

FACES OF THE REFORMATION

POPE LEO X

(A.K.A. GIOVANNI DE' MEDICI)

Born: Dec. 11, 1475 | Florence, Italy

Died: Dec. 1, 1521 | Rome, Italy



The leader of the Roman Catholic Church who saw Luther as just another heretic to easily dismiss

GIOVANNI DE' MEDICI WAS A MEMBER OF THE FAMOUS MEDICI HOUSEHOLD IN FLORENCE, ITALY. His father, Lorenzo the Magnificent, was a skilled statesman who raised his sons to be fellow patrons of the arts. As the second son, Giovanni was steered to a life within the church. Due in no small part to his family's connections, he was named a cardinal at age 17 and became pope at 37, taking the name Leo X.

Leo was raised in one of the wealthiest households in Europe, and thus was accustomed to lavish spending. He proceeded to make Rome one of the finest Renaissance cities in Europe. St. Peter's Basilica, started by his predecessor Pope Julius II, was to have the finest works of art in all of Europe. Master architects and artists such as Raphael and Michelangelo were commissioned to work on the design not only of the basilica, but also of the pontifical palace. His personal life was equally lavish, with extravagant hunting parties attended by a large entourage. He collected the finest gems and rare books, and his household expenditures quickly drained the papal accounts. Wars with France during this time only added to the financial need.

Leo saw his chance for a financial rebound when the archbishopric of Mainz came open. Albrecht of Brandenburg was willing to pay for the appointment... willing, but not able. He needed to borrow substantial funds. An arrangement was made that indulgences would be sold in his territory. Half the money would pay back the bank that loaned Albrecht the money to buy the archbishopric and half would go to Rome for the building of the basilica. In essence, Rome was paid twice, once with the money Albrecht borrowed from the bank and again with half the indulgence money.

Albrecht engaged the Dominican monk Johann Tetzel to sell indulgences. Tetzel would come into a town to announce what was Roman Catholic Church doctrine: that one could pay to have one's time in purgatory reduced. Payment could also be made on behalf of deceased relatives. Who would not want to lessen the time of dear old Mom and Dad?

The idea that forgiveness of sins could be bought with anything other than the blood of Jesus angered Martin Luther. Although Tetzel was not in Wittenberg, Germany, he was just over the border and Luther's parishioners were no less a target of Tetzel's deceptions. Luther's 95 Theses were primarily directed at Tetzel's activities. When Luther's theses challenged the pope's power to shorten one's time in purgatory, the two had a war of words over several years, culminating in Luther's excommunication in 1521.

Leo died later that year of pneumonia, just short of his 46th birthday. In his eight-year reign, his focus was split between the financial straits he helped to create and the political upheaval occurring in Europe. By comparison, a renegade monk should have been easy to deal with. Leo did not and could not foresee the looming divide. The hammering of the nails to secure the 95 Theses would become the hammering of the wedge that split the Western church.



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