

Jan Hus: A Reformation before the Reformation

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Abstract

John Hus, his life, work, and conflicts are recounted in this article, with the circumstances that lead him to martyrdom at the stake on July 6, 1415, six centuries ago. His work galvanized Bohemia and contributed to the identity of the Czech nation and places him in the gallery of those who were precursors of the Reformation, such as Waldo and Wycliffe. Some comparisons are drawn between Hus and Luther, who were both passionate for the truth. They desired it, sought it, and wanted to unearth it wherever it was buried by centuries of human tradition. It was the light that did not leave them even in the darkest night. No other consideration could obstruct them, even though their lives were at stake.

I. Introduction

On July 6, 1415, six centuries ago, Master Jan Hus, priest and former rector of the University of Prague, died at the stake. His only fault was to talk too much or perhaps to be heard too much. His sermons in the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague silenced protests. In line with Francis of Assisi, Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, and others, and before Girolamo Savonarola (executed in 1498), he denounced the wealth of the Roman institution and the taxes the

This article was originally published in a longer version in French as “Jean Huss: Une réforme avant la Réforme,” *La Revue réformée* 66.3 (Juillet 2015): 39–65. It is translated by Bernard Aubert with the permission of the author and *La Revue réformée*.

pope levied throughout Europe. In the church, everything was bought or sold, and in Bohemia, the church owned about half the land, whereas the king owned only one sixth. Beside this widespread simony, Hus dared to point the finger at the hypocrisy of numerous prelates (including the pope) who were thirsty for power and pleasure. At Constance, in order to host the council (which convened from 1414 to 1417), new brothels were opened and prostitutes procured for the members of the council.¹ Throughout Europe, many called for a reformation of the church, and Hus embodied this cause in Bohemia. At Constance, however, he was condemned for heresy. His numerous diatribes against the immorality of the clergy did not play in his favor, but how was Hus a heretic in Rome's eyes, a forerunner of the sixteenth-century Reformation? A presentation of the context and a look at his work will help us to answer this question.

II. *The Context*

a) *The Emergence of Czech Nationalism*

Jan Hus was born in Bohemia, a small kingdom of central Europe, around 1369. Since the reign of Wenceslas I (1230–1253), the country had been a place of immigration for Germans. They brought skills beneficial to the economy but threatened the cultural and social autonomy of the Czechs, since Bohemia belonged to the Holy Empire, which was becoming more Germanic. From 1346 on, Bohemia had an energetic sovereign in the person of Charles IV, who transformed Prague into an influential intellectual center with the first university in the German speaking world. The importance of the city grew and, with 80,000 inhabitants at the end of the century, it was among the most populated in Europe. Behind this apparent success, social tensions were growing among the Czechs, who realized that they had been “colonized” by the Germans who occupied key positions. The nationalists wanted the Czech language to occupy a place of choice, and this played against the Roman Church, which was making its power felt throughout Europe.²

After the death of Charles IV, the situation became even more volatile when Wenceslas IV became emperor in 1378. Far less competent than his father, he was unable to establish his authority, and Sigismund, his brother,

¹ See the fascinating book by Paul Roubiczek and Joseph Kalmer, *Warrior of God: The Life and Death of John Hus* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1947); French translation (FT), *Jean Hus, guerrier de Dieu* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1951).

² The states accepted less and less the fiscal obligations of Rome. In 1365, England refused to pay taxes to the pope. John Wycliffe, then spokesperson of the parliament, provided the judicial foundations for this refusal.

king of Hungary, challenged him as emperor. War followed with German armies (on the side of Sigismund) and Czech ones (on the side of Wenceslas). In 1400, the Germans laid siege to Prague, which fueled Czech nationalism. The same year, the great electors divested Wenceslas IV of his imperial title and gave it to Count Rupert of Palatine.

