History:

IN PRAISE OF ERASMUS

"I wish to be called a citizen of the world," wrote Desiderius Erasmus in 1522. Every country in Western Europe tried to claim as its own Erasmus of Rotterdam, the peripatetic man of letters who shunned the public spotlight in favor of a quiet study—wherever he could find it. In 1974, the University of Toronto Press launched an effort to translate into English the complete Latin works of this prodigiously productive scholar. Nine volumes of *The Collected Works of Erasmus*, including his *Adages*, have already been published. Sixty-six more volumes are to come. Here, historian Paul F. Grendler describes the life of the wandering Dutchman, the intellectual arbiter of his age, the man of whom Sir Thomas More once said, "Wherever he is, he scatters abroad, as the sun its rays, his wonderful riches."

by Paul F. Grendler

In the summer of 1524, Desiderius Erasmus gave to publisher Johann Froben of Basel, Switzerland, his long-awaited public statement on Martin Luther, who, by publishing his 95 Theses seven years before, seemed to have declared war on the Roman Catholic Church—his own church and that of Erasmus. Erasmus's book, *De libero arbitrio (Discourse on Free Will)* appeared on September 1. All of literate Europe turned to it at once to learn whether Erasmus supported or condemned Luther's demands—and ideas—for radical reform of the Church. Would he offer or withhold his endorsement? The question was not academic; Erasmus was not only among the most respected men in Europe but also one of the most well known, and his books had sold more copies than anyone else's.

Ever since that time, many scholars and much of the interested public have tended to judge Erasmus on the basis of his

Portrait of Erasmus at about age 57 by Hans Holbein. Although the painting shows the Dutch scholar seated, his habit was to work standing up.

role in the Lutheran controversy, as if this were his most important contribution to history.

It was not. Erasmus matters most as the intellectual leader of his age, as the apostle of good learning and good morals—learning and morals based on the classics of both pagan and Christian antiquity. He was so powerful an advocate that Western culture and society have yet to escape his influence.

Erasmus's early life was inauspicious. He was born in the Netherlands city of Gouda, 12 miles from Rotterdam, in 1466, 1467, or 1469. (Erasmus was never sure of the date.) He did know one important, damaging detail: He was the son of a priest. Little is known of the circumstances, although Erasmus told a romantic yarn about his illegitimacy in his *Compendium vitae Erasmi* (1524).

According to the story, Erasmus's father and mother were living together in Gouda, intending to marry as soon as they could overcome strong familial objections. When his father was on a journey to Rome, his relatives sent word—falsely—that his

pregnant mistress had died. In sorrow and despair, Erasmus's father became a priest—only to return home to discover that his beloved was alive and well, with a baby boy. It is a fine story, with one difficulty: It fails to take into account the existence of Erasmus's older brother, born three years earlier. The truth of the matter is probably more straightforward and less defensible: Erasmus and his brother were products of priestly concubinage, the sort of clerical immorality that Martin Luther later denounced in fiery terms.

Erasmus's parents saw to it that he received a good early education, first at Gouda, then at Deventer in a school run by the Brethren of the Common Life, a loosely structured religious community whose members did not become priests. The Brethren, who eschewed questions of religious dogma in favor of living simply and emulating Christ, gave Erasmus a solid, if conventional, introduction to the Latin classics.

But in 1480 and 1481, Erasmus's parents died of the plague. The boy's guardians sent him and his brother to another school run by the Brethren of the Common Life at 's Hertogenbosch. In the boys' absence, their small inheritance disappeared. What was to become of the two illegitimate, penniless, orphaned sons of a priest? His guardians pressured Erasmus to take monastic orders. An embittered Erasmus later complained that his guardians had squandered his inheritance and then colluded with his teachers to ship him, unwilling, to a monastery. The facts, however, seem to be that he freely joined the Augustinian monastery at Steyn, near Gouda, where he professed his vows in 1487 and became a priest in 1492. The monastic life offered Erasmus what he wanted more than anything else in life, the opportunity to devote himself to his studies.

