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Hands Respectful and Clean: Cajetan and the Reformation

WILLIAM PAUL HAAS

Tomasso de Vio (1469–1534), later known as Cardinal Cajetan, was a well-respected philosopher and theologian who became progressively more enmeshed in the religious and political turmoil of the sixteenth century. He struggled to understand the thrust of Luther's new way of thinking and to bring the Church to deal with the challenge of radical reform in all aspects of Church life. Some of the changes which the Cardinal recommended to several of the popes he served seemed as revolutionary in his own day as they would in the present. Gradually his perception of the Church as an inclusive rather than an exclusive community evolved.

This essay is not intended to be the last word on Cardinal Cajetan's role in the emerging Reformation. Rather, it tries to trace Cajetan's efforts to understand the personalities and forces which both propelled and resisted the unavoidable crisis. He explored every way conceivable to keep the Church intact: in its governance, in its doctrine and discipline, and in its tolerance of error and confusion. Cajetan may well have failed in most of his initiatives, but he stands as a persuasive example of the Church's need at all times for courageous intellectual witnesses, not afraid to think through the roots of the Church's predicament and the solutions it ought to examine.

The Background

At the turn of the sixteenth century, the Catholic Church was as desperately in need of reform as it had ever been. Despite centuries of turmoil and despite the efforts of many heroic persons of high and low estate to alert the hierarchy to the dangers of disintegration, genuine reform was resisted and even persecuted. Jan Hus, the Bohemian priest and scholar whose execution at the Council of Constance in 1415 has been singled out for explicit apology by Pope John Paul II, stands as a telling witness to the plight of those whose warnings were unwelcome. If any lessons are to be learned from those chaotic days, one figure must be better understood if not emulated. He is Tomasso de Vio from Gaeta, Italy, whence came the name that followed him into history, Cajetan.

Until he was about forty years old, Cajetan lived as a simple mendicant friar of the Order of Preachers, the Dominicans. He was trained as a typical scholastic philosopher-theologian, except that he examined everything that came before him with uncommon depth and courage. He wrote the first comprehensive

commentary on the works of Thomas Aquinas, he penetrated Aristotle and his Arab interpreters, and he wrestled with the 250 years of controversy that followed after Aquinas. Cajetan's commentaries are often credited with being the inspiration of the work of Francisco de Vitoria in formulating a theory of international law and in defending the rights of the Indians of the New World against the violations by pope and emperor.¹ Moreover, Cajetan paid careful attention to the new humanism which was stimulating intellectual Europe and he would present his views with distinction before no less a figure than Pico della Mirandola. Through his efforts, Cajetan became recognized as a bridge from the established ways of philosophy and theology to the new ways of thinking about man and God, about intelligence and freedom, and about faith and authority. In 1508, Cajetan was elected Master General of the Dominicans, a position from which he urged his brethren to remain true to their intellectual heritage and faithful to the conventual life.²

In time, Cajetan was identified by the Holy See as an individual totally committed to reform and as a theologian capable of grasping both the traditions of Christian thought and the mounting spiritual crisis facing Christianity. For the remainder of his life he served four popes: Julius II (1503–1513), Leo X (1513–1521), Adrian VI (1522–1523), and Clement VII (1523–1534). He represented them, negotiated for them, and advised them in the thick of the battle with the corrupt factions within the Curia and the hierarchy, with the Emperor and the heads of state throughout Europe, with Luther and the German Reformation, and with councils, diets and synods.

Four centuries later, at the time of the Second Vatican Council, Yves Congar, O.P., Cajetan's confrere and one uniquely capable of penetrating Cajetan's experience, wrote of him:

From the outset [Cajetan] realized, what many Catholics even after four hundred years have not grasped, that this was not just any kind of revolt, but a revolt of the mind: that these demands of Luther were not a mere claim that the flesh must be emancipated, but demands of the spiritual, and more particularly, demands in the domain of the theological. Cajetan was taken advantage of, and he was beaten: how could he possibly not have been? But this much at least must be said, that he did not touch the gaping wounds of Christendom with hands that were not respectful and clean.³

¹ L. Garcia Arias, "Francisco de Vitoria," *Enciclopedia biografiasuelta*, 1991, <http://www.canalsocial.net> (September 29, 2003).

² Gabriel Loehr, O.P., "De Cajetano reformatore Ordinis Praedicatorum," *Revue Thomiste* 39 (Oct.–Dec. 1934): 593-602.

³ Philip Hughes, *A History of the Church*, vol. 3: *The Revolt Against the Church: Aquinas and Luther* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1947), 475.

One can see Cajetan as the paragon of today's "historical and Transcendental Thomist" as Thomas O'Meara, O.P. characterizes the present stage of evolution of Thomism, represented by Congar, M.D Chenu, Edward Schillebeeckx, Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, and Henri de Lubac. "Luther's ideas so impressed him [Cajetan]" O'Meara writes, "that afterwards the Dominican set aside writing scholastic commentaries for small studies on the Bible and on understanding but refuting [where possible] the views of the Protestant Reformers."⁴ The Thomism that Cajetan espoused was not Thomism "under house arrest." Quite the opposite, it was a Thomism conscious of its limitations and therefore powerful enough to reach beyond them. Thus, rooted was Cajetan's courage.