In a chaotic atmosphere of mixed social, national, and religious claims, when Hus, a Czech from a poor family in southern Bohemia, became the university rector in Prague, he was the symbol and pride of an entire people. Neither the empire nor the church could tolerate the independence of Bohemia. They calculated that by striking the symbolic head and declaring Hus to be heretical, they could cool the fervor of the Bohemians who supported him. It did not turn out exactly that way, but this explains what took place after Hus's execution. The Hussite movement in Bohemia became a political force and raised armies that on several occasions successfully resisted the coalition forces of the pope and the emperor. Indeed, the Hussite wars lasted from 1419 to 1434.

b) *The "Great Schism" in the West*

The desire of the Council of Constance to deal with the Hus case can also be explained by the internal situation of the Roman Church, and the fear of a split. Since 1378, the church existed with two rival popes. The exile of the bishop of Rome in Avignon in 1309 cast a significant shadow over Christendom, the scandalous behavior of the popes tarnished the image of the head of the church, and many questioned the legitimacy of papal wars to defend St. Peter's see or its interests elsewhere.³ The subsequent opposition of Urban VI in Rome and Clement VII in Avignon, commonly called the "Western Schism," saw rival popes fighting for control of the church, excommunicating each other and setting up their own synods.

Each bishop and secular ruler had to decide which pope to support in a way that had little to do with religious considerations. Historians have also observed that during this period—in an absurd way—every Christian was cursed by one pope or blessed by the other! No wonder that the Roman institution was weakened and more and more voices called for a reformation of the church "in her head and members." But the only answer given was tighter repression, as illustrated by the Cathars. While in the eleventh century, Bishop Wason argued that the pastors of the church ought not to call upon the secular sword to punish heretics, things changed in the next

³ Furthermore, in the 14th century, the amount dedicated to war frequently exceeded 60% of the revenue!

century.⁴ In 1231, Pope Gregory IX established the Inquisition, the systematic prosecution of heretics and death sentences (used by common law) increased against all those so-called enemies of the Catholic faith.

The solution advocated by the University of Paris to the schism was for the cardinals on both sides to assemble a general council and unseat both popes and elect a new one. This proposal was against tradition since it gave the council ultimate authority, with the power to undo popes at will. At the time of his trial, Hus put his finger on this issue in order to confound his accusers, even if this was not the issue at stake.

A council met at Pisa in 1409, without the two popes, and a new one was appointed. This decision only worsened the crisis, since the two former popes challenged the validity of the council and remained in office, making three pontiffs who claimed legitimacy! The church was unable to resolve the crisis and Emperor Rupert died and Sigismund of Hungary, who was appointed in his stead, helped the Roman Church out of the dead-end.⁵

Another general council gathered in the city of Constance at the end of 1414. The emperor obtained the removal of the three popes and the election of a new one, Martin V, putting an end to the schism that had lasted for too long. Hus's trial must be considered in light of this project, as the survival of the Roman institution could not be compromised by one individual who continued to challenge the authority of the church and her representatives.

III. Reform according to Jan Hus

a) The Influence of John Wycliffe

By his commitment, his sermons in Prague, and his entire trial Hus showed himself to be a man of faith, deeply attached to the Holy Scriptures and the defense of truth. He was not, however, a pioneer in the spiritual or theological field. He followed paths opened by others before him. If he was a faithful Catholic, his quest for truth and authenticity led him to embrace the ideas of the Oxford professor John Wycliffe, who died in 1384.

⁴ Bishop Wason writes, "We have not received power to cut off from this life by the secular sword those whom our creator and redeemer wills to live so that they may extricate themselves from the snares of the devil ... Those who today are our adversaries in the way of the Lord can, by the grace of God, become our betters in the heavenly country ... We who are called bishops did receive unction from the Lord to give death but to bring life." Cited in Jean Comby, *How to Read Church History* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 1:167; translation of *Pour lire l'histoire de l'Église* (Paris: Cerf, 1984), 1:173.

⁵ Sigismund clearly grasped that if he could bring back the church to a normal situation, his imperial throne would be firmly established.

