

Martin Luther's Reply to the Papal Bull of Leo X



Luther burning the Pope's bull in front of the east gate of Wittenberg in December 1520.

Exsurge Domine (Latin: Arise O Lord) is a papal bull issued on 15 June 1520 by Pope Leo X. It was written in response to the teachings of Martin Luther which opposed the views of the papacy. It censured forty one propositions extracted from Luther's 95 theses and subsequent writings, and threatened him with excommunication unless he recanted within a sixty day period commencing upon the publication of the bull in Saxony and its neighboring regions. Luther refused to recant and responded instead by composing polemical tracts lashing out at the papacy and by publicly burning a copy of the bull on 10 December 1520. (From Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exsurge_Domine)

I call upon you to renounce your diabolical blasphemy and audacious impiety, and, if you will not, we shall all hold your seat as possessed and oppressed by Satan, the damned seat of Antichrist;

I have heard that a bull against me has gone through the whole earth before it came to me, because being a daughter of darkness it feared the light of my face. For this reason and also because it condemns manifestly the Christian articles I had my doubts whether it really came from Rome and was not rather the progeny of that man of lies, dissimulation, errors, and heresy, that monster John Eck. The suspicion was further increased when it was said that Eck was the apostle of the bull. Indeed the style and the spittle all point to Eck. True, it is not impossible that where Eck is the apostle there one should find the kingdom of Antichrist. Nevertheless in the meantime I will act as if I thought Leo not responsible, not that I may honor the Roman name, but because I do not consider myself worthy to suffer such high things for the truth of God. For who before God would be happier than Luther if he were condemned from so great and high a source for such manifest truth? But the cause seeks a worthier martyr. I with my sins merit other things. But whoever wrote this bull, he is Antichrist. I protest before God, our Lord Jesus, his sacred angels, and the whole world that with my whole heart I dissent from the damnation of this bull, that I curse and execrate it as sacrilege and blasphemy of Christ, God's Son and our Lord. This be my recantation, Oh bull, thou daughter of bulls.

Having given my testimony I proceed to take up the bull. Peter said that you should give a reason for the faith that is in you, but this bull condemns me from its own word without any proof from Scripture, whereas I back up all my assertions from the Bible. I ask thee, ignorant Antichrist, dost thou think

that with thy naked words thou canst prevail against the armor of Scripture? Hast thou learned this from Cologne and Louvain? If this is all it takes, just to say, "I dissent, I deny," what fool, what ass, what mole, what log could not condemn? Does not thy meretricious brow blush that with thine inane smoke thou withstandest the lightning of the divine Word? Why do we not believe the Turks? Why do we not admit the Jews? Why do we not honor the heretic if damning is all that it takes? But Luther, who is used to bellum, is not afraid of bullam . I can distinguish between inane paper and the omnipotent Word of God.

They show their ignorance and bad conscience by inventing the adverb "respectively." My articles are called "respectively some heretical, some erroneous, some scandalous," which is as much as to say, "We don't know which are which." Oh meticulous ignorance! I wish to be instructed, not respectively, but absolutely and certainly. I demand that they show absolutely, not respectively, distinctly and not confusedly, certainly and not probably, clearly and not obscurely, point by point and not in a lump, just what is heretical. Let them show where I am a heretic, or dry up their spittle. They say that some articles are heretical, some erroneous, some scandalous, some offensive. The implication is that those which are heretical are not erroneous, those which are erroneous are not scandalous, and those which are scandalous are not offensive. What then is this, to say that something is not heretical, not scandalous, not false, but yet is offensive? So then, you impious and insensate papists, write soberly if you want to write. Whether this bull is by Eck or by the pope, it is the sum of all impiety, blasphemy, ignorance, impudence, hypocrisy, lying – in a word, it is Satan and his Antichrist.

Where are you now, most excellent Charles the Emperor, kings, and Christian princes? You were baptized into the name of Christ, and can you suffer these Tartar voices of Antichrist? Where are you, bishops? Where, doctors? Where are you who confess Christ? Woe to all who live in these times. The wrath of God is coming upon the papists, the enemies of the cross of Christ, that all men should resist them. You then, Leo X, you cardinals and the rest of you at Rome, I tell you to your faces: "If this bull has come out in your name, then I will use the power which has been given me in baptism whereby I became a son of God and co-heir with Christ, established upon the rock against which the gates of hell cannot prevail. I call upon you to renounce your diabolical blasphemy and audacious impiety, and, if you will not, we shall all hold your seat as possessed and oppressed by Satan, the damned seat of Antichrist; in the name of Jesus Christ, whom you persecute. But my zeal carries me away. I am not yet persuaded that the bull is by the pope but rather by that apostle of impiety, John Eck...

If anyone despises my fraternal warning, I am free from his blood in the last judgment. It is better that I should die a thousand times than that I should retract one syllable of the condemned articles. And as they excommunicated me for the sacrilege of heresy, so I excommunicate them in the name of the sacred truth of God. Christ will judge whose excommunication will stand. Amen.

1950) (pp. 153-155).