Erasmus

ICONIC FIGURE with **STAR ALLURE**

PETER MATHESON **introduces the Dutchman, Desiderius Erasmus as a visionary reformer and contemporary of Luther but who stayed with the Catholic Church.**

The spotlight will be on Martin Luther this year as it is 500 years since his 95 Theses about indulgences sparked off what we often call, rather carelessly, the Reformation. But movements for reform have always been part of the Church's history. The great monastic movement of the Early Church was launched in a desire for renewal of Christian life. Perhaps the best known of all reforming waves was that of the Franciscans and Dominicans reaching out to lay people in the 13th-century cities. We need to see the Augustinian friar, Martin Luther, in the context of these ongoing reforms. That's why historians these days speak of a multiplicity of 16th-century reformations — Catholic, humanist, communal, Lutheran, Reformed and Radical. In fact, the Church around 1500 throbbed with reform movements of many kinds — lay, monastic and clerical.

The culture of the 1500s was unbelievably different from ours today. At that time the influence of the Church permeated life in a way we cannot begin to imagine. Warm, personal piety was expressed in countless manifestations including pilgrimages, the celebration of saints' days and Marian festivals and above all, in the sacraments and devotions which accompanied every moment of individual and communal life from birth to death. Some felt the problem was not a lack of spirituality but a surfeit of it. Certainly that was the view of Catholic reformers such as John Colet, Dean of St Paul's London; Thomas More, famous for his fraught relationship with Henry VIII; and the superb classical scholar, Erasmus.

Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) stemmed from the Netherlands but his work had a truly European resonance. He was an iconic figure with star allure. To receive a letter from him — and his web of correspondents was huge — was a coveted distinction. Often his letters went straight into print. You won't go far wrong if you imagine enthusiastic teachers, lawyers, priests, monks and nuns from Spain to Hungary sporting a lapel badge: "I love Erasmus!" A superb Latin and Greek scholar, Erasmus symbolised for thousands of laymen and women, as well as clergy, the need to get back *ad fontes*, to the sources. By this he meant to study the writings of the Early Fathers and above all the Bible.

In many of the courts, cities and monasteries of Germany, Italy, France and elsewhere, little groups or sodalities gathered to discuss his writings — rather like today's book clubs. As Erasmus's writings were in Latin we might be tempted to dismiss these gatherings as élitist but their members were the opinion-makers of the age; advisers to princes, city clerks, merchants, teachers, students and poets.

One of Erasmus's greatest achievements was the brand new edition of the New Testament in 1516 — going back to the original Greek. Luther profited from it, as did biblical scholars throughout Christendom. Erasmus was alive to the potential of the new printing press to make available to the growing literate class, outside the universities, new editions of the works of Augustine, Jerome and the Cappadocian Fathers. He felt most at home in the printing press of friends such as John Froben, of Basel.

Erasmus was no mere scholar, though. He had a vision of a less cluttered Church and of a spirituality that gave worth and dignity to daily life, to the personal and communal work and relationships of ordinary people. He thought that the ploughman in the field should have direct access to the songs and prayers of the faith. He had a feel, too, for the folly of the Gospel. One of his most famous and witty books is *The Praise of Folly*. He wrote: "Christ seems to take his greatest delight in little children, women and fishermen."

In Erasmus sophistication was yoked to a yearning for simplicity, *innocentia*. Discipleship was not about a retreat from the world, about "being religious", but about following the way of Jesus in the world. Key words for him were harmony, moderation, peacemaking. He said that mercenary warfare and the pursuit of martial glory were a dreadful curse. He condemned them in memorable terms: "Princes display brawn rather than intelligence."

Today we could learn much from his passion for good communication. One of his intriguing insights is that conversation comes alive not through clever words on the lips of the speaker, or through the attentive ears of the listener, but in the space between. He had a profound awareness of the dynamics involved in a real meeting of minds. One mark of true humanity, he believed, was civility — patient listening to the viewpoint of those who differ from us — real dialogue. In the bitter controversies on everything from domestic to religious to political matters much could be achieved, he believed, if only those involved would agree to sit around a table in a respectful and prayerful manner.