Erasmus was driven, as he later described it, by "an occult force of nature" to study literature. Like many other intellec-

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IN PRAISE OF FOLLY

Perhaps Erasmus's best-loved work, the satirical Encomium moriae *was dedicated, "as a keepsake from a friend," to Sir Thomas More, whose name, says Erasmus, inspired the punning title, which can be translated into English either as* The Praise of Folly *or as* The Praise of More. *The work is a light-hearted speech by the goddess Folly lauding herself and all things foolish. After celebrating certain of her foolish fellow gods and goddesses—Bacchus, Cupid, Venus—Folly turns her attention to humankind:*

But now the time has come when, following the pattern of Homer, we should turn our backs on the heavens and travel down again to earth, where likewise we shall perceive nothing joyous or fortunate except by my favor. First of all, you see with what foresight nature, the source and artificer of the human race, has made provision that this race shall never lack its seasoning of folly. For since, by the Stoic definitions, wisdom is no other than to be governed by reason, while folly is to be moved at the whim of the passions, Jupiter, to the end, obviously, that the life of mankind should not be sad and harsh, put in—how much more of passions than of reason? Well, the proportions run about one pound to half an ounce. Besides, he imprisoned reason in a cramped corner of the head, and turned over all the rest of the body to the emotions. After that he instated two most violent tyrants, as it were, in opposition to reason: anger, which holds the citadel of the breast, and consequently the very spring of life, the heart; and lust, which rules a broad empire lower down, even to the privy parts. How much reason is good for, against these twin forces, the ordinary life of men sufficiently reveals when reason—and it is all she can do—shouts out her prohibitions until she is hoarse and dictates formulas of virtue. But the passions simply bid their so-called king go hang himself, and more brazenly roar down the opposition, until the man, tired out as well, willingly yields and knuckles under.

Reprinted from *The Praise of Folly*, trans. H. H. Hudson. Copyright 1941. © renewed by Princeton University Press.

tuals of the age, he embraced the classics of Greek and Roman antiquity as a means to teach eloquence and virtue. What came to be known as Renaissance Humanism was a reaction against medieval scholastic philosophers and theologians, such as Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, who, starting in the 13th century, had constructed a vast system of thought, based on Aristotle's logic and metaphysics, precisely defining the nature and purpose of everything from blades of grass to God.

This Scholasticism, or the philosophy of the schools, provided intellectually defensible answers to questions about God's

existence and man's life, and the relations between them. Later medieval philosophers such as William of Ockham (c. 1285–c. 1349) accepted the terms of discussion—logical syllogisms, definitions of being, essence, or *quidditas* ("whatness")—but questioned Scholasticism's answers. That is, Ockham did not deny God or his universe, but he doubted whether the human mind could know much about them. The ensuing debates, arcane and technical, alienated those intellectuals who simply wanted to know how to live well and to serve God—among them, the Renaissance Humanists.

Italy, then the commercial, industrial, and intellectual center of Europe, was the birthplace of humanistic studies. Scholars such as Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444) and Lorenzo Valla (1407–57) developed the new humanistic studies; schoolmasters like Guarino of Verona (1374–1460) and Vittorino da Feltre (c. 1378–1446) taught them to future princes and scholars. Humanistic studies transformed the intellectual landscape of Italy and two generations later moved north. A pioneer northerner, Rodolphus Agricola of Germany, who was born the year Bruni died, studied with Guarino in Italy, then returned to Germany during the 1480s to spread humanistic studies.

Like the Italians, the Northern Humanists turned to the great men of classical antiquity—the poets Vergil and Ovid, the historians Livy and Sallust, the dramatist Terence, and the orator Cicero. Medieval thinkers were not ignorant of these authors (though certain of their texts had yet to be rediscovered: Cicero's *Letters to Atticus* was brought to light by Petrarch in the middle of the 14th century; his *De oratore*, in 1421). Rather, medieval Scholastics selectively chose concepts from the ancient classics, inserting them into their own philosophical and theological system.

Renaissance Humanists, on the other hand, studied the classics in the context of ancient Roman and Greek civilization. But the humanists also looked to the ancients for practical guidance—advice on the conduct of affairs, wisdom for raising a family, and moral courage for confronting life's painful choices. Finally, paradoxically, the humanists fervently believed that the pagan authors could help Christians live virtuously enough in this life to achieve salvation in the next. Cicero and Vergil, so the humanists contended, taught the same Christian morality as the New Testament.

Above all, Renaissance Humanists admired the good Latin (and Greek, if they mastered it) of the ancients. Classical Latin was eloquent and grand, sensitive and majestic; it was a mature language, capable of expressing the most sublime and complex

thoughts—just the opposite of the serviceable, but jargon-ridden and technical Latin of medieval Scholastics. On one thing Scholastics and humanists were agreed: They rejected vernacular languages. Italian and English might be adequate for such light literature as Petrarch's sonnets or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, but they were insufficiently mature to bear weighty thoughts.

