

Both Proles and Staupitz were men of talent, but they had developed certain theories on the total privation of free will. They considered man to be an inert creature who could not obtain salvation except through the divine energy.

In the Catholic system, a double activity — that of God and of man — meets, interpenetrates and assimilates in some manner to work out regeneration. Grace comes to quicken man, but man is bound to correspond thereto. God offers to draw man out of the gulf of sin, but it is necessary for man to extend his hand to his Redeemer. Such is the comforting doctrine that leaves us in the possession of full liberty. If the Church tells us grace is entirely gratuitous, She tells us, at the same time it is offered to all. So an eternal consignment of the soul to hell springs from man's free refusal to accept the assistance of the Holy Trinity.

Contrary to that, the theories of Proles and Staupitz were the forerunner of Luther's theory denying man's free will, and contributed to his eventual rebellion against the Church.

Luther's cloistral life was truly that of a hermit, but characterized by extremes of behavior. He believed himself to be a great sinner and, as a result, fasted, mortified himself and practiced all sorts of monastic severities even until they endangered his health. His novitiate was a painful one.

His superiors, aware of Luther's propensities to pride, tested his vocation by a rigorous ordeal. Luther was obliged to sweep the dormitory, open and shut the doors of the church, wind up the clock and beg publicly. When Luther complained, the

University interfered, as did Staupitz, who put a stop to such probation, under which it was feared Luther would break.

Eventually, Luther's superiors showed him signs of confidence and on April 3, 1507, Luther was ordained to the priesthood, although he had scarcely begun the study of theology.

"Do you promise," asked Laspius, the prelate who ordained him, "to live and die in the bosom of our good mother, the Catholic Church?"

"I do promise," replied the neophyte.

Overwhelmed with the fear of rubrical error, he delayed his first Mass until May 2, and then had to be forcibly restrained from leaving the altar.<sup>2</sup> Let us hear in his own words, Luther's feelings: "When I said my first mass at Erfurt, I was well nigh dead, for I was without faith. My only notion of myself was, that I was a very worthy person. I had no idea that I was a sinner."<sup>3</sup>

He was appointed professor of Theology at the University of Wittenberg and pastor of a church in that city. It was there that in 1513 that he began the movement we have learned to call the Reformation.

<sup>1</sup> William Hazlitt, Trans. and ed. The Table Talk of Martin Luther. "A Memoir of the life of Luther" by Alexander Chalmers (London: G. Bell & Sons, LTD. 1911) xxv.

<sup>2</sup> Newman C. Eberhardt, A Summary of Catholic History, Vol. 2. (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co. 1962) 139.

<sup>3</sup> William Hazlitt, The Table Talk of Martin Luther, xxviii.

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## **Martin Luther**

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**Martin Luther in 1520**  
engraving by Lucas Cranach

Mention the Reformation and the rotund figure of the ex-Augustinian friar rises up before the imagination. Martin Luther, the "Father of the Reformation," was born Martin Luder, son of Hans Luder and Margaret Ziegler in Eisleben, Saxony, at the foot of the Harz Mountains on Nov. 10, 1483. Martin changed his name to Luther because in the Saxon tongue the name Luder signified a rake, a good-for-nothing fellow.

Luther ever manifested the coarse traits of the medieval Saxon peasant in his speech and manner. He was sensitive, morose, gloomy and subject to bouts of depression. His parents were strong-willed, hot-tempered and at times abusive.

Luther wrote that one day, having stolen a paltry little nut, his mother beat him until she drew blood; and that he was so afraid of his father he used to hide in the nook of the chimney when he was so unlucky as to disobey him. His memory of their punishments remained with him throughout his life.

In *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, a self-description is provided:

“I am a peasant’s son, and my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were all common peasants. My father went to Mansfeldt, where he got employment in the mines; and there I was born. That I should become a bachelor of arts, doctor of divinity, and what not, seemed not to be written in the stars. How I must have surprised folks by turning monk; and then, again, by changing the brown cap for another! By so doing I occasioned real grief and trouble to my father. Afterwards I went to loggers with the pope, married a runaway nun, and had children by her. Who foresaw these things in the stars? Who could have foretold that they were to come to pass?”<sup>1</sup>

Luther left home at the age of fourteen to begin his formal education. In school, he was a hard-working, fast learner with a retentive memory, naturally proud and rebellious, often in trouble with school authorities. He entered the University of Erfurt in the spring of 1501, at the age of seventeen, and completed the prescribed course in philosophy. As a student, he paid for his books and teaching by means of the small alms given to him by the rich under whose windows he sang twice a week, or which he received at church for singing in the choir. He received a bachelor’s degree at age nineteen and a master’s at age twenty-two.

Although his father wanted him to study law, he entered a monastery of Augustinian hermits in Erfurt in July 1505, at age 21. In the Middle Ages, the monasteries were the shelters of arts and learning. The monks were at that time the only representatives of knowledge. In the cloisters alone were to be found painting, sculpture, poetry and the love of antiquity. It was in them that civilization took refuge.

Every monk had his appointed occupation. Some sowed the soil, cleared forests, cultivated waste lands, stemmed torrents, taught and transmitted the principles of irrigation, raised crops, grafted trees and practiced other agricultural sciences. Others were employed in transcribing and deciphering ancient manuscripts and translating the text of Greek and Latin authors; while ordinary scribes, consecrated to the glory of God, labored, exhausting their skills with the patience of angels in copying the Sacred Scriptures. In Italy, for example, the cloisters that existed during the fifteenth century were transformed into the studios of painters, architects and sculptors. When prayers were over, the monks hastened to work — some with chisel, others with the compass or pen. Italy is replete with the glory of the monks.

A mediaeval monastery may be said to have presented the very appearance of a hive of bees. Let it be borne in mind the cloister was the holy ark which brought together classical literature as well as the Inspired Writings and saved them from the hands of marauding vandals. We are also indebted to the monks for the first translations of the

Bible into German and various other European languages.

For nearly fifty years, Andreas Proles presided as Vicar General over the Augustinian monastery, which Luther entered. Johann von Staupitz succeeded Proles. Staupitz had been the prior at Tübingen, then at Munich, and had taken a prominent part in founding the University at Wittenberg in 1502, where he became a professor of theology and the first dean of the faculty.

In the fourteenth century, discipline became relaxed in the Augustinian monasteries. For various reasons, such as the mitigation of the Augustinian rule — either by permission of the pope or through a lessening of fervor — but chiefly in consequence of the Black Plague and the Great Western Schism, reformers appeared who were anxious to restore it.

A reform of the Augustinian order was begun in 1492 at Erfurt by Proles and continued by Staupitz. When Staupitz commanded all the hermits of the Saxon province to accept and practice a stricter rule on pain of being punished as rebels, and to obey him as the general of the order, seven convents refused to obey. Among them was that of Erfurt, of which Martin Luther was a member. Luther was sent on a mission to Rome as a representative of the rebellious monks; but, contrary to assertions sometimes made, this mission did not weaken his faith or his loyalty to the Church. In consequence of this appeal to Rome, the consolidation of the hermits under Staupitz did not take place.