the foolish fellow thinks to gloss over such disobedience and contempt of the divine commandments with his self-willed pilgriming, when it is really only curiosity or devilish delusion which leads him to it. The popes have helped this along with their false, feigned, foolish, "golden years," [52] by which the people are excited, stirred up, torn away from God's commandments, and drawn toward their own deluded undertakings. Thus they have accomplished the very thing they should have forbidden; but it has brought in money and strengthened false authority, therefore it has had to continue, though it is against God and the salvation of souls.

In order to destroy in simple Christians this false, seductive faith, and to restore a true understanding of good works, all pilgrimages should be given up; for there is in them nothing good -- no commandment, no obedience -- but, on the contrary, numberless occasions for sin and for the despising of God's commandments. Hence come the many beggars, who by this pilgriming carry on endless knaveries and learn the habit of begging when they are not in want. Hence, too, come vagabondage, and many other ills which I shall not now recount.

If any one, now, wishes to go on pilgrimage or take a pilgrim's vow, he should first show his reasons to his parish-priest or to his lord. If it turns out that he wishes to do it for the sake of the good work, the priest or lord should boldly tread the vow and good work under foot, as though it were a lure of the devil, and show him how to apply the money and labor necessary for the pilgrimage to the keeping of God's commandments and to works a thousandfold better, viz., by spending it on his own family or on his poor neighbors. But if he wishes to make the pilgrimage out of curiosity, to see new lands and cities, he may be allowed to do as he likes. If, however, he has made the vow while ill, then such vows ought to be forbidden and canceled, and the commandments of God exalted, and he ought to be shown that he should henceforth be satisfied with the vow he made in baptism,[53] to keep the commandments of God. And yet, in order to quiet his conscience, he may be allowed this once to perform his foolish vow. No one wants to walk in the straight and common path of God's commandments; everyone makes himself new roads and new vows, as though he had fulfilled all the commandments of God.

13. Next we come to that great crowd who vow much and keep little. Be not angry, dear lords! Truly, I mean it well. It is the truth, and bitter-sweet, and it is this, -- the building of mendicant-houses[54] should no more be permitted. God help us, there are already far too many of them! Would to God they were all done away, or at least given over to two or three orders! Wandering about the land has never brought any good, and never I bring any good. It is my advice, therefore, to put together ten of these houses, or as many as may be necessary, and out of them all to make one house, which will be well provided and need no more begging. It is much more important to consider what the common people need for their salvation, than what St. Francis, Dominic, St. Augustine[55] or any other man has decreed; especially since things have not turned out as they expected.

The mendicants should also be relieved of preaching and hearing confession, except when they are called to this work by the express desire of bishops, parishes, congregations or the temporal authorities. Out of their preaching and shriving there has come nothing but hatred and envy between priests and monks, and great offense and hindrance to the common people. For this reason it should properly and deservedly cease, because it can well be dispensed with.[56] It looks suspiciously as though it were not for nothing that the Holy Roman See has increased this army, so that the priests and bishops, tired of its tyranny, might not some time become too strong for it and begin a reformation which would not be to the liking of his Holiness.

At the same time the manifold divisions and differences within one and the same order should be abolished. These divisions have at times arisen for small reason and maintained themselves for still smaller, combating one another with unspeakable hatred and envy.[57] Nevertheless the Christian faith, which can well exist without any of these distinctions, is lost by both sides, and a good Christian life is valued and sought after only in outward laws, works and forms; and this results only in the devising of hypocrisy and the destruction of souls, as everyone may see with his own eyes.

The pope must also be forbidden to found and confirm any more of these orders; nay, he must be commanded to abolish some of them and reduce their number, since the faith of Christ, which is alone the highest good and which exists without any orders, is in no small danger, because these many

different works and forms easily mislead men into living for them instead of giving heed to the faith. Unless there are in the monasteries wise prelates, who preach and who concern themselves with faith more than with the rules of the orders, the order cannot but harm and delude simple souls who think only of works.