Erasmus devoted himself to the classics in the monastery at Steyn. He soon lost patience with his fellow monks and his superiors, many of whom criticized the "pagan" *studia humanitatis*. At this time he wrote his first book, *Antibarbarorum liber* (*The Book against the Barbarians*, not published until 1522), an attack on those members of religious orders "barbaric" enough to reject classical authors. Erasmus had no trouble justifying his own pursuit of the new humanistic learning: "All studies, philosophy, rhetoric, are followed for this one object, that we may know Christ and honor him. This is the end of all learning and eloquence."

To broaden his studies and to make a name for himself, Erasmus embarked, in 1492, on a career outside the monastery. He served briefly as secretary to a bishop and as a tutor, and he sought patrons. He spent most of the years 1495–99 studying theology at the prestigious Collège de Montaigu, at the University of Paris. But Erasmus hated the rotten eggs and spoiled herring that bulked large in the student diet, and he found Paris's intellectual fare—late medieval Scholasticism—even worse. He complained that his teachers talked as familiarly of hell as if they had been there. One of Erasmus's later fictional characters (in his *Colloquies*) greets a new acquaintance from Montaigu College by saying, "You come to us full of learning." The acquaintance responds, "No—full of lice." In fact, Erasmus developed in Paris a lifelong antipathy to universities. Although offered many appointments, he agreed to teach at only one—at Cambridge from 1511 to 1514.

Erasmus also disliked intensely the other type of sinecure that intellectuals commonly sought to earn a living: secretarial posts in princely courts. He was willing to accept the occasional position as tutor to a young noble if it offered the opportunity to travel. And he wrote letters and orations flattering princes to obtain gifts and pensions. Gradually he acquired just enough income to scrape by. He also acquired a large circle of friends

ERASMUS AND LUTHER

From a letter written by Erasmus to Albert of Brandenberg, Cardinal of Mainz, October 19, 1519:

I was sorry that Luther's books were published; and when some or other of his writings first came into view, I made every effort to prevent their publication, chiefly because I feared a disturbance might result from them. Luther had written, in my opinion, a very Christian letter to me, and I replied, advising him in passing not to write anything seditious, nor against the Roman pontiff, nor too arrogantly and passionately, but rather to preach the Gospel teaching in a sincere spirit and with all gentleness. I did this politely, so to accomplish more. I added that there were some here who favored him, with the hope that he might adapt himself more readily to their judgment. Certain simpletons have interpreted this to mean that I favor Luther. Since none of these men have admonished Luther up to now, I alone have admonished him. I am neither Luther's accuser nor his defender, nor am I answerable for him. I would not dare to judge the spirit of the man, for that is a most difficult task, especially when it is a question of his condemnation. Yet, if I were favorably inclined to him as a good man, which even his enemies admit him to be, or as one oppressed, following the dictates of humanity—indeed, as one oppressed by those who under the false pretext of being devout fight against learning—if I were inclined thus to take his part, what reproach would there be, provided I did not become involved myself in his cause? In short, I think it is only Christian to support Luther this far, for if he is innocent, I do not want him crushed by a faction of rogues, and if he is in error, I wish him to be corrected, not destroyed.

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who appreciated his learning enough to offer him extended periods of hospitality. He made his first trip to England in 1499, where he met the young Thomas More, a man, Erasmus said, "born and created for friendship." The Englishman who was later to give his life rather than allow his Prince, Henry VIII, to dictate his religious convictions attracted Erasmus irresistably by his wit and charm: "If he were to lay it upon me that I join in a rope dance, I would readily comply," Erasmus confessed.

In early 1506, he accepted employment as tutor to Alexan-

der Stewart, son of the King of Scotland, who wished to visit Italy. In Venice he joined the charmed circle of scholars, editors, and printers, who learned, worked, and dined together under the roof of Aldus Manutius (c. 1450–1515), founder of the Aldine Press, publisher of distinguished editions of Greek and Latin classics. Here Erasmus perfected his Greek.

