1999

Faith and Understanding: the Reforms of Nikolaus Cusanus

Joseph Eric Sych

ABSTRACT

Faith and Understanding: the Reforms of Nikolaus Cusanus

Written by Joseph E. Sych

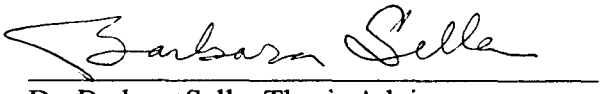
Thesis to satisfy the requirements of the Degree of Master of Arts

University of Richmond

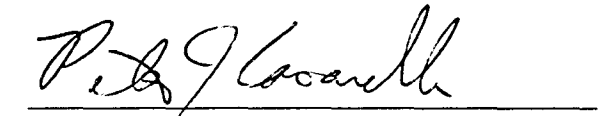
Barbara Anna Sella, Ph.D., Advisor

This paper explores the reform ideas of Nikolaus Cusanus, Bishop of Brixen, and Cardinal of St. Peter in Chains. It demonstrates the centrality of reform to the life of Cusanus, and traces the development of his reform ideas. To accomplish this, several of Cusanus' works are utilized, including *De concordantia catholica*, *De docta ignorantia*, *De quaerendo Deum*, several of his sermons, as well as *Reformatio generalis*, which contains his reform ideas in their most mature stage of development. The paper argues that Cusanus' reform concept was formulated early, but was later influenced by the emergence of mystical and nominalistic forces.

I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

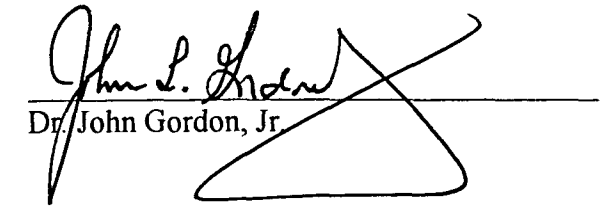


Dr. Barbara Sella, Thesis Advisor



Dr. Peter Casarella

Dr. G. Scott Davis



Dr. John Gordon, Jr.

FAITH AND UNDERSTANDING:
THE REFORMS OF NIKOLAUS CUSANUS

By

JOSEPH ERIC SYCH

B.A., Christopher Newport University, 1994

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the University of Richmond

in Candidacy

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

History

May, 1999

Richmond, Virginia

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. John Gordon, Jr., and Dr. G. Scott Davis for their comments, questions, and suggestions in the preparation of this thesis. Special thanks go to Dr. Peter Casarella of the Catholic University of America who provided source material, extensive guidance, and critical analysis during my research and writing. Special thanks also go to Dr. Barbara Sella for her tireless help in securing source material, answers to numerous questions, critical analysis, and her flexibility in scheduling meetings.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One

NIKOLAUS CUSANUS

As Donald Sullivan noted in 1974, the reform aspect of the career of Nikolaus Cusanus has been much neglected by modern scholars.[1] This observation is still valid today, over twenty-five years later. Morimichi Watanabe and Thomas Izbicki, translating Cusanus' *Reformatio generalis*, wrote of their surprise that an English edition of this work had not appeared earlier than the time of their publication, in 1996.[2] The neglect of Cusanus' role as a reformer and specifically of the *Reformatio generalis* is especially significant since reform is the key to understanding the life of this controversial fifteenth century cardinal and bishop, and since the *Reformatio* represents the full maturity of Cusanus' reform ideas. While some writers have discussed elements of this issue, the *development* of his concept of reform has been treated only superficially in nearly all cases.

Accounts of the life and achievements of Cusanus often focus on his contributions as an outstanding representative of late medieval humanist scholarship, and for good reason. Cusanus was one of the greatest thinkers of his time, a man whose intellect was broad in scope, and whose interests included theology, philosophy, humanist scholarship and manuscript collection, political thought, and canon law, as well as the sciences of motion, mathematics, and astronomy.[3] Not surprisingly, therefore, he is often

---

[1]Donald Sullivan, "Nicholas of Cusa as Reformer: The Papal Legation to the Germanies, 1451-1452," *Medieval Studies* 36 (1974): 382

[2]Morimichi Watanabe and Thomas M. Izbicki, "Nicholas of Cusa: A General Reform of the Church," in *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 175.

[3]Morimichi Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries: Reform and Resistance," *History of Political Thought* 7 (1986):53; Brian A. Pavlac, "Nicolaus Cusanus as Prince-Bishop of Brixen (1450-1464): Historians and a Conflict of Church and State," *Historical Reflections* 21 (1 1995): 131; Robert Joda, "Nicholas of Cusa, Precursor of Humanism," in *The Renaissance and Reformation in Germany: An*

depicted as a man whose activities were limited to the intellectual or political arenas of his time.[4]

One aspect of Cusanus' life that is often either under-emphasized or ignored altogether, however, is his deep and powerful religious faith. This omission is significant since his faith provided a great deal of the motivation for the life goals he chose to pursue. He was, in fact, a devout minister of the church who firmly believed in the literal interpretations of many tenets of the faith, such as the incarnation of Christ, the rise of the Anti-Christ, the second advent, and many others.[5] Well known for the great depth of his personal piety, he was also not only a student of mystical theology, but one who professed to have experienced a mystical encounter in his own life.

Cusanus was, therefore, a multi-faceted man. He was a great thinker of considerable intellect and ambition, and also a devout and mystical Christian of considerable faith and determination. Above all, however, Nikolaus Cusanus was a reformer; his career as a reformer represents the point of synthesis between his great intellectual powers and his immense spiritual depth. His concept of reform was shaped by forces from both of these areas: the nominalist influences of his education, his deep piety, his interest in mystical theology and his own mystical experience, as well as his

---

Introduction, ed. Gerhart Hoffmeister (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1977), 33, 34; Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, *A History of Christian Doctrine*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1978), 298; Sulivan, "Nicholas of Cusa as Reformer," 382; Karl Franz Zani, "Mordplan gegen Kardinal Nikoalus Cusanus (1457)," *Der Schlern* 56:4 (1982): 224.

[4]Peter L. McDermott, "Nicholas of Cusa: Continuity and Conciliation at the Council of Basel," *Church History* 67 (June 1998): 267-268; Joachim Stieber, "Nicholas of Cusa's Decision for the Pope," in *Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom*, ed. and trans. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 221, 232; Pavlac, 153.

[5]Nikolaus Cusanus, *The Catholic Concordance*, ed. and trans. Paul E. Sigmund (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1.XII, 36. *The Catholic Concordance* is herafter referred to as DCC.

implementation of church reform in Germany as papal legate, and in the Tyrol as Bishop of Brixen. His mature reform ideas are present in the work *Reformatio generalis*, written late in his life, while he was nearing the end of his reform efforts in the Tyrol. It is the purpose of this work to show the centrality of reform in the life of Nikolaus, to trace the development of the concepts on which the *Reformatio* is based, and to analyze those ideas in their mature form.

Nikolaus Cusanus was born in the town of Kues, on the Mosel river, in 1401 to the wife of a wine shipper and fisherman.[6] About Cusanus' early life little is known; tradition suggests that he had some trouble with his father, after which he left home at the age of twelve and spent time with the Brothers of the Common Life in Deventer under the influence of Thomas a Kempis, who inspired in Cusanus a life-long interest in mystical theology.[7] While this is a commonly held view even among many scholars, there is no evidence to support Cusanus' ever having lived among the members of the *devotio moderna*, even though by virtue of his interest in mystical theology he doubtless knew about the movement.

Cusanus entered the University of Heidelberg at the age of 15 in 1416, while already a cleric in the archdiocese of Trier.[8] The University of Heidelberg was well known as a center for the ideas of the *via moderna*, and it is probable that the nominalist influence on the young Cusanus was greater than is often admitted.[9] This influence will

---

[6]McDermott, 255; Pavlac, 132.

[7]Wilhelm Baum, *Nikolaus Cusanus in Tirol: das Wirken das Philosophen und Reformators als Furstbischof von Brixen*, (Bozen: Verlaganstalt Athesia, 1983), 15; Karl Jaspers, *Nikolaus Cusanus*, (Munich: R. Piper, 1964), 17; Erich Meuthen, *Nikolaus von Kues: 1401-1464: Skizze einer Biographie*, (Munster: Verlag Aschendorf, 1964), 12; Joda, 37; McDermott, 255.

[8]Morimichi Watanabe, The Episcopal Election of 1430 in Trier and Nicholas of Cusa," *Church History* 39 (1970): 299.

[9]See Joda, 37; Watanabe, "The Episcopal Election of 1430," 300.

be explored later in more detail. Cusanus spent three semesters at Heidelberg and was probably awarded his *baccalareus in artibus* before he left to enter the next phase in his education.

In 1417, he enrolled at the University of Padua, where he studied until the summer of 1423. While there, Cusanus began to exhibit the broad scope of his intellect. He showed great interest in the subjects of Ancient Literature, Mathematics, Astronomy, Physics, Medicine, and History, but eventually tightened the focus of his studies on canon law.[10] In pursuit of these studies he came under the influence of several important figures of his day. The teachings of the hero of Constance, Franciscus Zabarella, were all but required of the students of canon law, and Zabarella's nephew Bartholomew was the lecturer on his theories at Padua. Cusanus also met Giuliano Cesarini at Padua, who may have been taught by the elder Zabarella. It was Cesarini, the lecturer, to whom Cusanus would later dedicate three of his works, although Cesarini's influence may not have been as great as earlier believed.[11] Cusanus received his *decretum doctor* in 1423, and returned to his native Germany in 1424 to once again serve the archdiocese of Trier.

Otto von Ziegenhain, the Archbishop of Trier, was in search of fine legal minds and took the young Cusanus into his employment. After a trip to Rome in the summer of 1427 as the agent of von Ziegenhain, Cusanus became personal secretary to the archbishop. Over the following several years in the employment of von Ziegenhain, Cusanus began to collect a variety of benefices, such as the church of St. Andrew of Altrich, early in 1425, for which he received an annuity of 40 florins, one cart of wine,

---

[10]Donald Sullivan, "Apocalypse Tamed: Cusanus and the Traditions of Late Medieval Prophecy," *Journal of Medieval History* 9 (1983): 228; Watanabe, "The Episcopal Election of 1430," 300.

[11]Gerald Christianson, "Cardinal Cesarini and Cusa's *Concordantia*," *Church History* 54:1 (1985): 7; James E. Biechler, "Nicholas of Cusa and the End of the Conciliar Movement: A Humanist Crisis of Identity," *Church History* 44 (March 1975): 10; Watanabe, "The Episcopal Election of 1430," 300.

and four measures of wheat. He became canon of the church of St. Simeon in Trier on 29 May 1426, and canon of St. Gangolf in 1427. Also in 1427 Cusanus became dean of the church of Our Lady in Oberwesel, and dean of St. Florin in Koblenz.[12] These benefices and others he would collect over the years would become a point of some controversy in modern assessments of his life.

Cusanus matriculated at the University of Cologne on 8 April 1425, and studied theology under Heimericus de Campo. Under the tutelage of de Campo he became interested in the works of the mystic Ramon Lull (1235-1315), which he studied with some intensity in 1427-1428.[13] He also developed an interest in legal history, and may have taught canon law at Cologne.[14]

While at Cologne, Cusanus began to gain local fame and prestige as a canon lawyer, appearing in several relatively high profile cases. He also gained some renown as a collector of manuscripts, as a result of research he conducted at the cathedral library.[15] While he had become well-known in and around Cologne, events were soon to propel him onto the international stage, and launch him into a life spent in the pursuit of ecclesiastical reform.

---

[12]Watanabe, "The Episcopal Election of 1430," 301, 304, 305; Joda, 37; Brigide Schwarz, "Uber Patronage und Klientel in der Spatmittelalterlichen Kirche am Beispiel des Nikolaus von Kues," *Quellen und Forschungen aus Italienishcen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 68 (1988): 288.

[13]Ibid., 302.

[14]Ibid., 303.

[15]Ibid., 303-304.

Chapter Two

CHURCH REFORM, NIKOLAUS CUSANUS, AND THE COUNCIL OF BASEL

Church reform was a common theme in the social and religious environment in which Cusanus came of age. As early as 1363 Nicholas of Oresme had declared concerning the church that "from the sole of the foot to the crown on the head there is no health in it."[1] Over fifty years later that opinion was unchanged, at least in the words of a preacher at Constance, who noted in 1417 that "everyone knows that the reform of the Church Militant is necessary - it is known to the clergy, it is known to the whole Christian people. The heavens, the elements . . . and, with them now, even the very stones cry out for reform."[2] Indeed, by the time of the Council of Constance the church had been wracked by schism and heresy that threatened to seriously erode the power wielded by church leaders as well as the faith of ordinary Christians.

The Babylonian Captivity (1309-1376), when the papal court was removed from Rome to Avignon, was seen by many as an indicator of the need for ecclesiastical reform. Following hard on its heels was the Great Schism of 1378-1417, which erupted when rival popes were elected by competing groups. The stubborn refusal of either group to yield, and the eventual appearance of a third pope led to the convocation of the Council of Constance early in 1415.

Heresy was another major problem faced by the church in this period, and another indicator to many of the day that reform was badly needed. The Lollard movement in England, composed of followers of John Wyclif, emphasized the authority of Scritpure over papal or conciliar decrees. Wyclif stressed the internal, mystical journey to God,

---

[1]Francis Oakley, *The Western Church in the Later Middle Ages*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), 213.

[2]Ibid.

questioned the doctrine of transubstantiation, and criticized the wealth of many church leaders. While he was allowed to live out his days peacefully, his followers were deemed heretical. The Lollards influenced the Hussites, followers of Jan Hus in Bohemia. Taking up many of the elements of Lollard belief, the Hussites additionally pushed for Czech independence from German influence. Hus and his followers were a main focus of the Council of Constance, where he was captured and executed.

The problems facing would-be reformers were significant. In the first place, the papacy had become a powerful bureaucratic institution that was not likely to agree to reform measures that limited its powers or weakened its political position or sources of revenue. Second, the boundary between secular and ecclesiastical affairs had in many cases become so blurred as to be nearly impossible to determine, and so ecclesiastical reforms in many cases required the cooperation of secular rulers who were even less likely than the papal bureaucracy to give up power or revenue. This was especially true by the early fifteenth century, since advances in the scope and magnitude of secular power made it a force with which any reformers would have to reckon.

A further complication involved the very nature of reform itself. What exactly did "reform" mean to members of the church, the nobility, or the people in fifteenth century Europe? The answer depended upon whom was asked. There were many types of reforms that were common by the time of Cusanus, such as monastic reform, papal-sponsored reform, conciliarism, lay movements, and even more "radical," heretical factions.

Monastic reform had shown itself to be a powerful tool which could achieve lasting results. The Cluniac reform movement of the tenth century is perhaps the most outstanding example of this type of reform; it had culminated in the accession to the papal throne of Leo IX and ultimately Gregory VII in the mid-late eleventh century. Monastic reform movements usually called for a return to the strict observance of the monastic rule, the re-introduction of personal poverty, regulation of the common life, and

a return to monastic enclosure. Members of monastic houses who placed themselves under these measures came to be known as "Observants."[3] The proliferation of monastic orders, however, placed a limitation on the effectiveness of monastic reform movements. Such movements were often confined to a single order or even a single house of monks, and in the late middle ages no overarching, centralized reform developed that was capable of harnessing and directing the energies of reforms initiated in isolated localities.

A series of reform movements arising from the monastic impulse, but at the same time in sharp contrast to it, were the mendicant orders of the early thirteenth century. The mendicants lived according to a rule, but assumed voluntary poverty and operated in the world. The two dominant orders were the Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans) and the Order of Friars Preachers (Dominicans).[4]

The Franciscans were founded by St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), who adopted a new model of the apostolic life, after hearing a sermon based on the Matthew 10.7-19, in which Christ commissioned his disciples to eschew all temporal goods and preach the imminence of the Kingdom of Heaven.[5] In embracing strict voluntary poverty and preaching repentance, Francis wished to set an example not only for the clergy but also for the laity. While he always showed respect for the clergy, his actions were aimed at reminding clerics who were often preoccupied with worldly affairs that their true calling was to imitate Christ. Unlike monks who took vows of stability, the Franciscans moved from city to city, ministering largely to the urban laity. The order spread so rapidly that by 1316 there were an estimated 1400 Franciscan convents in Latin Christendom.[6] The

---

[3]Ibid., 234.