Erasmus could wield an acidic pen. He had no patience with pomp and ceremony, a purely outward piety. He fiercely criticised Renaissance bishops and popes, such as Julius II, for their neglect of pastoral and theological matters and their participation in military campaigns. A savage satire, almost

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Portrait of Erasmus by Hans Holbein the Younger [Wikipedia]

MARTIN LUTHER
Let the Word Run Free

PETER MATHESON **situates Martin Luther in his historical context and discusses his contribution to the Reformation.**

Who was Martin Luther? What motivated him? How do we account for his massive impact on the world of his time? How has our understanding of him changed since Vatican Council II?

With someone as controversial as the Augustinian friar Martin Luther, it is impossible to be objective. I am an historian by trade and also a Protestant, so I cannot escape my own background and perspectives. Maybe the key question is: What can we all, Catholic and Protestant, learn from Luther today?

After a lifetime studying this early modern period of history when the very foundations of European society and culture were shaken, I feel less and less confident that there are quick and easy answers to the questions we pose.

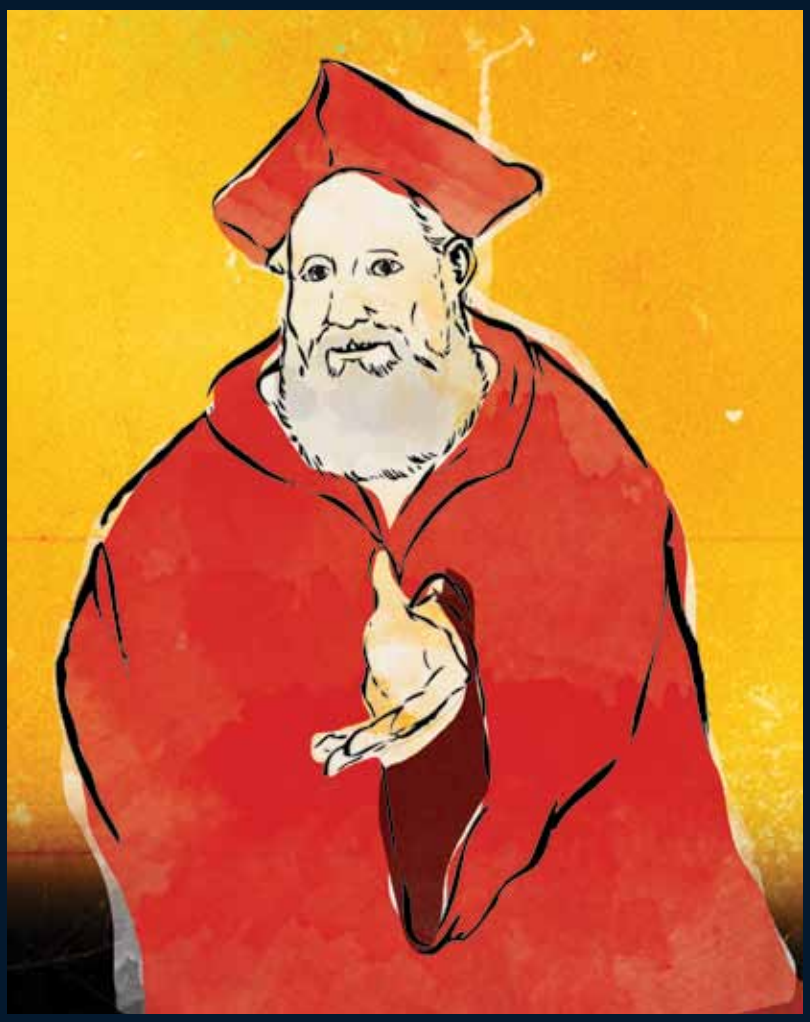
The 1500s were a different world from ours. Unlike today, virtually no one doubted the Christian faith. The sacramental life of the Church, with its priestly and pastoral care, accompanied everyone from birth to death. Worship flowed from churches into the streets in processions, and pilgrimages and festivals gave shape to the year. In older European towns today we can still see images of the saints on every house corner and little chapels dotting the hillsides. In the towns every trade, from

Inspiring Cardinal Gasparo Contarini

PETER MATHESON tells how Cardinal Contarini tried unsuccessfully to reform the papal bureauocracy and reconcile the Church and Protestants.

When we think of the Reformation our mind naturally turns to Germany and Martin Luther. However, reform movements were active not only in Germany but in the Netherlands, in Spain, in France and not least in Italy, and were active well before Luther appeared.