Wycliffe is known for having begun the translation of the Vulgate Bible into English, which reveals three important aspects of his thought:

1. Holy Scripture is the true authority in matters of faith;
2. Access to the Bible must be as broad as possible, and lay people have as much a right to it as clerics and academics;
3. Latin is no longer the language of the church, but only of the Church of Rome.

Wycliffe led a widespread protest against moral abuse in the church of his time in England, and in that, he was the voice—though not always the example!—of authentic Christianity.⁶ His reading of the Bible led him to an anti-Roman and anti-clerical radicalism and to challenge many beliefs and ceremonial practices. He rejected most of the sacraments, excessive ceremonies and feast-days, the veneration of saints and the worship of images and relics. All this resulted in his first trial in 1377, but because of the protection of the duke of Lancaster, the condemnation by Pope Gregory XI remained void. In 1381, he published a work against the doctrine of transubstantiation, asserting against the dogma of the fourth council of Latran in 1215, that the bread is not transformed in the Eucharist but remains bread and that the presence of Christ is spiritual. His doctrine of the church was also far removed from that of Rome. The church is the community of the elect or of those who are saved, not the historical church attested through the hierarchy. The sacramental acts of the clergy in the mediation of grace are only valid if they proceed from those who display signs of salvation, that is, who are morally worthy. The people of God only owe obedience to the clerics who are not in a state of mortal sin. Wycliffe considered the schism of 1378 as a judgment of God that confirmed the identity of the pope as the antichrist.

Doctor Wycliffe would ultimately be deprived of his position of professor at Oxford, but thanks to the protection that he enjoyed, he would escape the stake, and he left a legacy in the action of a group of disciples, the “Lollards.” More important, however, are the books that Wycliffe wrote, most of which were preserved, especially at Oxford University.

In the last years of the 14th century, the sister of King Wenceslas, married to Richard III of England, eagerly promoted exchanges between the universities of Prague and Oxford. Young Czechs studying in England discovered Wycliffe’s works and the thought of a heretical professor lived on in Bohemia.

⁶ Although he protested against the abuses of the clergy in matters of income, he himself kept on receiving benefices and prebends throughout his life.

b) *The Path of Jan Hus*

In 1391, for the first time, the name of student Hus appears in the register of Prague University. He was then a poor student of modest background. In 1396, he decided to pursue studies in theology, a subject for which he hitherto had shown no particular interest, and two years later when beginning to teach, he was already affirming a reform of the church to be necessary. He gave great attention to Wycliffe's first works brought back to Prague and started to copy them and would later translate them into Czech.

In 1400, he was ordained as a priest, and, two years later, installed as preacher of the Bethlehem Chapel. This building was erected about ten years earlier so that there would be a place in Prague where the gospel could be preached in the language of the people. Hus quickly became the most listened to Czech preacher. He transformed this chapel into a symbol of national identity and a center for propagating reformational ideas.

Hus cultivated good relations with his German colleagues at the university and the archbishop, and this surely contributed to his being appointed first dean of the Faculty of arts, and then, in 1402, rector of the University for a year. Later, in 1406, he was honored with the appointments of court chaplain and confessor of the queen. If King Wenceslas (an alcoholic) turned out to be an unreliable protector, the queen, who frequently listened to him at the Bethlehem Chapel, would always regard him highly.

Meanwhile, Wycliffe's writings spread, although condemned in England; in May 1403, 45 theses were selected from them to be examined by the university. The Germans were in agreement with the Church of England, which had rejected these theses, whereas the Czechs approved of them. Hus remained neutral, noting that phrases of Wycliffe should not be taken out of context and that their precise meaning should not be misunderstood, and he also indicated some inaccuracies of translation.⁷

Later, however, in 1407, suspected by Wenceslas, who wished to gain influence with the Germans, Hus was dismissed from his function as Synod preacher, being suspected of "Wycliffite" sympathies. He abandoned his reserved attitude in a sermon preached on July 14, 1408 in the Bethlehem Chapel, when he refuted accusations leveled against the Wycliffite doctrine, challenging what he considered to be unjust caricatures.

