

*The following letter was written by Luther to his Father in 1521. He writes to his Father on the publication of his book, "On Monastic Vows" – and includes this letter in the preface to that book.*

To Hans Luther, my Father, I, Martin Luther, your son, send greetings in Christ

This book I have decided to dedicate to you, dearest Father. [I do not intend to make] your name famous in the world and to glory in the flesh, which would be contrary to the teaching of St. Paul. Rather my purpose is to recall, in a short preface, what took place between you and me in order to indicate to the pious reader the argument and the content of this book, together with an example.

To begin with, I wish you to know that your son has reached the point where he is altogether persuaded that there is nothing holier, nothing more important, nothing more scrupulously to be observed than God's commandment. But here you will say, "Have you been so unfortunate as ever to doubt this, and have you only now learned that this is so?" Most unfortunately indeed I not only doubted it, but I did not at all know that it is so; and if you will permit me, I am ready to show you that this ignorance was common to both of us.

It is now almost sixteen years since I became a monk, taking the vow without your knowledge and against your will. In your paternal love you were fearful about my weakness because I was then a youth, just entering my twenty-second year (that is, to use St. Augustine's words, I was still "clothed in hot youth"),<sup>9</sup> and you had learned from numerous examples that this way of life turned out sadly for many. You were determined, therefore, to tie me down with an honorable and wealthy marriage. This fear of yours, this care, this indignation against me was for a time implacable. [Your] friends tried in vain to persuade you that if you wished to offer something to God, you ought to give your dearest and your best. The Lord, meanwhile, was dinning in your ears that Psalm verse: "God knows the thoughts of men, that they are vain"; but you were deaf. At last you desisted and bowed to the will of God, but your fears for me were never laid aside. For I remember very well<sup>12</sup> that after we were reconciled and you were [again] talking with me, I told you that I had been called by terrors from heaven and that I did not become a monk of my own free will and desire, still less to gain any gratification of the flesh, but that I was walled in by the terror and the agony of sudden death and forced by necessity to take the vow. Then you said, "Let us hope that it was not an illusion and a deception." That word penetrated to the depths of my soul and stayed there, as if God had spoken by your lips, though I hardened my heart against you and your word as much as I could. You said something else too. When in filial confidence I upbraided you for your wrath, you suddenly retorted with a reply so fitting and so much to the point that I have hardly ever in all my life heard any man say anything which struck me so forcibly and stayed with me so long. "Have you not also heard," you said, "that parents are to be obeyed?" But I was so sure of my own righteousness that in you I heard only a man, and boldly ignored you; though in my heart I could not ignore your word.

See, now, whether you, too, were not unaware that the commandments of God are to be put before all things. If you had known that I was then in your power, would you not have used your paternal authority to pull me out of the cowl? On the other hand, had I known it, I would

never have attempted to become a monk without your knowledge and consent, even though I had to die many deaths. For my vow was not worth a fig, since by taking it I withdrew myself from the authority and guidance of the parent [to whom I was subject] by God's commandment; indeed, it was a wicked vow, and proved that it was not of God not only because it was a sin against your authority, but because it was not absolutely free and voluntary. In short it was taken in accordance with the doctrines of men and the superstition of hypocrites, none of which has God commanded. But behold how much good God (whose mercies are without number and whose wisdom is without end) has made to come out of all these errors and sins! Would you now not rather have lost a hundred sons than not have seen this good?

I think that from [the days of] my childhood Satan must have foreseen something in me [which is the cause] of his present suffering. He has therefore raged against me with incredible contrivings to destroy or hinder me, so that I have often wondered whether I was the only man in the whole world whom he was seeking. But it was the Lord's will, as I now see, that the wisdom of the schools and the sanctity of the monasteries should become known to me by my own actual experience, that is, through many sins and impieties, so that wicked men might not have a chance, when I became their adversary, to boast that I condemned something about which I knew nothing. Therefore I lived as a monk, indeed not without sin but without reproach. For in the kingdom of the pope impiety and sacrilege pass for supreme piety; still less are they considered matters for reproach.

What do you think now? Will you still take me out of the monastery? You are still my father and I am still your son and all the vows are worthless. On your side is the authority of God, on my side there is nothing but human presumption. For that continence of which they boast with puffed-up cheeks is valueless without obedience to God's commandments. Continence is not commanded but obedience is, yet the mad and silly papists will not allow any virtue to be equal to continence and virginity. They extol both these virtues with such prodigious lies that their very craze for lying and the greatness of their ignorance, singly or together, ought to cast suspicion on all they do or think.

