

MARTIN LUTHER'S ATTACK ON MONASTICISM

by

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A THESIS

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D E D I C A T I O N

This work is affectionately
dedicated to my mother
and father.

They waited.

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Luther thought so highly of teachers that he would allow no-one into the Ministry who had not first been a school-teacher. And, indeed, is there anything more to be treasured than good teaching? Real debts can seldom be repaid, only acknowledged: I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to many teachers.

Particular thanks are due to staff members of the Faculty of Divinity in Rhodes University; they cannot be "boxed", nor did they produce students to be fitted into boxes. In their company I learned that the disciplines of Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology, and Church History, were always to be related, and, in the end, were aids to worship.

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I acknowledge, too, the genial co-operation of the typist, Mrs. D. Lynsky, and of the bookbinder, Mr. Eric Naidoo.

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Donovan Enslin

Durban

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ABBREVIATIONS AND NOTATION

- L.W. - American edition of Luther's Works
edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (for vols. 1-30)
and Helmut T. Lehmann (for vols. 31-55);
(Philadelphia and St. Louis : Fortress
Press and Concordia Publishing House,
1955 -)
- (()) - insertion of comment or explanatory note
into quoted material.

INTRODUCTION

1) Summary of Previous Studies

No comprehensive study of Luther's attitude towards monasticism is available in English. Most of the English works on Luther devote only a few pages or part of a chapter to this aspect of his life. Two reasons account for the cursory treatment. First, concern with the great themes of Luther's theology has led (Protestants at least) to concentrate on the theological aspects of his critique : monasticism as a denial of the free grace of God, and as involving a mistaken view of perfection.¹ Pelikan has commented : "Valid though this concentration on the theological aspects of Luther's polemic against monasticism is, it may obscure the bearing of that polemic upon the structures of the church."² Moreover, a concern for theology 'pure and simple' (if such is possible) has led to a tendency to arrive at Luther's view of monasticism by a process of deduction from his great theme of justification by grace through faith alone, so that many of the niceties of his position, and especially the gentleness of his approach, have been obscured. Second, the cursory treatment is possible because there is a real sense in which the arguments Luther

1. J. Pelikan, Spirit Versus Structure, (London: Collins, 1968), p. 51

2. *ibid.*

adduced in his major work on monasticism - though comprehensive and systematic - were by no means original. Yet, The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows was the most decisive critique of monasticism ever presented. ^{1.}

The need to see Luther as a whole is apparent in the current Catholic reappraisal of Luther. Jedin has pointed to three levels of study: the biographical, the growth of the split in the Church, and the theological. ^{2.} This reappraisal has already led to the conclusion that "Luther did not wish to found a new Church, but he wanted to 'reform' the Catholic Church, and only when he failed in that - had to fail because he understood by reform something quite different, and new - did he agree to the setting up of a Protestant Church community with the help of territorial princes and local Church authorities." ^{3.} This conclusion has great importance for the ecumenical movement - the question is whether Luther's attitude towards monasticism bears out Jedin's view.

2) The Problem

If Luther is viewed as arch opponent of monasticism, can one account for:

- (i) his retaining the cowl until as late as 1524, even though von Staupitz had released

1. David Knowles, The Religious Orders in England, III (3 vols., London : Cambridge University Press, 1957), pp. 164 ff.

2. H. Jedin, "Changes Undergone by the Image of Luther in Catholic Works on Ecclesiastical History," 450th Anniversary of the Reformation, (Bad Godesberg, Inter Nationes, 1967), p. 92

3. *ibid.* p. 93

him from the Rule after the interview with Cajetan in October 1518;

- (ii) the pastoral concern that motivated his major work on monastic vows;
- (iii) his positive view of monasticism as educational institution?

3) Basic Requirements for Solution of the Problem.

- (i) To determine whether "attack" provides an adequate framework for comprehending Luther's relationship to monasticism.
- (ii) To show how the pressure of events in Wittenberg and his own experience as a monk influenced his views, and, thereby to suggest the proverty of an approach which deals with theology 'pure and simple.'
- (iii) To come to grips with the highly individual and paradoxical description he gave of his own vocation.
- (iv) To show that when Luther outlined his concept of monasticism he was thinking historically, and far from regarding the movement of renunciation during the Fourth Century as the seed-bed of monasticism, saw it rather as the perversion of true renunciation.

- (v) To explain, and give proper weight to his tenderness towards people under monastic vows.

4) Sources and Methodology

Because the secondary sources pay such cursory attention to the problem, much use has been made of Luther's own writing in the Philadelphia Edition of his works - editorial comments and annotations in these volumes have often proved to be the most helpful secondary material.

One of the most important turning-points in the formation of the thesis occurred when it was realized to what a great extent Luther's views on monasticism were still developing during 1521. From then on the "Letters" became a vital source because they not only often give the content of ideas found in a finished form in the Judgement on Monastic Vows, but also show how Luther developed his point of view, and what arguments he rejected en route.

5) Period Covered.

The thesis concentrates on the years 1521 and 1522, because this was the period in which Luther was forced by the pressure of events in Wittenberg to write down his views with precision. Nor was this simply an exercise in committing to paper ideas that had been

formed much earlier. The "Letters" show plainly that he was wrestling with his position throughout 1521, and that the theological insights of the earlier years could not be applied across the board 'just like that.'

No attempt is made to analyse Luther's decision to enter the monastery - for two reasons. First, Luther himself recognized the futility of ruminating on that decision, because it was so overlaid by the process of reflection. Second, there are good grounds for believing that his experience of Anfechtung reached its peak in the Wartburg, and that he achieved some of his most decisive insights into monasticism while he was isolated there - as he put it: "Now I am really a monk."¹.

From the point of view of his attitude to monasticism, the later years were marked by two important developments : his marriage, and his growing opposition to the "Spirituals," whom he dubbed "new monks." In view of his attitude towards life-long vows his marriage presents no real problems of interpretation, but, at the same time, Luther must not be chained for convenience to his early views, particularly as the situation in Germany changed, and

1. L.W. vol. 48 p. 323 (Letter to Spalatin : 1 Nov. 1521)

the the immediate threat to his own life receded somewhat.

In the dispute with Karlstadt - particularly in the matter of the interpretation of Scripture - is seen the basis of his opposition to the so-called "Radicals," so many of whom he held to have relapsed from Law into law, and thus were similar to the "old monks" in all fundamentals.

Provided Luther is allowed room in which to move, a concentration upon the years 1521 and 1522 should not result in a distorted view of his attitude towards monasticism, but, on the contrary, promises valuable insights - both for his development up to this period, and for some of his later positions.

CHAPTER I

THE PASTOR OF WITTENBERG

When, in 1521, Luther was forced to formulate his views on monasticism with some precision, he was subject to three main influences:

- (a) The pressure of events in Wittenberg;
- (b) his meditation on the Magnificat;
- (c) the need to come to grips with the implications of the vow of obedience, both for the sake of monks confused by the happenings in Wittenberg, and for himself, under ban in the Wartburg.

(a) THE PRESSURE OF EVENTS IN WITTENBERG

Martin Luther wrote down his views on monastic vows while in hiding in the Wartburg and receiving reports of disturbances in Wittenberg. He concluded his Judgement on Monastic Vows with two quotations which indicate both his own mood and the atmosphere of the time: ¹. "As free, but not as making liberty a cloak for malice, but as servants of God"; ². "You have been called to freedom: but do not make freedom an occasion for the flesh." ³. Late in November 1521 Luther sent the manuscript to his close friend Spalatin, chaplain to the Elector, but, probably on orders from the latter, it was withheld from the

1. L.W. vol. 44 p.400

2. I Pet. 2 : 16

3. Gal. 5 : 13

printers as likely to further agitate the populace. Hearing of the subterfuge, Luther wrote indignantly to Spalatin: "There is nothing that would disturb me more at this moment than to know that ((these manuscripts)) had reached you and that you were holding them back, since I have dealt in these little books with themes that require the greatest possible haste." ¹. The Wittenberg disturbances were the immediate cause of Luther's work on monastic vows.

Much of the ferment in Wittenberg centered on the Augustinian monastery, where, in Luther's absence, the monks were led by Gabriel Zwilling. Unlike Karlstadt, Zwilling was later to be reconciled with Luther, but at this stage was impatient to draw far-reaching liturgical and ecclesiological conclusions from the new theology. "... he tried to push the Reformation to a complete separation from the Roman Church." ². Luther, by contrast, exercised restraint in the conclusions he drew, in part because he hoped to co-operate with the hierarchy in working out the practical implications of his theological insights. After Worms, however, the possibility of co-operation receded, but he would still not allow his hand to be

1. L.W. vol. 48 p.351 (letter to Spalatin : 5 December 1521.)

2. *ibid.* p. 39 note 3 (Editorial comment by Gottfried Krodel.)

forced. Thus he took pains to refute Karlstadt that communion in one kind involved the recipient in sin. Pleased as he was that Melanchthon was "...restoring Christs' institution...",¹ he argued that since "...Christ does not absolutely require 'both kinds,' and the tyrant prevents them, I do not see how those who receive only the 'one kind' commit sin."² There is a sense in which Luther's concern for the correct theological bases for action slowed down the pace of change in Wittenberg, but his refusal to brand sinful communion in one kind also tended to keep open doors for communication, and, to cool tempers.

Priests who married caused the first troubles. Bartholomew Bernhardi, provost of Kemberg, was the most eminent of these. Elected President of Wittenberg University in 1518, he had supported Luther with all the authority of the University. Luther commented: "I admire the newly married man of Kemberg; he is afraid of nothing and was in quite a hurry in these troubled times."³

1. *ibid.* p. 281 (Letter to Melanchthon: 1 August 1521.)

2. *ibid.* p. 280

3. *ibid.* p.231 (Letter to Melanchthon: 26 May 1521.)

Bernhardi was fortunate to be in Electoral Saxony, and could count on the intercession of Melanchthon, who wrote, in German, a widely circulated apology: Priests May Take Wives. Less lucky was another priest who married, Siedler, pastor of Glasshütte, in Ducal Saxony, whom Duke George had executed.

These events may have prompted Karlstadt to publish theses on clerical and monastic celibacy.¹ Luther wrote to Melanchthon: "I highly approve of his effort and diligence, of course, although I rather wish that he had not twisted that passage ... ((Our)) enemies will ridicule the distortion... ." ² By now the monks were being brought into the reckoning. On August 6th Luther wrote jestingly to Spalatin: "Good Lord! Will our people at Wittenberg give wives even to the monks? They will not push a wife on me!" ³ He continued to complain of Karlstadt's obscurity. In the days that followed his tone towards Karlstadt became sharper: "How I wish that Karlstadt had tried to refute celibacy with more fitting Scripture passages! I am afraid he stirs up quite a lot of talk for himself and for us. ... The cause he has undertaken is important, and an excellent endeavour, but I wish it were

1. On Celibacy, Monastic Life and Widowhood:
21 June 1521.

2. L.W. vol. 48 p. 283 (Letter to Melanchthon:
3 Aug. 1521.)

3. *ibid.* p.290 (Letter to Spalatin: 6 Aug. 1521)

also done in an outstanding, skilful, and successful way. ... Perhaps I am concerned about things that are not my business. But they are not things beyond my concern, if Karlstadt succeeds in his attempt. For what is more dangerous than to incite such a big crowd of unmarried people to matrimony on the basis of such unreliable and uncertain Scripture passages, only to have them harassed afterward with continual anguish of conscience, worse than the cross they now have to carry. I, too, wish to see celibacy made a matter of choice, as the gospel requires. I do not see clearly yet how to accomplish this. But my warning is in vain. Maybe ((Karlstadt)) does not want to be held back in his course. Therefore one has to let him continue." 1.

This letter shows Karlstadt forcing Luther to consider monastic celibacy. Uppermost in Luther's mind was a pastoral concern for the monks and nuns whom Karlstadt might have misled, and this accounts for the letter's note of caution. Aware too, of the civil threat inherent in the liberation of "... such a big crowd of unmarried people...," 2. Luther turned to the Scriptures to discover the correct bases for action. He also began to get really worried about the preaching situation in Wittenberg. From the earliest days of going into hiding, Luther had expressed this concern - now he became almost clamant that Melanchthon should fill his pulpit, and in one letter passed directly from an expression of grief "... because of Karlstadt" 3. to the appeal to persuade Philip. Yet, Luther knew

1. *ibid.* pp. 293 f. (Letter to Spalatin : 15 Aug. 1521)

2. *ibid.*

3. *ibid.* p. 311 (letter to von Amsdorf : 9 Sept. 1521.)

that to break openly with Karlstadt would confuse the people, and, moreover, "... an occasion would be given to our enemies to boast over our internal disagreement." ¹.

On 9 Sept. 1521 he sent to Melanchthon some "Theses on Vows" with the promise of a brief commentary dedicated to the congregation at Wittenberg, should Philip desire their publication. These "Theses", provoked by the marriage of priests and the line taken by Karlstadt, marked the close of the first phase of developments in Wittenberg during 1521. The "Theses" were a private communication to Melanchthon - at this stage Luther still held back from publication.

