

## 500 YEARS SINCE THE REFORMATION:

### Removal of the defamatory sculpture from Luther's Wittenberg parish church long overdue

On the exterior of Wittenberg's historic Parish Church, where Martin Luther preached, is a much-debated anti-Semitic sculpture. The *Judensau* (Jewish sow) epitomizes a shameful aspect of German church history. In 1988 a memorial plaque was embedded in the paving below the sculpture, pointing to the dire consequences of the church's blindness from early medieval times to the Holocaust with its atrocities. The full significance of this plaque, however, may not be obvious at first glance.

In 1933 the National Synod of the German Evangelical Church deliberately chose to convene in Wittenberg. Here Ludwig Müller, Hitler's nominee, was unanimously elected *Reichsbischof* (Reich Bishop). In Luther's parish church he received a Guard of Honor from Germany's "first SA theological storm troops" (*erster SA-Theologen-Sturm Deutschlands*).

Most visitors will be unaware of the history of the sculpture: a history with direct links to Martin Luther. The sculpture itself dates from before his time, but some years after his death an inscription was added in golden letters: *Rabini Schem Hamphoras*. It is based on Luther's virulently anti-Semitic tract of 1543, *Vom Schem Hamphoras und vom Geschlecht Christi* (On Shem Hamphoras and on the Lineage of Christ), widely distributed at that time with six reprints.

Excerpts from the inflammatory pamphlet translate as follows: "Here on our parish church in Wittenberg is a sow sculpted in stone ... Behind the sow is a rabbi lifting up her right leg and peering intensely ... under her tail at the Talmud ... No doubt this is where they get their Shem Hamphoras from [in rabbinic Hebrew the ineffably holy name of God]." Derived from the title of Luther's anti-Semitic tract, the words carved in stone above the sculpture were a public

affirmation of his hatred and sacrilege. And so they stand to this day.

Not only is the above quotation deeply wounding to Jewish people; it is also a severe affront to our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, honored and loved by Jews and Christians alike – the God to whom we owe our salvation.

Roman Catholics and Protestants of all denominations share the pre-Reformation history and heritage in which this anti-Semitic sculpture is rooted. A fitting prelude to the *Christusfest* planned for 2017 would be a collective act of repentance, in which we ask forgiveness of God and His covenant people Israel. "Where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation", to quote from Luther's *Small Catechism*. Repentance in word and deed is crucial to the integrity of any such celebration of the Reformation. The removal of a centuries-old obstacle would be a concrete expression of grief over past sin. Wittenberg 2017 could be a turning-point in church history with far-reaching implications. Its effect could be more widespread than official theological statements.

Luther ministered in great blessing from the parish church of Wittenberg. That is reason enough to remove this relic of a bygone era.

The Jubilee year of 2017 is a unique opportunity to part once and for all with both the sculpture and its inscription. By replacing the defamatory sculpture with a new symbol, this time one in honor of our Lord and His chosen people, the church would send out a clear signal to the world, in keeping with the true spirit of the Reformation. Wittenberg 2017 could become a landmark in history.

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