The theological issues, moreover, which were so fundamental for Luther, the role of the Bible, the central message of Paul and the primacy of grace and faith in penance and justification, were widely discussed within Catholic study groups in monasteries, court circles, civic sodalities and universities throughout Europe. Humanist scholars, as we have seen in the case of Erasmus, were determined to reform spirituality by a return to the ethos of the Early Church, to the world of Scripture and of the Greek and Latin Fathers. A particular interest was the letters of St Paul. This biblical focus was often associated with a drive to improve the education of the clergy and to reform absenteeism, simony, pluralism and other abuses in church structures.



I remember when I was a young lecturer how astonished Church of Scotland candidates in Edinburgh were when they discovered that in the early decades of the 16th-century there were groups of Catholic evangelicals in Italy and elsewhere, both clergy and laity, men and women, all eagerly reading Paul's epistles. They were still more surprised to find that one of Pope Paul III's leading advisers, Cardinal Gasparo Contarini, was a keen advocate of justification by faith.

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Leader of Spirituali

Gasparo Contarini (1483–1542), of a Venetian aristocratic family, was influenced in his youth by the civic humanism widespread in Italy. Even as a layperson he had combined a passion to reform the pastoral and educational work of the Church with personal study of Scripture and particularly the Pauline letters.

His understanding of justification by faith, which he shared with a varied and influential circle of friends, led him to be critical of the view that our salvation was assured by the performing of meritorious good works. The Jesuit scholar, Hubert Jedin, was one of the first to identify the group of Catholic evangelicals around Contarini, sometimes called the *"spirituali"*. They were to be found in many Italian cities, such as Rome itself, Naples, Milan, Modena and Lucca. They included Cardinals Reginald Pole and Giovanni Morone, both of whom were to have considerable influence at the Council of Trent, and prominent noblewomen such as Giulia Gonzaga and Vittoria Colonna. Other countries harboured similar groupings, for example, those around Jacques Lefèsvre in France.

Reform Plans for Curia

As a Venetian diplomat Contarini, who is widely regarded as the leading figure of the *spirituali*, became aware of the strength of the reforming movements in Germany and saw the reform of the Papacy, especially its civil service, the *Curia*, as urgently necessary. Such reform, he and his associates thought, would be a first step toward pursuing the possibility of an understanding with the Lutherans, thus restoring the unity of the Church. Pope Paul III appointed Contarini as a cardinal in 1535. From that time on he headed up a reforming group which sought

to regain the unity of the Church by dialogue with the moderate elements within Lutheranism. In 1536 he was actively involved in the *consilium de emendanda ecclesia*, a commission which suggested far-reaching reforms in the Curia, the papal bureaucracy. Unfortunately, conservative opposition scuttled its proposals.

Hope for Peace with Protestants

Then in 1541 the emperor, Charles V, weary of the incessant wars with France which divided Christendom and aware of the serious threat of Turkish advances in the east, launched a serious attempt at a reconciliation with the Protestants.

> *His letters breathe a spirit of warm humanity and a humble desire to be of service to the Church he loved. He was also aware that many of the forces opposing an ecumenical solution were non-theological, driven by political and self-interested concerns.*

His aim was a more united empire. His Chancellor, Granvelle, deployed the Erasmian idea of a learned colloquy of theologians, who were to report on the possibility of theological agreement or at least a degree of tolerance of different views to the Reichstag or Imperial Parliament. Charles V summoned the Reichstag to Regensburg on the Danube in 1541 and it opened with a magnificent *Corpus Christi* procession through the city.

Contarini was appointed by Paul III to the delicate task of being the papal representative to the Reichstag and he encouraged the Catholic theologians, Johann Eck, Julius Pflug and Johann Gropper to explore the possibility of an agreement with the Lutherans, including Luther's closest colleague, Philip Melanchthon.

Despite deep scepticism on the part of Luther in Wittenberg and of opponents in Rome, an agreement was actually reached by the Catholic and Lutheran collocutors on the central doctrine of justification. Faith formed by love was the formula that satisfied all sides. In his report to Rome Contarini included a heartfelt "*dio laudato*". John Calvin, who was an observer in Regensburg, was also impressed. In his view the agreement accorded "with the essentials of our true teaching".

And, in fact, this was a truly remarkable achievement after two decades of bitter polemic warfare between Protestant and Catholic. It was one not to be repeated until the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between Catholics and Lutherans in 1999 — some 450 years later!