To fully grasp the complex life and work of Cajetan, especially after he was appointed a cardinal in 1518, one would have to revisit every aspect of the Reformation in Germany and England, which is beyond the purpose of this essay. However, the broad outline of his life and thought can be adequately understood so as to appreciate his value to this moment in the life of the Church particularly as the Church continues to wrestle with the consequences of its initial handling of the Reformation as it took shape. In his own time, Cajetan was considered a Thomist second only to Thomas Aquinas himself; he was an ecclesiastical trouble-shooter and a ready controversialist, a meticulous scholar, and a biblical exegete. He also held a reputation as a man of simple candor and surprising endurance. Yet from within the Church and from outside, he is often blamed for not preventing the Lutheran Reformation and for failing to guide the Vatican in its most desperate crisis. He was "beaten", according to Congar, but neither the Reformation nor Luther personally can be rightly understood without realizing the impact of Cajetan on all factions.⁵ It should become clearer in these pages that Cajetan used his great mental powers in the service of Christianity by searching for ideas, options and arguments that could bring the Christian world closer to peace and unity of purpose. As he was drawn into the unfathomable and unpredictable world of ecclesiastical and imperial personalities and politics, his insights were rarely appreciated and too often shuffled about for the advantage of others.

First Encounters

In 1511, Cajetan received his first major papal commission when Julius II sent him to Pisa to confront the rebellion taking shape at the "pseudo-council"

⁴ Thomas F. O'Meara, O.P., *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 161.

⁵ John M. Todd, *Martin Luther, A Biographical Study* (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1964), 150.

convened by the Emperor, Maximilian, and the French King, Louis XII, along with several cardinals, bishops, and theologians. There was open talk about possible war with the Holy See and about the deposition of the Pope himself. Maximilian wrote of the prospect of his crowning himself with both the imperial crown and the papal tiara.⁶ Into this caldron of animosity and distrust, Cajetan, disciplined philosopher and theologian, was sent to exhort reasoned dialogue and obedience. Thus he began, in the face of inevitable failure, to try to reconcile the demands of the moment with the continuity of faith and principle. At least some saw it as a “momentous event” when Cajetan intervened in the debate at Pisa and “pushed the canonists aside” so as to establish the theological foundation of the authority of the pope and council.⁷

At this same time Cajetan was completing a study of the conciliar theory, prevalent among some Church and secular bodies who had lost confidence in any pope alone being able to deal with the growing conflict within Christian Europe. Their only hope appeared to be in a general council where the full authority of the Church would be present. Cajetan reasoned in *De auctoritate papae et consilii* (1511), that a council does not represent the universal Church apart from papal participation. If there were a circumstance where there were no reliable Church authority, as was claimed at the Council of Constance, 1415, then a council might claim authority to resolve the question. However, in Cajetan’s view, the papal authority of Julius II was not in question. Incidentally, Cajetan considered Constance to be a “reprobate” council, even though it was compelled to find a way to remove three claimants to the papacy.⁸ A gathering of the Church in its “totality and unity” is the Church universal, which cannot err because it is governed by the Holy Spirit. Here Cajetan reflects the insight of Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theol* II-II, q.1, art. 9, q. 2, art.6 and q.39, art. 1). Yves Congar, facing the same issue in recent decades, notes Cajetan’s “profound theology of the unity of the Church through communion,” in which “The sign of this single whole and its parts is the unity of a universal council.”⁹

⁶ Fernand Mourret, *A History of the Catholic Church*, vol. 5 (Saint Louis: Herder, 1945), 247-49.

⁷ Hubert Jedin, *A History of the Council of Trent*, vol. 1 (Saint Louis: Herder, 1957), 114.

⁸ Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 162.

⁹ Yves Congar, O.P., “The Council as an assembly, and the Church as essentially conciliar,” in H. Vorgrimler, *One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic: The Nature and Role of the Church in the Modern World* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1968). For a fuller examination of Cajetan’s thoughts on the papacy and the Church see V.M. Pollet, “La Doctrine de Cajetan sur l’Eglise,” *Revue Thomiste* 39 (Oct-Dec 1934): 515-532.

The problem facing Cajetan was that of getting the reluctant Pope Julius II to join forces with rebellious secular and Church leaders to form that "totality and unity" from which reform would become possible. Although Cajetan was never able to bring about this convergence of interests, he did not abandon the practical goal, despite constantly shifting elements, nor did he compromise his theological principles in struggling for it. Shortly after the fruitless excursion to Pisa, Cajetan was in a unique position to urge Pope Julius II to convene a genuine ecumenical council to cope with the catastrophe looming in Europe.¹⁰ Accordingly, the Fifth Lateran Council was convened by Julius, but without the support of the Emperor or the French King. Cajetan was sent to the Lateran both as a theologian and as a witness to the "rotten state of the City" and to plead "how urgently reform was needed."¹¹ Given the severity of his judgment of clerical corruption, it was not surprising that Cajetan was already not a very popular figure in Rome. Moreover, his enemies delighted in ridiculing him for his awkward appearance, his dark complexion, and his small stature.¹² His power lay neither in his appearance nor in his connections, but in his argument. The Lateran Council was the last occasion when Cajetan would be able to influence the genuine cooperation between the Papacy and at least some of the hierarchy and royalty. So, lacking adequate support from the key factions in Christendom and given the illness and death of Pope Julius II (1513), the Council never effectively achieved the reform it sought. Ten years after the council Cajetan still described the festering conditions of the Church as "infected with the most vile morals, devoid of any spiritual goods, overwhelmed by the shadows of ignorance."¹³ Obviously, the need for an effective council remained unsatisfied.