[4]Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1978), 146; Rosiland B. Brooke, *The Coming of the Friars* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1975), 17.

[5]Little, 146, 148.

[6]Ibid., 151-152.

order founded by St. Dominic (1170-1221) was initially aimed at the conversion of Cathars in southern France, but quickly expanded its mission of religious reform. Like the Franciscans, the Dominicans believed that heterodoxy and ignorance could only be combated if the clergy lived ascetic lives and devoted themselves to the moral and spiritual instruction of the laity.[7] The Dominican emphasis on education led them to establish houses of study usually connected to universities. This dedication to learning produced some of the most eminent philosophers and theologians of the High Middle Ages, most notably St. Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274).

The papacy sometimes exercised a leading role in reform efforts, such as the activities of Leo IX and Gregory VII. Although the rise to power of both of these popes is considered by many to have been a result of the Cluniac reform movement, once installed in Rome they initiated their own programs of church reform.[8] While they often gave attention to such abuses as simony and clerical concubinage, the main thrust of papal-sponsored reform in the high and late middle ages most often involved the expansion of papal power. This is most clearly seen in the struggle between Gregory VII and the Emperor Henry IV in the late eleventh century, and also in that between Eugenius IV and the Council of Basel in Cusanus' day. Since papal reformers were so preoccupied with the contest between secular and ecclesiastical power, and since by the end of the fourteenth century many had come to see the papacy itself as a barrier to effective church reform, papal reform efforts were rarely able to achieve a positive, lasting effect.[9]

Conciliarism called for a reassessment of traditional concepts of authority *within* the ecclesiastical structure. Advocates of this concept believed that authority within the church should be shared between the pope and the general council. Despite papal

---

[7]Ibid., 158; Brooke, 93.

[8]Oakley, 220.

[9]Ibid., 30, 74, 220.

objections, the conciliar movement gained momentum as the Great Schism dragged on.[10]

While conciliar theory began simply as an alternative view of church authority, initially separate from attempts at church reform, the disruption brought on by the Schism forged these two ideas into one. By the early fifteenth century the general council was seen by many as the reform movement of choice, aimed at erecting "constitutional barriers" to the excessive abuses of papal power that conciliarists believed were at the root of the problems in the church.[11] Despite the resolution of the Great Schism, which could be called the finest hour of the conciliar movement, it too was unable to achieve any satisfactory, lasting positive reforms within the church. At the height of the Council of Basel, it had already begun to unravel due to a variety of reasons. The Council of Basel was divided by internal disagreements, often based on national interests or personal conflicts. In addition, many conciliarists increasingly defined church reform as the reform of the papacy and the regulation of its authority. These conciliarists showed an eager willingness to deprive the pope of annates without designating any alternate sources of income. The conciliarists also suffered from a malady common to many reformers: they balked when reform measures involved some measure of sacrifice on their part. Additionally, many outside the conciliar movement began to see the general council as merely a tool through which secular rulers were attempting to manipulate the papacy.[12]

Lay movements also arose which were designed to achieve a measure of church reform. The most significant of these was the *devotio moderna*, or the "Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life," among whom unsubstantiated tradition had placed the young Cusanus. Initiated by Gerhard Groote (1340-84), who lived for a time in the

---

[10]Ibid., 61.

[11]Ibid., 73, 222-223.

[12]Ibid., 224-225; 227-228.

Carthusian monastery of Monikhuizen, members of this movement lived communally, practiced poverty, chastity and obedience, but avoided formal vows. They also avoided both scholastic and nominalist writings, emphasizing instead the scriptures and the spiritual works of such figures as St. Augustine, St. Bonaventure, Richard of St. Victor, and especially John Cassian. Their beliefs were best expressed by Thomas a Kempis in his well-known work, *Imitation of Christ.*[13]

The Beguines and Beghards also appeared in Europe as laypersons struggled to find an outlet for spiritual expression in a church they believed was sadly in need of reform. These groups were orthodox, adopting a semi-monastic character; their members wore habits and practiced poverty, but lived at home and worked in the "world."[14]

The Lollards and Hussites, radical movements which veered into heresy, have already been mentioned. It is enough to say here that they also expressed a desire on the part of Christians to realize church reform. The fact that so many were willing to split with church orthodoxy not only demonstrates the strength of the perceived need for reform, but also helps define the spectrum of meaning which might be applied to the term.

How then can one define "reform" as it applies to the late medieval church in Europe? The answer is that the term defies any meaningful, explicitive and comprehensive definition. In light of this ambiguity, the necessity of tracing the development of Cusanus' concept of reform becomes even greater. While his basic reform ideas were established in his early work, the *De concordantia catholica*, the emphasis and means of implementation of his ideas of reform underwent significant development between the *De concordantia* and the later *Reformatio.*

---

[13]Ibid., 100, 104; Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe*, (New Haven: Uale University Press, 1980), 96-97.

[14]Ozment, *The Age of Reform*, 86, 91.

In 1418 Otto von Ziegenhain was elected archbishop of Trier. A man of great piety, well known for his personal example of self denial, he convoked a local synod in 1423 for the purpose of initiating a series of reforms within his archbishopric. The decrees issued at this synod, typical for the period, attacked such abuses as concubinage, clerical use of unsuitable habits, and irregular performance of the divine office, among others.[15] Unfortunately, in attacking many of these abuses, von Ziegenhain was in direct violation of his election agreement of 1418, in which he had promised not to suspend any established habits, rights, customs, and privileges of the cathedral chapter. In order to overcome this obstacle, he began hiring lawyers to find ways to push his reforms in spite of his legal entanglements. It was this necessity which led him to employ Nikolaus Cusanus. In many ways the struggles of the archbishop of Trier foreshadowed those of Cusanus, who would himself later convoke local synods and issue reform decrees, fighting bitterly against local custom and privilege.

Serving the archbishop soon led Cusanus to great fame and controversy. He enrolled at the University of Cologne on 8 April 1425, soon after he entered the service of von Ziegenhain, to study theology and legal history. At the time he was studying at Cologne, the local cathedral dean was Ulrich von Manderscheid. Cusanus had long standing family ties with the von Manderscheid family, as indicated by the fact that of the six cells reserved for the nobility in the hospital he founded at Kues, one was reserved for Count Dietrich I, the father of Ulrich.[16] Two weeks after von Ziegenhain died on 13 February 1430, Jacob von Sierck was elected archbishop, due in large part to his opposition to the reforms of the archbishop. Von Ziegenhain, on the other hand, had, prior to his death, expressed his support for von Manderscheid, who was supported by a minority, and who he felt would carry forward his reform program. The question of

---

[15]Watanabe, "The Episcopal Election of 1430," 301.

[16]Watanabe, "The Episcopal Election of 1430," 303.

succession in Trier was additionally complicated because the issue involved more than high ecclesiastical office; the archbishops of Mainz, Cologne, and Trier were also imperial electors. Moreover, they had been appointed by the cathedral chapter since the twelfth century.[17]

In spite of this strong tradition, neither side would yield, and the case was taken to Rome where it was presented to Pope Martin V. He resolved the dispute with an innovative decision: he rejected both claimants to the seat of Trier and inserted his own candidate, Raban von Helmstadt, the Bishop of Speyer. Von Sierck immediately accepted the papal decision and withdrew from the conflict. Von Manderscheid however, supported by many local nobles who resented what seemed to them unnecessary papal intervention in a local matter (even though they themselves had invited it by virtue of their appeal), arranged for a second election which took place at Koblenz on 10 July 1430. Using bribery and threats, von Manderscheid secured the unanimous support of the cathedral chapter, with the result that both he and the cathedral chapter were excommunicated on 15 September, and the see of Trier was placed under an interdict which lasted four years.[18]

The Council of Basel was convoked on 1 February 1431 by Martin V, who died five days later. Seeking further redress of his grievances, von Manderscheid brought his case to the council, and was represented there by Johannes Rode, Helwig of Boppard, and the young lawyer who had been hired by von Ziegenhain, Nikolaus Cusanus. Over the previous several years, Cusanus had been building a respectable legal reputation, appearing in several high profile cases; his arrival at Basel signaled his entry onto the stage of international affairs.[19]

---

[17]Ibid., 307.

[18]Ibid., 308.

[19]Ibid., 304, 308-309; Christianson, "Cardinal Cesarini and Cusa's *Concordantia*," 7.

It is important to note that Cusanus came to Basel as a lawyer, not as a reformer.[20] He stayed on at the council since the question of von Mandercheid's claim was not immediately addressed, and he was later appointed to the conciliar Committee on the Faith. It was during this time that he wrote the treatise which made him famous, and began his career as a reformer, the *De concordantia catholica.*

The *De concordantia* is significant for many reasons. It is Cusanus' first major work, and provides the first substantial evidence we have of his thinking on the subject of reform. While it draws heavily on theology for many of its arguments, it is also a well known and lauded work of political theory.

Cusanus began his reform ideas in *De concordantia* with a very negative assessment of the condition of the fifteenth-century church, anchored firmly in his Christocentric view of history. Since all created things exist because of and for Christ, and since the world is filled with God as Christ, then Christ is the center not only of truth but also of time. He was revealed in degrees from the beginning of time until His incarnation, after which John the Baptist, the most holy of men and the immediate precursor of Christ, pointed Him out with his finger. Afterward came the apostles, the most holy of men after Christ. Thus, just as the light which illuminated man became clearer as the incarnation drew nearer, so the light became dimmer as the incarnation passed and time moved away from Christ. Quoting St. Augustine writing *To Hesychius On The Last Day* Cusanus wrote "Although there have always been bad men, there will be many more as we approach the end . . . But we know that we act as Apostles in the world today, but much more those who preceded us and we more than those who follow after us until those come who, if we may use the expression, will be the last of the last."[21]

---

[20]McDermott, 257, 260; Watanabe, "The Episcopal Election of 1430," 308.

[21]Cusanus, DCC, I:III.14, 12.

So Cusanus believed that the church of his day was in a state of darkness due in some part to its place in history. Specifically Cusanus implicated the pope, who as a human being was by nature subject to evil; since evil increases as time moves away from the incarnation, then it follows that while the pope once used his powers to build up the church, he was increasingly using his powers to destroy it.[22]

A further indictment against the church is found in Cusanus' allegory of the emperor and the Queen of France. In the parable, Cusanus likened the contingency of salvation to a betrothal between the emperor and the queen. The betrothal would be fulfilled on the condition that the Queen of France bring her kingdom under the rule of the emperor. In this case, Cusanus wrote, the betrothal did not take place because the queen was unable to end resistance within her kingdom to the rule of the emperor. Clearly he was describing the church as an institution in opposition to its leader, Christ.[23]

Later, Cusanus listed specific charges against church leaders. First, he charged "certain metropolitans" with neglecting to carry out their duty to perform the divine office within their own cities, entrusting these duties instead to bishops. This failure was due to the over-involvement of the metropolitans in secular affairs. To make matters worse, the bishops were instructed to carry out these duties at times of the month which were contrary to apostolic recommendation simply in order to collect their incomes.[24] This practice was not just isolated to a limited number of locations, according to Cusanus, but was rampant throughout the church from the pope down to the Roman curia. The focus of church leaders, Cusanus argued, should be their ecclesiastical duties; they should avoid worldly pre-occupations entirely. Instead, under the pretext of visitations, church leaders were placing heavy burdens on suffragan churches by using the administrative and

---

[22]Ibid., II.XVII.148, 113.

[23]Ibid., I.IV.26, 17.

[24]Ibid., II.XXIX.221, 171-172.

ministerial funds of those churches for their own selfish and avaricious desires.[25] Finally, plurality combined with the ignorance of priests who lived in a state of idleness and vice was not only a disgrace but a source of hostility and conflict between clergy and laity.[26] It was these abuses, coupled with greed and the failure to carry out the duties of the ministerial office which in Cusanus' view led to such crimes as simony, concubinage, and irregularities in provincial and universal councils and elections.[27]

In detailing the resolution to these problems within the church, Cusanus laid out a program for reform from which he would not deviate substantially for the rest of his life. The underlying cause of all of these abuses lay in the improper functioning of church leaders within their assigned offices and ministries. When a member in the church interfered in an area which lay outside of his sphere of responsibility, or attempted to usurp the responsibilities of another, a "disturbance of order" resulted which in turn caused "a disturbance of the entire corporate union of the church."[28] The program of reform put forth by Cusanus was thus a very simple one: all ministers within the ecclesiastical hierarchy were to function in accordance with the regulations specified by the universal councils of the church. If this were done, and all Christians properly executed their offices, vows, religious duties and ranks, then the health of the church would increase until all parts of it were working in proper order, and "a sweet concordance which is neither heavy nor wearisome will prevail in the temple of God."[29] The penalty for non-compliance with this directive would also become a standard

---

[25]Ibid., II.XXX.225-226, 174-175

[26]Ibid., II.XXXIII.245, 189.

[27]Ibid., II.XXXIII.246, 192; Anton Weiler, "Nicholas of Cusa on the Reform of the Church," in *Election and Consensus in the Church*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Anton Weiler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 102.

[28]Ibid., II.XXVII.214, 165.

[29]Ibid., II.XXVII.213, 164; II.XXXIII.242, 188.

element in the reforms of Cusanus: clerics who refused to obey would be removed from office; monks and laymen would be excommunicated.[30]

In order to initiate this program of reform it was not necessary that the council enact any new reforms; the only requirement was that it enforce the existing precepts found in ancient writings. Cusanus believed that these writings were regularly ignored by his contemporaries. He especially referred to the rulings of the first eight ecumenical councils.[31] Nor was the council (or by implication, conciliarism) solely responsible or even crucial for the realization of these reforms. Cusanus placed the responsibility for reform directly on the shoulders of the *existing* church leadership. For example, in his analogy of the Queen of France and her betrothal to the emperor, it was the queen who was responsible for the conversion of her kingdom. Cusanus wrote that the enforcement of existing canons, and thus the achievement of true church reform, could only take place if ecclesiastical leadership is made up of "good rulers. If we have them, we would easily and quickly find the ways of our fathers . . ."[32] Cusanus also used the hierarchical model of the church to illustrate the need for effective leaders; for just as sickness in the head results in sickness throughout the entire body, so the health of the church was dependent on the health of its leadership.[33] The health of the papacy was especially crucial. Citing Bahanes, a prominent prefect and patrician in the early church who was active in the eighth ecumenical council, Cusanus wrote that "the patriarchal sees ought to be reduced successively to one patriarchate and that through it God ought to create the other patriarchates anew."[34]

---

[30]Ibid., II.XXXIII.242, 188.

[31]Ibid., II.XXXIII.246, 192; preface, 4; II.XXVII.213, 164; II.XXIX.221, 171.

[32]Ibid., II.XXXIII.246, 192.

[33]Ibid., II.XXVII.214, 165.

[34]Ibid., I.XVII.68, 48.

At this point a few words should also be said about the relationship between the secular and ecclesiastical realms in the reform program of the *De concordantia*. To Cusanus, this relationship was not one between separate elements, but between two parts of one unified entity. This entity was the church, and it was made up of its soul, the priesthood, and of its body, the empire.[35] While this need hardly be said to any student of medieval thought, the closeness of this relationship, and the relationship of the two elements to each other would be crucial to Cusanus in his future as a reformer. Secular rulers, following the example of Charlemagne, were thus perfectly within their rights to convene local synods for the purpose of enacting ecclesiastical reforms. Secular princes also shared in the responsibility for enforcing conciliar rulings.[36]

Although the two parts were strongly integrated, there is no doubt which part held the dominant role in the mind of Cusanus. After all, as he would later preach to a congregation in Rome, it is the soul, or the understanding spirit, which must control and guide the body.[37] And even though he had made provision in the *De concordantia* for secular rulers to convene local synods, he stipulated that laymen should not be present when canonical matters were under discussion, unless they were specifically invited.[38] Even the emperor himself was confined to the role of exhortation in the convocation of a general council, and then only if the pope refused to call the council in the face of a danger to the church (a dangerously ambiguous phrase).[39] Concerning reform of the empire, however, the church was under no such restraints. Representatives of the church

---

[35]Ibid., preface, 4.