What kind of intelligence do they show when they distort the word of the Sage, "No balance can weigh the value of a continent mind," to mean that virginity and continence are to be preferred to everything else and that vows of virginity cannot be commuted or dispensed with? It was a Jew who wrote these words to Jews about a chaste wife; among the Jews virginity and continence were condemned. Thus, too, they apply to virgins that eulogy of a modest wife: "This is she who has not known a sinful bed." In a word, although the Scriptures do not laud virginity but only approve it, these men,<sup>18</sup> who are so ready to inflame men's souls to lives that endanger their salvation, dress it up in borrowed plumes, so to speak, by applying to it the praises the Scriptures bestow on a chaste marriage.

But isn't [the value] of an obedient soul also beyond all measure? For that reason indeed a continent soul (that is, a chaste wife) defies every measure, not only because [such a soul] is commanded by God but also because, as the well-known proverb says, there is nothing in the world more desirable than a chaste wife. But these "faithful" interpreters of Scripture [take] everything that is said about the continence which is commanded [and] apply it to that type of continence which is not commanded, and [thus] make a human evaluation the measure of God's judgment. Thus they grant dispensations from everything, even from obedience to God,

[but they grant no dispensation from continence],<sup>20</sup> even from that forbidden continence which is entered upon against the authority of one's parents. O worthy and truly picayunish papistic doctors and teachers! Virginitly and chastity are to be praised, but in such a way that by their very greatness men are frightened off from them rather than led to them. This was Christ's way. When the disciples praised continence and said, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is expedient not to marry," he at once set their minds straight on the matter and said, "Not all men can receive this precept." The precept must be accepted, but it was Christ's will that only a few should understand it.

But to come back to you, my Father; would you still take me out of the monastery? But that you would not boast of it, the Lord has anticipated you, and taken me out himself. What difference does it make whether I retain or lay aside the cowl and tonsure? Do [they] make the monk? "All things are yours, and you are Christ's," says Paul. Shall I belong to the cowl, or shall not the cowl rather belong to me? My conscience has been freed, and that is the most complete liberation. Therefore I am still a monk and yet not a monk. I am a new creature, not of the pope but of Christ. The pope also has his creatures,<sup>24</sup> but he creates puppets and straw-men, that is, masks and idols of himself. I myself was formerly one of them, led astray by the various usages of words, by which even the Sage confesses that he was brought into the danger of death but by God's grace was delivered.

But am I not robbing you again of your right and authority? No, for your authority over me still remains, so far as the monastic life is concerned; but this is nothing to me anymore, as I have said. Nevertheless [God], who has taken me out of the monastery, has an authority over me that is greater than yours; you see that he has placed me now not in a pretended monastic service but in the true service of God. Who can doubt that I am in the ministry of the Word? And it is plain that the authority of parents must yield to this service, for Christ says, "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." Not that this word destroys the authority of parents, for the Apostle [Paul] often insists that children should obey their parents;<sup>27</sup> but if the authority of parents conflicts with the authority or calling of Christ, then Christ's authority must reign alone.

Therefore—so I am now absolutely persuaded—I could not have refused to obey you without endangering my conscience unless [Christ] had added the ministry of the Word to my monastic profession. This is what I meant when I said that neither you nor I realized that God's commandments must be put before everything else. But almost the whole world is now laboring under this same ignorance, for under the papal abomination error rules. So Paul also predicted when he said that men would become disobedient to parents. This fits the monks and priests exactly, especially those who under the pretense of piety and the guise of serving God withdraw themselves from the authority of their parents, as though there were any other service of God except the keeping of his commandments, which includes obedience to parents.

I am sending [you] this book, then, in which you may see by what signs and wonders Christ has absolved me from the monastic vow and granted me such great liberty. Although he has made me the servant of all men, I am, nevertheless, subject to no one except to him alone. He is himself (as they say) my immediate bishop,<sup>30</sup> abbot, prior, lord, father, and teacher; I know no other. Thus I hope that he has taken from you one son in order that he may begin to help the sons of many others through me. You ought not only to endure this willingly, but you ought to rejoice with exceeding joy—and this I am sure is what you will do. What if the pope should

slay me or condemn me to the depths of hell! Having once slain me, he will not raise me up again to slay me a second and third time, and now that I have been condemned<sup>32</sup> I have no desire ever to be absolved. I trust that the day is at hand when that kingdom of abomination and perdition will be destroyed. Would that we were worthy to be burned or slain by him before that time, so that our blood might cry out against him all the more and hasten the day of his judgment! But if we are not worthy to bear testimony with our blood, then let us at least pray and implore mercy that we may testify with deed and word that Jesus Christ alone is the Lord our God, who is praised forever. Amen.

Farewell [in the Lord], my dearest Father, and greet in Christ my mother, your Margaret, and our whole family.