Into the Fray

Julius was succeeded by Leo X, a ranking member of the Medici family, already a cardinal at age fourteen, more renowned for his cultivation of the arts than for his theological depth. Leo X appointed Cajetan a cardinal in 1517, against the background of a plot to assassinate the pope the year previous. While the threat of hostilities grew at the center of Catholic leadership, the danger of a Turkish invasion from the East grew even more frightening. This was the context in which Cajetan was sent by Leo to Augsburg on a doubly sensitive mission. First, he was to rally the German bishops and princes to

¹⁰ John R. Volz, "Cajetan (Tomasso de Vio)" *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, (1967), 1053.

¹¹ Hughes, 474.

¹² Mourret, 250.

¹³ Hughes, 474.

contribute to the war against the Turks, and secondly, he was to dispose of the growing Lutheran controversy and the wider pressure for reform.

For the third time in recent years, the Holy See offered a special indulgence to the Germans to motivate their cooperation in resisting the Turks. But the Germans would have no part of it, though they paused to consider a proposal to pay the Turkish war-tax by charging a tenth of a florin to each person who went to communion.¹⁴ In their view the real battle threatening Christianity was the struggle against the "Turks" in Italy.¹⁵ This opposition in Germany to the tactics of Rome, such as the "false and blasphemous indulgence" set the stage for the second part of Cajetan's mission in Augsburg.¹⁶ He was sent to resolve the theological conflict with Martin Luther over those very matters of indulgences, papal domination, the foundations of faith and salvation, and the radical reform of the Church from top to bottom. Cajetan was commissioned to offer Luther a pardon for his errors if he retracted, or to have him arrested and brought to Rome in bonds if he refused to accept the Church's demands.

The encounter of these two friars, the Dominican and the Augustinian, from such different spiritual and intellectual traditions and both viewing the need for fundamental reform from very divergent perspectives, was further warped by the animosity that had grown between the Dominicans in Germany and the reform movement. Both formally (through their general chapter) and informally, the Dominicans were committed to uprooting the "heresies" of Luther however they might. Moreover, the "senseless babble" about Luther's sanity, his drunkenness, and even his diabolical possession abounded, enough to be of concern to Erasmus. By contrast, "the learned Cardinal Cajetan prefers to clarify questions at issue without attacking the person or character of his opponent."¹⁷

Cajetan was left prey to those within Germany who thought that they could destroy the reform movement by destroying Luther. They gave Cajetan a document to deliver to Rome, reported to be the doctrinal statements of Luther himself, which were malicious misrepresentations of Luther's convictions at the time.¹⁸ The pamphlet in question, considered to be a blatant forgery, was put

¹⁴ Ludwig Pastor, *The History of the Popes*, vol. VII: *From the Close of the Middle Ages* (St. Louis: Herder, 1928-1953), 249.

¹⁵ Edith Simon, *Luther Alive: Martin Luther and the making of the Reformation* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968), 160.

¹⁶ Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale, 1989), 195.

¹⁷ Hartmann Grisar, *Martin Luther: His Life and Work* (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1950), 363-64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 337.

together from notes collected by "spies" stationed at the Church in Wittenberg where Luther preached,¹⁹ and from angry words jotted down by some Dominicans "loitering outside" the door of a hall where Luther was dining and arguing with friends.²⁰ Cajetan, not knowing the nature of the "concoction" he carried, was asked to deliver to Rome the incriminating evidence on Luther's heretical assertions. By the time Luther published the true formulation of his thought, the harm had been done. He held up a copy of the pamphlet to Church and civil leaders as evidence of "how subtly and maliciously these murderous Dominicans carry on with a view to my ruin."²¹ Unquestionably the atmosphere in Augsburg was not congenial to theological dialogue. Luther's sovereign and protector insisted that Luther be judged in Germany and that the order for Luther's arrest be suspended for the present. Cajetan concurred with this and so recommended to Rome. It is not clear whether Cajetan forewarned Luther that the arrest warrant would become effective once their discussion ended, or that Cajetan allowed Luther to escape the arrest after Luther sent Cajetan notice of his departure.²²

When the meeting between Luther and Cajetan finally took place, the atmosphere was so poisoned that history is left with several conflicting accounts. One version is that Cajetan was arrogant and overbearing, even insulting in his ridicule of Luther and in his demand for abject surrender.²³ While Cajetan quoted papal authority, Luther quoted the Bible. Neither apparently heard the other, though in time Cajetan showed that he paid closer attention to Luther than Luther had realized. Yet, another view of the interaction is that Cajetan did his very best within the constraints placed upon him by the Holy See, and by the instructions of Frederick III to be open and fatherly. Despite all of Cajetan's "kindness and earnestness," Luther was the one who responded with "arrogance and obstinacy."²⁴ Then there is the view that their exchange was doomed from the beginning because Cajetan assumed that there was no need for argument, while Luther assumed that the matters before them were open to legitimate debate among competent scholars and should be

¹⁹ Simon, 151.

²⁰ John M. Todd, *Luther: A Life* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1982), 134.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²² Simon, 159-169; Murret, 341.