After the council of Pisa in 1409, the situation became very confused. The king took advantage of it to assert the independence of Bohemia: he changed the statutes of the university to grant more influence to the Czech

⁷ Jean Puyo, *Jan Hus: Un drame au cœur de l'Église*, Temps et visages (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1998), 58–59.

representation than the Germans who left to found their own university in Leipzig. Hus regained his position as rector, but of a greatly weakened university, with fewer students and with much opposition. The archbishop, believing that it was a favorable moment to eradicate the Wycliffite heresy, had prohibited books burned, resulting in riots that forced him to flee for his life. The university rehabilitated Wycliffe's writings, without pronouncing them free of heresy.

As Wenceslas attempted to take control of the Bohemian church, the new archbishop and others faithful to Rome called upon the pope to act against Hus. He was summoned to appear before John XXIII in Bologna and threatened with excommunication in case of non-appearance. Despite a declaration of faith (September 1, 1411) in which he presented his position in the most Catholic way possible, he did not succeed in erasing suspicion of heresy.⁸ Moreover, the following year, a new scandal broke out: the pope, to finance a war against the king of Naples, promulgated the sales of plenary indulgences. Hus could not remain silent. The pope has no power over the eternal destiny of souls, even less for money; and, on the other hand, no right to declare and wage war. The response was harsh. Hus was declared anathema in the churches of Bohemia, and the city of Prague was placed under a ban as long as Hus stayed there.⁹ This situation placed Master Hus in a serious dilemma. He observed that the people he loved, and upon which he counted, could not resist for long "this tight net of the antichrist." The king himself asked Hus to leave the city for a while. He exiled himself at the end of October 1412 and after a few weeks wandering found refuge with Baron of Lefl.

As Hus was not far away, he made frequent trips to Prague. During one of them, in 1413, he posted on the wall of the Bethlehem Chapel the *Treatise of Six Errors*. This time of forced exile was productive for his thought and literary output as he wrote his programmatic work: *De Ecclesia*. He was again summoned, this time to the council of Constance. In contrast to the previous summons from the pope, in which he saw no positive perspective, Hus perceived an opportunity to present and defend his views in the presence of the whole of Christendom, represented by the delegates to the council. He did indeed suspect that it could turn out badly, but the safe-passage received by Emperor Sigismund was a favorable sign.

⁸ He wrote his declaration upon the request of King Wenceslas, who sought appeasement with Rome.

⁹ The ban entailed the suspension of clerics. The religious services, marriages, baptisms, and burials were no longer performed.

c) *The Trial*

In October 1414, Hus set off for Constance with a few of his friends, the opening of the council being scheduled for November 5. He was able to come and go freely for a few weeks, to attend religious services, since the pope had lifted the anathema and the interdict. However, he was arrested under a false pretence before the emperor, who would withdraw his support for Hus, had reached Constance. The council was not chiefly preoccupied with Hus's case, but with Pope John XXIII, considered by many members of the council to be unsuited because of notorious immorality, not to mention his sacrilegious behavior.¹⁰

Hus spent long months in prison without an opportunity to meet the council, while a commission collected information relevant to charges against him.¹¹ It scrutinized his writings and received the testimony of his Czech opponents, who were especially virulent, bringing all kinds of accusations, mixing shamelessly truth and fiction. Hus was also subjected to regular interrogations, seeking to obtain a confession or to have him recant supposed heresies.

But with the coming of spring 1415, the imbroglio relating to the papacy found a partial and unexpected resolution when the pope, feeling that his throne was escaping him, surreptitiously left Constance. Instead, the council not only continued to deliberate, but it was also the occasion of a victory for the conciliar party. On April 6, the general council proclaimed itself the supreme authority in Christendom, which constituted a stunning turnaround in relation to the belief in the succession of St. Peter in the person of the popes. John XXIII was solemnly deposed on May 29 while the Catholic Church, until the election of Martin V at the end of 1417, spent more than two years without a pope, an unprecedented situation!