The same day that he posted the "Theses" he wrote to Amsdorf about the possibility of yet another set. ² Whereas the first set had "... discussed the issue of whether or not a vow was made in a godly or ungodly way," ³ the second discussed "... under what circumstances vows ((were)) to be kept," ⁴ and were entitled : "Whether it is Permitted to Take a Vow Intended to be Permanently Binding." The slight shift in emphasis pointed to the change in the pace of events. In October the two sets of "Theses" were published as :

1. *ibid.*

2. *ibid.*

3. *ibid.*

4. *ibid.*

Martin Luther's Opinion on Vows. Thus far, a certain cautiousness had characterized Luther's treatment of vows. Also, he was working on the problem of vows in general, and had not yet concentrated his attention on monastic vows - the "Theses" had, after all, been occasioned by the marriage of priests. But on Nov. 11th he intimated that he was now mulling over the issue of monastic vows, and a marked change in tone, a greater decisiveness, characterized his letters. This was not surprising - a lot happened in the roughly three months that followed the first "Theses".

Late in September, Melanchthon gave communion in both kinds to the students at the Town Church, and soon he published sixty-five propositions on the mass. During October, Zwilling led the Augustinian monks of Wittenberg to "... abolish private masses, restore the cup to the laity, abandon their costumes, give up begging, and transform all ceremonies inimical to Christ." ¹. In alarm, Elector Frederick ordered a committee of inquiry which reported on October 20th, and urged the abolition of abuses in the mass. Meanwhile, the harassed Elector was trying to appease an enraged Luther who was threatening to blast the Archbishop of Mainz for issuing more indulgences. On October 23rd, most Augustinian monks resolved not to celebrate mass in the traditional way, so that the Prior, Conrad Helt,

1. C.L. Manschreck, Melanchthon: The Quiet Reformer (New York : Abingdon, 1958) p.73

entirely stopped the celebration. Justus Jonas preached in the Castle Church on November 1st and called for the abolition of vigils, masses and indulgences.

Although the pace of events was quickening, the peace held, and the fears Luther had entertained about the incitement of the "large body of unmarried people" subsided. In private he accordingly expressed himself more forcibly. To Nicholas Gerbel he wrote: "...Philip and I have a powerful conspiracy concerning the vows of monks and priests; they have to be abolished and made void." ¹. Yet aggression did not mask pastoral concern: "The ((theme)) on which I am now working, however, concerns the perdition of souls. For I have decided to attack monastic vows and to free the young people from that hell of celibacy totally unclean and condemned as it is through its burning and pollutions." ².

The monks started to leave the monastery. On November 12th Conrad Helt reported to the Elector that thirteen monks had discarded their cowls. Zwilling was behind it. Luther wrote to Spalatin: "From a vague and indefinite report, I have learned that some of our people have disposed of the cowl. I have been afraid that perhaps they might have done this with a

1. L.W. vol. 48 p.321 (Letter to Nicholas Gerbel: 1 Nov. 1521)

2. *ibid.* p. 328 (Letter to Spalatin: 11 Nov. 1521)

conscience not sufficiently strong. This fear has wrested out of me this little book" ¹.
 The "little book" was a major work: The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows. But, against Luther's will, this crucial document was not published until February 1522. The lack was felt in the stormy months of December and January..

Luther paid a secret visit to Wittenberg early in December - perhaps he felt out of touch with the situation, as his complaint to Spalatin about "... a vague and indefinite report ..." ². suggested. Spalatin may well have been withholding information on the Elector's instructions - Government alarm had already led to a clamp-down on the printing of his manuscripts. Three documents were involved: the pamphlet directed at the Archbishop of Mainz, Against the Idol of Halle ; the Judgement on Monastic Vows ; and, On the Abrogation of the Private Mass. During the visit Luther evidently learned of Spalatin's complicity. Angered, he wrote: "There is nothing that would disturb me more at this moment than to know that ((these manuscripts)) had reached you and that you were holding them back, since I have dealt in these little books with themes that require the greatest possible haste. Therefore if you have them, for goodness' sake curb that moderation and prudence of which I suspect you, for you accomplish nothing by rowing against the stream. What I have written I want published, if not in Wittenberg, then certainly somewhere else. If the manuscripts have been lost or you have kept them, I will be so embittered

1. *ibid.* p.337 (letter to Spalatin: 22 Nov. 1521)

2. *ibid.*

that I will write more vehemently than ever on these points." ¹.

The authorities were on edge and looked upon Luther as a firebrand. Like other governments in times of tension, they did not distinguish between troublemakers, and Luther was lumped with Karlstadt and Zwilling. Here Luther paid the price of his earlier reluctance to come out against Karlstadt for fear of splitting the movement. Luther had no intention of forcing a break with the Church hierarchy, as Karlstadt and Zwilling seemed bent on doing. In a private letter to Cardinal Albrecht he did not mince words at the new sale of indulgences, but also assured him of his willing service.² And recalling the indulgence episode of 1517 which began it all, he wrote with a note of regret: "Your Electoral Grace will please remember the beginning, and what a horrible fire was caused by ignoring this little spark." ³. That confusion of freedom and excess which typified Zwilling, Luther spurned in the pointed choice of texts with which he concluded his Judgement. ⁴. Moreover, in his radical departures from the mass, Karlstadt left Luther way behind. Ironically, the Government censored

1. *ibid.* p. 351 (Letter to Spalatin : 5 Dec. 1521)

2. *ibid.* p. 339 (Letter to Archbishop of Mainz: 1 Dec. 1521)

3. *ibid.*

4. I Pet. 2 : 16 and Gal 5 : 13

the one man capable of exerting a moderating influence.

The day before Luther arrived in Wittenberg, some students and townsmen, armed with knives, entered a parish church, harassed the clergy, and slashed mass books. In the same letter in which he harangued Spalatin Luther wrote: "Everything else ¹ that I hear and see pleases me very much. ... Nevertheless I was disturbed on the way ((from the Wartburg)) by various rumours concerning the improper conduct of some of our people, and ((therefore)) I have decided to issue a public exhortation on that subject as soon as I have returned to my wilderness! The "everything else" must refer to the implementation of reforms in Wittenberg. Evidently the student action had not alarmed him. Kostlin argues that : "... Luther, who knew at first hand something of the ebullient nature of college students, laughed off these episodes as mere boyish pranks. " ² What then were the "various rumours" that "disturbed" Luther "on the way" from the Wartburg? Brandt is of the opinion that "What really bothered Luther was not the rash acts of irresponsible students, but rather the widespread feeling of unrest and smouldering resentment against the Church, which he had sensed and observed on his journey to Wittenberg." ³

1. i.e. apart from the withholding of manuscripts.

2. Julius Kostlin, Martin Luther: sein Leben und seine Schriften, I (5th ed. 2 vols.; Berlin : Duncker, 1903), p. 374 quoted in L.W. vol. 45 p.55

3. L.W. vol. 45 p.55 (editorial comment)

The promised exhortation : A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to all Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion was ready on December 12th. It was not written in response to specific acts of violence, but because Luther was alarmed at the growth of resentment against the Roman clergy. But he did make some pointed remarks about those who "... go at it slam bang, and do no more than overwhelm others with reproach and find fault with them and their practices as being unevangelical, without stopping to consider that many of them are plain and simple folk who would soon learn the truth if it were told them." ¹. This, too, was the document in which Luther urged that men make no reference to his name: "... let them call themselves Christians not Lutherans."².

The events of 1521 forced Luther to a more precise formulation of his views on monasticism. Karlstadt had been the catalyst of the first period. Concerned about the risks of inciting "the large body of unmarried" Luther's letters revealed his hesitancy. The first set of "Theses", produced early in September, marked the first phase of developments. In the three months that followed, this fear proved groundless - instead he became more concerned about the hostility of the general populace at large towards Rome.

1. *ibid.* p. 70

2. *ibid.*

This was the period in which he produced his major work on monastic vows, and although he expressed himself on vows more clearly than ever, this did not indicate a desire to break with the Church. The Sincere Admonition marked the close of a second phase, and showed how much hostility towards the Church alarmed him.

The time of tumult in Wittenberg was at hand. No sooner was Luther back in the Wartburg than Karlstadt put himself at the head of the reforming party and began in earnest to campaign for the immediate implementation of far-reaching changes. The day on which Luther announced that the Sincere Admonition was ready, the Elector received another committee report even more urgent for reform. Frederick was caught in a cross-current: led by Provost Jonas the canons of Wittenberg urged him to resist change, whilst almost all the professors of his university were pro-reform. Karlstadt and Zwilling led the monks in a tumultuous exodus from the monasteries. Luther wrote to John Lang, his successor as District Vicar of the Reformed Augustinians: "I do not approve of that tumultuous exodus, for the monks could have parted from each other in a peaceful and friendly way. You will be at the next chapter meeting; see to it that you favour and defend the evangelical party."¹.

1. L.W. vol. 48 p. 356 (Letter to John Lang: 18 Dec. 1521)

To Wenceslas Link, Vicar General of the Reformed Augustinians in Germany, Luther made the same point, and then went on to explain his own relation to the "evangelical party." "... it would be best to arrange during your coming chapter meeting, by means of a public proclamation, that freedom be given to those who wish to leave No one should be delayed or forced to remain in a monastery against his will. Meanwhile you, like Jeremiah, should remain in the service of Babylon, for I too, shall remain in this cowl and manner of life, if the world does not change."¹

There could be no clearer statement that his published views on vows did not inhibit his freedom to continue to live as a monk.

The Zwickau prophets, with their claims of direct illumination, added an element of hysteria to the tense situation in Wittenberg, so that Luther felt frustrated by his isolation in the Wartburg. On 11 January 1522, Karlstadt and Zwillling led a mob that destroyed the side altars in the old convent church, and burned the oil used in extreme unction. Following representations from Duke George, the Imperial Government in Nürnberg ordered that all innovations cease. Luther wrote to Spalatin : "... now I daily hear wilder things. The Lord willing I shall definitely return in a short time" ² Still linking him with Karlstadt and Zwillling, the Elector tried to dissuade him, but Luther would not hear. The people needed the Word. He returned on 6 March 1522.

1. *ibid.* p. 359 (Letter to Wenceslas Link : 18 Dec. 1521)

2. *ibid.* p. 381 (Letter to Spalatin : 17 Jan. 1522)

Just how mistakenly the Elector had judged Luther, was proved by the turn in Karlstadt's fortunes. He retired to the parish at Orlamunde, where he subsequently broke with the Faculty at Wittenberg, and in 1524 was exiled from Saxony. How deep were the differences between the two men only now became apparent. "Karlstadt's legalistic understanding of Scripture, and spiritualistic interpretation of the Christian religion precipitated the first internal crisis in the Reformation movement. The Spiritualists (Schwärmer) rejected "concreteness" as a medium of divine expression and saw an infinite chasm between matter and spirit. This led Karlstadt to his iconoclasm... ." 1.

In the third sermon after Invocavit Sunday, on Tuesday, 11 March 1522, Luther warned : "It is not enough to say : this man or that man did it. I followed the crowd, according to the preaching of the Dean, Dr. Karlstadt, or Gabriel ^{2.} or Michael ^{3.}." ^{4.} It was not the case that because "... this monk or that nun has left the cloister, therefore, they must all come out. Not all all." ^{5.} Luther exercised this very freedom, and preached the famous eight sermons that restored order to the streets in his Augustinian cowl.

1. *ibid.* p. 79 (editorial comment by G. Krodel)

2. Zwilling.

3. The Archangel (!)

4. L.W. vol. 51 p. 80

5. *ibid.* p. 81

b) Meditation on the Magnificat

More than anything else Martin Luther's Judgement on Monastic Vows was a pastoral document. The vow of obedience was so much a part of the monk's thinking that an impulsive decision to leave the monastery could leave the conscience more entangled than ever. Thus, it was important for the integrity of Luther's opinions that he should have pondered obedience in his Commentary on the Magnificat¹. during the Spring and Summer of 1521.

The Commentary had almost as chequered a career as the Judgement. Dedicated to the Elector's nephew, it was begun late in 1520, but was interrupted by Worms. Luther resumed work on it in the Wartburg, and after delay in the press, it finally appeared in print in September 1521. Luther was always anxious about the printing of his work, but especially so in the case of

1. There is probably no work of Luther's which Roman Catholics find more congenial. It is playing an important rôle in the current Catholic reappraisal of Luther and was quoted at the Second Vatican Council. The historiography of Catholic Luther studies has now moved to the point where Luther is being studied as a theologian, and it is significant that Thomas Sartory should have drawn on the Commentary in order to communicate to the Catholic world the picture of Luther as "spiritual man." ((H. Jedin, "Changes Undergone by the Image of Luther in Catholic Works on Ecclesiastical History," 450th Anniversary of the Reformation, (Bad Godesberg : Inter Nationes, 1967) pp. 80 - 94.)) That a work so acceptable to Catholics (in the present climate of opinion) should have played an important rôle in the formation of ideas which led to the Judgement on Vows helps explain why Luther could attack monastic vows without also wanting to break with the Church of Rome.

the Magnificat, and in letter after letter implored Spalatin and Philip to see to it. ^{1.}

Luther's study of the Magnificat confronted him with the relationship between humility and obedience. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it according to thy word" ^{2.} - the theme of obedience. "He has looked upon his lowly handmaid" ^{3.} - the theme of humility. The link between obedience and humility had been classically stated by Benedict of Nursia in the sentence with which he began the Fifth Chapter of the Rule : "The first degree of humility is prompt obedience." Any rebel was particularly vulnerable to the charge of pride, and Aleander had successfully used this argument to persuade the Emperor to rescind the first invitation to have Luther's case heard at Worms. "Has the whole world gone wrong and Martin only has the eyes to see?" ^{4.} Humility might even require a monk to obey the Church and submit to the charge of heresy, though convinced he did not hold the condemned views. Thus, Workman records the dilemma of John Hus : "Some argue that a man who submits himself to the Church wins merit by his humility when he

1. L.W. vol. 21 pp. XVIII f.

2. Lk. 1 : 38.

3. *ibid.* 1 : 48.

