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TEXT, FOR THE RECORD

Taking a Stand for Reformation: Martin Luther and Caritas Pirckheimer

by KENNETH G. APPOLD

[On October 31, 2017, the quincentennial Reformation observance at Princeton Theological Seminary featured Kenneth G. Appold's inaugural lecture as James Hastings Nichols Professor of Reformation History]

I

Two hours ago, students of this seminary posted several pages of theses to the door of Miller Chapel. (As a concession to our administrators and to their own professional futures, they used tape rather than nails.) In doing this, the students reenacted one of the most iconic scenes of the Reformation: Martin Luther's posting of his *Disputation on the Power of Indulgences*, commonly known as the "95 Theses," to the door of his own university chapel, the Castle Church of Wittenberg, on October 31, 1517—exactly 500 years ago. Despite the fact that no eyewitnesses took note of the event and Luther himself never mentioned it, which has prompted some historians to question whether it happened at all, the moment has acquired enormous symbolic significance for Protestants. The nails and hammer, wielded by the clear-headed and courageous Reformer, have come to represent a turning point in Christian history: the birth moment of the Protestant Reformation.

The fact that October 31 should have become so important to Protestants is not at all obvious. The date had no special significance during the Reformation itself. That is not surprising. For Luther, the

“95 Theses” were an academic exercise. The chapel door served as the university’s bulletin board, and posting theses prior to a planned disputation was standard practice. It would have been no more significant than posting a course syllabus on Blackboard today. Our celebrations of that event would have puzzled Luther as much as I would be surprised to find students, 500 years from now, ceremoniously pressing a giant “enter” button on a replica keyboard to commemorate the scheduling of CH3440 in 2017. Luther did not think posting disputation theses was remarkable. In this particular case, he probably had little intention of following through with the disputation itself; in fact, it never took place. Far more momentous for Luther—and for history—was something else he did with those theses on that day: he mailed them to three individuals, one of whom was the most powerful church leader in Germany, Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz. Luther wanted to open a public debate that reached beyond the walls of the academy. He wanted to engage the church. In that sense, sending the theses to Albrecht was a bad move. The archbishop profited enormously from the indulgence trade—far more than Luther realized at the time—and the last thing he wanted was a public debate on the virtues of those indulgences. Albrecht wanted Luther to go away. And the most appropriate destination for Luther, in Albrecht’s mind, was a bonfire in Rome. So Albrecht forwarded his Luther folder to the pope.

That in turn set off a chain of events that quickly catapulted an entirely unknown professor from a backwater university onto center stage of European politics. Heresy proceedings were opened against Luther, refutations of Luther’s theses were published, and demands were issued to have Luther brought to Rome to stand trial in person. Since Luther himself had absolutely no intention of going to Rome, those demands were sent to his ruler, Frederick the Wise of Saxony, requesting immediate extradition of the heretic. To Rome’s irritated surprise, Frederick, too, showed no intention of complying. He argued that Luther was not only his subject, but also a professor at his state university and therefore should stand trial at home. Negotiations dragged on, interrupted by various distractions, until an exasperated Pope Leo X finally excommunicated Luther in January of 1521.

That should have sealed Luther's fate, but it did not. Frederick ignored the bull of excommunication, along with the repeated demand to send Luther to Rome, and instead insisted on a secular hearing by imperial authorities on German soil. Frederick got his way and the hearing landed on the agenda of the next imperial diet, scheduled to take place in April in the German city of Worms.

That event turned out to be far more dramatic than the initial publication of Luther's "95 Theses" three-and-a-half years earlier. It is not hard to see why: Luther's life was at stake. He would have to answer for his views in the presence of Germany's most important rulers and even of the Holy Roman Emperor. As the well-known cases of Jan Hus and Florence's Savonarola reminded everyone, the life expectancy of heretics in such circumstances was not long. And attached to Luther's personal fate was the outcome of the Reformation itself. Would Rome, with the Empire's help, manage to crush the renegade reforming spirit, or would the German princes commit themselves and support the Reformer? History hung in the balance. The resulting showdown—Luther at Worms—has turned into the second great "iconic moment" of the Reformation. In many ways, this image outshines the first. The stakes were quite obviously higher, there were plenty of eyewitnesses, and the consequences were dramatic. The picture of Luther at Worms inspires the imagination, as the nineteenth-century representation printed in your bulletins makes clear. Here we have a simple monk and scholar, facing the most powerful men in Europe, armed with nothing more than the truth of scripture and his conscience. Here we have a heroic Reformer, clad in minimalist black amidst the opulence of his accusers, eyes lifted heavenward, "speaking truth to power" in a way that could hardly be more immediate. If any image symbolizes our traditional understanding of "Reformation," this is arguably it.

