



BLESSED SACRAMENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

“So that we may obtain this [justifying] faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted.” — Augsburg Confession, V. “Concerning the the Ministry of the Church”

Dear Saints,

24 Oct 2021

Then Twelve-year-old Marie stated the obvious conclusion. After giving my homeschooled girls a series of lectures on the philosophy of St. Augustine, Marie surmised: “Ah, St. Augustine: hence, Martin Luther and hence we Lutherans.” It was a perfect summary of those lectures and the implication of Augustinian ideas that led to Luther and “we Lutherans.” It was also a very good reminder, especially as we celebrate the 504th Anniversary of the Conservative or Lutheran Reformation,¹ that Luther was an Augustinian Friar and we, by extension, stand in the Augustinian tradition too.

Let me explain why we might say this about Luther and ourselves and, in doing so, I hope to explain why, in part, we remain Lutheran and why the whole Church needs Lutheran theology.

St. Augustine (AD 354-430), one of the Great Doctors of the Church, argued that there was a necessary and reciprocal relationship between faith and reason. They belonged together and needed each other. While others said there was nothing that Jerusalem (theology) had in common with Athens (philosophy), the Bishop of Hippo—Aurelius Augustine—saw significant points of contact between the academy and the church, between faith and reason.

First, Augustine articulates the point that *faith*, biblically speaking, cannot be understood simplistically or in a reductionistic way. Rather, the word “faith” is a high-level, multifaceted word, possessing nuances and incorporating many different dimensions of commitments by faculties and various commitments themselves. Faith, he said, sometimes involves thinking as *assent*. That is, faith gives an affirmative answer to a particular question. One need not be certain before one holds to a particular position or conviction. For example, if I were to ask a group of people if they believe in God, some would say, ‘No!’ But others would say, ‘No, I don’t think so.’ Others still would say ‘Yes, I think so’ and, lastly, others would exclaim, ‘Yes!’ The faith of assent, according to Augustine, is that which allows a person to move across that line of saying ‘I think so’ to assenting — ‘Yes.’

Another dimension of faith is *accepting authority*. This did not mean for Augustine marching lockstep to the dictates of authority. That would be mindless. Neither does not mean blind faith (a point that needs to be stressed in light of the history of aberrant Christian movements). That, too, can be mindless, leaving persons susceptible to abuse, oppression, and manipulative groupthink. Rather, faith’s relationship to accepting authority means coming to a place where the person indeed does have confidence in the

¹ It is important to note that there were reformations, in the plural. The one spearheaded by Luther is known as the “Conservative” Reformation beginning 1517. There were others such as the English Reformation, Scottish Reformation and Dutch Reformation. Some fall under the heading of the “Radical” Reformation”, such as the Swiss and Anabaptist movements. Even the Catholic Church’s *Counter-Reformation* has been rebranded the “Catholic Reformation.” In truth, the beginning of the Lutheran Church as such was really 24 June 1530, upon the reading of the Augsburg Confession.

authority they are trusting. For example, we see this kind of faith in the reliability of witnesses; we see it in credibility in scholarship and also find it in consistency in teaching. In accepting such authorities we exhibit a certain kind of faith.

It is precisely at this point that Lutheran ears should prick up. Through the teaching of this kind of faith, Augustine became the father of what is called the *fides simplicitum* principle — implicit trust in the Church, yet *not without reason*. And really, it is this last clause that both gives rise to the advent of Lutheranism and the ongoing need for the Lutheran theological mind. Christians are to have a simple, implicit faith in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church *because* we have trust in the credibility of the Church's *raison d'être* (reason for its existence), teaching, and practice. Christians should accept the authority of the Church ... but only insofar as the Church comports to the reason for her existence.

Augustine therefore taught that *fides simplicitum* is one of those “insofar as” principles. Christians should be mindful to exercise a *fides simplicitum* insofar as the Church herself is obedient to her calling as curate of the gospel, accurate in her gospel transmission, and faithful to the gospel in her ministerial and sacramental practices. Quite a reasonable proposition, reasoned St. Augustine. The gospel is the Church's business, as it were, and when she is busy about this work and renewed for this work, our acceptance of her authority should increase, along with our joy and security. But if the Church neglects, obscures, or alters the reason for her existence, then avenues for reform and correction are to be implemented to reestablish such faith.

Centuries after Augustine expounded this dimension of faith a devout collegian from Eisleben endured a frightful storm, he believed, with the aid of St. Ann and vowed to “become a monk.” Shortly thereafter he became not a monk but an Augustinian Friar.² During his time at St. Augustine's Monastery in Erfurt (1505-1507) Luther came under the tutelage of Augustinian devotee Johann Von Staupitz, his father superior and confidant. It was not only the discipline of the Augustinian mendicant order that Luther imbibed but also the Augustine's theology.³ Luther learned Augustine's *fides simplicitum* concept as an Augustinian friar from his Augustinian Confessor, Staupitz.