4. R. Bainton, Here I Stand, (London : Hodder and Stoughton 1951), p. 173

confesses to guilt though it be granted that he is innocent." 1.

For Luther, the search for humility was self-defeating. "It is in vain, therefore, to teach men to be humble by teaching them to set their eyes on lowly things, nor does anyone become proud by setting his eyes on lofty things. Not the things but our eyes must be changed, for we must spend our life here in the midst of things both lowly and lofty." 2. Luther began his exposition of Lk. 1 : 48 by insisting that _____ be rendered not 'humility' but 'low estate'. "For humility is so tender and precious a thing that it cannot abide beholding its own face." 3. Nor for that matter was there any intrinsic merit in a low estate.

Mary's outstanding humility Luther attributed to her response to God's unmerited grace : she did not extol the virtues of life à la baisse, nor did she lift her eyes too high, but "... confesses that the foremost work God did for her was that he regarded her, which is indeed the greatest of his works on which all the rest depend" 4.

1. H.B. Workman, The Evolution of the Monastic Ideal, (London : Charles H. Kelly, 1913), p.70.

2. L.W. vol. 21 p. 316

3. *ibid.* p. 317

4. *ibid.* p. 321

Lk. 1 : 48 provides the key to Luther's understanding of obedience, which was not, in the first instance, a surrender of the will which God held especially dear, but a joyful freely offered response to his regard for us.

When, in his letters, Luther expressed the wish that monks should be free to leave the monasteries, his intention was not that they violate their vows and break with the Church, but that they reinterpret the vow of obedience in the light of Mary's understanding of humility. This was the framework of ideas which ruled in Luther's mind, and which enabled him to retain the cowl - unlike Zwilling, he was no rebel - iconoclast determined to destroy monasticism as institution.

Fife writes of Luther's Magnificat that it is "... a striking expression of the ideology of the transitional age, still mediaeval in its spiritual forms, but struggling to free itself from the bonds of convention." ¹. Thus "Martin sets forth a truly mediaeval ascetic philosophy with respect to the goods of this world" ². and "a monastic attitude towards society." ³.

1. R.H. Fife, The Revolt of Martin Luther, (New York : Columbia University Press, 1957), p.647.

2. *ibid.* p. 646.

3. *ibid.* p. 647

In the exposition of Lk. 1 : 50 Luther raised the crucial question of how one is to behave, what action one is justified in taking, should one believe that one is "in the right!" The question was crucial because Luther certainly believed himself to be "in the right" in the matter of monastic vows. Yet he wrote : "No rich or mighty man is so puffed up and bold as one such smart aleck who feels and knows that he is in the right ..." ¹. To be in the right and the right assertion of rights, were different issues.

To bring out the distinction, he argued that "... money, property, body, wife ..." ². were in themselves good. It may be, however, that God tries us to see whether we cleave to him rather than his gifts. Thus we may have to regard these things with "... equanimity and to confess that they are good and not evil," ³. while at the same time not exercising the right to recover them, should it be God's will to deprive us of them. "To confess the right and good is one thing, to obtain it is another. ... if you

1. L.W. vol. 21 pp. 332 f.

2. *ibid.* p. 334.

3. *ibid.* p. 335.

cannot obtain it, commit that to God." ¹.

This passage is of great importance. First, it shows that Luther's attitude to asceticism was not based upon a dualistic negating of material things, but upon the will of God as interpreted by each individual. Second, he stressed "right confession". This is seen in the painstaking attention he devoted to the theology of vows, but having done that, was content to commit the cause to God. Nowhere in the great work on monastic vows was there a call to monks to flout their vows. Thus the Magnificat is full of insight for the background to Luther's thinking in the crucial period when he began to be forced into an exposition of his views on vows. He presented a reinterpretation of the relation of obedience to humility which he confessed with all vigour, but which he ultimately committed to the Lord.

c) The Vow of Obedience and the Power of Tradition.

It is impossible to grasp the pastoral significance of the Judgement on Monastic Vows without appreciating that from the first days of his novitiate a monk was taught to obey. Life under vow was above all life given over to obedience. In the Judgement, Luther showed his familiarity with the stories of astounding obedience told of religious down the ages, and which had become part of

1. *ibid.* p. 336.

the cherished folk-lore of monasticism. Stories such as that of John the Short who was ordered to water a dry log, and did so for a whole year - in some accounts, until it sprouted green branches and people ate of its fruit. Luther was also familiar with the story of the two hermit sons who, in obedience to their vow of solitude, refused to see their mother. He called this story "godless as it is horrible" ¹. - but these accounts of obedience were part of the atmosphere of monasticism. ².

1. L.W. vol. 44 p. 327

2. Theologians of monasticism had elevated obedience as the chief monastic vow. Pope Gregory I had supplied a decisive insight "Obedience is rightly placed before victims, since by victims another's flesh, but by obedience one's own will is sacrificed." ((Gregory, *Moralia*, (XXX.10) quoted in Thomas Aquinas II:II.186.6.)) This insight was also the basis for Thomas Aquinas concluding that obedience was the chief vow. Whereas in poverty a man offered external things, and in continence his own body, in obedience he offered his own will. Moreover, obedience included the other vows, and was bound up with the essence of the religious enterprise. ((Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, (London: Blackfriars, Eyre and Spottiswoode; New York: McGraw Hill, --) II.II.186.6.)) The pressure on the monks to obey was stronger by virtue of the belief that the religious sinned more grievously than the secular by the same kind of sin. (ibid. Q.186 A.10) For to disobey was not merely to break the most important vow, but to betray the monk's calling to the life of perfection. When a monk vowed obedience he believed that he was dedicating himself to the total sacrifice of his will, and this total sacrifice set him apart from the secular. Thus, answering the objection that obedience did not belong to works of supererogation, but was binding on all, Aquinas wrote: "To obey one's superiors in matters that are essential to virtue is not a work of supererogation, but is common to all: whereas to obey in matters belonging to the practise of perfection pertains properly to religious. This latter obedience is compared to the former as the universal to the particular. For those who live in the world keep something for themselves and offer something to God, and in the latter respect they are under obedience to their superiors; while those who live in religion give themselves wholly and their possessions to God, as stated above ((A.3)). Hence their obedience is universal." (ibid. Q. 186 A.5)

Bearing in mind this great weight of tradition from which it was so difficult to make a clean break with an untroubled conscience, Luther's concern that the monks should not make precipitate decisions, contrasted with the irresponsible haste with which Karlstadt and Zwingli led the monks out of the monasteries. Luther, too, had so steeped himself in the monastic life that he could not put his habit off just like that. A sixteen years' discipline leaves its mark on any man, and it is not surprising that even after he had achieved his theological breakthrough, at least four years should have elapsed before he formulated his views on monasticism at any length, and even then, it was only under the pressure of events.

Luther still regarded himself as a monk when he delivered the Invocavit Sermons. A man who, in a real sense, was still working through the issues for himself, could not with integrity counsel a rash breaking of vows. It is not too much to suggest that, in writing to meet the pastoral needs of others, Martin Luther wrote also for his own consolation.

CHAPTER II

A MONK YET NOT A MONK

Musing on his seclusion in the castle, Luther wrote to Spalatin that he was "... now finally and really a monk. Yet I am not actually a monk, because I have many evil and astute demons with me... ." ^{1.}

The period in the Wartburg provided opportunity for deep meditation, not just about monastic vows considered in the abstract, but about his own experience as a monk. This cryptic statement about his isolation gives a clue to the working of his mind at the time. It was not that he took an impish delight in paradox, but it was the kind of language in which he could best express the mysterious operation of the Divine Will. The Wartburg had its frustrations, caused especially by anxiety for the preaching situation in Wittenberg, but it also brought leisure for reflection : "At the moment I have nothing else to write." ^{2.} In these moments Luther meditated on the Divine Purpose, and how it was served by his own profession and sixteen years as a monk. To approach Luther as an assailant of monasticism does not do justice to his desire to interpret his experience in the light of the Will of God.

"But it was the Lord's will, as I now see, that the wisdom of the schools and the sanctity of the monasteries should become known to me by my own actual experience, that is, through many sins and impieties, so that wicked men might not have a chance, when I became their adversary, to boast that I condemned something about which I knew nothing." ³

1. L.W. vol. 48 pp. 323 f. (Letter to Spalatin : 1 Nov. 1521)

2. *ibid.*

3. L.W. vol. 48 p. 333 (Letter to Hans Luther : 21 Nov. 1521)

His own experience as a monk did not ever occasion a single expression of regret, and in seeking the mind of God, he came to see his vocation in a highly paradoxical way, which he himself summed up as "a monk yet not a monk." ¹.

The debate about monastic vows in 1521 blew up, in the first instance, as a quarrel over clerical celibacy, and the whole controversy bore the marks of this preliminary skirmish. The line of development in Luther's attitude towards vows can be narrowed down to the development in his thinking about the vow of chastity. While he dealt briskly enough with the question of clerical celibacy, the monks' position proved more difficult to resolve. Thus, in an early letter he took pains to distinguish between priests and monks : "You people do not yet convince me that the vows of priests and monks are to be considered in the same category. For it is of special importance to me that the order of priests was established by God to be a free order; with the monks this is not the case. They have chosen their estate and made it an offering to God of their own accord." ². His certainty in the case of

1. *ibid.* p. 335

2. *ibid.* p. 277 (Letter to Melanchthon : 1 Aug. 1521)

priests rested upon what he claimed to be the plain word of Scripture. He felt that I Tim. 4 : 1 ff. made it clear beyond doubt that a prohibition of marriage was inspired by the devil, so that any priest was free to break it. In the first stages of his reaction to Karlstadt's June theses on celibacy, Luther looked for a similar clear word to apply to the situation of monks, and his early hesitancy stemmed, in part, from his inability to find such a word. "I have no such declaration of God concerning the monks; therefore it is not safe to make the same assertion about them. I myself would not dare to comply with it; therefore I will not counsel anyone else to do so." ¹. Those were emphatic, unequivocal words about his own state of mind, and his view of himself as a monk. He evidently saw the monk as someone who of his own free will offered celibacy to God as some kind of sacrifice. Unable to find a plain word of Scripture which would provide a knock-down verdict, the line of his development lay along the path of what it meant to offer 'freely!'

In taking the vow of poverty, the monk freely surrendered his rights to external things, in the vow of continence, the rights of his own body, and in that of obedience, his will. But in Luther's day the meaning

1. *ibid.* p. 278 (Letter to Melanchthon : 1 Aug. 1521)

of the monk's free choice had become subtly modified by the relative ease with which dispensations from the vows could be obtained: Érasmus was a famous case of a man who succeeded in manipulating his Rule to suit his own condition. Thus, rights were 'freely' surrendered in the knowledge that dispensations were available. At this point, Luther became aware of a great anomaly in ecclesiastical practice. Dispensations from obedience to the Rule of the monastery were readily granted, with the notable exceptions that no relaxation of the vow of chastity was condoned. "Why is only the vow of chastity as hard as flint, while all the others are straw and stubble?"¹ While in the tradition it was given out that the vow of obedience was most important, the tenacity with which celibacy was defended, pointed to a different order of values in practice.

Pondering this, Luther achieved a decisive advance in understanding. He traced the exaltation of celibacy to a passage in Ecclesiasticus: "No balance can weigh the value of a continent mind."² In its Old Testament context, he argued that this passage had nothing to do with virginity and celibacy (which

1. L.W. vol. 44 p. 344.

2. 26 : 20

the Jews universally deprecated) : the primary meaning of continence was faithfulness to the marriage bond. The distortion of Scripture which had resulted in the misapplication to celibacy of this wisdom eulogy to continence, Luther traced to the abiding human failing of desiring to do something great, a desire which he castigated as an attempt to do better than faith. Now it became clear to him that the desire to do "a great thing" was founded on a works orientated theology, which imposed its own compulsions, as destructive of freedom as any external pressure. Unable to find a Scriptural passage which had a clear word about the validity of monastic vows, Luther had been led to an examination of what it meant to offer "freely," and this in turn plunged him into the thorny field of motivation. The crux of the matter was what motivated the monk to vow. Further, if motive was what really mattered, then all the argument about "burnings" and "pollutions" were arguments a posteriori. Almost as important as the arguments Luther advanced against vows, were the arguments he rejected.

Some of the most attractive, but specious, arguments appealed to the freedom of the Christian. ^{1.} In view of the atmosphere in Wittenberg, and the disturbances occasioned by the 'illuminist' prophets in December and

1. Most of these claimed freedom from the consequences of vows, and were, therefore, a posteriori arguments.

January, the way in which Luther treated the Christian's freedom in relation to rules of any kind was of some importance. In a letter to Melanchthon,¹ Luther spun off an experimental argument based upon Acts 15 : 10, 11 : "It would only provoke God's anger now, surely, if you imposed on the disciples the very burden that neither we nor our ancestors were strong enough to support? " What struck Luther was the reason Peter gave to the Council: the impossibility of fulfilling the Law. Could it be inferred that if a vow proved impossible to fulfill, it should be ignored? Luther parried that Peter's reason was based upon a special revelation to consider nothing unclean, in other words, that the Law was unnecessary for Gentiles. On the basis of this special revelation Peter had further concluded that if the Law was unnecessary for Gentiles, nor was it necessary for him as a Jew.

Although Luther had sent this off to Melanchthon merely to promote discussion, he did not hide his own lack of clarity : "I don't know what phantom of pomp and human opinion is plaguing me here. ... We are certainly a people on whom no law should be imposed - especially not for the whole of life - but to whom everything should be left free." ².

