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September 12, 2017

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"Martin Luther: The Idea That Changed The World"

PBS

Sept. 12, 2017

Check local listings

To commemorate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's "95 Theses" on "the Efficacy and Power of Indulgences" on Oct. 31, PBS is airing a docudrama about the improbable monk who started an even more improbable revolution.

Did this emotionally fraught, well-educated Augustinian monk really nail the document with 95 theological points protesting the sale of indulgences to the cathedral door in Wittenburg, Germany? Most of the experts who comment in this film don't believe he did. He sent his document to the bishop and then something happened. Printers got hold of it, set the type, printed copies and set the world on fire. Within ten days it appeared in Spain.

But he seems to have enjoyed it — as much as the experts enjoy telling his story. Luther was a character custom-made for the social media of his day: the press. Without it, Luther's place in history may have ended quite differently.

I must say I got a kick out of how he conspired to sneak a group of nuns out of their monastery in the middle of the night. They were unhappy at being placed in the convent by their families and wrote to him that they wanted out. Luther still maintained his vow of celibacy and arranged marriages for all of the nuns but one, Katharina von Bora, who refused to marry anyone because she had literally set her cap for Luther. They married and raised their six children in an abandoned monastery.



Padraic Delany as Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms in 1517, in "Martin Luther." (PBS/Courtesy of Jake Thomas)

The film attests that Martin Luther was the best-selling author of his age, and Katharina was second behind him. She was also the only woman published for many years.

An aspect of Luther's personality I was not aware of was his way with words, his troll-like repartee — or insults — that he used to spar with those who disagreed with him. Some examples that remind me of contemporary Facebook remarks and had me laughing are:

"You are a murderer, traitor, liar, the very scum of all the most evil people on earth. You are full of the worst devils in hell — so full that you can do nothing but vomit and out come devils!"

"He is a pig, an ass, a dunghill, the spawn of an adder, a lying buffoon, a mad fool with a frothy mouth and a whorish face."

"I beg you, blow your nose a bit, to make your head lighter and the brain clearer."

The film stars Padraic Delany ("The Tudors") as Luther and is narrated by Hugh Bonneville ("Downton Abbey"). It was filmed in castles, monasteries and locales in Eastern Europe. Cardinal Dolan of New York is one of the experts included in the film.

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This docudrama is informative and entertaining and I think well worth your time, especially as the Catholic Church and Lutheran leaders [seek unity and sharing the Eucharist](#) once again

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