[36]Ibid., III.VIII.359-361, 241-242; III.IX.364, 243.

[37]Sermon 286 by Nikolaus Cusanus in Latin, delivered in Rome, on the Sabbath after the Conversion of Saint Paul, 1459, edited by Dr. Peter Casarella, 2, l. 3-7.

[38]Cusanus, DCC, III.VIII.358, 240.

[39]Ibid., III.XV.399-402, 258.

were to be intimately involved in secular reform efforts, and annual general meetings were to be held, similar to general councils of the church. In addition, judges, appointed to adjudicate temporal matters, were to be selected from each of the three estates of the nobility, the church, and the people.[40] It is clear that to Cusanus, church leaders had the upper hand over those in the secular realm. The difficulties inherent in the enforcement of this position would become painfully and intimately obvious to him twenty years later in Germany and the Tyrol.

The reform ideas which would guide him for the rest of his life were thus enunciated in the *De concordantia*. Reform of the church would be accomplished if and when the church returned to the ways of its much holier and wiser forbears. Effective and worthy church leaders were crucial in this effort, and it was only they who could find and follow the ways of the ancients. In the process, the disobedient would be punished by deposition and excommunication, (with the secular realm reaping the divinely conferred spiritual benefits of reform as it assumed its rightful role under the authority of ecclesiastical leadership).

Notably absent from this model is any essential or even strong role for the general councils. While Cusanus argued strongly for the authority of the general council in *De concordantia*, its primary role in the process of reform was to help enforce existing guidelines. Much has been written about Cusanus' role in conciliarism, especially regarding his later defection to the minority party which swore allegiance to Pope Eugenius IV. As McDermott has pointed out, however, Cusanus was not a committed conciliarist.[41] Conciliarism provided for him only the means through which reforms would be enacted:

And because the holy council has begun to adopt decrees on simony,

---

[40]Ibid., III.XXXII.508, 295; III.XXXIII.511, 296.

[41]McDermott, 254.

> concubinage, universal and provincial councils, and elections, though the Holy Sprit it will provide for all these things and will reduce to canonical order all pestilential practices inspired by avarice, and make each one carry out his responsibility and ministry.[42]

The emphasis is on what the Council of Basel was doing, i.e., enacting reform decrees, and it is primarily from the execution of these duties that the council derived its legitimacy. *Reform* held Cusanus' interest, not the *concept* of conciliarism. In this sense, his decision to join the papal party at Basel on 7 May 1437 appears less a "crisis of identity" and more a *statement* of identity; it certainly does not involve a "fundamental realignment of theological and religious values as well as other significant intellectual and vocational changes."[43]

Not only was Cusanus never a committed conciliarist in principle, but his views were never anti-papal. Indeed, after the Council of Basel decided against Ulrich von Manderscheid and Cusanus had submitted an appeal, he then sought papal confirmation of his benefices from Eugenius IV, as well as a provostship.[44] In the autumn of 1435, while he was at Basel, he sought out the friendship of Ambrogio Traversi, general of the Camoldolese Order but also papal emissary to the council. Cusanus had an intense interest in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, and Traversi was considered by many as the foremost authority on this Neoplatonist mystic.[45] On 19 November 1436, on behalf of the German delegation, Cusanus argued to postpone a vote on the site for a proposed council of reunion with the Eastern Church until a site could be found which was suitable not only to the council, but also to the pope.[46] On 7 May 1437 came the final break with the

---

[42]Cusanus, DCC, II.XXXIII.246, 192.

[43]Biechler, 8.

[44]McDermott, 266.

[45]McDermott, 267; Stieber, 233.

[46]Biechler, 6; Erich Meuthen, *Nikolaus von Kues*, 49.

council; Cusanus publicly declared his allegiance to the minority papal party at Basel.[47]

The reasons for his decision given by scholars are many and varied. Stieber claims that Cusanus was driven largely by opportunism; he was very concerned over his social status and his non-noble birth, and he was hungry for more and more benefices. In addition to these desires, his education as a canon lawyer helped him to see the practical side of the matter: he declined to support the reforms of Basel because they were not in his material interest, and thus joined the party of Eugenius IV.[48] Biechler writes that Cusanus was faced in 1437 with a deep and crucial crisis of identity that drove him to relinquish his conciliarist position in favor of the papal faction. He argued strongly for the strength and depth of Cusanus' conciliar views before and during the Council of Basel, and cited the shift in subject of Cusanus' writings after 1437 as evidence of the resolution of his identity crisis.[49] McDermott, on the other hand, argues that Cusanus was never a conciliarist in principle, and that the views in the *De concordantia* were not a reflection of his own ideas. Not surprisingly, he sees continuity in Cusanus' thought before, during, and after the Council of Basel.[50] Others see Cusanus' decision as a result of disillusionment with the factionalism that increasingly divided the council along national and personal lines. According to this view, Cusanus saw allegiance to the papal party as the only true hope for ecclesiastical reform.[51]

As noted above, McDermott is the most convincing in his assertion that Cusanus was never a committed conciliarist, though less so in his argument that the ideas recorded in the *De concordantia* were not his own. The work itself can only at best be described

---

[47]Biechler, 6; McDermott, 254.

[48]Stieber, 221.

[49]Biechler, 8-11.

[50]McDermott, 254-255.

[51]Sullivan, "Nicholas of Cusa as Reformer," 390; Cunliffe-Jones, 298.

as that of a conservative or moderate conciliarist, who protected the papal office and privileges.[52] There is also very little to support Stieber's claim of opportunism on the part of Cusanus. He was well known for the intensity of his personal piety, and even though he was a pluralist, he was very generous with his income and not given to the accumulation of great amounts of wealth.[53] The hospital that he endowed in his hometown of Kues is still in operation today. The reason given by Cusanus himself for his decision to support the papal faction was the failure of the council of Basel to bring about reconciliation with the Eastern Church, and there seems little reason to doubt him on this point, given the moderation of his conciliarist position and his overwhelming commitment to the realization of church reform. It is also likely that the factionalism at Basel contributed to his disillusionment. Once again, McDermott is correct in so far as he argued that Cusanus' decision at Basel does not represent a major shift in his thinking.[54] A shift in his focus was coming, but only after Cusanus left the council.

---

[52]McDermott, 254; Cusanus, DCC, I.XIV.56, 39; II.XVII.147, 113.

[53]Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 70.

[54]Biechler, 12; Cunliffe-Jones, 298; McDermott, 255.

Chapter Three

NOMINALISM, MYSTICISM, AND A CHANGE OF APPROACH

After he left the Council of Basel, Cusanus never again wrote a major work of political or canonical theory, and later in his life he all but ignored *De concordantia.*[1] As Biechler correctly points out, this was indicative of a shift in Cusanus' thought, but it was not Biechler's "crisis of identity." The transformation in Cusanus' thought took place as influences of nominalism and mystical theology were ignited by a mystical experience on the return from Constantinople. Since discussions about both nominalism and mysticism are often hampered by uncertainty about the definitions of the concepts involved, a short clarification is required.

The University of Heidelberg, which Cusanus attended for three semesters, was known as a center of nominalism.[2] It is uncertain how extensively his short time there influenced his thought, although some traces of nominalism appear in his later works.[3] Nominalism is usually defined as the philosophical belief that universals were merely mental constructs and "without meaning as a description of external reality."[4] It is seen by many as contributing to epistemological skepticism and hence to the separation of faith from reason, since the limits it placed on what the mind could know about material

---

[1]Biechler, 18.

[2]Joda, 37; Watanabe, "The Episcopal Election of 1430," 300.

[3]Watanabe, "The Episcopal Election of 1430," 300; McDermott, 256; F. Edward Cranz, "Cusanus, Luther, and the Mystical Tradition," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 99.

[4]William J. Courtenay, "Nominalism and Late Medieval Religion," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 26-27.

objects destroyed the demonstrability of cause and effect relationships. While this placed definite limits on what man could know about material objects, it totally eradicated the possibility of rationally comprehending spiritual truths. Thus knowledge of spiritual matters came to rely solely on faith or revelation, a doctrine known as fidesim.[5]

Research into the beliefs of well-known nominalists, especially William of Ockham, reveals their ideas to be much more conservative than previously thought. Ockham, for example, upheld the validity of causality, and can no longer be seen as one who destroyed metaphysics. While he maintained that the present ethical system (a product of the *potentia ordinata*) was chosen by God and not necessary, he did not believe that God would capriciously do away with it in favor of a new system (from the *potentia absoluta*). On the issue of sacramental theology, where Ockham is often thought to be heterodox in his views, new research shows no evidence to support the accusation. Concerning society and the church, Ockham is now seen as more traditional than earlier believed, since he relied heavily on canonical teaching and cannot be thought of as the father of conciliar theory. Finally, there is more continuity between Ockham and Thomas Aquinas than earlier believed, and less of a link between Ockham and the more radical strains of nominalist thought.[6]

The result of this new view of Ockham and his nominalist ideas is to see mainstream nominalism in a much more conservative light, and to see Ockham, Gabriel Biel and Pierre D'Ailly as non-radical, orthodox thinkers within a similar school of thought, although their similarities are more theological in nature than philosophical. This theological unity consisted primarily in "a conception of the centrality, efficacy and dependability of verbal, contractual agreements for all aspects of relationship between

---

[5]Ibid., 28-29.

[6]Ibid., 45-51.

God and man."[7] Nominalism, seen from this perspective, can no longer be made directly responsible for atomism, skepticism, fideism, or the division between faith and reason.[8] This "theological" nominalism is a mode of thought which emphasizes the omnipotent concept of God communicating directly with man through covenental relationships. It also emphasizes the Judeo-Christian biblical concept of God as opposed to the Prime Mover of Latin Averroism.[9] Nominalism, far from encouraging skepticism, would encourage a more active life for the Christian due to its reliance on covenant. God, as the omnipotent judge, was free to pronounce the final judgment, but because of His covenant, He could be trusted to act in accordance with the promises made in the Scriptures and in church teaching.[10] Given this view of conservative, Ockhamist nominalism, it is easier to see its influence on the reform ideas of Cusanus, especially as his mystical experience brought mystical theology into the forefront of Cusanus' thought, where it stayed for the remainder of his life.

Mystics and mysticism have received harsh criticism, sometimes with justice, but often because of misunderstanding. The very word conjures up in our minds images of wizards and sages, obscured in mists of incense, mumbling endless incantations amid otherworldly trances, and very far removed from what we would call reality. The truth, however, is something far less mysterious.

The word mystic, sometimes, though mistakenly, thought to be derived from the same root as "mysterious," is actually inherited from the days of Greek antiquity, and has its roots in the process of initiation into a mystery cult. Some believe that the initiates, or

---

[7]Ibid., 51.

[8]Ibid., 56.

[9]Ibid., 58; Steven Ozment, "Mysticism, Nominalism, and Dissent," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 78.

[10]Courtenay, 59.

mystics, were so named because they were required to keep their eyes and mouth closed. Others think it was applied to them because they were thought to *still* have their eyes closed and were thus not yet full partakers of the divine mysteries. Later, however, the word was adapted to indicate those whose senses were closed to external stimuli.[11]

The term mysticism has been applied, especially in the past three centuries, to a wide variety of beliefs and phenomena.[12] The term is almost never used by those to whom it is applied, but is more often a term of ridicule employed by their critics. The members of this type of belief often refer to themselves as "spiritual" or "illuminated."[13] It should be clear here that the word "mysticism" will be used, not as a means to ridicule, but because it is already in common usage.

Mysticism has also often been confused with magic, whereas the two concepts differ greatly both in the means they use and in the ends they seek. Magic seeks to manipulate higher powers in order to gain something, such as knowledge or physical well-being. Mysticism, on the other hand, seeks only to give, and is without demands or expectations.[14] Nor is mysticism the search for or the acquisition of visions or divine mysteries.[15] Finally, and not without significance to our current discussion, mysticism does not involve the total sacrifice of human reason.[16]

---

[11]William Ralph Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (London: Methuen & Co., 1899), 4.

[12]See J. H. Overton, *William Law, Nonjuror and Mystic* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1881), 140-142; George E. Clarkson, *The Mysticism of William Law* American University Studies Series V, Philosophy, vol. 124 (New York: Peter Lang,1992), 63; Inge, 3; Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness,* 16th ed. (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1948), xiv.

[13]Overton, 141.

[14]Underhill, 71-72.

[15]Overton, 142; Inge, 19.

[16]Inge, 14; Joseph E. Sych, "Reason and Illumination: William Law, Mysticism, and the Age of Enlightenment," *Douglas Southall Freeman Historical Review* (Spring

Evelyn Underhill, in an old but classic work, defined mysticism as "the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the Love of God." It is an experience, by which the practitioner, through the undertaking of the "Mystic Way," undergoes a profound transformation of the personality, and ultimately achieves union with the transcendent Absolute.[17] Underhill here emphasizes the *experience* of mysticism, and the Mystic Way as a *process* toward union with God. She also stresses the transformative effect of this process on the personality and argues that union with the transcendent Absolute is mysticism's sole end.

Bernard McGinn, in a recent multi-volume work that covers the history of Christian mysticism, provides a slightly different emphasis. He writes " . . . the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its beliefs and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God." It is an experience that transcends words or even mental concepts. "Radical obedience to the divine will" is included by McGinn as a category of mystical experience.[18]

McGinn, like Underhill, emphasizes the experiential aspect of mysticism, and some type of personal transformation as a result of the mystical encounter. Unlike Underhill, however, McGinn does not stress union with the divine as the sole end of mysticism. Interaction, which may or may not culminate in union, defines the experience for him.

From these sources, then, we can finally arrive at a working definition for mysticism. It is an experience by which the practitioner participates in a transcendent

---

1998): 124-125.

[17]Underhill, 72, 81-94.

[18]Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 1, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xvii.

interaction with the presence of God, and through which he or she undergoes some type of transformation. While this definition is somewhat more liberal than that given by Underhill, in that it does not insist on union with God, it is more inclusive of various facets of mystical phenomena.

While describing mysticism itself is difficult, characterizing types of late medieval mystical belief is even more challenging. There are many ways of ordering mystical ideas as espoused by various writers, and many of these methods of classification overlap and sometimes contradict each other. One way of characterizing medieval Christian mystical belief is by specifying two distinct types of mysticism, Dionysian and Eckhartian. Dionysian mystical belief is rooted in the fifth- and sixth-century writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and is considered orthodox. It is Christocentric and emphasizes love and practical piety, seeking the "embrace" of Christ or conformation to his will.[19] Eckhartian mystical belief is based on the early fourteenth-century writings of the German mystic Meister Eckhart. It emphasizes the intellect over the will or piety, and focuses on a contemplative, intellectual vision of God. It seeks union with God as the "divine abyss" and sees this movement of the human soul toward the divine as a movement of like toward like. Due to implications of this facet of the belief, it is often viewed as heterodox.[20]

Almost as if to highlight for us the difficulty in such characterizations, and to show his own ability to draw from various modes of thought, the mystical beliefs of Cusanus defy classification into this or any scheme of mystical theology. Cusanus was definitely a student of Pseudo-Dionysius, as has already been established. His mystical belief was heavily Christocentric and orthodox, but also shared the Eckhartian emphasis

---

[19]Ozment, *The Age of Reform*, 115; Ozment, "Mysticism, Nominalism, and Dissent," 67.

[20]Ozment, *The Age of Reform*, 116; Oakley, 94.

on the intellect.

Mystical theology was a long-held interest of Cusanus. Two of his earliest acquisitions for his library were works of great mystics, *The Journey of the Soul Into God* by St. Bonaventura, and *Mystical Theology* by Jean Gerson. He also, as noted above, had studied the works of Ramon Lull while at the University of Cologne.[21] By the time he left for Constantinople in the summer of 1437, Cusanus had been exposed to mystical ideas for many years.

The emotional significance of the reunion with the Eastern Church is hard to overestimate. It was the rising hope of many as the fifteenth century wore on, due to a complex mix of both secular and religious motivations. It had been a major issue at the Council of Basel, but one which the council failed to resolve.[22] Writing later of the Council of Florence, where the reconciliation took place, Cusanus counted it as one of the most significant events of his life.[23]

He sailed from Venice in August 1437 on the orders of Pope Eugenius IV, returning to Venice from Constantinople on 8 February 1438 with the emperor, the patriarch of Constantinople, and 28 archbishops of the Eastern Church.[24] The ensuing Council of Florence was successful in bringing about the reunion of the two churches, although the reconciliation was short lived due to the Turkish invasion. It was on the return trip from the east that Cusanus had his mystical experience.