When discussion proceeded to the sacraments and to the magisterial authority of the Church, however, no agreement proved possible. The Chancellor, Granvelle, was not even able to obtain any undertaking to tolerate differing views.

Reconcilation Failed

After returning to Italy Contarini died in 1542, some said of a broken heart, and the hopes of the *spirituali* for reconciliation with the Lutherans (and the increasingly important Calvinists) effectively died with him. The Council of Trent (1545–63) ended such mediatory attempts. Under Pope Paul IV many of the *spirituali* began to be harried by the Inquisition. The era of the Counter-Reformation had begun.

However, Contarini's life and thought illustrate the variety, subtlety and attractiveness of pre-Tridentine Catholicism and this raises in tantalising form the question whether the Reformation schism was inevitable.

Contarini was not, perhaps, an original thinker, but he was a skilled diplomat, originally in the service of Venice. He knew his world. His letters breathe a spirit of warm humanity and a humble desire to be of service to the Church he loved. His personal piety was deep and he originally considered entering monastic life. Yet he was convinced, as he once put it, that the basic insight of Luther was a Catholic one, the *fundamento* of Lutheranism was *verissimo*, was "spot on". He had no sympathy at all with an understanding of salvation based on meritorious good works. He was also aware that many of the forces opposing an ecumenical solution were non-theological, driven by political and self-interested concerns. The Bavarian Dukes were a case in point.

On the other hand he was genuinely shocked at Regensburg to find that even moderate Protestants such as Bucer and Melanchthon had views on the Mass and on the nature of the Church which for him were totally unacceptable. Occasionally authors have portrayed him as a crypto-Lutheran but this is as nonsensical as dismissing him as an unrealistic dreamer. Peacemakers are often vilified by both sides. I suspect that many of us, whether Catholic or Protestant, would wish that his policies had prevailed. He was truly an admirable person who continues to inspire us today. ■

Illustration by Lilly Warrenson and Daniel Ido

candle makers to goldsmiths, had its brotherhood with sacred obligations to their members, living and dead. Personal piety flourished and this was long before Luther's vernacular Bibles circulated.

Understanding Luther's Role in His Time

The idea that Luther swept into prominence because the Old Church was dead and decadent is simply nonsense. Instead, we need to understand Luther and his reforms as part of a much wider reform movement, which coursed through the monasteries, lay people and clergy.

Today historians agree that there was considerable continuity between the late medieval period and the Reformation. Luther's theology and reformist ideas are inconceivable without considering his formation in monastic life and scholasticism (the theology of the universities), and the enthusiasm for biblical studies of Catholic scholars, such as Erasmus, Contarini and the French theologian, Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples.

Luther — Monk, Teacher, Scholar, Preacher

Luther was ordained a priest in 1505 and lived conscientiously as an Augustinian monk and teacher. Luther has been described as a curious character, a bundle of contradictions: by turns charitable, priggish, humble and dismissive. His initial popularity lay in his little devotional writings. The fiercely anti-papal Luther who developed later was very different from how he began. Though he later left the monastery, married and had theological differences with Rome, he never lost his profound reverence for the Mass. He remained a life-long lover of the Psalms, of the Hebrew Bible and of the New Testament. He prayed, wrote and studied the Bible and preached and translated the Scriptures from Latin into German. His passion was biblical — to let the Word run free. Although he became a reformer, he never intended to found a new Church. Unlike others, for example Calvin, he did not think systematically about the structures of the Church. Indeed a legitimate criticism of him is that he was a poor planner. If we follow his progress from 1517 when his 95 theses about indulgences appeared, to 1521 when he defied the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, at the Diet, or Imperial Parliament of Worms, it is clear that he did his thinking on the run.

Necessity of the Reformation

Today we can discuss the tragic necessity of the Reformation. We cannot close our eyes to the damage done by the intransigent response of the Roman Curia to the genuine issues raised by Luther about the true nature of penitence. While the Renaissance Papacy had many virtues, not least its patronage of the arts, under the Borgia and the Medici popes it had become embroiled in politics and lost touch with the Church's pastoral priorities. Therefore, a perfect storm arose when the theological issues raised by Luther melded with lay people's grievances about such matters as absentee priests. These were effectively voiced in the floods of pamphlets, vivid woodcuts and broadsheets issuing from the new printing press.

The unfortunate attempt to silence and intimidate Luther both radicalised him and made him into something of a national hero. For the first time in European history public opinion made its voice heard and the movement for a root and branch reform of the Church became unstoppable.