Erasmus began his real public career in 1500 with the publication of the *Adagia (Adages)*, his first book to see print. Thereafter, Erasmus shaped European opinion by the written and printed word. In addition to his numerous books, some 4,000 of his letters survive—the largest private correspondence of his age. The letters run the gamut from everyday matters discussed in a few lines (to the Swiss physician Paracelsus, he wrote hastily in 1527 seeking a remedy for kidney stones: "As I told you, I have no time for the next few days to be doctored, or to be ill, or to die, so overwhelmed am I with scholarly work") to 50-page discussions of important contemporary issues. Erasmus corresponded with almost every learned man in Europe, with kings, popes, ministers of state and civic leaders, not to mention old friends without claim to importance. Erasmus wrote his letters knowing that they would be passed from hand to hand, copied, and eventually printed. The last point is the key one: Erasmus was the first intellectual who shaped European elite opinion by means of the press.

Johann Gutenberg and his associates had invented and brought together the technical processes that made possible movable type in Mainz, Germany, about 1450, though it took half a century before presses became numerous, their products cheap, and the network for distributing and selling books comprehensive enough for the printing press to become a means of mass communication. But by 1500, practically every small city and town had a printing press. Luther's Wittenberg, a small university town in Saxony of about 2,000 souls, had one. And because printing developed so quickly that it left state and church regulations far behind, each printer was free to print what he pleased, unhampered by copyright laws. If a new book sold well, numerous publishers obtained copies and printed it. Within a few years, a book originally published in Basel might be selling under varying imprints in Strasbourg, Cologne, Antwerp, Paris, London, Lyon, Venice, and Florence without recompense for the original publisher or author.

Erasmus's popular satirical work, *Encomium moriae (The Praise of Folly)*, to take one example, first appeared in 1509, followed over the next 15 years by 40 more printings with an average press run of 1,000 copies. The original publisher issued but seven. Forty printings of 1,000 copies each may seem small by the standards of 1983, but the combined population of Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the British Isles was only 47 million in 1500. And only a minority of Europeans could read. (Thomas More speculated that in a major urban center like London, 60 percent of the people could read. Modern scholars doubt that the figure was that high in cities, and suspect very few rural dwellers were literate.) And even fewer could read Latin.

One of Erasmus's major goals in writing was to bring all literate Europeans, not just scholars, to a better knowledge of the classics. In this respect, the most important of his works was the *Adages*, a collection of proverbs derived from the Latin and Greek classics. The first, quite small edition of 1500 contained 818 adages, accompanied by brief discussions of their origins and, often, witty essays satirizing human foibles. The last of many revisions (1536) had become a very large folio volume containing over 4,000 adages. Sometimes called "the world's largest bedside book," the *Adages* was for a century and a half the volume from which European writers and speakers culled proverbs and anecdotes to adorn their own literary efforts.

While in one sense a study of literature, the *Adages* might also be called an educational work. Erasmus wrote numerous others: advice on designing a curriculum of study, a manual for teachers on how to practice their craft, a guide to writing letters (based on the classics, of course), a concise primer of Latin grammar and syntax, another on the correct pronunciation of Latin and Greek, and a tract addressed to parents on "civilizing" their offspring.

Erasmus's educational advice was as sensible as it was learned. Should a girl be educated? His reply was "yes, certainly!" In his view, a girl was much more likely to grow up virtuous and sensible if she attended school. The worst possible policy was to keep her at home, locked in the company of foolish and ignorant servants and grandmothers. Erasmus stopped short, though, of recommending that a girl attend university. He argued that since a woman had no public role to play (which

was perfectly true in his day), she did not need university training. His notion that a girl should be sent out of the home to elementary and secondary schools was daring enough in the 16th century.

Erasmus was not always so good-natured; he was also the age's sharpest and most persistent critic of religious and political sin, an intense reformer who hated war and hypocrisy. One of his chief targets was the Renaissance papacy. The popes, supposedly promoters of peace and virtue, instead bought and sold offices, broke their vows, and waged war rather than preached peace. One of the worst offenders was Pope Julius II (1503–13), a central figure in the European political struggle and the leader of a military campaign to reconquer parts of the papal states that had drifted out of his control. An anonymous satire, entitled *Julius exclusus (Julius Excluded)*, began to circulate in 1513, after Julius's death.

In the satire, Pope Julius demands admittance to heaven. St. Peter questions him at the gate:

Peter: What did you do on earth?

Julius: I revamped the finances, increased the revenue, annexed Bologna, beat Venice, harassed Ferrara. . . . I killed some thousands of the French, broke treaties, and celebrated gorgeous triumphs. I did this not by learning—I had none—nor by my popularity—I was hated—nor by my clemency—I was tough.