*From the wilderness, November 21, 1521<sup>1</sup>*

*This letter is from 1530 when Luther learns that his Father may be close to death*

Dear Father:

James, my brother, has written me that you are seriously ill. As the weather is now bad, and as there is danger everywhere, and because of the season, I am worried about you. For even though God has thus far given to and preserved for you a strong, tough body, yet your age gives me anxious thoughts at this time—although regardless of this [worry], none of us is, or should be, sure of his life at any time. Therefore because of these circumstances I would have liked to come to you personally, but my good friends advised me against it, and have talked me out of it. I myself have to agree, for I did not dare to venture into danger at the risk of tempting God, since you know how lords and peasants feel toward me. It would be great joy for me, however, if it were possible for you and mother to be brought here to us; this my Katie, too, desires with tears, and we all [join her in this]. I hope we would be able to take care of you in the best way. Therefore I am sending Cyriac to see whether your weakness [will allow you to be moved]. For if according to God's will your illness turns out to be one either to life or to death, it would be a heartfelt joy for me (as would be only right) to be around you in person and to show, with filial faithfulness and service, my gratitude to God and to you, according to the Fourth Commandment.

In the meantime I pray from the bottom of my heart that the Father, who has made you my father and given you to me, will strengthen you according to his immeasurable kindness, and enlighten and preserve you with his Spirit, so that you may perceive with joy and thanksgiving the blessed teaching concerning his son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to which you too have been called and have come out of the former terrible darkness and error. I hope that his grace, which has given you such knowledge and begun his work in you, will preserve and complete [his work] up to the arrival of the future life and the joyous return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. God has also sealed this teaching and faith in you and has confirmed them with marks; that is, because of me, you, together with all of us, have suffered much slander, disgrace, scorn, mockery, contempt, hatred, hostility, and even danger. These are but the true marks with which we have

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 48: Letters I*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 48, pp. 330–336). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

to become identical to our Lord Christ, as St. Paul says, so that we may also become identified with his future glory.

Therefore let your heart now be bold and confident in your illness, for we have there, in the life beyond, a true and faithful helper at God's side, Jesus Christ, who for us has strangled death, together with sin, and now sits [in heaven] for us; together with all the angels he is looking down on us, and awaiting us, so that when we are to depart, we dare not worry or fear that we might sink or fall to the ground. His power over death and sin is too great for them to harm us. He is so wholeheartedly faithful and righteous that he cannot forsake us, nor would he wish to do so; [he wishes] only that we desire [his help] without doubting his promise, for he has said, promised, and pledged [his help]. He will not and cannot lie to us, nor trick us; there is no doubt about this. "Ask," (he says,) "and it will be given you; seek, and you will find, knock, and it will be opened to you."<sup>16</sup> And elsewhere: "All who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." The whole Psalter is full of such comforting promises, especially Psalm 91, which is particularly good to be read by all who are sick.

I wished to talk this over with you in writing, because I am anxious about your illness (for we know not the hour), so that I might participate in your faith, temptation,<sup>19</sup> consolation, and gratitude to God for his holy Word, which in these days he has given to us so richly, powerfully, and graciously. Should it be his divine will, however, for you to wait still longer for that better life, [and] to continue to suffer with us in this troubled and sorrowful vale of tears, and to see and hear sadness, or, together with all Christians, to assist [others] in enduring and overcoming [this sadness], then he will also give [you] the grace to accept all this willingly and obediently. This cursed life is nothing but a real vale of tears, in which the longer a man lives, the more sin, wickedness, torment, and sadness he sees and feels. Nor is there respite or cessation of all of this until we are buried;<sup>21</sup> then, of course, [this sadness] has to stop and let us sleep contentedly in Christ's peace, until he comes again to wake us with joy. Amen.

Herewith I commend you to Him who loves you more than you love yourself. He has proved his love by taking your sins upon himself and by paying [for them] with his blood, and he has let you know this through the gospel, and has given it to you freely to believe this by his Spirit. Consequently, he has prepared and sealed everything in the most certain way, so that you are not permitted to worry about or be concerned for anything except keeping your heart strong and reliant on his Word and faith. If you do this then let him care for the rest. He will see to it that everything turns out well.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, he has already accomplished this in the best way, better than we can understand. May he, our dear Lord and Saviour, be with you and at your side, so that (may God grant it to happen either here or there) we may joyfully see each other again. For our faith is certain, and we don't doubt that we shall shortly see each other again in the presence of Christ. For the departure from this life is a smaller thing to God than if I moved from you in Mansfeld to here, or if you moved from me in Wittenberg to Mansfeld. This is certainly true; it is only a matter of an hour's sleep, and all will be different.

I hope that in these matters your pastor and preacher will abundantly demonstrate their faithful service to you, so that you will not need my words. Yet I could not refrain from excusing my physical absence, which (God knows) causes me heartfelt sorrow. My Katie, Hänschen,<sup>26</sup> Lenchen, Aunt Lena,<sup>28</sup> and all my household send you greetings and pray for you faithfully.

Greet my dear mother and all my relatives. God's grace and strength be and abide with you forever. Amen.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Luther, M. (1999). [\*Luther's works, vol. 49: Letters II\*](#). (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 49, pp. 268–271). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.