In the following forty-five minutes, I would like to take a closer look at Luther's confrontation with the authorities in Worms. As we will see, things were more complicated than they appear in paintings and iconography. It makes good sense, on this historic occasion, to take a look behind the screens of our confessional legend-making and ask ourselves anew what that celebrated moment has to teach us. And in order to facilitate that learning process, I will do something

that to my knowledge has never been done before: I would like to juxtapose Luther's great stand with that of another Reformer, someone far less known today, a Catholic woman who was a nun and who took her own courageous stand, armed with little more than scripture and her conscience, also roughly 500 years ago. She had to take her stand in part because Luther had taken his. Unlike Luther, she stayed Catholic and remained in her convent. Her name was Caritas Pirckheimer, and if you don't know much about her now, you will get to know her better in a few minutes.

On March 29, 1521, a herald arrived in Wittenberg, wearing an imperial eagle on his sleeve and carrying a summons for Martin Luther.¹ He would escort Luther to the imperial diet in Worms, roughly 300 miles away. Luther had expected him. The fact that he was an official of the empire and not of the Roman church already represented a kind of victory for the Reformer. Rome had desperately sought to avoid such a scenario for it undermined the authority of its own supposedly definitive actions against Luther and ceded authority to a secular process whose outcome it would be at pains to control. The man charged with imposing that control was a papal nuncio named Girolamo Aleandro [Jerome Aleander], an accomplished humanist scholar and papal confidant, who was sent to observe the proceedings and to make sure that Rome's interests would be served by them. Aleandro's correspondence² and subsequent report³ are important sources for reconstructing Rome's view of the event. The Lutheran perspective appeared in print shortly after the diet; it was likely the work of several authors with Luther playing an important role. As always in these early years of the Reformation, Luther and his allies had the edge in public relations; they published their account in both Latin and in German, thereby making it available to the widest possible audience. The Catholic version was in Latin only and saw a much lower circulation, thereby yielding valuable ground in the battle over the narrative. Such concerns about messaging dominated Luther's preparations for the trip, as well. Inexperienced and a bit naïve back in 1517, Luther was by now a veteran of high-profile clashes with prominent authorities and demonstrated an astonishing knack for controlling his public message. When the imperial herald arrived on March 29, the Reformer was ready.

Still, Luther waited until April 2 to depart. If Rome wished that he would go to Worms as inconspicuously as possible, Luther and his allies had other plans; they sought to turn the trip into a political campaign.⁴ Stylizing himself as a “simple monk,” Luther borrowed a rickety old cart and, accompanied by several close colleagues, spent the next two weeks making his way towards Worms.⁵ Some have likened his entourage to the image of Jesus entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.⁶ Others to a triumphal procession.⁷ All along the way, throngs of people lined the road to see him. Clearly, Luther’s case had struck a nerve. Though some found him offensive, many more had come to view him as a kind of national hero—the first in hundreds of years to have the courage to stand up to the corrupt powers that be.⁸ Resentment against the pope and Roman curia was particularly strong, undergirded by long-standing cultural rivalries between the supposedly simple Germans and overly sophisticated Italians. Luther knew how to play to those emotions, taking every opportunity to point out Italian condescension and emphasize his own Teutonic sincerity.

Behind this calculated façade, however, Luther was genuinely anxious. He may have known how to orchestrate opinion, but he also realized that something far greater was at stake. At its heart, this was not about politics; it was not even about his own survival. This was about faith, and it was about salvation. It was about an insight that Luther had come to call “the Gospel.” On Sunday, April 7, while taking a stop in the city of Erfurt, Luther preached a sermon to an overcrowded church.⁹ At times prophetic, at times almost apocalyptic, but always with an eye on the central message of salvation by trust in God and not by works of the law, the sermon climaxes in the following lines: The world may be full of evil, but “I want to speak the truth, and I must. That is why I stand here, without taking money for it. One must not trust in human laws or works, but rather have a right faith, which is a destroyer of sin, and in this way we find ourselves growing in him.”¹⁰ And in another passage, he draws attention to the stakes of this message: “I know that many don’t want to hear this. But I want to speak the truth, and need to do so, even if it costs me twenty necks.”¹¹ Though he never mentions Worms

or his personal fate, the sermon strikes the themes that would later surface in the hearing: The gospel message is disruptive. It comes to destroy—to destroy sin, but nonetheless to destroy. Despite that cost, however, Luther feels compelled to proclaim the message. He must take a stand, with no regard to self-interest or self-preservation, and no concern for the powers that seek to stop him. The emotional burden, though, was considerable. Shortly after, on his way to Eisenach, he nearly collapsed and had to be bled. The city's mayor gave him a more effective remedy: a stiff drink and a good night's sleep. Luther recovered.¹²

Meanwhile, Aleandro was seething. Nothing was going to plan. Far from remaining quiet, the heretic was spreading his toxic message everywhere he went. The nuncio's nightmare was about to get worse. Hoping that Luther would enter Worms through inconspicuous backstreets with minimal commotion, he now had to watch on April 16 as Luther arrived at the main gate with an entourage of Saxon nobles, welcomed by trumpets blasting fanfares from the cathedral tower, and met by a rush of more than two thousand locals frantic to meet the excommunicated Reformer.¹³ If Rome's strategy had been to silence Luther, it was failing.