References to Cusanus' actual mystical experience are scarce, but his own description of the episode on the return from Constantinople is definitely one of a

---

[21]McDermott, 267; Watanabe, "The Episcopal Election of 1430," 302; Joda, 37.

[22]Biechler, 12.

[23]Ibid., 12-13.

[24]Ibid., 12; Meuthen, *Nikolaus von Kues*, 52; Meuthen, "Leben in der Zeit," in *Nilolaus von Kues: Einfuhrung in sein philosophisches Denken*, ed. Klaus Jacobi (Munich: Verlag Karl Alber Frieburg, 1979), 7.

mystical experience:

> Accept now, Reverend Father, what for so long I desired to attain by different paths of learning but previously could not until returning by sea from Greece when by what I believe was a celestial gift from the Father of Lights, from whom comes every perfect gift, I was led to embrace incomprehensibles incomprehensibly in learned ignorance, by transcending those incorruptible truths that can be humanly known.[25]

In this brief passage Cusanus showed that his experience contained several of the elements of mystical experience. It was an experience of transcendence, where he embraced "incomprehensibles" in a way that would have been impossible by exercise of the intellect alone. It is this experience that represents a turning point in the life of Cusanus, and started him on the path of Dionysian negative theology which so strongly characterized much of his later works. Stieber is correct when he writes that the year 1437 was a watershed in his writings; it is only in describing the nature of that watershed that he is mistaken.[26] After this experience, the works of Cusanus are overwhelmingly of a spiritual, mystical nature. Mysticism becomes for him the primary mode in which God relates to man, and man to God. While Cusanus' concept of reform does not change substantially from that outlined in *De concordantia*, mysticism becomes, as we will see below, the way through which human beings can most fully realize the transformative power of their relationship with God. It is this transformative effect that would, for Cusanus, usher in the reforms for which he yearned, and to which he devoted his life.

The mystical shift in Cusanus' thought was immediately reflected in his writings. The *De concordantia*, which he wrote in the early 1430s, while it contained some references to mystical theology, was rooted in reason and drew heavily on canonical and

---

[25]Nicholas of Cusa, "De docta ignorantia," in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), Letter of the Author to Lord Cardinal Julian, 205-206. Hereafter referred to as DDI.

[26]Stieber, 221; Biechler, 8.

political theory. *De docta ignorantia*, which Cusanus wrote in 1440, begins by pointing out the limits of reason, and ignores the canonical and political arguments of his earlier work. The mind used reason, Cusanus argued, in the process of learning, or "investigation" by comparing unknown quantities or properties to one that is believed certain, and thus arrives at a judgment concerning that which was previously unknown. The process works well, but becomes more complex as more intermediaries are required to mediate between the first principles and the proportional investigation at hand. The infinite, however, is beyond all use of proportion in any investigation of it, and so answers to questions concerning it must remain hidden; in short, the infinite is unknowable. In light of this, and since some of the most learned men in history have strongly asserted the difficulty in *knowing* anything, it then follows that the highest pinnacle of knowledge is to understand one's inability to *know*. Thus learned ignorance, that ignorance that comes through the knowledge of our inability to comprehend, is the end of all investigation.[27]

Cusanus goes further to describe the necessity of learned ignorance to the relationship with God. Worship of God is based on affirmative theology (i.e., positive affirmations about the nature and character of God), where God is worshipped as one Person of the Trinity, or as Light, or Truth, etc. Although all of these things are true and necessary, worship is based on faith, which perceives God not as any one or other thing, but as "the most simple and infinite light;" as such, God is only embraced through learned ignorance. Thus negative theology is absolutely essential to affirmative theology, since without it man would worship God as a corporeal entity, which is idolatry. So it is only through learned ignorance alone that one is able to approach God, who has revealed Himself as incomprehensible.[28]

---

[27]Cusanus, DDI, I.1, 88-89.

[28]Ibid., I.26, 125-127.

Nor is it the institutions of the church, the curia, or the general council that must be thus transformed by the embrace of Christ, but the *individual*, the "rational creature," the "intellectual soul," who acquires this transformative effect by degrees.[29] Since the infinite contains all things (the infinite is the place of residence for the coincidence of opposites), then infinite light is also eternity and truth; one who wishes to experience illumination through this light must turn toward those things which are true and eternal, and away from those which are below, "worldly and corruptible things."[30] This transformative effect takes place because corporeal things and spiritual things behave in opposite ways. For example, when one eats corporeal food, it is transformed into the form of the one consuming it. When one turns to eternal things, and consumes them, they cannot be transformed into the form of the consumer, since they are "eternal and incorruptible." Nor can the consumer be transformed into the form of eternal things, since the consumer would then cease to be an intellectual substance. Instead, the consumer is transformed in such a way that it becomes a likeness of the eternal things, and this only in degrees, so that the more ardently and passionately the intellectual spirit pursues the eternal things, the more like them it becomes.[31] This process is led forward by faith, which precedes understanding, directs it, and then is in turn directed by the extended understanding. Thus through learned ignorance, faith is unfolded and extended as "in stages of ascent" the intellectual spirit approaches the incomprehensible God. This ascent by faith, through which one is becoming more and more Christ-like, leads one increasingly to forsake sensible things, to avoid "fleshly contaminations," and to follow Christ, taking up the cross with joy. The end of this process of mortification by faith is union with Christ, and absorption into Him insofar as it is possible in this earthly life.

---

[29]Ibid., III.9, 193; III.10, 195.

[30]Ibid., III.9, 193.

[31]Ibid.

This yields the complete perfection of the individual nature.[32]

Cusanus further argued that this process on the individual level promoted ecclesiastical unity. Since it is possible, while one is in one degree of faith and love, to progress to another, then one should strive toward achieving one's potentiality in Christ, who is faith and love. The highest degree of unity is attained in the church as each "rational nature turns to Christ in highest faith, hope, and love;" thus it is through the pursuit of mystical union with Christ that the church ("a unity of many, with the personal truth of each member preserved without confusion of natures or degrees") is reformed and most perfectly unified.[33] "In no other way," Cusanus wrote, "can the church be more one."[34]

Five years after completing *De docta ignorantia* Cusanus wrote *De quaerendo Deum*, in which he more specifically detailed the method of man's approach to God, through which reform might be accomplished. He began where he had in *De docta ignorantia*, by describing the limits of the use of human reason. In what was likely a strike at scholastics, Cusanus wrote that the use of reason for the purposes of approaching God is the hallmark of the proud, who think themselves to be like God, and who have "assumed for themselves a knowledge of gods."[35] By choosing human reason as the pathway to God, the true path of wisdom becomes closed off automatically by the supposition that there are no more efficacious means to God than those which can be measured by the human intellect.

Cusanus detailed the steps by which one might follow the true pathway and the

---

[32]Ibid., III.11, 196, 200.

[33]Ibid., III.12, 204.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Nicholas of Cusa, "De quaerendo Deum," in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), III, 227.

means by which one might tell if another is on that path. To approach the "intellectual life and immortal divine wisdom," the individual must believe in God not just as creator, but as the giver of the best gifts.[36] He must also conduct his life in the fear of God, as well as in the love of God. Next, in humility he must approach God, earnestly requesting immortality, for which he must embrace eternal things and make them the unrivaled priorities of life. Those who have so ordered their lives will manifest the virtues in their daily conduct. They will observe the commandments and show an outward manifestation of devotion. The crucifixion of worldly desires is openly demonstrated in their lifestyle, and they show obvious contempt for the world and all that it holds. If the individual life is not characterized by these attributes, then "it is clear that one is not on the path but outside it."[37]

Cusanus believed that this process by which man sought union with God is the ultimate end of human existence. The realization that God is more desirable than all that can be imagined or reasoned, will lead the individual to reject all things "limited and contracted," such as the body, the senses, common sense, fantasy, imagination, and the intellect.[38] This rejection turns the individual inward, deeply into the self, not to find anything "like" God within the self (as Eckhartian mysticism claimed), but to turn to the self in order to turn away from the exterior, rejected things and pursue the pathway to God.[39]

Through a comparison of these writings with *De concordantia*, it is clear how significantly Cusanus' focus had shifted; the church could not realize reform through conciliar enforcement of the decrees of the first eight universal councils, but only as

---

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Ibid., 228, 231.

[39]Ibid., 231.

individuals turned toward union with Christ. In spite of this change, Cusanus' reform program as outlined in *De concordantia* remained essentially intact. The problems within the church were still the same, and to correct the problems good leaders were still required and ministers still needed to carry out their offices, vows, and religious duties with the utmost care. On New Year's Eve 1450, Cusanus embarked on a nine-year phase of his life in which he attempted to implement this plan to initiate church reform on a large scale. The ensuing events were among the most controversial of his life.

Chapter Four

THE LEGATION TO GERMANY AND THE BISHOPRIC OF BRIXEN

The legation to Germany and the Tyrolese reforms he intiated while at Brixen were Cusanus' first major experience with executing church reform. Up to this point, his reform program had been only theoretical; beginning in Salzburg in January 1451, however, he experienced what many theorists never even dream of: the opportunity to personally oversee the implementation of their ideas. The challenge proved to be considerable, and revealed much not only of Cusanus and his reforms, but also of the spiritual condition of the empire on the eve of the Protestant Reformation.[1] He encountered time and again a variety of negative attitudes to his initiatives, ranging from apathy to stubborn and determined opposition, all of which He met with determined persistence.

In 1450-51 Pope Nicholas V sent out four legates to the north to dispense the jubilee indulgence and initiate programs of reform. Cardinal Bessarion was sent to Bologna, Cardinal D'Estouteville to France, and the Franciscan preacher Juan de Capistrano to Eastern Europe.[2] Cusanus, who a few years earlier had been made cardinal, was sent to Germany; his was the most expansive legation not only in territory but also in authority. Two papal bulls outlined his mission. The Bull of 24 December described the lands to which Cusanus would travel as "Germany, Bohemia, and the countries adjacent."[3] He was to dispense the jubilee indulgence, reform religious life, and mediate disputes. The Bull of 29 December expands the scope of Cusanus' authority, ascribing to him the title *legatus a latere* (the highest ambassadorial rank), for the purpose of

---

[1]Sullivan, "Nicholas of Cusa as Reformer," 383.

[2]Ibid., 391.

[3]Ibid.

reforming churches, monasteries, priories, both secular and regular, exempt and non-exempt, and for the purpose of removing heresy and punishing heretics. To accomplish these ends, Cusanus was even authorized to use secular power in extreme cases.[4]

The legation departed Rome on 31 December 1450. It would last for 15 months and take Cusanus through Austria, into southern and northern Germany, into the Netherlands and back through Cusanus' home in the Mosel Valley, through Mainz and Cologne, ending in his new bishopric of Brixen on 7 April 1452.[5] The first stop was Salzburg, where Cusanus arrived in January 1451 and where he began his legation using a form he may have first seen used by Otto von Ziegenhain, Archbishop of Trier, over twenty years earlier. He convoked a provincial synod to declare the jubilee indulgence and to issue reform decrees. He also hoped to use the synod to mobilize the local clergy to help implement his reforms.[6]

His work ran into problems early on. Nicholas V had made Cusanus Bishop of Brixen on 23 March 1450. The see of Brixen was within the archdiocese of Salzburg, and so in this respect Cusanus was under the authority of Friederich von Emmerberg, the archbishop of Salzburg; at the same time, Cusanus was acting as *legatus a latere*, a position by virtue of which Cusanus enjoyed special apostolic authority over von Emmerberg. To make matters worse, von Emmerberg and two of his bishops had been supporters of the Council of Basel to the end, and undoubtedly saw Cusanus as a traitor to their cause.[7]

Nevertheless, Cusanus set about his business. His reform decrees included the addition of a prayer to the Sunday Mass calling for divine protection for the pope and his

---

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid., 392-393, 419.

[6]Ibid., 393.

[7]Ibid.

bishops, the renunciation of simony, and the suspension of loans from Jews. Another decree called for the visitation of monastic houses, in which monks would be commanded to conform to their rules, especially in regard to poverty, chastity, and obedience; refusal would result in excommunication. This shows the continuity of Cusanus' reform ideas from the *De concordantia*--the way to reform was to observe existing rules and vows. Visitors were appointed from Benedictine, Cistercian, and Augustinian orders to visit monastic houses and enforce the reforms. The visitors were instructed to try to introduce the reforms in a way that would encourage the desire for change: "Work to introduce, above all, charity and love of divine worship," Cusanus admonished. "Make those whom you contact understand why they are religious . . . Persuade them that God's service is easy and his yoke sweet for those who will accept . . . it . . . Repeat your admonitions."[8] Cusanus also continued his emphasis on the need for leadership, encouraging the visitors to go to great lengths to set a personal example during their visitations. They were to take only one chaplain and a single servant, to be content with the food of the monastery under visitation, and to accept no gifts while there, so that all would know that they desired only the emendation of those being visited.[9]

While the initial monastic reforms met with some success, maintenance of the reforms was nearly impossible. Monastic houses were dominated by the local nobility, support for the reforms from Archbishop von Emmerberg and Emperor Friederich III was weak, and perhaps most catastrophic of all, many of the reform decrees were overturned when those involved appealed to Rome. This process would repeat itself over and over as Cusanus moved across Germany, and even after he took up his episcopal seat in Brixen. One example of this in Salzburg was the fate of Cusanus' decree suspending loans from Jews. It soon proved to be unenforceable, since there was heavy reliance on

---

[8]Ibid., 394.

[9]Ibid.

this source of revenue; on appeal to Rome, the decree was later overturned.[10]

Moving into southern Germany, Cusanus met a variety of circumstances which he would also see over and over again in the coming years. He mediated a dispute at Eichstatt between Bishop von Eich and the cathedral dean, in which the dean claimed authority over the bishop in matters of cathedral reform, relying on the strength of local tradition to back his argument. Cusanus offered a compromise in which the dean kept a measure of authority in the matter, but the bishop kept the greater part.[11] It was not the last time Cusanus would encounter trouble at the hand of local tradition. At Nurnberg, he skillfully employed another reform tool that he would use with great skill: the sermon. He preached before large crowds at least twice weekly, basing his sermons on the scriptures, not on local legends and superstitions.[12] In Bamburg Cusanus issued guidelines for the proper use of the eucharist and prohibited lay brotherhoods, which he feared often strayed from the authority of Rome. Later, at Wurzburg, he encountered another effective barrier to his reform measures, one which he would also see again: the decrees were received with joy and then either enforced lightly or altogether ignored.

Entering Northern Germany, Cusanus initially met with greater success. He arrived at Magdeburg on 13 June 1451, where the local archbishop was sympathetic to his reforms. Cusanus issued eleven reform decrees at Magdeburg, including decrees to curb abuses in the conferment of benefices, the naming of deputies to enforce synodal decrees, as well as concubinage and abuses of local power.[13] Nearly one month later Cusanus issued a decree which demonstrated that his mystical beliefs had not left him devoid of reason: he denounced the bloody hosts of Wilsnack as a deception perpetuated

---

[10]Ibid., 396-397.

[11]Ibid., 397.

[12]Ibid., 398.

[13]Ibid., 402-403.

by local clergymen for the purposes of financial gain. Declaring that "every occasion by which the unlettered are deceived must be removed," he ordered the practice discontinued immediately. Again, however, in spite of his broad apostolic authority, this decree was later countermanded by Nicholas V.[14]

Monastic reforms in the Magdeburg area met with some lasting success, due in large part to the persistence and zeal of one of the visitors, Johann Busch, the Augustinian prior at Halle, who with a colleague visited twenty Augustinian monasteries in the service of Cusanus' reform program. In the neighboring towns of Hildesheim and Minden, however, Cusanus' efforts were rendered ineffective due to strong resistance from the secular sector.[15] This, too, would be an obstacle with which he would contend later.

