

# People in World History Activity 12

## Profile 2

### Martin Luther (1483–1546)

A mighty fortress is our God,  
A bulwark never failing.  
Our helper He amid the flood  
Of mortal ills prevailing.

Hymn based on "Ein' Feste Burg" (1529) by Martin Luther

Martin Luther was raised in the mining town of Mansfield, Germany. In keeping with his father's wishes, Luther enrolled at the University of Erfurt in 1501 to study law, but he abandoned his legal studies in 1505 and entered a monastery instead. It was a hard, disciplined life. He lived in an unheated cell, leaving only to receive instruction, take meals in silence, and join others in the chapel for services. Luther was ordained a Roman Catholic priest and celebrated his first mass in 1507. Luther continued his studies and, by 1512, was a professor of biblical theology at the University of Wittenberg.

The Roman Catholic Church had developed indulgences as a way to release sinners from part of the penance for their sins. For example, instead of going on a pilgrimage as a penalty for one's sins, an indulgence permitted the person to make a contribution to a worthy cause. In 1515, the pope authorized the sale of indulgences to raise money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

In response to what he saw as the abuse of indulgences, Luther wrote a letter explaining that by seeking escape from

divine punishment through indulgences, people were led away from true sorrow for their sins and into a sense of false security. This letter became known as the Ninety-five Theses.



The Theses marked the beginning of Luther's disillusionment with the Church and the start of the Reformation. Luther went on to publish other highly influential works questioning the Church's teachings.

In April 1521, Luther was given a hearing before a meeting at Worms, Germany. Although urged to retract his teachings, Luther refused. The emperor then declared Luther an outlaw. Luther's supporters hid him at Wartburg Castle, where he spent time studying and writing. During his year there, he translated the Bible into German. He took care to write simply and in common everyday language. Together with hymns he had written, this German Bible was to become a mighty force of the Reformation.

Luther remained a professor at the university where some 16,000 students studied the teaching of Luther and his successors in the theological faculty, spreading the new Lutheran religion across Germany.

### REVIEWING THE PROFILE

**Directions:** Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Before Luther criticized the Catholic Church, how did he make his living?
2. What did Luther write that had a great influence on the Reformation?
3. **Critical Thinking** Determining Cause and Effect. Do you think Luther's study of the law had any influence on his later criticisms of the Catholic Church? Why or why not?