As the crisis resolved itself, the council turned its attention to the question of the threat of heresy. First, they came back to the person and work of Wycliffe. Although he and his writings had already been condemned more than once, the council considered its duty to pronounce itself. On May 5, it condemned 305 articles by Wycliffe; his books were burnt and his body was exhumed and his remains dispersed. As for Hus, against his expectation, it was not the intention of the council to hear him at length, and even less to let him expound his thought in sermons. His appearance was only to take place once the hearing was closed to permit an abjuration, since the conviction of heresy had already been established.

¹⁰ Significantly, Cardinal Giuseppe Roncalli, when he became Pope John XXIII in the twentieth century, wanted to erase the memory of this predecessor—considered today by the Catholic Church as an anti-pope—by taking again his name and number.

¹¹ In prison, he lived under very harsh conditions and almost lost his life.

The nobility of Bohemia, already alienated by Sigismund's perjury, requested the council give Hus the opportunity to express his views. In order not to further aggravate the situation, the council agreed in principle and dedicated three sessions to the accused. It would be exaggerated to say that he was able to express himself freely. On June 5, during the first appearance, there was such a noise that Hus could hardly hear himself. In the second meeting, Hus was able to express himself on the priesthood and the presence of the body of Christ in the Eucharist, but the next day he was ordered to answer only very briefly to the questions. Finally he was ordered again to abjure his errors in order to avoid the stake. He remained firm even if he could not refute opinions falsely attributed to him or defend teachings which he was convinced were faithful to the Catholic tradition.

Hus was thus found guilty of heresy. On June 23, it was decreed that all his books were to be burned, and on July 6, after an audience in which the charge, the sentence, and the solemn excommunication were pronounced, he was led to the place of execution.

d) *The True Points of Contention*

What were the real differences between Hus and the official doctrine of the church? Putting aside false accusations invented to get rid of this Czech agitator, with regard to the dogmas of the first four councils concerning the nature of God and the incarnate Son, Hus—like the sixteenth-century Reformers after him—was perfectly orthodox. He confessed the Trinity defined at Nicea and Constantinople and the two natures of Christ according to the teaching of Ephesus and Chalcedon. He believed in the truth of the Holy Scriptures, without rejecting some unscriptural traditional beliefs such as purgatory or the assumption of Mary. While his attacks on the clergy were often outspoken, they targeted behavior he judged scandalous, without calling into question the institution itself. In contrast to Wycliffe—although, like him, he dared to call the pope antichrist—Hus remained convinced that ecclesiastical right was legitimate and that the Roman Church could call herself the Catholic church.

It is often difficult to clarify his thought on specific topics since, depending on the circumstances, his discourse could vary greatly. In some cases, it is legitimate to ask whether his desire to present himself as a good Catholic did not lead him to take distance from certain statements he made when he took up the mantle of protest leader. This tension is apparent when one considers his famous *Treatise against Six Errors*. The first affirmation about the Eucharist condemns the idea that the priest at the altar creates the body of Christ, and seems to present the position of Wycliffe. This is what the fathers

of the council understood: Hus revived the “heresy” taught by the professor of Oxford. But throughout the trial, during interrogation in prison or before the assembly of the council, Hus was eager to distance himself from this characterization. During his second appearance, he did so by using the language of the Council of Latran of 1215 itself: he acknowledged that at the time of consecration the bread disappears, being “transubstantiated” into the body of Christ. Surprised, one of the members of the council requested confirmation, “Do you say that the body of Christ is there, totally, really, and in a multipliable fashion?” His answer was unambiguous, “Truly, really, and totally; the body of Christ is in the sacrament of the altar, this body born of the Virgin Mary, which suffered, died, and was raised, and is at the right hand of the Father.”¹² Jean Puyo asks, “Could Jan Hus be more orthodox?”¹³ And André Vauchez’s prudence is understandable when he proposes that Hus is “probably more orthodox than Wycliffe”!¹⁴

On the doctrine of the church, Hus is clearly and consistently problematic for Rome. Although his attitude was on the whole one of respect toward the hierarchy of the church, and although he did not adopt the Wycliffite ideal of the complete submission of the visible church to the invisible, many signs indicate a different ecclesiology from the one shaped by St. Augustine, which prevailed throughout the Middle Ages. Several positions presaged a new way of seeing things, a way incompatible with and a threat to the Roman system.