In our days, however, the prelates who have had faith and who founded the orders have almost all passed away. Just as in olden days among the children of Israel, when the fathers, who knew God's works and wonders, had passed away, the children, from ignorance of God's works and of faith, immediately became idolatrous and set up their own human works; so now, alas! these orders have lost the understanding of God's works and of faith, and only torture themselves pitifully, with labor and sorrow, in their own rules, laws and customs, and withal never come to a right understanding of a good spiritual life, as the Apostle declared when he said in 2 Timothy 3:5, 7: "They have the appearance of a spiritual life, yet there is nothing back of it; they are ever and ever learning, but they never come to a knowledge of what a true spiritual life is." There should be no monastery unless there were a spiritual prelate, learned in the Christian faith, to rule it, for no other kind of prelate can rule without injury and ruin, and the holier and better he appears to be in his outward works and life, the more injury and ruin he causes.

To my way of thinking it would be a necessary measure, especially in these perilous times of ours, that all foundations and monasteries should be re-established as they were at the first, in the days of the Apostles and for a long time afterwards, when they were all open to every man, and every man might remain in them as long as he pleased. For what were the foundations and monasteries except Christian schools in which the Scriptures and Christian living were taught, and people were trained to rule and to preach? So we read that St. Agnes[58] went to school, and we still see the same practice in some of the nunneries, like that at Quedlinburg[59] and others elsewhere. And in truth all monasteries and convents ought to be so free that God is served in them with free will and not with forced avarice. Afterward, however, they hedged them about with vows and turned them into a lifelong prison, so that these vows are thought to be of more account than the vows of baptism. What sort of fruit this has borne, we see, hear, read and learn more and more every day.

I suppose this advice of mine will be regarded as the height of foolishness; but I am not concerned about that just now. I advise what I think best; let him reject it who will! I see how the vows are kept, especially the vow of chastity, which has become so universal through these monasteries and yet is not commanded by Christ; on the contrary, it is given to very few to keep it, as He himself says, and St. Paul. (Matt. 19:11 ff., 1 Cor. 7:7, Col. 2:20) I would have all men to be helped, and not have Christian souls caught in human, self-devised customs and laws.

14. We also see how the priesthood has fallen, and how many a poor priest is overburdened with wife and child, and his conscience troubled, yet no one does anything to help him though he might easily be helped. Though pope and bishops may let things go as they go, and let them go to ruin if they will, I will save my conscience and open my mouth freely, whether it vex pope, bishops or any one else.

Wherefore I say that according to the institution of Christ and the Apostles every city should have a priest or bishop, as St. Paul clearly says in Titus 1:6; and this priest should not be compelled to live without a wedded wife, but should be permitted to have one, as St. Paul says in I Timothy 3:2, and Titus 1:6, "A bishop should be a man who is blameless, and the husband of but one wedded wife, whose children are obedient and virtuous," etc. For with St. Paul a bishop and a priest are one and the same thing, as witness also St. Jerome.[60] But of bishops as they now are; the Scriptures know nothing; they have been appointed by the ordinance of the Christian Church, that one of them may rule over many priests.

So then we clearly learn from the Apostle that it should be the custom for every town to choose out of the congregation[61] a learned and pious citizen, entrust to him the office of the ministry, and support him at the expense of the community, leaving him free choice to marry or not. He should have with him several priests or deacons, who might also be married or not, as they chose, to help him rule the people of the community[62] by means of preaching and the sacraments, as is still the practice in the Greek Church. At a later time,[63] when there were so many persecutions and controversies with heretics, there were many holy fathers who of their own accord abstained from matrimony, to the end that they might the better devote themselves to study and be prepared at any time for death or for controversy. Then the Roman See interfered, out of sheer wantonness, and made a universal commandment forbidding priests to marry.[64] This was done at the bidding of the devil, as St. Paul declares in I Timothy 4, "There shall come teachers who bring doctrines of devils, and forbid to marry." From this has arisen so much untold misery, occasion was given for the withdrawal of the Greek Church,[65] and division, sin, shame and scandal were increased without end, - which is the result of everything the devil does.

What, then, shall we do about it? My advice is that matrimony be again made free,[66] and that every one be left free choice to marry or not to marry. In that case, however, there must be a very different government and administration of Church property, the whole canon law must go to pieces and not many benefices find their way to Rome.[67] I fear that greed has been a cause of this wretched unchaste chastity, and as a result of greed every man has wished to become a priest and everyone wants his son to study for the priesthood, not with the idea of living in chastity, for that could be done outside the priesthood, but of being supported in temporal things without care or labor, contrary to the command of God in Genesis 3:19, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat thy bread." They have construed this to mean that their labor was to pray and say mass.

