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## FILM REVIEW

*LUTHER*. Starring: Joseph Fiennes, Peter Ustinov, Alfred Molina, Claire Cox.

Director: Eric Till

Producers: Brigitte Rochow, Christian Stehr and Alexander Thies

Year of Production: 2003

Time: 122 Minutes. Rating: PG-13



Martin Luther (Joseph Fiennes) before the Holy Roman Emperor at Worms (1521) © NFP 2003 / photos: Rolf von der Heydt

### A Review of Eric Till's Film *Luther* (2003)

Edmund J. Campion

This is a very curious movie about the great German reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) that pleased neither Protestants nor Catholics. This is not to say that this film by the prolific director Eric Till is without value. The quality of the cinematography is extraordinary. The outside scenes

were filmed in well-preserved late medieval churches, monasteries, and castles and this enables viewers to learn about early modern architecture in central Europe. Many scenes were actually filmed in the Czech Republic perhaps because production costs are significantly more expensive in Germany than in the Czech Republic. The major reason for seeing this movie, however, is that it would be a shame to miss the final film in which the great British actor Peter Ustinov (1921-2004) appeared. In *Luther*, Peter Ustinov played with great skill the role of Frederick the Wise of Saxony, who protects Luther for reasons that are never explained in this film. Viewers are left with the impression that Frederick the Wise protects Luther from Cardinal Albert of Brandenburg and Emperor Charles V and eventually converts from Catholicism to Lutheranism basically because he liked Luther. This film does not suggest that there was any theological motivation for Frederick the Wise's actions. Although the lines for Frederick the Wise are fairly wooden, the quality of Peter Ustinov's acting is so solid that it only serves to remind us how ineffective this film is from a theological and an historical point of view.

This major problem is not limited just to minor characters such as Frederick the Wise but also to major characters including Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, Andreas Karlstadt, Cardinal Cajetan, Johann Tetzel, and Pope Leo X. Eric Till chose to overlook the theological reasons for the Lutheran Reformation and for Catholic opposition to Martin Luther. There is no reference in this movie to the central Lutheran tenet of "justification by faith." Joseph Fiennes, who plays the title character in this movie, portrays Martin Luther as an emotionally unstable man who feels uncomfortable in his monastery for reasons that he cannot understand and then suffers a mental breakdown. Soon after his ordination, Father Luther expresses serious concerns about his religious faith and his abbot wonders why Father Luther had not discussed these doubts during his years of theological study in the monastery in Erfurt. From very early in this movie, viewers do not have a favorable opinion of Martin Luther and things just get worse.

Like many practicing Catholics of his era such as Desiderius Erasmus (1466?-1536), Martin Luther had serious reservations concerning the sale of indulgences. In Eric Till's film *Luther*, however, opposition to the sale of indulgences becomes the major reason for Luther's break from Rome and support for the sale of indulgences seems to be the major motivation for Catholic opposition to Martin Luther. To say the least, this is a grotesque distortion of historical reality. Catholic theology teaches that indulgences shorten the time that a sinner must spend in Purgatory before earning the right to enter Heaven. Many



Catholics feel that indulgences should be earned by prayer and should not be for sale. As a Catholic priest, Luther clearly understood that indulgences do not free grievous sinners from Hell. Luther was properly offended when he heard Catholic priests, such as the indulgence seller Johann Tetzel, tell believers that indulgences would exempt them from the fires of Hell. Luther's opposition to the sale of indulgences was perfectly compatible with orthodox Catholic theology.

In this movie, Eric Till never makes clear to viewers the theological bases for the Lutheran Reformation. Converts did not embrace Lutheranism merely because they admired Martin Luther as a charismatic and effective preacher. Had this been the case, they would have stayed Catholic had Luther remained Catholic. The Catholic Church has certainly not lacked eloquent and caring priests over the centuries. These converts to Lutheranism were persuaded by his theological arguments among which the most important were "justification by faith" and the right of people to interpret the Bible on their own and not only through the prism of traditional Catholic *magisterium*. These were the major reasons both for the break with Rome and the rapid spread of Protestantism to many other countries, first of which was Switzerland. It would not have taken too much time for the actor Joseph Fiennes to explain during the powerful scene at the Diet of Worms (1521) what was meant by justification by faith as opposed to salvation through good works. This film, however, never indicates to viewers that there were, in fact, clear reasons for the theological positions of Martin Luther and his Catholic opponents. It was not necessary or even appropriate for Eric Till to argue that Martin Luther or Pope Leo X was necessarily correct because this will remain a question of individual religious belief, but Eric Till should have made it clear to viewers, who may well not possess a good understanding of the key beliefs of Lutheranism and Catholicism, what the basic reasons were for the momentous event that we now call the Reformation.

Although the events portrayed in this movie extend until the famous 1530 Council of Augsburg at which Lutheran leaders presented their Augsburg Confession, which expressed the essential beliefs of Lutheranism, no mention is made of the existence of many different Reformed Churches in European countries other than Germany. This is an amazing oversight especially because Andreas Karlstadt, who studied and taught theology with Luther in Wittenberg, later played an essential role in developing the Protestant Reformation in Basel where he taught theology at the University of Basel from 1534 until his death in 1541. Even more surprising is that there is not even a passing mention of

Ulrich Zwingli of Zurich (1484-1531), who was in regular contact with Martin Luther and is generally considered to be the person most responsible for the initial spread of Protestantism outside Germany and for the development of Reformed theology that differed significantly from Lutheranism. In conclusion, Eric Till's film *Luther* is a visually impressive movie that was graced with the presence of Peter Ustinov, albeit in a minor role, but *Luther* will not satisfy viewers with an interest in history or theology because it does not explore the central issues of the Lutheran Reformation.