

explainity explains: The Protestant Reformation

Lina can read, understands the texts and can form her own opinion. To her this is nothing special, but 500 years ago that was not the case for many people.

Back then Germany and other parts of Europe were divided up quite differently both politically and geographically. They were ruled by emperors, kings, princes and the Roman Catholic Church – there was not yet a Protestant Church at the time. These mainly told the people what to believe in and how they should live.

The church had something – well, how should we put it?... to “offer” sinful people. For example, they sold “letters of indulgence”. These were supposed to exonerate someone from sin and reduce or even completely avoid the time spent in purgatory – that is, the period before entering heaven. Money in place of repentance – and indeed they could be bought for deceased relatives, too. The church used the money to finance the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica, for example, and to plug up financial gaps.

Not everyone agreed with this. A German theologian by the name of Martin Luther criticized this misuse of indulgence. According to traditions, he was said to have published 95 theses on that issue on October 31st, 1517. He listed reasons that things should be about belief alone, about repentance and God’s grace – and not about making money and the Church as an institution. How his theses were acknowledged is not known exactly today, but one thing is clear: Luther wrote history – and he heralded a “reformation”.

Thanks to the newly developed book printing technology, Luther’s writings spread quickly and he gained followers - which the Church did not exactly like that much. It was a turbulent time for Luther: he was excluded, accused and pursued.

Away from the public eye, at the Wartburg Castle in the German town of Eisenach, he continued to write using the alias Knight George. It was there that he also translated the New Testament from Greek, Hebrew and sometimes Latin into German.

This is how he made it possible for many people to read the Bible and to think for themselves. Education and freedom were the most important topics of the reformation.

However, it was not only a religious matter. In his writings about the reformation Luther also addressed those who were dissatisfied with the political and social order, such as farmers, who suffered due to taxes and serfdom. They now demanded justice from those who ruled over them.

The institution of the Catholic Church was shaken by this – and a new Protestant Church was founded, even if this had not been Luther’s intention at all.

Over the course of decades, the prevailing common order of Church and state gradually dissolved. The selling of indulgences has been prohibited in the Catholic Church since 1562 as well.

Lina now knows why October 31st is marked in her calendar as Reformation Day. Protestants commemorate the publication of Martin Luther's theses on this day along with the start of a reformation, which stands for freedom, justice, education and social equality.