

# *This Month in Moravian History*

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## Luke of Prague (1458-1528)

*Luke of Prague was one of the main leaders of the early Unitas Fratrum. His legacy to the Unity cannot be overestimated. Although scholars are not certain about the year of his birth, it is generally assumed Luke of Prague was born in the year 1458. The 550<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth is a good occasion to reflect on his contribution to the development of the Unity.*



Luke was born in Prague during a time of great unrest within the Czech church. Various groups, adhering to the legacy of Jan Hus, separated from the Roman Catholic Church. In Kunvald, a small village east of Prague, the Unity of Brethren was formed in 1457 or 1458. This was the religious group Luke would soon join.

Luke graduated from the University of Prague in 1481. We know that he wanted to live his faith in fellowship with other people “who follow truth.” Luke and some

of his friends joined the Unity not long after his graduation.

In these years there was heated discussion within the Unity as to whether to maintain the strict order and seclusion from the outside world of the earlier years, now that more nobles and city dwellers wanted to join the Unity. Leaders were looking for outside guidance. In 1491 Luke and three other Brethren set out on a trip to find other Christian communities who lived according to the true “apostolic” ways. Luke visited Constantinople and the Balkans, but returned disappointed.

Luke had a great hand in restoring harmony within the Unity in 1494, when less restrictive ideas became the official position of the church. Luke was also elected to the Inner Council, the leading board of the Unity. For the next three decades, Luke was the most influential theologian of the Unity. One author calls him the “architect” of the sixteenth-century theology of the Unitas Fratrum.

In 1498 Luke went on another trip, this time to Italy. He was not impressed by the wealth of the church he saw in Rome. This might not be surprising, but when he

visited the Waldensians, who had been instrumental in the establishment of the ordained ministry of the Unity, he was disappointed as well. He found them too much caught up in worldly pursuits. Interestingly, during this trip Luke did develop a new appreciation for Mary, the Mother of Jesus. He also introduced certain elements of Catholic liturgy into the worship of the Unity. He noted: “Our separation [from Rome] is from the bad, and not from that which may be used for good purpose honestly.” In 1500 Luke was consecrated a bishop of the Unity.

The administrative center of the Unity during this period was Mlada Boleslav. This is where Luke and the other leaders resided. Luke wrote a catechism for children in 1501 or 1502. He was also the writer of hymns. The current Moravian hymn book contains one of his hymns in translation: “Christ, the Model of the Meek” (no. 336). In 1518 Luke became the president of the Unity’s governing body, the Inner Council.

When Martin Luther became active in Germany, Luke corresponded with the young reformer. For the Brethren, however, Luther’s emphasis on salvation by faith alone seemed to underestimate the importance of good works as a fruit of faith. The exchange between Luke of Prague and Luther ended in 1524.

Luke of Prague died on December 11, 1528, in Stará Boleslav. He left a lasting legacy for the Unity which he, according to Daniel Crews, saved “from too much narrowness and cold and rigid strictures, to which its first generation was prone.”

Image: from Lukas’ Reply of the Brethren to Martin Luther, 1523. Sources: C. Daniel Crews, “Luke of Prague: Theologian of the Unity,” *The Hinge* (Autumn 2005): 21-54. Idem, *Faith, Love, Hope. A History of the Unitas Fratrum* (Winston-Salem, 2008).

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