Moving from northern Germany into the Netherlands, Cusanus encountered the strongest resistance of his journey. Arriving at Utrecht on 27 August 1451 after restful but brief stays at Deventer and Windesheim, he set to work almost immediately on the issuance of reform decrees. On 3 September he threatened the excommunication of any male Christian who violated the sanctity of a Utrecht convent. To his dismay, this decree was not only ignored, but also later overturned by Nicholas V.[16] In Liege, where he was met outside the city by Prince-bishop Han van Heimberg and an accompanying party, he was treated even worse. After entering the city he was challenged by a local abbot and abbess and two canons from districts he had earlier visited, who warned the locals of the harshness of Cusanus' reform decrees. His commission was then examined and the locals declared that he had no authority in Liege as a papal legate. His protests went unheeded,

---

[14]Ibid., 403-404.

[15]Ibid., 405-408.

[16]Ibid., 411-412.

and he was forced to leave for Trier where he arrived on 23 October.[17]

Despite the fact that Cusanus was now near his own home, he was scarcely received with more warmth than what he had experienced in the Netherlands. The archbishop in Trier was none other than Jacob von Sierck, who had been opposed by Ulrich von Manderscheid in the election of 1430. Needless to say, von Sierck had little sympathy for Cusanus' mission in Germany. Moving on to Mainz, where he arrived on 13 November, Cusanus issued eight reform decrees, trying to draw on the records of the Council of Basel. As in Liege, his reform authority was called into question; local ecclesiastics believed that until the papacy and curia underwent reform then reform of the church's other members was invalid. Cusanus' attempts in Mainz were thus rendered inert.[18] Still persistent, however, Cusanus moved on to Cologne, where he convoked a provincial synod on 23 February 1452 and issued decrees similar to the decrees of Mainz. Here, additionally, he barred Franciscans who were in violation of their rule from preaching, hearing confession, or receiving theology degrees from the University of Cologne. The Franciscans, following the lead of so many others, appealed to Rome.[19] Finally the legatine journey ended as Cusanus arrived at the seat of his bishopric in Brixen on 7 April 1452.[20] While it may have been difficult for him to believe it at that time, an even more challenging situation awaited him there.

It is not known how Cusanus viewed his legatine experience, but it is difficult to see how he could have felt very encouraged by the results of his efforts. He had met with resistance from both secular and ecclesiastical leaders. While in a few locations his reforms were enforced successfully, especially when he had willing and zealous enforcers

---

[17]Ibid., 413-414.

[18]Ibid., 415-417.

[19]Ibid., 417-418.

[20]Ibid., 419.

such as Johann Busch, in most places his reforms had been ignored or opposed, and in some locations even his papal commissions were insufficient to convince locals of his authority to even issue reform decrees. Perhaps most debilitating were the almost constant appeals to Rome against his reforms, and the frequent agreement of the pope with the plaintiffs. His use of excommunication had also proven a feeble weapon to strengthen the efficacy of his reform efforts. Despite this start, Cusanus settled into his new job as Bishop of Brixen in the highland Tyrol and continued his work of reform. Whereas during the legatine journey he had moved from place to place, now he would be committed to one area for a long period of time, and would have a chance to attempt on a smaller, local scale what he had previously tried on a larger, almost imperial scale: to initiate a broad, long term reform based on a renewal of devotion on the part of individual Christians within his diocese, both clerical and lay.

However, just as Cusanus' legatine journey had started out in controversy, so too did his episcopacy even before his arrival in 1452. It started on 28 February 1450, with the death of Johann Rottel, the former Bishop of Brixen. The following month, on 14 March, Leonard Wismayer was elected bishop by a committee of the Brixen cathedral chapter, in accordance with ancient custom which was in turn reinforced by decrees from both the Councils of Constance and Basel, a series of imperial treaties, and the Concordat of Vienna, which Cusanus himself had helped negotiate.[21] Little more than one week later, Nicholas V appointed Cusanus to the see. He resorted to a loophole in order to press his claim over that of Wismayer: he declared that the appointment of Wismayer was illegal since it had been carried out in the house of Sigmund, the Tyrolese duke, where armed guards had been present. Nicholas V also argued that in spite of the support of the

---

[21]Wilhelm Baum, "Nikolaus von Kues wird Bischof von Brixen (mit Edition unveroflentlicher Cusanus und Kaiserurkunden)," *Der Schlern* 58:2 (1984): 379; Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyolese Monasteries," 56; Pavlac, 136; Pardon E. Tillinghast, "Nicholas of Cusa vs. Sigmund of Habsburg: An Attempt at Post-Conciliar Church Reform," *Church History* 36 (1967): 372.

Concordat of Vienna for the right of cathedral chapters to elect their bishops, it also granted the pope a measure of latitude in the endorsement of bishops so appointed. He demanded the full measure of this latitude in his appointment of Cusanus.[22] As a last gesture of contempt for papal interference in their affairs, several of the Brixen canons registered an appeal on 27 January 1451 to "a better informed pope" or even a future general council in an effort to show their disapproval of the new bishop.[23] Cusanus, meanwhile, still on the first leg of his legatine journey, stopped in Wiener-Neustadt and after convincing Emperor Friederich III to recognize his claim to the see of Brixen, received on 1 March 1451 the "Stiftsregalien," or the feudal rights and privileges of his bishopric.[24] As prince-bishop, Cusanus held secular as well as ecclesiastical power; at one point the counts of the Tyrol had been the vassals of the prince-bishops, but had surpassed them in the thirteenth century. The boundaries between secular and ecclesiastical power, however, were still not clearly drawn.

Despite the initial controversy which clouded his appointment, Cusanus was by the time of his arrival in the spring of 1452 the undisputed Bishop of Brixen; he soon set about the task of transforming Brixen into a model diocese.[25] He sought to rejuvenate faith and morals, and to free the church from the control of Tyrolese secular authority. He received further aid in the pursuit of this end when on 12 May 1453, the bull *Inter cerea* was issued by the pope, granting Cusanus broad authority in the pursuit of reform at the Praemonstratensian monastery at Wilten, the Cistercian house at Stams, the house of Augustinian Canons at Neustift, the Benedictines at St. Georgenberg and Sonnenburg,

---

[22]Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 56; Pavlac, 136; Tillinghast, 373-374.

[23]Tillinghast, 375.

[24]Baum, "Nikolaus von Kues wird Bischof von Brixen," 383-384; Tillinghast, 375-376.

[25]Tillinghast, 381.

and the Franciscans at St. Clare.[26] To achieve these reforms and others, Cusanus initiated a series of actions that were by now familiar to all who had followed him through Germany: he convoked diocesan synods, ordered monastic visitations, preached sermons, and used excommunication and interdict to punish the stubbornly disobedient.[27]

The specific issues of reform were also familiar themes: the eradication of concubinage, the standardization of the missal, the regulation of pilgrimages, clerical dress and behavior, and the prohibition of certain lay practices, such as card playing and consumption of dairy products during Lent.[28] As always, the reforms of Cusanus involved no new rules or regulations, but simply the enforcement of those rules and vows which were already in existence.

Nicholas V had not selected Cusanus at random, nor had he gone to such great lengths to secure his appointment simply to get his own way. He had chosen Cusanus to be a weapon of the papacy with which Nicholas V hoped to restore some measure of control in the south of Germany. The area was still, in the early 1450s, an established stronghold of conciliarism and Cusanus was known in Rome for his loyalty to the papacy. Additionally, the Tyrolese dukes had, for many years, been steadily encroaching on ecclesiastical authority in Brixen and Nicholas V hoped to reverse this trend. Cusanus was a relatively famous person by this time and the pope hoped that his German lineage would make him more palatable to the people of the Tyrol.[29]

Cusanus, however, faced many problems even as he arrived to take over his see.

---

[26]Wilhelm Baum and Karl Rauter, "Bernhard von Waging (+1472): 'Klagliefer uber St. Georgenberg.' Das Scheitern einer Klosterreform des Nikolaus Cusanus (1453/54)," *Der Schlern* 57:9 (1983): 486; Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 57, 60.

[27]Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 56.

[28]Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 57; Tillinghast, 381.

[29]Tillinghast, 372.

The papal intervention in the episcopal election process had definitely caused hard feelings toward Cusanus among the locals, as evidenced by the appeal of January 1451 to a "better-informed pope." Additionally, while Nicholas V saw Cusanus as a well-known personality and of German lineage, the highland Tyrolese, including Duke Sigmund, saw him as a well-connected outsider who was not to be trusted.[30] The high degree of integration between secular and religious concerns and responsibilities also caused Cusanus immediate headaches. Many of the monastic houses he hoped to reform were overseen by members of the nobility who looked down on Cusanus, resented his interference in their daily activities, and even questioned his authority to pursue reform initiatives in their houses.[31] While many of these local nobles were not opposed to ecclesiastical reform *per se*, they had a far different definition of the term. The primary goal of a local leader such as Duke Sigmund was the unification of his lands and the maintenance of security against outside threats.[32] The actions of an outsider like Cusanus, who held a seat of such power in the complex ecclesiastical-political structure of the Tyrol, might easily seem threatening if for no other reason than that they were not in line with Sigmund's political goals.[33] In addition to these obstacles, the nature of Cusanus' reforms, which consisted largely in returning leaders to obedience of their well-documented vows and rules, as well as his own zealous personality, precluded any major room for compromise in his efforts. Many thus came to see Cusanus as harsh and unreasonable. This had caused him trouble on his legatine journey, it would cause him trouble in the Tyrol, and even later in Rome.

---

[30]Baum, "Nikolaus von Kues wird Bischof von Brixen," 381; Tillinghast, 380.

[31]Tillinghast, 380, 382; Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 60.

[32]Tillinghast, 378-379; Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 59.

[33]Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 63.

In order to understand these problems in more detail, we will examine three examples of Cusanus' efforts at reform in the Tyrol: the reform of the Cistercian house of Stams, the Benedictine house of Sonnenburg, and an initiative directed at the laity. The case of reform at Stams was not clear-cut, since the Cistercians had been exempt from episcopal control since 1184.[34] On 25 January 1451, while still at the beginning of his legatine journey, Cusanus opened a conference of abbots from the Tyrol. Abbot Georg Ried of Stams, who enjoyed a close relationship with Duke Sigmund, did not attend, but did, on this occasion, send a representative.[35] This was an obvious slight to Cusanus and a clear message that the bishop's reforms were not high on the Cistercian abbot's agenda. On 29-30 May 1452, shortly after his arrival in Brixen, Cusanus visited Stams and, despite the gesture of over a year before, his relations with Ried were cordial at first. Ried even attended Cusanus' first diocesan synod, convoked on 6 February 1453. It was with the issuance of *Inter cerea* the following May that relations began to deteriorate.[36] Apparently, the specific authority granted to Cusanus in the papal bull was too much for Ried to take. Five months later, on 29 October, Ried was invited by Cusanus to serve on a board of monastic visitors to the Benedictine house at Sonnenburg, and politely declined to serve.[37] It is probable that Ried did not attend Cusanus' second diocesan synod in February of 1454, and when the third was called in November of 1455 he did not even bother to send a representative.[38] When he sent two vicars with an apology to the fourth synod on 24 May 1457, Cusanus had reached his limit. He excommunicated

---

[34]Ibid., 66.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Ibid., 67.

Ried that same month.[39]

The course of events at the Benedictine abbey of Sonnenburg proceeded along similar lines, but this situation was made more complex because of the confusing spheres of responsibility for the house, indicative of the relationship between secular and ecclesiastical power in the Tyrol. The affairs of the abbey were the responsibility not only of the abbess, Verena von Stuben, but of Cusanus as Bishop of Brixen, and also of the Count of Gorz and Duke Sigmund.[40] Perhaps because of this arrangement, there had been a long history of conflict involving the Bishop of Brixen, the convent of Sonnenburg, and the Duke of the Tyrol.[41] Frustrated in his repeated attempts to initiate reforms within the abbey, Cusanus enforced enclosure on the nuns. They saw this as an attempt on his part to usurp their temporal authority over the surrounding villages.[42] The abbess was excommunicated on 30 April 1455, and the abbey was placed under interdict the following September.[43]

In addition to monastic reform, Cusanus also attempted to initiate reforms directed at the laity. He prohibited activities such as popular pilgrimages and holidays, false veneration of relics and eucharistic blood miracles (as he had as Wilsnack), and other practices such as dancing and card playing.[44] In a specific instance, Cusanus prohibited dancing and the bearing of weapons during the 1455 Whitsunday festival in honor of the patron saint, and threatened the denial of the sacraments and burial in consecrated ground to violators. The only tangible result of this action was the alienation

---

[39]Ibid., 58, 67.

[40]Pavlac, 148.

[41]Wilhelm Baum, *Nikolaus Cusanus in Tirol*, 211-212.

[42]Pavlac, 148-149.

[43]Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 58; Pavlac, 149.

[44]Pavlac, 143.

of the Gufidaun family, who were responsible for the maintenance of order at the festival.[45] He was soon to encounter more serious trouble at the hands of the Gufidauns.

It is clear that Cusanus' efforts were not producing the rejuvenation of faith and morals on the scale that he had hoped; between 1455 and 1457 his position in the Tyrol began to deteriorate rapidly. It was in these years that he increasingly used excommunication and interdict to punish those who opposed his efforts. Since opposition to his reforms continued to grow during this period, there is little evidence that these were effective tools of coercion.[46] In May 1457, Duke Sigmund returned to the Tyrol after an absence of nearly one year and invited Cusanus to a meeting at Innsbruck.[47] When Cusanus arrived he found Sigmund absent and he retired to the monastery of Wilten, outside Innsbruck, to await his arrival.[48] On the night of 24 June, the monastery was surrounded by ducal troops, who attempted to force their way inside. Cusanus feared that he was their target.[49] After the troops departed, Cusanus met with Sigmund on 26 June, only to become insulted during their meeting. He immediately left Innsbruck. On his way back to Brixen, he was nearly captured by members of the Gufidaun family, whom he believed were intent on killing him.[50]

No longer feeling safe in Brixen, Cusanus left the town permanently on 4 July 1457, installing himself in the castle of Andraz near the Venetian border. After hiring Venetian troops for his protection, he issued a series of demands to Sigmund, including

---

[45]Tillinghast, 385.

[46]Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 58; Tillinghast, 378, 382.

[47]Tillinghast, 385.

[48]Pavlac, 145.

[49]Pavlac, 145; Tillinghast, 385.

[50]Pavlac, 145; Tillinghast, 385; Zani, 225.

orders for the return of castles, the assertion of mining rights, and the return of temporal authority.[51] More than two years later, in February 1460, when Cusanus returned to the Tyrol briefly after a stay in Rome, he was persuaded to attend a synod at Bruneck on Easter Sunday, 13 April. Once there, and despite Sigmund's promise of safe conduct, he was presented with letters of defiance by representatives of the duke, the town was surrounded and besieged by Sigmund's army, who forced both the town and castle to surrender.[52] Cusanus was then forced to sign a humiliating capitulation in which he gave up all of his demands. He repudiated the agreement as soon as Sigmund released him, and Pius II placed the Tyrol under interdict.[53] Nikolaus Cusanus' career of reform in Brixen was over.

Cusanus has come under severe criticism for his actions while papal legate and as Bishop of Brixen, both by his contemporaries, as we have seen, and also by modern scholars. The lack of tangible and lasting results produced by his reform initiatives, his frequent use of excommunication and interdict, and his seemingly inflexible position on so many issues have provided ample targets for his critics. He is called unimaginative in his approach to reform, too theoretical and impractical, petty and rigid in his dealings with locals, and too prone to use extreme threats in the pursuit of his reform goals.[54] His political dealings are also a source of criticism, in that he was unable to come to terms

---

[51]Pavlac, 145-146; Tillinghast, 386.

[52]Wilhelm Baum, "Nikolaus von Kues und der Konflikt Herzog Sigmunds von Oesterreich mit dem Schweizer Eidgenossen," *Zeitschrift fur Schweizerische Kerchengeschichte* 82 (1988): 12; Tillinghast, 388.

[53]Pavlac, 150; Tillinghast, 388.