1. L.W. vol. 48 p. 285 (Letter of Melanchthon : 3 Aug. 1521)

2. *ibid.* pp. 287 f. (Letter to Melanchthon : 6 Aug. 1521)

Yet once he was finally clear in his own mind that the real issue was not freedom from the consequences of vows, but whether vowing was motivated by a spirit of freedom, he became quite irritable when Melanchthon persistently argued on a posteriori grounds. "Aren't you talking as if you wanted to say that a vow should not be binding since it is impossible to fulfill it? Following this line of reasoning you would have to concede that the divine commandments are to be abolished." ^{1.} The implied comparison between the force of a divine command and the force of a vow was an important step in the debate, because it clarified the distinction between voluntary behaviour and free behaviour. The fact that one entered voluntarily into a vow made not a scrap of difference to Luther. The Scriptures said: "Make your vows and perform them," ^{2.} so that a vow entered into voluntarily had all the force of a divine command. To vow voluntarily, meant that one vowed without being compelled by external circumstances - it did not mean that one was motivated by a spirit of freedom. Luther was explicit: "... abrogate the vow a priori and not a posteriori ; that is, refute the principle of the vow and its custom. It is over

1. *ibid.* p. 297 (Letter to Melanchthon : 6 Aug. 1521)

2. Ps. 76 : 11

this matter that I am now sweating. Whether or not a vow can be fulfilled doesn't bother me." ¹.

Melanchthon had produced a syllogism which Luther could not accept:

"Whatever is contrary to the freedom of the Gospel has to be abolished under the threat of an eternal curse;

"The obligation to keep vows is of this kind;
"Therefore vows have to be abolished." ²

The trouble with this syllogism was that "... many have lived as free under the slavery of vows." ³. Luther loved to quote the example of Bernard, who did not look upon his vows as a mark of special holiness, and who took a full part in the affairs of his day, as he felt led by the Spirit. Luther was drawing upon his understanding of Pauline theology : it was because the Law was not based on faith ⁴. that the Christian could live in freedom under Law. In fact "... all laws are even confirmed because we establish the Law by faith. Therefore the law of vows will stand together with the freedom of the Gospel, indeed, it will even be made firm by it." ⁵.

1. L.W. vol. 48 pp. 297 f. (Letter to Melanchthon : 9 Sept. 1521)

2. *ibid.*

3. *ibid.*

4. Gal. 3 : 12

5. L.W. vol. 48 pp. 298 f. (Letter to Melanchthon: 9 Sept. 1521)

Having reduced the issues to the categories of Pauline theology - especially as it was presented in Galatians - one might have expected as sharp an attack on vows as Paul levelled at the "stupid Galatians," and for the same reason : that they had preferred the bondage of the Law to the freedom of the Gospel. But instead, there came a gentle question, overflowing with tenderness and wisdom : "Don't you think that the Galatians circumcised themselves with a true heart as if they were serving God by it? ... Didn't they offer themselves to God by this in the same way as when someone offers himself to God through a monastic vow? " ¹. But what he did question was whether they vowed with an enslaved conscience. So he was led to reformulate Melanchthon's syllogism :

"Whoever has taken his vow with a spirit which is contrary to evangelical liberty has to be released from it and his vow condemned;

"He who has taken his vow with the intention of seeking salvation or righteousness through it belongs in this category;

"Therefore his vow has to be annulled." ².

Luther was under no illusions that the majority of monks and nuns had taken their vows in a spirit of

1. *ibid.* p. 299

2. *ibid.*

captivity: "... almost all of them have this enslaved conscience in one way or another." ¹. But who was to be the judge of this? As was only to be expected, sixteen years had dulled his memory, and overlaid the original experience with a mass of reflection, so that he admitted "... I am uncertain with what kind of an attitude I took my vow. I was more overpowered than drawn ((by considerations)). God wanted it this way. I am afraid that I, too, may have taken my vow in an impious and sacrilegious way." ². The most certain opinion in this was that "God wanted it that way." Reasonably the rest was misty. And it was also because of this insight that Luther was unwilling to dogmatise about how others should act. Motives so easily elude analysis. Thus he would make no rules, but left it to the individual conscience to decide in what attitude vows had been taken, and with what attitude they were being kept. This respect for the individual conscience separated Luther from Karlstadt and Zwilling - always too ready to lead a mass movement.

Because the debate about celibacy was the real background to the debate about vows, it was not surprising that his particular conclusions about

1. *ibid.* p. 300

2. *ibid.* p. 301

celibacy paralleled his general conclusions about vows. He had to come to terms with I Cor. 7. The argument that it was "better to marry than to burn" he dismissed very quickly as a "quibbling rationalisation"¹. when it was interpreted to mean that it was preferable to sin by breaking a vow, than to sin by fornicating. Moreover, he who "burned" today need not "burn" tomorrow. Luther had put his finger well and truly on the weakness of all a posteriori arguments.

By a painstaking attention to the text of Scripture Luther came to the conclusion that by "burning" Paul meant no more than a burning desire.² Always loathe to scatter base sexual insinuations concerning monks, he pointed out that when Paul meant onanism he used 'unchastity,' and when he meant nocturnal emissions he spoke of 'uncleanness.'³ In the area of sexual morals, Luther never used language carelessly, and for this reason rounded with heat on Karlstadt, when the latter twisted a passage about "seed offered to Molech"⁴ into a reference about the emission of semen. Against the background of much literature that was pornographic and written to wound, this diligence and restraint stands as an abiding

1. L.W. vol. 48 p. 279 (Letter to Melanchthon : 1 Aug. 1521)

2. *ibid.* p. 304 (Letter to Melanchthon : 9 Sept. 1521)

3. *ibid.* p. 293 note 11 (Letter to Spalatin : 15 Aug. 1521)

4. Liv. 18 : 21

monument to his love for people in religious orders.

With respect to the vow of chastity, as in other areas of monastic life, his tender concern for individual consciences preserved him from dogmatism. The most he would say about I Cor. 7 was that Paul finally left the matter in the hands of the individual, so that this was one area of life not to be hedged about by human laws and statutes. Reflecting on Ma. 19 : 10, 11 he felt that it was probably healthier to dissuade people from celibacy,¹ certainly not encourage it, but he would be pushed no further. "It was dangerous, therefore, to vow chastity. But who would claim that there is no value in unmarried life? Especially since, following the counsels and examples of Scripture, one may freely live unmarried."²

The letters from which the evidence of Luther's development has been culled, were written with the Wittenberg situation very much in mind. The position they suggest can be outlined roughly as follows:-

1. If vows were made in the expectation that they availed for salvation, then they must be condemned as destroying the freedom of the Gospel.
2. But the spirit in which vows were first

1. L.W. vol. 48 p. 334 (Letter to Hans Luther : 21 Nov, 1521)

2. *ibid.* p. 285 (Letter to Melanchthon : 3 Aug. 1521)

taken and afterwards held, was a matter for the individual to decide, so that merely human laws should be avoided at this point.

3. The balance of Scriptural evidence was that the celibate life should not be indiscriminately encouraged - indeed it was preferable to discourage people from taking the decision too lightly.

Yet the letters only hint elusively at the stand Luther himself was to take regarding his own vocation as a monk. More often than not he shielded behind a certain jocularly: "They will not push a wife on me!"^{1.}

"What now? Am I myself already free and no longer a monk? Do you think that you should be a Demas for me, and finally fix up this Micio with a Sostrata, in order to get even with me for having fixed you up with a wife, as they say? But I shall be quite careful with you that you don't succeed!"^{2.}

The most personal testimony was a letter written to Hans Luther on 21 Nov. 1521.^{3.} Yet even this was very much an 'open letter'; for it was intended to serve as the preface to his major work on monastic vows. Nevertheless, it remains the best source for his personal intentions, and the one in which he expressed his own view

1. *ibid.* p. 290 (Letter to Spalatin : 6 Aug. 1521)

2. *ibid.* p. 303 (Letter to Melanchthon : 9 Sept. 1521)

3. *ibid.* pp. 329 - 336

of himself as "a monk yet not a monk."

The preface was intended for publication, and was very tightly argued. It had a defined purpose : "...to recall ... what took place between you and me in order to indicate to the pious reader the argument and content of this book, together with an example." ¹. The argument revolved around a question which occurs like a refrain: "What do you think? Will you still take me out of the monastery?" ². This question Martin answered in terms of the Will of God, which both he and Hans at first understood differently, but which in the end, surprised both.

Martin recalled that his Father had reproached him for entering the monastery in defiance of his express opposition : in fact, Hans had invoked the Fourth Commandment. Had he then been truly obedient, Martin conceded that he should have obeyed, because now "... he is altogether persuaded that there is nothing holier, nothing more important, nothing more scrupulously to be observed, than God's commandment." ³. Had Hans himself properly understood God's commandment he should have hauled his son out of the monastery by the scruff of his neck, if need be. Then the question : "Will you still take me out of the monastery?"

1. *ibid.* p. 331

2. The background was Hans Luther's intense disapproval of his son's decision to become a monk.

3. L.W. vol. 48 p. 331

But perhaps, so the argument ran, Hans should relent, because, after all, his son was leading the celibate life, "And no balance can weigh the value of a continent mind." ¹. Here Martin had a field-day, attacking the distorted interpretation of this passage. He wrote with racy vigour, because he was able to play off the obedience the monks demanded to a human commandment, against the obedience owed to God in the Fourth Commandment. Hans had his rights as a Father reaffirmed, and again came the question : "Would you still take me out of the monastery?"

In one sense, there was no need to supply an answer ; he was out of the monastery, and hiding in the Wartburg. So that a new question arose in its place ; should he retain cowl and tonsure - those outward symbols of monastic vows? To have discarded these, would have had a very definite significance ; it would have meant a formal, public break with his vows. But in such an act Luther would have acknowledged that which he was in no circumstances prepared to acknowledge : that he was not free under vow. "My conscience has been freed and that is the most complete liberation."². He would live the vows with fidelity, but in the freedom that came from the knowledge that salvation

1. Ecclus. 26 : 20

2. L.W. vol. 48 p. 335

was by grace through faith. After all, cowl and tonsure were simply externals : "Do they make the monk? "All things are yours and you are Christ's" says Paul. Shall I belong to the cowl or shall not the cowl rather belong to me?" 1.

He had a clear idea of how God intended him to use the cowl. Of one thing the seclusion in the Wartburg had convinced him : God had meant him to become a monk so that as a monk he could preach the Gospel to monks. From the perspective of the Wartburg, he looked back on the years of torment in the monastery, and concluded : "I think that from ((the days of)) my childhood, Satan must have forseen something in me ((which is the cause)) of the present suffering. He has, therefore raged against me with incredible contrivings to destroy or hinder me, so that I have often wondered whether I was the only man in the whole world whom he was seeking."2.

He was out of the monastery. The need to renounce cowl and tonsure had fallen away ; moreover, they were only externals - useful tools. But again the question : "Does not your authority over me remain as far as the monastic life is concerned? " Luther clearly saw vows and the monastic life as separate issues. And on the special question of whether he acknowledged his Father's right to force a break with his monastic way of living, he answered : "I could not have refused to obey you without endangering my conscience unless

1. *ibid.*

2. *ibid.* p. 333

Christ had added the ministry of the Word to my monastic profession." ¹. This left an important question : did Luther retain the cowl simply to remain acceptable to monks, and to provide an opening for the Word? Almost a month later, he wrote to Wenceslas Link, Vicar General of the Augustinians, that if the world did not change he would remain in the cowl, and retain his manner of life. ². After all, he was living as an excommunicate, and he must have felt that his life was in the balance. It was in the same mood of impending judgement that Paul had given his advice in I Cor. 7. Martin Luther was following the Apostle when he wrote to his Father : "And now that I have been condemned I have no desire ever to be absolved." ³.

1. *ibid.* p. 335

2. *ibid.* p. 359 (Letter to Wenceslas Link : 18 Dec. 1521)

3. *ibid.* p. 336 (Letter to Hans Luther : 21 Nov. 1521)

CHAPTER III

COUNSELS AND PRECEPTS

Luther had attacked monastic vows in so far as they were made and kept in a spirit of slavery. The making of vows, as such, he did not attack, because Scripture said : "Make your vows and keep them." ¹. Nevertheless, he believed that religious frequently kept their vows in a spirit of slavery because the vows were based upon a wrongly made distinction between the precepts and counsels of Scripture.

The traditionally twelve evangelical counsels ². were distilled from Matthew 5, part of the Sermon on the Mount, and these were the counsels which the monastic vows sought to express. When the University of Paris had adversely reported in April 1521 on Luther's performance at the Leipzig Disputation, the Sorbonne theologians had defended the distinction between counsels and precepts in a way which had infuriated Luther. They had argued that Christ's words in Chapter 5 would place an impossible burden on Christian obedience were they interpreted as commandments (precepts), and thus had to be regarded

1. Ps. 76 : 11

2. (i) Do not requite wrongdoing! (ii) Do not avenge yourself! (iii) Offer the other cheek! (iv) Do not resist evil! (v) Give your cloak along with your coat! (vi) Go the second mile! (vii) Give to everyone that asks! (viii) Lend to him who borrows! (ix) Pray for your persecutors! (x) Love your enemies! (xi) Do good to those who hate! (xii) Do the other things that Christ teaches here! (L.W. vol. 21 p. 4)



as counsels. When Luther presented his Judgement on Monastic Vows for publication in November 1521, he had the opinions of the Paris theologians very much in mind. (This explains why Luther's discussion of the distinction was the most abusive section of the Judgement.)