In order to understand the conflict that was now brewing, one needs to appreciate Aleandro's agenda. While Luther tended to speak of the "tyranny of the papacy," and had by now even begun to refer to the pope as an "Antichrist" bent on obstructing the gospel, Rome was concerned with something else. For the pope and his advisors, Luther was clearly a heretic. Heresy was dangerous not only because it preached falsehood and imperiled people's salvation, but also because falsehoods were destructive to society. A heretic was by nature someone who struck out on his or her own, someone whose one-sidedness of perspective put him or her at odds with tradition and consensus, and who therefore posed a serious threat to the social equilibrium both church and state worked so hard to maintain. Heresy was disruptive. And if heresy went unchecked, it spread like a corrosive cancer through the delicate sinews of society. This is why Aleandro and others wanted so much to keep Luther contained. Germany was restless and vulnerable to insurrection. A

man like Luther, intolerant, reckless and delusional, could do enormous social damage if left to speak freely.

The hearing began on April 17. Pointing to a stack of books, an official asked Luther two questions: Did you write these books? And do you stand by what you wrote? Luther was expected to answer simply “yes” or “no.” Everyone expected him to say “yes” to both, thereby ending the trial and sealing his fate. Aleandro was already rubbing his hands at the thought when Luther came up with a surprise that astonished everyone present. The first question he could answer easily. Yes, he had written those books. But the second, Luther, continued, was more difficult. “Because this is a question of faith and the salvation of souls, and because it concerns the divine Word, which we are all bound to reverence, for there is nothing greater in heaven or on earth, it would be rash and at the same time dangerous for me to put forth anything without proper consideration.”¹⁴ And then Luther asked for time to reflect. This was completely unexpected, but after consulting with the emperor and princes, the secretary, visibly annoyed, informed Luther that he would have until the next day to prepare his answer.¹⁵

The next day Luther did indeed return, escorted by the herald, arriving punctually at 4:00 pm. The princes made him wait. Finally, at six, the secretary told Luther his time of reflection had come to an end; he must now give his answer. Facing the emperor and princes, Luther made his reply. It was not short. Transcribed and in book form, it covers four full pages. It was not even a clear “yes” or “no.” Luther’s response resembled a sermon or lecture more than a legal statement. It is hard to imagine the imperial bureaucrats sitting still for all of it. But Luther was undeterred. Rather than retracting or affirming his books in their entirety, he divided them into three groups. The first were simply devotional, and even his opponents conceded their value—therefore it made no sense to retract those. The second included his attacks on the papacy. To retract these would fan the flames of papal tyranny, and leave Rome’s machinations—which he went on to describe in some detail—uncriticized. This he could not do. That same reasoning applies to the third group, in which he attacks private individuals who wrote against him in order

to defend the papacy. Though he admits he may have overstepped the mark and given genuine offense, he nonetheless cannot step back from those statements lest his opponents, who surely deserved his criticisms, continue their efforts and open the door to godlessness among God's people.¹⁶

At this point, Luther digresses slightly. What he says now tends to get overlooked because it does not add to the argument materially, but it may well be more significant than the more famous words he said later. Luther knew very well that he had been accused of causing dissent and division, and that, interlocked with the charge of heresy was the assumption that his efforts could spark insurrection and a collapse of the social order. He lets the emperor and princes know that he has considered this potential effect of his teachings. And now he says something remarkable: "To see excitement and dissension arise because of the Word of God is to me clearly the most joyful aspect of all in these matters."¹⁷ One can imagine Alessandro sitting up at this point; one can imagine the young emperor, Charles V, raising his eyebrows. They would have expected Luther to deny these consequences of his teachings, saying he could not take responsibility for what others did when they misunderstood him. Instead, the Reformer actually welcomed—and even took joy—in this ominous outcome. "For this is the way," Luther continued, "the opportunity, and the result of the Word of God, just as Christ said, 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.'"¹⁸

This was a direct challenge to all the worldly powers assembled before him. Like a prophet, Luther reminds the kings that they, too, answer to the word of God—and that that word will be their judgment. That he would say such a thing while himself on trial seems either extremely foolish or even delusional. Some would argue that Luther had by this time given up on his own safety and took this chance to speak his mind—for the record. Others, including his famous inner-Protestant rival Thomas Müntzer, viewed this episode as proof that the entire event was rigged and that Luther was in no real danger at all. But those explanations place too much value on external factors. Luther's closing statements make clear that he is motivated by a much more interior dynamic, something deeply

personal that makes him forget, at least momentarily, his personal temporal fate. When the court's speaker reproached him for not answering the question, Luther agreed to give a "simple" answer:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in the councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.¹⁹