I am not referring here to popes, bishops, canons and monks. God has not instituted these offices. They have taken burdens on themselves; let them bear them. I would speak only of the ministry which God has instituted[68] and which is to rule a congregation by means of preaching and sacraments, whose incumbents are to live and be at home among the people. Such ministers should be granted liberty by a Christian council to marry, for the avoidance of temptation and sin. Gal. 1:8, For since God has not bound them, no one else ought to bind them or can bind them, even though he were an angel from heaven, still less if he be only a pope; and everything that the canon law decrees to the contrary is mere fable and idle talk.

Furthermore, I advise that henceforth neither at his consecration to the priesthood nor at any other time shall any one under any circumstances promise the bishop to live in celibacy, but shall declare to the bishop that he has no authority to demand such a vow, and that to demand it is the devil's own tyranny.

But if anyone is compelled to say or wishes to say, as do some, "so far as human frailty permits,"[69] let everyone frankly interpret these words negatively, to mean "I do not promise chastity." [70] For human frailty does not permit a chaste life,[71] but only angelic power and celestial might. 2 Pet. 2:11.[72] Thus he should keep his conscience free from all vows.

On the question whether those who are not yet married should marry or remain unmarried, I do not care to give advice either way. I leave that to common Christian order and to everyone's better judgment. But as regards the wretched multitude who now sit in shame and heaviness of conscience because their wives are called "priests' harlots" and their children "priests' children" I will not withhold my faithful counsel nor deprive them of the comfort which is their due, I say this boldly by my jester's right.[73]

You will find many a pious priest against whom no one has anything to say except that he is weak and has come to shame with a woman, though both parties may be minded with all their heart to live always together in wedded love and troth, if only they could do it with a clear conscience, even though they might have to bear public shame. Two such persons are certainly married before God. And I say that where they are thus minded, and so come to live together, they should boldly save their consciences; let him take and keep her as his wedded wife, and live honestly with her as her husband, caring nothing whether the pope will have it so or not, whether it be against canon law or human law. The salvation of your soul is of more importance than tyrannical, arbitrary, wicked laws, which are not necessary for salvation and are not commanded by God. Ex. 12:35 f. You should do like the children of Israel, who stole from the Egyptians the hire they had earned, or like a servant who steals from his wicked master the wages he has earned. In like manner steal thou from the pope thy wife and child! Let the man who has faith enough to venture this, boldly follow me; I shall not lead him astray. Though I have not the authority of a pope, I have the authority of a Christian to advise and help my neighbor against sins and temptations; and that, not without cause and reason.

First, not every priest can do without a woman, not only on account of the weakness of the flesh, but much more because of the necessities of the household. If he, then, may have a woman, and the pope grants him that, and yet may not have her in marriage, -- what is that but leaving a man and a woman alone and forbidding them to fall? It is as though one were to put fire and straw together and command that it shall neither smoke nor burn.

Second, The pope has as little power to command this, as he has to forbid eating, drinking, the natural movement of the bowels or growing fat. No one, therefore, is bound to keep it, but the pope is responsible for all the sins which are committed against this ordinance, for all the souls which are lost thereby, for all the consciences which are thereby confused and tortured; and therefore he has long deserved that some one should drive him out of the world, so many wretched souls has he strangled with this devil's snare; though I hope that there are many to whom God has been more gracious at their last hour than the pope has been in their life. Nothing good has ever come out of the papacy and its laws, nor ever will.

Third, Although the law of the pope is against it, nevertheless, when the estate of matrimony has been entered against the pope's law, then his law is at an end, and is no longer valid; for the commandment of God, which decrees that no one shall put man and wife asunder, takes precedence of the law of the pope; and the commandments of God must not be broken and neglected for the sake of the pope's commandment, though many mad jurists, in the papal interest, have devised "impediments"[74] and have prevented, destroyed and confused the estate of matrimony, until by their means God's commandment has been altogether destroyed. To make a long story short, there are not in the whole "spiritual" law of the pope two lines which could be instructive to a pious Christian, and there are, alas! So many mistaken and dangerous laws that the best thing would be to make a bonfire of it.[75]

But if you say that this[76] would give offense, and the pope must first grant dispensation, I reply that whatever offense is in it, is the fault of the Roman See, which has established such laws without right and against God; before God and the Scriptures it is no offense. Moreover, if the pope can grant dispensations from his avaricious and tyrannical laws for money's sake, then every Christian can grant dispensations from them -- for the sake of God and the salvation of souls. For Christ has set us free from all human laws, especially when they are opposed to God and the salvation of souls, as St. Paul teaches in Galatians 5:1 and 1 Corinthians 9:4 ff.; 10:23.