His fundamental objection was that the distinction did not rest upon the Word of God, and he sought to show that what the monastic theologians interpreted as counsels, were in fact precepts, which all Christians were bound to obey in virtue of their baptism. And ironically, the one counsel Luther did allow - celibacy - he charged them with perverting into a precept, through making it a life-long vow. The attack on counsels as contrary to the Word of God, proved to be one of the Reformation's primary arguments against monasticism. Thus in Melanchthon's Loci Communes¹ the attack on monastic vows followed the attack on the distinction between counsels and precepts. Calvin also followed this order in attacking the claims of monastic perfection.²

1. Philip Melanchthon, Loci Communes, ed. C.L. Hill, (Boston, Meador Publishing, 1944), pp. 122 ff.

2. John Calvin, The Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. J.T. McNeill, II, (2 vols., London : S.C.M., 1960), 4.13.12 ff.

The issues at stake in this debate were basic:
what constituted the plain meaning of Scripture?

"...these belly-centered creatures have not had enough concern for the gospel to open the books at any time, to turn the pages, or even to look up a single word. If they had looked up the words of the gospels just once they could have avoided the monstrous sacrilege of their blasphemies, because the words are so clear and straightforward." 1.

At stake was the nature of the Word spoken by Jesus.

"Unlike many of his predecessors, who interpreted the parables of Jesus as illustrations of common-sense morality, Luther took seriously the formula that introduced most of the parables; 'the Kingdom of God is like...' He therefore read them as descriptions of the ways of God in his kingdom, where God spoke his Word by means that man could neither control nor predict. The Word of God in the teachings of Jesus was, therefore, a redemptive Word, and not just good advice about human problems. ...His opponents made the Sermon on the Mount a new morality of so-called 'evangelical counsels' possible only for monks and other religious athletes. Luther's interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount sounded the redemptive note in these chapters, and he could, therefore, apply them to the everyday needs and problems of his hearers in Wittenberg." 2.

The distinction between counsels and precepts was common in scholastic theology, and was clearly expounded by Aquinas. "The difference between a counsel and a precept lies in this, that a precept implies necessity, while a counsel is left to the choice of the one to whom it is given. ... ((It was, therefore,)) fitting that in the New Law, which is the Law of freedom, counsels be provided as well as precepts, but not in the Old Law which is the Law of servitude. ...Precepts in the New Law bear on whatever is necessary to reach the end of eternal blessedness, but counsels are concerned with better and more expeditious ways by which man can reach this end." 3.

1. L.W. vol. 44 p. 260.

2. L.W. Introduction to the Exegetical Writings ed. J. Pelikan, pp. 60 f.

3. Aquinas, op. cit., I · II 108 · 4.

If two categories of things are imagined : "of the world" and "of the Spirit," then "... the more he attaches himself to either, the more he leaves the other behind." ¹. So that, total attachment to the things of the world would lead to a total abandonment of things of the Spirit, which, in turn, would lead to a disorder that required the precepts. Provided, however, a person did not make things his end, he need not totally abandon them to attain eternal blessedness. But the most expeditious way of attaining perfect blessedness was by total abandonment of things of the world, and that was why the Gospel counsels were given.

The "reply to objections" ². throws further light on the distinction. Aquinas argued that the counsels were advantageous to all, but that some people lacked the proper disposition. Thus he held that in proposing a counsel Jesus always mentioned men's aptitude for their observance - this was how he treated the case of the young man with much property. Referring specifically to the Sermon on the Mount, Aquinas held : "What the Lord says in Matthew 5 and Luke 6 about true love for enemies and the like is necessary for salvation, if it is taken to refer to inward readiness of mind, in the sense that one should be ready to do good to enemies and so on when necessity demands. And so these matters are put among the precepts. But that someone should readily put this into effect to enemies, when no special necessity

1. ibid.

2. ibid.

arises, belongs to the particular counsels." 1.

The rôle Aquinas gave to "freedom" in his explanation of the distinction was important. This understanding of "freedom" could be paraphrased as: provided one complies with a certain minimum standard, one may choose one's own route to eternal blessedness. Luther's comment on this understanding of freedom was characteristic: "Perhaps we should follow the insanity of Paris, that Gomorrah, where they assess the commandments of God in relation to the strength of their free will rather than in relation to the grace of God and the commandments themselves." 2 Given the command to desire the 'end'-love of God and neighbour with all our hearts - and the simultaneous freedom to choose the means to that end, Aquinas still could not get around a 'dispositive' explanation of why most people did not choose the most expeditious way. Thus to understand 'freedom', the real issue was the question of 'disposition.'

'Disposition' had to be understood in the context of the New Law. For Luther, the sense in which the Law was 'new' was vital. It was not new in the sense that something was added to it. Hence, in his exegesis of Galatians 5 : 14 he insisted that

1. *ibid.* Reply to obj. 4.

2. L.W. vol. 44 p. 259

'fulfill' meant 'summed up.'¹ It was new in the sense that it had been fulfilled by grace. Because of this view of fulfillment Luther objected violently to counsels because they could so easily insulate people from the grace of the Gospel. Moreover, counsels insulated people from the awareness of their own mediocrity.

When Aquinas said that counsels occurred in the context of the New Law because they offered the opportunity of choice, as opposed to the closed options and servitude of the Old Law,² the way in which Luther understood 'ability to choose' is raised. For Luther, 'ability to choose' was essentially a divine attribute. It was more proper to speak of men as acting 'voluntarily' from an inward principle, and this principle was that of the Holy Spirit, who dictated the law of love unceasingly in the heart. Acting thus, one did not act without motivation, but without thought of reward.

The pursuit of perfection - the 'end' of eternal blessedness - was one of the main motives for the taking of monastic vows, and the aim of observing the counsels - which so largely inspired the vows - was the most expeditious attainment of perfection. Luther's attack on vows was also the basis for his attack on the monastic concept of perfection. His main contention

1. L.W. vol. 27 Galatians (1519) p. 348

2. Aquinas, op. cit, I · II · 108 · 4

was that "it was a colossal mistake to measure the state of perfection by counsels and not by precepts."¹ Thus, "Do not lust comes before the vow of chastity."² In Luther's day the doctrine of perfection had achieved a developed form at the hands of the Scholastics. Asking whether anyone can be perfect in this life, Aquinas argued ³ that perfection carried the idea of a certain universality, because that which was perfect lacked nothing. Perfection could be considered in three modes.

- (a) Totality on the part of the lover so that God was loved as much as he was lovable. This was not possible for the creature.
- (b) Totality on the part of the lover so that he loves to his full capacity. This was not possible in the present life.
- (c) Totality as regards the removal of obstacles. This was of two kinds:
 - (i) Removal of obstacles contrary to charity. This was necessary for salvation.
 - (ii) Removal also of what hindered charity.

1. L.W. vol. 44 p. 263

2. *ibid.*

3. Aquinas, *op. cit.*, II · II · 184 · 2,3.

Having defined the concept, Aquinas then asked whether perfection consisted in the observance of the Commandments or of the counsels. He answered that perfection consisted in a thing primarily (i.e. essentially) and secondarily (i.e. instrumentally).

a) Primarily

The command was to love God with the whole heart i.e. perfectly) and one's neighbour as oneself. In all of this there was no question of more or less, and hence no room for counsels.

b) Secondarily

The commandments were directed at things against charity - except the command of love itself. The counsels were directed at things that hindered charity but were not against charity.

This was the elaborate concept of perfection with which Luther took issue. For him, perfection was not at all a matter of counsels, but precepts - that is, he took issue with the secondary or instrumental view of perfection. But Luther went further, and attacked the Scholastic understanding of a precept, so that he also questioned the primary or essential view of perfection. In going to the root of the doctrine of perfection by questioning its basic concept of precept, Luther showed that monks could not avoid taking their vows in a spirit of slavery.

Along with the doctrine of perfection outlined

above, Aquinas argued further for a concept of "Order in love," that is, a justification for loving oneself more than one's neighbour!¹ These two concepts Luther found irreconcilable. His position became apparent in his review of the vexed question of self-love in his commentary on Galatians 5:14.² He made three points. First, the Scriptures clearly commanded love for neighbour. Second, people loved themselves anyway - this perverted natural love was not the love with which they should love neighbour, otherwise there would be no need for grace. Third, people should, therefore, love their neighbours according as they loved themselves less. Because of this utterly basic disagreement on what it meant to love neighbour, Luther was also at odds with the primary understanding of perfection. He was not only questioning the distinction between counsels and precepts, but the understanding of the most basic of all precepts.

One of the hallmarks of Luther's treatise on monastic vows was the extent to which he managed to show the monk to be a creature of contradiction. He had a taste of this contradiction in the Wartburg, when alone at last, he had found himself not alone, and his whole environment peopled with demons. These

1. Aquinas, op. cit., II · II · 26 · 4

2. L.W. vol. 27 pp. 348 ff.

contradictions had their origin in the basic contradiction contained in the understanding of the precept : "love your neighbour as yourself." To pursue perfection on this basis was bound to end in contradiction. Taxed as he was by demons, Luther discovered in the Wartburg that the self was the most important representative of the world from whom it was impossible to flee. The counsels could advocate total disengagement from the world as the most expeditious route to perfection, but the counsels were in tension with a precept which inevitably made the self the most pernicious representative of the world. By uncovering this inner tension in the doctrine of perfection, Luther had in large measure revealed why so many unconsciously vowed in a spirit of slavery.

CHAPTER IV

A POSITIVE RÔLE FOR MONASTICISM -

THE MONASTERY AS SCHOOL

Luther's primary attack on monastic vows was directed against the spirit in which they were taken; he traced this error to the falsely drawn distinction between counsels and precepts, and an inner tension in the widely held doctrine of perfection. Nor did he mean his attack to be a break with the Church - this is what distinguished him from Karlstadt and Zwillling - he actually returned to Wittenberg in the habit and tonsure of an Augustinian monk. Apart from the individualistic way in which he interpreted his own vocation to be 'a monk yet not a monk,' the question is whether he saw in monasticism any positive content at all? The short answer is that he conceived of monasticism as an instrument of education. This short answer has to be developed in three ways to show that:

1. he conceived of his educational programme for Germany in monastic terms;
2. he thought of monasticism in much the same way as Paul thought of the Law as a schoolmaster leading to Christ;
3. he regarded his educational programme as the recovery my monasticism of its original raison d'etre

1) The Educational Programme for Germany.

While it is true that in his own life-time

Melanchthon earned the title "Preceptor of Germany," this must not obscure Luther's importance. Painter eulogized him as "the greatest of educational reformers" ¹, and educationalists such as Graves ², and Boyd ³, paid him considerable attention in their histories of education. Thus, Pelikan's conclusion is important: "If vows could be made voluntary and if the education of the young could be recovered as the chief task of the monastic establishments, Luther saw a possible rôle for them in the reformed ecclesiastical structure for which he was working." ⁴.

The argument being developed would be one-sided if account were not taken of the extensive criticisms Luther made of the education offered in monastic schools. While these criticisms indicated the measure of change for which he pressed, they also enable one to lightly colour in the outline of a reformed monasticism.

Stress on the Holy Scriptures flowed from the basic elements of his theology, but there is something modern and fresh in the advice on the composition of libraries he gave to the Mayors and Aldermen of

1. F.V.N. Painter, Luther on Education, (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1889), p.168

2. F.P. Graves, A History of Education During the Middle Ages and the Transition to Modern Times, (New York : Macmillan, 1920).

3. W. Boyd, The History of Western Education, (5th ed.; London : A. and C. Black, 1950).

4. J. Pelikan, Spirit Versus Structure, (London : Collins, 1968), p.68.

Germany in 1524. "First of all there would be the Holy Scriptures, in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and German, and any other language in which they may be found. Next, the best commentaries, and if I could find them, the most ancient, in Greek, Hebrew and Latin. Then books that would be helpful in learning the languages, such as the poets and orators, regardless of whether they were pagan or Christian, in Greek or Latin, for it is from such books that one must learn grammar. After that would come books on the liberal arts. Finally there would be books on law and medicine... ." 1.

Luther's regard for a liberal education stemmed from his assessment of its excellence as a tool in the study of the Scriptures, and also throws light on his understanding of renunciation, for it is hardly consistent to flee the world while carrying its books with one. Education in such surroundings would have a liberal flavour, and, obviously he was unafraid of ventilating his schools with the ideas of the world.

The new schools would have to allow for a greater traffic in ideas and mobility of teachers. Monastic education was showing all the symptoms of acute in-breeding, so that the new structures would have to provide a much higher level of academic freedom, in the sense that teachers from rival orders and observances should be more easily accredited. There is little doubt that the sectarianism and competition of mediaeval monasticism tended to close frontiers, and obstruct the exchange of ideas, upon which learning depended.

Because Luther's theology informed both his philosophy of education and his attitude to monasticism,

1. L.W. vol. 45 p. 351.

certain common factors were only to be expected. Nevertheless, there was surprising correlation between his educational ideals and aspects of monastic life which he criticized, so that his philosophy of education throws light on his ideal view of monasticism. Two areas of his educational thinking are especially instructive: the universality of education - in the sense of its being necessary for all - and education as an activity which fitted people for life.

For Luther, education was a necessity for all, and the state had an obligation to provide it - not for boys only but for girls as well. He also found it necessary to oppose the denigration of some callings as less worthy than others: "We should duly praise all the offices and works ordained of God and not despise one for the sake of another." ¹. Here Luther drew on his theology of vocation: the Judgement had clearly opposed the idea of a specially righteous class - his educational writings no less emphatically opposed the idea of an "aristocracy of letters," ². an idea to which the humanists, in particular, were prone.

