



# I.

## On the Threshold of the Modern Era

In the most common current division of the epochs of European history, the turn from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century is seen as the threshold between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era. The boundaries of epochs are certainly subject to discussion, and Martin Luther is an essential part of such discussions because the Reformation, which he set in motion, began a new era in the history of the Western church. If we take into account the central significance of church and Christendom in the medieval world, the choice of the year 1500 as the boundary between eras seems increasingly plausible. A perspective from outside Europe and one less interested in church history may well draw that line somewhere else.

The world into which Martin Luther was born was in upheaval. That is true of most historical epochs, but it applies to Luther's time in extreme measure. Earlier research repeatedly emphasized the crisis-nature of the time, for the late Middle Ages as a whole and especially for the church. The fifteenth century had echoed with calls for a reform of the church "in head and members." But despite the crisis situation this church was at the same time altogether vital. Old and new, upheaval and holding fast, crisis and flowering jostled one another everywhere.

Society, Politics, and the Economy *circa* 1500

Conditions in central Germany formed the external frame for the first thirty-five years of Luther's life. The tiny county of Mansfeld, Luther's home, between the Harz and the Saale, was part of the larger domain ruled by the House of Wettin at the end of the fifteenth century. The counts of Mansfeld struggled to maintain their independence against the powerful and economically potent territorial state of Wettin, which was expanding its influence in every direction. The Treaty of Leipzig in 1485 split the Wettin lands between the brothers Ernst and Albrecht, forming the Ernestine electorate and the Albertine dukedom of Saxony.

This was the situation Luther knew. The county of Mansfeld, itself divided into three parts after 1501, was surrounded not only by the Albertine and Ernestine realms but also by spiritual and other secular divisions: the archbishoprics of Magdeburg, Merseburg, and Halberstadt were its immediate neighbors, along with the principality of Anhalt and the county of Stolberg. Luther's home region was divided into small sections and politically splintered.

This region, near the center of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, was at the end of the Middle Ages one of the aspiring parts of the empire. The discovery of silver deposits in the Harz mountains in the years after 1470 was an essential factor in the rise

The family castle of the Wettins, first attested in 961, now located in Saxony-Anhalt. From an etching by Ludwig Friedrich, 1888.



of the Wettins. They also had an interest in the copper mines in the county of Mansfeld, but the local counts claimed the rights of use. Mining played an important role in Luther's family also. The exploitation of the natural resources accompanied the expansion of an early mercantile capitalism, which in turn promoted the economic boom that took place during Luther's lifetime.

From the end of the fifteenth century onward the population of Germany increased steadily, but wealth was unevenly divided among places and social classes. Particular centers of economic activity were found in the large imperial cities of southern Germany such as Augsburg or Nuremberg, with their mercantile associations, active on a worldwide basis, the best known of them including the Fuggers and Welsers. Their mercantile relationships extended far beyond the borders of the empire into the Baltic, northern and western Europe, and to some extent already to the colonies on the other side of the Atlantic. The economic balance shifted steadily from upper Italy to western and northwestern Europe (the Netherlands, northern France, England, and Spain), and within the empire to southern Germany and Saxony. Luther's local ruler, Elector Frederick the Wise, was one of the wealthiest princes in Germany.

Around 1500 the social conditions in central Germany, as elsewhere, were marked by two fundamental characteristics: the steady expansion of society and its overwhelmingly agrarian structure. Ninety percent of the population lived on the land. The mass of farmers existed as best they could; even small economic crises and rising levies threatened their very existence and, in the course of the fifteenth century, repeatedly led to peasant revolts. Still, it would be wrong to speak of general impoverishment or overall lack of freedom among the people of the land. Legal

and economic conditions varied quite widely from region to region. There was no acute crisis around 1500.

The lesser nobility, in part, lived lives that were not very different from those of the peasants. They, too, had no economic leeway, but the loss of their functions was still more threatening. The self-concept and self-confidence of the nobility rested essentially on service in the army and at the princely court, but both areas were being invaded around 1500 by other social groups. It was no longer the noble army, but paid troops of mercenaries who filled the battlefields, and the nobility were being increasingly shouldered aside at court by bourgeois citizens educated in the law. There were scarcely any alternative activities for the nobles, since business and commerce were not befitting their rank. All that remained, for many, was a kind of Robin Hood existence in the style of a Götze von Berlichingen<sup>1</sup> or the attempt to raise money at the expense of the peasants.