Having said this in Latin, he now added in German, according to some sources, the famous words: "I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen."²⁰

Of course, this answer is not quite as simple as Luther suggested. Importantly, it is not a straightforward appeal to his conscience—which is how it is often understood. Luther does not say that his conscience prevents him from recanting, but that his conscience is "captive to the Word of God." That is an important difference because it does not locate the authority for his actions within himself; he is not listening to an inner voice, trying to be authentic, or true to himself. He is trying to be true to the word of God. And this is also different from saying that God prevents him directly from recanting. Luther is not saying that God has spoken to him—as God spoke to the prophets, for example. He is not claiming immediate revelation—not even by using formulas like "after 'prayerful reflection' this is the path that was revealed to me," the way our contemporaries frame their statements when they want to escape scrutiny. Luther does something else entirely. He points to the authority of the word of God. It is the word that holds his conscience captive. And even that statement is qualified in a significant way: If someone convinces him that scripture says something else, or that he has misunderstood or even misapplied scripture, he will be open to changing his position. In that sense, Luther behaves less like a prophet and more like a scholar. He seems to be interested in a kind of free academic inquiry, where the truth emerges through open discourse. After all, he was a professor. Let us remember, though, that this is a special kind of scholarship: a scholarship where the stakes

are ultimate, and where one's conscience is stressed to the full. It is a scholarship that matters—in the deepest sense.

II

Luther lived to see another day. His remarkable stand in Worms swayed ambivalent princes and inspired masses to line up behind him in a hope for change. While the imperial diet condemned him, threatened his allies and ordered the burning of his books, the empire had reached the limits of its might. Prince Frederick of Saxony, aptly named “the Wise,” refused to implement the diet's edict and instead protected Luther. Other rulers ignored the measure, too. Following Martin Luther, an entire society was beginning to take a stand as the Reformation entered an entirely new dimension.

But not everyone was happy with these changes, and not everyone who resisted did so out of spite, or fear of change, or out of a desire for more papal tyranny. There were people who found their own consciences burdened by the now predominant call for upheaval, and whose consciences called on them to fight for a different way.

Caritas Pirckheimer was abbess of a convent in the imperial city of Nuremberg, Germany. She belonged to the order of the Poor Clares, a group of female mendicants closely allied with the male Franciscans, and founded by Francis and his associate Clare of Assisi three hundred years before the Reformation. They, too, were born of a protest movement, rising against the waves of a new mercantile economy and its ethos of wealth-acquisition. They rejected the new obsession with owning things and thought that private property strangled one's soul. They dedicated themselves to a more purely spiritual life, a life unencumbered by money and objects, and committed to following Jesus Christ in serving the world.

Caritas was born as the eldest child into a wealthy and highly intellectual patrician family in 1467—making her sixteen years older than Martin Luther. Her given name was Barbara. The girl's upbringing was unusual for her time because her father made sure that she received the best possible education a girl—or boy—of that age could get. That meant private tutoring, learning Latin, and having access to the family's remarkable humanist library, much of

it acquired in Italy. That was not at all a normal way to treat girls' education, even among the wealthy of the day. Barbara's father made little distinction between boys and girls in that respect and extended the same principles of classical education to her eight younger siblings, as well. Among them, Willibald would grow up to become one of the most distinguished humanist scholars of Germany. Interestingly, when their father died in 1501, he left his library not to Willibald, but to Barbara.²¹

Barbara entered the convent at age twelve. Had she been a boy, she could have enrolled in one of Nuremberg's Latin schools, but since that path was barred to girls, the convent offered the main opportunity for a life of learning.²² Of the four Pirckheimer daughters, three would enter convents.²³ Four years later, in 1483, which also happened to be the year Luther was born, Barbara professed her vows and joined the order, taking the name Caritas—or "love."²⁴ It guided her for the rest of her life.

Caritas Pirckheimer's impact on humanist intellectual circles of her day is astonishing, especially when one considers that she rarely left her convent and could speak to outsiders only through a screen at the visitors' window. She did, however, write letters. And she wrote many. Her correspondence, at times deeply insightful, erudite and revealing, reached luminaries across Europe, and even included the pope. Most of these partners were men, and quite a few were profoundly inspired. They included the painter Albrecht Dürer, the poet Conrad Celtis, and other intellectuals, several of whom dedicated poems and other writings to Caritas. To many, she came to represent a kind of idealized image of a German Renaissance woman; in their eyes, she stood for humanist progress and became a reminder that gender distinctions, at least in those rarified airs, could be blurred. An erudite woman could become like a man, entering friendships with men and even taking the roles of men.²⁵

Erasmus of Rotterdam, arguably the most famous humanist in all of Europe, knew of her through her brother²⁶ and likely based a character in his piece, "The Abbot and the Learned Lady" at least partly on Caritas.²⁷ In this satire, a dim-witted abbot finds himself mismatched in conversation with an educated woman. He tells her that women should not read or seek education, for "books ruin

women's wits—which are none too plentiful anyway,” and “learning doesn't fit a woman.”²⁸ His conversation partner calmly disagrees, pointing out that, while unlettered abbots are all around, there are growing numbers of literate women who “can rival any man.” “If you're not careful, the net result will be that we'll preside in the theological schools, preach in the churches, and wear your miters.”