Education fitted people for life. Luther had criticized monastic education because it had become so dominated by the Church, that it prepared people only

1. Painter, op. cit., p. 255.

2. L.W. vol. 45 p. 342.

for the spiritual estate, and, moreover, "... they designed their schools so exclusively for the spiritual estate that it has become almost a disgrace for an educated man to marry." ¹. Having himself attacked monastic education, and having also to contend with the anti-intellectual excesses of Karlstadt and Muntzer, Luther found himself forced to answer questions such as: "Pray why have schools for people who are not going to become spiritual?" ². The second part of the "Sermon on the Duty of Sending Children to School" exhorted parents to appreciate the need to educate their children for the secular callings. The appeal was based on the need to serve Prince and Country in manifold offices such as scribe and jurist, and to break away from a self-interested preoccupation with trade and commerce. This appeal paralleled Luther's castigation of the monks for their neglect of the command to love neighbour, and their preoccupation with things spiritual.

The picture which emerges is of a community committed to the mobility of ideas and personell, combatting elitist conceptions of its own rôle in society, and expressing its committment to the Prince through the training of people for service in all walks of life, the whole enterprise to be permeated by, and founded upon, the study of Scripture.

1. *ibid.*

2. *ibid.* p. 367.

2) Monasticism and "the Law as a Schoolmaster that Leads to Christ."

Luther argued that "...monastic obedience is an elementary and infantile obedience. It is instituted for a limited duration for the instruction of the young."¹. He saw monastic discipline as a limited period of schooling preparatory to the later exercise of evangelical freedom. There is a sense in which he shared St. Benedict's concept of "a little Rule written for beginners," but Luther meant by "limited duration" that lifelong monastic vows were contrary to evangelical freedom. Between this view of monasticism and Luther's exposition of Galatians 3 : 23-25 ², there was a close affinity.

The Law's function was to police the flesh, but although it secured outward compliance, it did so at the cost of resentment and animosity. This policing function was conducted at two levels: "politically," when through the deterrent effect of punishment evildoers were constrained to obey; "theologically," when it humbled through the awareness it brought of sin. This latter, Luther considered the proper rôle of the Law. Because "the conscience is a very delicate thing," and because the Law brings despair in its wake, to be perpetually confined by the Law would break the spirit, and hence,

1. L.W. vol. 44 p. 368

2. L.W. vol. 26 Lectures on Galatians, (1535)

"custody under the Law must not last any longer than until the arrival of faith." ¹ It was possible to grasp in theory that the Law prepared the ground for faith: that is, "whoever knows that when the Law is most terrifying, then the end of Law and the beginning of Grace and future faith are present ... uses the Law correctly." ² But on the other hand, in practice "...it is the most difficult thing in the world to join them ((Law and Gospel)) together."³

Luther was sure that "even Papists and Sectarians" could distinguish the concepts of the "time of Law" and the "time of Grace"; they grasped that the individual Christian life was divided into two "times" : "to the extent that the Christian is flesh he is under the Law, and to the extent that he is Spirit he is under the Gospel." ⁴ But Christ's coming should be applied "not only to time but also to feelings" ⁵ and "the Papists and Sectarians know absolutely nothing about this."⁶

It was one of Luther's charges that monastic vows "entangled" the consciences of the young in law, and it is important to understand how he envisaged the entanglement came about. Luther implied that anyone

1. *ibid.* p. 337

2. *ibid.* p. 338

3. *ibid.* p. 340

4. *ibid.* p. 342

5. *ibid.* p. 340

6. *ibid.*

who would add to the burden of the Law was insane. Because the Law was such a thorn in the flesh "anyone who says that he loves the Law is lying and does not know what he is saying." ¹. The risk of entanglement was so great because while it was relatively easy to theorise about the relationship of Law and Gospel, their conjunction in the heart was very difficult. He called the application of Law and Gospel in the realm of the feelings "an art" of which "he hardly knew the basic elements." ². Theorising was one thing; but to bring these utterly contradictory things together amid temptation" ³. was another.

The risk of entanglement required great vigilance : "... we must travel the royal road, so that we neither reject the Law altogether nor attribute more to it than we should." ⁴. Following Paul, his argument ran that the Law was designed for the unrighteous, not the righteous. And the unrighteous were of two kinds: those to be justified and those not. The latter - "wild and untamed beasts" ⁵ - would always have to be policed by the Law in its political function. But the former "are disciplined by the theological or proper use of the Law for a time." ⁶. Whereas the

1. *ibid.*

2. *ibid.* p. 342

3. *ibid.* p. 338

4. *ibid.* p. 343

5. *ibid.* p. 344

6. *ibid.*

political use of the Law was ever operative, the theological use was curtailed because "it looks forward to the coming of faith, and when Christ comes it is finished."¹ (Here it must be remembered that Luther desired "Christ's coming" to be thought of not only as a coming in time, but to be appropriated as an entrance into feelings.)

When Luther expounded Galatians 3:24 he showed that everything hinged on the use to which the Law was put. Depending on the approach the Law might be a custodian with a monotonous syllabus of whippings, or it might be a custodian that led to Christ. "It is not the father's intention that the son be subject to the schoolmaster forever."² So much depended upon the impression the boys received: would it always be nothing but hateful authority, or would they be led to taste "the liberal artâ and other good things, so that eventually they may do with pleasure what initially, when they were forced to it by their teacher, they did involuntarily?"³

The great danger of not joining Law and Gospel in the feelings was that the Old Law was abolished only to be replaced by "a new Law, or Christ the Lawgiver,

1. *ibid.*

2. *ibid.* p. 346

3. *ibid.*

rather than Christ the Abolisher of the Law." ¹ Luther attributed the many monastic sects to this relapse from Law into law. Hence he insisted that faith is "neither a law nor a work." ² Now that Christ had come the Law had lost its rights to terrorize the conscience, "but according to our feelings ... sin still clings to our flesh and continually accuses and troubles the conscience."³ That was why Christ was needed daily.

Luther's 1521 Judgement on Monastic Vows indicated his opposition to lifelong monastic vows, and with the help of the exposition of Galatians 3: 23-25 fairly firm conclusions can be drawn regarding the rôle of vows envisaged by Luther in any reformed monasticism. The critical moment for the Christian arrived when he managed to conjoin Law and Gospel in the heart. This was the moment when the Christian ceased to look upon the Law as a tyrant and began to fulfill the Law joyfully by grace through faith. Because of the fleshly nature, the Law would remain, but its hateful rôle as taskmaster would diminish in the measure that the Christian grew in grace. What Luther found especially repugnant was the idea that the Law should exercise a lifelong tyranny, and the

1. *ibid.* p. 347

2. *ibid.* p. 348

3. *ibid.* p. 349

sinner never reach the point where he began to perform its requirements joyfully. Thus when the Gospel entered the heart, the Christian's condition was so transformed in actuality and potentiality, that Law or 'Rule' became concepts too feeble to describe his condition, even though Law and rules would continue to play a part in his life, but exercising an ever-diminishing compulsion. Hence, Luther could not accept the lifelong vow because of its suggestion that 'Rule' was the primary concept in the description of the Christian life.

The question, to which the Galatian exposition suggests an answer, is whether Luther would have allowed lifelong vows on the other side of the Christian experience. It has been shown ^{1.} that Luther did not like to lay down criteria for determining the spirit in which vows were taken : this was a matter for the individual. But he had a great fear of entanglement in the Law, and to him, one of the most terrible things that could happen to a man, was that, to escape its tyranny, he would make further laws, and thus relapse from Law into law. Conceding that the spirit in which vows were taken was an individual matter, he nevertheless sounded a warning about the great temptation to seek to do better than faith.^{2.}

1. Chap. II

2. L.W. vol. 44 p. 322

To conclude, for their duration, monastic vows were a kind of nursery for educating young Christians to comprehend that the Law had not merely a "political" but also a "theological" rôle, which latter, was its "proper" rôle; and that in lapsing, monastic vows were an analogy of the Law as custodian that led to Christ.

3) Education as the Recovery by Monasticism of its Original Raison D'etre

Luther had some remarkable views on the origin of monasticism.¹ "The vow is and remains a human invention. Yet it is not altogether ridiculous. Voluntarily to vow, subjection of this kind for only a given time, is not without worth. We know this kind of voluntary vow was an institution of the primitive church and was a wholesome practice whereby for a time the elders instructed the young people who had been handed over to them in faith and in discipline. The epistles of the apostles Peter and Paul declare that youth should be subject to its elders. ((I Peter 5:5)) The first Christian schools arose from the practice. Even girls were educated in them as the story of St. Agnes shows. Colleges and monasteries eventually developed from these early beginnings for the benefit of those who of their own volition wanted to remain in these schools for life. When, however, wealth and leisure increased, those who had taken on the education of the young began to grow lazy and look after their own interests, and when the young people had grown more rebellious, they invented the snares of vows. By means of vows they bound the consciences of youth so that each held himself in check by the dread of sin, and those responsible for them secured peace and quiet for themselves. ... If, then, the present-day vow were related to the ancient custom, and kept in the same spirit, there would be no harm in it. Without any doubt God would regard it as nothing but the temporary continuation of an old tradition whereby immature, unlettered souls may absorb a Christian education, and eventually be allowed to go out again as free men." 2.

1. The evidence, which is plentiful, has been presented in the appendix, and has been gathered from those of his writings which have a bearing on educational matters.

2. L.W. vol. 44 pp. 312 ff.

A study of this passage reveals that Luther held:

- (i) that voluntary vows were an institution of the primitive church
- (ii) for the instruction in faith and discipline of the young by the elders;
- (iii) that the first Christian schools arose from the practice;
- (iv) that monasteries developed from these schools for the benefit of those who chose to remain in them for life;
- (v) that the perversion of monasticism stemmed from the institution of lifelong vows.

This passage purported to be an historical account of the origins of monasticism, and one's first reaction is that as a piece of historical writing its accuracy is questionable. The fourth point is probably the most contentious. Workman began his account of The Evolution of the Monastic Ideal with the sentence "In every human heart, except, possibly the utterly depraved, we find a yearning for self-surrender rising at times to a passion,"¹ and most historians of monasticism would agree in placing the spirit of renunciation high in a list of origins. Looking at the late Third and the Fourth Centuries they might ascribe different causes to the great

1. H.B. Workman, The Evolution of the Monastic Ideal, (London : C.H. Kelly, 1913), p. 3

movement of renunciation of the time, but would regard an explanation of the passion for renunciation as one of the major problems.

The simplest hypothesis, that Luther did not have access to the sources on which to draw more balanced conclusions, cannot stand. The lives of the Desert Fathers were familiar to him, and in his Judgement he made use of that indispensable source: Athanasius's : Life of St. Anthony. Moreover, in his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Luther made explicit reference to the spirit of renunciation in the context of monasticism. "From ((Jerome's Commentary on Ecclesiastes)) there arose and spread over the entire Church, like a flood, that theology of the religious orders or monasteries. It was taught that to be a Christian meant to foresake the household, the political order, even the episcopal (or, rather, the apostolic) office, to flee to the desert, to isolate oneself from human society, to live in stillness and silence; for it was impossible to serve God in the world." 1. He was aware, too, of the spirit of personal debasement. "Thus in the Lives of the Fathers we read that there were some who did not even want to look at the sun (such men would deserve to have their eyes gouged out) and who for the sake of religion ate the filthiest of foods." 2. Luther, then, was fully aware of the great power of attraction in the life of renunciation.

1. L.W. vol. 15 p. 4

2. *ibid.* p. 9

Yet he could still argue in varied contexts and at different times, that monasticism originated as an educational institution.

In the detailed exposition of his theory Luther made some statements which are difficult to accept;¹ for example, "the exceptional pupils should be allowed to continue in school longer ... that is how the monasteries and foundations originated..."² But in its more general statement the theory is easier to defend. It could be argued that in its pagan context the whole atmosphere of early Christianity was bound to be educational. And it was not unimportant from Luther's point of view that the two great emphases in Third Century Spirituality were devotion to martyrdom and baptismal spirituality!³ Now baptismal spirituality was inseparable from catechesis. Given that the Third Century was a critical phase in the history of Christian asceticism, it was significant that this century also witnessed a great burgeoning in the field of Christian education. Clement of Alexandria⁴ then becomes an interesting case study.

In Clement were amalgamated the scholar trained in the liberal arts, the educator, and the ascetic who referred to ascetics as "the elect of the elect."⁵

1. i.e. the writer has not yet been able to verify them!

2. L.W. vol. 45, Letter to the Mayors and Aldermen, p. 371

3. Bauss, Handbook of Church History, I, (London : Burns and Oats, 1965), p. 288

4. Origen, too

5. Bauss op, cit., p. 296

Clement's Paedagogue made it clear that Christianity had to educate - educate out of the crudities of much of pagan life, and out of the superciliousness of Gnosticism. Clement himself was a learned and refined man, and that he found it necessary to devote so much of The Instructor to the rules of decent living showed to what extent he judged pagan culture to be in need of refinement. Education for him was a broad concept - more than academic, it embraced the whole of life. Thus, Clement's asceticism, which was often expressed in terms of observing "due proportion," has to be seen as an aspect of his concept of education.