[54]Sullivan, "Nicholas of Cusa as Reformer," 425; Baum, *Nikolaus Cusanus in Tirol*, 91, 212; Meuthen, *Die Letzten Jahre des Nikolaus von Kues: Biographische Untersuchungen nach neuen Quellen* (Cologne and Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1958), 20; Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 70, 71; Jaspers, 258.

with Sigmund, and that moreover his political dealings with powers outside the Tyrol fueled the mistrust already held by local secular and ecclesiastical leaders.[55] He is also accused of fostering institutional reform in such a way as to preclude the realization of any lasting, meaningful change. This, it is argued, can only come through reform on the individual level, requiring change of heart on the part of those in need of reform. Since lasting reform did not take place in Brixen or in Germany, then it is obvious that no such large scale change of heart ever took place during Cusanus' reform efforts. This occurred, it is argued, because of Cusanus' insistence on institutional reform and his reluctance to question his own methods even in the face of their failure.[56]

These criticisms, while not without some measure of validity, in many cases ignore any careful analysis of the forces which shaped Cusanus' concept of reform. They also ignore one very significant implication of the conservative nature of his reform: Cusanus was not implementing new measures; he was, in fact, simply trying to enforce guidelines of behavior *to which the individuals involved had already agreed.* In addition, charges of pettiness, rigidity, or a failure to take into account the individual factor ignore one element of Cusanus' reform program that, when analyzed, shows Cusanus in a different light: that element is the sermons which he preached.

The sermons of Cusanus are remarkably under-utilized in scholarly evaluations of his ideas and, more importantly, of the practical means by which he pursued ecclesiastical reform. This is all the more remarkable given the heavy use of this method of communication by Cusanus, both during his legatine journey and his episcopate at Brixen, when he preached over 130 sermons.[57] Analysis of these sermons provides

---

[55]Pavlac, 152-153; Tillinghast, 390; Watanabe, "Nichoals of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 71.

[56]Jaspers, 204, 258.

[57]Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 57.

valuable keys both to a more complete understanding of Cusanus' reform ideas and to the personality of the reformer, as well as offering new answers to some of the criticisms leveled against him.

First and foremost, in the sermons, Cusanus' program of reform was rooted in obedience to established doctrine, mystical transformation, the necessity of separation from sensible things, and the responsibility of church leaders. Obedience, Cusanus argued, is the indication of Christian belief; a lack of obedience, therefore, is understood as evidence that the disobedient individual does not accept Christ as the Word of God.[58] Obedience also provides the means by which the Church Militant is unified and perfected, and is key in its becoming the Church Triumphant.[59] The obedient soul is the blessed soul--a partaker of the gospel of Christ, keeping the body obedient to its demands like a rider who guides his horse to the finish line in a race.[60] Obedience, then, is the beginning, not the end, of Christian belief.

To be obedient it is necessary to turn away from sensible things and to turn toward eternal things. Those who are following Christ are not permanent citizens of this world, but mere pilgrims and exiles, who do not find truth through scholastic inquiry into sensible things.[61] Following the imagination, reason, memory, and the will can lead one not to truth but to ruin; the role of the intellect is to bow in humble worship to Christ, and to offer to Him all of the possessions of this world, since it is not able to join the

---

[58]Sermon 284, delivered 29 June 1457 on the feast day of the Apostles Peter and Paul, in Innsbruck, edited and translated by Thomas M. Izbicki, 2.

[59]Sermon 21, delivered 6 January 1439 or 1440 on the feast of the Epiphany, in Koblenz to the clergy and people of St. Florin, edited and translated by Thomas M. Izbicki, 2, 4.

[60]Sermon 21, 10; Sermon 284, 1; Sermon 286 in Latin, delivered in 1459 on the Sabbath after the Conversion of Saint Paul in Rome, edited by Peter Casarella, 1, lines 34-40; 3, lines 31-38.

[61]Sermon 286, 1, lines 24-28; Sermon 21, 2; Sermon 287, 7, lines 16-21.

individual to the divine Spirit.[62] Therefore, in order to taste Christ, the "hidden manna," the unity of divinity and humanity, one must turn away from the "entire world of the flesh" which is contrary to the way of truth.[63] Through obedience and turning away from sensible things individuals become true partakers of the church, defined as the "union of rational spirits to their head, Christ."[64] It is through this mystical union with Christ that each individual undergoes transformation and afterward receives the innocence of a newborn baby.[65] Leaders have the primary responsibility in this process of reform, since they have the greater obligation for obedience.[66]

In addition to showing the continuity of Cusanus' reform ideas, the sermons also reveal the method by which Cusanus hoped to turn his thought into reality, answering those who criticize Cusanus for being too philosophical and impractical.[67] In his sermons he demonstrates how one might experience true and individual reform, and how one might ignite a desire for spiritual things if it is lacking. One experiences the mystical union with Christ through such a burning desire to obey the gospel that it moves one to rejoice in all adversity and to remain in a state of determined obedience even to the point of death.[68] One of the main obstacles faced by Cusanus throughout his career as a reformer was igniting this desire where it did not exist. This he tried to accomplish

---

[62]Sermon 21, 14, 15; Sermon 286, 2 lines 46-48, 3 lines 1-22.

[63]Sermon 76, delivered in 1453 on the day of the Apostles Peter and Paul, in Brixen, edited and translated by Thomas M. Izbicki, 6-7; Sermon 287, 7, lines 1-3.

[64]Sermon 21, 3.

[65]Sermon 76, 7; Sermon 287, 9, lines 42-45.

[66]Sermon 286, 4, line 48, 5, lines 1-12; Sermon 287, 7, lines 31-37, 43-48.

[67]Sullivan, "Nicholas of Cusa as Reformer," 425; Baum, *Nikolaus Cusanus in Tirol*, 91.

[68]Sermon 286, 4, lines 12-18.

through the application of discipline. Desire would follow actions, and so one must be obedient to the best of one's ability, as a runner who strains forward to the finish line in a race.[69] It is in choosing obedience that one finds the motivation and desire to obey. If one is a canon, for example, the canonical rule is to him the "measure of uprightness and righteousness," which consists in the regulation of the passion of inordinate desire, which is pride, avarice, and luxury. One may also find the desire for obedience by reading the words of the Scriptures, or sacred writings, just as the eunuch who was so moved in the Acts of the Apostles, or as St. Augustine described his own experience in the *Confessions*.[70] Here again, the primary role of obedience in Cusanus' reforms is underscored; it is easier to understand why he placed such a high premium on its observance.

Cusanus' sermons also reveal a prophetic aspect that is not readily apparent in his philosophical writings and further demonstrates the influence of nominalism on his thought. Medieval prophecy is often the handmaiden of reform, since it is often motivated, like its prophetic counterpart in the Hebrew Scriptures, by dissatisfaction with the present world and hope for some improvement in the future.[71] Cusanus expressed this hope in an early sermon delivered in Augsburg on 1 January 1441, in which he declared that the span of this present age could be roughly determined by a comparison of it with the life span of Christ, each year in the life of Christ representing fifty years of modern history since the incarnation. Thus the present age was not about to end, as many might proclaim; there were approximately one and one-half centuries left, which Cusanus believed would be a period of cleansing and reform.[72] Cusanus also used prophetic

---

[69]Ibid., 4, lines 19-27.

[70]Sermon 287, 2, lines 6-75.

[71]Robert Lerner, "Medieval Prophecy and Religious Dissent," *Past and Present* 72 (August 1976): 7.

[72]Sullivan, "Apocalypse Tamed," 230.

passages in his sermons, such as that in Sermon 287 (Ezekiel 36.23-25) to show how God would reward the obedient faithful with cleansing by the "purest water," a new spirit, a joyous song in the heart, and a nearer measure of His presence.[73] This also shows the nominalist view of God, dealing directly with individuals by way of covenant relationship, wherein God promises to reward those who keep faith with Him.

The view of Cusanus which is seen in his sermons is not one of rigidity or pettiness, nor one of a man bent on institutional reform, but one of a man who ardently desires to see individual transformation within the church. The sermons show Cusanus to be one who believes that God is faithful to reward obedience with both a renewed desire for obedience, and also the reward of immortality. They show him to be a man doing all that he could to bring about true reform, all, that is, except to compromise what he held as the sacred and inviolable precepts of salvation.

[73]Sermon 287, 1, lines 23-27, 9, lines 39-40, 42-45, 10, lines 3-10.

Chapter Five

THE MATURITY OF CUSANUS' REFORM IDEAS: THE *REFORMATIO GENERALIS*

In 1458, a long time friend of Cusanus, Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, became Pope Pius II. His electoral capitulation included commitments on his part to pursue curial reform and the crusade against the Turks. Pius convened the Congress of Mantua to deal with the question of the crusade; while he was in attendance, he organized a commission to develop a plan of reform and to report back to him upon his return.[1] Pius also appointed Cusanus, who was in Rome at the time and also serving on the commission for reform, as papal vicar general for Rome while he was in Mantua. Whatever the proposals of the papal commission were, only two have survived. One is focused on the reform of the curia, entitled *Tractus de reformationibus Romanae curiae*, written by Domenico de Domenichi, Bishop of Torcello, the other is Cusanus' *Reformatio generalis.*[2]

The *Reformatio* is a short work, consisting of an introductory section dealing with the theological basis of reform, followed by a section which outlines the rules for general visitations, and finally some details about papal and curial visitations. Cusanus, in the introduction, demonstrates the Christocentric nature of church reform, describes the structure of the church, the state of the church and the need for reform, and finally closes with the conclusions of these arguments.

The introduction begins by asserting the necessity for the manifestation of Christ. The purpose of man in the first place, Cusanus argues, is to seek God. Indeed, man was

---

[1]Morimichi Watanabe and Thomas M. Izbicki, "Nicholas of Cusa: A General Reform of the Church," 178.

[2]Watanabe and Izbicki, "A General Reform of the Church," 179.

only created so that "he might see God in his glory."[3] To this end, intellectual nature was created so that the individual would be inclined toward "revelation of and participation in" God, moving the wisest of men to write that man most clearly shows the potential of his intellect when he is reaching with his mind toward God.[4] Creation itself is like a series of books, through which the intellect would seek to know God, and would discover Him if possible. Unfortunately, the intellect is incapable of knowing the Word of God, although in its investigations of created entities it might make certain conjectures about the nature of God. True apprehension of the knowledge of God, however, is not possible without a mediator.[5]

Since God created man to desire Him, and since He saw that the ignorance of man and his inability to acquire the knowledge of God was leading him into error, He granted to man the manifestation of the teacher "who takes away ignorance and illuminates all who come to him."[6] Christ is that teacher, not only because of merit, but because of His divine identity which He shares with us by grace, since we could not attain it on our own.[7] Thus the manifestation of Christ was essential if man was to achieve the end for which he was created by God.

Christ, the Word of God made flesh, who unites the divinity of God and the humanity of man, was sent by God with a command that all should hear Him. He then allowed all who obeyed this command to become His own sons. This is, in fact, the only law of God, that man should believe in the name of His Son, since whoever believes in

---

[3]Nikolaus Cusanus, *Reformatio generalis*, reproduced in Morimichi Watanabe and Thomas M. Izbicki, "A General Reform of the Church," 188.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid., 189.

[7]Ibid., 190-191.

His name receives Him as the Son of God, and must therefore believe all else which He says. Thus Christ came and chose the twelve from the world to become the foundation of the church, i.e., the union of the faithful with Christ as the head. This union was quickened by the doctrine and spirit of Christ, to which He remains joined for all eternity.[8] This then is the faith, that Christ is Truth itself; whoever believes this will visibly keep the commandments of Christ and will not sin, but will turn away from the glories of this present reality and comprehend that there is no life beyond the promises of Christ. It is thus only through Christ that one can apprehend complete knowledge, which is the faith by which the just live.[9]

Therefore, since Christ is the Truth, then the leaders of the church must inquire no further for guidance than the precepts of Christ, those of the apostles, and of their successors the Church Fathers. Leaders should simply perform their duties and renounce the lusts of this world, since all temporal elements will soon pass into eternity. Since Christ has put on our mortal form and united it with his divine nature, then the only way for the mortal to put on immortality, to participate in the things of eternity, is through the imitation of Christ.[10]

This was indicated by the Apostle Paul, when he had exhorted the early church by saying, "Be imitators of me, beloved children, as I am of Christ." Since, therefore, the present leaders of the church hold the place of the apostles, then leaders must first put on the form of Christ by imitation, so that they might exhort others as did Paul. All who participate in Christ, who is the living virtue, will find eternal rest, and will also find hidden in themselves "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."[11] Christ calls out to

---

[8]Ibid., 189.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid., 189-190.

[11]Ibid., 190.

all who would be His disciples and thus be transformed into His form to learn from Him by the example that He set, and to turn from the things of this present world. Indeed, no other form can be put forth to Christians for the purpose of reform than the form of Christ. He is the living standard by which all matters of eternal life shall be measured, and those who fail to conform will be accursed and damned. Since this is the case, then all reform efforts should focus on personal cleansing and the renewal of the innocence one received at baptism.[12]

After establishing the Christocentricity of reform, Cusanus briefly outlined the nature of the church structure, arguing that it consisted both of unity and diversity. Just as in a human body the many members are united by the spirit of life within the body, so the many members of Christ are united by the spirit of Christ, to which they all cling in faith.[13] Diversity exists, however, since the church is made up of diverse offices for the purpose of edification. These offices, held together by love, the "glue of Christ," are occupied by individuals who are content with their offices, so long as they are joined to the Spirit of Christ, which as noted above keeps the diversity in unity. The holders of these offices act as eyes, or rather agents of correction, through which other members are adapted to the particular duties of their offices. Thus the proper functioning of the eyes, or leaders, of the church, is essential for the proper operation of the church as a whole. If these leaders, these "eyes of the body" are clear, then light flows throughout the church, and darkness and sin is purged on a regular basis, since it can find no foothold. If, however, these eyes are dark, then light is unable to flow into the various parts of the church and the whole entity is darkened. The first step in reform, then, is the enlightenment of the eyes, or leadership, so that reform can take root throughout the

---

[12]Ibid., 191.

[13]Ibid.

ecclesiastical structure.[14] While the church was once in a state of light, it has fallen from its former state into an era of decay and "dark shadows."[15] This has happened primarily because church leaders are in a state of darkness, unable even to see themselves in truth, and so cleansing must come from some exterior source.

The introduction closes with the conclusion of its argument: to remedy the problem of darkness in the church, existing leaders should submit themselves to visitation, lest they be deceived into thinking themselves full of light when in fact they are full of darkness. As the leadership is visited, corrected, and cleansed, beginning in Rome with the papacy and curia, they should then turn their enlightened eyes on the body, initiating visitations to other members either personally or through others on their behalf, since this is a matter of the utmost importance, for which the leaders are accountable to God. The process should begin with the selection of three "grave and mature men" in whom the form of Christ is clearly manifest, possessing "zeal for God, knowledge and prudence."[16] These men would not be allowed material compensation for their visitations, beyond what was necessary for the execution of their duties, in an effort to free them from any attempt at bribery or suspicion of partiality. Each would be required to swear a binding oath.

The second section of the *Reformatio* detailed the rules for the visitations. The first four rules give instructions to ensure the compliance of the visited with the required rule, vow, or oath. Rules five through eight deal with the examination of the structure of benefices, while nine through eleven specify punishments for refusal to cooperate. Rule twelve lists some details about hospitals, rule thirteen regulates the use of relics, pilgrimages, and miraculous displays, and rule fourteen calls for attention in the

---

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid., 192.

punishment of various public displays of disobedience and sin.

