

# Luther's Rehabilitation in Recent Roman Catholic Opinion

Colleagues,

Today's posting comes from Jose [Joe] B. Fuliga, one-time president of the Lutheran Church in the Philippines. Fuliga has an ancient connection with Crossings. Here's how: Cathy Lessmann, Crossings executive director for ages, is a "missionary kid" born in Davao City in the Philippines when her parents were missionaries there. Cathy's father, Arnold Strohschein, was a conduit for Joe's move from Roman to Augsburg-Confession catholicism. "I remember him dearly," says Cathy, "he always teased us kids when he came over to our home."

Thereafter Joe came to Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) for graduate study in systematic theology. The initial semesters of that grad study were back in the days when Bob Bertram and others of us were still considered kosher at that place. Joe knows—and practices—the Augsburg Aha!

Besides the LCP presidency, Joe has served as principal of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Baguio City, Philippines; as Tutor and Overseas Research Fellow (1991-1996) St. Simon of Cyrene Theological Institute, London, UK; and other ecumenical work. Now retired, he lives near one of his sons in Chula Vista, California. The other two sons live and work in the Philippines. Joe and wife Lily are members of Hope Lutheran Church (ELCA).

Joe's been tracking Luther's reputation among recent Roman Catholic theologians. Here's what he's found.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## REFORMATION OF THE CHURCH

It has been said that the Church needs constant reformation. October is the month when Protestant Christians, especially Lutherans, all over the world celebrate the reformation of the Church. Seven years from now on October 31, 2017—the day Luther posted his 95 theses for debate on the practice of indulgences—the world would be celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. In the course of about a hundred years the Roman Catholic Church has taken many steps in reforming itself. Today Luther and the reforms he has fought for are viewed favorably by Catholic theologians. Here are what some of them say.

“Luther was correct in claiming that the concept of transubstantiation came out of Greek philosophy (Aristotle)... The Catechism of the Catholic Church, for example, doesn't use the word 'transubstantiation' at all in its discussion of the Eucharist.” (Father John J. Dietzen, CATHOLIC Q & A: ALL YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT CATHOLICISM (New York: A Crossroad Book, 2009), p. 146.

“If we use 'faith' as Luther did and as Paul did in Romans and Galatians, that is, heart-faith, then this is saving faith. It is sufficient for salvation, for it necessarily produces the good works...” Peter Kreeft & Ronald Tacelli, HANDBOOK OF CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1994), p. 31.

“The official teaching of Catholics (as distinct from the popular misconception) is that salvation is a totally free gift that we can do nothing to 'buy' or 'produce' it.” Kreeft & Tacelli, Ibid., p. 321.

“The Roman Catholic Church today accepts that there was the need

of reform most obvious in the exaggerated practice of indulgences [which] by the Middle Ages ... had been vulgarized to include remission of punishment in purgatory and even remission of sins themselves." Michael Glazier and Monika K. Hellwig, eds. THE MODERN CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004), p. 506.

Louis Bouyer makes identical claims in his book, THE SPIRIT AND FORMS OF PROTESTANTISM. According to Bouyer, Luther's view of salvation, in its most basic form, "is in perfect harmony with Catholic tradition, the great conciliar definitions on grace and salvation, and even with thomism."

Catholic scholar George Tavard wrote in his book PROTESTANTISM that there is no real contradiction between Roman Catholic theology and Luther's gospel. Tavard explains that when Luther began his work as a Reformer, the gospel was in "partial eclipse." "Today many Catholic scholars think Luther was right in his central doctrine of justification by faith and the [sixteenth century Catholic] church was blind to the point he was making...Both Lutherans and Catholics agree that good works by Christian believers are the result of their faith and the working of divine grace in them, not their personal contributions to their own salvation. Christ is the only Savior. One does not save oneself... Luther's doctrine of justification by faith needs to be recognized and endorsed as an expression of the perennial Catholic tradition."

Reflecting on Christian history, a plurality of scholars has chosen Martin Luther as the most influential non-Roman Catholic Christian of the past 2,000 years.

Dr. John Dwyer, who teaches at St. Bernard's Institute in Albany, named Luther because he "grasped – and was grasped by – the theological vision of Paul of Tarsus as virtually no one had

been before his time and few after it. He discovered Paul's vision of faith as the acceptance of God's unmerited love and mercy, and Paul's understanding of the cross as God's participation in the pain and estrangement of human existence."