“God forbid,” cries the abbot.²⁹

Caritas Pirckheimer did not say those words, of course, but she could easily have inspired the role. Few women of her time were better qualified to preside over seminaries, preach in churches, or wear an abbot's miter. Indeed, Caritas did preside over a convent school, taught the sisters from scripture, and was herself an abbess—thereby already fulfilling these very functions, albeit in a space reserved for women. Judging from her correspondence, more than a few men would have been delighted to learn far more from her.

Although she inspired many men to write to her and about her, we know her through her own words, as well—above all through her many letters. Caritas also left another remarkable document: a journal chronicling the convent's experience during the tumultuous years of 1524–1528.³⁰ This eye-witness account provides a unique perspective on the Reformation from someone who showed some sympathy for its theology but found herself completely at odds with its methods. Many of Nuremberg's leading minds sympathized with Luther, who visited the city in 1518. Willibald Pirckheimer even wrote to the pope to defend the Reformer. Caritas and her sisters read and discussed Luther in the convent, and the biggest churches had Lutheran-minded pastors by 1522. Bit by bit, evangelical reforms found implementation. Churches began celebrating communion in both kinds; services, scripture readings and sermons shifted to German; priests started to marry; and voices rose in calls to close the monasteries and convents.

Both Luther and Melanchthon had written very negatively about monastic life and in particular about monastic vows, arguing that, as currently understood and practiced, such vows encouraged works righteousness. While monastic vows could be useful if properly understood, they were human constructs and not binding before God. Those who taught that keeping one's monastic vows was

necessary for salvation committed a serious error.³¹ Though Luther's writings were aimed at comforting monks and nuns who had left their orders and were struggling with their consciences as a result, their impact on those still in monastic life was enormous. All around Germany, monastery walls opened like bursting dams, spilling their contents into the streets. And where that did not happen, civic leaders sought to pry them open by force—both out of conviction and because they could take possession of the houses once empty.

In Nuremberg, pressure on the monasteries and convents had been building for several years. Caritas makes this point in her very first journal entry for 1524:

In the year noted above it happened that many things were changed by the new teachings of the Lutherans and much dissension befell the Christian faith. The ceremonies of the Church have been done away with in many instances and the clerical class has been almost completely destroyed in many areas. At that time Christian freedom was being preached as well as the idea that the laws of the Church and even the oaths of the religious orders were invalid and no one was obligated to keep them. And so it happened that many nuns and monks made use of such freedom and ran away from their cloisters and threw off their robes and habits; some married and did whatever they wanted. From this we suffered much distress and affliction. During the day many of the powerful and of the simple people came to their relatives who resided in our cloister. They preached and spoke of the new teachings and disputed incessantly, arguing that the cloistered were damned and subject to temptations and that it was not possible for them to attain salvation there. We were all of the devil.³²

When the city council adopted the Reformation formally in March of 1525, the oppression increased dramatically. The Protestant Reformers pressured the sisters to put on worldly clothing, to open their visitors' windows so that outsiders could see the sisters, and finally to open the convent itself. Evangelical pastors were sent in to preach sermons, and attendance was taken to make sure the sisters heard them:

Thus for the whole passion week we had to hear all the preachers so that we might be converted by force since there was no escape. Truly we had a difficult passion week, with a great deal of commotion, shouting and unrest in the chapel. The entire convent was compelled to hear the sermon and no sister could miss it. . . . They threatened us that . . . they would let people enter who

would sit with us during the sermon and keep watch to see if we were all there, how we behaved and whether or not we stuffed wool in our ears. . . . In good faith [the evangelical preachers] exhorted [the people] to wipe out our godless community entirely, tear down the cloisters and drag us out of them by force. We were, you see, in a state of damnation, heretics, idolaters, blasphemers and would belong to the devil forever.³³

Perhaps more seriously, the city council prohibited the Franciscan friars from hearing confession in the convent, as they traditionally had done. This meant the sisters had no way of making confession, thereby disrupting their religious life in a central way. Things came to a head when citizens came and dragged their daughters out of the convents, at times with the help of police.

As implausible as it may have seemed to those concerned citizens, these sisters very much wanted to stay in their cloistered life; and they wanted to remain true to their vows. Caritas refused to back down or to give in to the pressure from the city fathers—and, to be fair, local mothers, too, since it was often the mothers who came to pry their daughters out of the convent. Caritas defended the sisters and the convent tirelessly, writing letter after letter to the city council, asking for relief—and for respect. For the next nine months, she stood up to an overwhelming tide of public opinion in the city, as wave after wave of would-be intruders arrived to “liberate” the sisters from behind their walls. Her position was unfashionable and thought to be unmodern. Well-established Reformers, such as Andreas Osiander and Wenceslaus Linck, key movers in Nuremberg’s Protestant Reformation, wrote fiery treatises attacking the convent and did their best to wear down the abbess. But she stood firm.