First, in line with the Christocentric mysticism based on the *via moderna* of the Brothers of the Common Life, Hus considered that the relationship of the believer to Christ does not depend on the mediation of the church. Regarding the forgiveness of sins, he believed much more in sincere repentance than the efficacy of indulgences. Similarly, he dared to separate God’s absolution from the liturgical act of the clerics. He unambiguously stated,

Let anyone, whoever it may be, pope, bishop or any other priest, cry: “Man, I forgive you your sins, I free you from your sins and all the pains of hell,” *it is empty clamour and it is vain: it avails nothing unless God forgives the sinner who heartily rues his sins.*¹⁵

The consequence is important because ecclesiastical authority does determine the eternal destiny of believers.¹⁶ The church is dispossessed of the power of the keys concerning salvation and damnation. This is confirmed

¹² As cited in Puyo, *Jan Hus*, 138.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ André Vauchez, in *Histoire du christianisme des origines à nos jours*, ed. Michel Mollat (Paris: Desclée, 1990), 6:288; as cited by Puyo, *Jan Hus*, 89.

¹⁵ Cited in Roubiczek and Kalmer, *Warrior of God*, 127; FT, *Jean Hus*, 120 (emphasis mine).

¹⁶ To the great sorrow of the members of the council, Hus asserted that Wycliffe was in heaven with the “blest” in spite of the condemnations against him.

by the *Treatise of the Six Errors*, since the third article rejects the so-called power of the priest to remit sins and their punishment, while the fifth article rejects the power to excommunicate.¹⁷

A consequence of this—which Hus assumed—is the lessening of the distance between clerics and laity. Since the ultimate authority in the church is Christ and since the hierarchy does not exclusively control access to Christ, the clergy is not the judge of everything or itself beyond judgment. Neither is the laity only a flock that is led; it is comprised of the members of the body of Christ. When Hus preached at the Bethlehem Chapel, he loved to call upon his hearers and to ask them their opinion! He gave Christian people their voice back. Moreover, he was convinced that the civil authorities have a duty in regard to the church, and they should, if the occasion arises, punish clerics who behave badly.

Furthermore, the direct appeal to Christ and “hearing” the voice of God apart from the mediation of the church expresses a movement in Western thought, in an ever stronger affirmation of the individual, characterized by the emergence of the “I.” The message of the gospel underscores the worth of the individual since it addresses the heart and invites personal decision. Religious questions are not matters of consenting with implicit faith to the dominant discourse. What was changing was the balance between the collective and the individual. Hus’s aim was not to challenge the right of the church to assert the content of the faith; he was not strictly a rebel; rather, he could not accept a mere argument from authority. Throughout his trial, he explained that he was willing to revise his positions if some good reason were put forth. In his main work, *De Ecclesia*, he writes: “Who can forbid a man to judge according to his reason?”¹⁸ After having removed from the church the power of the keys in the administration of grace, he challenged her claims in the formulation of truth. The discourse of the church is not infallible; conscience can demand her to present her credentials.

From this, a question arises: upon what basis does the conscience recognize truth if not necessarily via the discourse of the church? Hus invokes reason, which is not a norm for faith, but a means of inquiry. It is useful and necessary, but it is only a guide to truth. Hus was convinced that truth resides in God’s revelation, in the Holy Scriptures. He clearly was one of the first to formulate what would later be called the right of private

¹⁷ Jan Hus, “De sex erroribus compilatum, atque cura ipsius Pragæ parietibus Bethlehemiticis inscriptum (1413),” in *Historia et monumenta Ioannis Hus atque Hieronymi Pragensis*, ed. Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1558; repr., Nürnberg: Montanus & Neuberus, 1715), 1:238, 239–40.