NOTES:

[1] See [nobility.05; note 11], p. 84, note 1.

[2] The passage is chapter 31, *Filiis vel nepotibus*. It provides that in case the income of endowments bequeathed to the Church is misused, and appeals to the bishop and archbishop fail to correct the misuse, the heirs of the testator may appeal to the royal courts. Luther wishes this principle applied to the annates.

[3] See above, pp. 91 f.

[4] See above, p. 91.

[5] See above, p. 94.

[6] i.e., Promises to bestow on certain persons livings not yet vacant. Complaint of the evils arising out of the practice was continually heard from the year 1416. For the complaints made at Worms (1521), see WREDE, *op. cit.*, II, 710.

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[7] See above, pp. 86 f.

[8] See above, pp. 92 f.

[9] See above, p. 93.

[10] See above, p. 89.

[11] Rules for the transaction of papal business, including such matters as appointments and the like. At Worms (1521) the Estates complain that these rules are made to the advantage of the "courtesans" and the disadvantage of the Germans. (WREDE, *op. Cit.*, II, pp. 675f.)

[12] The local Church authorities, here equivalent to "the bishops." On use of term see Realencyk., XIV, 424.

[13] The sign of the episcopal office; as regards archbishops, the pallium; see above, p. 89, and note.

[14] See above, p. 87, note 1.

[15] The first of the ecumenical councils (A. D. 325). The decree to which Luther here refers is canon IV of that Council. Cf. KOHLER, L. *Und die Kg.*, pp. 139 ff.

[16] The primate is the ranking archbishop of a country.

[17] "Exemption" was the practice by which monastic houses were withdrawn from the jurisdiction of the bishops and made directly subject to the pope. The practice seems to have originated in the X Century with the famous monastery of Cluny (918), but it was almost universal in the case of the houses of the mendicant orders. The bishops made it a constant subject of complaint, and the Lateran Council (Dec. 19, 1516) passed a decree abolishing all monastic exemptions, though the decree does not seem to have been effective. See CREIGHTON, *History of the Papacy*, V, 266.

[18] i.e., Antichrist. See above, p. 73, note 2.

[19] The papal interference in the conduct of the local Church courts was as flagrant as in the appointments, of which Luther has heretofore spoken. At Worms (1521) it was complained that cases were cited to Rome as a court of first instance, and the demand was made that a regular course of appeals should be re-established. WREDE, *op. cit.*, I, 672,718.

[20] The reference is Canon V of the Council of Sardica (A. D. 343), incorporated in the canon law as a canon of Nicaea (Pt. II, qu. 6, c.5). See KOHLER, L. *Und die Kg.*, 151.

[21] i.e., Appealed to Rome for decision. This is the subject of the first of the 102 Gravamina of 1521 (WREDE, *op. cit.*, II 672).

[22] The judges in the bishops' courts. The complaint is that they interfere with the administration of justice by citing into their courts cases which properly belong in the lay courts, and enforce their verdicts (usually fines) by means of ecclesiastical censures. The charges against these courts are specified in the Gravamina of 1521, Nos. 73-100 (WREDE, *op. cit.*, II 694-703).

[23] The *signaturae gratiae* and the *signaturae justitiae* were the bureaus through which the pope regulated those matters of administration which belonged to his own special prerogative.

[24] See above, pp. 88 f.

[25] See above, p. 88, note 3.

[26] See above, p. 94.

[27] i.e., The cases in which a priest was forbidden to give absolution. The reference here is to cases in which only the pope could absolve. Cf. The XCV Theses, Vol. I, p. 30.

