

The Road to the Reformation

Step Three

Confronting Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg

News of Luther's challenge to indulgences continued to spread throughout Germany after the Heidelberg Disputation. Printed copies of the Ninety-Five Theses circulated around Germany and were greeted with much approval. Luther also was rebutting some of his critics in published works which further highlighted the indulgence controversy.

People like John Tetzel, the indulgence salesman, were ominously suggesting that Luther was a heretic. Meanwhile, in Rome, the Pope was becoming increasingly concerned. Luther was challenging both the sale of indulgences (a great source of papal revenue) and the authority of the pope over the Church. The problem was, he was stirring up things in Germany where the papacy was very unpopular. Germans did not like seeing their money crossing the Alps to benefit Rome and the Italians. Luther had a ready audience for his ideas and it was clear to the Pope that Luther needed to be stopped.

The Catholic Church was and is a hierarchical organization, and in that way was very similar to the military in which obedience to orders and deference to authority are highly valued. So the Pope decided to have the new papal legate in Germany straighten Luther out. Thomas de Vio, Cardinal Cajetan (1469-1534), had just been approved as the papal legate at the Diet of Augsburg on 26 August 1518.

A papal legate was a direct representative of the Pope, sort of like an ambassador but with greater authority to make decisions on the spot. Cajetan was also the prior general of the Dominican Order and a famed scholastic theologian and expert on Thomas Aquinas.

The Pope also summoned Luther to Rome during July 1518. By 5 August the Emperor Maximilian had denounced Luther as a heretic. Luther received the summons in Wittenberg on 7 August. News and information moved much more slowly before the middle of the nineteenth century. Luther immediately asked his patron Frederick the Wise of Saxony to have his case heard in Germany, not Rome, so he would get a fair hearing.

The Pope's instructions to Cajetan, on 23 August, were to demand that Luther recant and if he refused, Luther was to be arrested and sent to Rome. In early September, however, Frederick the Wise, who was at the Diet of Augsburg with Cajetan, persuaded the Cardinal to treat Luther in a fatherly fashion and not arrest him. The Pope on 11 September issued a further instruction that Cajetan was not to engage in a debate with Luther over the indulgence question.

On 26 September Luther began his journey from Wittenberg to Augsburg where he arrived on 7 October. He had his first meeting with Cajetan on 12 October. Instead of simply demanding a recantation from Luther, Cajetan laid out to Luther those points where his ideas conflicted with church doctrine. The problem was that Luther did not find Cajetan's presentation convincing because it was not

based on the Bible or decision from church councils. Cajetan ended up shouting down Luther while his Italian companions laughed at Luther.

Luther returned the next day, 13 October, for a second meeting but this time he brought along four imperial counselors, including George Spalatin, as witnesses along with a notary to record the meeting. Then Luther proceeded to read a statement he was willing to submit to lawful conclusions of the Church but also denied that he had said anything that contradicted the Bible, the Church Fathers, or papal decrees. He refused to anything further but promised to submit a written defense. That document was submitted the following day and Luther vigorously defended himself based on scripture and conscience. It was a rejection of the scholastic approach that Cajetan espoused. Luther also expected the Church to respond by acting on its conscience. It was a rehearsal for his famous stand at the Diet of Worms in 1521.

Cajetan angrily told Luther to leave and not come back until he was willing to recant. He also demanded that Johann Staupitz as Luther's superior in the Augustinian Order intervene and make Luther recant. Instead Staupitz released Luther from all his vows of obedience. Four days passed, and Luther wrote a letter to the Pope on 18 October protesting how he had been treated. Then with the situation in Augsburg becoming potentially dangerous, Luther left town on the night of 20 October.

On 25 October, Cajetan demanded that Luther's lord, Frederick the Wise, either arrest Luther or drive him out of Saxony. That demand did not reach Frederick the Wise until 19 November. He immediately showed it to Luther for him to make a response. Luther did. On 28 November he demanded the calling of a legitimate general council of the Church to hear his case and discuss the issue of indulgences. Popes fear calling councils which might try to limit papal authority. Shortly after that, Frederick the Wise responded to Cajetan with his refusal to arrest Luther or banish him.

The significance of the confrontation with Cajetan at Augsburg was three-fold. First, Luther refused to back down and was increasingly questioning papal authority. Second, the Pope responded by reaffirming papal authority and the practice of granting indulgences with no attempt at reform. Third, the indulgence controversy was no longer a matter of internal debate within the Church. Secular authorities such as Frederick the Wise and various councils of the larger cities of Germany had also become involved. Any hope for reaching a consensus or settling the matter amicably continued to fade. The situation also left Luther resolved defend his ideas with greater determination which he would proceed to do during 1519.

Luther had sidestepped Cajetan's demand for recantation and turned the Augsburg meeting into a further public debate over church doctrine as we will see next at Leipzig.