The life of St. Anthony ¹ also provides food for thought. Athanasius recorded that individuals who practised asceticism separated themselves "not far" from their own village. To one such man Anthony attached himself, and there he spent the time of his initiation. In fact, he subjected himself to various pious men. "He observed the graciousness of one, the earnestness at prayer in another; he studied the even temper of one and the kindheartedness of another; fixed his attention on the vigils kept by one and on the studies pursued by another...having thus taken his fill, he would return to his own place of asceticism." ²

The whole process was clearly educational, and the specific reference to the studies of one of the ascetics

1. St. Athanasius, Life of St. Anthony, (London : Longmans Green, 1950).

2. *ibid.* p. 21

is particularly interesting as providing evidence that Third Century monasticism was not opposed to learning.

Nevertheless, considered as an explanation of the great movement of the late Third and the Fourth Centuries, Luther's theory remains an exaggeration. In the light of that movement, for his theory to stand, it would have to be shown that the monks themselves saw their act of renunciation as an opportunity to pursue broad educational aims. This cannot be shown, even though many ascetics were not anti-intellectual, and much catechetical training was rigorously ascetical.

Luther's explanation of the origins of monasticism in education can only be written off as unfounded speculation if one disregards his accurate knowledge of the impulse to renunciation displayed in his Commentary on Ecclesiastes, in which he was greatly concerned with such concepts as "vanity" and "the world". He knew that the flight into the desert was occasioned by a desire to renounce the world, but he expressed the strongest disapproval for the concept of renunciation involved in the movement of the Fourth Century. This false concept of renunciation in turn gave rise to a perversion of the monastic ideal as he construed it in educational terms. Thus, when Luther spoke of the origins of monasticism he was not thinking

of those systems of coenobia and sets of 'Rules' which so quickly developed in the Fourth Century. These were not the monastic models of which he instinctively thought. His model was more accurately depicted by the life of St. Anthony, who can truly be called one of Luther's heroes. What he venerated in Anthony was prompted by the contrast with the Fourth Century. Thus he praised Anthony for living without the fixed system of rules and life vows which the Fourth Century found so necessary. In Anthony, too, he found a contrast to the Fourth Century concept of renunciation, which he so castigated in Jerome. Luther delighted in the fact that Anthony did not magnify asceticism as a way to perfection - quite the opposite : "So, children, let us now grow weary nor think that we are toiling a long time or that we are doing something great ... neither let us look back upon the world and think that we have renounced great things."¹

Luther's view of renunciation showed how he conceived his "monasteries" to relate to the world around them. And it also proves to be compatible with the liberal view of education which he has been shown to espouse.

Central to his understanding of renunciation was his interpretation of "world" in Scripture. A

1. St. Athanasius, op. cit., p. 34

strategic passage was : "Do not love the world or the things of the world."¹ He made it clear that this was an exhortation to those who were already converted : I John 2 : 14, "I write to you, fathers, because you know him ...!" Thus the exhortation "not to love the world" was to be a response to faith. This was the essential presupposition of what Luther went on to affirm. He argued that the world was created good (which was a response of faith anyway) implying that the spirit of renunciation could not be motivated by a view of matter as being inherently evil. "...some understand the world to mean God's creatures themselves, as the Franciscan monks understand money and society. But they are in error..."² In I John 2: 15, then, "world" meant "man's state of mind deprived of the proper use of the creatures of God."³

A dualistic attitude to nature was not the only motive for renunciation. It could stem from an act of self-sacrifice. Here, as so often, the Magnificat proves an incomparable source for the best of Luther's thought. He realised that one did not become lowly through debasing oneself with lowly things. Similarly, one did not become proud through living amid lofty things. In this life one had to live in the midst of

1. I John 2: 15

2. L.W. vol. 30, The Catholic Epistles, p. 248

3. *ibid.*

things both lowly and lofty. Thus renunciation was essentially a joyful act of praise that God had regarded his handmaid of low estate, and not a subtle pride in the life of debasement.

A third motive of renunciation was belief in its ability to quell the lust of the flesh. In this respect Luther was fond of quoting Romans 8 : 13, "If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live." The stilling of the flesh was accomplished through the Spirit, not, in the first instance, by rules and vows. "That is the way that married people do it, who never have any peace from their children or servants ... It is among such people that you will find those who believe and have killed their flesh. But the man who sits all alone in the corner of the monastery ... simply hands himself over to the devil, so that he can arouse all his evil lusts..." 1.

For the light which it throws on his view of monasticism, Luther's rejection of these three motives for renunciation is most illuminating. It was not education into a negative view of the world, but stood for faith in a world created good, and thus for a responsible use of the things of the world. It was not a gymnasium for athletic feats of debasement, but a community that celebrated God in his regard for those of low estate. This community could live indifferently amid affluence or poverty for God has placed men amidst things both lowly and lofty. It would teach that self

1. L.W. vol. 46 "An Answer to Several Questions on Monastic Vows" (1526), pp. 150 f.

control began as a gift of the Spirit and was not a technique. In sum, monasticism for Luther was education in the joyful praise of God the Creator - Father, God the Regarder of those of low estate, and God the Gift of holiness. Thus it was education in the worship of the Trinitarian God, for each of the three perversions of renunciation had struck at the true worship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit respectively.

CHAPTER V

"... THE LOW ESTATE OF HIS HANDMAID..."

(Luke 1 : 48)

The view of Luther as excommunicate monk who confirmed his apostasy by marrying a renegade nun, was sufficiently partial and spiteful to have served as a tag in the long history of Luther - polemic. Its inadequacy is proved by the clear evidence that he sought no open break with the Church of Rome, that he retained cowl and tonsure for at least three years after his excommunication, and was able to think of his educational programme as the recovery by monasticism of its original purpose. When it is further realised that his Judgement on Monastic Vows was primarily a pastoral document, which did not exploit abuses for political ends, the real area of interest becomes the character of the man himself, and the sources of his restraint and tenderness.

To search for the sources of a man's inspiration it is not a bad policy to look at his heroes : Luther's heroes make a fascinating study, not least because he was so aware of the danger of imitation. He came to believe that the lesser disciples of great men copied their outward deeds and made rules of them without coming to grips with what motivated their behaviour.¹ Here he was hinting at the reason monasticism after Anthony solidified into a system of rules, and in the process stultified.

1. L.W. vol. 44 p. 291

Later, Luther came to reject the concept of imitation, and became suspicious of the greatest of the Brothers of the Common Lot - for this very reason. Deeds could perhaps be imitated - but could faith? Would it not be just that - an imitation?

Two of his heroes were revered monks : Anthony of Egypt and Bernard of Clairvaux. In Athanasius's Life of St. Anthony, Anthony's address to the monks starts with a statement about the sufficiency of Scripture. His attitude to renunciation Luther endorsed in his own statements - there was no attempt to magnify asceticism as a way of perfection. But it was how Anthony behaved, that was more important than what he said. Luther accurately observed that he lived without formal rule or vow, and, when the need arose, willingly broke solitude to teach, heal and denounce the Arian heresy in Alexandria. So highly did he regard Anthony that Luther wrote: "... the rule of Anthony... is the rule of Christ." ¹.

Luther's Judgement of Monastic Vows is dotted with references to Bernard - not surprisingly, because when necessary, the Abbot of Clairvaux did not allow his Rule to daunt him from a thorough involvement in the affairs of his day. Of him, Luther wrote : "If

1. L.W. vol. 44 p. 253

there were men of Bernard's calibre in the monasteries they could be tolerated..."¹. For Luther, Bernard was the archetype of the man who kept his vows in a spirit of joyous freedom, and not at all because he was compelled to do so. He loved to quote Bernard's supposed death-bed remarks, in which he put no trust in his vows, but appealed only to Christ who "possesses the Kingdom by a double right : in the first place because he is the Son and in the second place because he has suffered. But there was no need of this second right in his case. He gave it to me and all who believe in him."². Luther was unwilling to dogmatize on the keeping of vows - it was a matter for the individual. Here was one of his reasons: the willingness to penetrate the screen of generalizations to applaud the particular examples of excellence; the largeness of heart that judged a movement by its best exponents as well as its worst. Both Anthony and Bernard drew their inspiration from the Scriptures - in Bernard, it was accompanied by that special enthusiasm that belongs to rediscovery - and these were phenomena Luther could not overlook.

Luther is so frequently portrayed as rebelling against the doctrine of works implicit in the monastic

1. *ibid.* p. 325

2. *ibid.* p. 290

penitential code, that the catalytic rôle played by the Augustinian Eremites in the formation of his theology is neglected. The house at Erfurt had fallen into line with the reform initiated by Andreas Proles in 1477 and codified by his successor Johannes von Staupitz. The reform had resulted in the formation of the "Congregation of Reformed Augustinians" composing about thirty cloisters within the province of Saxon Thuringia. The impetus of this reform in the direction of a strict yet humane observance of the Augustinian Rule had not been lost when Martin entered the monastery in 1505, and this provides one explanation for his lack of interest in the abuses allegedly attending life in the cloister. But the Eremites were more than rigorists. They had a long tradition of scholarship in the Scriptures and early Fathers - notably Augustine - and thus the Order provided the ideal environment, and indeed the incentive, for overleaping the Scholasticism of the High Middle Ages. Moreover, quite a number of academics from the Arts Faculties of Erfurt University had joined the Eremites : von Paltz, Professor of Theology and Director of Theological Studies in Martin's early days in the cloister; and von Usingen, Martin's one-time Professor of Philosophy. These men, all modernists, found the atmosphere of the Augustinian cloister a relief from Thomism and Scotism, for unlike the Dominicans and

Franciscans the Augustinians had no vested interest in these doctors.¹ Concerned as he was for philological studies, Luther was doing no more than follow the lead given by Egidio of Viterbo, elected Augustinian General in 1507. At home in Greek, Latin and Hebrew, Egidio had sided with Reuchlin in the quarrel over Hebrew literature. No arid scholar, "he was an ardent propagandist of the Christian Faith, which he defended in sermons of genuine pietism and in a genial tone, sharply contrasting with the fanaticism of Savonarola."²

In an early letter to John Lang, Prior of the Augustinian Eremites at Erfurt, Luther had an intriguing reference to "our" theology. "Our theology and St. Augustine are progressing well and with God's help rule at our university. Aristotle is gradually falling from his throne, and his final doom is only a matter of time."³

The letters are full of references to scholarly Augustinians who rapidly accepted the new "Lutheran" theology.⁴ Without detracting from Luther's personal rôle, the community of these men - Augustinian

1. R.H. Fife, The Revolt of Martin Luther, (New York : Columbia University Press, 1957), pp. 77 f.

2. *ibid.* p. 77

3. L.W. vol. 48 pp 41 f. (Letter to John Lang : 18 May 1517)

4. For example: Wenceslas Link, L.W. vol. 48 p.169; Martin Glaser, *ibid.* p.124; John Lonicer, *ibid.* p. 164; James Propst, *ibid.* p. 233

friars all - should not be ignored..

The most important of these Augustinian companions - especially in the formative years prior to the indulgence controversy - was Johannes von Staupitz. Following the work of Wolf,¹ Luther's dependence upon von Staupitz is considered to lie in three areas. First, Staupitz opened Luther to the possibility that temptation could have a positive value for Christian growth. Second, in the doctrine of predestination he chose to stress the mercy of God rather than human merit. Third, repentance began with the love of God and not with a formal act of penance. On the question of asceticism, von Staupitz's views are fascinating for Luther research, although one cannot be sure whether Luther did not perhaps influence von Staupitz. "With such strong emphasis on suffering, temptation and obedience it is surprising to find so little stress on asceticism. Not all pleasures in life must be fled... . Temporal goods may be loved in their proper order. Indeed, the sexual act in marriage - so far from being sinful - can even be meritorious. Moderation, not the removal of pleasure is the goal." 2. These were clearly strategic areas in Luther's theology - but every scholar is a debtor to others. What was especially important about von Staupitz was that the Augustinian Order could have thrown up such a man - of warm

1. D.C. Steinmetz, Misericordia Dei, (Leiden : E.J. Krill, 1968), pp. 20 f.

2. *ibid.* pp. 169 f.

piety, and of an urgent concern for redemption.¹
 He makes the young Luther look a much less lonely and
 tormented figure.

It is easy to regard von Staupitz's later
 differences with Luther as indicating opposition
 to the Reformation. The position was more complex.
 Just before his death in 1524 he wrote to Luther:

"My love for you is unchanged, passing the love of women...
 but you seem to me to condemn many external things which
 do not affect justification. Why is the cowl a stench
 in your nostrils when many in it have lived holy lives?
 there is nothing without abuse. My dear friend, I
 beseech you to remember the weak. Do not denounce
 points of indifference which can be held in sincerity... ."2

Luther's position on the cowl was never adiaphorist :
 he always claimed that vows were valid provided they
 were observed in evangelical freedom, not because they
 were a matter for indifference - nevertheless, it is
 interesting to see von Staupitz assuming an adiaphorist
 position. Not only does this throw light on his
 releasing Luther from the obligations of the Rule
 after the interview with Cajetan, but it also shows
 how loosely he sat with respect to the conventional
 theology of vows. Indeed, just as important as von
 Staupitz's disagreement with Luther, was his criticism
 of secular practices in the Church. These views and
 criticisms culminated in Pope Paul IV indexing his

1. Fife, op. cit., pp. 142 f.

2. R.H. Bainton, Here I Stand, (London : Hodder
 and Stoughton, 1951), p. 256

works in 1559. This man von Staupitz, Luther acknowledged as his spiritual father. There was in Luther's attempts to restore the broken communication with von Staupitz a pathos which revealed Luther's separation from Spalatin, and even Philip at times and looked back to the support and encouragement of earlier years.