²³ Simon, 167.

²⁴ Grisar, 102.

reviewed without prejudice.²⁵ It has been suggested that Luther actually knew very little about the theology of Thomas Aquinas which underlay Cajetan's approach to reform and that Luther never had time to examine the questions which Cajetan had drafted in preparation for their meeting.²⁶ Luther offered various interpretations of the encounter in Augsburg but the most humiliating for Cajetan was the comment: "The Cardinal may be an able Thomist, but he is not a clear Christian thinker and so he is about as fit to deal with this matter as an ass is to play the harp."²⁷

Notwithstanding this musical limitation, Cajetan is given credit for the "wonderful acumen" to identify the central significance of Luther's emerging explanation of faith and justification.²⁸ Luther refused to acknowledge Cajetan's competence on this question, so the vital discussion proved fruitless, except that Cajetan, as always, continued to try to fathom Luther's concern. Without attempting to unravel this fundamental religious mystery here, suffice it to note that it was Luther's view that human nature is so corrupted by original and personal sin that one can only be saved by faith in the redeeming forgiveness of God and not by any meritorious human action. This appears to contradict the traditional Catholic position that "grace perfects nature," such that sin does not destroy the fundamental goodness of human activity, before and after faith. Cajetan was one of the very few theologians of his time who paid adequate attention to this central Reformation issue. Some years later, in 1532, Cajetan formulated his interpretation of Thomas Aquinas' view of grace and good works in *De fide et operibus*.

Also, Cajetan's commentary on the Epistle to the Romans "bears traces of his having learned something [about justification] from his conference with Luther."²⁹ Although he tried to reconcile elements of the Catholic and Reformation thinking on justification, Cajetan is blamed on both sides for failing to understand Luther's meaning and for misinterpreting Thomas Aquinas which, in turn, sowed the seeds of contention within Catholic circles, too.³⁰ Had

²⁵ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: a Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950), 93-95.

²⁶ Otto Pesch, O.P., "Existential and Sapiential Theology—The Theological Confrontation Between Luther and Thomas Aquinas," in *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, ed. Jared Wicks (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970), 183-84.

²⁷ John P. Dolan, *History of the Reformation: A Conciliatory Assessment of Opposite Views* (New York: Desclee Co., 1965), 266.

²⁸ Jedin, 171.

²⁹ James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1961), 143-151.

³⁰ Fergus Kerr, O.P., *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Pub., 2002), 136.

Cajetan succeeded in reconciling the conflicting views on justification, the dismal failure to do so at Ratisbon in 1541, seven years after his death, might have been avoided and the Council of Trent might have found a stronger and clearer voice in addressing the escalating crisis over predestination within and outside Catholic theology. Lastly, it would not have taken four hundred and fifty years for the joint declaration of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation on justification to take place. Most fittingly, this long delayed reconciliation was held at Augsburg, where Luther and Cardinal Cajetan first met. However much fault one lays at the feet of Cajetan for not seeing more deeply into the evolving tensions over the workings of first grace, he is to be recognized for realizing, perhaps before Luther himself did, that the reformer's beliefs in the Church as the community of the redeemed and not as an hierarchical institution, "would mean that one must build a new Church" as Cajetan told Luther at Augsburg.³¹

From every perspective then, it appears that Cajetan failed at Augsburg in both parts of his mission: the princes rejected the Turkish indulgence and Luther rejected the offer of pardon. Conscious of his defeat and waiting for further instructions from Rome, Cajetan fell back upon the habit of any good scholastic: he sketched out on paper what he thought were the essential elements in the controversy over indulgences and justification. Soon afterward this essay was promulgated as the papal bull *Cum postquam* (1518), which distinguished between those penalties imposed by God for offenses against divine law, and therefore beyond anyone's interference, including the Pope's, and those penalties imposed by the pope for offenses against Church rules, which the pope could deal with as he saw fit. Of course, the Church could pray that the treasury of Christ's merits be applied to those in need of grace. But, indulgences could have no effect on God's judgment. This understanding was not in disagreement with Luther's original criticism of the scandalous practices of publicly dispensing indulgences. Although the papal bull was "an intelligent, scholarly work—as far as it went," it was too late to be effective. Yet, for Cajetan, as convinced as Luther was that the practice was scandalous, the most telling effect of his essay was that it put several of the notorious peddlers of indulgences out of business, including his confrere, John Tetzel, the most aggressive promoter in the trade.³²

No doubt, at this stage, Cajetan had failed to impress Luther, but the reverse was not true, at least to the extent that Cajetan began to see more clearly that the return to Scripture was central to the future of Christianity. If Scripture were not the only rule of faith, it was clearly an essential rule of faith. "For the

³¹ Marius, 136; Charles Morerod, *Cajetan et Luther en 1518, édition, traduction, et commentaire des opuscule d'Augsburg de Cajetan*, vol. 1 Fribourg, Switzerland: Editions Universitaires, 1994), 475.