Twenty years later we find Luther applying the principle of *fides simplicitum* at the Marburg Colloquy (1529) as he disputed with those (Zwinglians) who rejected the real presence of Christ in Holy Communion: He said, “If the Lord should command me to eat dung, I should do so, knowing full well that this is salutary for me.”⁴ This may sound like incredulity but it is actually quite the opposite. Luther had reasons for making such an assertion. His implicit faith in what the Church authoritatively taught about the real presence of Christ was based on four principle things: (1) since God was King, we must cede to the Lord's position and wisdom concerning this sacrament; (2) since this same God was also

² There is some fluidity to the designations “monk” and “friar”, but some differences arise too. The word “friar” is from *fratre* (from the Middle Ages — the *fratre Provençal*), which means “brother.” The word arose with the creation of the mendicant (traveling/ preaching) orders in the late Middle Ages, most predominantly by Saint Francis (Franciscans) of Assisi and Saint Dominic (Order of Preachers, or “Dominicans”). These “new religious” were no longer tied to monasteries and convents but went out among the people, to preach and to pray, to educate and to serve the sick.

A priest who is part of a conventual/monastic community (contemplative/stationary) is a *monk*. But monks and friars need not be priests. Some monks and friars discern their vocations as religious, content to simply be brothers within their order or community; they do not pursue the priesthood. The word “monk” comes from the Latin *monachus*, a word for hermits, rooted in a meaning of “solitude.” It is related to the emergence of the first experiences of contemplative men and women, such as the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Saint Benedict of Nursia (480-547) is considered the founder of Western Monasticism.

³ St. Augustine is known also by the moniker, *Doctor Gratia*.

⁴ See, *Luther's Works, Word and Sacrament IV* (St. Louis: Concordia), 38:18ff.

loving and merciful, we should know that eating a horse-apple would therefore be “salutary”; (3) this same God had made Himself known and trustworthy supremely through Jesus Christ and thereby established the Divine credibility by fulfilling all of His promises through the Messiah; and (4) the Scriptures themselves had born witness and testimony concerning the gracious covenant with which God would deal with humanity through the same Jesus Christ. The upshot to Luther’s reasoning was a simple faith in God: If the Lord said “I renew you in Holy Baptism”, then we are renewed. Period. If he said that this bread and wine were now his body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of sins, then it was so. Nothing doubting. And if he said, go out and eat that dung in the street then, a faith fortified with excellent reasons (including one’s experience of this gracious God) simply acquiesces. And when this is the teaching of the Church then we do well to cede to the Church’s authority.

Now, of course, the example of eating a dung was absurd because God did not and would not ask Luther or anyone else to masticate a turd. But that too is part of Luther’s point: the Lord has established his authority, credibility and consistency in Holy Scripture and, further, Scripture’s credibility was fortified through corroborating sources of authority: the liturgy of the Church, in the Creeds of the Church, and in the Ecumenical Councils of the Church. Reliable, trustworthy and consistent — that’s the Word of God and so an inerrant revelation of God Himself. There are reasons why a person can rest and recline in the trustworthiness of God — good reasons that give the highest confidence; so confident in fact that one need not scrutinize and quibble over each and every pronouncement or practice of the Church.

Fides simplicitum, therefore, is not fideism, where there’s no argument or substantiation for belief and practice, but rather it possesses considerable antecedent reasonableness for fostering such beliefs and practices. Fideism, for Luther, was repugnant when it came to the relationship of the Church to the Christian because it violated the relationship between faith and reason as articulated through the *fides simplicitum* concept. Fideism demanded servile obedience. Period. However, when a reasonable faith obtained and the Church preached and taught the pure Word of the Gospel and administered the sacraments according to the Gospel, then implicit faith could move on to a richer dimension, namely the surrender of the will to a loving God. All of this is possible when there is established confidence in the Church.

But what happens when the Church loses much of her credibility with respect to her reason for existence — the promulgation of the Holy Gospel, the sanctification of the baptized and fostering peace and justice in the world through the kingdom of Christ? What happens when such confidence is destabilized by Pontifical wars, the amassing of staggering wealth, extorting the laity for forgiveness, dictatorial political governing from the See of Rome, manifest injustices, and the plight of believers exasperated by the ambiguity of what was once the Gospel of God’s grace? What is the obligation of the Christian endowed with a reasonable faith, with a faith that seeks understanding (Augustin’s motto was *Credo ut intelligas*, “I believe in order that I might understand”)? Simply put, what when the Church is inaccurate with gospel transmission and the law seems to become the gospel (you must do this!) and the gospel now the law (You can be saved if you pay, go, submit, etc.)? What does a faithful member of the Church do when the central leadership of the Church, in large part, become unfaithful in teaching and practice and has a notorious reputation for extravagance, corruption, simony, nepotism and warfare? In other words, what does one do when one cannot exercise *fides simplicitum* in the Church?