¹⁸ As cited in Puyo, *Jan Hus*, 91; cf. Jan Hus, *De Ecclesia: The Church*, trans. David S. Schaff (New York: Scribner’s, 1915), 262, 224, 227, 234, 251, and 257.

conscience, the right and duty of Christians to test the teaching of the church in light of Scripture. After the publication of the pontifical announcement of the sale of indulgences in Bohemia (1412), Hus expressed himself in this way:

Therefore a disciple of Christ must examine papal bulls, and if they are in agreement with the laws of Christ, not oppose them in any way. But if they are against Christ's laws he must join Christ Himself to oppose them. ... Holy Writ is the law of Christ and therefore nothing must be added to it and nothing taken away. For the law of Christ is sufficient, and alone it is enough to lead and rule the militant Church.¹⁹

We discern here the famous *sola Scriptura*, the formal principle of the 16th century Reformation. Hus is concerned to bring the "law of Christ" to bear on decisions and acts of the contemporary church, rather than to challenge the whole tradition with the teaching of Scripture. Nevertheless, the affirmation that Holy Scripture "alone ... is enough to lead and rule the militant Church" opens the door to critique the beliefs and practices of tradition. Hus planted a few important signposts. Most symbolic was his desire to restitute the cup to the laity, as for two centuries the priest alone had access to the chalice, while the people had to be content with the host. In several chapels and churches in Bohemia, Hus restored the cup to the faithful. The council of Constance reproached him and called it heretical. "What madness," wrote Hus, "to condemn as heresy the Gospel of Christ, the epistles of St. Paul, yea, the deeds of Christ and His apostles and the other saints."²⁰ After his death, communion under two species became the emblem of the Hussite movement. The Reformation unanimously inherited this legacy.

IV. Conclusion: From Jan Hus to Martin Luther

With the Waldensians, Wycliffe, and others, Hus was one of the forerunners of the great Reformation movement that would unfold in the 16th century. Striking similarities can be noted between the path of Hus and that of Martin Luther.

First, both were born in the Holy Roman Empire and incarnated national claims and identity. While Hus was largely responsible for the emergence of the conscience of the Czech nation over against Germany and Rome, Luther was as a prophet of the German nation against the hegemony of Rome. Both contributed to the development of their language: Hus the

¹⁹ Cited in Roubiczek and Kalmer, *Warrior of God*, 130; FT, *Jean Hus*, 123.

²⁰ See Roubiczek and Kalmer, *Warrior of God*, 233; FT, *Jean Hus*, 204.

Czech language, and Luther the German through his theological writings, and his remarkable translation of the Bible.

Both were university teachers confronted by a similar global context: on one hand, the domination of scholastic erudition from which they sought to escape, and on the other, a Catholic institution that continued at the time of Luther to create one scandal after another through the behavior of her leaders, the papal wars, etc. At key moments, they both had to face the problem raised by indulgences. The publication of 1517 was the spark that would light the fire of the Reformation, but that of 1412 had already provoked indignation not only in Hus, but also in the population of Bohemia. The rejection was so passionate that students of the University of Prague burnt publicly the papal bull which contained the promulgation of indulgences. This episode anticipated Luther's gesture of burning in 1520 the bull that condemned his writings.

A striking element in the comparison of the two stories is the convocation of Hus to Constance and Luther to the diet of Worms. If no council gathered at Worms, the stated objective of the ecclesiastical authorities was the same: to eradicate a protest movement either by an abjuration or by physically eliminating its leader. Luther, who had already been excommunicated (like Hus), received from the Emperor Charles V a safe conduct, which assured his security, and which bears resemblances to the tragic story of Hus. To his friends, who discouraged him from going to Worms, Luther replied: "Yes, I will go to Worms even if there are as many devils as tiles on the roofs. They were able to burn Jan Hus but were not able to burn the truth." The emperor too remembered the events at Constance. When some prelates advised him to lift the protection granted to Luther through the safe passage, he answered, "I do not want to have to blush like my predecessor Sigismund." Hus's martyrdom was Luther's gain.