City life was blooming around 1500. The major imperial cities were not only centers of commerce and business but also of crafts, arts, and culture. They were hubs of information. Here stood the great printing presses, which for the first time made it possible to bring printed materials to the people cheaply and in great numbers. There was a reading public in the cities to consume these writings. In 1521 there were eighty-six imperial cities. Besides large, rich communities like Augsburg, Nuremberg, Strasbourg, Frankfurt am Main, or Cologne, there were tiny cities like Zell am Harmersbach in the Black Forest. Size and wealth were indispensable for a city attached to the empire, that is, directly subordinate to the emperor and the empire. Within the Wettin sphere of influence lay two of the smaller imperial cities, Mühlhausen and Nordhausen.

It is a mistake to try to apply modern ideas of statehood to the empire at the end of the Middle Ages. In essence, it was still the medieval “state of personal associations” based on individual legal relationships, especially the system of feudal law and investiture that linked the emperor with the princes. We can get a realistic picture of the empire by examining actual participation in imperial politics. Those who took part in the imperial Diets, paid the imperial levies, and submitted to the rulings of the imperial courts considered themselves part of the empire. Beyond that, the Italian- and French-speaking regions, as well as Bohemia, with Silesia and Moravia, had only loose connections to the empire—if any. Treaty partners also, after the end of the fifteenth century, no longer felt themselves obligated to the empire. Something similar was true of the Habsburg Netherlands, including Burgundy.

View of the city of Augsburg in Hartmann Schedel's *Buch der Chroniken*, 1493.

Head of the empire was the emperor. In Luther's lifetime there were three emperors of the Habsburg line: Frederick III (King of Rome, 1440; Emperor 1452–1493); Maximilian I (King of Rome, 1486; Emperor 1508–1519); and Charles V (King of Rome and Emperor 1519–1556; see p. [110]). Of these, only the third played an important role in Luther's life. Alongside the emperor, whose powers one should not overestimate, there were the imperial orders, which numbered especially the Electors, the spiritual and secular princes, and the imperial cities. These orders were both opponents and partners of the emperor. They were included in the process of making political decisions, though with differing degrees of importance. The \*Worms Register of 1521 numbered 383 imperial orders subject to duties; membership in an order carried with it the right to participate in the Diet, with seat and voice.



The class of Electors had been defined in 1356 by the “Golden Bull,” and in the sixteenth century still included the three spirituals then named (the archbishops of Mainz, Cologne, and Trier), and four secular Electors (the King of Bohemia, the Count Palatine on the Rhine, the Duke of Saxony, and the Margrave of Brandenburg). The Electors were elevated over the mass of other princes by having the right to act as royal electors, but besides that, the political system of the empire accorded them special prestige. Spiritual and secular princes were distinguished not by the character of their office but primarily by the fact that spiritual princes succeeded through election, secular princes through inheritance. Otherwise, sixteenth-century bishops were sovereigns over their lands just like secular lords. The bishop was a two-fold person; his office had both a spiritual and a secular side: lord of the manor in his castle,

shepherd in his diocese. The secular princes were less numerous in the sixteenth century than the spiritual (24 in 1521). They included the counts, landgraves, counts palatine, and margraves, but also the group of less-powerful counts and lords, these last concentrated in the traditional lands of the empire associated with the king: Swabia, Franconia, the middle Rhine, and the district of the Main. The counts of Mansfeld were also part of the imperial order and were permitted to participate in the Diet.

The Diet was the most important forum for regulating all the concerns of the empire (government and administration, justice and the military, finance and foreign policy, but especially defense against the Turks and confessional conflicts). Diets played a part again and again in Martin Luther’s biography, because here decisions were made that decisively shaped the course of the Reformation (see p. [114]).

In 1519 the Electors chose Charles of Spain to be emperor. Charles ruled a world empire; German matters were never more than side issues. That had major consequences for Luther. Maximilian I had already pursued a Europe-wide polity and linked the house of Habsburg to the Spanish crown. The major European power struggle, between the Habsburgs and France, played out in the last years of the fifteenth century and shaped European politics for two and a half centuries. Charles V was at war with France throughout his life, and for that reason he was absent from the empire for a long period in the 1520s and 1530s, so that he had to defer to the independent-minded members of the imperial orders.