In rule one, the visitors are instructed to begin the visitation by publicly celebrating the mass with those being visited, preaching to them in such a way that the requirements of the visitation are clearly established. They are to make clear that they are present to enforce the tenets of the Christian faith. They will then select three men from among those being visited, administer to them a public oath of truth, and then interview them concerning the observances and customs of the location under visitation. As a result of these interviews, the visitors can initiate corrective action, or choose individual members for further interviews.[17] The second rule instructs the visitors to bring back those undergoing visitation to the original form of their faith; Christians are to be brought back to the form they put on at baptism, prelates to the form they put on at ordination; priests, religious, beneficed clergy should all be held to their vows, "since all things licit and honest promised to God become necessary for salvation."[18] If they refuse, they are to be rejected. In order to render this process most efficient, the visitors are to have copies of the relevant vows or oaths on hand for referral. Next, the visitors are instructed in dealing with corrupt oaths or vows. If the official forms are not in use in the location undergoing visitation, whether because of carelessness or bad customs, then the visited should be held to the forms that were in practice when they swore their oaths. If they refuse or fail to comply they are to be driven away.[19] The fourth rule carries a stipulation for conduct in addition to those contained in rules, vows or oaths. All are required to comply with the standards of their respective station. A layperson, for example, cannot be called a Christian if his or her life is lived contrary to Christ, nor can a monk be a monk if he "runs around in cities," nor can a curate be a curate if he neglects the care of

---

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid., 193.

his congregation.[20]

The fifth rule deals with the structure of benefices. Visitors are especially instructed to examine all benefices for the neglect of divine worship. Where this is found as a result of incompatibility or absentee clergy, then the visitors are to restore the office to proper worship. If this cannot be accomplished, then they are to treat the office as if it were vacated and provide a new occupant to the benefice.[21] Next, the visitors are instructed in correcting problems found with the "diminution of divine worship" due to the neglect of anyone holding multiple but compatible benefices. If possible, they should correct the problem through the current occupant; if not, they are authorized to appoint another.[22] The seventh rule instructs the visitors that " . . . any provostship, deanship, archdeaconry, [precentorship], schoolmastership, treasureship and the like . . . in cathedrals or collegiate churches" was incompatible with identical offices in other cathedrals or collegiate churches. Violators are required to relinquish one of the offices to another occupant.[23] The final rule dealing with benefices declares that when the visitors find that a union between a parish church and a cathedral church has resulted in the increased luxury of the canons and religious to the detriment of divine worship, then the monies of the parish churches should be reserved immediately and made available for the strengthening of the parish worship, as if the union had not taken place.[24]

Rules nine through eleven tell the visitors how to handle specific cases of disobedience. If some do not admit the visitors or refuse to obey them, and these same held apostolic privileges, then the visitors can order their obedience at once and revoke

---

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid., 193-194.

[22]Ibid., 194.

[23]Ibid., 194-195.

[24]Ibid., 195.

their privileges immediately in the case of stubborn disobedience. In cases of cathedrals or collegiate churches which have apostolic exemptions, unions of churches, or other apostolic or episcopal privileges, the visitors are authorized to revoke the privileges if the visited refuse the correction of the visitors. In this case, those under revocation of privileges are to be refused the divine offices.[25] By the authority of the eleventh rule, the visitors can seize the benefices or forbid the practice of the ministry of the sacraments to any displaying open obedience to the law, the papacy, papal legates, or bishops. Any found supporting these or hearing their masses were to be excommunicated at once.[26]

In the case of hospitals, they should be examined to ensure that alms are given to the poor as was originally specified and that those in positions of responsibility are held accountable. Frauds are to be investigated, including deceptive alms seekers. Cloisters of nuns should also be examined, in order to determine if their behavior was in accordance with their vows or if they were engaged in excess.[27] Next, relics should be examined wherever they were found, to ensure that they were true relics, and not duplicates. It is better to prohibit the display of duplicate relics than to allow the scandal to exist among the laity. Pilgrimages to relics or places of miraculous displays such as bleeding hosts should be opposed and even forbidden by the visitors; Christians should be exhorted to worship Christ more than relics, and care should be taken lest temporal wealth be obtained at the expense of truth.[28] Lastly, the visitors should be diligent in removing those guilty of public displays of unrepentant sin. Divination, sorcery, adultery, and other practices should be purged from every place, so that the church might

---

[25]Ibid., 195.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid., 196.

[28]Ibid.

be "a pure bride, pleasing to God--just as the church of the original [disciples] was."[29] In closing, Cusanus wrote that since the aforesaid rules contained the form of goodness, then anyone who contradicted the visitors in the execution of their duty in accordance with these rules should not be countenanced, but rather coerced.[30]

The last section of the *Reformatio* gives specific instructions for the visitation of the pope and the curia. It details the obligation of the papacy relating to the visitations, and the procedure for visitations of the papacy, the cardinals, persons in the curia, and the Penitentiary, as well as for the reform of divine worship in Rome. Cusanus begins by pointing out the obligation of the pope to guard the Christian faith, and also to uphold the commitments of his predecessors in the papal office. The pope is also bound to observe whatever agreements he made when he took the office of the papacy.[31] Next Cusanus explicitly called on the pope to come under the fourth rule of the visitations, i.e., that the pope must observe those things implied by the etymology of his name, "because we ought to be the ultimate father." So too the patriarch, "because we are obligated, first of all, by all by which all the fathers were bound," and after that by what is implied in the names archbishop, bishop, and even priest. All that is implied in all of these names was to be first and foremost seen in the pope, which is why, according to Cusanus, he is called by Christians "holiness."[32]

The pope, however, as a man, was incapable of judging himself and so required visitation by the visitors, in this case functioning as the legates of God. They should examine his "person, household, curia, and all things which pertain to the papal dignity

---

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid., 196-197.

[31]Ibid., 197.

[32]Ibid.

and office."[33] Since the pope is, like all men, a weak sinner, and knows himself to be such, but at the same time wishes to use his office for edification and not for an occasion of scandal to the church, then whatever the visitors find that is scandalous they should point out for the purpose of correction.

After the papal visitation, then the visitors are to address the cardinals, who are to be examined specifically in three areas. First, they are to have "zeal for God's house."[34] This was of primary importance since, Cusanus argued, the cardinals are a representation of the church. The college of cardinals is a "comprehensive council of the church," made up of "legates of the nations."[35] When they elect a new pontiff, for instance, it is as though the entire church were consenting to the pope through them. The primary responsibility of the cardinals, therefore, is to care for the church, and to ensure that no unworthy persons are promoted on the basis of their relationship with the cardinals themselves.

Second, the cardinals are to be examined to ensure that they were "faithful and free in council."[36] The counsel of a cardinal is hindered by the harboring of hatred or partiality for any reason. National or local loyalty which supersedes the ecclesiastical duty is also to be corrected, as is any desire for gifts from patrons. The cardinal should be limited to a modest living, and should turn away from worldly marks of status and rank.

Lastly, the cardinals should be examined to ensure that they are proper examples to which all men may look when in search of a form for the proper Christian life. As in other places, Cusanus argues that because of their leadership role in the church, they have

---

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid., 198.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

an obligation to observe a higher degree of propriety than others. They should have a modest household (with no more than 40 persons or twenty-four animals) and should not be criticized for pluralism, or neglect of worship in any church. The cardinal should be content with his one titular church and give an annual accounting of it. The cardinals should also observe modesty in dress ("there is only one college of cardinals; why are there so many types of capes?"), since the existence of such individual expression in dress implies levity. The table of the cardinals should also be modest, with a monastic atmosphere at meals, which should include reading, followed by discussion.[37]

After the visitation of the cardinals, the visitors are instructed to reform divine worship in Rome in accordance with the rules above, including an examination of the books and vessels used for celebration of divine worship. Next, the curia is to be examined. Whatever persons were required for the execution of curial duties would be allowed to stay. If they are superfluous persons in search of additional benefices, the visitors should dismiss them to their own localities, to look after their existing responsibilities. Others, of greater merit and who display more care toward their duties should be preferred in promotion over these.[38] Lastly, the Penitentiary is to be visited in accordance with the fourteen rules for visitations, as if it were a church or monastery. The regulations for penance were to be followed scrupulously, with any laxity punished by the ejection of the penitentiaries.[39]

* * * * *

The *Reformatio* reflects both continuity in the thought of Cusanus as well as some

---

[37]Ibid., 199.

[38]Ibid., 200-201.

[39]Ibid., 201-202.

specific clarifications resulting directly from his experiences in Germany and the Tyrol. The main themes, however, of Cusanus' reform program remained intact: it was strongly Christocentric, relied on the practices of the ancient church, placed the bulk of reforming responsibility on the shoulders of church leadership, called for harsh penalties for non-compliance, and reflected strong mystical and nominalistic influences.

From the beginning, Cusanus had approached reform from a position centered around the person of Christ and his role in the world. While this had not changed, the position of Christ in the *Reformatio* is a much more essential one than the position of Christ in *De concordantia*. Beginning from first principles, Cusanus starts his argument with God creating man, and instilling within him an intellectual drive toward the knowledge of his Creator. It is the pursuit of this drive which fulfills the highest purpose for which man was created. However, because human beings are limited by their human intellect and unable to grasp the infinite, God sends Christ as the mediator, or Teacher. Since Christ is both human and divine, he forms the point of connection between God and man; His spirit unites the diverse members of the church and it is only through imitation of Him that immortality may be grasped.[40] Thus Christ is not just the focal point of history, but the center of reality in any age, at any time, and the only means through which man can achieve the end for which he was created.

The *Reformatio* also relies on the practices of the ancient church. As in *De concordantia*, Cusanus argued that new rules or structures were not required to achieve reform; Christians need only fulfill their existing commitments.[41] Here Cusanus does not rely on the decrees of the first eight ecumenical councils to provide the benchmark of holiness, but does hold fast to the notion that the ancient church provided the best example of victorious living for the Christian, since it was a glorious church in a

---

[40]Ibid., 188-190, 196.

[41]Ibid., 189, 192-193.

condition of "light and day" from which the church of his time had fallen.[42]

The responsibility of ecclesiastical leaders also remains constant in the *Reformatio*. Leaders occupy their offices for the purpose of edifying, or building up the church, not in order to acquire wealth, luxury, or the satisfaction of worldly lusts.[43] Leaders also perform a crucial function in maintening the health of the church by regulating those members who are in subjection to them. Failure on the part of the leadership to perform this duty results in the corruption of the entire structure of the church and makes it imperative to correct the leaders from an outside source.[44]

The penalties for non-compliance with his reform decrees are a source of some of the harshest criticisms leveled against Cusanus. His intolerance of disobedience is a constant throughout his writings, and provided the ultimate remedy for defiance both in *De concordantia* and the *Reformatio*.[45]

While the *Reformatio* cannot be called a work of mystical theology on the order of *De docta ignorantia* or *De quaerendo Deum*, it relies heavily on ideas derived from a mystical perspective. First there is the highly individual nature of its concept of reform. While Cusanus retains the existing hierarchy of the church, actual reform remains a very personal matter, not an institutional one. Obedience to the rules and vows of offices is the starting place for reform, but it will only be achieved as individuals are changed into the form of Christ. Reform, therefore, depends on the individual believer dealing directly with Christ with no other mediator necessary. The visitors present the standards of reform, but it takes place between the Christian and Christ. This direct link between the individual and the divine is a fundamental tenet of mysticism, which explains why church

---

[42]Ibid., 191.

[43]Ibid., 191, 193, 194, 200.

[44]Ibid., 191-192.

[45]Cusanus, *DCC*, II.XXXIII.242, 188; *Reformatio*, 193, 195.

leaders are often wary of mystical concepts.

Another indication of the reliance of the *Reformatio* on mystical concepts begins with the yearning for the knowledge of God, which Cusanus argued was instilled in man at his creation. Man was created "that he might see God in his glory" and the intellectual nature inclines "to revelation of and participation in" God because God had created it "so that he might reveal himself to it visibly."[46] In spite of man's inherent desire for God, however, he quickly finds that because of the limitations of human reason he is unable to acquire the goal for which he was created. Cusanus argued that the intellectual nature "wonders and is spurred to seek [wisdom], and seizes it, if it can. But mankind, ignorant of the speech or Word of God . . . could not attain wisdom or creative art through its own strength."[47] Hence the stage is set for the entry of mysticism: man is created to know God, but cannot attain his created end because of his own limitations. Cusanus resolved the conflict with the Neoplatonic Christ; drawing on the second chapter of the Epistle to the Philippians, he describes Christ as the possessor of the immortal *form* of God, who also took upon Himself our own "mortal nature and servile form" thus providing the point of contact and union between the two irreconcilable realms of humanity and divinity. To become a partaker in the immortal kingdom of God, therefore, one must take on himself the *form* of Christ.[48] This is done by imitation, which leads to a mystical participation in the person of Christ, who is "that living virtue, which gives eternal rest to all participating [in him]."[49]

Several of the elements of the *Reformatio* reflect modifications Cusanus must have felt necessary in light of his experiences as legate in Germany and Bishop of Brixen.

---

[46]Cusanus, *Reformatio*, 188.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Ibid., 189-190.

[49]Ibid., 190.

While these experiences did not lead to thematic changes in his reform program, the added emphasis at several points within the work are almost certainly the result of his career as a reformer, which at the time of the writing of this treatise was ongoing.

The *Reformatio* clearly makes reform a matter requiring papal sponsorship and commitment. One could argue, of course, that both Cusanus' legatine journey through Germany and his episcopacy in Brixen had proceeded in principle with strong papal sponsorship. The legatine journey was commissioned on the authority of two papal bulls; Cusanus' reforms in Brixen were especially authorized by the issuance of the *inter cerea* of 1453. Despite these decrees, however, he had experienced a *de facto* lack of papal support in crucial areas and at crucial times. Many monastic houses in Salzburg had made successful appeals to Rome to overturn his reform decrees, and Cusanus' attempt to end the lending of money by Jews met a similar fate at the hands of a papal appeal issued by Emperor Friederich III and the Jews of Nurnberg in 1453.[50] Later in the legatine journey, the attempt to end the perpetuation of a local superstition was also overturned by the pope in the case of the bloody hosts of Wilsnack.[51] In his conflict with Abbott Georg Ried of the Cistercian house of Stams, Calixtus III had overturned his excommunication of Ried, resulting in a great blow to Cusanus' personal prestige and damaging his ability to maintain any effective effort at reform.[52]

Cusanus hoped to avoid repetitions of these incidents by clearly laying down the requirements for punishment, deriving the authority for the punishment of disobedience directly from the pope, and using revocation of apostolic exemptions and other privileges as alternative forms of punishment to excommunication and interdict. The requirements to avoid punishment were clear: all officials must perform the oaths they had sworn and

---

[50]Sullivan, "Nicholas of Cusa as Reformer," 395-397.

[51]Ibid., 403-404.

[52]Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 67.

all Christians must put on the form of Christ, to the satisfaction of the visitors sent by papal authority.[53] To Cusanus these were the minimum requirements for the avoidance of punishment and merely the starting point for the achievement of true reform. In order to be reformed perfectly, one must not only observe strict obedience, but also be clothed in humility:

> When anyone would serve sincerely what he swore or vowed, devoutly accomplish the canonical hours at fitting times, devote himself to the divine office of the mass, fulfill vigilantly his assigned task, and wear fitting garb and tonsure, as law and religion prescribe, even then, unless he should regard himself as a useless servant of God, he has not been reformed perfectly.[54]

Cusanus did everything in his power in the *Reformatio* to make punishment totally a matter of papal authority. The documentation of the rules for visitations and the insistence that the visitors, after their papal visitation, be sent throughout the church as the pope's representatives is an attempt by Cusanus to tie punishment much closer to the papacy, and away from local authorities. Perhaps he hoped that this would make the appeals process somewhat more difficult for the plaintiffs, since the pope would be much more closely associated with the requirements which made the punishments necessary in the first place.

Cusanus also tried to limit the efficacy of apostolic privilege, which had caused him problems in Germany, the Netherlands, and the Tyrol. He specifically gave the visitors authority to revoke on the spot any apostolic exemptions or privileges.[55] This would have ended any discussion as to their authority in areas under papal exemption and would have also provided an additional means of punishment aside from

---

[53]Cusanus, *Reformatio*, 190, 191, 193.

[54]Ibid., 200.

[55]Ibid., 195.

excommunication and interdict, which had so often proved to be ineffectual.

Another modification in the *Reformatio* which clearly is reflective of Cusanus' experience is the section dealing with the reform of the papacy. Cusanus had learned the bitter lesson that all of the papal authority in Christendom was useless if it proceeded from an unreformed head. As noted above, he had not lacked for papal authority, only for papal application of it in certain specific, but crucial circumstances. While he may have hoped to resolve that problem partially with a clear documentation of rules and requirements, these would be useless if the pope was not inclined to impose them at the crucial moment. Since Cusanus had been undone by the pope on so many occasions, the section detailing the necessity for papal reform demonstrates his belief that the pope was unwilling to make the hard decisions in favor of reform since he was distracted by worldly, political concerns. Thus it was not only the members that required reform, but the head also, and the head first.[56] The heavy responsibility of leaders placed the primary responsibility for reform in the church directly on the papacy, and thus brought the need for a top-down reform into sharp relief. In what may have been more of a monition to the papacy than a statement of belief, Cusanus warned of the terrible judgment awaiting any pope who brought scandal on the church.[57]

After the papal visitation was completed, reform would cascade down through each element of the church hierarchy--members of the curia, patriarchs, archbishops, bishops, priests, monastics and lay persons would all be either reformed or removed.[58] This process would be systematic and comprehensive, but not institutional in nature. As shown above, reform was a matter for the individual.