Luther's Insights Still Challenge Us

Today we have a remarkable convergence in Catholicism and Lutheranism around Luther's key doctrine of justification by faith. A growing number of Protestants are critical of many aspects of Luther, for example, his rather uncritical acceptance of social hierarchies, his intolerant polemic against the Anabaptists, his anti-Judaic writings. Perhaps, though, we can agree that his greatest contribution to us today is his courageous commitment to the truth of the Gospel as he saw it, and his marvellous skills as a linguist, translator and interpreter of the Bible. It will be exciting if we can move beyond demonising or heroising him to seeing him as a man of his time, yet also as someone whose critical insights transcend his time and are still with us. ■

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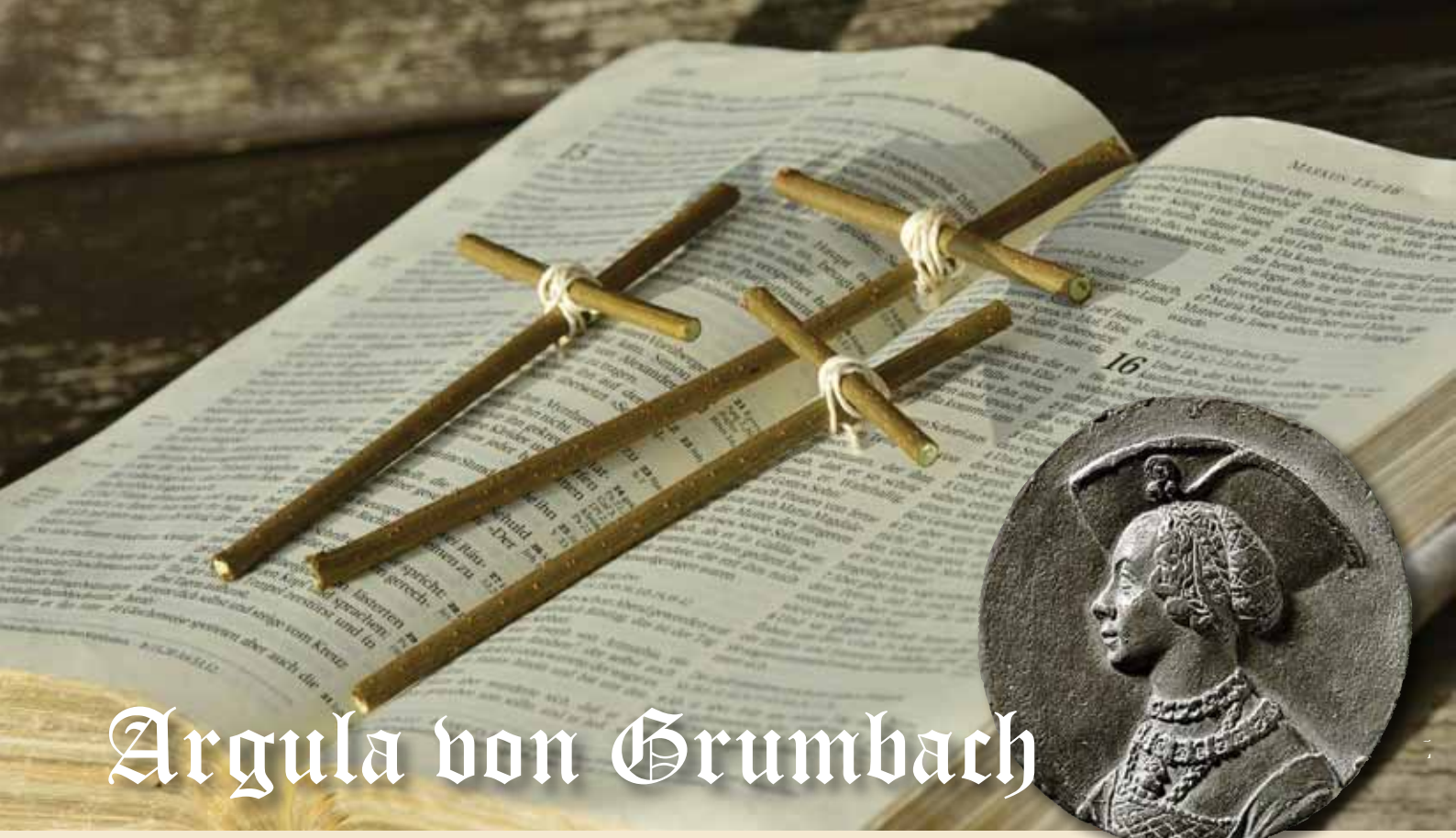