The Ottoman expansion in the eastern Mediterranean was the second basic foreign political constant of Luther’s time. The Turkish peril, creeping closer and closer to the borders of the empire, preoccupied Luther throughout his



life, though for theological, not political reasons. Europe's outreach across the ocean to the New World, by contrast, left him remarkably unmoved. His perspective was above all central German, then German, then European, but scarcely global in the then-familiar sense.

### Church and Piety in Germany

Martin Luther's world was confusing. The same was true of church and piety, which older Lutheran literature liked to paint in particularly dark colors for the time around 1500, to make the Reformation shine all the more brightly. But caution is in order here. The outgoing fifteenth century was a time of light and shadows, an altogether pious period, but also—or for that very reason—a time in which the conviction that the church needed reforming was widely held. Throughout the fifteenth century there were calls for a reform of the church “in head and members.” But the resistance was powerful, and the forces of inertia prevailed. The attempt to change the church by means of \*reforming councils was unsuccessful. In the end, the papacy asserted itself against Conciliarism.

The picture in Germany around 1500 was also ambivalent. The church still regulated all

private and social arrangements, such as marriage, family, profession, class, and economy. It accompanied every step in life and offered answers to people's urgent questions. Even today the rebuilding or renovation of many late Gothic churches, their countless altars and artistic treasures, reveals the wealth of donations. Processions, pilgrimages, and the preaching of indulgences attracted high rates of participation around 1500. The church was experiencing a boom, in the empire more than anywhere else. Critique of the system, manifested in the formation of sects, had long vanished from Germany. The teachings of Jan Hus played virtually no continuing role within the empire. The call for a council as a way to church reform had fallen silent in Luther's time, after the failure of Conciliarism and the establishment of papal \*primacy.

The higher church offices were quite often accommodations for the nobility. A good many church officials in the empire lacked any kind of theological qualifications, nor did they have any spiritual inclinations. The consequence of the twofold character of episcopal office—a bishop was both imperial prince and cleric—was that interest in the secular side and the associated income and rights frequently outweighed the spiritual. On the level of the lower clergy as

#### Conciliarism and Church Reform

Conciliarism arose in the crisis years of the Great Western Schism (1378–1417), when two, and briefly even three, popes competed with each other. It rested on the idea that the supreme leadership of the church belonged to the ecumenical council, which was as responsible for ending the schism as for the overdue reform of the church. The call for

church reform “in head and members” was widespread in the fifteenth century. Because Conciliarism was ultimately defeated by \*Papalism or \*Curialism, there was no authority that could accomplish a reform of the “head” (the pope). But even the reform of the “members” (for example, combating clerical concubinage and the sale of offices) did not advance much, because of the papacy's rejection of reform.



Bust of Emperor Charles V by Leone Leoni, ca. 1555.

well, the parish priests, monks, and friars, the situation was worrisome. Incomes were collected and consumed, but the office to which they belonged was neglected. The practice of collecting \*benefices was widespread. Everyone wanted the lucrative posts, the fat benefices in large churches and monasteries, which in many cases drew to themselves the \*tithes that really belonged to the country priests. These local priests received the merest crumbs.

The moral failings of the secular and order clergy nourished a rampant anti-clericalism. The number of clerics freed from all levies and services was significant. \*Clerical concubinage and the sale of offices (\*simony) were widespread. Elimination of simony was one of the concerns of church reform, but it remained a fiction as long as Rome itself sought greedily for more and more new sources of revenue and descended into nepotism. But even though the late medieval church revealed obvious deficits and defects, alongside the practitioners of concubinage, the ruffians and drunkards, there were also clerics who took their offices seriously and fulfilled them with integrity.

It is sometimes said that with his attacks on the pope and curia Luther was going along with a widespread aversion to Rome, monasticism, and the worldly clergy, but the significance of the anti-clerical mood for the Reformation

should not be overestimated. Luther was not first of all a critic of the church, and certainly not of the clergy; he was a renewer of theology.