Joseph F. Kelly, professor of religious studies at John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio said: "Oddly enough, Luther was a Roman Catholic when the Reformation began and he had every intention of staying one. He wanted to reform the church to which he belonged." "Luther insisted upon the importance of Scripture and its central place in Christian life, a point not recognized by the Council of Trent but accepted by Vatican II," Prof. Kelly explained. "Luther encouraged Bible reading by the laity, as did Vatican II. He also insisted that Protestant clergy be educated, and the Council of Trent recognized the importance of this by establishing the seminary system in 1563, only after educated Western Europeans noticed how well-trained the Protestants were."

Lawrence S. Cunningham from the Department of Theology at the University of Notre Dame chose Luther "for his setting the religious agenda for the post-medieval period; his brilliance as a commentator on Scripture; his critique of excesses in the Church; his power as a hymn writer; and his role as the trigger of the Reformation which radically reshaped Christianity and whose questions still energize theology to this day."

Francesco C. Cesareo, associate professor of history and director of the Institute of Catholic Studies at John Carroll University, chose Luther "because I believe that his own personal struggle for salvation, which eventually led him to break with the Catholic Church, served as the impetus for the Church to look at itself more critically in light of the many abuses that had made their way into Catholicism."

Luther also got the vote of Rev. Robert Scully, SJ, assistant professor of history at Le Moyne College in Syracuse. "Although the Reformation ended up causing a tragic split in Western Christendom, such a development was neither intended nor desired by Luther. His emphasis on justification by faith alone, the total dependence of each human being on the grace of God in order to attain salvation, and the central role of the Bible in Christian belief and practice, all had a transforming impact on Protestant – and ultimately on Catholic – orthodoxy and orthopraxy."

Cardinal Kasper said: "We have much to learn from Luther beginning with the importance he attached to the word of God." It was time for a "more positive" view of Luther, whose reforms had aroused papal ire at the time but could now be seen as having "anticipated aspects of reform which the Church has adopted over time."

"In the light of Christ the Catholic will no longer wish to regard Luther as an apostate monk who broke faith with his Church. He will recognize the many lights in his character...the holy defiance with which, as God's warrior, he faced abuse and simony; the heroism with which he risked his life for Christ's cause; and not least the natural simplicity and child-like quality of his whole manner of life and personal piety."

Fr. Karl Adam.

"It is widely recognized that Luther was justified in attempting to reform the theology and abuses in the Church of his time and that his fundamental belief – justification given to us by Christ without any merit on our part – does not in any way contradict genuine Catholic tradition, such as is found for example, in St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas."

Bishop James F. McCue.

Officially the Roman Catholic Church no longer considered Protestants as "Separated Brethren" but simply brothers and sisters in the faith. (Pars. 818, 819, 1271 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

"The repeal of Luther's excommunication by Rome is overdue." Hans Kung, THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: A SHORT HISTORY. Kung insists Luther remained a Catholic to the end.

Franz Xaver Kiefl, German Catholic Historian. "Luther never denied good works or holy living . Rather good works are the way in which faith expresses itself."

Sebastian Merkle, German Roman Catholic Historian. "Luther's motives were religious, not revolutionary or psychological."

Anton Fischer, German Roman Catholic Historian. "Luther was a man of prayer."

Hubert Jedin, German Roman Catholic Historian. "Catholicism never condemned Luther by name at Trent. No official judgment on Luther exists by which a loyal Catholic is bound."

Joseph Lortz, German Roman Catholic Historian. "Luther was a theologian of the highest rank. Luther was a profoundly religious man, a true Christian, who lived by a deep faith in Jesus Christ."

Yves M. J. Congar, Catholic French Scholar. "The Reformation was a religious movement, an attempt to renew religion at its source." He considers Luther a profoundly religious man who had a deeply sensitive conscience and was obsessed by the longing to find peace of heart and a warm, living, consoling contact with God.

There are many more Catholic scholars and theologians who praised Luther and the reformation he undertook but the above is

enough. God bless you all and may you continue what Dr. Martin Luther preached and lived for.

Rev. Dr. Jose B. Fuliga Th. D.