

Name: _____

Modern European History

Date: _____

Unit 2 – Reformations

Ulrich von Hutten: Letter to Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony

Directions: Read and annotate the following letter, specifically noting what the author says the Church is doing with the funds Germany has been sending them, as well as what he says Germany would do with the funds if they were able to keep them.

Many Germans were drawn to Luther's message, for it signified a return to the spiritual purity of the first Christians, which had been undermined by a wealthy and corrupt church. Most historians agree that religious considerations – people's yearning for greater holiness and communication with God – were the principal reasons Luther attracted a following. But economic and political factors also drew Germans to him. The urban middle class, in particular, greatly resented the draining of money from German lands in order to provide a luxurious lifestyle for the Roman upper clergy. In a letter written in 1520 to the Elector Frederick of Saxony, Ulrich von Hutten (1488-1523), a distinguished humanist and supporter of Luther, angrily denounced the Roman church for plundering German lands. Hutten's words, excerpted below, also reveal an emerging sense of German national feeling.

We see that there is no gold and almost no silver in our German land. What little may perhaps be left is drawn away daily by the new schemes invented by the council of the most holy members of the Roman Curia [papal court]. What is thus squeezed out of us is put to the most shameful uses. Would you know, dear Germans, what employment I have myself seen that they make at Rome of our money? It does not lie idle! Leo X gives a part to nephews and relatives (these are so numerous that there is a proverb at Rome, "As thick as Leo's relations"). A portion is consumed by so many most reverend cardinals (of which the holy father created no less than one and thirty in a single day), as well as to support innumerable referendaries, auditors, prothonotaries, abbreviators, apostolic secretaries, chamberlains, and a variety of officials forming the elite of the great head Church. These in turn draw after them at untold expense, copyists, beadles, messengers, servants, scullians, mule drivers, grooms, and an innumerable army of prostitutes and of the most degraded followers. They maintain dogs, horses, monkeys, long-tailed apes and many more such creatures for their pleasure.

They construct houses all of marble. They have precious stones, are clothed in purple and fine linen and dine sumptuously, frivolously indulging themselves in every species of luxury. In short, a vast number of the worst of men are supported in Rome in idle indulgence by means of our money ... Does not your Grace perceive how many bold robbers, how many cunning hypocrites commit repeatedly the greatest crimes under the monk's cowl, and how many crafty hawks feign the simplicity of doves, and how many ravening wolves simulate the innocence of lambs? And although there be a few truly pious among them, even they cling to superstition and pervert the law of life which Christ laid down for us.

Now, if all these who devastate Germany and continue to devour everything might once be driven out, and an end made of their unbridled plundering, swindling and deception, with which the Romans have overwhelmed us, we should again have gold and silver in sufficient quantities and be able to keep it. And then this money, in such supply and value as it may be present, might be put to better uses, for example: ... [that] great armaments may be raised to extend the boundaries of the [Holy Roman] empire; also that the Turks may be conquered, if this seems desirable; that many who, because of poverty, steal and rob may honestly earn their living once more, and that those who otherwise must starve may receive from the state contributions to mitigate their need; that scholars may be helped and the study of the arts and sciences and of good literature advanced; above all that every virtue may receive its reward; want be relieved at home; indolence banished and deceit killed.