Argula von Grumbach

PETER MATHESON **describes the story of Argula von Grumbach, Protestantism's first woman reformer.**

Don't be put off by the obscure name. Argeluse was one of the noble ladies of King Arthur's Round Table and our Bavarian noblewoman, Argula, was named after her. Argula von Grumbach (1492–ca 1554) grew up in a whirl of chivalric jousting and story-telling in the beautiful rolling countryside around the proud castle of her ancestors, the Ehrenfels, or "rock of honour", now an impressive ruin in the romantic little village of Beratzhausen. I've attended Mass in the lovely baroque church, there. On the western wall is an impressive monument to her grandfather, Johann von Stauff. History is palpable at every corner.

In the Otago University Library there's an illustrated page from the magnificent Koberger Bible, which was presented to Argula as a 10-year-old by her father, Bernhardin. It reminds us of the skill of early printers, and that German translations of the Bible circulated in Germany long before Luther appeared.

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Early Life

Young Argula's university, so to speak, was the glittering Munich Court, where she learned to hold her own with the high and mighty of her world. Here, too, she became a superb wordsmith, as we will see. She was educated alongside the future princes of Bavaria.

In 1510 she married Fritz (as he was called) von Grumbach, and moved to the tiny village of Lenting, which has just commissioned a statue to her. These were rough, tough times. It wasn't a great match, but her parents had both died of the plague, and after civil war her once prestigious family was in financial toils. Her uncle, Jerome, was even beheaded for alleged treason — a put-up job! But she held her head high.

As a young mother of four she ran the household, got some order into the chaotic finances, and rode side-saddle around the distant estates of her incompetent husband, organising the spring sowing and the autumn harvest and wine-making. We have fascinating lists of the foods and spices and clothes she ordered for the kitchen and household.

She also built up an impressive network of friends, many of them women. She was to need that support.

Influenced by Reformers

In the early 1520s she became part of a little group of lay people and nuns who began sharing and reading Luther's pamphlets. Her brothers, too, had links with the Saxon court and with a Lutheran noble Bohemian family. The University of Ingolstadt, on the Danube, was just two hours walk from her little village of Lenting. (I know this, because I've walked there through the grain fields.) Argula knew a young student at the University who had been to Wittenberg. He was arrested by the University authorities for spreading Lutheran ideas and then tried for heresy. Under huge pressure, he recanted. That was nothing very unusual or surprising.

What was utterly surprising was Argula's reaction. She was so outraged at this repression — "shaking in my

whole body", as she put it — that she, a mere woman, challenged the Ingolstadt professors to a public debate about the legitimacy of their actions.

"I have no Latin," she wrote, "but you have German." Did Jesus go about persecuting those who disagreed with him, she asked? Of course, women at this time had no access at all to universities — and far less the right to debate with learned professors.

Taking a Courageous Stand

Within a few months her biblically-based protest letter had appeared in print in 17 editions, being reprinted up and down Germany. Uproar resulted. Her husband, a ducal administrator, was dismissed from office. Argula herself was threatened with being walled up in a tower, or having her fingers chopped off — even with death.

But many hailed her as a prophetic figure. "This is scarcely credible," one supporter wrote, "something very rare for the female sex, and completely unheard of in our times." Six other writings flowed from her pen within a year, calling for reform not only of the Church, but of the legal system, of education and of the loose sexual mores of the nobility.

Argula Rediscovered

I got onto Argula by accident. While researching for something different, I stumbled on a poem she wrote to refute lewd attacks on her, and was so fascinated that I dropped everything else and eventually published a translation of all of her writings. Later I produced a critical edition of her works and wrote biographies of her in English and German, based on an usually rich collection of her family papers.

My personal Bible is dotted with marks to show her countless quotations from the prophets and the Gospels. I now read the Scriptures, so to speak, with her eyes.

I guess what fascinated me initially was Argula's courage. "I am compelled," she said, *gezwungen*, to speak up. As a baptised Christian she felt she had no choice. She had to confess her faith, whatever the cost. "I cannot and I will not cease to speak at home and in the street."