³² Simon, 170-71.

last fifteen years of his life, Cajetan did little else but continue the discussion begun in Augsburg in 1518.³³ With the help of Hebrew and Greek scholars, he gained access to the earliest texts of the Bible, and the ability to read them accurately. This new knowledge enabled him to write extensively on large parts of the Old Testament, including Genesis, the Book of Job, the Psalms, and the Pentateuch, and on almost all of the New Testament, particularly the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles of St. Paul, publishing nine volumes from 1525–1532. At the time of Cajetan’s encounter with Luther, there was a larger “evangelist movement” spreading through Europe fed by proliferating commentaries. As evidence of this growing interest, Thomas Aquinas’ commentaries on St. Paul were reprinted three times from 1522 to 1532.³⁴ Although Cajetan must have been aware of this ferment, it took the meeting with Luther to move him to commit himself “almost exclusively to the study of Sacred Scripture from then on.” The motive for this radical departure from the secure formulae of established philosophy and theology appears to be twofold: Cajetan saw the need to move the Church from the pope on down to a greater reliance on the literal sense of the Scriptures and to meet the challenge of Reformers on their own ground. At the end of Vatican II, Yves Congar reflected on this critical moment in the Reformation when he invoked the spirit of Luther explicitly “who wanted to reaffirm the Gospel for which St. Paul struggled.” Congar prayed to Paul “to intervene in this new age, to guide the Pope and us all.” Congar identifies the spirit that moved Cajetan in facing the “new age” of the Reformation.³⁵

Of special significance was Cajetan’s courage in questioning the reliability of the Vulgate translation in confronting the Reformers. He stood in opposition to the general practice of the Catholic exegetes of his time to concentrate on the “mystical sense” at the expense of the literal sense of the texts and of the assumption that nothing could be added to what Christian antiquity had handed down through the Fathers. He agreed with Aquinas that “there are more senses in Holy Scripture than any man could find.” His first exegetical work “provoked a storm of protest almost immediately” from traditional exegetes who faulted him for three deficiencies: for his “gross lack” of scholarship in patristic theology, for his lack of respect for the Vulgate, and for his entertaining a “new sense” of Scripture developed to meet the needs of the Church.³⁶ The controversy concerning polygamy appears to be instructive.

³³ Pesch, 183-84.

³⁴ Jedin, 366.

³⁵ Joseph A. Komonchak, “Vatican II as Ecumenical Council, Yves Congar’s vision realized,” *Commonweal Magazine*, November 22, 2002: 14.

³⁶ Thomas A. Collins, O.P., “Cardinal Cajetan’s Fundamental Biblical Principles,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 17 (1955): 363.

By returning to the best reading of the Old Testament he could find, Cajetan could argue that there was no prohibition to polygamy in the Scriptures and therefore papal authority would be enhanced by the exercise of judicious power to preserve the Church intact. Cajetan was severely criticized by his confreres and by the University of Paris for the heresies contained in this kind of scriptural commentary.

After the impasse of 1518 at Augsburg, political and ecclesiastical maneuvers became increasingly bizarre. One almost amusing example of this involved a minor operator in Roman circles, Karl Miltitz, who was commissioned by Leo X to attempt to win favor from Frederick III of Saxony who was the candidate favored by the Holy See for selection as the next Holy Roman Emperor. Miltitz was to bring to Frederick the papal honor of the Golden Rose. While making his way through Germany to deliver the prize, Miltitz took it upon himself to try to settle the Lutheran problem to everyone's satisfaction without the distraction of complicated theological disputes. To this end he felt compelled to belittle the efforts of Cardinal Cajetan, who preferred to examine Luther's teachings with scrupulous care.³⁷ Miltitz's machinations came to naught because Frederick deliberately procrastinated in settling the Luther problem and eventually agreed with the appointment of a committee of competent theologians to deal with the crisis. Miltitz's ineffectual efforts left the supporters of Luther convinced that "politics not theology was behind Rome's denunciation of Luther." Unfortunately, despite the Pope's elaborate strategies, Charles V was selected Emperor, not Frederick III, which left Leo X with an even more divided and contentious flock, with the Emperor agitating for a general council to face the political and religious instability, whether the Pope wanted a council or not.

In the midst of this evolving competition, Cajetan was asked, along with Cardinal Accolti, to lead a committee of theologians to pass final judgment on the troublesome theses of Martin Luther. Although Luther's views on the mass, the sacraments, papal authority, and indulgences were rapidly spreading among all classes in Germany, his views were still not well understood by Roman authorities, including the Pope. Cajetan urged the committee to study each of Luther's propositions in detail and in light of the soundest theological principles. However, the majority of the committee disagreed with Cajetan and preferred a broad condemnation of all of the reported teachings as "erroneous, scandalous and heretical." He insisted that these teachings were "errors and not heresies," and that the group should avoid "drawing exaggerated conclusions."³⁸ This distinction between error and heresy recalls the predicament of Meister Eckhard in 1326, a fellow Dominican and noted scholar who was accused of teachings that were "suspect of heresy." In response to these charges, Eckhard

³⁷ Jedin, 173-74; Marius, 165.

³⁸ Jedin, 175.

argued: "I can be in error, but I cannot be a heretic because the first belongs to the intellect, the second belongs to the will." Of his judges, Eckhard opined, "The first mistake they make is that they think that everything they do not understand is an error and every error is a heresy, when only the obstinate adherence to error makes error a heresy and a heretic, as the laws and the doctors hold."³⁹ One can only assume that both Luther and Cajetan would be well versed in this relevant distinction and the reasoning behind it.