Peter: Tell me now. Why did you attack Bologna? Was it heretical?

Julius: No.

Peter: Why then?

Julius: I needed the revenue!

Peter: Why did you harass Ferrara?

Julius: I needed it for my son.

Peter: What? Popes with wives and sons!

Julius: No wives, just sons.

Erasmus denied authorship of *Julius Excluded*, but not very convincingly. Renaissance contemporaries and most scholars today agree that he wrote it.

Julius Excluded typified the negative side of Erasmus's messages to Christians; the positive side was a call to men to follow the ethical example of Christ without worrying about theological complexities, dogma, or Church practices. Erasmus was

ERASMUS ON RELIGIOUS RELICS

In A Pilgrimage for Religion's Sake *(1526), several fictional characters discuss the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. The pilgrim, Ogygius, recounts to a friend his visit to the crypt where the saint's bones rest:*

Leaving this place, we went into the crypt. It has its own custodians. First is shown the martyr's skull, pierced through. The top of the cranium is bared for kissing, the rest covered with silver. . . . From here we return to the choir. On the north side mysteries are laid open. It is wonderful how many bones were brought forth—skulls, jaws, teeth, hands, fingers, whole arms, all of which we adored and kissed. This would have gone on forever if my fellow pilgrim [Gratian], a disagreeable chap, had not cut short the enthusiasm of a guide. . . . An arm was brought forth, with the bloodstained flesh still on it. He shrank from kissing this, looking rather disgusted. The custodian soon put his things away. Next we viewed the altar table and ornaments; then the objects that were kept under the altar—all of them splendid; you'd say Midas and Croesus were beggars if you saw the quantity of gold and silver. . . . My friend Gratian made a *faux pas* here. After a short prayer, he asked the keeper, "I say, good father, is it true, as I've heard, that in his lifetime Thomas was most generous to the poor?" "Very true," the man replied, and began to rehearse the saint's many acts of kindness to them. . . . Gratian, who's impulsive, said, "For my part, I'm convinced the saint would even rejoice that in death, too, he could relieve the wants of the poor by his riches." At this the custodian frowned and pursed his lips, looking at us with Gorgon eyes, and I don't doubt he would have driven us from the church with insults and reproaches had he not been aware that we were recommended by the archbishop. I managed to placate the fellow by smooth talk, affirming that Gratian hadn't spoken seriously, but liked to joke; and at the same time I gave him some coins.

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convinced that the best way to get men to follow Christ was to encourage them to read the basic texts of Christianity, chiefly the New Testament and the writings of the early Church Fathers, such as Augustine, Basil, Chrysostom, Cyprian, Jerome, and Origen. Erasmus devoted much of his scholarly life to immense editorial labor designed to make these books available in accurate, unadulterated texts.

His 1516 edition of the New Testament, the first ever published in Greek, marked a systematic attempt to recover the very words of the language in which it was originally written.

Hitherto, the New Testament had been available to Renaissance Christians in the Latin "Vulgate" translation done from the original Greek by St. Jerome around 400 A.D.—the only version authorized by the Catholic Church. But Jerome's translation was neither perfect, nor adequate for scholars, who gradually realized that their studies should be based on the original version.

Erasmus met this need; he based his Greek New Testament on four surviving Greek manuscripts, made a number of emendations correcting errors in Jerome's translation, and added critical notes. Perhaps his most controversial change was to omit from the first letter of John the verse (1 John 5:7) traditionally used to prove the existence of the Trinity: "For there are three that bear witness in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit: and these three are one." The verse did not exist in any of the Greek manuscripts he had assembled, and Erasmus, true to his scholarly principles, left it out, earning, for his trouble, a storm of clerical criticism. His New Testament was far from perfect; nevertheless, it was the pioneering work that inaugurated modern biblical studies. Everyone, from Luther on, used Erasmus's Greek New Testament. It underwent at least 60 printings during Erasmus's lifetime, and was not completely superseded until the 19th century.

Erasmus provided the Greek New Testament for scholars. For the rest of his audience, he wrote Latin paraphrases of the books of the New Testament, based on the Greek edition. In the paraphrases, he retold in simple language the story of Christ and the Apostles: "We are furnishing the Scriptures of Christian reading so that in the future more people may make use of this holy philosophy." To Erasmus, following "the philosophy of Christ" meant, first of all, understanding the words of Christ in their original purity and simplicity, free of theological and ecclesiastical commentary.