But I soon noticed that she read the Bible in a new way, with a woman's eye, and obviously her insight fascinated the thousands of readers who read her little pamphlets. Her theological mentor, Osiander, also published a writing of the Abbess, Hildegard of Bingen. Argula became a vocal advocate of reform in the German parliaments, or Reichstage, in Nuremberg and then in the famous gathering in Augsburg in 1530.

This was quite extraordinary, of course, at a time when women were supposed to keep to their house and kitchen. Luther himself met Argula and wrote a personal dedication of his little printed book of prayers to her. Finding this copy and holding it in my hands was one of my greatest thrills as a historian.

Living With Sorrow

Increasingly, though, I became aware of the tragic dimensions in Argula's life. Her husband, Fritz, died young and her second husband died shortly after their marriage in Prague. She fought a losing battle against the hard-drinking and violent mores of the German nobility at the time.

Despite getting the best possible teachers for her children, including her daughter, Apollonia, her eldest son got into a feud and died young; her second son was murdered; and Apollonia died early too. There is a moving letter about Apollonia's lengthy illness. Of her four children only Gottfried survived her.

My wonderful Catholic colleague in Bavaria, Elisabeth Spitzenberger, has discovered recently in the archives heart-rending material about the family quarrels (nothing to do with religion) which forced Argula in her extreme old age, already mortally ill, out of her family home. It was a brutal time.

Remembering Argula Today

Argula's, then, is no glossy success story. Yet her memory was preserved by a thin line of witnesses down the centuries, and now schools and hostels are named after her. There is even an Argula von Grumbach bicycle tour around the little villages in which she lived.

She is honoured not only for her courage, but for her critique of censorship and for her biblical insight. As she wrote: "Ah, but what a joy it is when the Spirit of God teaches us and gives us understanding, flitting from one text to the next." How astonished she would be that she is now remembered in distant New Zealand. ■

Medallion: Argula von Grumbach by Hans Schwarz (www.heiligenlexikon.de/BiographienA/Argula_von_Grumbach.html) [Wikimedia]

The Peasants' War by Constantine Émile Meunier.

THOMAS MÜNTZER
and the Radical Reformation 1489-1525

Priest, preacher, mystic, and a leader in the Peasants' War, Thomas Müntzer (1489-1525) is perhaps the single most controversial figure in the entire Reformation. He died young, having been captured, tortured and executed after the bloody battle of Frankenhausen in 1525; thousands of artisans, peasants and miners were mown down by the princely army.

Young Thomas studied in various universities in Germany, was ordained priest, associated himself with the reformation movement, moved around to some 50 different towns in the exciting but stressful early years of the Reformation, and wrote a rather beautiful Eucharistic liturgy for his parishioners in the little town of Allstedt. Finally, he was swept into the uprising of peasants and artisans in 1524-5. This Peasants' War was the greatest social upheaval in Europe before the French Revolution.

For a long time, communist East Germany hailed Müntzer as a heroic battler for the rights of the common people, a sort of founding father of their state communism. Meanwhile most Lutherans, following Martin Luther himself, were appalled, regarding him as a wild dreamer, a blood-thirsty radical who had brought the Gospel into utter disrepute by politicising it.

In June of this year a scholarly edition of his writings was finally launched in Leipzig, following two other weighty volumes devoted to his letters and the background of his life. It has taken us nearly 500 years to approach his life and his thought in this measured and fair way. My privilege has been to translate his fascinating letters and writings into English, with the help of two marvellous colleagues, Tom Scott and Siegfried Bräuer. His German is notoriously difficult, and it took me some 10 years, on and off, to complete the task.

Why spend so much time and effort on this one individual? Well, as we have seen before, the Reformation was not a one-man band. Erasmus, Contarini, the woman reformer Argula, all had their special insights, as well as the more

famous Martin Luther. So it's important, simply in order to illustrate this variety, to give a hearing to this controversial Christian, even if Luther saw him as Satanic! But there's more to it than that. He really gets under my skin. I love his language. I admire his courage. Perhaps we could best describe him as spelling out some of the *revolutionary* implications of the Christian Gospel.

He had a passion for ordinary people, the "clumsy, gnarled people", mostly illiterate, who were his parishioners. So he tried to talk their language, wrote hymns and prayers for them. He thought too many academics lived in ivory towers: "We talk big about the truth, write great tomes littered with blots, but spend our days in empty quarrels and in worrying about material things." Ouch!