Her brother, too, interceded on her behalf—finally writing his friend, Philipp Melanchthon. In reply, Melanchthon came to the city in November of 1525. Caritas expressed concern that the Wittenberg Reformer would make things worse. Nonetheless, she agreed to meet with him, and they spoke—through the screen. No one knows how long they spoke, but Caritas wrote about it in her journal.³⁴ Melanchthon tried to enlighten her about Lutheran theology, which Caritas seems to have understood much better than he anticipated. She assured him that she and the sisters placed their faith in the grace of God, and not in works. Deeply moved by her

arguments, her eloquence and her resolve, the reformer conceded that the sisters could indeed find salvation within the convent's walls—as long as they did not believe their vows were meritorious. Afterwards Melanchthon persuaded the city council to change its policies and to respect the nuns. The convent remained. No new novices were allowed to enter, but the sisters who were there stayed until they died. Caritas lived until 1532, two years longer than her younger brother Willibald, whose enthusiasm for the Reformation had dimmed long before.

III

Caritas Pirkheimer had taken a stand. But what was it for? Ultimately, it was for love. This was the name she chose for herself in her new life when she was sixteen and committed herself to a life in the convent. It was a profound love. For many on the outside, and even for many today, it was also a confusing love. Not a few scholars have struggled to define it, typically using terms such as “idealized,” “Platonic,” “pure,” a “love of the spirit and not of the body,” and so forth, taking great care to cleanse it of any trace of the erotic. This may say more about those scholars than it does about Caritas, however. She was far less prudish.³⁵

One of the most revealing of her epistolary exchanges took place with the Renaissance poet Conrad Celtis. Celtis was best known for a collection of love poems, divided into four books, each dedicated to a different one of his mistresses. Their relationship began in 1502, when Celtis sent her a copy of his most recent work, a drama based on a highly learned tenth-century nun. This piece Celtis dedicated to Caritas Pirkheimer, whom he had never met but of whom he knew through his friendship with her brother. The two began to exchange deeply revealing, personal letters.³⁶ Finally, Celtis sent Caritas a copy of his four books of love poems, to which he had added a new poem—to Caritas. It was passionate and eloquent at once, but also a bit risqué. His professions of eternal love were hardly chaste. Caritas took three weeks to respond. She thanked him for his poem, which she said had touched her deeply. But she would have been even more delighted if he had devoted himself to visions of

the heavenly Jerusalem than to earthly things.³⁷ She was concerned that Celtis would interpret this as a rejection—and indeed he did; he never wrote to her again.³⁸

But that was not at all her intent. Instead she wished to redirect his passion to a love of higher things, specifically into the mystical theology that she herself so much enjoyed. This, she suggests to him, is where true love—and true *caritas*—may be found.³⁹ It is something she would like to share with him. The play on words—offering him a path to the “true *caritas*”—is intriguing, and it may be worth noting that no part of the Christian repertoire is more overtly erotic than mystical theology! By appearing to reject more conventional expressions of love, she gives her partner a map to where a deeper love—and her truer self—reside. Unfortunately, Celtis, presumably embarrassed, bolted, and we will never know how their relationship might have unfolded.

As this exchange makes clear, the convent walls were more than protection from the outside, or a place of refuge for educated women such as Caritas. They gave them, to use a term from Virginia Woolf, a “room of their own”: a space to write. And, as Caritas’ letters show, that writing was itself an expression of Christian love—perhaps the highest expression to which men *or* women of that humanistic persuasion could aspire.⁴⁰ This was what the humanists called “erudition.” It formed and cultivated the spirit and lifted it closer to God. The art of humanistic letter writing was not an obvious component of a monastic life that traditionally emphasized askesis and unworldliness. In that sense, Caritas was reshaping the ideals of the convent and opening up new possibilities for those within it. If previously, convents were mainly places to pray, chant, and meditate, they were now, in her hands, also a place to write. And letter-writing was a potent medium. It transcended walls and crossed boundaries, bringing women like Caritas Pirckheimer into Christian friendship with men of every class and every station—and on equal terms. It was liberating. And it was this freedom that she fought so hard to protect.

It was a different freedom than being able to leave one’s convent, the kind of freedom she described earlier in her journal entry as a kind of “Protestant freedom.” But it was closer to the kind of freedom Luther showed in Worms: it was the freedom of someone who

has found something. More importantly, it was the freedom that comes from God—and frees us from ourselves. On one level, this is a theologically understood freedom, connected to the grace of God. But it also has a social dimension. Both Caritas Pirckheimer and Martin Luther find within that grace a freedom from societal discourse and conventions that have previously defined them—in Luther’s case an achievement-based doctrine of salvation, and for Caritas, the traditional constraints of gender. Both find themselves liberated from such exterior realities and led to the discovery of something more true.

