Lesson XVI(1978-1979)

THE RENAISSANCE IN NORTHERN EUROPE

Prayer

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3; 2:13

Hymn: 640 "Now Thank We All Our God"

The Renaissance gradually spread from Italy to the countries beyond the Alps. In these countries, Renaissance thought had to make its way against a deeply entrenched medieval conservatism, Gothic culture and scholastic philosophy. In spite of deep suspicion, distrust and stubborn opposition there was a growing desire for new learning. The Renaissance beyond the Alps was partially inaugurated by contacts with Italian humanists at the Councils of Pisa, Constance, Basel and Florence, but it did not become a powerful influence until the last quarter of the fifteenth century. It became fashionable in most of the nations for gifted youth to go to Italy to study. They returned to their homes as advocates of the new learning. The universities were important bridges for Renaissance influence. In the universities there was a revival of the older "realistic" medieval theology of early scholasticism with its emphasis on Augustine and Platonism and opposition to Aristotle. It spread from the University of Paris to the English and German universities and resulted in the dominance of Augustine in the Reformation.

The new rising nations borrowed different aspects of the Renaissance and united them with the native culture to form a new amalgam. Everywhere there was a "Revival of Learning" connected with a new emphasis on the study of classical antiquity and bursts of new exploratory and creative energies associated with the Renaissance. It meant a new human spirit, a new conception of life, a new interest in the universe, new manners, and new methods of education. Everywhere there was both the pagan side of the Renaissance and the more serious side that accompanied a return to the sources of the Christian religion—the early church fathers, the Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Old Testament. The immorality and irreligion of the pagan side raised much opposition to the new learning. Beyond the Alps it was the serious side that prevailed and bore fruit in the Reformation.

Some insist that it is more appropriate to speak of northern humanism than northern Renaissance. At the end of the fifteenth century expanding commerce, the growth of populous cities, the building of reserves of capital and the rise of the powerful monarchical states prepared the way for the great changes associated with the Renaissance.

RENAISSANCE HUMANISM IN GERMANY

The Renaissance became a powerful influence in Germany earlier than in France, Spain, the Netherlands or England. Close political connections between Germany and Italy were an important factor in opening the way. Merchants from the cities of southern Germany carried on a busy trade with the cities of northern Italy through the Brenner Pass. As Augsburg, Ulm, Munich, Strasbourg, Frankfort, Nuremberg and Vienna became wealthy they felt the charm of the social, artistic and intellectual life of Italy. The universities also served as a bridge for Renaissance influence. Between 1409 and 1506 twelve universities were founded in Germany—seven between 1386 and 1409. The German universities were not so much the creation of the Renaissance as the result of a desire for learning and the desire of the German rulers to have schools in their lands. The wandering scholars of the
Middle Ages were replaced by wandering students and travelling professors. After 1440 the new studies took deeper and deeper root in Germany as students flocked through the Remer Pass to Italian universities—especially Padua. They returned to Germany filled with humanistic ideas and the spirit of revolt against the pedantry of German teachers who taught traditional things in traditional ways.

NICHOLAS OF CUSA (1401-1464): One important figure who helped prepare the way for humanistic learning in Germany was the philosopher, Nicholas of Cusa, a cardinal and bishop of Brixen. Standing in the tradition of Neo-platonic mysticism, he developed an original cosmology and philosophical theology. His system contained both universalism and individualism. In his De docta ignorantia (1440) he saw God as the infinite unity of all finite contrasts of the universe. The universe was an infinite process. He sought for the unity of faith in the diversity of religions. His Vision of God with the "all-seeing eye" became a devotional classic.

THE BRETHREN OF THE COMMON LIFE:

A major force in preparing Germany for Renaissance humanism was the educational influence of the Brethren of the Common Life, founded in the Netherlands by Gerard Groote (d. 1381). The Brethren considered education the major instrument for promoting inward religious faith and for cultivating practical Christian living. They established schools and opened hospices for indigent university students and operated printing presses. They promoted a revival of classical learning, emphasizing a good Latin style, and using Cicero and Seneca for moral instruction. Their houses spread from the Netherlands throughout Germany. Many leading German professors were trained by the Brethren of the Common Life.