Half-way through the deliberations of the committee, Johann Eck appeared and wrested from Cajetan the committee's procedures. Eck had debated Luther in Leipzig and considered himself to be the most effective challenge to Luther. Cajetan did not share Eck's self esteem: it is reported that when Eck entered the committee's chambers Cajetan asked: "Who let in that animal?"⁴⁰ In any event, the document produced by this conflicted group became the papal bull *Exurge Domine* (1520), which attempted to make the final case for Luther's excommunication. It was quickly recognized as confused and an inept insult which failed to intimidate Luther or to frighten off his supporters. Even Johann Eck admitted that the bull was hopelessly inadequate because the committee knew very little about Luther's later teaching.⁴¹

A Brief Light

Not long afterward, in 1521, Leo X died and Cajetan became a major influence in the selection of his successor, Adrian VI, a trained theologian and former dean of Louvain University, who knew well Luther's positions.⁴² Adrian VI was thoroughly committed to the reform of the Church and publicly admitted that the sins of the clergy and the curia were largely responsible for the troubles in the Church.⁴³ Nor did the new pope shy away from the necessity of convening a general council, as too many of his predecessors did, "because his conscience and his conduct were blameless."⁴⁴ Cajetan and Adrian concurred that the Pope and Council together offered the fullest guidance of the Holy Spirit. Early on in Adrian's pontificate Cajetan recommended to him the radical reform of the hierarchy itself as the first step in the eventual reform of the clergy and the

³⁹ Meister Eckhard, *Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense* (Mahweh, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1981), 72,75.

⁴⁰ Simon, 214.

⁴¹ Todd, *Martin Luther*, 166.

⁴² Marius, 160.

⁴³ Jedin, 210.

⁴⁴ Jedin, 205.

entire Church. The most powerful precedent for Cajetan's proposal was the reform efforts of Pope Leo IX who, in the mid-thirteenth century, affirmed the need that bishops be elected by the clergy and the people and that they be freed from political influence and that simony be ended.⁴⁵ Cajetan's initial move was to have bishops elected by their local clergy and laity, and that cardinals working in the Roman curia should resign from their external dioceses and they be given a fixed income from the regions they represented. He also advised that the age of ordination should be raised to thirty years, apparently to prevent the practice of passing on benefices and offices to children too young to realize their responsibilities. Cajetan based his recommendations on the simple principle found in the *Summa Theologiae*: "Now bishops bind themselves to fulfill the pastoral office for the sake of the salvation of their subjects. Consequently when the salvation of his subjects demands the personal presence of the pastor, the pastor should not withdraw his personal presence from his flock."⁴⁶ The well-being of the flock begins and ends with the attention of their pastor, and thus in Cajetan's view, and the view of Adrian VI and Leo IX earlier, the reform of the Church begins with the reforms of the hierarchy. Yet, in all probability Cajetan "was not quite clear in his own mind whether these drastic reforms "were capable of realization."⁴⁷ The irony has been posed by Heinrich Denifle, O.P., one of the most severe critics of Luther's conduct and language, that as early as 1523, Luther was beginning to see that something was going awry with the German reform movement. He acknowledged that his followers "are more avaricious, more immodest, bolder and worse than before under the Papacy." Indeed, Luther saw them as "doubly worse than the Papists, yes, worse than Tyre, Sidon and Sodom." One wonders whether Cajetan realized Luther's misgivings at this critical moment.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, Adrian died in 1523, before he had time to initiate any significant movement toward substantial reform of the Church or to convene a general council. It would be many years before Cajetan's radical insights would resurface during the preparations for the Council of Trent.⁴⁹ With Adrian's death, the hope for courageous and enlightened papal leadership faded, but the path was becoming clearer to Cajetan, though certainly not any easier. Clement VII, the first cousin of Leo X, ascended the papal throne after Adrian's brief

⁴⁵ Michel Parisse, "Leo IX," in *The Papacy: An Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 924.

⁴⁶ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 185, art. 5.

⁴⁷ Jedin, 208, 420.

⁴⁸ Heinrich Denifle, O.P., *Luther and Lutherdom*. vol. 1, Part 1 (Somerset, Ohio: Torch Press, 1917), 25-26.

⁴⁹ Jedin, 420; Hubert Jedin, *A History of the Council of Trent*, vol. 2, 321.

reign. A member of the Medici family, he was very well connected to all the seats of power. He was reform-minded and a collaborator of Adrian's, but he was especially fearful of a council lest it cause still greater disunity in the Church council. Both his friends and enemies were convinced of his vacillating and timid character which led to the suspicion that he was devious and unreliable. Furthermore, rumors about the legitimacy of his birth would later haunt him. Whereas Charles V, the Emperor, favored a general council to reform and reunite Christendom, Clement VII, with his own allegiances to French and English interests, promised to convene a council and then reneged so often that his procrastination allowed the Lutheran crisis to spread and deepen.

From Bad to Worse

In May, 1527, the city of Rome was sacked by mutinous imperial troops composed of Germans, Italians, and Spaniards. Clement VII was confined for several months to the Castle of St. Angelo, helpless to find a way out of the confusion. Cajetan himself was "dragged through the streets of Rome, fettered and subject to ill-usage and ridicule."⁵⁰ His reflections on the confounding turmoil are revealing: "And now we, also, the prelates of the Roman Church, are going through this experience, given over to theft, plunder and captivity, not at the hands of infidels but of Catholics, and this the most just sentence of God, for we who should have been the salt of the earth, have decayed until we are good for nothing beyond outward ceremonials and external good fortune. . ."⁵¹ With the chaotic conditions surrounding the throne of Peter, any thought of a general council with enough cohesion to face the profound challenge of reform was unthinkable.⁵² The picture of pope and council together guided by the Holy Spirit faded before the reality of papal and secular instability. To this, Cajetan bore witness with a deepening sense of hopelessness.