For the friar Martin Luther, it was a matter of doing what Catholic and Orthodox Christians had done throughout the ages in somewhat similar though not as critical circumstances: identify abuses and errors, call for discussion and debate from within the Church, exercise reform and lead the way back to the most credible of sources — supremely the Holy Scripture, but also the Fathers, Creeds, Councils and Liturgy of the Church. St. Benedict organized a movement of reform. St. Francis and St. Dominic engineered

movements of reform. They found success. Others had attempted reforms, too, during the late Medieval period, but by this time they found the Church’s hierarchy resistant, the avenues for reform closed, and sometimes the leadership militaristically intolerant.

Luther, conscious of such resistance, turned to a commonality between the Pope and himself — the Church’s Doctor of Grace, St. Augustine. An implicit faith could be reestablished and strengthened in the Church of Rome if she would correct her trajectory, steering back to the Gospel of God’s grace through Jesus Christ alone, as preserved in *the* supreme authority for the Church, the Holy Gospel of the New Testament. Scripture was clear: Indulgences are antithetical to the Gospel. Indulgences undermined the *fides simplicitem* of the people and even many of the Church’s theologians and clerics. Reform at the center of the Church’s reason for existence was needed.

This ‘back to the sources’ (*ad fontes*) approach of Luther, however, was poorly received by the better part of the Church of Rome’s rich and powerful hierarchy and, especially, the financially-strapped Pope Leo X. There were only demands from his Archbishop, Cardinal envoy, and the Pope himself to recant and embrace what could in no other way be classified as anything other than ecclesiastical fideism — conformity of thought and obedience to the established authorities ‘just because’ they are the authorities. Luther, then, shifted his understanding and practice of *fides simplicitem* more directly to Christ Jesus by appealed to a higher authority than that of the Papacy — the Lord’s Gospel. It was the Gospel of Christ, His authoritative good news word of pardon and gracious divine rule that established apostolic authority, credal authority, and all ecclesiastical authority. Scripture wasn’t the only authority, to be sure. But it was the highest and final authority that did not and could not loose its credibility or destabilize confidence, even when the hierarchy of the Church did. The Church conforms to the Gospel, not the Gospel to the Church.

And it is for this reason that we, as Evangelical Catholics—*Gospel Catholics*—or, synonymously, ‘Lutherans’, must embrace at least this aspect of our Augustinian heritage and give twenty-first century voice to the *fides simplicitem* principle of *justification by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone*. This is the Gospel. Lutherans stand for the Gospel for all Christians, for all the baptized, as the highest and supreme word of God to us in Christ Jesus. In that authoritative word we can rest, acquiesce, and have firm confidence. “Hence Luther and hence we Lutherans.” That’s exactly right, Marie. You nailed it, sort of like that Augustinian friar nailed it to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg five hundred and four years ago. To God be the glory, now and ever unto ages and ages. Amen.

Twenty-first S. a. Trinity 24 Oct. Color: **Green**. Divine Service 3. Processional 908. Hymn of the

Oct. 24	Twenty-first S. after Trinity	Gen. 1:1—2:3	Psalm 8	Eph. 6:10–17	John 4:46–54
Oct. 31	Reformation Day	Rev. 14:6–7	Psalm 46	Rom. 3:19–28	John 8:31–36 or Matt. 11:12–19

Day 648; Psalm 8 chanted responsively; Eucharistic Hymn, 633; Recessional 883. Sermon: Psalm 8 “King Incognito.”

Reformation Sunday. 31 Oct. Color: **Red**. Divine Service 3. Processional 657. Hymn of the Day 578; Psalm 46 chanted responsively; Eucharistic Hymn, 677; Recessional 766. Sermon on the Gospel text from Rev. Steven Thomas, St. John’s Lutheran Church, Libby, MT.

Augsburg Academy: The Parable of Lk 15. Lesson 6, “Three Stories, One Parable.”

- * Note that Pr. Bombaro will be overseas 28 Oct.—25 Nov. Thereafter, he will be present for every Sunday through February.
- * First Holy Communion Catechesis, Session 7 @ the Bombaro home Tuesday 26 Oct @ 3:45.
- * Confirmation Catechesis, Lesson 2: “Summarizing the Bible’s Story” @ the Bombaro home Wednesday 26 Oct @ 3:45
- * Logos & Lager on hiatus for November but resuming in December. Thank you to the Ryan and Laughlin Drake family for hosting our best event yet!

- * Christmas Party @ the Bombaro home, 5pm Saturday 18 Dec. Please bring an appetizer and White Elephant Gift (kids version and adult version) for each person in your party who would like to play. Gifts \$10 and under. Carol singing. Ugly sweater contest. Bring friends. No humbugs.



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