PETELE LUDER (1415-1474): Some of the early advocates of the new learning did much to discredit it by their irreligious lives and their immorality. The wandering poet, Peter Ludor, was one of these. He went to Rome as a cleric. He studied at the University of Padua where he was a leader of a company of south German youths. In 1444 the elector of the Palatinate appointed him professor of classical languages and literature at the University of Heidelberg. His innovations met with stiff opposition from the faculty who charged him with immorality and paganism—he was a spendthrift and a hard drinker with scant regard for religion. In 1460 because of the plague he left Heidelberg, studied medicine at Padua, and then taught at Basel and Vienna.

RUDOLF AGRICOLA (1444-1485): Born near Groningen in Prisia, he studied under the learned master at Deventer, Alexander Hagius, one of the greatest of the teachers of the Brethren of the Common Life. He went on to study at Erfurt, Louvain and Cologne. He spent ten years in Italy (1469-1479) where he wrote a Life of Petrarch. On his return to Germany Bishop Johannes von Dalbert and the Palatine elector secured his appointment to the faculty of the University of Heidelberg where he became the leader of a circle of young humanists. He boasted that he would break the monopoly of haughty Italy on classical learning and that Germany would develop a Latin that would be the equal of the Latin of Italy. He did much to improve pedagogical methods in Germany. He became one of the most noted Greek scholars of his day. He insisted that Hebrew was indispensable to a correct understanding of Scripture. Conrad Celtes and Erasmus were two of his students.

CONRAD CELTES (1459-1508): One of the most influential of the roving scholars was the semi-pagan Latin poet, Conrad Celtes. He was the son of a peasant; he ran away to study at Cologne, Heidelberg, Rostock and Leipzig. He wandered from school to school in Italy, perfecting his Greek, collecting manuscripts, and steeping himself
in humanistic learning. On his return to Germany in 1487 the humanistically inclined Emperor, Maximilian I, crowned him the first German poet laureat of the empire at Nuremberg. He published four volumes of Amores celebrating his love affairs and his Odes praising life, love and learning. He carefully studied Cicero, Horace and Virgil. Late in 1487 he went back to Italy visiting Venice, Padua, Bologna, Florence, and Rome. He keenly felt the sting of the Italian air of superiority toward the backward Germans. He studied mathematics and poetry at Cracow. He returned to Nuremberg and then was made professor of rhetoric at the University of Ingolstadt. He made a romantic cultural nationalism one of the major themes of German humanism. He published plays and poems. He organized the Rhenish and Danubian sodalitie, lose associations of local societies of humanists. He began his Germany Illustrated, modeled after Biondo's Italy Illustrated. In his Norimberga he pictured the glories of Nuremberg. In 1497 the Emperor Maximilian invited him to the faculty of the University of Vienna where he became the most noted of the classicists of northern Europe. Zwingli was one of his pupils. He died of syphilis at the age of 49.

By the opening decade of the sixteenth century the universities of Basel, Tubingen, Ingolstadt, Heidelberg and Erfurt were all centers of humanistic studies. Wealthy patrons were backing humanism in the commercial cities of Nurnberg, Strassburg and Augsburg. Humanism was becoming a vital factor in Germany, but was showing great diversity. In addition to the pagan types where was a serious-minded humanism led by sincere churchmen anxious to reform the church and purify religious life.

OTHER EARLY HUMANIST PIONEERS IN GERMANY:

School teacher humanists, Johannes Murrullius and Rudolf von Langen were dedicated to improving Latin instruction. Scholastic humanists, Conrad Summenhart and Paul Scriptorius, were combining scholasticism with the new thought. There were also humanists who were moral critics of society. Such were Heinrich Bebel and Jacob Wimpfelbing (1451-1528). Wimpfelbing was cathedral preacher at Speyer. He attacked simony and concubinage in his De integritate. He refused an invitation to join the Rhenish sodality saying he would be a crow among nightingales and an owl among falcons. He founded the Schlettstadt sodality of reforming humanists. In his circle were such reforming preachers as Geiler von Kaisersberg (1445-1510) and Sebasyan Brant (1457-1521). Brant's satiric poem, The Ship of Fools, ridiculed lazy students and pedantic professors.

HUMANISM AT THE COURTS OF GERMANY: The humanists poured scorn on princes and nobles who took greater pleasure in drink and the hunt than in learned discourse and books.

Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (later Pope Pius II (1458-1464) who was sent by Pope Eugenius IV as ambassador to Emperor Frederick III complained that Germany was a very uncivilized place dominated by medieval conceptions. Emperor Frederick felt no attraction for the new learning; he was occupied with astrology, alchemy, chivalry, the care of his stables and the practical concerns of office.

Emperor Maximilian (1493-1519) took great pride in being a humanistic ruler, a patron of art and literature. Poets and classicists gathered at his court. He commissioned the Thuerdank, a tedious poetical allegory of his courtship of Mary of Burgundy. The Weisskunung (The White King) was an account of his princely deeds. Both were medieval in spirit but had caught the ideal of princely leadership in culture.

Elector Frederick III of Saxony diligently collected relics boasting that he would make Wittenberg the Rome of Germany. He
calculated that any one of his people could shorten his stay in the
flames of purgatory 1,902,202 years and 270 days by faithfully adoring
each of the relics he made available in the castle church.

The German princes came to admire the elegance of Italian
Renaissance courts and emulated their fashions.

**HUMANISM IN THE GERMAN CITIES:**

Until late in the fifteenth century the rich merchants of the
German cities clung to the literary standards of the old feudal
aristocracy, preferring chivalric romances and lyrics to the classical
works and humanistic writings. Both nobility and middle class preferred
moralizing treatises, golden legends, lives of saints. The early
printing press turned out much chivalric and devotional material.
Once humanistic culture took hold in the north enthusiasm for the
classics went wild.

Wealthy banking families such as the Fugger and the Welsers
collected books and art, employed architects to build showy palaces,
and championed humanism and supported young humanists.

Sigismund Goessnibrot (1417-1488), burgomaster of Nuremberg, in
1458 championed the new learning and in 1452 carried on a long polemic
against an old professor at the University of Vienna who criticized
the humanists Poggio Bracciolini and Lorenzo Valla.

Conrad Peutinger (1465-1547) studied in Italy and returned with
a doctor's degree. He represented the practical turn of the Renaissance
in Germany. In Augsburg he became a political and business leader.

Wilibald Pirckheimer (1470-1552) and his father, John, were
leaders in politics and humanism in Nuremberg. After study in Italy,
Wilibald continued to read the classics, wrote on the political
questions of the day, and encouraged interest in German history.
His sister, Charlotte, read the Latin classics, cultivated the style
of Cicero, and became abbess of a convent in Nuremberg—an
accomplished humanist.

This era also witnessed a great revival of witchcraft and the
burning of witches. Two Dominicans, Jacob Sprenger and Henry Kramer,
were appointed inquisitors and produced the classic treatment of
witchcraft, **The Witches' Hammer** (1487).

**HUMANISM IN THE LOW COUNTRIES:**

Under the influence of the Brethren of the Common Life, humanism
spread through northern Germany. Its chief aims were improvement of
instruction, cultivation of a good Latin style, and pious, devout
living. Alexander Hegius (1433-1498) taught more than 2200 young men.
He greatly improved the Latin grammars and other textbooks. He was
a friend of Agricola. As learned master at Deventer he was the
teacher of Erasmus.

Rudolf von Langen and John Murnemius reformed the schools of
Münster and Schlettstadt.

John Wimpeling, after studying at Schlettstadt and Heidelberg
opened a Latin school in Strasbourg. In his **On Clerical Purity**
he called for reform in the church. He urged the common people
to abandon their banal popular life, to become educated, and to
master their German tongue and to cultivate a good Latin style.

**ULRICH VON HUTTEN** (1488-1523):

One of the most noted of the wandering German humanists—a poet
and a satirist—was Ulrich von Hutten. He came from a noble family
that enrolled him in the monastic school at Fulda. He hated the
old-fashioned scholastic and ran away to become a wandering scholar.
He studied at Erfurt, Greifswald, Rostock, Cologne, Frankfort, Leipzig,
Vienna, Padua and Bologna. He returned to Germany only to be rejected
by his family for associating with humanists. He returned to Italy
and studied in Bologna, Ferrara and Venice.
He was an angry young man who turned out hitting pamphlets against the evils in the church—simony, nepotism, benefice-hunting, immorality, neglect of duty, clerical pride, insolvency. The sale of indulgences was exploitation of the people. The cardinals collected money for war against the Turks but spent it on luxuries. He became one of the bitterest critics of the wars and immorality of Pope Julius II.