### Forerunners of the Reform

Martin Luther himself, and later Protestantism as well, appealed to the critics of the late medieval church as their forerunners. A view widely held in the nineteenth century that found artistic expression, for example, in Ernst Rietschel's monument to Luther in Worms Cathedral (1868), counted Peter Walde († ca. 1207), John Wycliffe (1330–1384), Jan Hus (1370–1415), and Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498) among the "forerunners of reform." The name implies that essential elements of Reformation doctrine were already represented by these personalities. The nineteenth century also spoke sometimes of "reformers before the Reformation," whereby the characters in question could number far more than the four just named, including, for example, representatives of late medieval pietism or the \**Devotio Moderna*. In fact, however, the late Middle Ages exhibit only aspects or segments of what was later so important for and typical of Luther, particularly a biblically-oriented piety and theology, a sharp critique of the pope, and a way of working close to the people, including translations of the Bible into the vernacular. Thus from an evangelical perspective the "pre-reformers" were indeed witnesses to the gospel, but they were not reformers in the full sense; from the Roman Catholic perspective they were simply heretics.



The Luther monument in Worms by Ernst Rietschel, unveiled in 1868, shows Luther in the center surrounded by the "pre-reformers" and companions.

To that extent he does belong within the broad current of late medieval church reform and pre-Reformation anti-clericalism, but that is not all he was. Luther's Reformation was not simply the continuation of the tedious efforts of the fifteenth century to achieve church reform.

The panorama of the world into which Luther was born would be incomplete if we were to ignore the intellectual stage he came to know, at the latest when he studied in Erfurt. The system of learning in the late medieval universities was shaped by Scholasticism (see p. [30]). The great minds of the past, such as Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, or William of Ockham still dominated theological discourse. Strife over the correct methods in scholarship raged in the universities.

Alongside Scholasticism as the intellectual form of engagement with God and the world, mysticism and pietist theology played an important role in late medieval monasteries and in the devotional lives of simple layfolk. Italian Humanism had finally reached Germany around 1500. Late medieval and early modern Humanism took many forms, but they had in common a turn to antiquity, including pagan antiquity. The retrieval of antiquity meant seeking new norms and forms oriented to ancient models. This could lead to conflicts with Christianity, though not necessarily. The studies pursued were called *studia humanitatis* or *humaniora*. The subjects of study were in part identical with the seven liberal arts taught in the \*faculties of arts, but now the focus was not on dialectics, as in Scholasticism, but on grammar (cultivation of classical Latin and Greek), rhetoric (Cicero), poetics (Virgil), and history. It was Humanism that first established knowledge of Greek and Hebrew as a solid base for theological study in Europe. The Humanist motto was: *ad fontes*—back to the sources! This

could also apply to the vernacular sources for one's own past. It was the Humanists who first developed techniques for source criticism. In all this, the goal was not so much preparation for the study of theology and more the cultivation of the human person through education.

The religious lives of the people must be distinguished from academic theology as cultivated in the universities. Suffering and death were a part of everyday life in the late Middle Ages. The imminent end of one's own life was a constant preoccupation. Explanations in terms of natural science were unavailable. Accidents

#### Europe in the 15th and 16th Centuries

- Territories of the House of Habsburg before 1477.
  - The Burgundian Inheritance, 1477.
  - The Spanish Inheritance, 1504/16
  - The Bohemian-Hungarian Inheritance 1626
  - The Personal Union with Portugal, 1580–1640
- [cross-hatched and edged areas represent disputed territories]

and catastrophes were dealt with in the light of Christian faith or superstition. Major epidemics, such as the Plague, which from the middle of the thirteenth century had swept over Europe in waves and carried away hordes of people, were interpreted as God's punishment for human sins, unfavorable constellations of stars, or the attacks of evil forces. Evil could be averted through penance, fasting, prayer, or attacking those supposed to be responsible, which is why there were regular pogroms against the Jews in times of crisis. The omnipresent danger to one's own life led



to an intensive focus on death and a penitential attitude on the one hand, to unbridled pleasures on the other. Under these conditions the

*ars moriendi* (art of dying) flourished; sudden death was the most horrible prospect, because it did not allow one to prepare.