Beyond the historical parallels, it is interesting to note that the theological breakthroughs in Hus's thought foreshadowed the doctrine and the spirituality of the sixteenth-century Reformation: the direct relationship with Christ that was so dear to Luther, the rights of conscience, and the definition of ultimate authority as no longer belonging to the church, but to Scripture.

Regarding the church, Hus's thought is incomplete, but even in this there are hints of the doctrine of the covenant later developed in Reformed circles. Between the position of Wycliffe—which perhaps anticipates Anabaptist ecclesiology—and Roman Catholic teaching, Hus opens a third way. He does not propose the rejection of the historic church, the institutional church and her prerogatives, for the historical reality of the church is not to be confused with the elect people known to God alone. The

doctrine of the covenant of grace would provide a foundation for a third way. Reformed ecclesiology clarifies Hus's intuitions. His revalorization of the laity would also be taken up by Luther, to whom we owe the affirmation of the priesthood of all believers and the end of the sacerdotal institution as a mediating channel between God and men.

The gathering of these elements confirms our initial impression that there is a filial relationship between Hus's work and the Reformation. Luther acknowledged it when he said: "We are all Hussites without knowing it." However, Hus did not initiate or anticipate the doctrine of salvation by God's grace alone and through faith alone (*sola gratia, sola fide*). For Hus, as for the whole medieval church, and for other pre-reforming movements, grace was not the pivot of the relationship between man and God, but only a help and a comfort within a system that remained deeply legalistic. Luther will shatter all this! The power of his thought was the (re)discovery of the gospel of grace apart from merit, the glorious liberty of the children of God. This was not Hus's language. His last letter written from prison is significant. As he was preparing for martyrdom, he wrote: "I wrote this letter awaiting my death sentence in prison, in the chains in which I suffer, I hope, *for divine law*."²¹ Luther would not have expressed himself in this way. Is the darkness in which Hus remained on this point an underlying cause of the limited impact of his action? Did not Luther set Europe on fire precisely because he opened a radical new way to God? Between the two, a century elapsed during which mentalities evolved: there were the advances of humanism; there was Erasmus. A Christian reading of history does not forbid us to think that the action of the Holy Spirit was all the more palpable when the gospel was again proclaimed in its purity.

To conclude, both Hus and Luther were passionate for the truth. They desired it, sought it, and wanted to unearth it wherever it was buried by centuries of human tradition. It was the light that did not leave them even in the darkest night. No other consideration could obstruct them, even though they might lose their lives. In 1410, when the situation in Prague became critical and Hus was forbidden to preach, he defied the prohibition with these remarkable words:

In order that I may not by my silence lay myself open to the reproach that for a piece of bread or for fear of man I have abandoned the truth, I will defend till death the truth that God has vouchsafed me, especially the truth of the Holy Scriptures. I know that truth remains and is strong and will retain victory to all eternity.²²

²¹ As cited by Puyo, *Jan Hus*, 154 (emphasis mine).

²² Cited in Roubiczek and Kalmer, *Warrior of God*, 103–4; FT, *Jean Hus*, 99.

Luther similarly introduced his famous 95 theses with these words: “Out of love for the truth and for the purpose of clarifying it, the following theses will defended be at Wittemberg ...”

If Christ himself came into the world “to testify to the truth” (John 18:37), let us acknowledge that these two witnesses were wonderful followers of their Master. Today, when this ideal evokes more questions than passion, the combat and sacrifice of Hus is preserved by the motto of the Czech Republic: “Truth conquers.” And if we were to define what stood at the heart of every true reform of the church, it would be fair to say that it is the progress of God’s people in the way of truth. In this specific sense, Hus deserves the title of “reformer” before the Reformation.

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