He thought, too, that those in power were ruthless tyrants and enlisted religion to convince ordinary folk to obey them. "Our lords are violent, they flay and fleece the poor farm-worker, tradesman and everyone alive, but as soon as any of the latter commits some petty theft, our lords act the hangman. If saying that makes me an inciter to insurrection that's just too bad." Society simply had to change, he believed. "The old remedies won't fit any more." He saw the discontent of the peasants as part of a great cosmic, apocalyptic struggle between good and evil.

At heart, though, he was a pastor. Yes, like the early Christians he seems to have believed that property should be held in common. But first must come the change in heart. We cannot set out to change the world until we ourselves are changed.

So he taught his people a popular mysticism based on his reading of the medieval mystics, especially Tauler and Suso. Each of us must allow the Holy Spirit to purge us in the depths, in the abyss of our heart. He used homely images like the fish diving down into the dark depths of the pool and then rising up again. This led him to an exciting new way of viewing Scripture. We can't just appropriate the words of the patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles. We can't parrot them like some magic formula. "Scripture must come to pass in every person." What I think he meant by that is

First must come the change in heart. We cannot set out to change the world until we ourselves are changed.

that we all have to find our own way of experiencing what Abraham, or Jeremiah or Paul experienced of the trials and exaltations of the Spirit before we throw their words around. Müntzer was an interpreter of dreams. He talked the language of visions. We are all called, he argued, to share in the suffering of Christ. Too much easy preaching of mere words, of grace, of the "sweet Christ" and we will "eat ourselves sick of honey."

Today, as we struggle to do justice to Scripture, I find this approach very timely. Likewise, as we seek to understand how poverty is linked to a disordered understanding of creation, Müntzer's warnings hit home.

There is a puritan dimension to Müntzer's thought which many of us will find alien. And his dualistic division of the world into the godly and the wicked, his legitimation of violence to overthrow unjust structures, needs a long, hard, critical look. We can't swallow him whole! Indeed none of these Reformation figures should be put on a pedestal. Provided we listen carefully to their concerns, we can be discriminating in what we accept and what we reject.

I know of countless Catholic scholars working on Luther, but not a single one studying Müntzer. Let's hope that changes. He is a rough diamond all right. But let me close with a verse from one of his Eucharistic hymns, for in the end of the day it is the trail of language, stretching from then to now, their time to ours, which is the greatest gift left by our forebears in the faith:

Take then the body of the Lord
And as the Spirit strikes a chord
Within our hearts true God we know,
And godly love begins to glow.
On his vine,
His Spirit mine
His body given as the sign. ■

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certainly written by him, portrayed Pope Julius being "excluded from heaven". Erasmus and his followers campaigned for a better educated clergy and lampooned the pluralism, absenteeism and other abuses of the upper clergy. They also believed that proportions and priorities had been lost in much popular and superstitious piety. He said: "You could rush off to Rome or Compostela and buy up a million indulgences, but in the last analysis there is no better way of reconciling yourself with God than reconciling yourself with your neighbour."

His concern for the unity of the Church distanced Erasmus from Luther — who described him, predictably, as a "slippery eel". However, the truth is that their aims and perspectives were rather different. Erasmus stood for a gradual reform of the Church which would be achieved by a better educated clergy and by nudging the laity towards a personal, inward faith. For him the worst evil was hardness of heart and the best remedy — self-knowledge.

Erasmus also had his faults. He could be vain and twitchy when criticised. Some would say that he had scant appreciation of the sacramental and mystical life of the Church and tended to reduce the Gospel to a moral code. But like his great model, the 4th-century Church Father, Jerome, his long-term influence was benign and lasting. The humanist spirit he personified has nothing in common with modern humanism. His concern was profoundly religious and his championing of tolerance and moderation come close to what we would see today as a humane and liberal outlook.

We can glimpse his understanding and hope in his words: "Christian mercy should not be of the ordinary kind. God is appeased by several forms of sacrifice, spiritual hymns, songs, prayers, watchings, fastings, poor clothing; but no sacrifice is more effective than mercy towards your neighbour. Since we continually need God's mercy in all things, we should always try to relieve each other with mutual mercy and to bear one another's burdens. With one heart and one mind we shall sing eternally that the mercy of the Lord surpasses all his works." ■