The Emperor finally broke the stalemate in 1529 by proposing a strategy to resolve the Lutheran impediment to reunification. It was becoming clear to everyone that the threat of military confrontation with the Reformers was losing its persuasive power as the likelihood loomed of a second front opening up against the Turks in the East.⁵³ So, Charles V proposed that a committee be formed with half of the experts appointed by the Emperor and the Germans and the other half appointed by the Holy See. Again they would try for closure on the Lutheran front. Pope Clement was so enthusiastic at the

⁵⁰ Pastor, 410.

⁵¹ Hughes, 474.

⁵² Jedin, vol. 1, 233.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 252.

possibility of avoiding a council that he began to explore the range of concessions to the Lutherans that might advance a quick resolution of differences. Following the lead set by Luther himself in 1520 in his *Appeal to the Nobility of the German Nation*, Philip Melancthon, his most reliable collaborator at the time, prepared a list of the desirable concessions from Rome which would forestall any Protestant secession from the universal Church and would avoid armed conflict.⁵⁴ Most important among several of these concessions was that priests be allowed to marry and that the body and blood of Christ be received by all at mass, not only by the priest. The issue of the reception of communion as both food and drink appeared in every list of desirable concessions from then on, because in the Reformation view, the Catholic practice of allowing only the priest to drink of the chalice was totally without scriptural justification and it was seen as a device used for clerical domination and privilege. Also, the practice violated the Lutheran conviction that it was the faith of the individual believer that affirmed the divine presence in the reenactment of the Last Supper. This was not a matter of minor liturgical refinement. It was fundamental to the Lutheran doctrine that God manifested his presence in three ways: in the Word made flesh in Christ, in the Word addressed to mankind in the Scriptures, and through the Word in food and drink in the mass.⁵⁵ In Luther's words: "The closer any Mass approaches the first of all Masses, which Christ celebrated at the Supper, the more Christian it is."⁵⁶

Yet, the move toward reconciliation proved futile, which left the Emperor with no other choice but to force the Pope to call a council against his own will. Clement saw his dilemma clearly: if he refused he would bear the blame for the disintegration of Christian Europe, and if he did convene a council it might become the battleground for all the pent-up hostilities and might even lead to the question of the legitimacy of his own birth and therefore of his pontificate. The Council of Constance was still on everyone's mind. Beside himself at the horror of "a handful of drunken Germans...out to upset the council and the whole world," Clement bitterly lamented: "Let them. I shall flee into the mountains. The Council may elect a new Pope—a dozen Popes—for each nation will want its own particular Pope."⁵⁷ And so, in desperation Pope Clement VII turned to Cajetan to mark off the limits beyond which no further concessions to Luther could be made for the sake of what was left of peace and unity in Christendom. It had been clear all along that Luther and his supporters wanted to remain genuine Catholics—indeed that they bring the Church back to its pristine purity. For the Lutherans the question was: What concessions from

⁵⁴ Ibid., 257.

⁵⁵ Bainton, 140.

⁵⁶ Dolan, 283.

⁵⁷ Jedin, vol.1, 264-65.

Rome can be tolerated so that true reform takes place? For Cajetan, the question was: what concessions to the Reformers could be tolerated so that they might remain authentic members of the Church under the authority of the successor of St. Peter?

Pushed to the limit, Cajetan suggested to the pope that priests in Germany be allowed to marry as they do in the Eastern Churches and that communion be received as both food and drink by all the faithful, without denying the role of the ordained priest in the consecration of the Eucharist. His most provocative recommendation was that throughout the whole Church ecclesiastical rules concerning the reception of the sacraments not be binding under serious sin and that no more should be demanded of the Reformers than that they believe all that the universal Church believes without further retraction on specific points from their theologians.⁵⁸ Thus, Cajetan's conception of the Church's unity and wholeness was becoming more inclusive and less exclusive; seeking all possible ways of keeping the Reformers within the Church without endangering its vitality and its fidelity to Christ. In opposition to Cajetan's apparent surrender, other powerful cardinals urged that the only way to deal with heretics was with armed force.⁵⁹ It has been noted that, while Rome wrestled with its next move, "Luther himself could not escape being interiorly driven back, against his striving and his teaching, into his Catholic consciousness, even on leading points," including his doctrine of justification by faith alone.⁶⁰ Again, the question reappears as to whether Cajetan was able to judge that over time Luther would modify his errors.