[28] A papal bull published annually at Rome on Holy Thursday. It was directed against heretics, but to the condemnation of the heretics and their heresies was added a list of offenses which could receive absolution only from the pope, or by his authorization. In 1522 Luther translated this bull into German as a New Year present for the pope. (Weimar Ed., VIII, 691). On Luther's earlier utterances concerning it, see KOHLER, L. *u. die Kg.*, pp. 59 ff.

[29] The *breve* is a papal decree, of equal authority with the bull, but differing from it in form, and usually dealing with matters of smaller importance.

[30] Cf. Luther's earlier statement to the same effect in *A Discussion of Confession*, Vol. I, pp. 96.f.

[31] See above, p. 99.

[32] The Fifth Lateran Council (1512-17).

[33] See above, p. 90, note 1.

[34] In the canon law, *Decretal. Greg. Lib. I, tit. 6, cap. 4*. The decretal forbids the bestowing of the pallium (see above, p. 89, note 3) on an archbishop elect, until he shall first have sworn allegiance to the Holy See.

[35] The induction of Church officials into office. The term was used particularly of the greater offices

-- those of bishop and abbot. These offices carried with them the enjoyment of certain incomes, and the possession of certain temporal powers. For this reason the right of investiture was a bone of contention between popes and emperors during the Middle Ages.

[36] Especially in the time of the Emperors Henry IV and V (1056-1125).

[37] The German Empire was regarded during the Middle Ages as a continuation of the Roman Empire. (See below, p. 153.) The right to crown an emperor was held to be the prerogative of the pope; until the pope bestowed the imperial crown, the emperor bore the title, "King of the Romans."

[38] In the canon law, Decretal. Greg. Lib. I, tit. 33, cap. 6.

[39] In the treatise, *Resolutio Lutheriana super propositione XIII, de potestate papae* (1520). Weimar Ed., II, pp. 217 ff.; Erl. Ed., op. var. Arg., III, pp. 293 ff.

[40] See p. 70.

[41] Cf. *The Papacy at Rome*, Vol. I, pp. 357 f.

[42] A decree of Pope Clement V of 1313, incorporated subsequently in the canon law, *Clement. lib. ii, tit. II, cap. 2*.

[43] A forged document of the VIII Century, professing to come from the hand of the Emperor Constantine (306-337). The Donation conveyed to the pope title to the city of Rome (the capital had been removed to Constantinople), certain lands in Italy and "the islands of the sea." It was used by the popes of the Middle Ages to support their claims to worldly power, and its genuineness was not disputed. In 1440, however, Laurentius Valla, an Italian humanist, published a work in which he proved that the Donation was a forgery. This work was republished in Germany by Ulrich von Hutten in 1517, and seems to have come to Luther's attention in the early part of 1520, just before the composition of the present treatise (Cf. ENDERS II, 332). Luther subsequently (1537) issued an annotated translation of the text of the Donation (Erl. Ed., XXV, pp. 176 ff.).

[44] The papal claim to temporal sovereignty over this little kingdom, which comprised the island of Sicily and certain territories in Southern Italy, goes back to the XI Century, and was steadily asserted during the whole of the later Middle Ages. It was one of the questions at issue in the conflict between the Emperor Frederick II (1200-1260) and the popes, and played an important part in the history of the stormy times which followed the fall of the Hohenstaufen. The popes claimed the right to award the kingdom to a ruler who would swear allegiance to the Holy See. The right to the kingdom was at this time contested between the royal houses of France and of Spain, of which latter house the Emperor Charles V was the head.

[45] The popes claimed temporal sovereignty over a strip territory in Italy, beginning at Rome and stretching in a northeasterly direction across the peninsula to a point on the Adriatic south of Venice, including the cities and lands which Luther mentions. This formed the so-called "States of the Church." The attempt to consolidate the States and make the papal sovereignty effective involved Popes Alexander VI (1492-1503) and Julius II (1503-1513) in war and entangled them in political alliances with the European powers and petty Italian states. It resulted at last in actual war between Pope Clement VII and the Emperor Charles V (1526-1527). See *Cambridge Modern History*, I, 104-143; 219-252, and literature cited pp. 706-713; 727 f.

[46] A free translation of the Vulgate, *Nemo militans Deo*.

[47] The kissing of the pope's feet was a part of the "adoration" which he claimed as his right. See above, p. 108.