Unfortunately, the Nuremberg Reformers do not acquit themselves well in this story. They who found themselves inspired by the image of Luther in Worms to take a stand against tyranny turned around and imposed their own brand of tyranny on the convent. They wanted to remove the nuns and turn it into a school—which is perhaps the greatest irony of all, and says a lot about their incapacity to understand the life behind those walls. It also reminds us today, as we look back on 500 years of Reformation, that no “side” ever gets it completely right. More importantly, taking sides is not the same as taking a stand. It doesn’t take nearly as much courage—and it is certainly not as liberating.

A poet I admire has used the term “holy disorder.”⁴¹ It is what happens when the world of one’s certainties comes crashing down around one. That can be profoundly disorienting; but it can also be holy. It can open a window onto something new and as yet unrecognized, a world not yet seen, a promise not yet claimed. And within all that mess is a God who speaks and reveals a new and unanticipated way to call. The term is particularly apt for describing the Reformation. Because the Reformation itself was a kind of holy disorder. More than a specific agenda or program, more than any particular reforms or new confessions or a taking of sides, more than a recipe for the perfect polity or the ideal congregation or even the right way to read scripture, it was a time of disorder. The old certainties were cast into doubt and the course of events pulled the rug out from under a good many feet. Vows were broken, vows were upheld; no one knew what was next and nothing in the past gave a reliable map for the present—much less the future. At times like

that most people run for the sidelines; and there they line up and they take sides—which is what many in the Reformation did. A few, however, did something else. They heard the voice of God, whether in scripture, their conscience, or somewhere in the clutter and chaos around them. They saw the holiness. And they took a stand. That’s a lonely place to be, and not everyone has what it takes. But this evening I wanted to introduce you to two remarkable people who did. And the stands they took—each different but also profoundly similar—changed the course of the world.

NOTES

1. Accounts of Luther’s appearance at the Diet of Worms, and of the complicated negotiations that preceded it have generated much literature, beginning shortly after the event itself with a report by Luther and his allies, as well as a counter-report by the papal nuncio, Girolamo Aleandro. These and others of the period are collected and edited in WA 7:814–887. Luther’s letters shed additional valuable light on these events; see WABr2. Of more recent studies, I am particularly indebted to the following: Volker Reinhardt, *Luther der Ketzer. Rom und die Reformation*. 3. Aufl. (München: Verlag Beck, 2017); Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (New York: Random House, 2017); Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther. Sein Weg zur Reformation* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1981); Scott Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven and London: Yale, 2015); and Armin Kohhle, *Reichstag und Reformation. Kaiserliche und ständische Religionspolitik von den Anfängen der Causa Lutheri bis zum Nürnberger Religionsfrieden* (Heidelberg: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2001). Among the historic accounts closer to Luther’s own time, that of Friedrich Myconius (*Historia reformationis*, written around 1540, but published posthumously in 1715, as well as in more recent editions) remains influential, especially for Roper.

2. See Reinhardt, 174–182, 188–192.
3. See WA 7:825–840.
4. Particularly insightful on this dimension of Luther’s trip is Reinhardt, 171–174.
5. Reinhardt, 172–174; Roper, 165–168; Brecht, 427–429.
6. Reinhardt, 172; Hendrix, 102. The Palm Sunday motif was also applied to Luther’s trial in Worms; see Roper, 168.
7. Roper, 166.
8. See Brecht, 427; Roper, 167.
9. WA 7:803–813. For additional background, see Hendrix, 102.
10. WA 7:812, ll. 24–27.
11. *Ibid.*, ll. 17–19.
12. Friedrich Myconius, *Geschichte der Reformation*, ed. by Otto Clemen (Leipzig: Voigtländers Verlag, [s.d.]), 34.
13. Brecht, 429; Roper, 168; Reinhardt, 174. Aleandro’s reaction is documented in his correspondence; Reinhardt, 176.
14. LW 32:107. See WA 7:829.

15. Ibid.

16. LW 32:109–111. WA 7:832–835.

17. LW 32:111. WA 7:834–835.

18. Ibid.

19. LW 32:112. WA 7:838.

20. LW 32:113. WA 7:838. The sources are inconsistent on this point. Some omit the statement entirely, others include some variation of the statement, such as “May God help me.” (see LW 32:113, n.8).

21. See Anne Bezzel, *Caritas Pirckheimer. Äbtissin und Humanistin* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2016), 15–16. Also, Josef Pfanner, “Caritas Pirckheimer—Biographie der Äbtissin,” in: *Caritas Pirckheimer. Ordensfrau und Humanistin—Vorbild für die Ökumene. Festschrift zum 450. Todestag*, ed. by Georg Deichstetter (Köln: Wienand Verlag, 1982, 45–60; and François Terzer, *Caritas Pirckheimer: Une femme voilée de liberté* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2013).