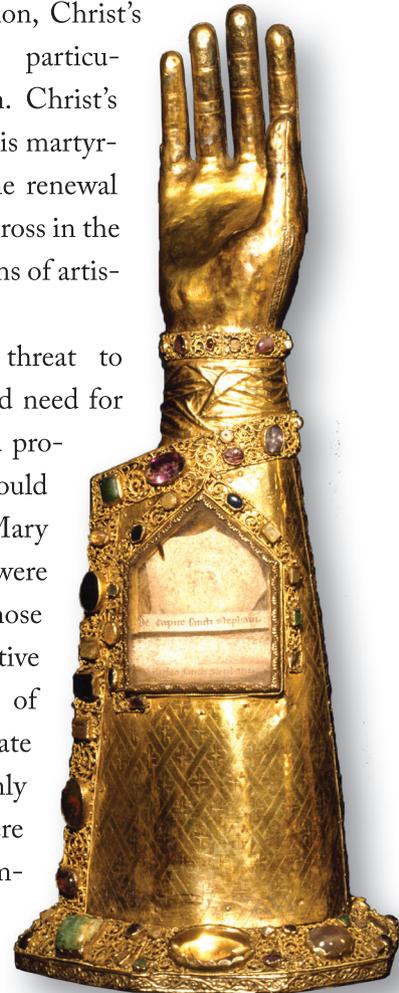
Ideas about what lay beyond death were widely varied. Attention was drawn not so much to Hell as a place of eternal damnation as to Purgatory, which was a fixed feature of church teaching from the high Middle Ages onward and was thought of as a place of purification through which the dead arrived at the judgment and, in the best case, reached Paradise. This was the origin of the doctrine of indulgences, because the purpose of an indulgence was to shorten one's time in purgatory. The end of the world was awaited with much the same tension as the end of one's own life. The book of Revelation served the late Middle Ages as a source for numerous speculations about the end-time. Preachers spoke to vast crowds about Christ's return and the establishment of his thousand-year reign, or the coming rule of the Antichrist (see p. [191]). Hans Behm of Niklashausen was one such messianic preacher, to whom a pilgrimage had developed before the bishop of Würzburg put an end to it in 1476 and had the Piper of Niklashausen executed.

There was an enormous deficit in religious instruction. Since the invention of printing, pious literature had spread like the wind. Religious festivals and rituals segmented the church year and so the human calendar as well; the church bells regulated daily life. It was a pious age, but often in problematic forms. Late medieval piety tended to excess. "More is better" was the motto; the hunger for holy things could scarcely be assuaged. At the center was the sacrifice of the Mass, with the changing of bread and wine, made visible by the \*elevation of the \*paten and chalice. The number of sacraments (seven) had been dogmatized by the Council of Florence in 1439, but the Mass, in which the ordained priest repeated Christ's sacrifice on

the cross, was the most important sacrament. The consecrated host was accorded the highest reverence, something clearly expressed in the artistic decoration of the tabernacles in Gothic churches. Ideas about \*transubstantiation, whereby the substance of bread and wine was transformed into the body and blood of Christ while the outward forms remained unchanged, were current everywhere. The feast of Corpus Christi was newly introduced in the late Middle Ages. Pilgrimages to the Holy Blood of Wilsnack in the Mark of Brandenburg drew thousands. Accounts of miraculous bleeding hosts circulated, but so did stories about sacrileges committed against the host. This late medieval sacramental piety was closely associated with devotion to the passion of Christ.

Before the Reformation, Christ's sufferings were the particular focus of devotion. Christ's wounds, the tools of his martyrdom, but above all the renewal of the sacrifice of the cross in the Mass evoked new forms of artistic expression of piety.

The omnipresent threat to life led to an increased need for the help, support, and protection that God could offer, but still more Mary and the saints. These were the mediators whose petitions were effective before God. The cult of the saints in the late Middle Ages was highly segmented. There were saints for every circumstance and need, for classes, cities, and



professions. Normally, newborns were named for the saint of the day. The legends of the saints collected in Jacques de Voragine's *Legenda aurea* were among the most-read texts of the Middle Ages. The cult of the saints was also associated with veneration of relics and with pilgrimages. Remains of the saints such as bones, hair, or teeth were collected, bought, exchanged, gifted, and stolen *en masse*. Reliquaries, in which the relics were housed and exhibited, became more and more elaborate and expensive. Indulgences

were associated with the viewing of relics. Touching a relic produced an immediately miraculous result.



The genuineness of relics was a question for faith; people did not worry much about the possibilities of fraud. Guidebooks described the relics available in particular places and at the same time urged visiting those places. The most famous example from Luther's area was the Wittenberg guide of Elector Frederick (1519), listing the relics to be seen in the Church of All Saints in Wittenberg.