[48] The three paragraphs enclosed in brackets were added by Luther to the 2nd edition; see Introduction, p. 59.

[49] The holy places of Rome had long been favorite objects of pilgrimage, and the practice had been zealously fostered by the popes through the institution of the "golden" or "jubilee years." Cf. Vol. I, p. 18, and below, p. 114.

[50] Cf. The Italian proverb, "God is everywhere except at Rome; there He has a vicar."

[51] Cf. Hutten's saying in *Vadiscus*: "Three things there are which those who go to Rome usually bring home with the, a bad conscience, a ruined stomach and an empty purse." (ed. BOCKING, IV, p. 169.) Vol., III. - 8

[52] The "golden" or "jubilee years" were the years when special rewards were attached to worship at the shrines of Rome. The custom was instituted by Boniface VIII in 1300, and it was the intention to make every hundredth year a jubilee. In 1343 the interval between jubilees was fixed at fifty, in 1389 at thirty-three, in 1473 at twenty-five years. Cf. Vol. I, p. 18.

[53] Cf. The statements in the *Treatise on Baptism and the Discussion of Confession*, Vol. I, pp. 68 ff., 98.

[54] The houses, or monasteries, of the mendicant or "begging" orders -- the "friars." The members of these orders were sworn to support themselves on the alms of the faithful.

[55] The three leading mendicant orders were the Franciscan (the Minorities, or "little brothers"), founded by St. Francis of Assisi (died 1226), the Dominican (the "preaching brothers"), founded by St. Dominic (died 1221), and the Augustinians Hermits, to which Luther himself belonged, and which claimed foundation by St. Augustine (died 430).

[56] The interference of the friars in the duties of the parish clergy was a continual subject of complaint through this period.

[57] By the middle of the XV Century there were eight distinct sects within the Franciscan order alone (See Realencyk., VI, pp. 212 ff.), and Luther had himself taken part in a vigorous dispute between two parties in the Augustinian order.

[58] St. Agnes the Martyr, put to death in the beginning of the IV Century, one of the favorite saints of the Middle Ages. See SCHAFFER, L. als Kirchenhistoriker, p. 235.

[59] One of the most famous of the German convents, founded in 936.

[60] The celebrated Church Father (died 420). The passages referred to are in Migne, XXII, 656, and XXVI, 562.

[61] Or "community" (*Gemeine*). Cf. *The Papacy at Rome*, Vol. I, p. 345, note 4. See also *Dass eine*

christl. Gemeine Recht und Mach habe, etc. Weimar Ed. XI, pp. 408 ff.

[62] Or "congregation." See note 2.

[63] i.e., At a time later than that of the Apostles.

[64] The first absolute prohibition of marriage to the clergy is contained in a decree of Pope Siricius and dated 385. See H. C. LEA, *History of Sacerdotal Celibacy*, 3d ed. (1907), I, pp. 59 ff.

[65] The priests of the Greek Church are required to marry, and the controversy over celibacy was involved in the division between the Greek and Roman Churches.

[66] Cf. Hutten's *Vadiscus* (BOCKING, IV, 199).

[67] i.e., Lie in Roman appointment.

[68] i.e., The ministry in the congregation. See above, p. 119.

[69] *Quantum fragilitas humana permittit*. A qualification of the vow.

[70] i.e., Celibacy. *Non promitto castitatem*.

[71] *Fragilitas humana non permittit caste vivere*.

[72] *Angelica fortitudo et coelestis virtus*.

[73] The court-jester was allowed unusual freedom of speech. See "Prefatory Letter" above, p. 62.

[74] The laws governing marriage were entirely the laws of the Church. The canon law prohibited marriage of blood-relatives as far as the seventh degree of consanguinity. In 1204 the prohibition was restricted to the first four degrees; lawful marriage within these degrees was possible only by dispensation, which was not all too difficult to secure, especially by those who were will willing to pay for it (see above, p. 96). The relation of god-parents to god-children was also held to establish a "spiritual consanguinity" which might serve as a bar to lawful marriage. See BENRATH, p. 103, note 74, and in the *Babylonian Captivity*, below, p. 265.

[75] This Luther actually did. When he burned the papal bull of excommunication (Dec. 10, 1520) a copy of the canon law was also given to the flames.

[76] i.e., The marriage of the clergy.

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