The *Reformatio* provided a program of reform with several strengths. It was

---

[56]Ibid., 197.

[57]Ibid.

[58]Ibid.

comprehensive and conservative in nature, and used an accepted form to achieve its aims. Cusanus described in the *Reformatio* a plan for the reform of individuals at all levels of church hierarchy, from the papacy to the laity. Many of the advocates of conciliarism have been criticized, and not without some validity, because their program of reform became increasingly defined by their insistence on papal reform only. Cusanus avoided this criticism by addressing his reform program to the entire church (presumably including himself). In this short treatise he outlined a systematic and thorough program which he felt could achieve his goal of church-wide spiritual renewal.

Another strength of Cusanus' reforms in the *Reformatio* was their conservative nature. This instilled a certain simplicity into the reform initiatives themselves. They did not involve any major restructuring of existing institutions or church offices, as might have been necessitated by some conciliar ideas. This would enable them to be executed easily within the existing church structure. Some may not have seen conservatism as a strength, but for all of Cusanus' ascetic rigidity, the conservative nature of his program would certainly make his ideas more palatable to the hierarchy than what Wyclif or Hus had done, and what Luther was about to do.

Finally, Cusanus also relied on accepted forms to realize the goals of his reforms. Cusanus' arguments in *De concordantia,* that reform should be based on the decrees of the first eight ecumenical councils, while appealing to conciliarists, might give pause to the papacy due to their conciliar origin. In the *Reformatio* Cusanus avoided any reference to controversial standards, relying only upon the standards of Christ and of previously sanctioned oaths, vows, and promises.

Despite the strengths of the *Reformatio,* it also contained definite weaknesses, such as a failure to take into account the spiritual and political realities of the mid-fifteenth century church and empire. The lack of any definite boundary between ecclesiastical and secular affairs, especially in Germany, made it unlikely that church reform could have been accomplished simply by returning everyone to their original

profession of faith, without some restructuring of ecclesiastical as well as secular offices. Secular rulers often bowed to Rome out of political expediency, and then only in as much as that expediency dictated. These rulers (such as Cusanus' nemesis in the Tyrol, Sigmund) in all likelihood had no intention accepting reforms, especially if these involved the forfeiture of property, authority, or territory. The pope himself was also deeply committed to many of the political realities of the day, as indicated by the frequency of papal interference in Cusanus' reform efforts. The pope could only afford to put so much distance between himself and secular rulers, who in the late Middle Ages were steadily gaining in power and influence, often to the detriment of ecclesiastical authority.

The reforms of the *Reformatio* were also at a disadvantage due to their reliance on human interpretation. Cusanus' careful documentation of rules to the contrary, enforcement of the reforms would ultimately be the responsibility of the visitors who would be required not only to assess the degree of observance of particular rules or oaths, but also to articulate to individuals how it is , exactly, that they were to "take on the form of Christ" by "imitation."[59] This necessity almost ensured irregular application of reform measures, including punishment of violators. Moerover, it would open the floodgates to a new host of papal appeals, complaints, and threats as the visitations spread throughout the church.

Before analyzing the relative success of Cusanus' reforms, and his career as a reformer, a few questions about the assessment itself might be in order. How, exactly, is one to determine the success of ecclesiastical reforms, especially those as intimate and individual as those pursued by Cusanus?[60] The answer may not be as obvious as it seems.

---

[59]Ibid., 190.

[60]Sullivan, "Nicholas of Cusa as Reformer," 423.

Most scholars have had no difficulty in pronouncing Cusanus' reforms a dismal failure, in light of the opposition he encountered and his inability to overcome it.[61] It is also apparent that Cusanus himself was extremely frustrated at his inability to bring about a renewal of spiritual devotion. Speaking personally to Pius II late in his life in Rome, he lamented:

> If you can bear to hear the truth, I like nothing which goes on in this Curia. Everything is corrupt. No one does his duty. Neither you nor the cardinals have any care for the Church. What observance of the canons is there? What reverence for laws? What assiduity in divine worship? All are bent on ambition and avarice. If I ever speak in a consistory about reform, I am laughed at. I do no good here. Allow me to withdraw. I cannot endure these ways. I am an old man and need rest. I will return into seclusion and since I cannot live for the common weal, I live for myself.[62]

From this passage one might draw the conclusion that Cusanus agreed with the verdict of modern scholars that his reforms had failed to bring about widespread spiritual renewal. The outcome of Cusanus' reform efforts, however, was influenced by many factors; the failure of the reforms to take root does not necessarily indicate inherent failure on the part of his conceptual model. It is the design of the reform program that should first be analyzed. The aim from the beginning and throughout Cusanus' reforms was to renew spiritual devotion within the church. In order to accomplish this, it was necessary to kindle a desire within the hearts of individuals so that they would pursue the knowledge of God. Cusanus' reforms were designed to show the way to accomplish this end, and in this sense, they must be considered a success, since they did indicate a way in which this might take place. That they did not accomplish this on a large scale was the

---

[61]See, for example, Tillinghast, 390; Baum, *Nikolaus Cusanus in Tirol*, 91, 212; Pavlac, 152-153; Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 71-72; Meuthen, *Die Letzten Jahre*, 32; Jaspers,258.

[62]Leona C. Gabel, ed., *Memoirs of a Renaissance Pope: the Commentaries of Pius II*, trans. Florence C. Gragg, (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962), 228.

result of other factors.

It is also difficult to see, given the nature of Cusanus' thought, how he could have proceeded differently. His reform program represented the area of intersection between his deep personal piety and his superior intellect. Faith provided the foundation on which everything else rested. As he explained in *De docta ignorantia*, it was faith that preceded and directed understanding and as understanding unfolded it extended faith.[63] So it was that Cusanus' reform concept proceeded from its first principle--a principle grounded in faith, namely, that man's created end was to seek and find the knowledge of God.[64] He then moved through each successive stage of thought, through man's inability to realize his end, and through God's plan to empower man to achieve it in spite of himself. Cusanus then simply outlined the requirements with which man must comply if he was to participate in God's plan of redemption, and the beginning point of these requirements was obedience. If members were not willing to be obedient, then they were demonstrating their unwillingness to participate in God's sacred plan and thus their unwillingness to realize the end for which they had been created. Such disobedience could not go unpunished. Indeed, to suspend punishment in such a case would involve a compromise of Cusanus' first principle of faith, thus rendering null and void the intellectual basis of his entire conceptual model. This Cusanus refused to allow.

While he is often strongly criticized for his alleged rigidity and pettiness, it should be recognized that there is a thin line separating these negative qualities from the more positive characteristics of persistence and endurance in the face of overwhelming opposition, for which individuals in similar circumstances are often highly praised. Those who opposed him did so with an intensity at least equal to that displayed by

---

[63]Cusanus, DDI, III.11, 196.

[64]Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries," 70.

Cusanus. Duke Sigmund obviously had no intention of supporting Cusanus' reforms.[65] He was bent on the consolidation of power in the Tyrol and resistance to interference, papal or otherwise. While it may be argued that one could expect no more from a secular ruler of the time, he must share a great deal of the responsibility for Cusanus' failed reforms.[66] Nicholas V, Calixtus III, and even Cusanus' friend, Pius II should also bear a large share of responsibility for the turmoil surrounding Cusanus' reform efforts. The unpredictability and ambiguity of their support made it impossible for Cusanus to succeed.[67] In the presence of these obstacles, it is remarkable that Cusanus had the discipline to persist in his commitment to reform.

On 11 August 1464, Cusanus died in the town of Todi, north of Rome on the Tiber River, three days before the death of Pope Pius II, who died before issuing the bull *Pastor aeternus*, which contained elements of the *Reformatio*.[68] Cusanus had left his lifelong dream of church-wide spiritual renewal unrealized; he had also left, however, in his writings and sermons, the record of a plan for reform that integrated the strengths of a great Renaissance intellect with the depths of a spiritual piety worthy of the forbears of Christianity to which he so often turned for guidance.

---

[65]Tillinghast, 380; Morimichi Watanabe, "Humanism in the Tyrol: Aeneas Sylvius, Duke Sigmund, Gregor Heimburg," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 4 (1974): 183.

[66]Pavlac, 144.

[67]Sullivan, "Nicholas of Cusa as Reformer," 423-424; Pavlac, 157.

[68]Stephan Ehses, "Der Reformentwurf des Kardinals Nikolaus Cusanus," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 32 (1911): 279; Meuthen, *Die Letzten Jahre*, 125.

Primary Sources

Gabel, Leona C., ed. *Memoirs of a Renaissance Pope: the Commentaries of Pius II.* Translated by Florence C. Gragg. New York: Capricorn Books, 1962.

Nikolaus Cusanus. *The Catholic Concordance.* Edited and translated by Paul E. Sigmund. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

_____. Sermon 21. Delivered 6 January 1439 or 1440 on the Feast of the Epiphany, in Koblenz to the clergy and people of St. Florin. Edited and translated by Thomas M. Izbicki.

_____. "De docta ignorantia." In *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond, 85-206. New York: Paulist Press, 1997.

_____. "De quaerendo Deum." In *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond, 215-231. New York: Paulist Press, 1997.

_____. Sermon 76. Delivered in 1453 on the Day of the Apostles Peter and Paul, in Brixen. Edited and translated by Thomas M. Izbicki.

_____. Sermon 284. Delivered 29 June 1457 on the Feast Day of the Apostles Peter and Paul, in Innsbruck. Edited and translated by Thomas M. Izbicki.

_____. Sermon 286. In Latin, delivered in 1459 on the Sabbath after the Conversion of Saint Paul, in Rome. Edited by Peter Casarella.

_____. Sermon 287. In Latin, delivered in 1459 on the Sabbath before he called the Roman Synod, in Rome. Edited by Peter Casarella.

_____. "Reformatio generalis." In *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church*, ed. and trans. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki, 175-202. Leiden: Brill, 1996.

Secondary Literature

Baum, Wilhelm. "Nikolaus von Kues und der Konflikt Herzog Sigmunds von Oesterreich mit dem Schweizer Eidgenossen," *Zeitschrift fur Schweizerische Kerchengeschichte* 82 (1988): 5-32.

_____. "Nikolaus von Kues wird Bischof von Brixen (mit Edition unveroflentlicher Cusanus und Kaiserurkunden)," *Der Schlern* 60:6 (1986): 379-88.

_____. *Nikolaus Cusanus in Tirol: das Wirken das Philosophen und Reformators als Furstbischof von Brixen.* Bozen: Verlagsanstalt Athesia, 1983.

Baum, Wilhelm and Karl Rauter. "Bernhard von Waging (+1472): 'Klaglieder uber St. Georgenberg.' Das Scheitern einer Klosterreform des Nikolaus Cusanus (1453/54)," *Der Schlern* 57:9 (1983): 482-94.

Biechler, James E. "Nicholas of Cusa and the End of the Conciliar Movement: A Humanist Crisis of Identity," *Church History* 44 (March 1975): 5-21.

Bond, H. Lawrence, Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki. "On Presidential Authority in a General Council," *Church History* 59 (March 1990): 19-34.

Boyle, Marjorie O'Rorke. "Cusanus at Sea: The Topicality of Illuminative Discourse," *The Journal of Religion* 71 (April 1991): 180-201.

Christianson, Gerald. "Cardinal Cesarini and Cusa's *Concordantia*," *Church History* 54:1 (1985): 7-19.

Clarkson, George E. *The Mysticism of William Law.* American University Studies Series V, Philosophy, vol. 124. New York: Peter Lang, 1992.

Courtenay, William J. "Nominalism and Late Medieval Religion," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman. Leiden: Brill, 1974.

Cranz, F. Edward. "Cusanus, Luther, and the Mystical Tradition," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman. Leiden: Brill, 1974.

Cunliffe-Jones, Hubert. *A History of Christian Doctrine.* Edinburgh: Tl & T. Clark Ltd., 1978.

Ehses, Stephan. "Der Reformentwurf des Kardinals Nikolaus Cusanus," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 32 (1911): 274-297.

Inge, William Ralph. *Christian Mysticism.* London: Methuen & Co., 1899.

Jacobi, Klaus, ed. *Nikolaus von Kues: Einfuhrung in sein philosophisches Denken.* Munich: Verlag Karl Alber Freiburg, 1979.

Jaspers, Karl. *Nikolaus Cusanus.* Munich: R. Piper, 1964.

Joda, Robert. "Nicholas of Cusa, Precursor of Humanism," in *The Renaissance and Reformation in Germany: An Introduction*, ed. Gerhart Hoffmeister. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1977.

Lerner, Robert E. "Medieval Philosophy and Religious Dissent," *Past and Present* 72 (August 1976): 3-24.

McDermott, Peter L. "Nicholas of Cusa: Continuity and Conciliation at the Council of Basel," *Church History* 67 (June 1998): 254-73.

McGinn, Bernard. *The Growth of Mysticism.* Vol. 2, *The Presence of God.* New York: Crossroad, 1994.

Meuthen, Erich. *Die Letzten Jahre des Nikolaus von Kues: Biographische Untersuchungen nach neuen Quellen.* Cologne and Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1958.

_____. *Nikolaus von Kues: 1401-1464: Skizze einer Biographie.* Munster: Verlag Aschendorf, 1964.

Oakley, Francis. *The Western Chruch in the Later Middle Ages.* Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1979.

Overton, J. H. *William Law, Nonjuror and Mystic.* London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1881.

Ozment, Steven. *Mysticism and Dissent: Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973.

_____. *The Age of Reform 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

_____. "Mysticism, Nominalism, and Dissent," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion,* ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman Leiden: Brill, 1974.

Pavlac, Brian A. "Nicolaus Cusanus as Prince-Bishop of Brixen (1450-64): Historians and a Conflict of Church and State," *Historical Reflections* 21 (1 1995): 131-154.

Schwarz, Brigide. "Uber Patronage und Klientel in der Spatmittelalterlichen Kirche am Beispel des Nikolaus von Kues," *Quellen und Forschungen aus Italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 68 (1988): 284-310.

Stieber, Joachim. "Nicholas of Cusa's Decision for the Pope," in *Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom,* ed. and trans. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki. Leiden: Brill, 1991.

Sullivan, Donald. "Nicholas of Cusa as Reformer: The Papal Legation to the Germanies, 1451-1452," *Medieval Studies* 36 (1974): 382-428.

_____. "Apocalypse Tamed: Cusanus and the Traditions of Late Medieval

Prophecy," *Journal of Medieval History* 9 (1983): 227-236.

Sych, Joseph E. "Reason and Illumination: William Law, Mysticism, and the Age of Enlightenment," *Douglas Southall Freeman Historical Review* (Spring 1998): 111-135.

Tillinghast, Pardon E. "Nicholas of Cusa vs. Sigismund of Habsburg: An Attempt at Post-Conciliar Church Reform," *Church History* 36 (1967): 371-390.

Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness.* 16th ed. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company Inc., 1948.

Watanabe, Morimichi. "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries: Reform and Resistance," *History of Political Thought* 7 (1986): 53-72.

_____. "The Episcopal Election of 1430 in Trier and Nicholas of Cusa," *Church History* 39 (1970): 299-316.

_____. "Humanism in the Tyrol: Aeneas Sylvius, Duke Sigmund, Gregor Heimburg," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1974): 177-202.

Watanabe, Morimichi and Thomas M. Izbicki. "Nicholas of Cusa: A General Reform of the Church," in *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki. Leiden: Brill, 1996.

Weiler, Anton. "Nicholas of Cusa on the Reform of the Church," in *Election and Consensus in the Church*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Anton Weiler. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972.

Zani, Karl Franz. "Mordplan gegen Kardinal Nikolaus Cusanus (1457)," *Der Schlern* 56:4 (1982): 224-5.

Joseph Eric Sych earned his Bachelor of Arts in History in 1994 from Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Virginia. He has attended the Univeristy of Richmond since 1995 as a graduate student in the Department of History.