Erasmus believed that everyone could profit from reading Scriptures: "the farmer, the tailor, the mason, prostitutes, pimps, and Turks," as he put it in the preface to his paraphrase of the book of Matthew. He strongly endorsed the idea of translating Holy Scripture into the vernacular languages: "Would that the farmer might sing some portions of them at the plow, the weaver hum some parts of them to the movement of his shuttle, the traveler lighten the weariness of the journey with

stories of this kind."

Oddly, Erasmus himself could not translate the Scriptures into vernaculars. Although he sojourned in the Netherlands, Belgium, England, France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy, he commanded no vernacular language beyond his childhood Dutch. He wrote and published exclusively in Latin and Greek; he never wrote a single book in any vernacular.

From 1500 to the 1520s, Erasmus dominated European discussion of religion, classical scholarship, biblical and patristic studies, education, and moral and political commentary. Then there appeared a barely visible cloud in the horizon. Martin Luther, an unknown friar who taught at Wittenberg, a third-rate university on the fringe of Europe, began his stormy public career in 1517. At first, Erasmus welcomed Luther as a fellow humanistic reformer. He wrote to Luther approving his criticism of greedy churchmen and of such superstitions as the worship of relics—both frequent targets of Erasmus's own barbs.

Erasmus urged church officials to heed rather than repress Luther. "I know of no one who does not commend his life," wrote Erasmus in 1519 to Frederick of Saxony, Luther's prince. "Yet no one admonishes him, no one instructs, no one corrects. They simply cry heresy."

But as Luther's criticism of Catholicism became more abusive, Erasmus became increasingly troubled. "Let us not devour each other like fish," he wrote in response to a stinging attack by Luther's associate and Erasmus's former friend Ulrich von Hutten. "The world is full of rage, hate, and wars. What will the end be?" Realizing that religious differences would degenerate into political warfare, he counseled moderation to Luther, suggesting that he would win souls more through love than through vituperation. But Luther could not compromise with what he viewed as the "Antichrist" in Rome. He upbraided Erasmus: "You with your peace-loving theology, you don't care about the truth. The light is not to be put under a bushel, even if the whole world goes to smash."

For its part, the papacy could not stand idly by while, in its view, Luther "led souls to hell" by establishing an heretical Protestant Church. Erasmus was squarely, unhappily, in the middle.

In the *Discourse on Free Will* (1524), Erasmus finally rejected Luther. He specifically repudiated Luther's doctrine of predestination and human depravity, the notion that man cannot merit salvation through his own efforts. "Since the fall of Adam," argued Luther, "free will exists only in name, and when it does what it can, it commits sin." Only God, concluded

Luther, may, for his own reasons, choose to save sinful man.

Erasmus, not surprisingly, asserted the importance of man's reason and good works. Man can choose freely to do evil or good; if he chooses to do good, he can merit eternal salvation. Otherwise, asks Erasmus, "What wicked fellow would henceforth try to better his conduct?"

Luther, predictably furious, denounced Erasmus. But Erasmus had angered Catholics as well. Though he differed with Luther about man's nature, he continued to assert that he found much to admire in Luther. Nor would Erasmus write a treatise endorsing papal supremacy over the Christian Church.

In such works as *Liber de Sarcienda ecclesiae concordia (On Mending the Peace of the Church)* of 1533, Erasmus continued to try to play the mediator between Catholic and Protestant. But Catholic assailed him as the man who, by his earlier criticism of the church, had prepared the way for Luther's break. "Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched," went the old saw. Lutherans looked upon Erasmus with contempt, accusing him of cowardice, of failing to follow his convictions and join Luther. In 1536, Erasmus died in Basel, a disheartened man.

But if 16th-century Catholics and Protestants, locked in open warfare, came to scorn Erasmus, they accepted his scholarly and literary program, which endured for centuries. Erasmus laid out the agenda: good letters and good morals, scholarship and civilized discourse based on the pagan and Christian classics of antiquity. More than any other single individual, he was instrumental in establishing a classical education as the prerequisite for the learned and civil elite of Europe and North America well into the 20th century. His immense scholarly labors bore fruit a thousandfold as generations of scholars continued his work. And his penetrating common sense passed quietly into the heritage of the Western world.