

# Catholic Teaching From Protestant Reformers



Mark Haas | March 3, 2020

The Papal Encyclical, *Exsurge Domine*, was the official response from Pope Leo X to Martin Luther's 95 Theses in 1520. The response addresses 41 topics of concern raised by Luther. The remaining 54 topics were of no concern to the Holy See, as there was no scandal involved. Thus, no explanation was required. The topics in question were addressed, and have since been addressed by the Church. This raises some questions: What was the problem? Why the ongoing division? What was the practice of early protestants? Upon researching the early reformers, it quickly becomes clear that many of their theological viewpoints were *very Catholic*.

## The Real Presence in the Eucharist

Martin Luther was a strong proponent of the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. In a sermon on the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, he states, "All right! There we have it! This is clear, plain, and unconcealed: 'I am speaking of My flesh and blood.'" He continues:

"There we have the flat statement which cannot be interpreted in any other way than that ***there is no life, but death alone, apart from His flesh and blood*** if these are neglected or despised. How is it possible to distort this text? ... You must note these words and this text with the utmost diligence ... It can neither speciously be interpreted nor avoided and evaded." (Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 6-8, 1532)



Thomas Cranmer, a reformer in the Church of England explains his theology concerning the Real Presence in this way:

“My meaning is, that the force, the grace, the virtue and benefit of Christ’s body that was crucified for us, and of his blood that was shed for us, be **really and effectually present** with all of them that duly receive the sacrament.” (Writings and Disputations of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, Martyr, 1556)

## Devotion to the Blessed Mother

Martin Luther also speaks about honoring the Blessed Mother: “Mary is the highest woman and the noblest gem in Christianity after Christ. She is nobility, wisdom, and holiness personified. **We can never honor her enough.**” (Christmas Sermon, 1531)

John Calvin echoes these sentiments by suggesting that great honor be given to the Mother of God: “It cannot be denied that God, in choosing and destining Mary to be the Mother of his Son, granted her the highest honor.”

Similarly, Huldrych Zwingli elaborates on the importance of giving honor to Mary: “The more honor and love of Christ increases among men, so much the esteem and honor given to Mary should grow.”

## Mary’s Perpetual Virginity

St. Paul urges the faithful to hold fast to our traditions (2 Thess 2:15). Luther, demonstrating the tradition of early Protestants, preached about Mary’s Immaculate Conception and perpetual virginity this way: “God has formed the soul and the body of the Virgin Mary full of the Holy Spirit, so that she is without all sins, for she has conceived and borne the Lord Jesus.” (Sermon, 1544) In the same sermon he later states, “It is an article of faith that **Mary is Mother of the Lord and still a Virgin.**”

Zwingli used strong language when defending Mary’s perpetual virginity:

“I firmly believe that Mary, according to the words of the gospel as a pure Virgin brought forth for us the Son of God and in childbirth and after childbirth **forever remained a pure, intact Virgin.**” (Zwingli Opera, Corpus Reformatorum, Vol. 1, 424)



## Sacramental Confession

It is said that, as a Catholic monk, Martin Luther went to confession as often as three times a day! It’s no surprise since he thought quite highly of private confession and absolution: “**I will allow no man to take private confession away from me,** and I would not give it up for all the treasures in the world, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me.” (Smalcald Articles, 1537) He goes on to

reference the reception of personal absolution during private confession: “[the penitent in confession] Therefore, I beseech you that in God’s stead **you will declare forgiveness to me** and comfort me with God’s Word.”

These examples are just a few of the theological teachings that protestant reformers and Catholics held in agreement. Within just 500 years, the division has produced over 40,000 denominations and growing confusion. St. Paul urges everyone to agree on everything (1 Corinthians 1:10), and Jesus himself prays that we all be one (John 17: 21). In truth, we need each other. As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I do not need you.” Nor can the head say to the feet, “I do not need you.” (1 Corinthians 12:21). Run to the Catholic Church; the Body of Christ.



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