Pope Clement was warned by his canonists that he would risk being deposed by a council if he took Cajetan's advice. His critics thought that Cajetan had gone too far in compromising the faith in order to preserve a superficial unity with the Reformers. On the other hand it could be argued that Cajetan anticipated a vision of Christian unity which incorporated differences while affirming a sacred core of beliefs, similar to the vision of unity developed at the Second Vatican Council and given fuller expression in the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (1995). Here Pope John Paul II reflects:

[I]n heeding the request made of me to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new

⁵⁸ Jedin, vol. 1, 274; Todd, *Martin Luther*, 224; Ludwig Pastor, *The History of the Popes*, vol. X (St. Louis: Herder, 1928-1953), 163; Dennis Doherty, O.S.B., *The Sexual Doctrine of Cardinal Cajetan* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1966), 320. Doherty speculates that Cajetan's recommendations "would not be too popular among some of his successors at Vatican II."

⁵⁹ Pastor, vol. X, 163.

⁶⁰ Denifle, 327.

situation. For a whole millennium Christians were united in a brotherly fraternal communion of faith and sacramental life...if disagreements in belief or discipline arose among them, the Roman See acted by common consent as mediator.⁶¹

It is suggested here simply that Cajetan saw that openness "to a new situation," may require new ways of thinking. However, Clement VII did not welcome the challenge forced upon him by Cajetan and so, from then on, Cajetan was generally ignored by the Pope and his recommendations were relegated to the Roman archives where they languished. "a monument to inertia."⁶²

Cajetan's last contribution to the Church-in-turmoil had its origin in some research he had done in 1517, when, in his commentary on the *Summa Theologica* (II-II, q.154,art.9) he raised the question of whether it is a violation of natural law against incest if a man marries the widow of his deceased brother. Without foreseeing the potential drama on the horizon, Cajetan noted that just such an example existed in the case of the English King, Henry VIII, who had married his brother's widow, Catherine of Aragon. Since the pope had dispensed Henry from any civil or canonical impediments to the marriage, and since a pope could not dispense from a prohibition of the natural law, Cajetan concluded that the union was not incestuous and that it should stand as a true marriage. Ten years later, in 1534, his casual reflection on Henry VIII's situation became another challenge to the ever-vacillating Pope Clement, whom Cajetan succeeded in convincing that he should judge Henry and Catherine to be truly united.⁶³ Cajetan offered one more opinion on the English situation based on his conclusion that polygamy was not against the law of nature nor was it forbidden in the Old Testament. William Bennet, the representative of Henry VIII, met with Clement VII to pursue the question of a dispensation to marry an additional wife without leaving Catherine. He reported to the King: "I asked Clement VII if he were certain that such a dispensation was admissible and he answered that he was not, but he added that a distinguished theologian had told him that in his opinion the Pope might in this case dispense in order to avert a greater evil, he intended, however, to go into the matter more fully with his council." The council advised him that a dispensation would not be possible. It appears certain that Cajetan was the "distinguished theologian," since he had developed this argument in his commentaries on the Pentateuch. Hermann Grisar notes that "in the matter of Holy Scripture, Cajetan erred." Cajetan's insistence upon the literal sense of the text in exegesis may have been in play

⁶¹ Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* 1995, paragraph 95.

⁶² Todd, *Martin Luther*, 224.

⁶³ Philip Hughes, *The Reformation in England* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1952-54), 168-69, 261-63.

here. Cajetan admitted that the Church had in the past forbidden polygamy, but that fact did not prevent the Church from allowing polygamy when deemed necessary. In this situation, he was a strong supporter of papal authority.⁶⁴ In 1531, Luther sent his opinion to England that he would advise King Henry to take an additional wife rather than to divorce Catherine. Luther would leave the final judgment to the conscience of the king himself, whereas Cajetan was careful to affirm the authority of the pope alone to make such a determination.⁶⁵ Clement was persuaded to ignore Cajetan's suggestion.

Conclusion

After he refused to grant Henry VIII the dispensation he sought and declined to offer him the option of bigamy, and as tensions continued to rise all over Europe, Clement died. Shortly thereafter Cajetan also died, on August 10, 1534. It is reported that Cajetan's standing with the College of Cardinals had risen considerably at this time, so that, had he lived a few months longer, he might well have been elected Clement's successor. . . .⁶⁶ Such was the "common opinion of his contemporaries."⁶⁷ Yes, Cajetan's hands were respectful and clean and he remained steadfast in his conviction that without papal leadership genuine reform would be impossible and fracture would be unavoidable. With the exception of Adrian VI, the popes whom he served were not equal to their responsibilities and, furthermore, the secular and ecclesiastical opponents to papal domination were themselves too divided to agree on the purposes of reform or unity. Cajetan was the most seasoned of the veterans of this battle, and one who remarkably established his independence from any vested interests. On the surface Cajetan failed at almost every undertaking. In the deeper currents of Church history, however, his voice heralds things yet to come. He moved steadily into the ever darkening mystery of the Church's need to stay whole: ever a champion of papal authority, always a scrupulous scholar and a fair judge, at home with the stability of tradition and the need for change. Acknowledging the "gaping wounds" of Christendom he chose not to remain silent, though his voice was rarely heeded. He was willing to risk error rather than risk ignoring the truth. He could hardly have foreseen how far the Church would move in acknowledging the working of the Holy Spirit among separated Christians as *Ut Unum Sint* does. This essay has gathered the scattered fragments of a portrait of which the missing pieces are as intriguing as are those here imperfectly assembled.

⁶⁴ Pastor, vol. X, 276-277; Doherty, 233; Grisar, 261.

⁶⁵ Denifle, 134; Dolan, 298.

⁶⁶ Hughes, *History*, 475.

⁶⁷ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, 1053.