Hutton held as one of his main goals to elevate the culture of Germany above that of Italy.

He welcomed and encouraged Luther as a liberator.

He was an ardent champion of Reuchlin in the battle for Hebrew studies. He was one of the authors of Letters of Obscure Men.

He died in 1523 of syphilis, the same disease that killed his arch foe, Pope Julius II.

THE HUMANISM OF JOHN REUCHLIN (1455-1522):

Reuchlin was born in Baden and educated at Heidelberg, Paris, Basel, Rome and Florence. He developed great proficiency in both Latin and Greek. He studied law at Orleans and Poitiers. He visited Italy in 1482, 1490 and 1498. He met Mirandola and began the study of Hebrew, developing great interest in the Cabala. In 1496 he was invited by Archbishop John Dalberg of Worms to teach at the University of Heidelberg. He became the leader of an enthusiastic circle of humanistic students. His fame as a teacher spread through Germany. He wrote a Hebrew grammar and lexicon, De Rudimentis Hebraicis (On the Elements of Hebrew) in 1506. Later he wrote On the Cabalists' Art (1517). Reuchlin was the greatest scholar of Greek and Hebrew in all Germany and a champion of a return to these sources as the way to truth.

In 1506 a Jew named Johann Pfefferkorn was converted to Christianity and became an ardent proselytizer for the Christian faith. He wrote strong pamphlets against the Jews, one of which was Jews! Mirror. Pfefferkorn urged that all Hebrew works should be confiscated and destroyed. The professors at Cologne supported him. In 1509 he secured from the Emperor Maximilian an order for the Jews to surrender their books. Pfefferkorn began visiting the cities of Germany calling for the order to be enforced. The Archbishop of Mainz refused to carry out the order until some scholars were asked to give their opinion on the advisability of destroying the Hebrew books. Pfefferkorn rashly suggested that Reuchlin be consulted. Reuchlin's reply was

a humanist classic, urging that Christians could gain much from the study of Talmud, Cabala and Hebrew Scriptures and commentaries. Pfefferkorn angrily attacked Reuchlin in a pamphlet called Handmirror, charging that Reuchlin knew little Hebrew and was incompetent to give an opinion on the subject. Reuchlin was enraged at the attack and replied in his Eyes! Mirror. The professors at Cologne charged Reuchlin with heresy and demanded that he withdraw his defense of Hebrew studies. Several other universities concerned the Eyes! Mirror. The inquisitor-general, Hochstraten, summoned Reuchlin to trial for heresy. The case was appealed to Rome and dragged on until 1520. Pope Leo X, frightened by the Lutheran revolt, declared the Eyes! Mirror a dangerous book. The humanists saw in the affair an example of the obscurantism of the church and an ignorant and unwarranted attack on scholarship.

Reuchlin in his defense had published Letters of Famous Men—a collection of letters from humanists who supported him. This suggested one of the most famous satires of the Renaissance and Reformation, Letters of Obscure Men. The collection was a satire on the opponents of Reuchlin, claiming to be written by supporters of Pfefferkorn to the professors of Cologne. The Latin was barbarous and it was filled with trivialities and ignorance, creating the impression that the foes of Reuchlin were hostile to all learning and progress. The stupid supporters of Pfefferkorn were equalled
by the stupid professors in Cologne. The first book of the Letters appeared in 1516 and is thought to have been the joint work of Oecolampadius of the Erfurt circle of humanists and Ulrich von Hütten. Most of the second book that appeared in 1517 is thought to have been mostly the work of Ulrich von Hütten.

Admirers of the professors at Cologne followed with a host of letters under such names as Ostrich Feather, Goat Milker, Goose Preacher, Honey Licker, Baldpate, Dung Loader. With ridiculous religiosity and uncouth Latin they sought to uphold tradition against Reuchlin and the humanists. Sheep's Mouth raised the question of the sin of eating an egg with a chicken in it on Friday. In the same spirit a doctor of medicine, Anton of Heidelberg, wrote Erasmus, attempting to prove that Caesar did not write the Gallic Wars since he was a soldier and would not have had time to master Latin. He suggested that Suetonius was the author. Erasmus smiled and said nothing. Anton thought he had defeated the great humanist.

AN EVALUATION OF THE GERMAN RENAISSANCE: If the Italian Renaissance liberated the intellect, the German Renaissance awakened and liberated the conscience.