When Luther claimed to be 'a monk yet not a monk' he was unconsciously expressing his indebtedness to the milieu of monks and monasteries in which his ideas were suggested and took shape. There are even strong grounds for suggesting that his view of monasticism as an educational institution owed something to the Bretheren of the Common Lot. Most of the humanist scholars of the day passed through their hands at one time or another, and it is known that Martin spent part of his fourteenth year at their school in Magdeburg. They practised a kind of monasticism without vows, but the extent to which they geared themselves to be the youth workers of their day is not so widely known. "Their goal was not the traditional monastic ideal of prayer and contemplation, but the devotio moderna, an active mission in aid of the body and morals of youth." ¹. The best evidence of their influence on Luther was a letter written in 1534

1. Fife, op. cit., p.23

to the Council of Herford, in which he referred to them as "witnesses of Christian freedom and the apostolic way of life." ¹. The reference to the "apostolic way" showed that Luther thought of the Bretheren as exemplifying the original impulse of monasticism.

The more the search for sources proceeds, the more it is realised that Luther was immersed in the atmosphere of monasticism. When he wrote, the tenets of monasticism had been debated for well over a thousand years, and the pages of his Judgement allude to many an ancient quarrel - particularly those surrounding virginity. So much was he part of the continuing debate that there was nothing in his work on monasticism that could be called original. This realization contains the seeds of a real problem, for to judge by its impact on monks and monastic profession, Martin Luther's Judgement on Monastic Vows has proved to be the most devastating critique of monasticism up to the present day. ². Its comprehensive and systematic approach were partial explanations of its appeal, but its effectiveness as a pastoral document owed as much to its tone as to its content. For one who for many years was tormented by doubts and fears, the Judgement was truly remarkable

1. *ibid.*

2. David Knowles, The Religious Orders in England, III, (3 vols., London S.C.M., 1960) p. 166

for its lack of self-pity, vituperation and recrimination. This calm restraint gave power to his testament, and however much the external influences on his thinking are probed, the ultimate source of his compassion was reflection on his own experience.

Though he described it in characteristically antithetical terms, in the critical years 1521 and 1522 Luther continued to view his vocation as that of a monk. In the letter to his Father which prefaced the Judgement, he argued for his vocation as a direct mandate from the Word, and from this perspective looked back on the cloistered years with thanksgiving for the predestining will of God. It is vital to understand this experience for which he later came to give thanks, because out of it emerged his theology. In the case of Erasmus, that other monk who turned his pen with cutting effect against monasticism, this impression is not so strong. Rather there is the feeling that Erasmus wrote about monasteries, that monasteries were the setting for his intellectual activity, and that his great work of New Testament criticism would have been produced had he never been a monk. Not so Luther.

This contrast between the two men was also seen in the different nature of their depressions. Luther called his state of depression "Anfechtung" which

Bainton paraphrases as "an assault from without, an attack by the devil."¹ Erasmus described his condition of despair as "pusillanimitas": "weakness of spirit, faintheartedness."² Yet the distinction must not be pressed too far because monastic experience of torment has combined both feelings. Indeed, part of the monk's agony lies in a continual tension between the two, so that he cannot for long pin down evil to an external objective source, without also experiencing the terrible doubt, that after all the trouble may lie within him. The Life of St. Anthony, with which Luther was so familiar, dealt with this very question. At the end of the long account of Anthony's confrontations with the devil, the devil complains to Anthony that the monks of the desert were unfairly ascribing their troubles to him (the devil), when he had in fact been defeated long ago on the Cross, and the real cause of all their troubles lay in themselves.³ Of course, it is the devil who speaks, so that Anthony does not let his guard fall for a moment, but nevertheless exclaims that the devil has spoken the truth this time, albeit against his will. In this witty dialogue Athanasius summed up the monk's torment as an oscillation between the two feelings of despair.

1. R. Bainton, Erasmus of Christendom, (London : Collins, 1970), p.33

2. *ibid.*

3. St. Athanasius, *op. cit.*, pp. 53 ff.

Luther's experience in the Wartburg conformed to this pattern. References to external, objective forces of evil occurred frequently in the letters. Disturbed that his manuscripts were being withheld, he wrote that he knew the Satan who plotted against them.¹ Luther's experience of the devil was as strong in the Wartburg as at any other time in his life. Side by side with the feeling of assault from outside, was the feeling of impotence. "I ask all of you to pray for me since in this seclusion I am drowning in sins."² Isolation from the fast flow of events in Wittenberg heightened the sensation of helplessness. He was also bothered by chronic constipation, which produced acute haemorrhoidal discomfort, and which only left him towards the end of 1521. To Spalatin, who was the confidant of his intimacies, he confessed that despair which can never be tied down to one source or another, but shifts in aspect, rather like those drawings which move on the page and mislead the eye : "Now is the time to pray against Satan with all our strength; he is threatening Germany with some fatal tragedy. And in spite of my fear that the Lord will allow him to bring it about, until now I have been sleepy and lazy, both in praying and in resisting ((Satan)), so that I am angry at myself, and am a burden to myself. Perhaps it is because I am alone and you are not helping me. I beg you, let us pray and watch that we are not entering into temptation."³

1. L.W. vol. 48 p. 296 (Letter to Spalatin : 15 Aug. 1521)

2. *ibid.* p. 263 (Letter to Melanchthon : 13 July 1521)

3. *ibid.* pp. 307 f. (Letter to Spalatin : 9 Sept. 1521)

Here, that languor of body and spirit, which is the special symptom of pusillanimitas, and fear of the devil, were clearly labelled, but moved in and out of focus. Yet Luther came to give thanks for this experience.

One who had served so long an apprenticeship in despair could write with compassion to monks entangled in their vows. For this experience of despair entangled the conscience in a web of doubt: could temptations be laid squarely at the devil's door, or were they really the weakness of the flesh? Luther wrote to monks urged on to forsake their vows by the oratory of Karlstadt and Zwingli. He knew that if the monks left or stayed for the wrong reasons, their consciences would be perpetually entangled in doubt, as they oscillated between blaming their decision on the devil's deceit, and personal recrimination.

Luther's theology bore the marks of his experience. As the devil assailed him from without, so salvation had to come from without, bursting in on a man with an impact which brought its own assurance that here was truth and not deceit. Perhaps his most repeated remark was that the Word had done it all - which reflected his experience of pusillanimitas. Unlike Erasmus, who held out some hope that weakness of spirit could be overcome by "pulling oneself together,"¹

1. Bainton, op. cit., p.33

Luther's was a real pusillanimitas, which no amount of self-help could correct.

When Luther worked on the Magnificat in the Wartburg, he brought to it all the ingredients of his own despair, so that in parts it pulsates with insight. This is especially true of the first three verses where he was absorbed by the exegesis of 'low estate'. His writing was informed by his own precarious position in hiding in the Wartburg, where he seemed to live out the meaning of the passage. It was a wretched way to live, and out of the question that God should approve anyone who voluntarily chose it. Moreover, he had not voluntarily chosen it, just as Mary had not chosen her station. United with her in the praise of God the Saviour, Luther with rapture embraced not his low estate but the God who regarded him. His vocation, paradoxically expressed as "a monk yet not a monk" can only be understood on the other side of this experience of joy and praise, and those who did not share this experience were safer out of the monastery and free of the cowl.

Summary and Conclusion

1) Summary

Luther was influenced to write down his views on monastic vows by the pressure of events in Wittenberg. He had to give careful consideration to the implications of the vow of obedience in view of the numbers of monks being swayed by oratory to leave the monasteries. His meditation on the Magnificat proved to be fruitful preparation for this task because of its emphasis on the theme of humility.

At the same time, he was trying to clarify his thoughts regarding his own vocation, which he at length expressed in somewhat paradoxical language as 'a monk yet not a monk.' He was no longer a monk in the sense that his conscience was freed from subservience to the illusion that fidelity to his vows made him acceptable to God. On the other hand, he was a monk in the sense that he retained the cowl and kept to the monastic mode of life in view of his commission from the Word and his feeling of being a man under sentence.

Monkish illusions about vows Luther traced to the mistaken view that the Sermon on the Mount provided a code for religious athletes - in fact, they were precepts applicable to all in virtue of baptism. To follow this code was to pursue perfection, but in the

end this was self-defeating. While the counsels sought to eliminate all obstacles to love, the understanding of the precept "love thy neighbour as thyself," ensured that self-love - the most pernicious obstacle of all - was not removed but entrenched.

Luther was not simply concerned to attack monastic vows when entered into with an enslaved conscience, but also saw opportunities for monasteries as educational institutions. To realise this educational potentiality was, in fact, to recover the original purpose for which monasteries had been founded, but which had been lost during the Fourth Century when perverted views of renunciation had gained ground.

The sources for Luther's ideas were many : but especially important was the close circle of Reformed Augustinians who not only provided a congenial environment, but also seemed to share some of his insights so that he himself spoke of "our" theology. Yet Luther did not simply discuss monastic vows - his overriding motive was a deep pastoral concern for monks and nuns, and this can only be understood by contemplating his own experience of God's regard for those of low estate.

2) Conclusion

Luther did not attack monasticism but monastic vows when they were kept with an enslaved conscience.

That he did not attack monasticism as an institution was shown by:-

- (i) his evident desire - in contrast to Karlstadt and Zwillling - not to force a break with the Church;
- (ii) his lack of interest in the abuses which contemporaries exploited with relish;
- (iii) his suggestion that monasteries be reformed as educational institutions - thus recovering what he held to be their original purpose.

That he believed monastic vows could be kept in a spirit of freedom was shown by:-

- (i) his pastoral concern for monks and nuns which was really an invitation to them to share in joyful praise of God who had regard for those of low estate;
- (ii) his admiration for monks like Anthony and Bernard whose lives testified to their freedom;

- (iii) his desire to remain in the cowl and to retain the monastic way of life, not to attain righteousness thereby, but to be able to fulfill his vocation to the Ministry of the Word in a unique situation, which was also one of great personal danger.

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APPENDIX

LUTHER ON THE ORIGINS OF MONASTICISM

To the Christian Nobility. (1520)^{1.}

"To my way of thinking it would be a necessary measure, especially in our perilous times, to regulate convents and monasteries in the same way they were regulated in the beginning, in the days of the apostles, and for a long time afterward. In those days convents and monasteries were all open to everyone to stay in them as long as he pleased. What else were the convents and monasteries but Christian schools where Scripture and the Christian life were taught, and where people were trained to rule and to preach?"^{2.}

The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows. (1521)^{3.}

"...monasteries would then have the character God intended them to have and nothing else. They would simply be Christian schools for youth designed to establish ardent young people in the faith by means of a godly upbringing, till they reached the years of maturity."^{4.}

"St. Anthony, the very father of monks and the founder of the monastic life, most wisely and in a Christian manner taught that absolutely nothing should be observed that did not have the authority of Scripture. He knew absolutely nothing about

1. L.W. vol. 44

2. *ibid.* p. 174

3. L.W. vol. 44

4. *ibid.* p. 355

monastic vows and ceremonial of this kind, but willingly chose to live as a hermit, and of his own will chose to live unmarried, after the pattern of the Gospel. Pursuing human wisdom, his successors have made this way of life into a vow, into a matter of obligation and compulsion. This way of life is but a specious copy and a mistaken observance of the rule of Anthony, which is the rule of Christ." ^{1.}

"Unless monastic obedience is vowed and kept for a limited time as a kind of first step toward a Christian and evangelical obedience, so that young people in practising it might learn to submit to everyone in everything, just as the monk by his vow submits to his superior in the monastery in certain things, just as certain examples in the lives of the Fathers also prove - unless, as I was saying, monastic obedience is regarded in this way, then clearly it is ungodly and should be abandoned at once." ^{2.}

"Among all the monastic vows none is less essential than the vow of obedience, and none argues more convincingly that the institution of monasticism is merely an introductory period for Christian youth -

1. *ibid.* p. 253

2. *ibid.* p. 364

which like the old custom of the Fathers ought to be preserved only for a time - for the purposes of learning faith and growing in the Gospel." ¹.

Letter to the Mayors and Aldermen (1524) ².

"Every citizen should be influenced by the following consideration. Formerly he was obliged to waste a good deal of money and property on indulgences ...endowments... and similar nonsense. Now that he is, by the grace of God, rid of such pillage and compulsory giving, he ought henceforth, out of gratitude to God and for his glory, to contribute a part of that amount toward schools for the training of the poor children." ³.

"The exceptional pupils... should be allowed to continue in school longer, ... that is how the monasteries and foundations originated; they have since been perverted to a different and damnable use." ⁴.

Sermon on the Duty of Sending Children to School. (1530) ⁵.

"But I do not mean the clerical office with its celibate manner of life, as seen in the cloisters and cathedrals; for it has there degenerated from its original excellent purpose,..." ⁶.

1. *ibid.* p. 367

2. L.W. vol. 45

3. *ibid.* p. 351

4. *ibid.*p. 371

5. F.V.N. Painter, Luther on Education, (Philadelphia : Lutheran Publishing Society, 1889)

6. *ibid.* p. 219

(Context : Luther was urging on parents the benefit of the ministerial office which required schooling.)

"For what are all the endowments and cloisters, as they now exist with their own works, in comparison with such a pastor, preacher or schoolmaster?

Although in former times they were established by pious kings and lords for this precious end, that they might be agencies for bringing up such pastors and preachers." 1.

"... the property of chapters and cloisters may be applied to this purpose for which it was originally designed." 2.

1. *ibid.* p. 227

2. *ibid.* p. 239