The many feasts of Mary in the Christian calendar (including those celebrating her conception, birth, and assumption) encouraged a powerful Marian piety. Mary gave access to her Son, and her mother, Anne, to Mary herself. There was no precise theological explanation of Mary's importance, but Augustine had already excepted Mary from the realm of sin. Whether

that applied only to \*actual sins, that is, concrete faults, or to \*Original Sin as well remained a matter of debate.

The doctrine of Mary's immaculate conception became more and more important, and in the late Middle Ages it triumphed, together with its feast. The idea that Mary had been taken up bodily into heaven was widespread, but it was not dogmatized until 1950. Increased Marian piety of course brought with it the danger of excess and presented a problem for the exclusive mediation of salvation through Christ. Representations of Mary were omnipresent in late medieval art: the life of Mary, with a striking array of symbols of virginity, was one of the favorite artistic genres; the works of Schongauer and Grünewald are exemplary in this regard.

Three arm reliquaries, ca. 1225, from the collection in Halberstadt, one of the greatest church treasuries of the Middle Ages.

### The Curia

At the summit of the late medieval church stood the pope. The church territories, which had been growing since the early Middle Ages, included Venice, Milan, Florence, and Naples as well as the Italian part of the Pentarchy, the supposed governance of Christendom by the five major episcopal sees. The popes in the final years of

the fifteenth century were deeply involved in the shifting alliances and ongoing wars among the Italian states. Dynastic interests were as important to the papacy as they were for the secular rulers of the time, while spiritual duties were increasingly neglected. Since the pope was seen as an Italian territorial ruler, willingness to accept spiritual leadership from Rome declined.

The rising national states, especially France

Medieval people hoped, by buying indulgences, to shorten their time in Purgatory, here depicted in a detail of the painting "The Crowning of the Virgin" by Enguerrand Quarton, 1450.



### The Renaissance Papacy

The concept of the Renaissance papacy derived from the history of art and culture usually describes an epoch in papal history beginning with Nicholas V (1447–1455) and extending to the mid-sixteenth century. Since the popes did not lay aside their family interests the moment they were elected, nepotism was rife. The dominant secular view of office held by the popes expressed itself in sensual ways of life, pomposity, avarice, and political recklessness, but also in building endeavors and support of artists. Their family connections and relationships involved them deeply in the Italian power system, and they acted like secular potentates. Important Renaissance popes included Pius II (1458–1464), an important Humanist who in 1460 refused to call an ecumenical council and thus contributed

to the victory of Curialism over Conciliarism; Alexander VI (1492–1503), a member of the Borgia family, who fathered four children while he was a cardinal, among them the famous Cesare Borgia, one of the cruelest mercenary leaders (“Condottieri”) of his time and the model for Machiavelli’s “Prince,” and his no-less-infamous daughter Lucretia. It was during the reign of Pope Julius II (1503–1513) that Luther made his journey to Rome. He engaged most intensively with Leo X (1513–1521), one of the Medici, who ruled a considerable part of upper Italy from their base in Florence. It was Leo X who \*excommunicated Luther; hence he thereafter had no direct contact with Leo’s successors, Hadrian VI (1522/23), Clement VII (1523–1534), and Paul III (1534–1549).

and England, withdrew their churches from the financial control of the curia. As a consequence the papacy had to make up for falling revenues by turning to other sources, for example, \*annates, which the incumbent of a newly bestowed benefice had to pay to the pope, or fees for dispensations. All these were intended, like the sale of church offices, to bring cash into the treasury; in the case of offices they were sometimes created only so that they could be profitably sold. The avarice of the Roman curia was proverbial, and complaints of financial exploitation by Rome were widespread. This was the origin of the swelling grievances among German secular princes; at the Reichstag meetings long lists of complaints against Rome (the “Gravamina of the German Nation”) were drawn up, and in Rome they were regularly ignored.

The curia’s need for money grew steadily, for a late medieval princely court—and the Roman curia was nothing else—had to stand for something. Because of the decades-long residence of the popes in Avignon and the subsequent Great Western Schism, the fourteenth century marked a caesura in building activity in Rome. So there was a lot to make up for. The papacy participated in Renaissance culture with buildings, art works, music, theater, and festivals. Like the pope, the cardinals bore themselves as princes of the church. The type of the spiritual benefice-hunter who took every opportunity to secure sinecures through good contacts in the curia was very much in vogue.

It was this Renaissance papacy Martin Luther had to deal with when, in the fall of 1517, he was cited in Rome for opposing indulgences.