22. Ibid., 17.

23. Pfanner, 45.

24. The date of her vows remains undocumented, but this seems most likely since it was the earliest age at which she would have been eligible, and it is around this time that her new name begins to appear. See Bezzel, 19.

25. Some humanists drew on older medieval traditions, particularly inspired by St. Jerome and his friendship with St. Paula, that allowed women to “become men” under certain highly spiritualized conditions, chief among them sexual abstinence but also, of course, learnedness. See Ursula Hess, “Oratrix humilis. Die Frau als Briefpartnerin von Humanisten, am Beispiel der Caritas Pirckheimer,” in: *Der Brief im Zeitalter der Renaissance*, ed. by Franz Josef Worstbrock, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (Weinheim: Acta humaniora, 1983), 173–203; here 191–193. See also Bezzel, 55; and Berndt Hamm, “Hieronymus-Begeisterung und Augustinismus vor der Reformation. Beobachtungen zur Beziehung zwischen Humanismus und Frömmigkeitstheologie (am Beispiel Nürnbergs),” in: *Augustine, the Harvest, and Theology (1300–1650). Essays Dedicated to Heiko Augustinus Oberman in Honor of his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. by Kenneth Hagen (Leiden, et al: Brill, 1990), 127–235.

It is worth pointing out that Erasmus does not make virginity a requirement for women’s erudition; indeed his “learned woman” in the famous colloquy, “The Abbot and the Learned Lady,” mentioned below, is married.

26. See Willibald Pirckheimer’s letter to Erasmus, dated May 20, 1516, in which he extends greetings from Caritas and their sister, both of whom had read Erasmus closely, especially his edition of the New Testament. Printed in: *Briefe von, an und über Caritas Pirckheimer (aus den Jahren 1498–1530)*, ed. by Josef Pfanner (Landshut: Caritas Pirckheimer Forschung, 1966), p. 259; and *Desiderius Erasmus: Opus epistolarum*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), p. 239. See also Martin H. Jung, *Nonnen, Prophetinnen, Kirchenmütter. Kirchen- und frömmigkeitshistorische Studien zu Frauen der Reformationszeit* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2002), p. 87 and n. 34.

27. The character of the learned lady is named “Magdalia” and therefore impossible to identify with certainty. Some scholars see her as based on Caritas, others on Thomas More’s daughter Margaret Roper. She may well be a composite. See Bezzel, 51–52, who takes the former view; and *Collected Works of Erasmus, vol. 39: Colloquies*, transl. and ed. by Craig R. Thompson, 499; Thompson favors Margaret Roper. “The Abbot and the Learned Lady” (*Abbatis et eruditae*) appears here annotated and in translation, *Colloquies*, pp. 501–519.

Erasmus himself mentions “the More daughters, . . . the Pirckheimer and Blarer ladies” in the piece by name (*Colloquies*, 504).

28. *Colloquies*, 503 (l. 32) and 504 (l. 22).

29. *Colloquies*, 504–505.

30. *Die “Denkwürdigkeiten” der Caritas Pirckheimer*, ed. by Josef Pfanner (Landshut: Caritas Pirckheimer Forschung, 1962); in English translation, *Caritas Pirckheimer: A Journal of the Reformation Years, 1524–1528*, transl. by Paul A. MacKenzie (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006).

31. Luther expounds on these topics in a series of writings from 1521 and 1522, culminating in the major treatise, *De votis monasticis Martini Lutheri iudicium* (The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows), WA 8, 573–669 (LW 44, 251–400). Melancthon was actually more critical of the monastic vocation than Luther, and included such statements in his *Loci communes* of 1521 and other writings (see Jung, 107–116).

32. *Journal*, 11–12 (with several changes of my own to the translation). See *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 1.

33. *Journal*, 62f; *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 54f.

34. See Jung, 96–107; *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 131f; *Journal*, 141f.

35. Hess points to a conflict between divergent trajectories in Caritas’ activity: that between her ascetic monasticism on the one hand and her humanist passion for learning on the other. See Hess, 177.

36. *Briefe*, pp. 100–108.

37. *Briefe*, 105.

38. See Bezzel’s account of the exchange; Bezzel, 43–48.

39. *Briefe*, 106.

40. For more on the status of letter writing in the Renaissance, and on the implications of Caritas’ own writing, see Hess, *passim*. Particularly helpful are Hess’s observations on the ideals of erudite friendship in Erasmus’ above-mentioned colloquy, and as evidenced by Caritas’ exchange with Celtis (173–175). Also instructive is Hess’ analysis of Caritas’ epistolary friendship with Sixtus Tucher, which has some parallels to that with Celtis (188–190).

41. Sera Chung, “Holy Disorder,” *Holy Disorder* [CD], Firemouth Culture, 2010.